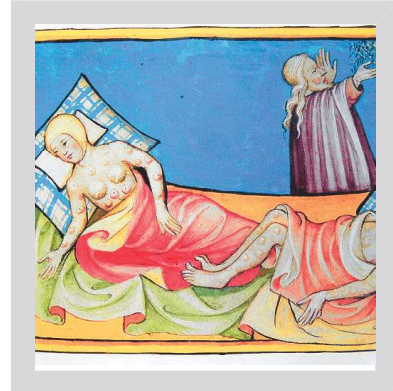


Plague: Body and Mind

As the great plague swept through seventeenth-century England, it brought not only fever, chills, and festering sores, but a rash of philosophical crises as well. People who lived in Renaissance England were used to disaster; wars, famines, and other diseases took the lives of thousands every year. What separated the plague from other afflictions, however, was the fact that it killed without regard to its victim's age, gender, personal habits, or social class. War felled male soldiers and starvation struck the poor, but the plague claimed men, women, beggars, nobles, infants, the elderly, thieves, and priests alike. This "indifference," as contemporary writers termed it, created a great deal of confusion amongst the doctors, philosophers, and theologians who attempted to understand how and why the plague was spread. Because people who lived during the Renaissance had a very limited understanding of how disease was contracted or cured, explanations usually relied on faulty observation, religious conjecture, or a combination of the two. Natural philosophers, precursors to modern scientists, sought logical or rational explanations for the plague. Christian moralists, on the other hand, ascribed all earthly experiences—including the plague—to God.



Natural philosophers argued that certain environmental factors were responsible for the plague. While these proposed factors ranged from the misalignment of the planets to an overabundance of cats, the most popular theory cited "bad air" as the cause, easily recognizable by its foul smell. According to this theory, known today as the miasmatic theory of contagion, diseases were thought to be transmitted not by the spread of bacteria or viruses—of which early moderns were wholly unaware—but by the air itself. Because sanitation and personal hygiene were astoundingly poor during this period, the air most likely smelled rather putrid, especially in crowded cities. Since the plague spread more quickly in these crowded areas, natural philosophers deduced that the bad air, and not the physical transmission of bacteria in these areas, was responsible.

Skeptical of this reasoning, many moralists penned treatises wondering why bad air did not seem to affect everyone who breathed it in and had no effect on animals or plants. After dismissing the natural philosophers' ideas, moralists subsequently offered divine explanations for the plague; suggesting that it resulted not from external natural forces, such as bad air, but rather from humankind's depraved nature. One of the most popular moralists was George Wither, who, in 1628 published *Britain's Remembrancer*, a massive poem detailing both the plague itself and the further doom that awaited Britain if its citizens did not repent. According to Wither, Britain brought the pestilence upon itself, incurring God's wrath by being an "unthankful and forgetful Nation" and a "wicked, perverse, ungrateful seed."

The problem with this rationale lies in the plague's aforementioned "indifference." The plague affected individuals of every age, gender, social status, and religious bent—showing no special affinity or predilection towards the "unthankful" or "wicked." Although moralists were quick to point out that rich misers and crooked lawyers were finally getting their comeuppance, there was no easy answer as to why the plague would also claim newborns or upstanding members of the clergy. As for the natural philosophers, even though the plague spread more rapidly in densely-packed cities, farmers in sparsely-populated rural areas were also dying. Moreover, as the moralists had observed, there were hundreds of people in even the most plague-infested areas of the city who remained untouched. Natural philosophers and moralists alike observed that the plague spared and slew, seemingly at random.

Because the concepts of antibodies or biological immunity were centuries away, natural philosophers instead suggested that those who had been spared were simply born with a stronger natural constitution—one capable of withstanding the presence of bad air. Moralists, on the other hand, had a much more difficult time explaining away the plague's "indifference." Some moralists simply argued that every person—no matter how innocent or pious he or she seemed—was a sinner, and thus, equally likely to be stricken down by God's wrath. Others tried to propose a somewhat more hopeful explanation. George Wither, for example, contended that every aspect of the plague was governed by divine providence. Even with a solid belief in a benevolent God, Wither recognized that the plague, unlike most other natural calamities, was incredibly difficult to reconcile with the notion of a loving God. However, Wither argued, the plague's "indifferent" nature actually served as further proof of God's power. Wither contended that the plague was meant to warn human beings to reform their sinful ways. Consequently, if the plague were to spare everyone who contracted it, then no one would fear it. On the other hand, if it were to kill all who came into contact with it, "some Atheist," Wither wrote, "would claim that God was powerless against it." The fact that people could and did survive the plague meant that God was, in fact, intervening when He saw fit. Wither thus reasoned that it was not the fickle hand of fate, but rather God's *will* that decided who survived and who succumbed to the plague. According to Wither, some were struck down so that "men might fear / His Justice" and others were spared so that "they might love his Mercy and perceive / That he can, at his pleasure, take, or leave." Moreover, Wither urged readers to remember that the plague's innocent victims were not being punished, but rewarded, as they received "perfect happiness" in heaven. Wither's explanation therefore allows for every single death to have meaning and purpose, proving that the plague derives from a loving God with England's best interests in mind.

While natural philosophers and Christian moralists had very different approaches to the plague, both of their perspectives were shaped by the fact that their society had a very limited comprehension of biology and human physiology. Nevertheless, both sets of thinkers were motivated by the same conundrum that still puzzles modern-day philosophers and individuals alike: why do bad things happen to good people? For all of the advances in medicine and theological insight that we have seen over the past 400 years, the notion of death's "indifference" continues to plague us all.

1) The author apparently believes that

- A. the Christian moralists were too harsh in their criticism of the natural philosophers
- B. the natural philosophers did not fully consider the opinions of the Christian moralists
- C. diseases that target specific groups of people are less philosophically troubling than diseases that strike at random
- D. a lack of both medical knowledge and religious enlightenment were the main causes of suffering during the Renaissance
- E. writers such as George Wither, who blamed disease on human sin, caused more harm than good

2) Which of the following best describes the organization of this passage?

- A. The ideas are presented in an order of descending importance.
- B. After providing the readers with background information, the author then expands on that information to give readers a detailed look into early modern notions of disease.
- C. The passage follows a chronological order, showing us how peoples' ideas about the plague developed over time.
- D. After providing background information, arguments from opposing sides are presented and then reexamined from a modern viewpoint.

E. The author presents one side's opinions and then spends the remainder of the passage refuting those opinions.

3) As used in paragraph 2, which is the best antonym for **putrid**?

- A. tolerable
- B. appealing
- C. dry
- D. delicious
- E. amusing

4) In paragraph 1, the author writes, "As the great plague swept through seventeenth-century England, it brought not only fever, chills, and festering sores, but a rash of philosophical crises as well." At the end of the final paragraph, the author writes, "For all of the advances in medicine and theological insight that we have seen over the past 400 years, the notion of death's 'indifference' continues to plague us all." Which of the following literary devices is used in each of these quotations?

A. Litotes, characterized by the use of understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by negating its opposite.

B. Pun, characterized by the use of a play on words intended to suggest the presence of two possible meanings.

C. Aphorism, characterized by the use of a concise statement that is made in a matter of fact tone to state a principle or an opinion that is generally understood to be a universal truth.

D. Anaphora, characterized by the repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of successive sentences, clauses, or phrases for rhetorical effect.

E. Parallelism, characterized by the repetition of similar grammatical constructions in a series of related words, phrases, or clauses.

5) It can be inferred that the plague's "indifference"

A. troubled natural philosophers more than it troubled moralists, because moralists were at least able to revel in the fact that "rich misers and crooked lawyers" were being punished

B. troubled moralists more than it troubled natural philosophers, because natural philosophers' theories were justified by the fact that the plague spread faster in cities than it did in rural areas

C. was ultimately neither troublesome to natural philosophers nor moralists because both eventually came up with convincing explanations

D. was more of a problem to the people who actually had the plague than it was to either moralists or natural philosophers

E. is primarily what led both natural philosophers and moralists to theorize about the plague

6) As used in paragraph 3, which is the best synonym for **depraved**?

- A. artificial

- B. depressed
- C. unfriendly
- D. internal
- E. immoral

7) It can be inferred that George Wither believed that

- I. the plague's "indifference" and God's benevolence were incompatible
- II. the plague was God's way of warning sinners to repent
- III. there was no such thing as random chance

- A. I only
- B. II only
- C. I and II only
- D. II and III only
- E. I, II, and III

8) As used in the final paragraph, which is the best synonym for **conundrum**?

- A. dilemma
- B. fact
- C. disease
- D. inspiration
- E. philosophy

9) Using your own words, explain differences of opinion between Christian moralists and natural philosophers with regards to the plague.
