

COVID-19: NATURE V/S MAN

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1. Punishment

Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through the breath and sight. And none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. And they died by the hundreds both day and night ... And as soon as those ditches were filled more were dug ... And I, Agnolo di Tura...buried my five children with my own hands. And there were also those who were so sparsely covered with earth that the dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies throughout the city. There was no one who wept for any death, for all awaited death. And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.¹

This is an account of the Black Death as given by the Italian chronicler Agnolo di Tura. His perspective plunges us immediately into the atmosphere of 14th century Europe as it was ravaged by some monstrous vermin even as another vermin animates itself today, this vermin now going by the name of SARS-CoV-2.²

It is certainly difficult to treat the above account, filled with apocalyptic symbolism, as a product of unfeeling biological machinery. And when we turn the scientific eye towards the iconographic value of all this symbolism, we see that all these vaguely catastrophic descriptives seem to unite in the idea that mankind is being *punished* for its various sins. The theme of self-flagellation for justifying some great misfortune, driven by the desire to establish the facticity of justice, is not new to psychology.³

We rationalized the ongoing pandemic to be our punishment for our sins towards planet Earth⁴; to be our punishment for our practices of animal cruelty.⁵ The men of the Middle Ages had their own ideas about the reason behind the Black Death: *"Many believed the epidemic was a punishment by God for their sins, and could be relieved by winning God's forgiveness."*⁶ The specific reasonings differ from misfortune to misfortune, but there is a clear, underlying, invariant theme.

2. Vengeance

The next move man makes in his struggle against such cataclysmic forces of nature is one borne of vengeance. The collective consciousness of society deems the punishment unfair, and the desire for revenge raises its ugly head. The enormity of the event is scaled down; divine retribution upon us is turned into anthropomorphic retribution by us. This image of the tragedy is in turn demonized and punished.

Thousands of Jews faced persecution in many vile forms during the maniacal frenzy of the largely scientifically illiterate populous of the Middle ages.⁷ On the other hand, *"There were more than 1,000 incidences of xenophobia and racism against Asian Americans between January 28 and February 24, 2020, according to a tally compiled by Russell Jeung, professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University."*⁸ And most shocking of all is some of the treatment meted out towards doctors.⁹

But let us not make the mistake of concluding that such progressions are manifest in only certain groups of fanatics. Each have their own villains. For the scientist, it may be the group of religious zealots who disregard safety laws. For the vegan, it may be the non-vegetarian who has, according to him, abused Mother Nature. All of us bring forth this flavor of retribution in our own ways.

3. Redemption

A reaction parallel to vengeance, mirroring its apparent aggression with an apparent calmness, is one characterized by the movement towards salvation. The receiver of punishment is here not some villainized group; rather, it is implicitly taken upon the self by prayer.

Despite its obvious inadvisability during a pandemic, one does not have to look far to find evidence for the numerous frenzied prayer meetings conducted during the height of the Black Death. The Brotherhood of Flagellants were a group of people who would reportedly publicly inflict physical punishment upon themselves in an attempt to redeem themselves and the world.¹⁰

One has to look even less to find the various violations of the law during the coronavirus epidemic in the name of such esoteric endeavors.¹¹ An amusing anecdote is that of an Italian mayor who used drones to scream profanities at residents ignoring lockdown.¹²

But once again, let us not make the mistake of limiting these ideas to be in the minds of a certain frenetic minority. For the modern-day scientist, salvation is analogous to working tirelessly on vaccines and relevant biological data...and so on and so forth. Certainly, the working hours of the biologist are pregnant with such emotion; he is forever aware of his position as the savior and the harbinger of salvation. It is no detached activity. So high is the investment that PTSD therapy is being considered for the doctors of the most heavily hit regions.¹³

4. Conclusion

The significance of history and society to science must be duly acknowledged if one wishes to carry out a holistic scientific analysis of any phenomenon. The emotive significance of such incidents often overrides the intellectualist in even the best of us. One must bring to conscious reflection the iconographic values of our psychological reactions towards such phenomena to better understand ourselves and optimize the way in which we handle such calamities.

Three dominant reactionary symptoms towards pandemics in the psyche of society have been traced out chronologically. These three psychological reactions are the fundamental motifs shaping the cultural backdrop in the midst of tragedy, and the enduring impact of a pandemic upon the social landscape (consider how recognizable as a symbol of death the beak mask of doom worn by the doctors during the Black Death is) can almost entirely be traced back to these three primary thoughts.

The coronavirus pandemic is but one of many disasters that nature throws at man. It is our duty to recognize it as the paradigm shift in human history that all such disasters are, and ensure that posterity receives from our reactions towards it not lessons of humanity as hatred and persecution, but of kindness and acceptance.

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