The Critique of Scholastic Language
in Renaissance Humanism and Early-Modern Philosophy

(Olomouc, 15 March 2017)

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I: Introduction
- “the Scholastics had the great virtue of being relatively uninterested in rhetoric and utterly unconcerned with compromising philosophical rigor for the sake of popular accessibility. They shared the view of the contemporary analytic tradition that the best philosophy will often be technical, difficult, and perhaps comprehensible only to specialists” (Robert Pasnau, Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages, Cambridge, 1997, 8)

Paul Oskar Kristeller:
- “the Italian humanists on the whole were neither good nor bad philosophers, but no philosophers at all”
- “most of the works of the humanists have nothing to do with philosophy even in the vaguest possible sense of the term”

II: Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457)
- “And just as nations and peoples have different customs and different laws, so do the natures of languages differ, each one sacred and unsullied among its own. Therefore we must rely on usage, as if it were a kind of established practice in the community.” (trans. Copenhaver and Nauta 2012, 2:89; Dialectical Disputations 2.11.14)
- “As for us, we must speak according to a grammatical standard (ad normam grammatices), speaking not so much grammatically as in Latin—following not so much the rules of an art, in other words, as the usage of educated and cultured people, which is the best art of all. And who does not know that speaking is based mainly on usage and authority? This is what Quintilian says about it: “In speaking, usage is the most reliable teacher, and obviously language is to be used like money, sealed with a public stamp.” (2012, 2:85; DD 2.11.6).
- “In fact, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Punic, Dalmatian and other tongues differ not just in the words that are spoken, but in how speech is constructed, and this happens because of practice, not theory (usu fit, non ratione), except in a few cases. We can no more give a theory for grammar (as some of those idiots do, including those who write about ‘modes of signifying’) than for the different words that different peoples use.” (2012, 2:85; DD 2.11.7).
"Anyone who abandons it must be hooted out of the company of educated people, no less than the scofflaw and scoundrel of custom must be expelled from the community." (2012, 2:89; DD 2.11.14).

- on act/potency: "He [i.e. Aristotle] actually says that ‘this wood or this tree-trunk is a box not in act but in potency.’ Go ahead, Aristotle, make a box out of this wood. Will we say that ‘this wood is a box in act?’ Has anyone ever talked that way? (…) What is the point of adding ‘in act’? Obviously, you reply, because for the wood to be a box is something else. Has anyone ever talked this way either, since reason does not even permit the locution? For it is one thing for wood to be able (posse) to be made into a box, another for it to be a box in potency (potentia). In saying that it is ‘able to be made into a box,’ we already declare that it is not a box since, once it has been made that, it is not able to be made again into what it already was. How much better it would have been to keep the ordinary way of speaking: ‘this wood can be made into a box!’ In other words, ‘the form and shape of this wood is changeable (mutabilis) into the form and shape of a box.’ ” (2012, 1:231; DD 1.16.6-7)

- on “empty”: “But let us see who speaks better, the ordinary person or the philosopher (populus an philosophus). The ordinary person says that he calls the barrel ‘empty’ when it lacks liquid, the pool ‘empty’ when it has no water or fish, the storehouse ‘empty’ when it lacks grain or seed, the forum ‘empty’ when people have left it, and also the kiln ‘empty’ or the oven ‘empty’ when the fire has gone out or has been extinguished or when the bricks and loaves are gone. The philosopher supposes that these things cannot be empty because they are full of air, so that if the air goes out, another body comes in, and when that leaves, air comes back in again: and so these things are never empty. Let the ordinary person (populus) respond that his is ‘the right to decide standards in language,’ [Horace AP, 70-72] and that he does not call such things ‘full’ when there is nothing but air in them, except when the air itself is of some importance, as when the sails of ships or a ball or balloon for playing games are full”

III: Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540)

- “if we all profess a Latin logic, words will have the meaning established by Latin practice and usage, not our own. (...) Indeed, I should very much like to hear from these men: if they were to teach dialectic in Spanish or French, which is as feasible as in Latin or Greek, would they make up rules as they please rather than take them from the structure of the language itself?” (Against the Pseudodialecticians, trans. Rita Guerlac, 1979, 67)

IV: Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

- “But what then would become of these terms, of entity, essence, essential, essentiality, that are derived from it [copula is], and of many more that depend on these, applied as most commonly they are?” (Leviathan 46.17, English Works III:674)
- “The common sort of men seldom speak insignificantly, and are therefore, by those egregious persons counted idiots” (Leviathan 8.27, EW III:69)
the writings of School-divines, are nothing else for the most part, but insignificant trains of strange and barbarous words, or words otherwise used, than in the common use of the Latin tongue (...) [L]et him see whether he can translate any School-divine into any of the modern tongues, as French, English, or any other copious language: for that which cannot in most of these be made intelligible, is not intelligible in the Latin. Which insignificance of language, though I cannot note it for false philosophy; yet it hath a quality, not only to hide the truth, but also to make men think they have it, and desist from further search.” (Leviathan 46.40, EW III:686)

“(…) they speak of accidents, as if they might be separated from all bodies. And from hence proceed the gross errors of writers of metaphysics; for, because they can consider thought without the consideration of body, they infer there is no need of a thinking-body; and because quantity may be considered without considering body, they think also that quantity may be without body (...) From the same fountain spring those insignificant words, abstract substance, separated essence and the like; as also that confusion of words derived from the Latin verb est, as essence, essentiality, entity, entitative; besides reality, aliquiddity, quiddity, &c.” (On Body 3.4, EW I:34; OL I:30)

- To define is to observe “how the word to be defined is most constantly used in common speech” (EW VII:229); “All definitions proceed from common understanding” (EW VII:226).

V: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716)

- “whatever cannot be explained in popular terms is nothing and should be exorcised from philosophy as if by an incantation, unless it can be known by immediate sense experience” (Preface to Leibniz’ edition of Mario Nizolio’s On the true principles and the true manner of philosophizing against the pseudophilosophers (1553); trans. Loemker, 1969, 124)
- “the greatest clarity is found in commonplace terms with their popular usage retained” (123)
- “der Gebrauch ist der Meister”
- “Technical terms are therefore to be shunned as worse than dog or snake, and one must abstain particularly from those words for categories which are far removed from Latin usage” (123).
- “There is certainly nothing which cannot be expressed in popular terms, at least by using many of them. Hence Nizolius rightly urges that anything be regarded as nonexistent, fictitious, and useless to which there cannot be assigned a word in the vernacular, however general” (124).
- “we must note that whether terms are popular or technical, they ought to involve no figures of speech or few and apt ones. Of this, the Scholastics have taken little notice, for (…) their speech abounds with figures. What else are such terms as to depend, to inhere, to emanate, and to influx?” (126)
- “since our discussion concerns philosophical discourse and the style that befits it, we shall omit elegance for the present, although we may admit that it can be of great service in securing attention, in moving minds, and in impressing things more deeply on the memory” (121-122)
- “It is customary for certain capable philosophers to urge the brilliant masters of dialectic and disputation either to explain their terms clearly or, if they want to avoid this vexing task, to step down
to some living and popular language and attempt to explain their meaning in it. When this happens, it is remarkable either how they become confused or, if they attempt the change, how they are ridiculed by all men of judgment and experience who are present and who are not interested exclusively in the Latin language” (125)

**Conclusion**

- Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655): “Reading Vives and my dear Charron roused my spirits and dispelled all my timidity; they taught me that there was nothing wrong in supposing that this sect [of the Aristotelians] was not necessarily correct in all matters just because most men approved of it. My strength grew greater as I read Ramus and Mirandola” (trans. C. B. Brush, 18)