

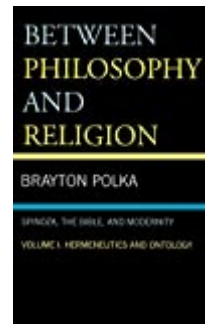
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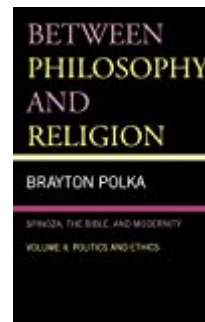


Travis L. Frampton. *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible.* London: Continuum International Publishing Group, Limited, 2006. 262 pp. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-567-02593-7.

Brayton Polka. *Between Philosophy and Religion, Vol. 1: Spinoza, the Bible, and Modernity.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006. 276 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-1601-2.



Brayton Polka. *Between Philosophy and Religion, Vol. 2: Spinoza, the Bible, and Modernity.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006. 333 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-1603-6.



Matthew Stewart. *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. 315 pp. \$25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-05898-7; \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-393-32917-9.

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Spinoza and the Claims of Modernity

In the last few decades, research on Baruch Spinoza has undergone a stunning transformation. It has seen not only an unprecedented increase in the number of studies produced but also a qualitative growth that has added depth, context, and sophistication to the field. In addition, discussions about Spinoza have broken down the traditionally narrow confines of what academic philosophy has in the last hundred years or so come to determine as the proper subject of philosophy—a universalist academic philosophy self-servingly invented in defiant disregard of anything that would challenge it. If, in some “philosophical” quarters, Spinoza is still considered an exotic affair—as G. W. F. Hegel so suggestively noted—recent work in the history of philosophy, in political theory, psychology, neuroscience, aesthetics, and religious studies has made it increasingly difficult to ignore modern philosophy’s most controversial *enfant terrible*. Spinoza, one is almost tempted to surmise, is in the process of finally receiving the attention his thought would demand. At least, so it might seem.

Although discussion of Spinoza’s significance has reached a level of sophistication about which we could only dream for other philosophers, my predicament in writing this review is one of audience. True, Spinoza seems to be on the verge of becoming popular, but one suspects that the more Spinoza research continues to grow, the more he might experience the fate of the classics: to remain an author, displayed but unread, celebrated but ignored. But then, Spinoza himself noted in the conclusion of his *Ethics* (1677) that great things were not only rare, but also difficult.

If Spinoza experts seem only to be read and heard by each other, nevertheless we can report that they are having a great conversation. Listening in on it could allow us to break down the walls that still so powerfully separate the disciplines despite—or occasionally because of—so much talk of interdisciplinarity. Spinoza’s status in comparison to his philosophical peers deserves attention because it captures in a telling manner the precarious relationship his conception of philosophy entertains to what is still considered conventional, traditional, and mainstream in the history of modern thought and philosophy. Often seen as the uncompromising outsider and outcast, Spinoza has become some sort of limit pole that marks the radical. But such a construction would remain oblivious to the central tenets that modern thought shares with Spinoza and which Spinoza could address philosophically in an often more convincing manner than others. Whether Spinoza serves as an absent presence, a figure who brings the philosophical challenges others

prefer to mute in a liberating way into the open, or a present absence, as the radical thinker who reclaims an ever-elusive otherness of that which historians of philosophy define as mainstream, the problem remains the same: how to rethink Spinoza’s significance historically and theoretically in the face of a tradition of historical and philosophical work that has stamped him as the radical, the heretic, the other. As attractive an appeal as such polarizing visions might command, their view ultimately distorts and neutralizes the critical force they wish to assign such a position.

In *The Courtier and the Heretic*, Matthew Stewart addresses this problem in an illuminating presentation of the difficult relationship between Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Spinoza that reads at times like the primal scene of Spinoza reception. In addition to offering a surprisingly translucent and accessible discussion of both Spinoza’s and Leibniz’s philosophies that engages with some of the best and most advanced theoretical discussions of these figures, *The Courtier and the Heretic* examines their difficult relationship, not just as a challenge of philosophy at the daybreak of modernity, but also as a telling constellation that stages the tensions of modernity. As the subtitle—*Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*—highlights, the author’s critical ambition makes it more than a popular introduction, as which it nonetheless can serve in a rather superb fashion. The unlikely juxtaposition of the career-obsessed and resourceful courtier Leibniz and the curiously independent dropout Spinoza provides more than a suggestive backdrop to explaining their so similar and yet so distinctly different philosophies. The book also examines the current fraught and difficult situation of how to assess Spinoza’s contributions and, as a consequence, the very question of how to define, imagine, or construct modernity itself. What distinguishes Stewart’s study from the customary variety of the popular book is that it does not just provide a more readable and rhetorically finer tuned version of works written in more “academic” style. Its eloquent directness and lightness of phrasing not only poses a notable challenge to established narratives of the history of philosophy, but also presents also an important supplement to the so-called academic efforts to reopen the question of the place of Spinoza in the history of philosophy as well as in modernity.

Interestingly, academics have reacted to the book with an initial display of reserve, after which they have hastened to point that they, too, recommend Stewart’s book enthusiastically to their students. However, they

express reserve regarding the book's academic virtues. Ironically, yet in a subtle but persuasive way, Stewart's book makes the question of the academic the very focus of its subject. After all, it presents a formidably researched case study of the complicated relationship of exchange between an academic entrepreneur of almost Faustian ambition, Leibniz, with the pointedly disengaged and "extra muros" Spinoza. The dialectics of the academic reveal that the distinction between academic and non-academic is, after all, non-academic. In a race for metaphysical truth, Leibniz stage-manages a drama against Spinoza. But the tale has not led to the scenes of recognition one might have hoped for. The more comic aspects of Stewart's account reveal the cognitive promise this drama holds but which the tragic mask has so long eclipsed. In other words, a more "academic" treatment could not do the kind of critical justice to the book's subject its title identifies in philosophic shorthand as the "Fate of God in the Modern World." In other words, Stewart does not so much challenge academic standards as demonstrate the necessity of pursuing alternatives if the academic approach itself seems to become a roadblock on the way to truth.

The irony is that if read with academic standards in mind, Stewart is often a better writer than many authors who, tenured or not, travel the road of conventional wisdom that they imagine contributes to "real" scholarship. But the same authors are often found to ignore the very research they proclaim so crucial just because they have not cited it. Stewart, on the other hand, not only has an impeccable apparatus that demonstrates a superb mastery that his argument relies on; his research also presents a level of scholarship rarely matched. Stewart's book is living proof that entertaining, amusing, and savvy presentation does not have to mean lack of accuracy. The short summary that follows will show that such a judgment is neither gratuitous nor superfluous. The precise philosophical significance of a philosopher becomes legible only through the lens of a method that attends to the historical specificity of that thinker's work.

The Courtier and the Heretic tells the story of a peculiar courtship, rejection, estrangement, and betrayal. Stewart's discussion focuses on the historic encounter so insistently desired and arranged by Leibniz. Leibniz later downplayed and occasionally even denied the relationship and claimed a purely cursory acquaintance with Spinoza, who was considered by most contemporaries one of the most dangerous thinkers of his century. Stewart argues that this encounter (only reluctantly granted by a guarded and wary Spinoza, whose

suspicions were shown to be justified) turned out to be a key event for Leibniz. Stewart argues that Leibniz's philosophical project can only be understood if seen in the context of his difficult relationship with Spinoza, against whose thought he developed his own particular brand of metaphysics. This perspective allows us to understand some aspects of Leibniz's thought and to account for the particular nature of the ensuing reception of Spinoza, something that Leibniz may have profoundly determined.

Although Leibniz and Spinoza represented complete contrasts of background, education, lifestyle, career, and even (as Stewart so eloquently portrays) manner of death, burial, and commemoration, Leibniz's philosophy rests on Spinoza's in a parasitic manner hard to ignore. Leibniz's response to the question of whether his monadology might not contain some traces of Spinozism has become famous in its categorical denial of any affinity with Spinoza. But this denial relies on a peculiar logic of rejection that tellingly forces Leibniz to acknowledge what he rejects. The reply has become famous and its dialectic logic has become emblematic of the ambivalence that defines the Spinoza reception of Leibniz. It has found quasi-verbatim repetitions in Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Hegel, and others. In 1714, Leibniz initiated this line of reception: "On the contrary, it is precisely by means of the monads that Spinozism is destroyed. For there are as many true substances—as many living mirrors of the Universe, always subsisting, as it were, or concentrated Universes—as there are Monads; whereas, according to Spinoza, there is but one sole substance. He would be right, if there were no Monads" (cited in Stewart, p. 278). The argument could have been suggested by Pangloss, Voltaire's parodistic impersonation of Leibniz in his novel *Candide* (1759). But the fact that in the interim, Spinoza has come to signify the default system of the various emerging philosophical systems stretching from Leibniz to Hegel highlights the central and profoundly critical importance Spinoza has continued to play for the development of modern philosophy. Leibniz, Stewart's study suggests, can therefore be occasionally read as an allegoric figure of this reception that allows us to grasp modernity as a challenging negotiation of contending claims rather than a unified vision. For Stewart, to succeed in the struggle of modernity is not to declare Spinoza's final victory over Leibniz, or vice versa, but to recognize the struggle between their opposing visions as modernity's defining but also liberating moment, a struggle between visions that might seem incompatible but is also grounded in a strikingly intimate affinity

of their concerns, dialectically engaged with each other. *The Courtier and the Heretic* captures thus the challenge of modernity as one of contention between two obsolete institutions that capture the tension that defines the modern world: the feudal paradigm of academic politics and the counter-ecclesiastic power of radical thought. The conversations between Leibniz and Spinoza on those November days in 1676 when Leibniz visited an already ill Spinoza (who died only months later, in February 1677) made, as Stewart helps us understand, a defining impact on the discourse of modernity.

While Stewart focuses on the secular implications of the “Fate of God in the Modern World,” in *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible*, Travis L. Frampton examines this fate as a pointedly interreligious experience. Frampton reminds his readers that many of Spinoza’s ideas regarding his Bible hermeneutics can only be properly understood if seen in the context of the ongoing debates among seventeenth-century Dutch Protestants, debates in which many of his friends, and particularly a group of his Collegiant friends—mostly Mennonites—assumed a central, active role. Frampton’s strategic concern is to reclaim Spinoza for a history of hermeneutics and Bible criticism that has traditionally been eager to keep him out of the story, either because the doctrinaire attitude would force Bible scholars to ignore if not altogether demonize his contribution to religious thought, or because Spinoza’s hermeneutic approach has a striking affinity with their own, a relationship that they have been anxious to hide. And Frampton is certainly right. It seems curious that Spinoza—who has played a crucial role in the rise of modern Bible criticism—is still excluded or only summarily mentioned in discussions of the discipline’s history. Equally, Frampton’s critique of ignoring Spinoza’s exposure to the contemporary debates that may have had a (still) underappreciated impact on his approach to the Bible and religious thought deserves serious attention. Many of the shifts in Spinoza’s arguments can be better grasped if seen in the context of contemporary debates and Frampton does a good job in highlighting these contexts. But if Frampton is rightly partisan in fleshing out the Protestant impulse that informs the push to a secularization that is not necessarily areligious or even atheistic (thus resisting a quick and easy equation of secularization with the irreligious attitudes so widespread in discussions on secularization), such a reminder is not as new as it seems. Hegel, who argued that modern German thought begins with Martin Luther’s act of emancipation, and Heinrich Heine, who wrote a variation on this theme in his intellectual history,

have made this point most succinctly. And Hegel’s masterful dialectics of faith and reason in the *Phenomenology* (1807) is a spirited reminder that secularization is a distinctly religious process. Frampton would thus find in Hegel an ally in the very Protestant tradition he is eager to foreground.

Frampton’s call to revisit the process of secularization not simply in terms of an agnostic and materialist standpoint, but also to acknowledge the profoundly genuine religious and resolutely spiritual concerns that urged many in the wake of the Reformation to develop a historical criticism of the Bible not despite but, on the contrary, precisely because of their uncompromising allegiance to faith, deserves critical attention. Indeed, as Spinoza understood, perhaps more than any other modern thinker, it is impossible to grasp the problem of secularization without attending to the very religious underpinnings of this process. Spinoza’s introduction of the critical term “theological-political” highlights his philosophically central concern that the secular and religious can only be separated if their reciprocally constitutive nexus is recognized. Spinoza’s sophisticated hermeneutic represents a key part of this argument.

Spinoza’s early move to Rijnsburg, the “cradle of Collegiantism,” supports in this context less the myth that Spinoza sought the tranquility and solitude of the countryside than the possibility that, as Frampton suggestively argues, Spinoza moved deliberately into a community far enough from Amsterdam to be undisturbed by the distraction of metropolitan life but right at the center of a spiritual renewal that was progressively emancipatory and embraced the individual as autonomous and spiritually independent. The proximity to nearby Leiden, the intellectual center of Cartesianism, may have been attractive as well. But if this would have been the main concern, Spinoza might just as well have chosen to live there. Frampton’s reminder that the particulars of the Rijnsburg community are crucial for understanding Spinoza’s development becomes particularly striking if we think of the biographical information we have about the thinker’s exchanges with his landlord and his family. Their active involvement as Collegiants not only explains why Spinoza turns out to have been less condescending than often assumed, it also illuminates comments of his preserved in the scarce biographical accounts. When, for example, he was asked by his landlady whether she was doing the right thing by going to church, Spinoza responded by saying that she need not worry. This statement was read in the particular context in which this scene played, as neither patronizing nor indifferent. In his view, go-

ing to a church meeting of the Collegiants was, after all, an action entirely in agreement with his own views and convictions. This point, minute as it may seem, forces us to reconsider the problematic assumptions informing the view that a politically guarded Spinoza withheld his true views and hid them behind some sort of esotericism. In light of this information, the operative line of the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric on which this view hinges—assuming, for the sake of argument, that it were tenable at all—would have to be redrawn altogether. For Frampton, Spinoza emerges as defiantly “Protestant” as the distinction between religious and irreligious, or theologically correct and false, proves to have been increasingly misapplied in scholarship on Spinoza’s critical impulses.

If Frampton’s study lacks the compass to become the definitive work on the subject, and if it leaves the readers who expect to learn more about the mutual relationship between Spinoza and historical criticism of the Bible disappointed with regard to the limited scope of the Protestant context, still, the work remains a thoughtful reminder that both the history of modern Bible hermeneutics and Spinoza scholarship can no longer afford to ignore each other. Highlighting the urgent need for more historical and philological work on these questions, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* succeeds in arguing its cause convincingly: unless the theological implications of Spinoza’s project come into view on their own critical terms, both the history of hermeneutics and Spinoza research will remain incomplete. Until the critical significance of the “theological-political” nexus comes into view as the crucial moment of tension and contention, any theory of secularization and modernity must necessarily fail by relapsing back into the naïve proposition of assuming a clear-cut distinction can be found between faith and reason. Spinoza’s approach to the “theological-political” problem, however, is resolutely non-contradictory and addresses this distinction rather as one of mutually enabling opposites that complement rather than cancel each other out.

Brayton Polka’s two-volume study, *Between Philosophy and Religion: Spinoza, the Bible, and Modernity*, addresses this issue. Recognizing Spinoza’s philosophy as distinctively unique, Polka offers an original approach. Taking Spinoza’s critical stance seriously, Polka replaces the categories operative in traditional philosophies with the distinctions Spinoza introduced to expose and challenge the problematic nature of the fundamental notions and categories of conventional thought. This task calls for a new way of examining Spinoza’s work, which

can no longer be compartmentalized under the ancient headings “philosophy” and “religion,” or politics and ethics. Instead, Polka chooses to consider Spinoza’s work through three works: his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), *Ethics*, and *Tractatus Politicus* (1675/6). His approach reveals a constellation that highlights the deep links between ethics and politics as a constitutive element of Spinoza’s project.

The central tenet of Polka’s approach is his provocative but at the same time polemically engaging proposition that Spinoza can only be adequately understood if he is recognized as both resolutely modern and biblical at the same time. Polka’s contention is bold in that it engages in an uncompromisingly pointed argument for the constitutive reciprocal relationship of modernity with the biblical traditions. Bringing the argument to a head, as it were, Polka’s dialogical paradigm presents a strikingly contemporary Spinoza liberated from the straitjacket of a binary logic incapable of comprehending modernity as profoundly biblical and the biblical traditions as profoundly modern. With Polka’s approach in mind, Stewart’s staging of Leibniz’s interminable controversy with Spinoza highlights the German philosopher’s unwillingness to embrace this paradigm openly. Leibniz failed to acknowledge and address this issue explicitly; instead, his system responded to it surreptitiously. But, in domesticating its dialectics, Leibniz revealed the limits of his approach. For Polka, at least, Spinoza is the philosopher with the more promising paradigm, which embraces modernity not in opposition to the biblical tradition but along with it.

Polka organizes his material in an original manner. Focusing on the three works mentioned above as Spinoza’s key texts, Polka brings out the continuing themes that define Spinoza’s thought. Through an examination of particular parts and passages in the context of the corresponding sections in the other two texts, Spinoza’s philosophy gains a consistency and coherence in structure and design. This coherence shows how outdated criticisms are that argue his approach is metaphysically old-fashioned. Spinoza’s critically pointed reasoning assumes sharper contours. In stressing the systematic coherence of the three texts, Polka succeeds in highlighting the philosophically consistent and suggestive framework on which these different texts rest.

Rather than three different and distant works, these contributions can be read, as Polka argues, as corresponding parts of one coherent philosophical project. Read this way, the three texts illuminate each other as

they address different concerns. The merit of Polka's study lies in its highlighting of this structure of mutually illuminating satellite texts without stipulating a doctrinaire core. Rather, Polka's approach brings out the philosophically critical impetus of Spinoza's thought that resists doctrinaire reduction and grasps its subject matter by the particular method and type of argumentation it requires. As the three texts approach the particular aspects of their inquiry, Spinoza advances alternatives to the conventions of philosophy that redefine the very nature of the categories not only of ethics and politics, but also of religion, and the attendant concepts that have conventionally defined them.

Polka's approach is most striking where he examines Spinoza's central arguments in detail. Tracing the finely spun threads of Spinoza's line of argumentation, Polka recovers behind the supposedly stone-hewn simplicity of logic a supple sense for the dialectics that define the basic distinctions, categories, and concepts that conventional thought has sought to reduce to easily manageable, atomic units. It is not just Spinoza's central conception of nature that challenges the most dearly held desire of Greek philosophy for simplicity and transparency. Equally, faith and reason can, in Spinoza's view, no longer be seen as simple and self-contained ideas. Rather, Spinoza's analysis in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* as well as in the *Ethics* and eventually in the *Tractatus Politicus* reminds the reader that they are intimately tied to the psychodynamic process of the work of the affects—and Polka reminds his readers of the non-translatability of this term, which means neither simply the passions nor merely the emotions. The relationship in which reason and faith thus relate to each other is, for Spinoza, not defined by the logic of contradiction, according to which only either reason or faith can be true, but by a dialectics that recognizes not only the possibility of coexistence of reason and faith, but their ultimate inseparability—since neither can be conceived without the other. More critically, as Polka reminds us, Spinoza solicits in every move the acknowledgment that faith and reason do not simply coexist but must be recognized as mutually constitutive moments of our mind's *modus operandi*. This recognition makes Spinoza at the same time both modern and biblical; it also links these two qualities profoundly, as Polka stresses. In a careful reading of the first part of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Polka highlights the way in which Spinoza develops his argument step by step through his hermeneutic. The second part of the first volume consists in a stunning reinterpretation of the ontological proof of the existence of God. In a bold depar-

ture from the conventional reading, Polka argues for the recognition of the relevance of the ontological proof for the existence of God as the paradigm for rethinking the relationship between thought and existence in general as the conceptual framework on which Spinoza's ontological conception rests as a whole.

In Polka's reading, this argument is profoundly dialectical, as it makes thought and existence mutually dependent on each other. Polka's point, however, is not to construe Spinoza to have propounded ontological propositions, but to address the dialectical framework that produces thought and existence, the divine and the human, and the spiritual and the rational as reciprocally defining each other. Spinoza's move allows him to highlight the complex dialectical relationship that determines even concepts as basic and fundamental as these—the central theoretical move that his text solicits. While often noticed and remarked on, this strategy becomes for Polka the center of his attention in volume 1. From his analysis flow a number of elucidations. One of the most important is his superb reconstruction of the hermeneutic Spinoza develops in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. But this reading provides also a new approach toward comprehending Spinoza's ontology.

While volume 1 examines the intimate nexus of hermeneutics and ontology and spells out the theoretical consequences of this nexus, volume 2 traces the equally intimate link that makes politics and ethics mutually constitutive notions whose genealogical nexus requires critical theoretical attention. With eye-opening consistency, Polka traces Spinoza's ethical-political vision, which is based, on the ontological ground level, on the notorious *conatus*, the basic drive that cannot be reduced to instinct or desire but designates the dynamics of the life-force that drives nature and human beings. Examining Spinoza's conception of the *conatus*, recognizing the critical difference in Spinoza's view between human nature and nature in general makes it possible to appreciate the fact that Spinoza not only parts company with other thinkers when it comes to the consequences of classical metaphysics, but that his very basic notions of freedom, autonomy, individual, law, sin, and sovereignty are fundamentally different as well. Matters that present unbridgeable challenges for most critics and philosophers—such as the notion that democracy and freedom are not only compatible but rest mutually on each other; that the biblical and the universal do not mutually exclude each other but might coexist, or can enable the full potential of each other; that the solidity of the state, equally, hinges on the freedom of speech and thought; that the individ-

ual is free only in civil society—all these matters are in Spinoza not disabling contradictions but enabling paradoxes. For Spinoza, they do not cancel each other but become constitutively linked parts of a complex dialectic construction. As a consequence—or point of departure—the fundamental link between the political and the ethical represents in Spinoza not a goal one day to be realized but the hermeneutic key necessary for theorizing the nature of individuals, their place in society, and their interactions. To reduce one to the other would simply be to undermine the dialectic that makes them possible in the first place. Also, while Spinoza is occasionally celebrated as an unfaltering universalist, Polka reminds us that at the heart of Spinoza’s conception of reason rests the recognition that like everything else in human nature, reason might be universally found and shared, but not com-

mand universal validity. Spinoza’s insistence that revelation remains as a historical necessity, despite all the hermeneutic savvy that provides the key to interpretation, makes him both, as Polka stresses, strikingly modern and biblical and therefore contemporary.

The three works under review remind us not only that theorizing modernity requires us to revisit the profound nexuses of reason and religion, ethics and politics, and hermeneutics and ontology—an insight that has once again moved to the center of current critical attention— but that this insight has its own particular history. Spinoza’s work holds important clues for imagining modernity no longer as a universal promise and solution but as a creative challenge for rethinking the universal and the particular as irreducibly complementary aspects of freedom and liberation.

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