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Civilizational Trauma and Value Nihilism in Boccaccio’s Decameron

David J. Rosner
drosner@mcny.edu

Introduction: Civilizational Trauma and Values Crises

In the introduction to their edited volume *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, Carsten Meiner and Kristen Veel discuss catastrophes and crises as “disruptions of order”¹. They argue that “through consequences of varying severity, catastrophes and crises change and subvert what we have become accustomed to as the normal state of things, thereby exposing what was previously taken for granted.”² Yet their book explores not merely the particular catastrophic events themselves, but in the “multi-layered and complex interlinkage between actual events and the cultural processing of these events”³, i.e., how they “understood in terms of their cultural life….how they are interpreted once they occur, and what kinds of cultural representation they subsequently engender.”⁴

This paper traces what happens to a civilization’s fundamental values during times of catastrophe and specifically how civilizational values are affected by collective psychic trauma. The specific case under consideration here is the Black Death plague, which ravaged Europe starting from around 1348. The paper examines how some themes in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, perhaps the most influential literary production created in reaction to the plague, can also be considered one of the West’s earliest chronicles of a moral/epistemological crisis, and how certain themes in the work, understood as a reaction to the Black Death, can even be seen to reveal elements of trends towards what we now call value nihilism (at least according to Nietzsche’s definition of the term).

This paper will also address the more general question of how crises and catastrophes are to be properly studied, as part of the “methodology” of civilizational studies. I will thus follow the theoretical lead of Meiner and Veel above (and civilizationalists like Piritrim Sorokin) in that, for this paper, the crucial moment to be studied is not necessarily the external catastrophic event itself (e.g., all of the details concerning an earthquake, economic collapse or world war--in this case the Black Death plague) but rather the internal “void of ethics” (Cf. Patrizia McBride) that this event left in its wake, and the implications this “void of ethics” has had upon those of us living in Western Civilization today.

² Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
The Abandonment of Values in Desperate Times

According to the Brown University Decameron Web:

in 1334 an epidemic which would eventually kill two-thirds of China’s inhabitants struck the northeastern Chinese province of Hopei, claiming up to ninety percent of the population…carried along trade routes, the ‘Black Death’, as it soon would be called, began to work its way east…In 1346 the plague came to Kaffa, a Genoese cathedral city…plague ridden ships from Kaffa brought the disease to Italy. Some cities lost almost all their inhabitants. In Venice at least three-quarters died. In Pisa seven tenths of the inhabitants died, and many families were completely destroyed…Estimates of the dead vary greatly…throughout Italy, at least half the population died.5

Boccaccio describes the physical symptoms and progression of the disease in the first chapter of Decameron: First there would be the appearance of certain swellings in the groin or armpit, which then would begin to spread, soon appearing at random all over the body. Later on, the symptoms changed, and many people began to find dark blotches on their arms, thighs, and other parts of the body…At this point, this was a certain sign that the person would die.”6

The question for this inquiry is how did this affect medieval civilization on a spiritual plane, in terms of its basic values? Part of the experience of trauma here was the unique sense of hopelessness spreading through Christendom, due to the fact that no matter who one was or what actions one took (or didn’t take), nothing proved effective to stop the plague’s deadly progress. Boccaccio thus writes: “against this pestilence no human wisdom or foresight was any avail.”7 Whether priest or layman, Christian or Jew, rich or poor, man or woman, all fell victim. Neither prayer nor medicine worked. Some desperately beseeched God, seeking penance through self-flagellation or participation in novenas, while others (perhaps equally desperately) attempted to “carpe diem,” trying to find a modicum of pleasure wherever possible. But it didn’t really matter what the people did, as the plague progressed relentlessly and indiscriminately across Europe. While the mass death wrought by the plague in itself was horrific enough, the accompanying realization of futility must only have exacerbated the collective trauma experienced in Europe at this time.

This sense of despair led to a widespread breakdown of morals. Boccaccio writes that in the face of mass death, (and with the hysteria, hopelessness and social disorder attendant upon the recognition that nobody, including the medical establishment and the clergy, could do

anything to stop the plague’s progress) “the revered authority of the laws, both divine and human, had fallen and almost completely disappeared.”

How, more specifically, was this moral breakdown made manifest? For one thing, we see that civilization’s most basic family ties and relations were abandoned out of sheer panic and fear for self-preservation. Boccaccio writes:

…brother abandoned brother, uncle abandoned nephew, sister left brother, and very often wife abandoned husband…even worse, almost unbelievable, fathers and mothers neglected to tend and care for their own children, as if they were not their own.

Moreover, in their desperation to quickly rid themselves of diseased corpses, the most sacred rituals in Christianity concerning death and funerals were also suddenly abandoned. People died alone in the streets and were then simply thrown into mass graves:

The city was full of corpses. Things had reached such a point that the people who died were cared for as we care for goats today…so many corpses would arrive in front of a church every day and at every hour…when all the graves were full, huge trenches were dug in all of the cemeteries of the churches and into the new arrivals were dumped by the hundreds, and they were packed in there with dirt, one on top of another….until the trench was filled.

Sexual (Im)morality in *Decameron*: Crisis or Catharsis?

In what other ways did mass trauma in medieval Christian civilization lead to the questioning of the most basic values of Christianity and of civilization itself? *Decameron* is interesting in large part because of its specific focus on the loosening of sexual morality. Hence Nancy Reale in her interesting paper “Boccachio’s *Decameron*: A Fictional Account of Grappling with Chaos,” writes:

*Decameron* is a recording of a deep crisis in Italian life in the largest sense and simultaneously Boccaccio’s personal crisis of faith. The text repeatedly and courageously questions received assumptions about religion and social organization and offers views of trecento Italy that are diverse, often destabilized and destabilizing, and sometimes devoid of an overarching religions faith that would otherwise (?) have been assumed.

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8 *Decameron* (Musa & Bondanella) 5.
9 *Decameron*, (Musa & Bondanella) 5.
10 *Decameron*, (Musa & Bondanella) 8.
We know that medieval Europe was a civilization saturated in religion and dominated by Christianity; religious explanations were offered and accepted without question in response to almost all events in life. Themes of salvation and sin were read into all aspects of human behavior and punishment, and the fear of eternal hellfire was on almost everyone’s mind consistently. (This obsession explains one of the origins of the indulgence controversy initiated by Luther, et al.) Thus the devastation of the Black Death was commonly explained as God’s punishment for human wrongdoing and transgression. Yet the destabilization described above is in many ways the central theme of Decameron. This destabilization becomes apparent also when Boccachio’s fictional account focuses upon (through the various tales told by the young people in the “brigata”) the loosening of Christian sexual morality as a consequence of the plagues’ devastation.

While Decameron is a fictional account of Late Medieval Europe’s reaction to catastrophe, it is also crucial to note that works of art often act as mirrors, reflecting pre-existing cultural patterns and tendencies (albeit sometimes lying just under the surface). Such works of art are not simply created “ex nihilo,” completely without context. And the loosening of sexual morality has often been viewed as a basic feature or symptom of societies in breakdown.12 The civilizationalist Pitirim Sorokin discussed the tendency for civilizations to become increasingly “sensate” as part of the process of gradual disintegration. So one might ask, with medieval Christendom in mind: Did the Black Death trigger, at least as reflected in Decameron, the fading of medieval Christendom’s more “ideational” culture (in which life’s fundamental frame of reference was religion and its transcendent God) and thereby herald the dawning of a more “sensate” culture, now focusing on forbidden sex and decadence?13

Decameron is famous for its tales of seduction, including those involving clergy, especially nuns. While perhaps the author was going for some “shock value” here, as background it should be noted that sex among clergy was not completely unknown at this time, and contrary to the modern stereotype that men desire sex more than females, during the Middle Ages women were viewed as more lustful than men. Thus Decameron has many instances of women overcome by lust, women with insatiable desires, women needing younger lovers because their older husbands can no longer satisfy them sexually, etc. 14 According to R. Hastings15, there is also in Decameron a new implicit value system being put forth by Boccachio, which was certainly “not the general morality of his time,” arguing that morality is “based on nature.”16 Hence attention is drawn to the quote by the character Dioneo (on

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14 Brown Decameron web - www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/society/sexual-desire.php
16 Ibid.
the Tenth Story of the Second Day): “I shall show the…foolishness of those who, overestimating their natural powers…attempt to mold people in their own image, thus flying in the face of nature.” According to Hastings, he then goes on to tell of an old man who cannot sexually satisfy his young wife, a recurrent theme in the Decameron…according to this…interpretation of the laws of nature, a young woman needs to be sexually satisfied and the old man, by failing to do so, quite justly loses her.17

We thus see in Decameron many instances where Christian morality seems to be conveniently discarded when it is found inconvenient and in conflict with more “natural” sexual desires. For example, one nun confesses to another her lust for a young man (in the story of the ‘deaf-mute’ gardener) and the question is then asked “don’t you know that we have promised our virginity to God?” This question is met with the interestingly pragmatic and somewhat jaded rationalization from the other nun: “how many promises do we make him every day which we can’t keep?”18 This example clearly reflects a break with the established Christian morality which dominated Europe during the Middle Ages. Moreover, no one could ever confuse the above emphasis on “nature” with any sort of natural law theology (e.g., that put forth by St. Thomas Aquinas) justifying Christian morality either.

What are we to make of this sudden and clear deviation from traditional Christian sexual morality in Decameron, a morality so dominant in medieval Europe, a culture long dominated by the values of religion? Is this apparent disintegration of traditional values in the text an almost nihilistic rejection of Christian morality? First, it should be noted that instances of premarital sex and adultery were much more common during the Middle Ages than many have supposed, and that despite very strong religious and cultural prohibitions, the temptations of the flesh were no less powerful then than they are now.19 Moreover, even if “nature” is now touted by Boccaccio as a new moral value, this is not, strictly speaking, nihilism (defined as the absence of values altogether) but rather it is just the substitution of new (perhaps more permissive) values for old values. Or could the above serve merely as an extreme and desperate example of “carpe diem,” indeed a rationalization for sexual license? After all, when bodies litter the streets at every turn, when the smell of death is everywhere, when your relatives and friends have all died horrible deaths in front of your very eyes, when your own chances of survival are slim to none, when none of the doctors have any idea what to do, when the priests themselves are all either dead or have abandoned their sick parishioners, perhaps the only honest way to view the situation is to take the position that nothing makes any sense, there is no cosmic justice, nothing matters anymore, so why not take pleasure in this life while one still can? Tendencies towards decadent sexuality are further detailed by David Herlihy, who writes how “plague mortalities reminded survivors of their own fragile grasp on life, and prompted some of them to spend

17 Ibid.
18 Boccaccio, Decameron, in Musa and Bondadella (ed. and trans.) p. 66.
19 Brown University Decameron Web.
www.brown.edu/Departments?Italian_Studies/dweb/society/sex/fornication-adultery.php
their remaining hours in revelry.”  

People seemed to desire a temporary victory over death, however illusory, and Herlihy describes how people sacrilegiously danced, played trivial games or committed “unseemly acts” in cemeteries, “over the graves of the dead. Prostitutes solicited in cemeteries, and fornicators and adulterers trysted among the graves”.

Given the context of total catastrophe and existential hopelessness, the impetus towards short-term pleasure must have been strong. This is especially interesting given the belief of most religions (including Christianity, cf. Saint Augustine) that this life is merely preparation for the much more important life to come, thus justifying delaying gratification in the present. We have seen how the element of hopelessness was evident in light of the impotence of both science (medicine) and religion (prayer) to stem the tide of death. How did this affect the prevailing value system? Christoph Jedan writes:

Boccaccio notes that “...in this situation, religion proved ineffective: it did not prevent the outbreak, it did not protect the faithful and it could not prevent the complete disintegration of social structure.” Boccaccio notes the widespread disillusion with religion e.g., by referring repeatedly to the ineffectivity of prayer and devotion…”

Regarding the widespread licentiousness (especially in the descriptions of the behavior of nuns) described in the tales told by the brigata, “religious values and religious experience...are depicted as a façade, concealing a uniform human nature in which desires that are repressed or denied by Christianity are the motivating force.”

Some critics might argue here that I’ve looked at this through too dark a lens and fundamentally misunderstood Boccaccio’s point. By this view, Decameron is not nihilistic in any sort of serious philosophical sense, but is actually a more playful work that refreshingly pokes fun at the seriousness of medieval religious fundamentalism (e.g., Dante, etc.). Decameron takes a fresh look at human beings as they really are (often lustful, light-hearted, imperfect and pleasure seeking) rather than as the haughty, humorless, pious and cerebral creatures that medieval Christianity seemingly would’ve liked them to be. Hence the tales told during the brigata, tales of infidelity, lust and adultery, are retold by Boccaccio in a light and almost playful manner. Like the Florentine Renaissance thinkers soon to come (e.g., Machiavelli), Boccaccio has a more human-centered, realistic and “this-worldly”

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21 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
approach to life, and has to some degree tried to leave behind the sterile, theocratic worldview of the recent past.

This is the view, for example, of Francesco De Sanctis. Moreover, according to De Sanctis, the emphasis on sensuality, almost ridiculing medieval piety was already present and established in the Italian spirit (many think Italy always took its religion with a few grains of realism and salt anyway--as opposed to the more dour Northern variants of Christianity). De Sanctis writes: “the book seemed to respond to something in people’s souls which had been wanting to come out for a long time…” It was, he says, “a time of transition.” Yet, on the other hand, and admitting the truths in this incisive analysis, we must remember also that the Decameron was written against the backdrop of the Black Death, the horrors of which Boccaccio himself vividly describes in the Proem. Perhaps going through the horrors of the plague functioned as a catharsis for the Italian people--ironically not as part of a pattern of moral disintegration, but instead as part of the progress from crisis to renewal. Yet Decameron was nevertheless still a reaction to an epic crisis, and in such times of crisis, value systems are questioned and often rejected.

Reactions to catastrophe are complicated and many-faceted. Of course we know that most citizens of medieval Europe retained their religious beliefs in the wake of the plague and many might even have increased in the intensity of their religious belief, as often happens during desperate times. Herlihy thus describes in detail “flamboyant movements of penance” such as the flagellants who “stripped to the waist and whipped themselves with knotted cords”, scourging themselves in expiation for their own sins and those of society.” Religious explanation was still the overarching conceptual framework of the time, the basic prism or conceptual framework through which all human experience was inevitably filtered. And these religious impulses were similarly taken to extremes in these desperate times. On the other hand, Boccaccio’s text, while certainly illustrating his own personal crisis of faith, perhaps also reflected a repressed undercurrent of a more radical sort of doubt beginning to simmer under the surface of medieval civilization itself during this horrific time.

Works such as Decameron are not conceived or written in a vacuum, but often reflect larger crises on the civilizational level. Interestingly, Pitirim Sorokin uses Decameron as evidence of the complexity of the phenomenon of civilizational disintegration (that of medieval Christendom). Sorokin observed that often during this process there occurs a splitting between ideational and sensate tendencies. He writes:

the soul of the society in the transition will be split into the Carpe Diem on the one hand and on the other into ideational indifference and negative attitude towards all

26 F. De Sanctis in Musa and Bondanella (ed.), 216.
27 DeSanctis, 217.
28 Herlihy, Op Cit, 68.
29 Ibid, 67.
the sensory pleasures. Society itself will be increasingly divided into open, perfectly
cynical sinners with their ‘eat, drink, and love, for tomorrow is uncertain’ and into
the ascetics and saints who will flee the sensory world into a kind of new
refuge...such a split has uniformly occurred in small and great transitions and
especially in the period of the great transitions from one culture to another.
Boccaccio’s Decameron with its hedonistic company, and the medieval flagellants,
mystics and ascetics are the concrete examples of such a split in the transition of the
fourteenth century.

This “splitting” thus illustrates the complexity of the reactions to the Black Death (and
catastrophes generally) and in all likelihood, the matter was complicated--so much so that
all of these patterns in the realm of psychology and morality were perhaps occurring
simultaneously.

Aporia in the Later Middle Ages

What does all this mean? The widespread, indiscriminate death caused by the plague called
into question the most basic assumptions of Christian Europe and left it in a state of
widespread spiritual aporia. Robert Gottfried writes:

People were traumatized. They lost faith in their own abilities, in the old values, and
if not in God then in the traditional ways in which He had been propitiated. Europe
was plunged in a moral crisis. The old order was collapsing and the new one was
not yet in place.

At the heart of the moral crisis was also a crisis of understanding and explanation--an
epistemological crisis. What is an epistemological crisis? Alasdair MacIntyre describes this
as “a problem about the rational induction of inferences from premises...to
conclusions...that would enable us to make reasonably reliable predictions.”
What one “took to be evidence pointing unambiguously in some one direction now turns out to have
been equally susceptible of rival interpretations”. MacIntyre continues:

it is not only that an individual may rely on the schemata which have hitherto
informed all his interpretations...and find that he has been led into...error...so that
for the first time the schemata are put in question...but the individual may come to
recognize the possibility of systematically different possibilities of interpretation, or

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31 Robert S. Gottfried, The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe (NY Free Press,
1983), 103.
32 Alasdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science” in Why
Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Eurgene Oregon,
33 Alasdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises....” In Hauerwas & Jones, Op Cit, 139.
the existence of alternative…schemata which yield mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on.\(^{34}\)

Or, perhaps more to the point of this pre-modern situation (as opposed to the “post-modern” one MacIntyre describes), the epistemological crisis was even more dire. The dominant religious interpretation (in which there exists a coherent moral order or overarching cosmic justice) had been called into question by the indiscriminate nature of the plague, yet there were no other rival explanations to confront, no larger set of alternative explanations among from which to choose. Moreover, there were no coherent or convincing scientific explanations at the time. One couldn’t even find another alternative explanation, so there was basically no coherent understanding or explanation of the event at all.

**The Spectre of Cosmic Disorder**

Perhaps in its starkest form, catastrophes like the Black Death raised (and still raise) the prospect of the complete lack of a cosmic order and any moral justice in the universe. This theme goes back much further than medieval times; it paradoxically goes back to the Bible itself. Consider the following quote from the Book of Job, as Job, by all accounts a righteous and religions man, loses inexplicably everything he has in the blink of an eye. In the midst of his inexplicable suffering, Job laments of God: “It is all one. He destroys wicked and blameless alike.”\(^{35}\)

This astonishing exclamation by Job helps us understand how it must have felt to experience not merely the wholesale nature of death through the plague but its indiscriminate nature as well. In fact, the quote suggests the entire cosmic order or system of divine justice that religion is built upon either has been somehow overthrown, or perhaps it never really existed in the first place. Perhaps the universe is simply amoral, and things just happen as they must, regardless of any human concerns, any discernible patterns of human behavior or any considerations of morality whatsoever.\(^{36}\)

Let’s look at this more closely and how this is played out in the case of the Black Plague, specifically with regard to the indiscriminate nature of the plague’s destruction. One illustration of this indiscriminateness is that there apparently were higher rates of mortality among the clergy than among the general population, especially in England.\(^{37}\) Clergy generally were among those who ministered to the sick and dying, so this might make sense, yet it on the other hand revealed to many the fundamental impotence of the clergy and the church in the face of this crisis. Moreover, in a great many cases, priests actually abandoned their sick flocks to save themselves. Although priests generally would have been thought to exist on a higher spiritual plane than the average citizen, (though perhaps there has always

\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) *Oxford Study Bible*, Job (9-22).


\(^{37}\) Gottfried, 62.
been some cynicism on this score) the abandonment of their flocks by many clergymen caused many citizens to further question the moral integrity of the clergy, and the anger of the masses began to simmer. Gottfried writes:

Many parish priests fled, leaving no one to offer services, deliver last rites and comfort the sick. Flight might have been intellectually explicable, but it was morally inexcusable.

Pitirim Sorokin, in *Man and Society in Calamity*, devotes a chapter to how calamities affect the spiritual life of society. He cites A.M. Campbell’s *The Black Death and Men of Learning* to furnish examples of how the demoralization of clergy was decried by a number of chroniclers during this time, e.g., John of Reading’s lament that many mendicant priests have “become unduly rich through confessions” and were now “seeking after earthly and carnal things,” or the Archbishop of Canterbury’s charge that the priests “now desire voluptuous pleasures to such an extent that souls are neglected and churches and chapels are empty.” This priestly abandonment of their flocks and general bad behavior paved the way for further skepticism of the masses towards the clergy itself, as phenomenon which in turn helped the eventual cause of Wycliff, Luther and the Reformation. This is relevant further as the Reformation helped usher in, according to Hermann Broch, “the dissolution of values” characteristic of modernity, which it seems to me we still face today in post-modernity. Broch writes:

In the Renaissance, that criminal and rebellious age, the unified Christian worldview was broken in two halves, one Catholic and one Protestant. With the falling asunder of the medieval organon, a process of dissolution destined to go on for five centuries was inaugurated and the seeds of the modern world were planted.

In this sense, the Black Plague contributed to the Reformation, the decline of religious authority, and the general erosion of the values of medieval civilization as it had traditionally been known.

David Herlihy also discusses another important aspect of the widespread perception of cosmic disorder--how it impacted fundamental debates in late medieval philosophy. Herlihy notes how St. Thomas Aquinas’ thought, perhaps the dominant philosophical system of this time, “argued that the universe possessed an underlying order, and that the human intellect

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38 This anger was also taken out elsewhere. The Jews of Europe, traditional scapegoats of Christendom, were predictably accused of poisoning the wells and spreading the plague, and were often massacred en masse throughout this time.

39 Gottfried, 84.


could achieve at least a partial understanding of its structure.”42 Yet Herlihy reports how Aquinas’ late medieval critics, the nominalists, “claimed that he was wrong on both counts.”43

According to this nominalist perspective, “the human intellect had not the power to penetrate the metaphysical structures of the universe. It could do no more than observe events as they flowed.”44 Again, of course, this viewpoint did not entail the wholesale rejection of religious belief, as the nominalists (like the other major schools of medieval European thought) were always thoroughgoing theists. Yet the nominalists still had to reconcile their religious beliefs with “the experience of plague--unpredictable in its appearance and...unknowable in its origins, yet destructive in its impact.”45 Herlihy describes how the conception of God put forth by these late medieval critics of Aquinas involved an interesting view of divine omnipotence. This divine omnipotence “meant in the last analysis that there could be no fixed order. God could change what He wanted when He wanted. The nominalists looked on a universe dominated by arbitrary motions,” and thus their criticism of Aquinas was “consonant with the disordered experience of late medieval life.”46

**Boccaccio’s Lessons for Modernity**

It might be interesting to now view in more depth this state of affairs from a more modern philosophical lens. The larger questions here are these: what happens to a civilization when its most basic assumptions and values are ripped asunder? What were the symptoms of the values crisis engendered by the Black Death, and how did this crisis help usher in the eventual disintegration of medieval European civilization? And how did this values crisis reveal the problem of nihilism, in my view still the most important moral question facing humanity today?

Is *Decameron* in some important sense a nihilistic work? After all, Boccaccio’s depiction of the Black Death with its indiscriminate destruction, chronicled the dissolution of a number of basic Christian values. Or is it rather (to paraphrase Patrizia McBride writing on modernity specifically through the writings of Robert Musil) that such crises with their revealing of the indiscriminate, relentless nature of death and suffering “merely provide the conditions” through we can somehow see that a coherent moral order “never really existed in the first place?”47 And if the latter option is true, how can we deal with this? Nietzsche, the first thinker of modernity to deal comprehensively with the problem of nihilism, argues

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid, 73.
the problem of nihilism arises when “the problem of why receives no answer”⁴⁸. The questioner (in this case the survivor of catastrophe) experiences only a deafening cosmic silence. But Nietzsche seems somewhat unclear on some other key points here. He suggests at one point that nihilism arises when values devalue themselves and no longer hold⁴⁹. But elsewhere he suggests that the problem is that human beings seek “meaning in events that is simply not in them”⁵⁰, and then attempt to fabricate this meaning “solely out of psychological needs”⁵¹. But exactly what are these psychological needs?

This is a complicated question, but basically we need the events in our lives to make sense in order to survive psychologically and spiritually in this world⁵². It is a basic human need to make sense of things. An unintelligible world is for many an unlivable one.

But what happens when events don’t make sense, and we have no scientific, psychological, religious or philosophical tools at our disposal to help us make sense out of the events? Survivors are then left bereft in the aftermath of catastrophe; without a guiding set of coherent and consistent principles or values, they are then at a loss to explain properly the events, integrate them, predict future events, and/or put the entire situation into a larger context. Long standing values and cultural assumptions have proven themselves ineffective, but they have not yet been replaced with new ones. A spiritual void or aporia is thus what is revealed during moments of moral crisis, and as this aporia becomes more widespread and more pervasive in the collective consciousness of a civilization, it increasingly becomes a relevant factor in the process of this civilization’s gradual disintegration—until which time a new moral paradigm is somehow eventually put in its place.

The lessons of Decameron are important for us to learn because the human need for a coherent guiding value system is still the central philosophical question of our postmodern age. After all, we currently are living at the dawn of the twenty-first century. What lessons can we apply from the devastation of the Black Death, an event that occurred in such a completely different time and place than our own today? Is it even possible to make intelligible comparative judgments (e.g., the comparative study of civilizations), given the considerable foreignness of the world-picture of medieval Christendom as compared with our own, postmodern civilization? I believe that human nature, if there is such a thing, probably doesn’t change dramatically over different times and places. Given certain similar conditions, human beings feel (as they always have and always will) emotions like jealousy, lust, hopelessness and joy, and they will act and react to stimuli and situations in similar, often predictable ways. Thus, I believe some important applications apply.

⁴⁹ Ibid.
⁵⁰ Ibid, 12.
First, we are beginning to see the rise and spread of another plague or epidemic--the Ebola outbreak--which may be revisiting many of the issues we have already discussed above. A recent (May 9, 2015) New York Times article, “Liberia Conquers Ebola, but Faces a Crisis of Faith” highlights some of these similar themes. The article describes how congregants of a Liberian church ceremoniously laid hands on an ailing parishioner, and soon thereafter, “the disease tore through the church, killing eight members, or about a tenth of the congregation.” The article reports that many of these otherwise religious people began to have “doubts in their minds about God” in large part because “Ebola’s apparent randomness...took a toll. Scientists believe that some people have a greater resistance to Ebola, or even immunity. But to church members, the deaths of some, though not others, challenged their faith.”

Herlihy discusses similar reactions to the AIDS virus:

Many persons today do not believe what the experts relate about AIDS and its modes of transmission. They still want infected children taken from schools and contacts with the sick severely limited. We seem to witness here too a crisis of confidence in expert opinion, much like the one that occurred in the Middle Ages.

Of course, some panic in the face of widespread epidemic will perhaps always be a part of human nature, as most of us fear death, and are still terrified by the fact that all the expertise and technology we currently possess simply cannot completely protect us and our loved ones in many such cases.

Moreover, on the moral level, we who live in the postmodern West are actually experiencing a “void of ethics” right now. We still have yet to intellectually and spiritually process the catastrophic events of the twentieth century--perhaps history’s bloodiest century ever. After the horrors of the twentieth century, what enduring value system can we now ascribe to in the postmodern West? We may have advanced technology today, but can this technology, or science generally, ever explain which values we should believe in, and why, in an age...
which featured two brutal world wars and culminated in Auschwitz—a scene of mass death almost incomprehensible in its scale and scope? Further, much postmodern philosophy has offered us nothing beyond various forms of skepticism and relativism. Mark T. Mitchell writes:

modernity has reached a dead end. The optimism in which the modern world was conceived and nurtured has been replaced by a thoroughgoing skepticism that denies the possibility of making meaningful truth claims, especially as those claims bear on morality and religion...From a certain vantage this situation might appear a stable solution to the...bloodletting that moral and religious truth claims spawned. Yet on another level such a position is simply intolerable, for it is inhuman. It is not possible to deny for long the very things for which human souls most yearn. If these sorts of claims are denied...they will invariably assert themselves in perverted and often violent ways.57

Perhaps the rise of (increasingly violent) religious fundamentalism that we now are witnessing worldwide is an attempt by some to fill this void of truth and meaning. But it also seems that in many cases (ISIS, etc.), the fundamentalist cure may be worse than the disease. We in the West have actually been down this path many times before—consider also the bloody cycles of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the wars of religion, mass killings of “heretics,” witch burnings, etc., that characterized the early modern period on the European continent, in light not only of the Protestant Reformation but also of the scientific revolution and other major upheavals of thought. During this time, the poet John Donne famously wrote of the anomie and spiritual dislocation experienced so acutely by thoughtful people when “a new philosophy calls all into doubt.” This spiritual dilemma thus reveals to us another important pattern in the history of civilizations— that with regards to the question of values in times of crisis, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

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