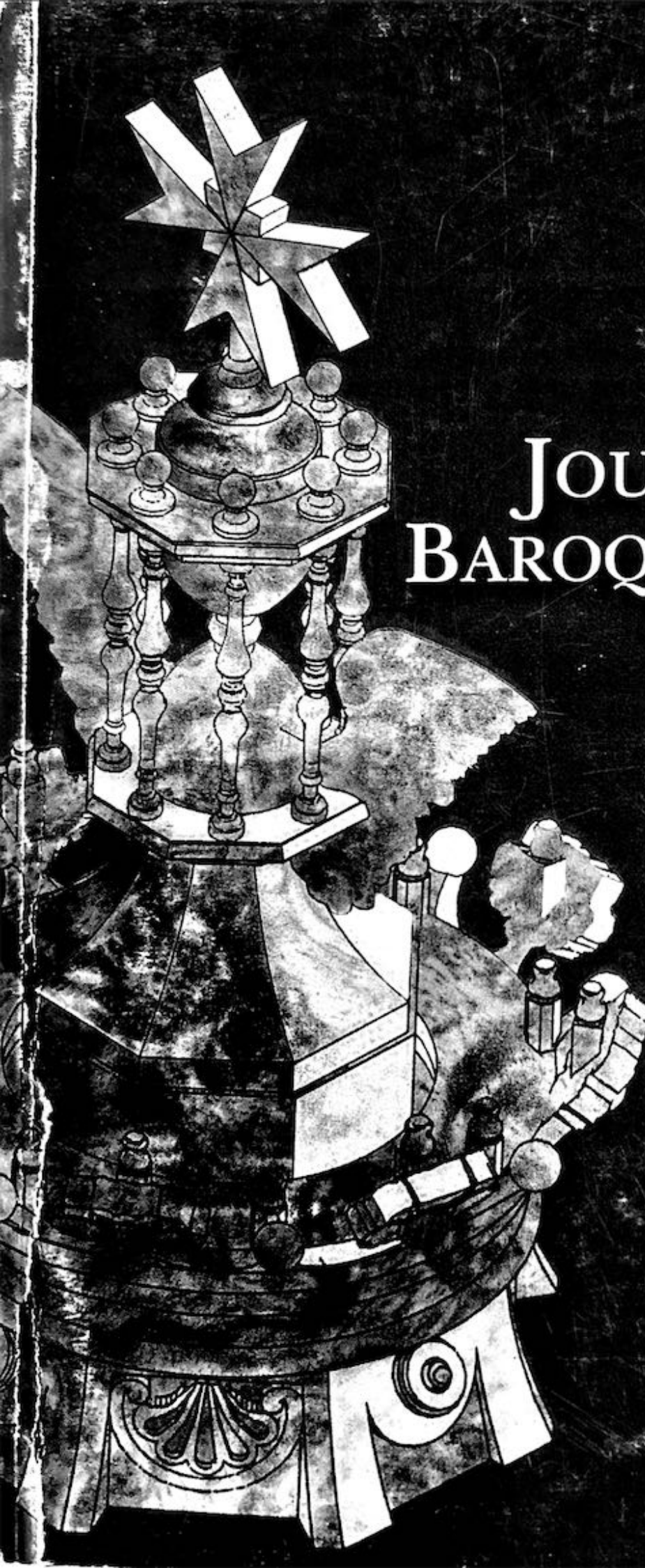




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Front cover: Representation of top section of Romano Carapecchia's Chapelle Ardente

International Institute for Baroque Studies

The International Institute for Baroque Studies (IIBS) at the University of Malta was set up to promote the pursuit of interdisciplinary academic studies on various aspects of Baroque culture. It organises symposia, public lectures, exhibitions and other activities leading to a greater appreciation of Baroque culture, with particular reference to Malta, and networks with similar centres for Baroque studies overseas. It is currently engaged in research projects concerning Baroque art and architecture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Institute organises MA courses on Baroque studies and short courses on the Baroque heritage of Malta and its conservation, and gives assistance to various bodies concerned with the restoration of Baroque buildings and artefacts. It also organises a pre-tertiary Certificate course and a Diploma course in Baroque architecture.

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FOREWORD

'Triumph Over Death: A Baroque Celebration'

The following six papers were presented at a seminar on 5 May 2003, which formed part of a wider range of activities organised by the International Institute for Baroque Studies in collaboration with the Manoel Theatre and the KGU. The seminar took place at St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity in Valletta, and was the fourth activity in a series of cultural events that together made up the Baroque Festival 2003 – the second edition of this biannual festival.

It was decided from the outset that this edition of the Festival would have an overall theme, uniting the events. The theme chosen was a bold one – death in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the ways that attitudes towards death are reflected in the art and culture of the period. A variety of musical and dramatic performances on this theme were staged in Malta and Gozo over a period of eight days.

Still on the same theme, another ambition of the Festival was to restore the magnificent 'Chapelle Ardente' designed by Romano Carapecchia for the funeral of Grand Master Vilhena. While the project proved too extensive to complete in time for the Festival, the International Institute for Baroque Studies is pleased that its initiative has encouraged the restoration of this artefact to begin in earnest, in conjunction with the Valletta Rehabilitation Project under the direction of Dr Ray Bondin. One of the papers in this volume gives an overview of this project to date.

Thanks for support in the production of this first issue of the Journal of Baroque Studies are due to the Hon. Francis Zammit Dimech, Minister of Tourism, Ms Patricia Camilleri of the Communications Office at the University of Malta, Chev. Roger De Giorgio, and the Malta Tourism Authority.

Dr Petra Bianchi

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Baroque Philosophy and Death

Peter Serracino Inglott

"Aristus and Theotimus had become great friends ... nevertheless these two gentlemen could not agree on the subject of death. Aristus thought life too short. Theotimus found it too long. The thought alone of death horrified Aristus; there was nothing more terrible for him. Theotimus, on the contrary, spoke of death with transports of joy. It is the end of all our ills, he said". A third character, Theodorus, then intervenes and says: "Perhaps you are both right: you, Aristus, to fear death; and you, Theotimus to desire it".

So begins the first of *Three Conversations on Death* by Nicholas Malebranche, apparently written after a very serious illness and first published in 1696. (Incidentally, it was a version of Malebranche's Occasionalist philosophy rather than Thomism that was taught at the University of Malta in the following century, as evidenced in the textbook authored by my predecessor Dr. Bernard).

A reinterpretation of the meaning of death had become a necessity for all European philosophers as a result of the Cartesian revolution, which began the modern era in the history of philosophy.

Descartes himself, towards the end of his life, had written to his friend Chanut, French Ambassador to Sweden at the time of Queen Christina, who was soon to prove the unintentional engineer of the philosopher's death in 1650, that until then he had spent most of his time in medical studies, in the hope of, among other goals, extending his own life.

In 1638, he had written to Huyghens that he had good hopes of living up to well over a hundred years; to Father Mersenne, a year later, he wrote that it seemed to him that he was now further away from death than in his youth (when he was a soldier and when, away from the wars, in the Paris of the Musketeers, he seems to have delighted and excelled in duelling; he even wrote a textbook on the art of fencing – literally, not philosophically). However around 1641 he suffered three losses; of his natural daughter Francine (who died at the age of five), of his father (who died at the age of seventy-seven), and of his elder sister Jeanne (who had brought him up, since his mother had died when René was aged one).

In 1641 Descartes wrote that "those who had tried to relieve his sadness had only made it more acute, while those who shared his sorrow had comforted him". The tone is very different to that of the Stoic letters of condolence he had himself previously written; but towards the end of his life he wrote that a fundamental principle of the ethics on which he was now concentrating his thought was to love life but not to fear death.

To Chanut he wrote that he had found this ethical principle a far easier and safer way of enhancing his existence than medical research aimed at find-

ing means of prolonging life. It is significant that Descartes spoke of his new concept of death in personal letters to friends.

Discussions about death such as those written by, most typically, Malebranche and also half a century earlier by Descartes, were by no means a novelty. Dialogues on the subject were, on the contrary, a common literary genre in the Middle Ages. In the baroque age, however, the discussions differ in three main ways. Firstly, they were not so often cast in the dialogue form still followed by Malebranche but in more self-involving forms such as autobiographies or personal letters. For instance, Blaise Pascal's most celebrated discussions of death, written the same year as the death of Descartes, are contained in two texts: the first a letter to his sister Gilberte in which he announced to her their father's death; the second is an account of his reflections on his own serious illnesses.

A second difference between the medieval and the baroque discussion of death is that the baroque texts are much more philosophical in content and less based on religious belief. I should perhaps, before going on, say a few words in justification of my speaking of baroque philosophy. The word 'baroque' – as is well-known – is derived from a technical philosophical term, more precisely from the jargon of logic, that is, the name of the kind of syllogism the medieval logicians described with the mnemonic term 'baroco'; but it is still not usually applied to philosophy. This is, in my opinion, due to the fact that until recently it was not usually considered that the style of a philosopher's writing, as distinct from the content, was important. It is only recently, after Wittgenstein and Derrida, that it has come to be generally realized that style and content are just as inseparable in philosophy as in literature, music or the visual arts. I think, therefore, that it is just as appropriate to speak of baroque philosophy, as it is to speak of baroque sculpture and architecture.

Admittedly, there has been a lot of discussion as to what the word 'baroque' exactly means. I do not have the time to contribute to this philosophical discussion today, as I have done in the past. Here I will only say that primarily it refers to works produced in the century and a half between the middle of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. Secondly, the word 'baroque' refers to all works produced at any time which have a 'family likeness' (to use Wittgenstein's term) with the works typically produced in the 150 years or so after the great siege of Malta and which happen to coincide with one of the two golden ages in the cultural history of our own islands including, notably, philosophy. (The other golden age is, of course, the megalithic: some baroque traits are not totally absent of course in the products of that chronologically more distant age. However it could be

said that the focus of interest then was not so much life triumphant over death as much as the generation of life subject to human ordering; and that is a related, but different, topic to ours today).

There is, I believe, no essence of the baroque, but as I have said, there is a family likeness between all its manifestations. Basically I am assuming for our present purposes that anything deserves to be called baroque, in the current most general sense of the term, if it is somehow related to the attempt to capture a glimpse of the eternal in some fleeting moment of time, or of the infinite in some one finite instance of space. Clearly, to any philosopher as to any artist engaged somehow in some such attempt, death is likely to be a focal concept.

However, there is a more specific reason why philosophers from Descartes onwards, perhaps culminating with Malebranche, felt such a compelling, if initially unwelcome, duty to tackle the topic of death, as I deliberately indicated in my very first words on this early May morning. The reason is the re-introduction by Descartes of the Platonist, dualist concept of man, that is, the concept of man as the enigmatic conjunction of two quite different substances, body and soul or matter and mind. This dualist concept (still often taken by many to be almost self-evidently true) is diametrically opposed to the medieval view, notably of St Thomas Aquinas.

St Thomas, following Aristotle and the non-Hellenistic parts of the Bible, explicitly held that it was strictly speaking wrong to say that man was made up of two different things, namely body and soul. Strictly speaking, man was just one thing (or substance); man was a body, which had (possessed, rather than was) a soul (or mind). By 'soul' Aquinas meant the power to move about, to feel and think. Consistently, Aquinas held that all living things had souls, although in the case of plants and animals, the soul perished with the body, which it merely informed.

In the case of man the soul did not quite perish with the body, according to Aquinas, who perhaps did not follow Aristotle on this point; simply because a thought – once thought – is indestructible; hence the power that produced that thought, which we call the mind, must be even sturdier than its products; it cannot therefore perish. But evidently the power that produced my thoughts is not myself in my integrity. The immortality of my soul was deemed by Aquinas to be very poor consolation for the perishing of my body. My body was not like the soul a mere possession, a bit of property that I owned; my body was myself. Hence, the true Christian hope was for the resurrection of the body, and the greatest philosophic difficulty for Aquinas was how to account for the survival of the soul in between the death and the resurrection of the body.

Obviously the problematique becomes quite different when, with Descartes, I am identified not with my soul-empowering material body, but with my soul on its own, assumed to be only incidentally and indeed accidentally, that is to say unfortunately, associated with my body.

On this assumption – that is on the basis of a dualist picture of man – the problem becomes the one set out by Malebranche in the opening quotation of this talk. If death is really and rationally speaking the liberation of the immortal soul from slavery to the body, why then do all human beings fear it – to the extent that the great representative of the other side of baroque philosophy, the British Empiricist side as opposed to the Continental Rationalist side, namely Hobbes held that fear of death was the defining and inalienable mark of belonging to mankind? Of course, no Continental Rationalist, not even Malebranche, denied that fear of death was instinctive, even if, in diametrical opposition to Hobbes, they held it to be irrational.

I do not have the time today to give you an account of how the different philosophers of the baroque age argued for a positive and cheerful, rather than neo-Stoic, attitude towards death. It is obvious that the arguments of Spinoza would be different from those of Leibniz. In Spinoza's view death, in the sense of the perishing of something that previously existed, simply does not happen; what really happens is just a transformation of something (x) into something else (y) due to an encounter of (x) with a more powerful something (z).

Moreover, Spinoza holds that there are degrees of dying; for instance, losing one's memory is a partial death. The fear of death only arises out of the human awareness that the human being is not the most powerful combination of elements that is possible. Hence, Spinoza concludes, a correct assessment of human nature logically implies that death should not be regarded as a negative happening. "The free man", says Spinoza, "thinks of nothing less than of death and his wisdom is a meditation not on death but on life" (Ethics IV: 67). Spinoza is here, of course, referring to the Socratic-Platonic idea revived in our time by Heidegger, that philosophy is essentially preparation for – an apprenticeship of – of death.

I will move to a rapid – and indeed somewhat abrupt conclusion – by simply extracting just three typical reflections from Malebranche's *Three Conversations on Death* with which I began.

The first reflection is that Malebranche considers death not so much in the perspective of time and eternity, as that of space and infinity. For him, the body is essentially the establishment of limits restricting the spatial extension within which the soul is free to act. With death, according to Malebranche,

time, which is a matter only of subjective perception, is abolished, while space is transfigured. The restricted operational room imposed on the soul by the body is substituted, not as a Christian might at first be tempted to think by the ultra-spaciousness of divine immensity, but rather by an absolutely clear understanding and acceptance of the immutable Order of creation as conceived and enacted by God's will.

The second reflection is that pain, according to Malebranche, was essentially that which made the soul realise what space it could call its own, that is the boundaries within which it could act. The body was that which hurt a soul that sought to escape its natural imprisonment in a fallen world. But Malebranche does not hold that death is the total separation of soul from body. He thinks that after death the soul retains a bond with the body which had constituted the space of its action before death – only after death, every soul's body is transfigured, first transported into a non-gravitational world and then rendered radiant and more perspicuous than a glasshouse. However any more knowledge of a glorified body was only available to us through revelation not philosophy. But Malebranche devotes practically the whole of his third conversation to the political implications of such knowledge as we have of society. There perfect friendship was possible, as it is not in our mortal world. In a society made of souls still associated with bodies, because of the indestructibility of substance, equality the indispensable basis of all true and full friendship, will reign.

The third reflection is a comparison and contrast between death and sleep. Theodore says:

Sleep seems to us pleasant and death terrible as a result of the natural laws of the union of soul and body; for these laws tend only towards the conservation of life. But you will know, Aristus, that natural laws only arouse in us confused feelings, while in the search after the truly good the mind must never allow itself to be led by instinct or confused feeling, but by reason and light. The soul in sleep is reduced to the basest of servitudes and deprived of all its rights. Death, on the contrary, delivers it from this slavery and re-establishes its dignity. Sleep has no relationship with death except by the immobility of the body. It is a relationship which our senses discover. But if you can consult Reason, you will learn that the two states of the soul are most contrary to each other.

I hope that quotation will help you keep awake as other speakers talk about death and baroque music and the arts. Not a bad task for philosophy!