Our study has explored how Trecento humanism contributed to the history of philosophy in significant ways. While the fourteenth-century ecclesiastics carried on the metaphysical traditions of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, Petrarch and Boccaccio searched instead for an understanding of humanity in its temporal existence. Any insight into humanity is temporal, of the moment. One’s grip on this insight is unsteady, and this unsteady and momentary quality is the prime manifestation of existence. In later life, both humanists found some solace in the post-Socratic morality that the Church espoused. There remains in their writings from this period the existential imprint of their earlier ideas, in particular the awareness of time’s flow and the voice of subjectivity. Yet opposing the conventional moral dicta of the ecclesia created a tension too much for them to bear. They drew back, however reluctantly, from the flux of experiential insight into the haven of metaphysical morality. Their ambivalent withdrawal from the sea of experience would shape their legacy. Although Boccaccio’s later Latin writings are typically considered to be his contribution to humanism, as they concern themselves overtly with classical themes and models and are written in a classicized language, these works often pass by the sceptical search for existential meaning that characterized the humanism of the Decameron, and instead posit a priori the moral claims they wish to validate. Petrarch’s position toward the Stoic verities is, we have seen, marked by inconsistency. We can witness in fact how the Quattrocento debates over the importance of Stoicism follow upon the thinking of Boccaccio and Petrarch at their lives’ close.

In a letter from 1373, two years before his death, Boccaccio writes to Mainardo Cavalcanti that he should prevent the women of his household from reading the Decameron. The stories are “common trifles,” some of which are “less decent and opposed to modest ways,” and can not only move the most morally secure to thoughts of wickedness, but also infect weaker, more shameless souls with the “obscene virus of concupiscence.” He tells Cavalcanti that one would
hardly excuse him by saying: “He wrote this when he was young, under the sway of a greater power.” Part of his reason for dissuading him is to protect his reputation: “Those who read the work will consider me a filthy beast, a dirty old man, a man of impure ways, a foul, evil-tongued and zealous teller of others’ misdeeds.” Now Boccaccio sees a correlation between language and lust, words and desire, that he had explicitly rejected in the Decameron’s two apologetiae (IV.intro and Conclusion).

Boccaccio’s reservations about his masterwork, however tempered they may be by his interest in preparing a manuscript of it during this time,2 surface again in his lectures on Dante’s Commedia and in his Genealogy of the Pagan Gods [Genealogie deorum gentilium libri]. Boccaccio declares that “a type of comic poets” was banned by Plato from his Republic. These comedians elicited the dangerous, sensual impulses among their listeners, and so posed a threat to public order:

And because the comic actors often portrayed, among shameless matters, the adulteries that the comedies recounted, they so whetted the appetites of the men and women in the audience to desire and undertake similar actions, and thus these actors so corrupted and made dissolute in all types of shamelessness [disonestà] their good morals and healthy minds.3

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1 Le lettere, ed. Francesco Corazzini (Florence: Sansoni, 1877), 298–299: “Sane quia inclitas mulieres tuas domesticas nugas meas legere promiseris non laudo... nosti quot ibi sint minus decentia et adverstantia honestati, quot Vereris infaustae aculei, quot in scelus impellentia etiam si sint ferrea pectora, a quibus etsi non ad incestuosum actum illustres impellantur feminae et potissimae quibus sacer pudor frontibus insidet, subeunt tamen passu tacitu estus ilcebris, et impudicas animas obscena concupiscientia tabe nonnumquam inficiunt, irritantque, quod omnino ne contingat agendum est... Extimabunt enim legentes me spurdigum leonum, incestuosum senem, impurum hominem, turpiqum maledicum et alienorum scelerum avidum relatorem. Non enim ubique est, qui in excusationem meam consurgens dicat: — Iuvenis scripsit, et maioris coactus imperio...” Emphasis in original.
2 See Battaglia Ricci, Boccaccio, 122–129, on the development of the work over time to its final form. The autograph MS Hamilton 90 in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek dates ca. 1370. Battaglia Ricci notes: “Il confronto tra l’Hamilton e i codici più antichi lascia infatti individuare varianti tali da legittimare il sospetto che l’opera sia stata fatta oggetto di una continua opera di riscrittura da parte dell’autore...” (123, n. 4).
3 Esposizioni, canto 1.i (litt.).74ff.; “una specie di poeti comici” (84); quotation 87: “E, per ciò che spesso vi si facevano intorno agli adulteri, che i comedi recitavan, di disonesto cose, si movevano gli appetiti degli uomini e delle femini riguardanti a simili cose desiderare e adoperare; di che i buoni costumi e le mente sane si corrampevano e ad ogni disonestà discorrevano.” Cf. Genealogie 14.19; 2:738ff., esp. 743.14–19, here explicitly criticizing Terence, Plautus, and Ovid: “Hi quidem seu mentis innata lascivia, seu lucri cupidine, et desiderio vulgaris applausus, scelestis