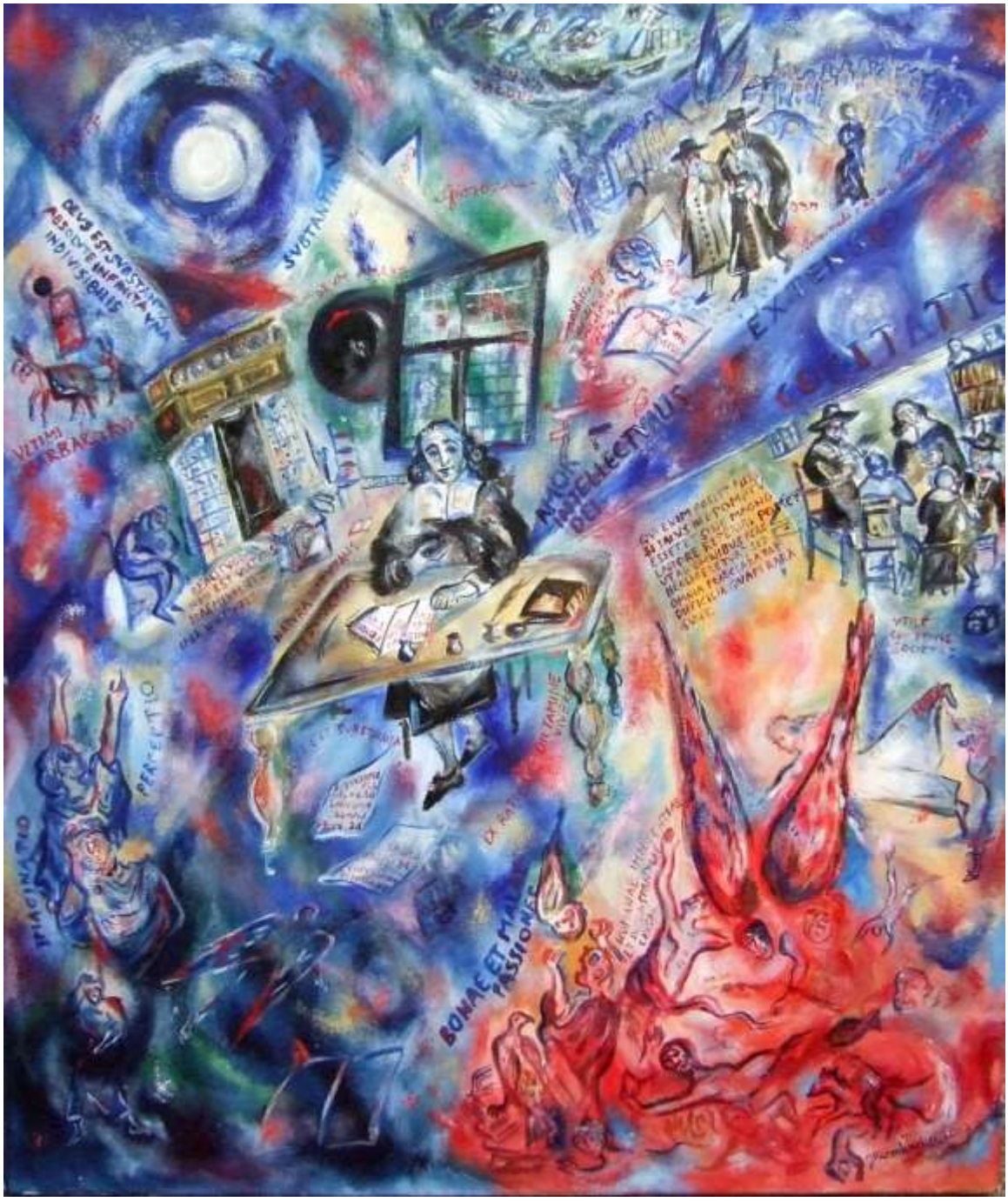


The Ethica of Spinoza

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 main theme of this painting is the philosopher Benedictus d'Espinoza, which is depicted writing his major work, the Ethica. He is sitting at his desk in his house in

Rijnsburg, surrounded by scenes from his life and allegorical representations of his work, which will be explained in the following pages.

General introduction. Baruch d'Espinoza (or Spinoza) was born in 1632 in Amsterdam. He was 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', 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, when Spinoza was still very young, his sickly mother passed away, in 1638. This must have made a big impression on the intelligent child. Baruch got a Jewish upbringing and attended the Talmud Torah School of his community. After that he became a merchant like his father, who passed away in 1654.

Spinoza started questioning religious doctrines at an early age. His open rejection of established religion, possibly combined with a dispute about business debts, led to many warnings from and conflicts with the rabbis and the leaders of his community, who were afraid of repercussions from Christian city and government officials and from the Dutch Christian lobby, which tolerated and even welcomed Jews to Amsterdam, but were known not to be fond of libertines and 'atheists', viz. people who denied angels and supernatural events as known 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 (Deus sive natura, God is substance and everything is an aspect or manifestation of God), thus denying the duality of Creator and creation. Spinoza also denied the divine origin of the Torah and basically all of Maimonides' 13 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 and live outwardly as a believing Jew for the sake of peace and unity among the Portuguese Nation. This 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 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, and 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, and changed his name from the Hebrew Baruch to the Latin Benedictus (both mean the blessed one). Here he found friends for life, Libertines, followers of Descartes and Freethinkers, and with them he discussed his philosophy. Spinoza was taught Latin by Van den Enden's daughter, Clara Maria, with whom he fell in love, according to legend. However, she married a different student of her father, Doctor Theodoor (Dirck) Kerkrinck, whom she convinced to convert to Catholicism. Spinoza never married.

Although 17th century Holland was a relatively tolerant country, deviant religious views were met with unbelief, suspicion and resistance by the influential more religious

part of the government and also by the influential Reformed Church. This was certainly also true for Spinoza's extreme views on God and religion. In particular the Reformed Church worked hard to have him banished 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 this threat which he feared and made him very cautious. His chosen motto was 'Caute' (be careful) and most of his work he dared not publish. Nevertheless, he frequented the printing shop of Jan Riewertsz 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.

About 1660 Spinoza left Amsterdam to have more peace and quiet in his life to work. He had probably already dwelled for a while at the manor of a rich protector outside of the city, but finally moved to the little rural town of Rijnsburg. The house with the gable inscription where he rented rooms still exists and can be visited. Here he studied, earned his living as a lens grinder and polisher, and received famous visitors. It was also here that he probably started working at the ideas for his Ethica, his major opus in which 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 only after his death in 1677. According to a story Spinoza discussed here with his landlord a bright and strange comet which appeared in the sky. It raised superstitious fear among the peasants and simple folks, which were not abated when plague broke out in its wake. Spinoza was spared and lectured about the dangers of superstition. 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, where the regent Johan De Witt and his brother Cornelis were lynched by a mob during political riots. Spinoza was enraged, a rare occasion, and could barely be contained in the house by his landlord, who feared for his safety when Spinoza wanted to run outside to paste a pamphlet with the words Ultimi Barbarorum on the wall. They 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, because 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 living as a 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 certain scientific circles, and 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.

Description of the painting.

Spinoza's life. In the middle of the canvas Spinoza is depicted sitting at his table in Rijnsburg, working at 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 on some other portraits, alone, deeply sunken in thought, even vulnerable, but everything around him is in motion and the swirls remind 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) are 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 17th century; in reality we are not sure about this. At the side of the hearth a figure huddles on a chair; it 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 often aloof attitude, and despite his libertine friends in Amsterdam.

In the upper part of the painting have been depicted the graves of Spinoza's parents at the cemetery Bet Haim at Ouderkerk. This burial ground of the Portuguese Jewish Community was reached by boat over the river Amstel. It is believed that Baruch 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 repenting, 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.

At the right of this scene are arched bridges, canals and a row of gable houses, representing the prosperity of Amsterdam in the 17th century. At the end (to the left) are ship 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 which wounded him and made him anxious to leave Amsterdam, but did not kill him. They 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 naſao 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, the famous Rabbi and teacher whom Spinoza rejected. Spinoza, here portrayed as a youth, looks at it. Behind the rabbis is an image of Spinoza's mother on a chair; because of her he could never ban Amsterdam and the Jewish Quarter from his thoughts.

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

At 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 not connected to events from Spinoza's life, but they are allegorical representations of his major work, the Ethica. There are many quotations from Spinoza's Ethica scattered over this canvas, definitions and words indicating the contents of the 5 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 is written Amor intellectualis Dei (from Chapter V, mainly dealt with in the axioms or definitions 24-31: this will lead to ultimate happiness and freedom). In the blue road which fans out ('extends') two of Spinoza's important philosophical tools, the attributes of Substance (read: God) which are used by humans, are written: Extensio and Cogitatio (II:1-9, extension and thought and their correlation). Beneath that we find 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 shows the Bonae et malae passiones (IV, especially dealt with in definitions 38-58), the good and bad emotions which can make people better, more rational and thus happier beings, or can lead them 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 Spinoza's own unanswered love, Clara Maria, hovers; as much as he wanted to, he was not immune to the 'condition humaine' either, but it is obvious from his life 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 infirmary. 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, dealt with in 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 show the Imaginatio and the Perceptio, both part of the Cognitio as described in II:14-23, next to the wings of imagination, under which a book with transparent dark pages lies open, since 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 and is according to Spinoza's philosophy not free: 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.

On the tiles near the cold fireplace hovers 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 the orthodox Jewish upbringing Spinoza has gotten, as 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 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.

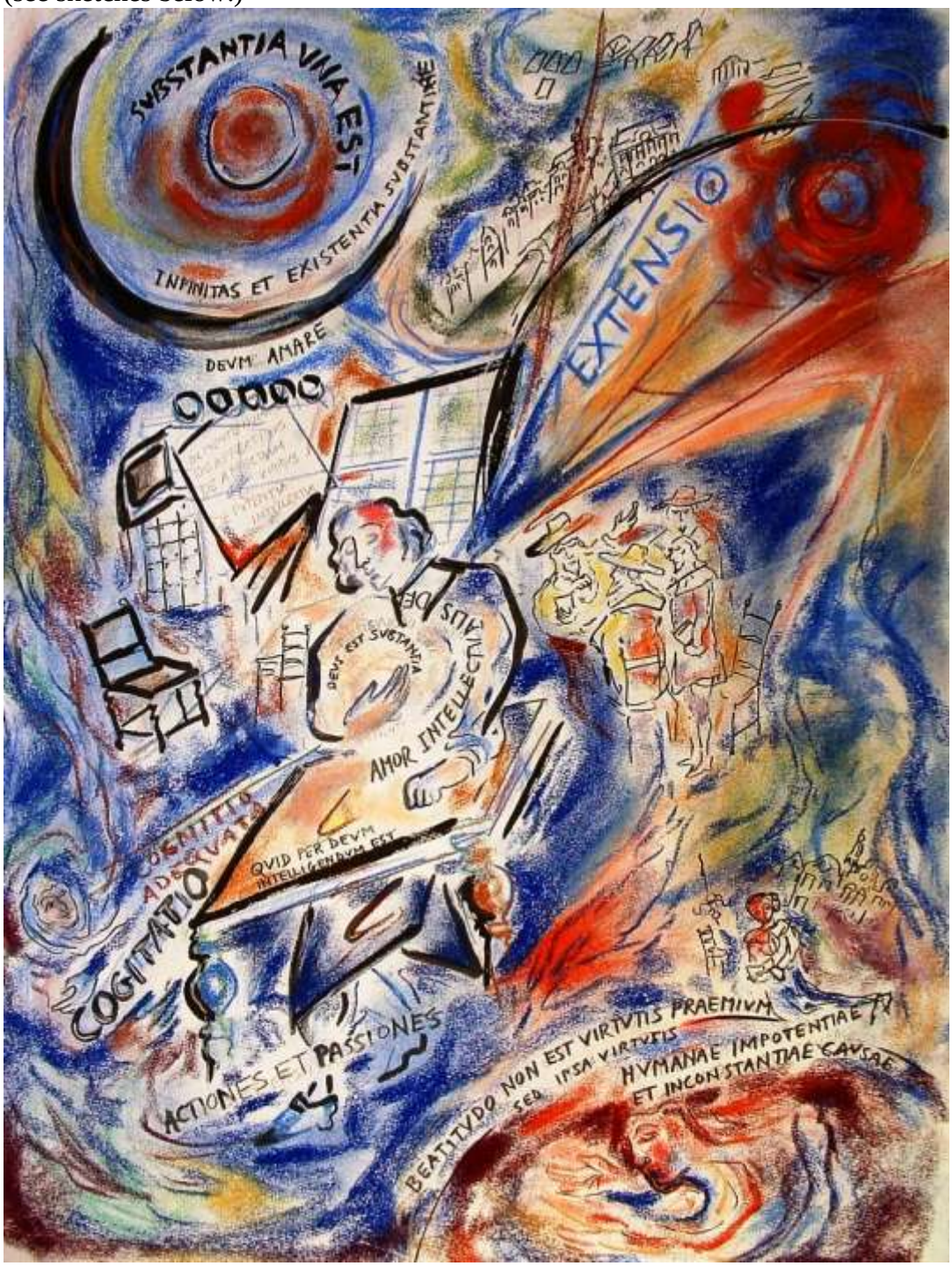
Around the white comet of light is written Substantia una est, from the opening definitions of the Ethica (I:1-6), and around the black sun is written Deum Amare, (from V:11-20, about the intellectual way of loving God/substance as the summum of happiness and freedom), which is also expressed in the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

Around Spinoza's table Deus est substantia is repeated, 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.

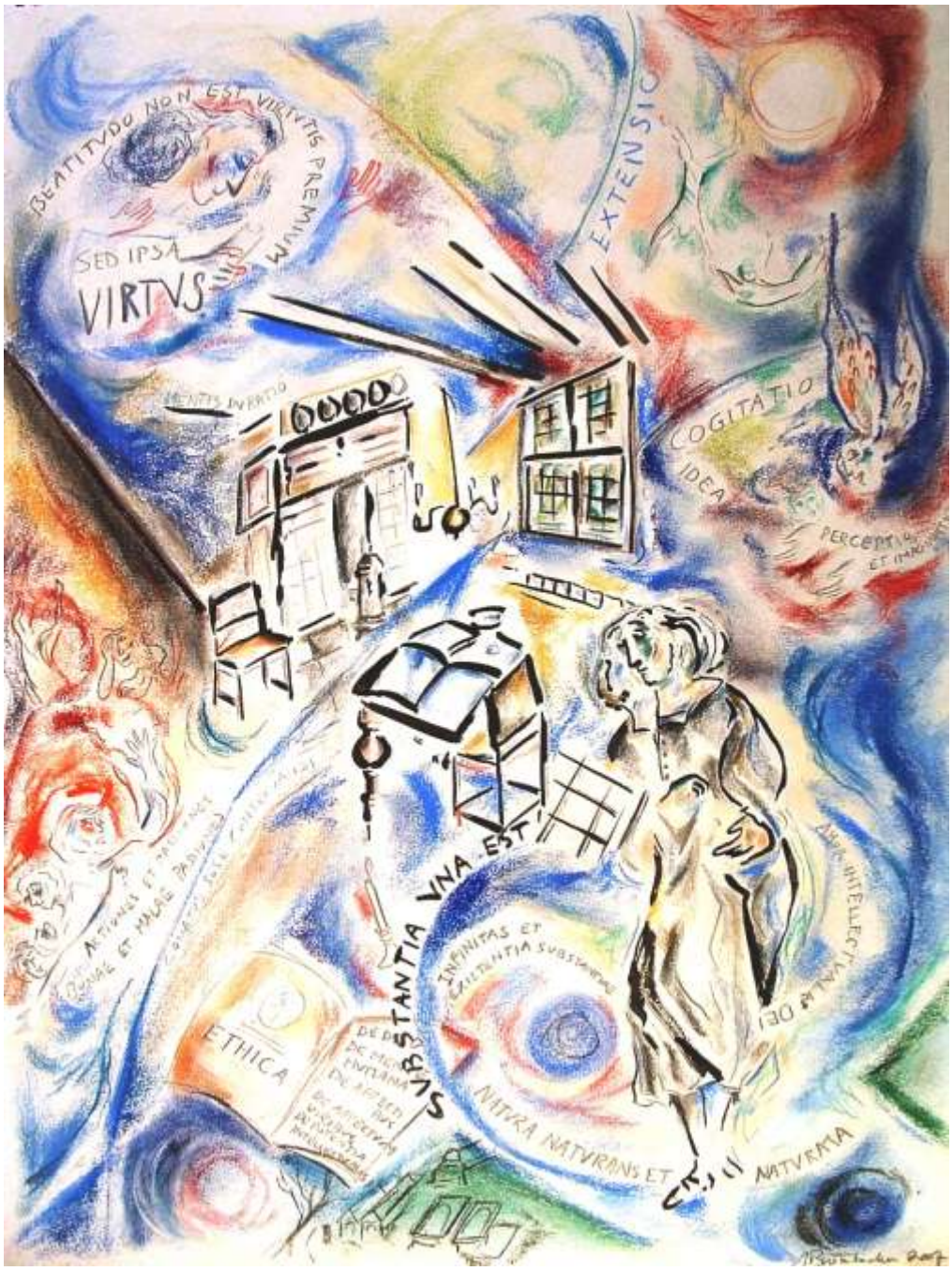
The artist's view. This painting is an artistic interpretation of the person and the philosophy of Spinoza, and of the complexity of the philosopher's work. The quotes are eclectic and the biographical details, due to the limited size of the canvas, reduced to some major events and moments in Spinoza's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

The lines and shapes suggest pages from books and papers, which were an important part of Spinoza's world, all over the canvas. 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 and is used for the fourth chapter of the Ethica where the emotions are described: De Affectuum Viribus. Of course nothing is only 'black and white', and blue contains traces of red and red contains fragments of other colors too. The motions and changes in intensity and hues in the colors, however, make this painting far more than 'rational', it is an artistic expression, and philosophical theories can interact with art, but are not identical to art. Spinoza scheduled the Ethica with mathematical precision, and 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 his residence, Rijnsburg, and the scenes in Amsterdam are bathed in 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 menacing sky and shows quite a different hue of green than Spinoza's window. The whole painting is in motion like a music symphony, and juxtaposes light, white, hope, reason and optimism, and black, darkness, hopelessness in spirals and facets, and enlarges and diminishes images and concepts like a perception one gets looking at them through the lenses Spinoza polished, whirling around the small quiet man with the pale complexion sitting in the center at his desk, hoping to change modern thought, in which he succeeded remarkably well.

(see sketches below:)



Sketch for the painting Spinoza's Ethica.



Another sketch for the painting Spinoza's Ethica.