

# Spinoza's Ethica

Artist: Shoshannah Brombacher, Ph.D.

Oil on canvas. 20 X 24 inches. New York, 2019



*An image with numbers (in red) referring to the descriptions in this article has been added at the last page.*



The theme of the exhibition “*Spinoza Marrano of Reason*” in Amsterdam in March 2019 for which this painting was created touches multiple subjects. Spinoza was a complicated man who lived in complicated times. Belonging to a Jewish community established by traumatized *Anusim* (Forced Ones) or Maranos, crypto-Jews who were forcibly baptized in Spain after 1492 and their descendants, some of whom were able to return to their ancestral faith in cities like seventeenth century Amsterdam, is difficult enough. Spinoza’s rejection of mainstream religion in a time and age when this was not tolerated shattered not only his reputation among his own people, but endangered his life and even his community. Consequently, being excommunicated from that community and finding a new circle of friends and colleagues, like the freethinkers of Amsterdam, and having to learn a new trade and finding new means of support added to his aggravation. But developing a philosophy which includes seeking personal, individual freedom from emotions—the human condition—promotes *ataraxia* in turbulent times. Spinoza sought freedom of speech and thought and his tool was Reason. Therefore, the theme of this painting is Spinoza’s *magnum opus*, the *Ethica*, which extensively deals with this subject. The work of art shows the philosopher writing his *Ethica*, surrounded by scenes from his life, his memories, and allegorical representations of his work, which will be expounded in the following pages.

**Baruch d’Espinosa** (or Spinoza) was born in Amsterdam in 1632 on November 24, the son of the Portuguese born Marrano-Jewish merchant Michael D’Espinoza and his second wife, Hannah Deborah. His parents belonged to the recently established community of the Portuguese Nation in Amsterdam, which was founded by Spanish and Portuguese *Anusim*. For fear of the Inquisition, these Sephardic Jews baptized by force in 1492 and their descendants had lived on the Iberian Peninsula outwardly as Catholics, but secretly adhered to their ancestral Jewish faith. Many had lost friends and relatives who were burned at the stake or tortured, others languished in the dungeons of the Inquisition after having all their possessions confiscated. These crypto-Jews were pejoratively called Marranos (pigs), and when accused of Judaizing and tried by the Inquisition, they were more often than not declared guilty no matter the circumstances. Only after being able to leave Spain and Portugal under false pretenses Marranos found freedom of thought and religion. They could live openly as Jews in cities like Istanbul, Venice, Hamburg or Amsterdam, which was the capital of the Dutch Republic of the Seven Provinces (established in 1588), and at war with the Catholic nation of Spain. The official state religion of the Republic was Protestant Calvinism. Therefore Jews, who were considered the “People of the Old Testament,” were not only tolerated, but welcomed to set up businesses and increase the prosperity of the thriving mercantile Dutch nation. They were allowed to establish synagogues, whereas Roman Catholics, associated with the hated Spanish monarch Philips II, were treated with contempt and mistrust, and were forbidden to worship in public. Amsterdam with its for that time very open, liberal, and cosmopolitan climate was known as *Eleuteropolis*, the City of Freedom. Spinoza was born there and received a Jewish education at the Amsterdam *Talmud Torah* educational institute for Sephardic Jews. He spoke Spanish and Portuguese in his community, learned Hebrew, and studied Jewish texts from an early age.

Unfortunately, in 1638 **at a tender age**, Spinoza lost his sickly mother. This must have made a big impression on the intelligent child, and probably influenced his psychological

relationship with people later in life. After completing their *Talmud Torah* education Spinoza and his brother Gabriel became merchants, like their father and many other members of the Portuguese Nation. Michael d'Espinosa passed away in 1654 when his son was in his early twenties. He is buried near his wife in the cemetery of the Sephardic Jewish community of Amsterdam, *Beth Haim*, which is situated in the village of Ouderkerk at the Amstel, less than ten miles from Amsterdam.

Spinoza started questioning religious doctrines early in life. Later on, his open rejection of established religion, Judaism in his case, led to numerous warnings from and conflicts with the rabbis and leaders of his community, who feared repercussions from the Protestant city council, government officials, and the Dutch Christian lobby. Although the Protestant governors of Amsterdam had provided a safe haven for Jews escaping the Spanish Inquisition, they weren't fond of libertines and 'atheists', such as people who denied angels, biblical supernatural events and miracles, and a caring, personal God who was actively involved in His creation, the world. Although Spinoza did not deny that God existed, for the philosopher He/it was impersonal and one with nature and its laws: *Deus sive natura*, God is substance and everything is an aspect or manifestation of God. Spinoza was a monist who denied the duality of a Creator and His creation and did not distinguish between the two, but considered them one and indivisible. Spinoza also denied the divine origins of the Torah, and basically abnegated all of Maimonides' thirteen Articles of Faith. This was enough for Jews and Christians alike to consider him not only a heretic, but a godforsaken atheist as well, and they warned him that he would be severely punished if he did not revoke his views and repent. But Spinoza, being a proud and stubborn young man, stuck to his principles. He, the son of Marranos, refused to keep up appearances and live outwardly as a believing Jew for the sake of peace and unity among the Portuguese Nation, as some suggested he should do. He was even offered a seizable annuity to keep his mouth shut in public in order to protect his community from harm, but he declined. In 1665, this culminated in his expulsion from the community. The *Mahamad* (Board) and the *Beth Din* (Judicial Court) of the Synagogue issued a *cherem*, a document of excommunication to sever all ties between Spinoza and all other Jews, meaning that they would shun both business and personal contact with him in any possible way, refuse to talk to him and about him, and not read any of his writings. He could not marry or be buried anymore in a Jewish community anywhere. One member of the *Beth Din* was the famous *Haham* (Rabbi) Saul Levi Morteira (1596-1660), the founder of the *Keter Torah* Yeshiva; an other one was *Haham* Ishac Aboab da Fonseca (1605-1693), who ten years later would become an enthusiastic adherent of the false messiah Shabtay Tzvi. He would be appointed as the first Rabbi in the Western Hemisphere. Spinoza's teacher Menasse ben Israel (1604-1657) was not present at the *Beth Din*, because he was on a journey to England, and Spinoza himself was probably not present at the ceremony either.

After he was ousted from his community, young Spinoza joined the Latin School of a former Jesuit from Antwerp, the freethinker Franciscus van de Enden, who had left the Southern Netherlands, which were still under the hegemony of Spain, for the more liberal climate of Amsterdam. Spinoza changed his first name from the Hebrew Baruch or Portuguese Bedito/Bento into the Latin version Benedictus (all meaning "the blessed one.") In Van den Enden's

house Spinoza made friends for life, libertines, followers of Descartes' ideas and freethinkers, with whom he could freely discuss his own philosophy. Spinoza, who had learned Hebrew but no Latin, the universal language of scholars at the time, attended Latin lessons from Van den Enden's daughter Clara Maria, an extremely educated and intelligent girl who walked with a limp. According to some sources young Benedictus fell in love with her. However, she married a different student of her father, doctor Theodoor (Dirck) Kerkrinck, whom she persuaded to convert to Catholicism, something she knew Spinoza would have refused to do. Spinoza never married, and we do not know of any other love affairs.

Although seventeenth-century Holland was a relatively tolerant country, deviant religious views were met with hostility, suspicion and resistance from the influential Protestant members of the city council of Amsterdam, the government, and the omnipresent Reformed Church, which worked hard to have Spinoza and his freethinker friends banished, silenced, imprisoned, and above all impeded from publishing and spreading their ideas, in which they only partly succeeded. After threats and bad reactions to some of Spinoza's pamphlets, printing subsequent writings, even anonymously or under a *nom de plume*, was deemed too dangerous. Spinoza was totally aware of this and it made him cautious. More than once he showed his friends his signet ring adorned with the rose and thorns (*spinosa*) of his surname and the motto *caute* (be careful). Nevertheless, he frequented the printing shop of his friend Jan Riewertsz. in Amsterdam, who not only had published some of his early works during his lifetime, but took care of the *Opera Posthuma* by publishing the *Ethica* after Spinoza's death in 1677.

About the year 1660 Spinoza left Amsterdam in search of a safe and quiet spot to work on his books. He probably had already resided for a while at the manor of a rich protector outside of the city. Now he moved to the small rural town of Rijnsburg, not far from Leyden and The Hague, which housed a community of the tolerant sect of the Collegiants. The house in which Spinoza rented two rooms was situated in a cabbage field at the outskirts of the town. It still exists and is now a museum, surrounded by modern streets with rows of houses and high-rises. Here, Spinoza studied and earned his living as a lens grinder and polisher, here he received famous visitors, like Leibniz, philosophers, thinkers, and scientists. It's probably here, in Rijnsburg, that he started working out his ideas for the *Ethica*, his *magnum opus* in which he applied Euclidian methods to demonstrate a metaphysical concept of the universe with ethical implications. The *Ethica* would not be completed until 1674 and be published a few years hereafter, in 1677. From Rijnsburg Spinoza regularly visited his old friends in Amsterdam to discuss his ideas, even after he learned that they were persecuted and some of them had been incarcerated or executed because of their extreme and libertine views. Understandably, this upset him. But it didn't scare him enough to revoke his ideas or be silent. Once, a large and bright comet appeared in the sky over Rijnsburg, which sparked superstitious fears among the peasants and simple folks, especially after the plague broke out in the comet's wake. Fortunately, Spinoza was spared. He lectured—mainly in vain—about the dangers of superstition, including certain religious ideas, and promoted scientific explanations of natural phenomena.



Spinoza left Rijnsburg, moved to Voorburg, and later on settled in The Hague. In 1672 two governors, Johan De Witt and his brother Cornelis, were lynched by a mob during political riots around the Dutch parliament buildings of The Hague. When Spinoza found out—while the riot was still going on—he became completely enraged, a rare occasion, and could barely be contained in the house by his landlord, who feared for Spinoza’s safety after he screamed that he wanted to go outside and put up an instantly created pamphlet with the words *Ultimi Barbarorum* at the site of the murder. These words are written in blood red letters (1) in the center of the painting, as a *j'accuse* against barbarism, primitivism, muzzling, and smothering a difference of opinion in blood, which is the ultimate attack on freedom of thought and defies reason. To preserve autonomy of thought and speech Spinoza had even declined an offer to teach at the prestigious University of Heidelberg, fearing that the rules and restrictions imposed by the University with its Roman Catholic protectors and sponsors were bound to curb or mute his own freedom of expression. He preferred to earn a modest living as a lens grinder, which offered him both time and freedom to think and write as he pleased, although it was not safe yet to publish his ideas.

On February 21 in the year 1677 Spinoza died at the age of forty-four, as a result of a lung disease which had been worsened by fine glass dust he breathed in during his lens polishing activities. He had never converted to an other religion after he had severed ties with Judaism, and never repented from his in the eyes of the rabbis heretical views, thus simply remaining in *cherem* after his death. Since he could not be buried next to his parents at the *Beth Haim* cemetery in Ouderkerk at the Amstel, he was interred in a temporary rental grave in a church, the Nieuwe Kerk (New Church) in The Hague, this being the only kind of burial site allowed for both Christians and non-Christians who had no other cemetery to go to, because general or non-religious graveyards did not exist in Holland yet. Despite and because of his rationalism, perceived atheism, scientific insight, rejection of miracles and the supernatural, and his break with established religion he was held in high esteem in philosophical and scientific circles. The poor, frugal, moral, socially withdrawn and hardworking philosopher had become famous in the Dutch Republic and abroad. His funeral in the New Church in The Hague was an impressive ceremony. Quite a crowd followed Spinoza’s bier, but he had died without much money, and his possessions were actioned off by his landlord to pay off the doctor who treated Spinoza for the illness leading to his death, and to cover burial expenses. After a certain amount of years rental graves of poor people were emptied out to make room for new burials. Old bones were collected and interred in a large, communal grave-pit, therefore there is no grave of Spinoza left. In 1956 a memorial stone has been erected in the yard around the church, with the text *Terra hic Benedicti de Spinoza in Ecclesia Nova olim sepulti ossa tegit* (The earth here covers the bones of Benedictus de Spinoza, long ago interred in the New



Church), and *amkha* (your people). Just a few minutes away from the Nieuwe Kerk is the house at the Paviljoensgracht where Spinoza spent his last years in the attic. It has undergone many renovations and got different destinations since the philosopher died, like workshops, a nineteenth century brothel, and apartments for families. Now it houses the *Domus Spinozana* library on the ground floor. Years ago, the artist had the privilege to visit this house where Spinoza exhaled his last breath, in the company of a friend, the author, artist and art historian Antoon Erfstemeijer who wrote about Spinoza in *Het Schetsboek van Spinoza* (1992). But in the renovated and redecorated attic nothing between the well-worn comfy chairs covered with moth-eaten, checkered material in gaudy colors reminded of the philosopher. However, imagination is a powerful tool. It enables an artist to see Spinoza lying in that room in the four poster bed with the red curtains he had inherited from his parents, or trying to dash out of the door to put up his *Ultimi Barbarorum* pamphlet, or writing at his desk in his house in Rijnsburg, and put those images on canvas.

### **The painting.**

This painting is an artistic interpretation of the person and philosophy of Spinoza. The quotations from the *Ethica* are eclectic, and due to the limited size of the canvas biographical details have been 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 letters of several of the quotations scattered over the canvas are not always outlined clearly, they seem to float on the River of Time in waving movements, like water. The straight lines and shapes all over the canvas suggest pages, books, and paper, which were a quintessential part of Spinoza's world. Bend lines, circles and arches symbolize movement, speed, light and thought, *panta rhei*. 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 predominant in the lower right quarter of the painting, which is dedicated to the fourth chapter of the *Ethica* which deals with emotions and their impact, *De Affectuum Viribus*. But nothing is only 'black and white,' therefore blue contains traces of red and red contains fragments of other colors, etc. The motions and changes in intensity of the colors in all their hues transform this painting into far more than a spinozistic 'rational' image. Philosophical theories can interact with art but are not identical to art, which is a product of the emotions of the artist. Spinoza scheduled the *Ethica* with mathematical precision, but this painting has been composed with interacting lines and dabs of color in an emotional and artistic way. The green glass of the window (2) instills the quiet and serenity of Spinoza's residence in Rijnsburg, the scene in Jan Riewertsz.' room in Amsterdam (3) is dreamily bathed in the brownish light of a November afternoon, but there is also bluish tobacco smoke wafting over the table. The cemetery where Spinoza's parents are buried (4) is cold and dark. It lies across the water of the River Amstel under a low, menacing sky, and its dominant chromate green differs from that of Spinoza's window. The whole painting is in motion like a musical symphony, and juxtaposes light, white, hope, reason, optimism, black, darkness, passions and hopelessness in spirals and facets, enlarging and diminishing images and concepts as if viewed through the lenses Spinoza



polished, whirling around the small, quiet man with the pale complexion who was hoping to change (modern) thought. He has succeeded remarkably well.

In the center of the canvas Spinoza sits at his writing table in his house in Rijnsburg (5), working at the *Ethica*. His signature is scribbled in the air over his head. (6) The titles of the five chapters of the *Ethica* are written on the sheets of paper on his desk. He looks pensive, not austere like in some other portraits, but deeply sunken in thought, alone, even vulnerable. Scenes from his life whirl around his table. To the right of his window are outlines of the tools and bench he used for grinding lenses, (7) to the left is a fire place decorated with Delft-blue tiles and a cauldron hanging from a ratchet, pewter plates and an earthenware jug on top of the wooden mantle-shelf. (8) Spinoza, known for his undemanding lifestyle, often prepared a simple meal of groats. Logs and a basket with peat bricks lie on the floor near a fire-screen to prevent sparks from dropping into the room. The tiles, and similar furniture as in the painting (but not used by Spinoza himself) are still on display in the sparsely furnished house in Rijnsburg. Spinoza's own books have been stolen by the Nazis and most are lost. They have been replaced by copies. Spinoza's slippers lie next to the fire place, where a dark figure (9) huddles on a low chair reminiscent of a Jewish *shiva* (mourning) seat. This is the personification of the loneliness which Spinoza no doubt must have experienced after being cut off from his own community, people who literally spoke his language. This caused for sure feelings of sadness and abandonment despite his rational philosophy and quasi aloof attitude, and despite his newly found circle of libertine friends in Amsterdam. The novel *The Spinoza Problem* (2012) by the psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom describes this state of mind beautifully. Spinoza's rational philosophy set his mind free, but no man is completely void of emotions.

The top part of the painting shows the funeral of Spinoza's mother at the cemetery *Beth Haim* in Ouderkerk, (10) which was usually reached by ship via the River Amstel. Men in black cloaks are lifting the coffin from a boat with black drapes. Underneath the keel, the first words of the prayer for the dead, *Kaddish*, are visible. The image of the dead mother with non-seeing eyes and wrapped in a white shroud is floating on the stream, leaving behind her beloved child. To the right of the graveyard scene, a year after the burial sad young Spinoza stands gazing at his mother's stone (11) in the company of his brother and father. The latter remarried after a while, as was customary in those days, but we do not know if little Bento and his step-mother got along well. Because of his mother Spinoza could never banish (pun intended) Amsterdam and the Jewish Quarter from his mind long after he ceased being a member of the Jewish community. His biographers mention that the philosopher returned occasionally to Ouderkerk after he had been put in *cherem* to visit his mother's grave. The Hebrew acronym "ת"נ"צ"ב"ה" (*tehi nafsho/ah tzerurah bitzror hachayim*, may his/her soul be bundled in the bundle of life) (12a) and the Spanish *S'A'G'D'E'G'* (*Sua Alma Goza da Eterna Gloria*, his/her soul attains eternal glory) (12b) in the painting are common inscriptions on the gravestones of *Beth Haim*. Spinoza himself is not buried there. Because of the *cherem* and his lack of repentance before he died he wasn't supposed to reach 'eternal glory.' The philosopher did not believe in the Jewish religious sense that the soul lives on after the body dies, but states that there is no dichotomy between body and soul, everything is Substance governed by the laws of nature.

The River Amstel appears twice in this painting. In the depiction of the funeral it's darkish, but underneath the assault (see below) it is light and bright, to express the mood of the scenes, such as sadness and the joy of liberation.

The arched bridges, wide canals and a row of richly decorated gable houses under the graveyard scene demonstrate the prosperity of Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. (13) At the left are the ship-masts and the Montelbaan's Tower in the vicinity of the port, known among Marranos in Spain and Portugal as the spot where newcomers from the Iberian Peninsula —like Spinoza's father—would be welcomed and introduced to members of the Jewish Community to assist them. But underneath, the murky phtalo green canal emanating its miasmatic vapors can barely hide the following disturbing scene. Two rabbis of the Portuguese community staged an assault with a knife on Spinoza, probably not to kill him but to scare him and motivate him to either repent and join the fold again or move far away from Amsterdam, where he endangered the political and therefore the physical safety and protection of the entire Jewish community. The attackers were supposedly Spinoza's old teacher Saul Levi Morteira and Spinoza's brother in law, Samuel De Caceres. Spinoza only suffered a minor cut, because the knife got stuck in his thick cloak and he could escape. But the incident shattered his sense of safety. He hung the ripped garment on a peg in his room (14) as a perpetual reminder of the dangers he faced for expressing his opinion in a time and age that opposed his philosophy. Is it possible he was reminded of the ritual cut made in his clothes as a sign of mourning after his parents died? Spinoza had a lot to bemoan and the kind of freedom he pursued was not yet in sight. After the assault he left Amsterdam. Phrases from the *cherem*, the document of Spinoza's excommunication issued in Portuguese, this being the preferred language of the Jewish Portuguese Nation in Amsterdam, are floating around to demonstrate how his community thought about him, powerful words 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 naçao de Jsrael* (may he be closed off and separated from the Nation of Israel), (15) plus the word *חרם* *cherem* (excommunication) in Hebrew. Beneath the white, bright comet in Rijnsburg (16) in the top left corner of the canvas is a smaller circle with Spinoza's signet ring bearing the emblem of a rose and thorns (*espinosa* means thorn), the letters *BDS* (Baruch d'Espinoza), and the word *Caute* (be careful!) (17). Below the feet of Spinoza and his attackers hovers a book with the word *חרם* (*cherem*) on the cover. Spinoza, here portrayed as a youth, gazes at it dolefully. (18) The scene of the ominous attack is painted in dark, glassy and somber green that suggests both the stench of the canals, which were used as sewers at the time, deeds that do not tolerate the light of day, and a suffocating lack of freedom to think and speak as one wishes openly. This darkness is contrasted underneath with the broad and majestic River Amstel outside of the city of Amsterdam, (19) its sparkling, silvery water reflecting the wide and famous Dutch sky, eternalized by many seventeenth century painters, the clouds and the sunlight offering a suitable refuge to the philosopher yearning to breathe free. The river-banks are lined with for Holland characteristic bullrushes and pollard willows. If Spinoza would have known the nineteenth century Dutch poet Willem Kloos (1859-1938), he would have identified with the first stanzas of Kloos' sonnet in such an environment:

*Ik ben een God in 't diepst van mijn gedachten,*

*En zit in 't binnenst van mijn ziel ten troon*



*Over mij zelf en 't al, naar rijksgeboôn  
Van eigen strijd en zege, uit eigen krachten.*

*En als een heir van donkerwilde machten  
Joelt aan mij op en valt terug, gevloôn  
Voor 't heffen van mijn hand en heldere kroon:  
Ik ben een God in 't diepst van mijn gedachten.*

*I am a God in the deepest of my thoughts,*

*Enthroned in the core of my soul  
over myself and all,  
conforming to the laws of state  
Of own fight and triumph, of own strengths.*

*And like an army of dark-wild forces  
Rises up at me, falls back again, has flown  
The raising of my hand and lucid crown:  
I am a God in the deepest of my thoughts.*

In the right border of the canvas, Spinoza is portrayed lecturing a group of freethinkers in Jan Riewertsz.' printing shop in Amsterdam. (3) Behind them stands a bookcase with busts of classical thinkers on top. Clara Maria van den Enden, her back turned towards the viewer, is standing next to her father, the former Jesuit and freethinker Franciscus van den Enden who took Spinoza under his wings. The wooden foot stove with a bowl of glowing embers next to a chair—so typically Dutch—is symbolic for the ardor of their conversation. The room is clouded by the bluish smoke of the long stemmed pipes men used in the seventeenth century. Also Spinoza is known to have loved smoking, and behind his shoulder in the center of the canvas, near the work bench, stands a blue and white *toeback* (tobacco) jar (20). A pipe-rack hangs on the wall next to his fireplace.

The floating shape of the woman in the white dress (21) in the bottom left corner of the canvas is a product of Spinoza's imagination. His beloved Clara Maria van den Enden has been haunting his thoughts. But her wrists and ankles are chained to the outlines of Spinoza's rival in love, her well-to-do husband Kerkrinck whom she chose over the philosopher, supposedly after the doctor presented her with an expensive necklace and a promise of a financially secure future. Spinoza's head is touched by the white wing of the allegorical figure *Imaginatio* which is portrayed a second time right under Clara Maria.

Above the fireplace of Spinoza's room in Rijnsburg his own funeral procession of six carriages drawn by dray-horses dressed in black covers and black plumes passes by slowly, (22) bringing the dead philosopher to his last resting place, a rental grave in the section reserved for impoverished citizens in the Nieuwe Kerk at the Spui in The Hague. Directly under the comet is a small scene of terminally ill Spinoza lying in his four poster bed in the attic at the Paviljoensgracht. (23) The black sun over the funeral procession was inspired by a line from the poem *This night is irredeemable* of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) about a funeral (not Spinoza's): *I woke in a glittering cradle, / lit by a black sun*. This image of a black sun appears in several of Brombacher's works. The bigger black sun (24) to the left of Spinoza's window is a symbol of the contemporary ignorance which Spinoza had to battle, and of the personification of loneliness crouching next to the fire place. It creates a stark contrast with the flashes of light emanating from Spinoza's brilliant mind.

On Spinoza's request, his precious lectern containing all his manuscripts was brought to safety by his friends right after he died and secretly delivered to Jan Riewertsz. in Amsterdam, who published Spinoza's *Opera Posthuma*. In the painting it is portrayed twice, high over Spinoza's funeral procession (25a) and under the ripped cloak on a peg in the center of the painting. (25b)

The remaining scenes in the painting are allegorical representations of Spinoza's *magnum opus*, the *Ethica*. Quotations from this work tumble over each other in the canvas, such as definitions and the contents of the five chapters of the book on sheets of paper on Spinoza's desk:

- I. *De Deo* (About God),
- II *De Mente Humana* (About the Human Mind),
- III *De Affectibus* (About the Emotions),
- IV *De Affectuum Viribus* (About the Strengths of the Emotions),
- V *De Potentia Intellectus* (About the Power of the Intellect).

Above the discussion in Jan Riewertsz.' house, at the right side of the canvas, one sees the words *Amor intellectualis Dei* (26) from chapter V, specifically the axioms or definitions 24-31: intellectual love for God leads to ultimate happiness and freedom.

The bright, yellow bifurcating trail of light (27) fanning out ('extending') above Spinoza's window behind his desk contains the terms for two of Spinoza's important philosophical tools, *Extensio* (extension) and *Cogitatio* (thought), from chapter II:1-9, which discusses extension and thought, the attributes ascribed to Substance/God, and their correlation.

In the blue bottom left quarter of the canvas, two allegorical winged figures are fluttering around: *Imaginatio* and *Perceptio*, (28) which are both part of *Cognitio* (see chapter II:14-23). Underneath lies an open book with transparent, dark pages, since not everything can be understood by all people and not everything is clear to all.

The concluding sentences of the *Ethica* are written at the bottom of the painting under *Imaginatio* and *Perceptio*, in wavy lines as if written on water with a light quill of light (29):

*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 bottom right quarter of the canvas visualizes the *Bonae et malae passiones* (chapter IV, specifically definitions 38-58), the good and bad emotions which either make a person better, more rational, and thus happier, or lead him astray, chain him in bondage, and toss him into utter misery. The hapless, twisting, cringing chained creatures in the painting are overwhelmed by their passions and emotions, their simian faces distorted, their fists clenched, or their hands thrown up in the air in despair. Some of these wretched people enslaved by their passions act and look like donkeys, others are limp and semi-lifeless. They are confused, because they failed to investigate their situation in a rational and intellectual manner which



would enable them to understand the logical order, connections, causes, and effects of whatever occupies them. But as we know, not all passions are evil, and therefore the color red (meaning bad passions) and blue (rational behavior, but in this part of the painting also beneficial passions) mix and merge, for instance in the embracing couple (30) on the left demarcation between the red and blue fields. Passion combined with healthy love is good, noble, desirable, and beautiful. But this kind of passion must be mutual in order to be constructive. Spinoza's unrequited love for Clara Maria (21) is floating around in the blue bottom left quarter of the canvas, but causes fierce red streaks and blots, like bloody wounds. The enamored philosopher must have suffered because of his strong emotions, but he did not drown in his passions thanks to his rational outlook on life. There is a reference to chapter IV:1-18, *Humanae impotentiae et inconstantiae causae* (Causes of human infirmity).(31)

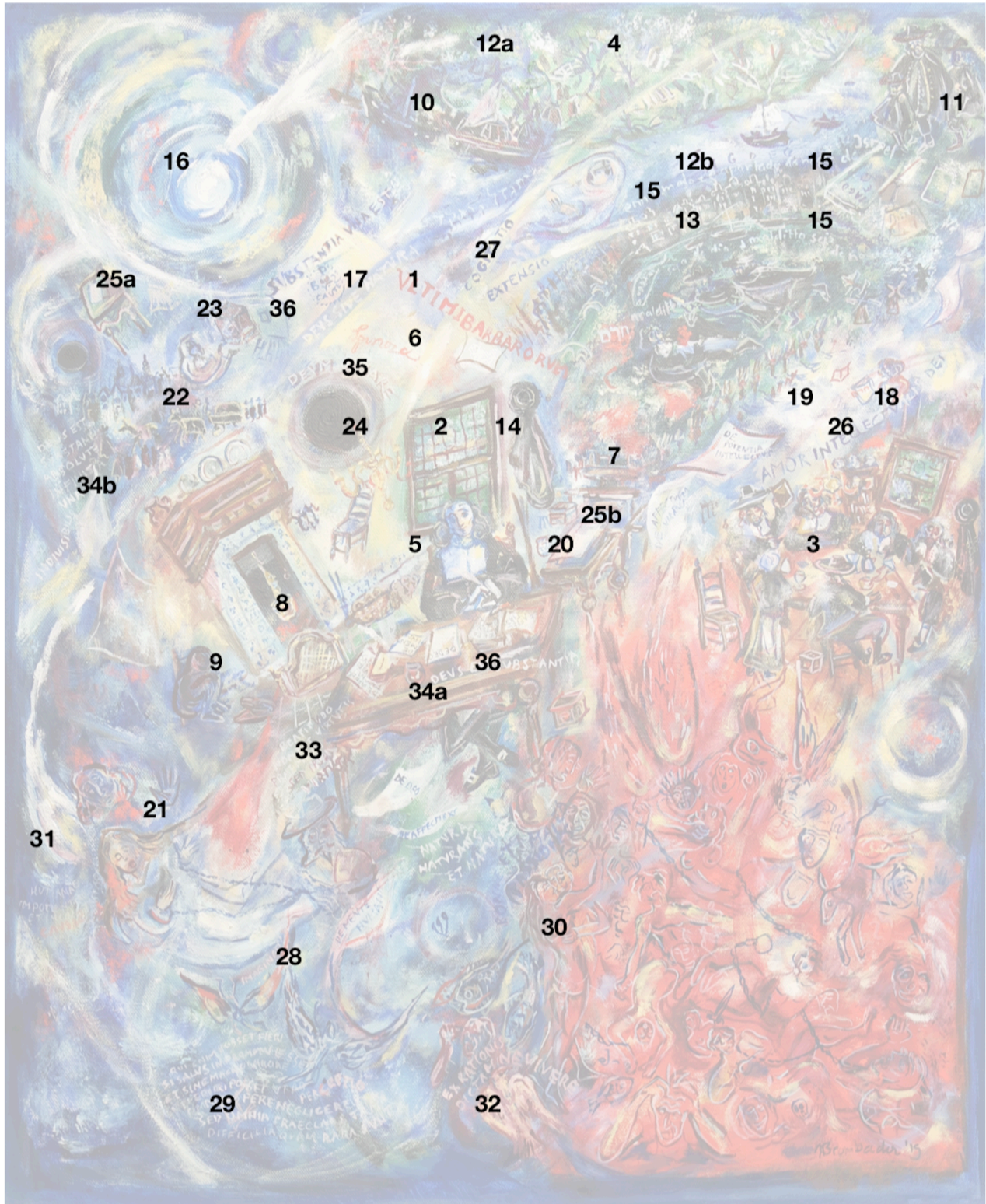
The bird next to the crazed orator (32) at the bottom of the canvas displays people's versatile character. It turns from a hawk into a dove and *vice versa*, from bad, irrational, and crazy, to good, and back. The orator calls out: "*Ex rationis dictamine vivere*," from chapter IV: 59-66, about slavery and the freedom one acquires by living according to reason, and thus refusing to blindly follow one's emotions.

Over the tiles in front of the fireplace hovers a quotation from chapter V:42, which contains one of the pillars of Spinoza's *Ethica*: *Beatitudo non est virtutis praemium, sed ipsa virtus*, (Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue is its own reward).(33) It's easy to recognize here Spinoza's Orthodox Jewish upbringing, which states in a similar way that the *mitzvah* (a good, beneficial and moral deed commanded in the Torah) itself is the reward of a *mitzvah*.

References to Spinoza's novel ideas about God which branded him a heretic and outcast, such as *Deus est substantia absolute infinita, una, indivisibilis* (God is Substance, absolutely infinite, one and indivisible, chapter I:11-15) are written over the philosopher's desk (34a) and floating around the philosopher's funeral procession (34b) in the left border of the canvas. Both in Christian and Jewish doctrine God and substance are considered two different entities: God is the Creator and as such not identical to or one with His creation. Around the black sun one sees the words *Deum Amare* (to love God), (35) from V:11-20, about the intellectual way of loving God/substance as the summum of happiness and freedom. Finally, the famous but sometimes misquoted words *Natura naturans et naturata* (I:29, are written under Spinoza's signet ring (36), indicating *the active 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, viz., attributes without which He cannot exist or be conceived.



The work in this exhibition is not the first portrait the artist made of the famous philosopher. Some of her Spinoza paintings and drawings are in collections in Germany, New Zealand, Holland, and New York, and embellish book-covers and academic posters from Great Britain, Turkey, and Holland.



*The painting "Spinoza's Ethica" hangs on dowels, but there is sufficient canvas around the borders for it to be stretched and framed. For more information contact the artist at [shoshbm@gmail.com](mailto:shoshbm@gmail.com) or via Facebook.*