Henry Crabb Robinson characterized Coleridge’s peculiar attitude toward Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza (1632–1677) fairly accurately in a diary entry from 1812, where he described the following encounter with Coleridge:

In the course of a few minutes, while standing in the room, Coleridge kissed Spinoza’s face at the title page, said his book was his gospel, and in less than a minute added that his philosophy was, after all, false. Spinoza’s system has been demonstrated to be false, but only by that philosophy which has at the same time demonstrated the falsehoods of all other philosophies. Did philosophy commence in an IT IS instead of an I AM, Spinoza would be altogether true; and without allowing a breathing-time he parenthetically asserted: “I, however, believe in all the doctrines of Christianity, even of the Trinity.”

Three points from this entry highlight Coleridge’s odd relationship with Spinoza. The first peculiarity is that Coleridge declared Spinoza’s Ethics “his gospel,” even though he believed it to be false. Second, Coleridge seemed to accept Kant’s analysis in showing that Spinoza’s philosophy is false in the way that all other philosophies are false, and yet, in the face of the Kantian critique, he nevertheless accepted the “doctrines of Christianity” as being true. The third is an inconsistency in Coleridge’s objections about Spinoza’s philosophy, as found in various places throughout Coleridge’s work. In his remarks to Robinson, he indicated that a major problem was Spinoza’s beginning the philosophic system of the Ethics from the perspective of an “IT IS” rather than an “I AM.” However, as we shall see below, Coleridge, though emphatic, was mistaken when he perceived Spinoza’s discourse of God beginning with an “IT IS,” that is, with God as an object.

From Robinson’s account alone, we could conclude that Coleridge was both confused and ambivalent about Spinoza, an uncertainty that appears elsewhere in Coleridge’s work. For example, in the weekly lectures on the history of philosophy delivered during the winter of 1818–1819, Coleridge...
devoted very little attention to a systematic discussion of Spinoza in general, or *The Ethics* in particular, limiting himself to positive comments about Spinoza’s strong character or rigorous philosophical system. The part of Coleridge that admired Spinoza and caused him, according to Robinson, to kiss Spinoza’s picture is the same characteristic that identified the *Ethics* as one of the three “greatest Works since the introduction of Christianity.” Yet, even in his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge avoided a systematic philosophical discussion with Spinoza. He commented mostly about the rigor of Spinoza’s system, the kind of life Spinoza lived, and the horrible, but undeserved, criticism that was commonly made about Spinoza’s being an atheist and living a non-Christian life. Ironically, Coleridge defended Spinoza the man while simultaneously asserting the falsity of Spinoza’s philosophy, specifically the analysis of God. It seems strange, given his deep admiration for Spinoza, that Coleridge did not engage *The Ethics* in either his public lectures or his written works to reconcile his ambivalent attitude.

The ambivalence might be summarized this way. On the one hand, Coleridge admired the tenacity and rigor of Spinoza’s system; he appreciated the geometric method that Spinoza employed throughout the *Ethics*, and he defended Spinoza against charges of atheism. However, he had difficulty reconciling Spinoza’s account of God with his own understanding of God as culled from the Gospels. Or, as he put it in *Biographia Literaria*, “my head was with Spinoza, though my whole heart remained with Paul and John” (*BL* 1:201). So, while at the same time praising Spinoza’s method, Coleridge denied what he perceived to be Spinoza’s conclusions, asserting that Spinoza erred in the way he began building and articulating his system.

More significantly, further confusion in the way that Coleridge articulated his objections suggests that Coleridge had not actually read *The Ethics* very closely. In the following pages, I review the substance of Coleridge’s objections and show how a careful reading of *The Ethics* either meets his objections or shows them to be misguided. The most succinct statement that Coleridge made about Spinoza appears in what had been an unpublished note found in the British Museum, subsequently published in 1960 by Lore Metzger. Coleridge’s aim in this note was to defend Spinoza from those who slandered or dishonestly misinterpreted his system. To Coleridge’s credit, what Metzger calls his “vindication” was not so much a defense of Spinoza’s system, as it was a polemic against those who illegitimately criticized Spinoza’s system. Nonetheless, in his opening paragraph, Coleridge elaborated his primary objection to Spinoza:

“*Unica Substantia infinitis Attributis*”: the well known words of Benedict Spinoza, whose (most grievous) error consisted not so much in what he affirms, as in what he has omitted to affirm or rashly denied:—not that he saw God in the Ground, i.e. in that which scholastic theology is called Natura naturans in distinction from Natura naturata; but that he saw God in the ground *only and exclusively*, in his *Might* alone and his *essential* Wisdom, and not likewise in his moral, intellectual, existential and personal Godhead. (283)