Susan James. *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theological-Political Treatise*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. x+248. Cloth, $55.00.

Review by Eugene Marshall

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Susan James' book on Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* is a magnificent work of historical and contextually focused philosophical scholarship. Anyone interested in Spinoza, the Dutch Republic, or early modern philosophy would profit by reading it. James richly situates Spinoza's *Treatise* in its proper context and thereby illuminates Spinoza's thought in a profound way. The Spinoza that emerges here is not the abstract metaphysician of the *Ethics*, but a savvy political thinker addressing the particulars of his time and place. In all, this book should fundamentally alter the way we think of this great text and, more broadly, the issues it addresses.

James moves through the *Treatise* in order, dividing the text roughly into four parts: the first concerns Spinoza's treatment of revelation, the second scripture, the third religion, and the fourth politics. James self-avowedly adopts a big-picture approach here, tracking the central issues and arguments Spinoza addresses. Such an approach serves her well, though it also requires that she not address some details, which some scholars might have preferred.

Throughout, she proceeds in a consistent fashion. First, she very briefly sketches a central claim in the text. Next she provides a remarkably rich and

thorough historical context for the debate. In most cases this involves identifying the relevant theological and political parties in 17th Century Holland. In addition, many of Spinoza's positions are also compared to the views of Hobbes and Descartes, though James always keeps her eye on Spinoza's Dutch contemporaries, and almost never goes any farther afield to consider the possible influence of someone like Maimonides, for example.

Indeed, this is the most remarkable and exciting feature of this book. By showing that Spinoza authentically took on and shared some of the concerns and approaches of the Dutch Calvinists of Spinoza's time, for example, James undermines the old interpretation according to which Spinoza did not really mean what he says when he uses religious language. As James illustrates so well, Spinoza took the thinkers of his time seriously — in fact, James shows not only that Spinoza took these people seriously, many of whom were his philosophical opponents, but she shows how he took their ideas seriously. She identifies their views and then locates them in Spinoza's own thought, explaining how Spinoza has brought these ideas on board and made them his own. This creates a picture of Spinoza as fundamentally engaged and in conversation with his peers and the philosophical, political, and religious community in which he lived. The result reveals Spinoza to be a nuanced and fascinating political thinker.

In giving this coherent, situated, and rather thematic overview of Spinoza's thought in the context of his contemporary interlocutors, however, James necessarily must not include as much detail, nor could she have entered into many of the scholarly debates about some of the finer issues that she discusses. This is an

understandable choice she makes, though it occasionally leads to her passing over a philosophical controversy.

For example, in Chapter 8, James acknowledges the gap between the anthropomorphizing imaginative representation of God as just and contrasts this with the rational understanding that God cannot properly be called just. She attempts to bridge this gap, saying, "the laws of nature are simultaneously divine decrees by which all human beings are equally bound and to which everyone must of necessity conform [which] ensures that they apply to everyone on exactly the same terms so that, in this metaphorical sense, God can be described as equitable or just." (199) She then argues that "the propositional content of the two sets of formulations [of God's justice] is obviously not the same…[but] there is nevertheless a sense in which they capture its spirit." (199) To be sure, Spinoza wishes to associate these two very different ways of viewing God in the mind of the reader, but they remain two distinct representations of God — and suggest two subtly distinct paths to salvation — rather than one. James may elide these distinctions too quickly, though perhaps she must in the interest of treating the larger themes and placing them in their proper historical context, which is a profoundly important and profitable enterprise. Nevertheless, some readers may find some frustration that James did not have the space to address these difficult philosophical concerns more fully.

These difficulties aside, though, this is a wonderful book. It may not settle all of the existing debates in Spinoza scholarship, but it will fundamentally alter and profoundly inform them and for that we are in James' debt.

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