

Deus Sive Natura,
God in the philosophy of Spinoza.



“Deus sive Natura” Artist: Shoshannah Brombacher, Ph.D.
Pastel and ink on paper, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2012

Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677) was one of the first philosophers in Western Europe who did not base his ideas of God on the traditional sacred texts of the monotheistic religions, such as the Torah or the Bible. He abandoned the path of a dualistic relationship between a Creator (God) and a Creation (the universe), but stated instead: “*Deus sive Natura*” (“*God, in other words, Nature*”). There is no division or separation between “nature” (the scientific principles and natural mechanical laws that govern this world and each and every being), and God.



God is a complexity of one substance (*Substantia Una*) in its manifold attributes, manifestations, shapes, modes etc., governed by scientific, natural, mechanical laws, which are compelled to follow their due inanimate and scientific course. This one substance encompasses everything. It is infinite, and it possesses an infinite number of attributes. Only two of these are known to humankind: *Extentio* (Extension) and *Cogitatio* (Thought). All existing things are modes of these two attributes, either bodies or spirits. The human mind is part of the impersonal Divine Intellect, and works according

to necessities. This idea excludes a personal relationship between man and God, because in Spinoza's monistic view, man and everything else is synonymous with God, is one of the numerous manifestations of the One Substance: man is (part of) God.

This drawing visualizes some of Spinoza's ideas about God in the context of his life and his time.

Spinoza was born into the Sephardic Jewish community of Amsterdam, which welcomed many *Maranos* (crypto Jews), Jews baptized by force in Portugal and Spain. They had fled these intolerant countries with its dreadful Inquisition and smoking pyres for the relative safety of Amsterdam, a city where Catholicism was hated by the Protestant authorities of the Dutch Republic, and an eighty year lasting war with Spain would come to an end in 1648. Jews were permitted to worship in their own synagogues, and to adhere to their own religious customs in Amsterdam, provided they respected the general laws of this mercantile city.



The son of a respected merchant and blessed with a sharp mind, Baruch d'Espinoza was educated in the religious school of Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira, who hoped young Baruch would one day emerge as

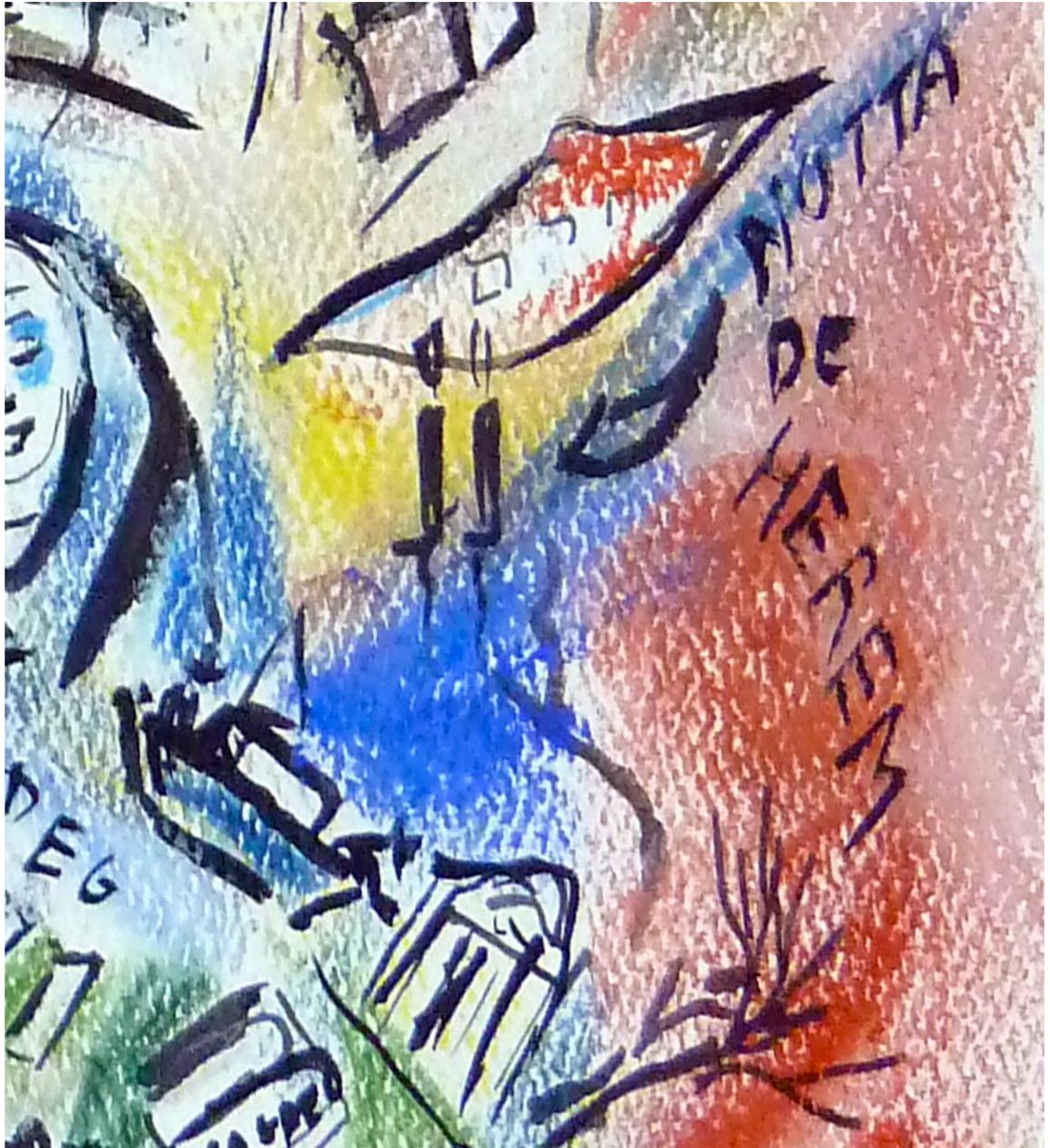
an outstanding and contributing communal leader. He was raised according to the principles, laws and values of the Torah: the Almighty and all-knowing God, Creator of the world, must be worshipped and obeyed by His chosen people, Israel. The Jews must follow His commandments in order to ensure for themselves a place in *Olam haBa*, the World to Come. *HaShem* (God) is the omniscient and sole Ruler of the Universe. He is compassionate, just, strict, merciful and desirous of the supplications, obedience, prayers and sacrifices of the mortal people He created.

On the right side of the drawing we see the boy Baruch Spinoza in the synagogue, reading from a Torah scroll at his Bar Mitzvah ceremony (religious coming of age at thirteen). Behind him stands a man wrapped in a prayer shawl cradling a Torah scroll, his rabbi, or his father. The Aron (Torah shrine) is open and the holy scrolls are visible. The white candlesticks in front of the bookcase illuminating the holy books are in stark contrast with the upside down black candles under the white paper with the Hebrew word *cherem* (ban). During the ceremony of banishing somebody from the community black candles are lit and a shofar (rams horn) is blown.

This part of the drawing contains early memories of Spinoza: his Jewish upbringing in the Sephardic community, and the painful loss at an early age of his mother, Hannah Deborah d'Espinoza. She succumbed to an illness, possibly the same tuberculosis that afflicted her son later in life. She was buried at the Sephardic cemetery Beth Haim outside of Amsterdam, in the village of Ouderkerk. Dead bodies and the mourners accompanying them were transported to the cemetery by boat, on the river Amstel. Many of the gravestones at Beth Haim are flat slabs with inscriptions in Hebrew and (more often) in Spanish or Portuguese. The common abbreviation *SAGDEG* (*sua alma goza da eterna gloria*, "his/her soul will reach eternal glory") and *t'n'tz'b'h'* (a Hebrew acronym for "May his/her soul be bundled in the bundle of life") hover over the stones.

The face of Spinoza's mother is visible in front of burial boats and rows of gable houses alongside the river Amstel. Mourners walk towards her grave, past the entrance gate and the jetty for the boats. Spinoza lost many relatives when he was relatively young, like his

father and several siblings. There are boats, masts of ships and towers in the Amsterdam scene. At the left end of the row of houses, the portly outlines of the Montalbaens Toren (Montelbaens Tower) are visible. Here, newcomers from the Iberian Peninsula would arrive, and find their way to the Jewish community and synagogues around the Houtgracht.



Spinoza, born into a family with both *Maranos* (crypto-Jews, forcibly baptized Jews who had fled Spain and Portugal) and non-

Marano Jews (born as free Jews), was well aware of the many difficulties facing these new arrivals and their unique challenges in adapting to traditional Jewish theology.

At the other side of the graveyard and upside down is another row of gable houses: this is the Paviljoensgracht in the city of The Hague, where Spinoza would spend his final years in the attic of the house painter Van Spyck. This same landlord probably saved Spinoza's life when he prevented him from going out to protest the political murder of the brothers De Witt, exclaiming *Ultimi barbarorum!!* (ultimate barbarians!!). He might have been lynched. Spinoza was not buried in the cemetery of the Jewish community with his family, but in the Nieuwe Kerk (New Church) in The Hague by lack of a neutral burial place for somebody who was not a member of the Jewish community anymore, but neither a Christian.

Spinoza himself received a rather thorough and very traditional Jewish education. He acquired a profound knowledge of the Hebrew language and Scriptures. However, his ideas about *HaShem* (God), the divine origins of the Torah, the uncontested truth of the words of the prophets, the miracles wrought by God, and the certainty of an afterlife, began to change in his early years. He questioned many tenets of religion in general, and of Jewish religious beliefs in particular, which he found permeated with superstition, ignorance and contradictions. He considered living a virtuous life the essence of loving God, and infinitely more important than following the "superstitious" customs and religious rituals that were followed by the vast majority.

When he expressed his new insights, they were, not surprisingly, strongly rejected by the rabbis. Not only did Spinoza's new views contradict and negate all that the rabbis cherished and taught as eternally true and holy, but those same ideas could easily be perceived as anti-religious, even atheist. As such they would endanger the existence of the Jewish community, even in the all inclusive and at that time very tolerant melting-pot of Amsterdam. The city bore the proud name *Eleutheropolis* ("City of Freedom") and was considered one of the most tolerant havens for all kinds of

thoughts and philosophies in Europe. Still, the idea of rejecting the traditional God of the Jews, and more specifically of the dominant ruling group, the Protestant Christians, could and would not be tolerated.

The world was not ready for someone challenging the belief in and the existence of a personal God. Any fledgling community, such as the Sephardim, that would dare protect and shelter a “freethinker” like Spinoza, risked resentment, reprisals and the possibility of expulsion.



This is one of the reasons that Spinoza was excommunicated in 1656 by the Sephardic *Beth Din* (Rabbinical Court), after refusing:

- to revoke his earlier statements about God,
- to repent, or
- to even accept a yearly sum of money, on condition that he keep his heretic views strictly to himself, pretend to go with the flow, and be silent.

The fact that Spinoza had once appealed to a Dutch (non-Jewish) city court in a civil case about an inheritance, instead of

presenting it to the *Beth Din* and thus undermining their authority in the community, probably played a role as well.

Baruch Spinoza's excommunication, proclaimed in the synagogue in a solemn ceremony, basically cut him off from all the people he had hitherto known and lived with. This *cherem* (ban), a document in Portuguese signed by several high ranking rabbis (including his teacher Saul Levi Morteira), floats into the drawing with the word *cherem* on it and the words *notta de Herem* around it at the extreme right, between the graves, his mother, and the scene of his Bar Mitzvah.



Spinoza, compelled to leave the Jewish neighborhood, sought

refuge in the house of Franciscus Van den Enden, a former Jesuit and Freethinker who ran a Latin School in Amsterdam.

He surrounded himself with all kinds of people with new philosophical and libertine ideas. Spinoza joined Van den Enden's students in order to learn Latin, Greek, sciences and non-Jewish philosophy, which for the most part, he was not overly familiar with. In exchange, he taught Hebrew language. The time spent in Van den Enden's school was crucial for the further development of Spinoza's ideas.

The lifelong friends, like Jan Rieuwertsz, the Koerbagh brothers, Lodewijk Meijer, Pieter Ballingh and Jarig Jelles, whom Spinoza first met in those early years, are depicted in this drawing in a large diamond hovering over the head of the philosopher sitting in the middle. They taught him many facets of life, and polished his thinking with their interactions, discussions and later correspondence; Spinoza was able to metaphorically filter his philosophy through the 'lenses' he would later actually grind as a profession, and see the whole specter of ideas from different angles. A diamond is said to be able to show a myriad shapes, like the deep multifaceted philosophy of Benedictus de Spinoza. The word Tempus (time) alludes to the time he spent in various places to learn and experience new things.

According to some of his biographers, Spinoza fell in love with Clara Maria, the brilliant daughter of Van den Enden. She was a child prodigy. Walking with a limp, she taught Latin in her father's school. She rejected Spinoza in favor of an other student, the doctor Dirck Kerkring, whom she later married after he converted to Catholicism for her sake. This was a step, notwithstanding his circumstances vis-a-vis the Jewish community, Spinoza was unwilling and unable to undertake, of course. Spinoza, in fact, never married, nor do we know of any more anecdotes about his pursuing other love interests. The episode with Clara Maria probably influenced his ideas about emotions, as expressed in his Ethics. In the drawing Clara Maria walks hand in hand with her fiance Kerkring, away from the



philosopher in the middle, but she looks shyly back over her shoulder. She is wearing the pearl necklace Kerkring gave her as a gift, showing he could earn a good sum of money to support a family. Spinoza had no pearls to offer other than his brilliant mind. Clara Maria and Kerkring are depicted in an enclosed space, just like the space Spinoza might have created for her in his memory. Spinoza moved out from Van den Enden's house soon afterwards, and lived in different places in and around Amsterdam.

Another event which might have influenced Spinoza's decision to leave Amsterdam is the attack on his life. When he returned from a theater one night (a rare occasion, he was no lover of the theater), a

man in a cloak jumped at him with a dagger. The attack failed, Spinoza suffered a mere scratch on his arm, and his mantle was ripped. He understood, however, that his life might be in danger, and that the attacker(s) might be found in his former community. As a warning to himself he never had his cloak repaired, but hung it on a hook in his room with the visible tear. Spinoza and his attacker are depicted over the Bar Mitzvah scene.



After the Dutch authorities were alerted about Spinoza's perceived "atheist" ideas, in the midst of a plague epidemic that ravished the population of Amsterdam, Spinoza thought it prudent to leave Amsterdam and surroundings. Instead, he sought out a quiet abode in the village of Rijnsburg, not far from the university town of Leyden. Rijnsburg had a small community of Collegians, a group of Protestants with very advanced ideas about the freedom of the human mind and the universal non sectarian qualities of God and people. Spinoza went there by "trekschuit", a barge pulled along by a horse on a small road along the canal which was very common in Holland.



It is depicted with its horse, upside down, over the houses of The Hague.

In a small house at the outskirts of town, Spinoza rented two rooms where he earned his livelihood by grinding lenses. He is sitting in one of those rooms in the center of the drawing. His lens grinding equipment is visible behind him, in the other room.

The lens grinder which is exhibited till this day in the Spinoza House in Rijnsburg is not the one used by Spinoza, and not the type he preferred.

Above his head we see the shaft of a microscope with a lens, referring to his correspondence with Johannes Hudde about the focal length of lenses. He corresponded with other thinkers, like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and exchanged ideas about lenses and science with men like Christiaan Huygens. In Rijnsburg he worked on his magnum opus, the *Ethica*. The rays of light from the glass of he lens is a veiled referral to the 'expansion' mentioned in his Ethics.



On a cold December night in 1664, Spinoza was surprised by the sounds of tumultuous screams in Rijnsburg: people saw a huge and fiery comet speeding through the night sky. Since there had already been outbreaks of plague in Amsterdam and nearby cities, this was considered a sinister omen, foreshadowing bad harvests, sickness, starvation and death. Spinoza was resolute in his belief that ignorance and superstition were the true root of evil, and not this natural, albeit rare phenomenon, of a huge shooting star. The comet is depicted in the drawing over the house where Spinoza lived in Rijnsburg, with yelling, panicky farmers running around in an eery reddish glow, symbolic of their fears.

Nowadays, the Rijnsburg house still bears the plaque with the same inscription in place when Spinoza rented his rooms:

*Ach! Waren alle Menschen wijs, (Alas, if all people would be wise,)
En wilden daarbij wel! (And in addition strove to (act) well)*

*De Aard waar haar een Paradijs, (The Earth would be a Paradise,)
Nu isse meest een Hel. (Now often it is Hell.)*

This gable-stone expresses basically what Spinoza himself promoted: to lead a virtuous life, void of ignorance and superstition.

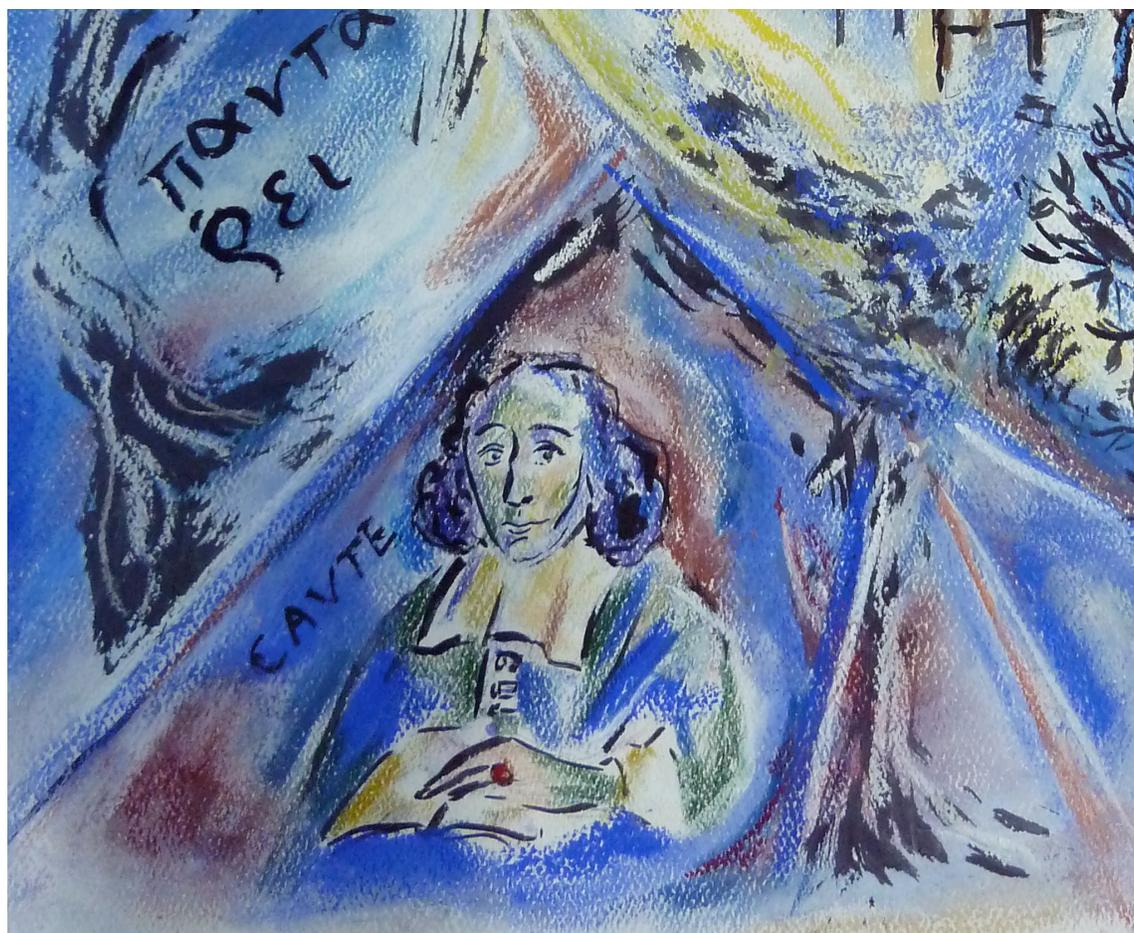


In the central scene of the drawing Spinoza sits in his room with the little window panes in Rijnsburg, next to his fire-place with a border of Delft tiles, with some of his friends. Spinoza received quite a few scholarly visitors in his remote and modest dwelling. At the right is his lectern in which he kept his manuscripts and personal papers. He made sure that it was shipped with its contents and papers to Amsterdam after he passed away in the Hague in 1674. When his old friends received the manuscript of his Ethics they were able to publish it posthumously, as he had intended.



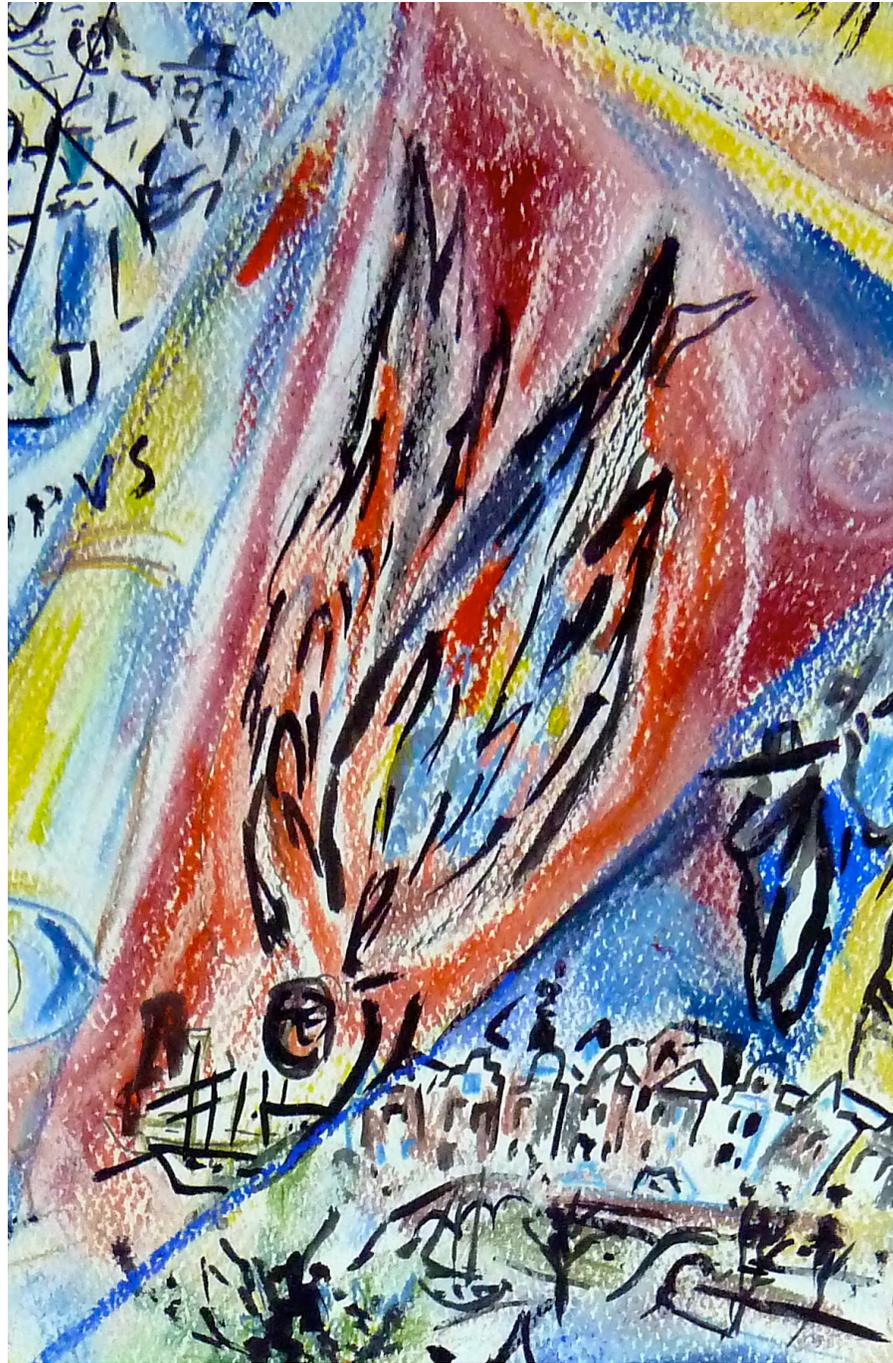
In this scene Spinoza is discussing his idea about God as the infinite, impersonal Nature, God in the monistic sense: God is everything and everything is (in) God.

A few of Spinoza's books: the *Principia*, his magnum opus the *Ethica*, his *Epistolae*, his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, his Hebrew grammar *Compendium*, and his *Tractatus de Deo et Homine Ejusque Felicitate* are large tomes symbolically leaning against the fireplace. This emphasizes how great they were, but also how dangerous it was for Spinoza to record his ideas in writing, as many wanted his works banned and/or burned. The author was in grave danger. Spinoza knew this all too well. He survived a knife attack in Amsterdam, and kept the mantle he wore at the time --with the jagged cut-- as a reminder. Here, it hangs on a peg on the spine of one of the books.



In the bottom left corner of the drawing he is encapsulated in a dark space, and looks at us with wary eyes. He is holding up his hand with his signet ring bearing the emblem of the Spinoza family: a rose with thorns and the word *Caute*, "Be careful".

Several of Spinoza's books were published anonymously , or even posthumously. However, being a driven scholar, danger did not prevent him from working on his theories.



The angelic figure over his head (seen next to the shaft of the microscope) carries his wings in a partly folded precautionary position, but manages to fly nevertheless, and will soar if given the opportunity. The angelic figure also alludes to Amsterdam as

Eleutheropolis, one of the few cities which offered *nolens volens* Spinoza such a unique opportunity to unfold his wings.

The rose in a Delft blue vase standing in front of him has five petals, corresponding to the five chapters of the Ethics. It also has thorns, to express the thorny issues Spinoza had to handle, and it is an allusion to his name (Spinoza, from *espinhoso*, thorny) and his signet ring with the motto *Caute*. The vase is a symbol of the Dutch country, which opened its gates to his family and where he was born. The Delft blue vase and the Delft tiles around the fireplace have the same colors as the *azulejos*, the famous Portuguese tiles of the country of origin of his family, but the difference between the two countries is vast like a sea. Still, one had to be careful, even in Holland.

The candle on the floor is a wink to his friend Adriaen Koerbagh, who shared Spinoza's vision that natural scientific principles rule the world, and that God and Nature are one. One of Koerbagh's books against religion bore the title: *Een Ligt Schynende in Duystere Plaatsen* ("A Light Shining in Dark Places").

The empty chair near the fire place symbolizes Spinoza's *cherem*, his ban, which ironically, opened new possibilities for him, but also came with the heavy price of loneliness and the painful lack of a family and friends from his own background.

The cosmic elements in the upper half of the drawing all express a facet of Spinoza's idea about God. The big triangle reminds of his fight against superstition, ignorance and the religious ideas of his time. He stated that people tend to shape and envision their God in an anthropomorphic manner, in the same way triangles probably would shape their god as a triangle. The sun in the upper right corner alludes to Petronius: *Sol lucet omnibus*, the sun shines for everybody alike, in the sense that nature/God works according to its impersonal scientific mechanical laws, and excludes any personal or emotional relationship with anyone. God is not the creator of the world, but the world is part of the divine. The divine expresses itself in the natural order of things, such as the seasons that follow each other in their fixed order, and do not deviate from their natural laws.



On one of the many mathematical lines crossing over all the multiple scenes in the drawing, four trees represent spring, summer, fall and winter, with the words *Natura Naturata*: the ‘created nature’, as opposed to the *Natura Naturans*, the creating/creative nature, as is written in the top of the drawing.

In his *Ethics*, Proposition 33 Spinoza states that “*Things could not have been brought into being by God in any manner or in any order different from that which has in fact obtained.*”

The big gears on the top left symbolize these laws. The mechanical gears keep turning around and around, unable to deviate to the left or to the right. They are part of a whole system, which in this work of art is symbolized by the planetary system in the top left and the four ancient elements: earth, water, air and fire. These elements appear also, albeit in a veiled way, in the four corners of the drawing: the planetary system in the top left corner contains Terra, the earth, the top right corner with the sun is Aer, the sky, the bottom right corner with the comet and the anxious peasants is Ignis, fire, and the bottom left corner with the fish is Aqua, water.

The ubiquitous circles in the drawing express Spinoza’s ideas about infinity.

Water, depicted by the stream on the left side of the paper, symbolizes the agility of Spinoza’s mind. *Panta Rhei*, everything is streaming . . . ~~ flowing~~ . . .

Water also connects his life with his native Holland, a country which perhaps contains more water than land and is for a great part created under sea level by emptying out polders and building dykes. In the

Dutch landscape, water creates the imagery of eternity. It is omnipresent. One always hears the sound of trickling, rippling, gulping, splashing, slushing, flushing, or fizzing. There are hidden worlds beneath the water waiting to be discovered, just as there are formless clouds reflected in the pools and streams. Water represents fecundity and abundance as well as devastating floods. These are not supernatural miracles, but natural phenomena caused by natural scientific laws, which can be explained by Spinoza's system of the Divine World, the *Deus Sive Natura*.



Shoshannah Brombacher Ph.D, Brooklyn 2013



Detail: the planetary system



Detail: the Sun