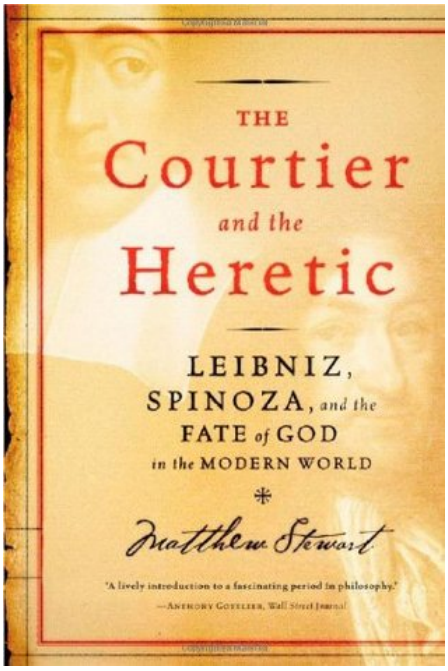

The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza & the Fate of God in the Modern World

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From Publisher's 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.

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

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From Reader Review The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza & the Fate of God in the Modern World for online ebook

Jess says

This book is one of those that makes you stop, put it down, write things down, and start asking large questions about the nature of things. It's about a short meeting between two philosophers 400 years ago that can be seen as symbolic of the notion of the nature of God in the modern world. On one side, Spinoza argues that God is 'Nature' -- not a judging, bearded fellow who punishes us, but more like a Buddhist notion of the underlying architecture of everything. On the other side is Leibnitz, who was so shaken by the implications of a world without God, he spent much of his life trying to disprove Spinoza by contemplating intricate systems of 'modes' to prove humanity is special.

Makes you wonder about existential questions, why we don't study philosophy as much as we used to, and how such inquiry can help us understand why we are and who we are.

S says

Spinoza's God is not a supernatural being that stands outside the world and creates it. Rather, his God exists in the world and subsists together with what it creates. God is the fundamental aspect of everything. “All things, I say, are in God and move God.”

Everything is contingent on a chain of causality. To be free is to act in accordance with one’s own nature. To be blessed is to realize the union that the mind has with the whole of nature. We find happiness not through some unfathomable mystery or trying to reach some other-world. Instead we find happiness through the slow and steady accumulation of many small truths; and the most important truth is that we need expect nothing more in order to find happiness in this world.

Spinoza radically rejected Descartes’ dualism, which was an attempt to conserve old truths in the face of new threats (by isolating the mind from the physical world the central doctrines of orthodoxy -- immortality of the soul, free will, humans are special-- could not be taken down by scientific investigation). Spinoza said humans are not special, rather a part of nature, the same way that stones and trees are. The mind is not distinct from the body. The mind is just an abstraction -- an idea, not a thing. The Mind and body operate in parallel because they are really the same thing seen from two angles, like two sides of the same coin.

Leibniz aimed to reunite the Protestant and Catholic churches and to establish “the religious organization of the earth”. His God is an agent, decision maker who faces options and makes choices. The human being is special and actually the point and substance of the world. The mind and body are independent.

“The two philosophers, after all, were nothing if not natural enemies. One was the ultimate insider, the other a double exile; one was an orthodox Lutheran from conservative Germany, the other an apostate Jew from licentious Holland. Above all, one was sworn to uphold the same theocratic order that the other sought to demolish.” But maybe they weren’t contraries rather different faces of the same philosophical coin.

Erik Graff says

Too often philosophy is taught in the abstract, reflecting either a certain idealism on the part of the instructor or an ignorance of the history of the text and its author. As I.F. Stone did for Socrates, contextualizing Plato, so Stewart does for Leibnitz and Spinoza,.

The focus of The Courtier and the Heretic is upon the relationship between the two philosophers who both corresponded and, during one brief period, conversed. Stewart's thesis is that Leibnitz' work was very much influenced by Spinoza despite the younger man's public disparagement of his atheism. The treatment of this thesis is conducted on three levels. First, Stewart traces the actual links between them, direct and indirect. Second, he compares their ideas. Third, he concocts a psychological explanation. The influence is entirely in one direction, Spinoza on Leibnitz, the former having had the misfortune of dying young, shortly after their encounter.

This book could be dangerous reading for anyone not already familiar with its subjects. I came out of continental philosophy very much impressed with both Spinoza and Leibnitz, not so impressed with Descartes, the one who posed some of the problems they dealt with. Stewart's book favors Spinoza, both as a person and as a thinker, and disparages Leibnitz. If I had read The Courtier and the Heretic prior to reading the primary texts of its subjects I would be disposed to ignore Leibnitz because of Stewart's ad hominem arguments. In fact, however, we know quite a bit about Leibnitz' personal and professional lives and very little of Spinoza's, giving us broad grounds to attack the former and little to go on as regards the latter.

Rick Patterson says

While the idea of reading a dual biography of 17th century philosophers may not immediately strike you as an entertaining investment of your time, this certainly repays the effort. Matthew Stewart is obviously thoroughly immersed in the philosophies he must deal with by way of introducing the characters of both Spinoza and Leibniz, and he does a masterful job of making the often abstruse ideas relatively clear to the attentive reader; however, he is much more interested in making his case regarding Spinoza's paradigm-shifting influence on Leibniz and, along the way, making the elder philosopher a much more attractive personality than the younger. Clearly, Stewart just plain likes Spinoza, and he wants us to like him too. Baruch de Spinoza is justifiably considered the father of modern philosophical thought, a man whose rigorous analytical mind led him to conclusions that remain revolutionary to this day. Instead of lumbering through the *Ethics* and guiding us from observation to observation, Stewart cuts dramatically to the chase, as in this passage: "A final (and for his contemporaries, dreadful) consequence of Spinoza's theory of the mind is that there is no personal immortality. For, to the extent that mental acts always have a correlate in physical states, then when the physical states turn to dust, so, too, does the mind. In other words, inasmuch as the mind is the idea of the body, then when a particular body ceases to exist, so, too, does its mind" (172). So much for most of the world's religions, dismissed as so much groundless wish-fulfillment by a man who knew very well what effect this would have on the society in which he lived.
Stewart goes on: "The ruthless quashing of personal immortality reveals again the extent to which Spinoza's metaphysics is linked to his radical politics. The theologians, says Spinoza, shamelessly use the prospect of eternal reward and damnation to cow the masses. If Spinoza is right, then philosophy since Plato is not just wrong, but an abomination, a fraud of global dimensions intended to excuse oppression in this world with the empty promise of justice in the afterlife" (172). This is earth-shaking stuff. No wonder the organized religions of his day sought so strenuously to quash any publication of Spinoza's ideas after his death. Stewart

provides a very funny description of their desperate activity: "The Vatican committee resolved to spare no effort in suppressing the insurgency [the posthumous publication of Spinoza's *Ethics*]. They alerted the vicar of the Dutch Catholic Church, who assigned the case to a leading priest in Amsterdam, who in turn called on all the denominations to contribute fellow spiritual detectives to his squad. On the canals of Amsterdam at the time, it seems, a visitor might well have espied the proverbial boat with a rabbi, a Protestant minister, and a Catholic priest" (216). It is impossible to miss Stewart's delight in Spinoza's heresies, nor his obviously profound respect for the man's lasting influence.
Gottfried Leibniz, on the other hand, fares considerably less well in Stewart's hands. The obvious genius Wunderkind who seems to have mastered many disciplines and has left innumerable volumes of his thoughts on just about every subject that can be imagined is, in the end, presented as a sycophantic glory-seeker who lives long enough to become an ignored has-been whose funeral is unattended and whose grave is unmarked. Stewart is careful to describe Leibniz's passing in suffocatingly close and nauseating detail, which is as good an illustration of Sic Transit Gloria Mundi as one could hope for.
But Stewart saves his most harsh criticism for Leibniz's obvious rejection of Spinoza's philosophy, ideas which were much too revolutionary to be entertained by someone who was boot-lickingly enamored of the conservative status quo, particularly that embodied by a despot like Louis XIV. It is impossible to take seriously Leibniz's reactionary (in more ways than one) invention of monads as his response to the intolerable clarity of Spinoza. Stewart depicts a man whose most precious and sacred dreams have been revealed as vain illusions and who, rather than waking up to unavoidable reality, pulls his covers over his head and tries to sing himself back to sleep with nonsense lullabies. It is not very kind, to say the least.
But it is definitely entertaining, perhaps against my own expectations.

Louise says

Through the personal stories of the two well known philosophers, author Matthew Stuart provides a window on how medieval philosophy broke into modern. The difficulties for those ahead of their times is apparent: Gottfried Leibniz enjoyed public acclaim and status while Baruch Spinoza who dared break with convention was branded as a heretic.

Both had had early experiences of rejection: Spinoza’s case was a complete expulsion from his community. In response, Spinoza made a simple living with the trade of lens grinding and made a few friends, some, thinkers like himself. He dedicated his free time to his writing which was considered atheistic and under constant attack.

Leibniz, stung by not getting a coveted university post, faced the world with manic energy. He forced himself into the limelight and attached himself to wealthy patrons. He worked in mathematics (inventing a calculating machine; independently discovered calculus 10 years after Newton), politics (drafted and promoted a French war in Egypt), ecumenism (created a plan to re-unite Protestants and Catholics) mining, alchemy, genealogy (paid very well over two years of travel and produced nothing) and studied things Chinese.

Stewart shows how Leibniz took advantage of the approbation Spinoza suffered for being ahead of his time. He shows Leibniz joining the anti-Spinoza chorus while taking Spinoza’s thought and spinning it around so that it would look more incremental and original to him. Leibniz's own words on page 193 sum it up: “nothing should be demonstrated in it that which does not clash too much with approved opinions.”

For the general reader, the Leibniz's interesting life makes the book. Stewart presents the points of

philosophy in the plainest English possible, but the book remains a niche read; that is, if you are not interested in early modern philosophy, it will not rope you in.

For those interested in the topic, you see how Leibniz was in competitive obsession with Spinoza (even beyond the grave) and essentially plagiarized him. You will appreciate the research and interpretive abilities of the author.

Robin Friedman says

Two Approaches To Modernity

In November, 1676, the German polymath and philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646 - 1716) visited the Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632 -1677) at the Hague. Leibniz, age 30, was a rising and ambitious young man who had already, independently of Isaac Newton, invented the calculus. Spinoza, age 44, had been excommunicated from the synagogue in Amsterdam at the age of 24. He had published a notorious work, the "Theological-Political Treatise", and his as-yet unpublished masterpiece, the "Ethics", had been widely if surreptitiously circulated among learned people. At the time of his meeting with Leibniz, Spinoza had only three months to live.

In "The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World"" (2005), Matthew Stewart takes as his pivot-point the Leibniz-Spinoza meeting. Little is known of what occurred at this meeting because Spinoza left no record of it and Leibniz rarely spoke of it. Nevertheless, Stewart uses this meeting as a fulcrum to illuminate the thought of these two philosophers and to show how their views developed into the two broad and competing responses to modernity and to the secular world that remain with us today. Stewart has the gift of presenting his story articulately and well. He combines elements of storytelling, historical narrative, and philosophy in an appealing and accessible fashion. He also shows a great dealing of learning and reflection. Stewart received a doctorate in philosophy from Oxford and is an independent scholar in California.

Spinoza was a self-contained individual. Stewart portrays him as the first and the prototypical secular thinker in philosophy. Stewart rightly places great emphasis on the "Theological-Political Treatise", a work which until recently has not received the attention it deserves. Stewart emphasizes the political character of the work, its goal of freeing the state from the claims of revealed religion, its commitment to the value of free inquiry, and its leanings towards democracy. In this work, Spinoza used a historical approach to interpreting the Bible with the purpose of clearing away supernaturalism and establishing a basis for what became modern, secular life. In the Ethics, Spinoza rejected a transcendent God with a will and with commands for the good conduct of people. Spinoza equated God with nature and with the scientific laws of the universe. Human beings were subject to scientific law and could be studied, rather than constituting a realm separate from nature. The mind was tied to the activities of the body. Human ethics and well-being were naturalistically based.

Unlike Spinoza, Leibniz valued worldly success and the approval of others. For Stewart, Leibniz' mature philosophy, as set forth in the "Monadology" and elsewhere, developed as a response to and rejection of Spinoza's secularism. Leibniz argues for a transcendent God with a free moral will, for a plurality of independent and autonomous substances called monads, and for the immortality of the soul. Stewart places greater emphasis of the meeting between Leibniz and Spinoza, and on Spinoza's alleged influence on Leibniz , than would some historians of philosophy. But Stewart's philosophical approach doesn't appear to me to

turn upon his reading of the historical record of Leibniz' actual contact with Spinoza. Rather, Stewart finds in Leibniz the first modern thinker who attempted, reactively, to restore many aspects of earlier, largely religious, thought, including a transcendent God, autonomous persons, and an afterlife, that have no place in Spinoza's thought. Thus, for Stewart, Leibniz is a distinctively modern thinker and the first to try to reconcile the world of physical science and physical law, with a form of transcendent, religious life not controlled by the dictates of science.

I found Stewart's reading highly challenging and suggestive, and he goes on to characterize the subsequent 300 year course of philosophy as a continuation of the basic divide between Spinoza and Leibniz. Thus, the basic issue that modern philosophy has addressed is the way in which meaning, purpose, and value are to be found in a secular world. Stewart finds that the dominant trend of modern philosophy has been an attempt to follow and strengthen Leibniz' approach and to answer Spinoza. He writes:

"Kant's attempt to prove the existence of a `noumenal' world of pure selves and things in themselves on the basis of a critique of pure reason, the nineteenth-century-spanning efforts to reconcile teleology with mechanism that began with Hegel; Bergson's claim to have discovered a world of life forces immune to the analytical embrace of modern science; Heidegger's call for the overthrow of western metaphysics in order to recover the truth about Being; and the whole `postmodern' project of deconstructing the phallocentric tradition of western thought- all of these diverse trends in modern thought have one thing in common: they are at bottom forms of the reaction to modernity first instantiated by Leibniz." (p. 311)

Stewart might also have included the American philosopher William James, whom I have been studying recently, in this latter group. Stewart does not come to a firm conclusion regarding the merits of the Spinozian and Leibnitzian positions, but he notes a strong tendency among most thinkers and most individuals to try to work a compromise between them. But to me Spinoza appears to have the last word with his famous conclusion that "fine things are as difficult as they are rare".

Robin Friedman

Lauren Albert says

The book is not an easy read--it couldn't be as long as it aimed to explain the philosophy of the two principal antagonists. But I think he makes a good effort at clarity. Two things annoyed me--his sarcasm and his repetitive argument about Leibniz--they detract from a good book. His sarcasm can be funny as when he said of Leibniz: "he [Leibniz] was always more interested in creating a sensation than in having one.” 137 But it gets to be a distraction from the story and therefore an irritant. His psychological analysis of Leibniz--his argument that Leibniz's philosophy and much of his life is a struggle with Spinoza--gets a bit repetitive and could have been told by the story itself and the conclusion.

Maria says

This is a huge misrepresentation of the thought of Leibniz and even the philosophy of Spinoza. I count this book as a work of pure fiction, as it focuses more on the dead skeletons of each philosopher's thoughts than on their ideas as living, evolving things. Countless generations of people have equated Leibniz's thought to merely the metaphysics of the Monadology when this is in fact not the case. Moreover it is ridiculous to

argue that a single meeting of less than a week had an overarching impact on Leibniz's thought. It ridiculously subordinates the entire, complex thinking of a long, rich life to one formalizing experience when in fact Leibniz's thought went through many, equally important (though not equally recognized) stages and continued to evolve after the Monadology, unable to crystallize in another form due only to the philosopher's death.

Leibniz is a laughable historical figure. It is true that he obfuscated his own views. But he wasn't the only one to do so in a time when the Church (even the Protestant Churches) made life very difficult for all independent thinkers. Not everyone wants to live a life like Spinoza. So although Leibniz did often misrepresent or orthodoxize himself, such practices were necessary for self-preservation. And laughing at Leibniz's schemes (draining the silver mines for instance) is certainly a rational reaction. But laughing at him in fondness is very different than the sort of immature needling Stewart stoops to in his book.

I read this entire book because I thought that maybe Stewart would eventually present a more equal picture of the two philosophers. And it was an entertaining read. BUT, it is not the sort of thing one should read expecting to know significantly more about philosophy and Stewart's words should be taken with a heavy dose of salt. It makes me sad to see so many people who normally don't like or don't know anything about philosophy review this book enthusiastically because I know, as I'm sure do others, that it is NOT an accurate representation. A popularizing book must be entertaining, and this one certainly is, but it entertains at the expense of one thinker and to the detriment of the other. AND it's a shame that the author couldn't try to be more fair. A valid argument for Spinoza > Leibniz could be made without bashing Leibniz. Moreover, there are certainly reasons why Leibniz > Spinoza in some respects as well.

For a more balanced look at Leibniz, the book by Nicholas Jolley is superb and entertaining. Even if the philosophy is too difficult to follow at times, one can gain a fairly unbiased knowledge of Leibniz's life and achievements from this book.

Andrew Spear says

The Courtier and the Heretic is a magnificent book that blends a remarkable depth of scholarship with good writing and a sensitivity for human beings, history and philosophy. Stewart’s telling of the portion of the history of modern philosophy having to do with Spinoza and Leibniz is interesting in a number of ways. Most striking, perhaps, is his identification of Spinoza as the first philosopher to truly appreciate the implications of modern science and the reformation for politics, religion and human life. Spinoza, on Stewart’s account, puts forward the metaphysical picture of a detached and uncaring God who is for all intents and purposes identical with nature, understood as the sum total of efficient casual processes at work in the universe. Human beings are just one of the many modes of this single substance, God or nature, with no special place or purpose in existence, but nevertheless capable of achieving a certain kind of happiness, collectively and individually, in the context of a modern secular state; one not ruled by the theocratic fanatics who were still at work during the lifetimes of Spinoza and Leibniz.
If Spinoza is the first fully modern philosopher, then on Stewart’s account, Leibniz is the first great reaction against modernity. For reasons both intellectual and philosophical, Stewart paints a portrait of Leibniz’s entire philosophical project as ultimately being a reaction to the modern philosophical world view that he encountered, first in the writings then in the person of Spinoza when the two met in the Hague in November 1676 and after. On Stewart’s account, the key to understanding Leibniz’s primary philosophical doctrines as

they developed over the course of his entire life after 1676 is to view them as so many attempts to respond in a philosophically coherent way to the doctrines of Spinoza.

Whereas it is common, at least amongst philosophers, to view Spinoza and Leibniz as epistemological allies, heirs to the rationalist tradition of Descartes and squarely opposed to the empiricism of the British, Stewart paints a picture according to which Leibniz and Spinoza are the true antipodes in the context of modern philosophy, with Spinoza falling on the side of (and quite possibly strongly influencing) the empiricist tradition, and Leibniz holding out for a rationalist, or more properly a scholastic revival in response to modern philosophy and science. Stewart substantiates this view by focusing on the political motivations and implications of the philosophies of Spinoza and Leibniz respectively, rather than on their views of and arguments in epistemology or metaphysics primarily. While my own view is that it is not fair to ignore, in ways that Stewart seems at times to do, the self-proclaimed arguments, epistemological, metaphysical or otherwise that particular philosophers put forward, nevertheless Stewart makes a very compelling case, one substantiated by a great deal of research, so I can only say that my jury is out until further notice on the question of the accuracy of his thesis that both Leibniz and Spinoza were motivated as much by politics as by reason in their metaphysics and epistemologies.

Finally, no discussion of Stewart's book could be complete without mentioning what is really its primary focus, the characters and interaction of two of the modern period's most outstanding philosophers. Whereas Stewart paints Spinoza as the self-sufficient sage par excellence, both materially and spiritually, his portrait of Leibniz is that of an enterprising and ambiguously self-serving courtier, unable to be satisfied with what he has available to him either materially or psychologically. Indeed, when it comes to the personalities of his two philosophers, Stewart could be said to pit the self-sufficiency of Spinoza against the "neediness" of Leibniz, while yet retaining a remarkable respect for and interest in both men. While one could complain that Stewart paints a rather unflattering picture of Leibniz, his analysis rarely amounts to more than recounting known historical facts, often as witnessed in Leibniz's own letters and private notes. But further, Stewart exhibits a genuine fascination with and sympathy for the personality of Leibniz, one that makes up, almost if not entirely, for his sometimes harsh treatment of the philosopher's motives and life.

A point that Stewart does not devote much time to, but one that his book raises rather sharply, is the question not just of the clash between the modern world, the per-modern world and the 'post-modern' reaction to modernity (which, as yet, has not truly been able to be anything more than a reaction; it is not at all clear that we live in a post-modern world at this point in history), but rather of the type of person whom we are likely to find associated with each. Stewart portrays Spinoza as a kind of stoical latter-day Socrates, whereas Leibniz, the reaction to modernity and partial champion of a by-gone era, comes off as rather conflicted and self-serving. What is interesting about this contrast is that there are a number of considerations suggesting that just the opposite will, in general, be the case. Few in the modern world are the Spinozas who, while propounding the purposelessness of nature and of human existence, are nevertheless able to advocate a kind of genuine virtue and human solidarity. Something rings hollow in the ruminations of a Dennett or a Dawkins that, for some reason or other, seems to have life in the philosophy and person of Spinoza. And, by contrast, it is precisely the Leibnizs, on Stewart's telling, the individuals who react against the modern world in various ways attempting to re-establish something of the significance of human existence in the universe, who in general are able to exhibit a kind of unity and integrity of character and purpose. It is the modern world view that renders individuals fragmented and self-serving, while that of the ancients and medievals lends unity of purpose and action, an integrity of character in the face of choice, that seems to be what is so admirable in, for example, Spinoza. Thus if, as Stewart suggests, we must all make a choice between Leibniz and Spinoza, it is worth noting that the choice between the philosophy, politics and religion that he takes each to be expounding on the one hand, and that between the character and style of life that each embodied on the other, may in fact be exactly inverse, at least for most of us.

Aria says

All the Spinoza bits were good. The Leibniz bits were so boring i ended up skimming those chapters completely. Should have just skipped them altogether. Spinoza is interesting enough w/o needing to contrast him with some character of the age. If the aim was to review the philosophical climate of the day, I'd have to say that it could have been done in a way that wasn't so dull. The presentation here of Leibniz himself I do feel is merely to have something to set Spinoza's thoughts in contrast w/, but as the two idea sets are so utterly different, it is akin to comparing apples and broccoli.
Short summation on Leibniz: he decided he wanted to believe in an external God and thus having decided such, he proceeded to put on airs toward philosophically setting forth some so-called "proof" of said concept. Obvious rubbish way to pretend at objectivity. He was dull, and typical of the sort of person who to this day still would carry on in this manner. He was not needed in this book, and I would not recommend it for reading.
I marked this as a 2-star "okay," b/c the Spinoza bits are still worth the read.

Jared Colley says

This book was a disappointment. Sometimes it's hard to tell with philosophical biographies. They look appealing, suggesting promise - but oftentimes fail due to cheap literary gimicks. Upon reflecting, I can think of two things wrong with this book: its reductive, preliminary thesis and its reliance on kitschy marketing ploys.

The book investigates the lives of Spinoza & Leibniz and attempts to make sense of the thinkers' intellectual relationship. The author, however, spends way too much energy trying to convince us of some sort of secretive, inverse relationship between the thinkers and their opposing philosophies (Leibniz was supposedly secretly enamored whith Spinoza's atheistic philosophy, for instance). Yet, he fails to make any concrete connections between his various suggestive claims.

There is no direct, thoughtful engagement with either thinker's texts - nor is there any satisfactory explanations of their philosophical systems. There is simply need-to-know information, related for the purpose of granting his speculative narrative some remote sense of plausibility.

This book, in my opinion, is partly the result of a new bad trend emerging in the field of literary/philosophical biography. The first one I read - that fits this trend - was *Wittgenstein's Poker*, a book that focuses on a heated encounter between philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein & Karl Popper. Although, such books can be interesting (there is good one about Camus & Sartre, for instance), they often revert into a kind of sensationalist journalism, reveling in the biographical drama without seriously engaging the thoughtful disputes at hand. I will say, *W's Poker* succeeded in ways that this book fails. But as for this book, I cannot offer any recommendation.

Jonfaith says

Matthew Stewart reminds us every few pages that Spinoza and Leibniz met in Holland during 1676. We are also informed that the world of their meeting was one of turmoil. The Reformation left Europe disenchanted, literally removing the catholic magic out of life and leaving everyone scurrying to a camp or church.

Spinoza's ancestors had been expelled from Spain and Leibniz grew up in a Germany blackened by the Thirty Year War. Spinoza lived simply, distrusted the hordes and aimed for a life of the mind. Leibniz was a prodigy who required constant confirmation and affection. He also liked money. Leibniz famously grew up to be a foil for both Newton and Voltaire: the best of all possible worlds and a calculus co-write remain on his CV. Spinoza is regarded as the first modern philosopher, Matthew Stewart quips that such a declaration leaves Leibniz as perhaps the first modern human. Oh well, that ignores L's diplomatic scheme to save Germany. The plan was known as the Egypt Plan, which was to persuade France that instead of conquering a devastated Germany, the French would benefit themselves and Europe by instead invading Egypt in some postscript to the hallowed Annals of Crusades (from Marathon to Fallujah).

So what transpired during this 1676 meeting of the era's brightest minds? We don't know exactly. Leibniz wrote about it often, but continually altered specifics and responses to suit his needs. Spinoza died a short time later. I suppose it doesn't matter. This is a fun book despite the lacunae at its center.

Andrew says

An entertaining and exceptionally well-written intellectual history, although as I've never read any Leibniz, I couldn't tell you much about how much I agree or disagree with Stewart's argument. However, I do know a fair bit about Spinoza and his place in the history of ideas, and Stewart gives him a fair shake, even if, like so many contemporary thinkers, he elevates Spinoza to damn near hierophantic status. As for the famed meeting in Den Haag, I can't say whether it had the world-changing status Stewart claims (or whether this was just the general direction the history of intellect was going among many entities at the time), but it's at least an interesting story. Bring this one with you on holiday, it's got enough meat to it to prevent your brain from turning to mush and yet it's light enough that you can comfortably read it on the beach or on a train, and added bonus, it'll give you plenty of anecdotes to bother your traveling companion with.

Nat says

Good, readable intro to the life and times of Spinoza and Leibniz. Short summary: Spinoza was a genius and lived a spartan life in the Netherlands eating rice gruel and grinding lenses. Leibiz was a genius but was in constant pursuit of money and recognition from famous patrons. They met each other once.

The author argues that Leibniz's philosophy is best viewed as a reaction to Spinozism, which he was secretly attracted to and publicly repelled by.

David M says

This isn't exactly a terrible book. Some of the notes I took while reading it may have been overly harsh.

In 1676 two of the greatest philosophers of that or any other century met for a couple of days to talk God. The sole meeting of Leibniz and Spinoza could be the subject of a wonderful play, but it would require a great deal of artistic license by the playwright. No record exists of what they said, but we can bet it was a lot more interesting than David Lipsky and David Foster Wallace discussing French fries in Minneapolis.

This material doesn't really lend itself to nonficiton treatment, unfortunately. There's just not enough information. Matthew Stewart is thus forced to over-interpret the few sources that do exist in order to suggest that Leibniz had a lifelong obsession with Spinoza, and that this obsession was the single most important factor in developing his own philosophy.

As a portrait of two fascinating personalities, however, it's a pretty decent book. While clearly partial to Spinoza, Stewart does fully acknowledge Leibniz's genius. Spinoza's extreme self-sufficiency and unworldly commitment to the light of truth are well known. Leibniz is an altogether different animal. Today we might be tempted to diagnose him with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, given that he always dozens and dozens of projects going at once, and though he lived to an old age rarely managed to finish any of them, yet a list of his accomplishments is truly staggering - inventor, diplomat, logician, one of the greatest mathematicians who ever lived, and of course the author of monads and the theodicy.

Overall the author's understanding of intellectual history is far too simplistic. On the second to last page he lumps Kant, Hegel, Bergson, and Heidegger together as heirs to Leibniz's reactionary, anti-modern philosophy. Really? It's hard to even know where to begin with that. Then on the very last page he writes that Spinoza teaches us that there is "no secret truth about anything. There is instead only the slow and steady accumulation of many small truths." Clearly he'd like to identify Spinoza with the progress of modern science, but it's an awkward fit in many ways. Whatever else it may be, the Ethics is not a work of empirical science. It's an extremely ambitious, intentionally esoteric books that attempts to sum up the truth about everything via axiomatic reasoning.

Chapter 10 is the author's most sustained engagement with the Ethics, and it becomes an opportunity for Stewart to write his own manifesto for a fairly banal kind of atheist naturalism in the manner of Richard Dawkins and others. He claims this as the modern, scientific way of seeing the world, and claims Spinoza as its forefather. Stewart approvingly cites the physicist Steven Weinberg that "the more we know about the origins of the universe, the more pointless it seems" (pp 157). And then the very next page, on Spinoza, "His philosophy is at a deep level a declaration of confidence that there is nothing ultimately mysterious in the world... that there is nothing that cannot be known" (pp 158-59). Stewart doesn't pause for a second to reflect on the apparent contradiction here. Just how is it that this universe of ours can be totally pointless and random and at the same time perfectly intelligible?
