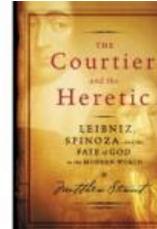


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Never A Harmless Affair

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Matthew Stewart's book, *The Courier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*, (W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), mentioned in this week's commentary, is a fascinating account of one of those rare historical events that has largely escaped modern attention. On November 18, 1676, two of the most significant minds in the Western world—and two of the founding figures of what became the Enlightenment—met in the Netherlands. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, known as one of the most brilliant minds of his day, visited Benedict Spinoza in The Hague in hopes of convincing Spinoza of the existence of a transcendent God. Amazingly, though almost nothing is known of what happened when Leibniz and Spinoza met (the only records being a few scribbles left by Leibniz), Stewart spins a virtual history of modern thought through the lens of this meeting.



As Stewart argues: “The conclusion that best fits the evidence available, then, is that Leibniz changed his mind about Spinoza at the very same time that he met Spinoza. Evidently, something happened when the two greatest philosophers of the seventeenth century sat down in the house on Paviljoensgracht—something possible unpleasant; something capable, in any sense, of dramatically altering the course of Leibniz’s life and the subsequent history of philosophy.”

In the end, Leibniz came to the conclusion that Spinoza was “truly Atheist.” As Stewart explains, “Modernity reduces God’s creation to a silent, colorless, odorless world of weights and measures—a pointless machine—or so it has seemed to many observers. Spinoza embraces this new world—indeed, with his doctrine that God is Nature, he attempts to deify it. But Leibniz does not believe in Spinoza’s new deity. And it is this rejection of Spinoza’s God that represents the first principle of Leibniz’s mature philosophy and the starting point of his own, unique response to modernity.”

Or, as Stewart later observes: “Modernity dethrones humankind. It reduces all our thoughts, purposes, and hopes to the object of scientific inquiry. It makes laboratory rats of us all. Spinoza actively embraces this collapse of the human into mere nature. Leibniz abhors it. Even more than he wants to convince us that God is good, Leibniz intends to demonstrate that we are the most special of all beings in nature.”

Matthew Stewart begins his book with this simple declarative sentence: “It is our good fortune to live in an age when philosophy is thought to be a harmless affair.” Stewart’s point in that sentence is to suggest that modern philosophers operate with little fear of political repression, legal consequences, or physical violence. In that sense, the statement is largely true. On the other hand, to understand that thought of Benedict Spinoza—and the course of philosophy in the modern world—is to be reminded that philosophy, though representative of the highest intellectual aspirations of humankind, is never merely “a harmless affair.”

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