

# The Ethica of Spinoza



Artist (painting and introduction): **Shoshannah Brombacher, Ph.D.**  
Oil on canvas, 24 X 20 inches  
New York 2007 Commissioned by Rabbi Elisa Klapheck, Amsterdam



The painting depicts the philosopher Benedictus d'Espinoza writing his major work, the *Ethica*. He is seated at his desk in his study in Rijnsburg, surrounded by scenes from his life and by allegorical representations of his work, which will be explained in the following pages.



**B**aruch d'Espinoza (or Spinoza) was born in 1632 in Amsterdam, as the son of the Portuguese Jewish merchant Michael D'Espinoza and his second wife, Hannah Deborah. His parents belonged to the established community of the 'Portuguese Nation', which was founded by Spanish and Portuguese 'Marranos' (*Anusim*) and their descendants: Sephardic Jews baptized by force, who fled the Inquisition in their countries of origin to live openly as religious Jews in the free and tolerant city of Amsterdam.



Unfortunately, Spinoza's sickly mother passed away in 1638. This must have made a huge and sad impression on the intelligent young boy. Baruch got a strict religious Jewish upbringing, and attended the Talmud Torah School of his community. Later he became a merchant like his father, who passed away in 1654.

Spinoza started questioning religious doctrines at an early age. His open and public rejection of established religion, possibly combined with a dispute about business debts and an inheritance, led to numerous warnings from and conflicts with the community leaders and the rabbis. They feared reprisal and repercussions from Christian city and government officials, and from the Dutch Christian lobby. Amsterdam tolerated and even welcomed Jews, but was not, however, known not to be fond of libertines and 'atheists', viz. people who denied angels and supernatural events mentioned in religious tradition, and a caring, personal God who was actively involved with His creation. Though for Spinoza God existed, He was impersonal and one with nature. He stated that *Deus sive natura*, God, in other words Nature, is a substance, and everything is an attribute or aspect or manifestation of God/substance. The universe is governed by mechanical, natural laws, without emotion. Spinoza adhered to monistic views, which denied the duality of a Creator and a creation. He also denied the divine origin of the Torah, and basically all of Maimonides' thirteen Articles of Faith. This was enough for many to brand him not only as a renegade, but as an 'atheist' as well.

Spinoza was a proud and stubborn young man, who stuck to his principles and refused to keep up appearances by living outwardly as a believing Jew, for the sake of peace and unity among the Portuguese Nation. This attitude culminated in his expulsion from the community. The *Mahamad* (Board) and the *Beth Din* (Court) of the Synagogue issued a '*cherem*', a ban or excommunication, to sever all ties between him and them, in the year 1656. One member of the *Beth Din* was the famous *Haham* Saul Levi Morteira (1596-1660), the founder of the Keter Torah Yeshiva; another member was *Haham* Ishac

Aboab da Fonseca (1605-1693), who would later be an ardent adherent of the false messiah Shabtay Zwi, and who became the first Rabbi in the Western Hemisphere. Spinoza's teacher Menasse ben Israel (1604-1657) was not present at the *Beth Din* because of a trip to England. Spinoza himself probably was absent at the ceremony.

After he was ousted from his community, Spinoza joined the Latin School of the former Jesuit from Antwerp Franciscus van den Enden. He changed his name from the Hebrew Baruch to the Latin Benedictus (both mean the blessed one). In the school he found friends for life, Libertines, followers of Descartes and Freethinkers, with whom he discussed his philosophy.

Spinoza was taught Latin by Van den Enden's daughter, Clara Maria. According to legend he fell in love with her, but she married a different student of her father, Doctor Theodoor (Dirck) Kerkrinck. This man she convinced to convert to Catholicism, a step Spinoza could and would never make. Spinoza never married.

Although seventeenth century Holland was a relatively tolerant country, deviant religious views were met with disbelief, suspicion and resistance by the influential more religious part of the government, and by the influential Reformed Church. They abhorred Spinoza's extreme views on God, and on religion in general. The Reformed Church strove to have him banished from Amsterdam, and to prevent his work from being published, in which they partly succeeded. It was even deemed dangerous to publish his writings anonymously. Spinoza was well aware of the threat of the government, which urged him to be extremely cautious. His motto was '*Caute*' (be careful), the word on his family signet ring with a rose and thorns. He dared not publish the majority of his works. Nevertheless, he frequented the printing shop of Jan Riewerts in Amsterdam, a friend who published some of his works during his lifetime, and who took care of the Opera Posthuma: he published the *Ethica* after Spinoza's death in 1677.



Around 1660 Spinoza left Amsterdam to seek peace and quiet to think and work. He had probably already dwelled for a while at the manor of a rich protector outside of the city, and later he moved to the small rural town of Rijnsburg. The house where he rented rooms still exists, now it contains a small museum. In Rijnsburg Spinoza studied, wrote, earned his livelihood as a lens grinder and polisher, and received famous visitors. It was also here, that he probably started working on the ideas for his *Ethica*, his magnum opus. In the *Ethica* he applied Euclidian methods to demonstrate a metaphysical concept of the universe with ethical implications. The *Ethica* would not be finished until 1674, and for political reasons it would be published posthumously 1677.

According to a story Spinoza once discussed a bright and strange comet with his Rijnsburg landlord, after it appeared suddenly in the winter sky. It raised superstitious fear and terror among the peasants and simple folks, which were enforced when the plague broke out in its wake. Spinoza was spared, and lectured about the dangers of superstition and the necessity of good medical care.

He continued visiting his friends in Amsterdam, some of whom later were incarcerated or executed because of their extreme and libertine views and writings.

In 1663 Spinoza moved to Voorburg (?) and later to The Hague. When his friends, the regent Johan De Witt and his brother Cornelis were lynched by a mob during political riots, Spinoza was extremely enraged, a rare occasion. He could barely be contained in the house by his landlord, who feared for his safety when Spinoza wished to run outside, to paste a pamphlet with the words *Ultimi Barbarorum* on the wall. These words are written in blood-red letters in the left border of the painting, as a *j'accuse* against barbarism and primitivism.

Spinoza declined an offer to teach at the University of Heidelberg. He feared the rules and restrictions imposed by the University were bound to curb his freedom of expression and thought, and he preferred to earn his sober livelihood as an independent lens grinder.



Spinoza died in 1677 in The Hague at the age of 44, from a lung disease which was aggravated by his lens polishing activities. He never converted to another religion after he severed ties with Judaism, and he never repented from his heretical views, thus remaining under *cherem* after his death. Despite (or in some cases because of) his tendencies to perceived 'atheism' and his break with established religion, he was held in high esteem in scientific circles. The frugal, moral, withdrawn philosopher had become famous in the Netherlands and abroad. His funeral in the New Church in The Hague was an impressive ceremony.



The painting.





Spinoza sits in the center of the canvas at his table in Rijnsburg, working on his *Ethica*. His signature is scribbled in the air over his head. The titles of the five chapters of the *Ethica* are written on the papers scattered around him. He looks pensive, not austere, like in some other portraits, alone, deeply sunken in thought, even vulnerable, but everything around him is in motion. The swirls remind us of the views through his lenses: *panta rhei*. Scenes from his life circle around his table. At his right (from the spectator's point of view) we see the outlines of his lens grinding bench and his tools, at his left a fire place with Delft blue tiles and pewter plates. Similar furniture and tiles are still on display in the sparsely furnished little house in Rijnsburg, to give the visitor an impression of how it might have looked in Spinoza's time; in reality we are not sure about this.

At the side of the hearth a figure huddles on a chair. This is the personification of loneliness, which Spinoza no doubt must have experienced after being cut off from his own people and his community, despite his rational philosophy and his often aloof attitude, and despite his libertine friends in Amsterdam.





In the upper part of the painting we see the graves of Spinoza's parents at the cemetery Bet Haim at Ouderkerk. This burial ground of the Portuguese Jewish Community could be reached by boat, on the river Amstel. According to his biographers Spinoza returned here from time to time after his *cherem*, to visit his mother's grave. The acronyms "ת"נ"צ"ב"ה" (Hebrew, *May his/her soul be bundled in the bundle of life*) and S'A'G'D'E'G' (*Sua Alma Goza da Eterna Gloria*, Spanish/Portuguese, *His/her soul attains eternal glory*) are common inscriptions on the gravestones of Bet Haim. Spinoza himself is not buried there. Because of his *cherem* and his lack of repentance of his heretical views, he is not supposed to reach 'eternal glory'. He did not believe that the soul lives on, in the Jewish religious sense, after the body dies, since in his view there is no dichotomy between body and soul. He lives on, however, in his books.



At the right of this scene are arched bridges, canals, and a row of gable houses, representing the prosperity of seventeenth century Amsterdam. To the left are ships, masts, and the Montelbaans Tower near the port, where newcomers from the Iberian Peninsula would meet. Two Rabbis walk down the street, Saul Levi Morteira and Spinoza's brother in law, Samuel De Caceres; according to legend the latter might have staged an attack on him. It wounded him and made him anxious to leave Amsterdam, but it did not kill him. The Rabbis are surrounded by phrases from the Portuguese document of excommunication, like *malditto seja de dia e malditto seja de noute* (may he be cursed by day, and may he be cursed by night) and *enhermado e apartado da nação de Jsrael* (may he be closed off, and separated from the Nation of Israel), and the word *cherem* (חרם) in Hebrew. At their feet hovers a book in red letters, with the name of Rabbi Menasse ben Israel. This was the famous Rabbi and teacher whom Spinoza rejected. Spinoza, here portrayed as a youth, stares at it. Behind the Rabbis is an image of Spinoza's mother, seated on a chair; because of her he could never ban Amsterdam and the Jewish Quarter completely from his thoughts.

Under this scene, in the right border, we see the printing shop of Jan Riewertsz in Amsterdam, with Spinoza lecturing a group of Freethinkers. Behind them stands a bookcase with busts of classical thinkers on top. The wooden foot-warmer next to a chair makes this scene appear very Dutch. The white floating woman in a long white dress is the image of Spinoza's beloved Clara Maria van den Enden. She keeps haunting Spinoza, even while being chained at the ankle to the outlines of Spinoza's rival in love, her husband Kerkrinck.





In the left border in the top half of the painting, horses in dark blankets and with black plumes on their heads pull the hearse with Spinoza's coffin. His simple gravestone is shown on top of the words *Ultimi Barbarorum*, far away from the graves of his family at Ouderkerk. The black sun refers to a powerful poem about a funeral (not Spinoza's), of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (d.1938).



Near the white, bright comet from his Rijnsburg years in the top left corner is the motto of Spinoza's signet ring, which bears the emblem of a rose (*espinosa* is the 'thorn of a rose'): 'Caute', be careful!



## The Ethica.

The remaining scenes in the painting are allegorical representations of Spinoza's major work, the *Ethica*. There are many quotations from the *Ethica* scattered over this canvas, definitions, and words indicating the contents of the five chapters of the book, which are written on the papers around Spinoza's table:

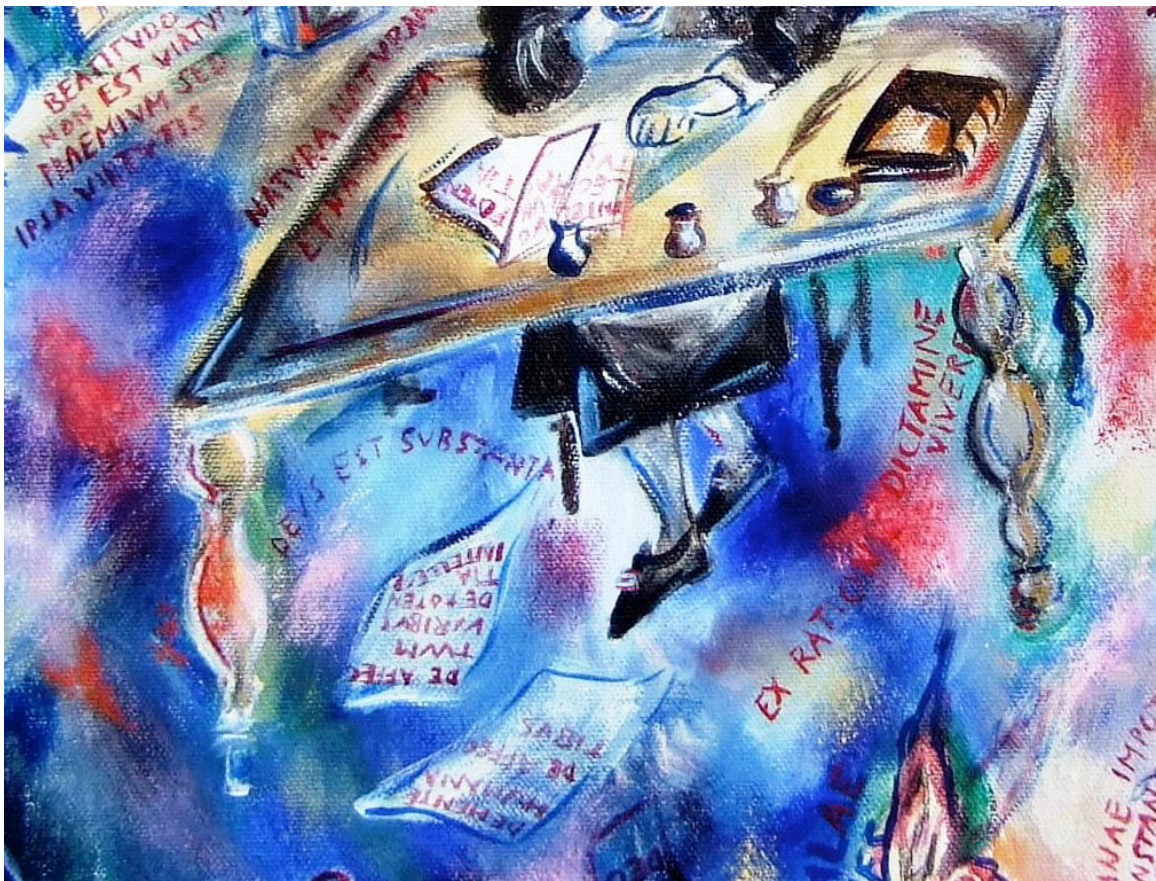
I *De Deo* (About God),

II *De Mente Humana* (About the Human Mind),

III *De Affectibus* (About Emotions),

IV *De Affectuum Viribus* (About the Strength of the Emotions),

V *De Potentia Intellectus* (About the Power of the Intellect).



At Spinoza's left we see the words *Amor intellectualis Dei* (from Chapter V, which mainly deals with the love of God in the axioms or



definitions 24-31: this kind of love will lead to ultimate happiness and freedom).

In the blue road which fans out ('extends'), we distinguish two of Spinoza's important philosophical tools, the attributes of Substance (read: God), which are used by human beings: *Extensio* (extension) and *Cogitatio* (thought, and their correlation, see II:1-9).

Under this are the concluding sentences of the *Ethica*:

*Qui enim posset fieri, si salus in promptu esset et sine magno labore reperiri posset, ut ab omnibus fere negligeretur, sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt.*

('How would it be possible, if salvation were ready at hand and could be found without much effort, that it should be neglected by almost all people? But everything which is excellent is as difficult as it is rare').

The red and tumultuous right lower half of the canvas represents the *Bonae et malae passiones* (IV, see specifically definitions 38-58). These are the good and bad emotions, which can make people better, more rational and thus happier human beings, or they can lead people astray, and toss them into utter unhappiness by bondage. Hapless twisting and cringing creatures in chains are overwhelmed by their passions and emotions, their simian faces are distorted, they are enslaved by passion. To the right hovers Spinoza's own unanswered love, Clara Maria. As much as he might have wanted to, he was not immune to the '*condition humaine*' either, but it is obvious from his life and his philosophy that his 'reason' had a grip on his feelings.

There is a reference to IV:1-18, *Humanae impotentiae et inconstantiae causae*, in which Spinoza sums up some of the causes for human infirmity. The bird next to the crazed orator could turn from a hawk into a dove and vice versa, from bad to good and back.

More to the left in the 'calmer' blue it says: *Ex rationis dictamine vivere,*



see IV:59-66 about slavery and freedom, and the freedom one acquires by living according to reason, and not by following his emotions blindly.

In the left corner, two allegorical figures represent the *Imaginatio* and the *Perceptio*, which are both part of the *Cognitio* as described in II:14-23. Next to them the wings of imagination hover over an open book with transparent dark pages: not everything can be understood



by all people, and not everything is clear to all. The figure in the bottom left corner shows utter confusion. According to Spinoza's philosophy he is not free, because he did not investigate things in a rational and intellectual way to reach the point, where he understands the logical order, connections, causes and effects of things.



The tiles near the cold fire-place reveal a quote from V:42, which is essential in Spinoza's *Ethica*:

*Beatitudo non est virtutis praemium, sed ipsa virtus*, 'Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue is it's own reward'. One recognizes



here Spinoza's orthodox Jewish upbringing; the same is said about the *mitzvah* (a good and moral deed) being the reward of a *mitzvah*.



In the top left corner are references to God, like *Deus est substantia absolute infinita, una, indivisibilis* (described in I:11-15), God is Substance, absolutely infinite, one and indivisible. This thesis is one of the main reasons why Spinoza clashed with (religious) authorities. Both in Christian and in Jewish doctrine God and substance are two different entities: God is the Creator and as such not identical or one with His creation, like in Spinoza's monistic view.



Around the white comet of light we see the words *Substantia una est*, from the opening definitions of the *Ethica* (I:1-6), and around the black sun is written *Deum Amare*, (from V:11-20, about the intellectual way of loving God/substance as the summit of happiness and freedom), which is also expressed in the fan of blue at the right of Spinoza's arm.

Around Spinoza's table *Deus est substantia* appears again, and his famous (sometimes misquoted) *Natura naturans et naturata* (I:29), the active nature and passive nature, or the eternal and infinite attributes of Substance (God as a free Cause), and that which necessarily follows from the nature of God, attributes without which He cannot exist or be conceived.

### **A word from the artist.**

This painting is an artistic interpretation of the person and the philosophy of Spinoza, and of the complexity of the philosopher's work. The quotes are eclectic, and the biographical details, due to the limited size of the canvas, reduced to some major events and moments in Spinoza's life. Fact and legend about Spinoza's life have been juxtaposed in this painting for art's sake.

The lines and shapes all over the canvas suggest pages from books and papers, which were an essential part of Spinoza's world. The colors express the emotions involved in the different definitions and chapters of the *Ethica*. Blue is by most people perceived as calm and rational, the way Spinoza wanted to be. Red is passion, it is used for the fourth chapter of the *Ethica*, about emotions: *De Affectuum Viribus*. Of course nothing is only the proverbial 'black and white': blue contains traces of red, and red contains fragments of other colors, too. The motions and changes in intensity of hues and colors, however, make this painting far more than 'rational', it is an artistic expression. Philosophical theories interact with art, but they are not identical with art. Spinoza scheduled the *Ethica* with mathematical precision.

This painting has been composed with interacting lines and dabs of color in an emotional and artistic way. The green glass of the window instills the quiet and serenity of the residence in Rijnsburg, the scenes in Amsterdam are bathed in a more neutral, ochre light: they have become memories. The cemetery, where Spinoza's parents are buried, is cold and dark; it lies across the water, under a low and menacing sky, and shows quite a different hue of green than Spinoza's window.

The whole painting is in motion, like a musical symphony, and juxtaposes light, white, hope, reason and optimism, black, darkness, hopelessness in spirals and facets, it enlarges and diminishes images and concepts, like a perception one gets looking at them through the lenses Spinoza polished, all whirling around the small, quiet man with the pale complexion sitting in the center at his desk, hoping to change modern thought. He succeeded remarkably well.



Below are a few sketches the artist made before she started the oil painting:









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