

Steven Nadler and Ben Nadler. *Heretics! The Wondrous (and Dangerous) Beginnings of Modern Philosophy.* Princeton University Press 2017. 192 pp. \$22.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780691168692).

Written by a father and son team, *Heretics* offers a most delightful introduction to modern philosophers. The book focuses on the period between 1600 and 1755 and includes well and not so well known philosophers ranging from Antoine Arnauld, Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle, Giordano Bruno, Ann Conway, René Descartes, Elisabeth of Bohemia, Galileo Galilei, Pierre Gassendi, Thomas Hobbes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, John Locke, Nicolas Malebranche, Henry Moore, Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, Baruch Spinoza, and Voltaire. The first cartoon of the book depicts Giordano Bruno commenting, ‘the 17th century did not start out well for philosophy’ (8). It shows how one of modern philosophy’s finest was burned at the stakes by the Roman Catholic Church.

Perhaps even more significant was the book’s next philosopher, namely Galileo Galilei who also suffered under the Catholic Church; only this time the world’s most important natural scientist wasn’t burned to death. The inquisition placed Galileo under house arrest. He was forbidden to publish. For any philosopher this is a severe punishment. Needless to say, in 1992 the Catholic Church had to concede their error. But Galileo’s story is only the beginning of the church’s fight against modernity, truth, rationality, and philosophy.

One of the more noteworthy highlights of the book is the extent to which many of the philosophers discussed knew one another, wrote to each other, and even visited each other. The second highlight is how the book tells the stories of exile. Being forced into exile was not uncommon for those who published heretical philosophy. Throughout the book one gets the impression that during the 17th century two countries stand out for offering refuge to philosophers. Not surprisingly, these two countries—Great Britain and the Netherlands—are still two of the most prosperous countries. Perhaps there might even be a link between being open, allowing philosophical, scientific debate and engaging with those who think differently and being wealthy. Perhaps Max Weber was not totally off the mark in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Their next chapter, entitled, ‘Leiden 1640’ begins as follows: ‘like Galileo, Descartes was not one to give up easily’ (19). He was somewhat similar to Francis Bacon who once talked about ‘the idols of the theatre’ (21). Well, one of them was recently elected president. Similar to Bacon, Descartes too had his run-ins with God but sought not to challenge the doctrine of the day. Outright accommodating was Pascal and his wager believing it is better to believe in God than not to do so. In a rather faithful discussion when Descartes was in fact in bed being sick, ‘their conversation must also have turned towards matters of faith and reason’ (35). Shortly thereafter, two men were thrown out of a window in Prague marking the beginning of the Thirty Year War. What followed was almost a Hobbesian war of all against all. At the philosophical level, the book notes that ‘Hobbes and Descartes simply did not like each other’ (41). The chapter entitled ‘Paris 1646’ discusses the basics of Hobbes’ philosophy.

The chapter entitled ‘The Hague 1670’ shows that heretics were not only tormented by the Catholic Church. Eminent moral philosopher Spinoza was ‘banished from Amsterdam’s Jewish community’ with the words, ‘he is hereby expelled from the people of Israel ... you are a monster’ (53). As is so often the case, the monsters were those who called others heretics, who expelled, who punished, who tortured and burned others on the stakes. Spinoza said ‘adieu’ (53) and worked as a ‘lens-grinder’ while writing ‘his philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics*’ (54). In his *Treatise*, Spinoza argues that ‘the freedom of philosophizing is essential for the peace and piety of the republic’ (65).

With that, the book moves to ‘Hanover 1686’ discussing Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, ‘the century’s great polymath’ (73) who covered ‘philosophy, mathematics, logics, physics, history,

language, politics, and theology' (74) while 'also inventing and designing a calculating machine' (75) often seen as initial step towards today's field of computer science. Leibniz 'was troubled by Spinoza's account of the necessity of the world and everything in it' (77). Nadler and Nadler conclude their extensive outline of Leibniz by asserting that he 'was a restless thinker' (97).

Perhaps an even more restless time began in 'Cambridge and London' (100) around the year 1650 with the female philosopher 'Lady Ann Conway' (101) when many philosophers argued that 'women [are] not permitted to attend universities' (101). Nonetheless, 'the viscountess Conway learned a great deal from her Cambridge tutor' (103). In the intervening time in Paris (1675) French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche 'was walking along the river Seine when he came upon a copy of Descartes' *Treatise on Man* in a bookstall' (107) and subsequently, 'enthusiastically adopted Descartes metaphysics' (109).

By 1698, philosophy's development moved back to London and John Locke who 'was suspected of participating in a conspiracy to assassinate King Charles II' (122). As 'he was no friend of the Stuart monarchy [he] moved to the Netherlands' (122). Locke argued that in a 'generally peaceful condition, a person acquires property by mixing his labour with something' (125) – a point later taken up by Adam Smith, Hegel, and Marx. He also argued for the creation of a commonwealth—when each person voluntarily gives up his natural power to enforce his rights and hands it over to the community-at-large' (128), a stance that was later taken up by Hegel and Marx. In any case, 'between Boyle and Gassendi, Locke had a rich schooling in natural philosophy and empiricist epistemology' (144).

This leads the authors to Isaac Newton, who published his 'magisterial mathematical principles' in 1687 (161). Most likely to the dismay of the church, 'Newton's preferred stance was agnosticism' (166). By that time, the church—at least in England and the Netherlands—had lost much of its power to prevent heretical knowledge. Unlike Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was free to create philosophy and knowledge marking perhaps the decline of the Roman-Spanish world and the rise of the English world. Nadler and Nadler's book closes with François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778) better known as Voltaire. For Voltaire 'it was the contrast between Descartes and Newton that really caught his attention' (176) knowing that 'the Englishman's philosophy had won the day' (177).

Their highly entertaining introduction to the founding fathers of modern philosophy ends as follows: 'Nevertheless, had Newton been born in Portugal and had a Dominican friar happened to discover a heresy in his inverted ration of the squares of the distance of the planets, Sir Isaac Newton would certainly have walked the procession in his Sanbenito at his auto-da-fé' (179). But thankfully, Newton was not born in Portugal, he did not have to wear the clothes of the Inquisition (Sanbenito) and was not burned as a heretic by the Spanish Inquisition (auto-da-fé). Quite apart from the rather well-known historic lesson, Nadler and Nadler remind us of the importance of being able to engage with philosophy unhindered by persecution whether by the Roman Catholic Church in the 17th century, or by states and politicians in the 21st.

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