

The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World

By Matthew Stewart

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“A colorful reinterpretation. . . . Stewart’s wit and profluent prose make this book a fascinating read.”?Publishers Weekly, starred review

Philosophy in the late seventeenth century was a dangerous business. No careerist could afford to know the reclusive, controversial philosopher Baruch de Spinoza. Yet the wildly ambitious genius Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who denounced Spinoza in public, became privately obsessed with Spinoza's ideas, wrote him clandestine letters, and ultimately met him in secret.

"In refreshingly lucid terms" (*Booklist*) Matthew Stewart "rescues both men from a dusty academic shelf, bringing them to life as enlightened humans" (*Library Journal*) central to the religious, political, and personal battles that gave birth to the modern age. Both men put their faith in the guidance of reason, but one spent his life defending a God he may not have believed in, while the other believed in a God who did not need his defense. Ultimately, the two thinkers represent radically different approaches to the challenges of the modern era. They stand for a choice that we all must make.

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Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. According to Nietzsche, "Every great philosophy is... a personal confession of its creator and a kind of involuntary and unperceived memoir.". Stewart affirms this maxim in his colorful reinterpretation of the lives and works of 17th-century philosophers Spinoza and Leibniz. In November 1676, the foppish courtier Leibniz, "the ultimate insider... an orthodox Lutheran from conservative Germany," journeyed to The Hague to visit the self-sufficient, freethinking Spinoza, "a double exile... an apostate Jew from licentious Holland." A prodigious polymath, Leibniz understood Spinoza's insight that "science was in the process of rendering the God of revelation obsolete; that it had already undermined the special place of the human individual in nature." Spinoza embraced this new world. Seeing the orthodox God as a "prop for theocratic tyranny," he articulated the basic theory for the modern secular state. Leibniz, on the other hand, spent the rest of his life championing God and theocracy like a defense lawyer defending a client he knows is guilty. He elaborated a metaphysics that was, at bottom, a reaction to Spinoza and collapses into Spinozism, as Stewart deftly shows. For Stewart, Leibniz's reaction to Spinoza and modernity set the tone for "the dominant form of modern philosophy"—a category that includes Kant, Hegel, Bergson, Heidegger and "the whole 'postmodern' project of deconstructing the phallogocentric tradition of western thought." Readers of philosophy may find much to disagree with in these arguments, but Stewart's wit and profluent prose make this book a fascinating read. (*Jan. 2006*)

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From [Booklist](#)

A mere footnote for most historians, the meeting in 1676 between Leibniz and Spinoza opens to a discerning eye the intellectual forces destined to reshape the entire Western world. Stewart supplies that discerning eye as he chronicles the events and arguments linking the illustrious German polymath to the controversial Dutch lens grinder. In refreshingly lucid terms, he explains the controversies surrounding Spinoza as the consequence of the radical religious and political doctrines he articulated in works fiercely debated throughout Europe. By highlighting the way Spinoza's metaphysics justified secular and democratic challenges to traditional regimes, Stewart also reveals the piquant irony in the way that metaphysics hypnotized the most brilliant of the status quo's defenders--Gottfried Leibniz, who first eagerly absorbed Spinoza's thought, then recognized in it a perilous threat to traditional beliefs in God and immortality. Because Spinoza's doctrines have won acceptance from the architects of the modern world even as Leibniz's traditional religious beliefs have persisted among many who inhabit that world, the drama Stewart recounts will rivet readers skeptical and devout alike. *Bryce Christensen*
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Review

A most entertaining read about two extraordinary characters, which is both rich in history and overflowing with ideas. -- *David Edmonds and John Eidinow, authors of Wittgenstein's Poker*

A page-turner about jousting metaphysical ideas that casts the hallowed, hoary thinkers as warriors in a heated ideological battle. -- *New York Times Book Review*

Altogether excellent...Stewart's approach is au courant and quite convincing...He deserves a medal for avoiding jargon and opting instead for accessibility. -- *New York Post*, Michael Weiss

An absorbing study....Lays the ground for a new genre: rigorous, readable intellectual history. -- *The Economist*

An engaging portrait of...the most important and fascinating thinkers of the modern age...A brilliant job of illuminating...personal, intellectual...historical context. -- *Steven Nadler, author of Rembrandt's Jews and Spinoza*

Exhilarating....Stewart has achieved a near impossibility, creating a page-turner about jousting metaphysical ideas, casting thinkers as warriors...A fluid, even...jaunty writer. -- *New York Times Book Review*, Liesl Schillinger

Stewart goes far to rescue both men from a...dusty academic shelf, bringing them to life as enlightened humans. -- *Library Journal*, Francisca Goldsmith

Stewart...brings the men to life...A highly readable examination of two influential, but often overlooked, thinkers of the early Enlightenment. -- *Kirkus Reviews*

The best current untechnical introduction to their lives and philosophies...A thoroughly good book, hard to put down. -- *Literary Review*, A.C. Grayling

Witty, fascinating...Deftly intertwines the lives and works of Spinoza and Leibniz and gives an elegant...sometimes hilarious overview of their differences...delightful. -- *San Francisco Chronicle*, Lisa Montarelli

Users Review

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Catherine Walters:

Reading can called mind hangout, why? Because when you find yourself reading a book mainly book entitled *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World* your head will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in most aspect that maybe unknown for but surely can become your mind friends. Imaging each word written in a e-book then become one web form conclusion and explanation that will maybe you never get before. The *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World* giving you yet another experience more than blown away the mind but also giving you useful info for your better life in this particular era. So now let us explain to you the relaxing pattern at this point is your body and mind is going to be pleased when you are finished studying it, like winning a. Do you want to try this extraordinary shelling out spare time activity?

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experience in examining a book.

Martin Dowling:

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