

Ivan Illich and the Pandemic (Preview)

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In his remarkably detailed yet encompassing book on Illich's intellectual journey, David Cayley narrates a little-known episode. In 1985, Illich spoke to a group of church leaders assembled by Will D. Campbell — the famed confederate of Martin Luther King — who requested he speak on the topic of Life, which was, in Campbell's words, "tearing the Church apart." Rather than offering a "mollifying prayer" to ease tensions, "Illich instead began with a solemn curse. Raising his hands, he repeated three times, 'To hell with Life!'"¹ This was an astonishing pronouncement, especially for a man who, though he had renounced his duties, was still a priest in good standing with the Catholic Church. Four years later, Illich would clarify his meaning in another address, this time to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He implored those theologically trained among the audience to beware their complicity "in the social creation of a fetish which, in a theological perspective, is the perversion of revealed Life into an idol."²

Illich's warning about Life becoming a fetish or an idol (depending on one's commitments) anticipates both the purpose and the mode of managing the Covid-19 pandemic. Such phrases as "saving lives," "human lives," and "managing life" were used as rallying cries to manage how people thought and acted during the pandemic. Life was presented as a substantive, as a thing distinct from the activities and thoughts embedded in living. By speaking against Life as if it is a thing, Illich underscored the confusion spread when a verb — living — is transformed into a noun — Life. There is "Life is Not Living: A Lesson from the Pandemic According to Ivan Illich." ...

... speed, duration, and extent. In response to the discovery of a contagious pneumonia-like illness of unknown origin in late December 2019, the city of Wuhan, China, is placed under quarantine. Within two weeks, a novel coronavirus is isolated, and its genomic sequence is publicly shared for scientific study and to spur the invention of a vaccine. Within a month, the WHO declares Covid-19 as a "public health emergency of international concern" (PHEIC) and the US declares a nation-wide public health emergency because a man in Washington state who had returned from Wuhan is found to be infected. By mid-February 2020, a "whole-of-UN response" to Covid-19 is initiated which is outlined in several documents including, inter alia, the WHO's "Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan" (SPRP), the UN "Global Humanitarian Response Plan" (GHRP), and the UNDP's "A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to Covid-19." By early March 2020, the WHO officially announces Covid-19 as a pandemic. This prompts the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) created by the UN in 1991 to coordinate global humanitarian efforts, to activate "The Humanitarian System-wide Scale-Up Activation Protocol for the Control of Infectious Disease Events." By late March/early April, most of the world shuts down, reflecting "massive scale up of global magnitude [that] is

¹ David Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2021), 314. I strongly recommend this book and above all chapter 11, titled "To hell with Life" which traverses similar territory as this paper.

² Ivan Illich, "The institutional construction of a new fetish: Human Life," in *In the Mirrors of the Past: Lectures and Addresses, 1978-1990* (London: Marion Boyars, 1992), 226.

required to respond to the immediate health needs resulting from the pandemic.”³ What took about three months to put in place lasted about three years — China lifted its zero-covid policy only in late 2022 and the US federal government extended the national level public health emergency until January 2023. If the speed and duration of the Covid-19 pandemic management is noteworthy, its comprehensiveness is extraordinary. Never has the whole human species come within the purview of management. There are 193 countries in the world — excluding the Holy See and the stateless country of Palestine. According to incomplete records maintained by the International Center for Non-Profit Law, at least 112 countries officially declared a nationwide state of emergency, while even more — 153 countries — established partial measures that affected the ability of citizens to assemble.⁴ Accordingly, almost 80 percent of all countries and far more than 80 percent of humans no such thing as “a Life” except when fabricated as an object to be managed. For example, walking is something most people do in the course of living. Yet, when it is captured by Life, as for instance by a program promoting healthy lifestyles, walking is managed in terms of the number of needed steps. This paper’s thesis is twofold: that Covid-19 management took all of humanity as the object to be managed, and that this was feasible when justified in the name of a fetish called Life.

The view of Life as an object for management or government emerged in Western societies around the 18th century. Biopolitics was the name Michel Foucault gave to this logic of government which aimed to manage populations and individuals in the name of fostering life. Over the centuries, biopolitics was discrete and episodic in implementation. The singularity of the management of the Covid-19 pandemic was that it was global, fast, and long lasting relative to both other pandemics, such as the one in 2009 caused by the H1N1flu virus, and to the exercise of biopolitics. Never before in history has the entire human population, in intent if not in fact, been managed. In this paper, I suggest that such an extensive and intensive program to manage all the peoples of the earth was possible precisely because Life has become a fetish.

In the Name of... Life

Barely a year ago, the entire world was in the grip of a pandemic. Though the news-cycle has since moved on to the next disaster — ongoing war over Ukraine, the possibility of war with China — the management of Covid-19 remains a singular event. For about two years, beginning early 2020, the entire human species itself became the object of management. No one in the world was exempt from the procedures to manage the pandemic, all of which were instituted to protect, prolong, and save Life. In this section of the essay, I show that the three key elements in managing the Covid-19

³ [interagencystandingcommittee.org the%20COVID-19%20Pandemic_0.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/the%20COVID-19%20Pandemic_0.pdf), accessed Feb 15, 2023.

⁴ www.icnl.org, accessed Feb 15, 2023.

pandemic —governmental policies, scientific knowledge, and media publicity — were all implemented in the name of Life. The efforts to manage the Covid-19 pandemic epidemiologists quickly established that Sars-cov-2 was novel, contagious, and lethal. A new virus is one to which humans have no immunity. A contagious virus infects many humans and a lethal one kills its host. None of these three characteristics is of great concern if they occur individually. Sars-cov-2 is considered deadly because it exhibits all three characteristics at once — new, highly contagious, and very lethal. Epidemiological data suggests about one in a thousand die from the flu each year, up to half a million annually world-wide. The early data from Wuhan, China estimated a fatality rate thirty-four times worse than the flu, suggesting that Sar-cov-2 would kill many millions world-wide. This was an output of a scientific model of infectious disease dynamics, exemplified by the SEIRS model.⁸ These models compartmentalize the human population of interest into the “Susceptible”, “Exposed”, “Infected”, and “Recovered” groups and model the movement of individuals and groups through these compartments. Such models are just as applicable to humans as they are to cows—for instance, for modeling the effects of bovine foot and mouth disease—and are only as good as the assumptions used — of birth and death rates, of infectivity, of transmissibility, and so on.⁹ It was the prediction of half a million deaths in Britain by a highly regarded scientific team from Imperial College, London that spurred the lockdown there. A few weeks later a rival scientific model from Oxford predicted far fewer deaths. By assuming social distancing and recalibrating the model parameters, the original team reduced its own estimate of excess deaths from Covid-19 by 98 percent to about 10,000. Similarly, the lockdown policy in the US was justified by the results of a 2020 model by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) based in Seattle Washington, suggested between 100 and 240 thousand Americans would die from the virus even with social distancing policies in place. Ten days later, on April 11 the revised IHME estimate of the same number was 61,000. Much has been made of the unreliability of scientific models for management decisions. The wild swing in modeled estimates is used as proof that the output of scientific models should not be confused with evidence, much less used to shape policy.⁵ Equally, much has been made about the gap between the political uses of “follow the Science” and real scientific work, have been subjected to some form of collective management including control

⁵ To gauge the extent of disagreement among scientists about the public policy on Covid-19, consult the many video interviews of ‘dissident’ scientists conducted by Freddie Sayers of UnHerd.com. For the slow rate of scientific consensus relative to public policy, also consult, Perspectives on the Pandemic II: A conversation with Dr. Knut Wittkowski, former chief biostatistician and epidemiologist at Rockefeller University Hospital, New York rational.org accessed on April 15, 2020. Comments by Dr. Sucharit Bhakdi, former director of Institute for Medical Microbiology at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany who claims the lockdown is ‘grotesque, absurd, and very dangerous.’ hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/an-expert-says-the-current-response-to-the-coronavirus-is-grotesque-absurd-and-very-dangerous.html, accessed April 5, 2020. Interview with Prof. Johan Giesecke, advisor to the Swedish government and Chief scientist for the European Centre for Disease prevention and control. www.youtube.com accessed April 22, 2020.

over movement, speech, and medical procedures. This is not to say that all people everywhere were subjected to the same policies or to the same degree. The extent to which humans were managed differed between countries and regions. Sweden and the US had less restrictive measures on population movements than China or Italy. Most countries sealed their borders to travelers and curtailed domestic travel to a minimum, many shut down schools and factories, and protocols of “social-distancing”, “self-isolation”, “shelter-in-place”, masking, handwashing, and vaccine passports were variously specified, encouraged, and enforced. Whereas migrant workers in India were forced to walk hundreds of miles to reach home, “essential workers” in the US were pressed into service while the rest of the US working population became familiar with Zoom and other video conferencing platforms. For those who could afford them, the screen became a teaching device to millions of schoolchildren and a shopping portal for millions of house-bound consumers. Despite differences of degree in the application of these policies, the management of the Covid-19 pandemic revealed that humanity itself was manageable. This singular phenomenon is one enduring precipitate of the Covid-19 pandemic.

But more significant is the fact that the human species became a manageable entity in the name of Life. The preservation and prolongation of Life was the animating purpose of pandemic management — at the level of public policies, science, and media. Saving Life was the stated goal of the agencies involved in pandemic public policy — both governmental and non-governmental. A couple of examples should suffice. The strategic priorities of the GHRP include “decreasing the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion and livelihoods” due to Covid-19.⁶ What is true of international organizations is no less true of every country. As the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the USA says, it works “24/7 to protect America from health, safety, and security threats...[and] saves lives...”⁷ Similarly, related public policies like “flattening the curve”, “social distancing”, and “self-isolating” were explicitly organized to save Lives. Human life is the acknowledged object not only of governmental policies but also of the sciences involved in pandemic management. Virologists and the exponential speed with which the virus moves through the population, histograms tracked the daily number of deaths, and pie-charts displayed the proportion of the dead that was young or sick. Video clips of masked humans shuffling on empty streets reinforced the need to remain isolated. Death counters produced by reputable universities updated the body count of the infected and dead, amplifying the dread of its implacable power. TV clips of patients on ventilators and in unburied coffins confirmed the merciless tax exacted by coronavirus and its mutations. The coronavirus pandemic show made plain that Life was the object of its concern. Consider for example, the media success of Andrew Cuomo, the Governor of New York who held a much-admired daily press conference, which was carried nationally by all the news channels.⁶ At the bot-

⁶ Through much of April and May 2020, Andrew Cuomo was the favored politician on matters Covid-19.

tom of the TV screen in an endless moving scroll were the phrases: Stay Home. Stop the Virus. Save Lives. Saving Lives was the overarching justification of the Covid-19 pandemic management program as reflected in each of its elements — whether public policy, science, or media.

Life is a Fetish

In this second section, I follow Illich's claim that Life is a fetish into the thicket of pandemic management. Life is not a scientific concept or idea though, like other "verbal amoebas." It carries many connotations. Life pretends to be a substantive, an entity, a thing — as for instance in such phrases as "a life," "human life," or "American lives." Yet, argued Illich, Life is a fictitious construct shaped by the techniques of management. Illich elsewhere noted that the images of the blue planet and the pink fetus serve as fetish objects of Life. However, in the specific case of the coronavirus pandemic, there is no image of Life. Instead, Death stalked the mediatized landscape in the form of the spiked coronavirus that even toddlers were taught to recognize. Frightened by this media show of Death, viewers clung ever closer to the non-thing called Life. Ellul's warnings about the humiliation of the word and the suffocating spread of images find resonance in Illich's caution against fabricated entities. In his 1989 address to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Ivan which is conducted methodically and slowly. Yet, such focus on the confusion between model and reality or indeed on that between fake and real science, overlooks the crucial phenomenon. Regardless of the representative accuracy or predictive success of scientific knowledge concerning the pandemic, disease dynamic models in particular, and epidemiological sciences in general, take Lives as the unit of analysis. But more than public policy or epidemiological science, it is perhaps the media that offers the clearest evidence of the extent to which the human species has become a manageable entity in the name of Life. A virus cannot be seen, either by the naked eye or through an ordinary optical microscope. Except for those looking through an electron microscope, no one can see it. Yet almost all know what it looks like because we have been shown suitably doctored images of it. Even a seven-year-old child can now draw as a crowned circle the coronavirus he has been shown but cannot see. Seeing what they are shown is a training in how to see on command. Viewers of the coronavirus pandemic show have forgotten they never saw the virus or even an image of it. Mesmerized by the visualizations they watched, viewers confused reality TV for reality. The production of the coronavirus pandemic show was a global affair. From Wuhan China to Seattle Washington, coronavirus was beamed to all corners of the earth. Glowing TV, computer, and phone screens announced its presence to billions. Sars-cov-2 had a retinue of courtiers and ministers that heralded its coming, tracked its movement, and attested to its power. Popular books by academics, films about global contagions, and TED talks by billionaire philanthropists had prepared the psychological soil to welcome the virus. Virologists and epidemiolo-

gists, public health officials and politicians, data analysts and statisticians produced the data stream of Lives: infected, recovered, dead. TV program producers, newscasters, and social media influencers packaged the data stream into viewable segments for what became the coronavirus pandemic show.

Global maps colored in shades of red marked the countries, cities, and towns in which the coronavirus had taken residence. The number of confirmed cases infected by coronavirus pulsed in threatening circles. Hotspots identified the cities where far too many and died. Curves showed is not capable of auto-mobility but must be transported between living organisms by direct or indirect contact. Using such criteria as reproduction and locomotion to distinguish slugs from stones condemns the virus into a liminal zone. Scientists are stumped on how to classify the poliovirus which, if stored at minus 20 centigrade, can be kept in suspended animation — inert yet potent — indefinitely. The third reason why Life scientists do not have a definition of the thing they think they study is that they arbitrarily identify a specific step in the continuum from “complex chemical system to primitive living systems” as evidence of Life. But this simply begs the question, as is evident when asking that a definition of life should “should cover ‘all forms of life we know about.’”⁷ The absence of a scientific definition of “life” only proves Illich’s contention that “the notion of an entitative human life which can be professionally [managed] and legally protected has been tortuously constructed through a legal-medical-religious-scientific discourse...”⁸ Accordingly, Life is a meaningless yet suggestive term— one of many “verbal amoebas” as Illich said. Life does not denote something specific or concrete. Life is not a palpable entity, though it appears as one in the language. To work 24/7 to ‘save lives’ as the CDC does, or to decrease the deterioration of ‘human assets’ as the Global Humanitarian Response Plan intends, is to both create and name a manageable social reality. As Illich notes, what can be done to “a life” would be unthinkable if it were done to “a person.” This fictitious substance called Life also functions as a religious fetish. A fetish is an object venerated for its salvific powers. We are used to fetishizing commodities and services because they are thought to bring happiness, health, and pleasure. But since Life captures existence itself, it becomes an encompassing fetish. Toilet paper was hoarded during the pandemic because it was vital to Life. Consumers were gouged for new commodities like plastic face shields because these protected Life. Old activities have gained new meaning — handwashing is ‘life-enhancing’, handshakes are ‘life-threatening’. New activities such as being masked in public preserves Life while self-isolating is feared for possibly diminishing the ‘quality of life.’ When the doctor does triage in an emergency room or Covid-19 ward, she compares ‘expected life years’ to determine who is worth saving. Illich argued that “Life” appears in ordinary speech and official discourse as a fictitious and factitious entity. References to “a life” among pro-lifers, to “American lives” in CDC or Department of Defense documents, or to “human life on earth” among

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ecologists, invoke “a new kind of social construct” that connotes “something precious, endangered, scarce [and] amenable to institutional management.”⁹ Life is “a management bred phantom” incapable of “denoting anything which we could ourselves taste, smell or experience.” Illich’s claim appears to be an exaggeration if not downright foolish. After all, the 21st century has been called the era of the biology — of clones, germline therapies, mRNA vaccines, and all the rest.¹⁰ Yet, it remains a paradoxical truth that there is no scientific definition of Life even though the so-called Life Sciences are flourishing. Already in 1983, Peter Medawar, Nobel Laureate in biology and considered the “father of transplantation” for his work on acquired immune tolerance, noted that “from a strictly scientific point of view, the concept of life makes no sense.”¹¹ Nothing has changed in the intervening decades. The question “what is life” has found a home in the discipline of Astrobiology because it is concerned with understanding “how life began on Earth and to search for life elsewhere in the universe.”¹² A leading group of astrobiologists recently confessed that “in spite of the spectacular developments in our understanding of the molecular basis that underlies biological phenomena, we still lack a generally agreed-upon definition of life, but this is not for want of trying.”¹³ It is instructive to briefly review the reasons why the very scientists whose remit is to find Life do not know what they are looking for. Hundreds of working definitions of Life have been proposed though none has received wide-spread agreement. The reasons are three. The term Life is “defined using terms that are themselves undefined” such as complexity, information, and order.¹⁴ To say that “Life is process that organizes matter to higher levels of complexity and maintains that complexity” is to say nothing, since complexity is undefined. The second reason Life remains undefined even as it is a profitable object of techno-science, is that “a combination of descriptions of life is called a definition.” The distinction between the living and the non-living cannot be reduced to a single property. That is why virologists cannot say whether a virus is an animate or inanimate being. A virus does not reproduce but replicates on contact with a living cell. A virus ...

... ourselves.¹⁵ Foucault argued the church is a unique institution for three reasons: it is organized to take hold of every aspect of quotidian life; and does so, in principle, for all humanity. There is no historical precedent for this comprehensive aim. Moreover, the Church is also unique for its manner of “conducting, directing, leading ...taking charge of men collectively and individually throughout their life.” The Church undertakes its mission of universal salvation as a pastorate, that is ☐on the model of a shepherd’s

⁹ Ivan Illich, “The institutional construction of a new fetish: Human Life,” in *In the Mirror of the Past*.

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care of his flock. The pastoral style of governing souls is distinct from that of politics, child-rearing, or rhetoric, each of which, in different ways, seeks to shape and influence individuals. In contrast, says Foucault, the logic of pastoral caretaking infuses the Western Catholic church from “top to bottom”: in its distribution of authority, the specification of tasks, and organization of offices. It is not only the whole flock but every single sheep that falls within the ambit of pastoral caretaking. Foucault further argued that the logic of pastoral care found expression in the secular mentality of government from the 18th century. Biopolitics was the name that Foucault gave to this mode of government, which takes for its object the life of all and of each (*omnes et singulatim*), of the collective and the individual. He contrasted the logic of sovereignty against that of biopolitics. The former was rooted in the splendor and grandeur of sovereign power expressed most vividly in the act of putting to death. The right to seize, whether “things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself”, characterized the sovereign power over life and death. In contrast, biopower is concerned with fostering life, “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order”, where ‘life’ refers to both the large and small scale, both the population and the person.¹⁶ The transformation in the logic of Western political power from the “right to take life or let live” to “a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death”¹⁷ carries a few consequences pertinent to the distinction between Life and living. First, the rise of biopolitics before biology, wherein its meaning remains elusive, shows that Life is essentially a political notion. Second, the rise of biopolitics as the logic of politics marks the moment when living begins to be captured by Life — understood as the Illich once argued that images of the planet and the fetus functioned as sacred objects.¹⁸ Such technogenic objects give visual shape to Life as worthy of veneration and reverence. There is no icon for Life as the object of coronavirus pandemic management. Instead, visualizations of the spiked coronavirus as the harbinger of Death — including constables wearing bright red corona helmets while beating up pedestrians in Delhi, India — spread far and wide to redouble the fetishized veneration of Life.

Life is a Technique

That Life cannot be confused with living — the activities and thoughts of people as they go about their days — is best explained by recalling what Michel Foucault documented almost forty years ago. Living became politicized in the 18th century when politics began to concern itself with both the health and welfare of the individual and the population. What the coronavirus introduced and made obvious for the first time is the worldwide capture of living by methods of management. Human activity and healthcare system capacities — beds, nurses, ventilators, or protective equipment —

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were jointly optimized as a problem in supply chain management. In describing this logic of pandemic management, I confirm Illich's prescience in noting that what Ellul called the technological system could generate a new human condition. The global management of Covid-19 revealed Life is a technique within the technological system and one that will take great effort to resist. When Michel Foucault gave his annual lecture in 1978, he made a remarkable claim: The Church is a religion that lays claim to the daily government of men in their real life on the grounds of their salvation and on the scale of humanity, and we have no other example of this in the history of societies. With this institutionalization of a religion as a Church...an apparatus was formed of a kind of power not found anywhere else and [this] ...pastoral power, in its typology, organization, and mode of functioning, pastoral power exercised as power, is doubtless something from which we have still not freed ...

... cise in supply chain management, well known to industrial engineers. Just as the number of shoes manufactured can be calibrated by the amount of leather available, so also the number of Covid-19 cases can be restricted by the available hospital beds and medical personnel. It was this style of just-in-time management that previously gutted the facilities so much that it caused New York hospitals to be almost overwhelmed by sick patients during the flu season of 2018. Then, excess capacity was reduced. This time, excess infections were flattened. This technique to manage the supply chain of human populations in and out of infection was best explained by the Governor of California, Gavin Newsom. Mr. Newsom warned that ending the lockdown was not like turning on and off a light switch. That is because death rates would have soared if all restrictions were lifted at one fell swoop. Instead, the only way out of a lockdown was to manage it as one would "operate a dimmer." He intended "to toggle that dimmer, so that we get exactly the appropriate lighting, so that we can transition to herd immunity and that vaccine." During a storm, engineers regulate the flow of water from a dam so it does not breach the banks of a river. Newsom wanted to control the flow of humans in and out of their houses so that the resulting illnesses and deaths would not breach the medical systems capacity. Like a good scientist, he promised to take an experimental approach to solving the problem. He would try lifting a restrictive measure, say opening businesses on Sundays only. He would then check the infection rates. If they were too high, he would reimpose that restriction and try easing another, say reopening high schools. If the resulting death rates were still unacceptable, he'd loosen constraints like increasing the number of ICU beds and ventilators. If the death rates were now less than available capacities, he would cut back on medical personnel or protective gear to save money. Millions of people adapted themselves to this program. They reconfigured their residence into a fortress against viral invaders in whatever form, replete with portholes to receive inputs and expel outputs. Money came into online bank accounts for those still receiving an income, even if only to meet on screen. Nutrients were ordered online, prepared with minimal human contact, and left at the doorstep. Entertainment was piped in through cable wires while excrement was piped out through sewers. Muscles not needed spectral substance of political pro-

grams to manage individuals and collectives. Foucault described the detailed, fussy, and meticulous techniques of public health surveillance prescribed at the end of the seventeenth century to combat a plague. Quarantines, contact tracing, self-isolation, immunity passports — none of these are anything but 21st century avatars of the three-hundred-year-old logic of biopolitics, a politics geared to administering and fostering lives. Third, biopolitics is the historical matrix from which such contemporary political efforts as the management of Covid-19 takes place. In political ambition if not in fact, all the peoples of the world are subjected to public health management as is every individual. Both the population and the person constitute the target of governmental programs that foster life. Fourth and most disquieting, Life pretends to be identical to living — the innumerable and varied activities and thoughts of men and women. It is only by confusing the two that those who are the objects of management, clamor for their distinction. Life does not refer to concrete persons — Mary or Joe — but to an amorphous aggregate of biological entities, only accidentally with a human form (recall, even bison and cows can be instances of ‘lives saved’). Joe gets sentimentally attached to saving Life because the term conjures up a vague image of his friend Mary. Joe confusedly glides over the chasm that separates Mary from ‘a life’. He feels that by participating in the program to save Lives he is saving Mary and himself. He makes the switch between being Joe and being ‘a life’ without noticing the change. Joe switches between being himself and seeing himself as an epidemiologist, bureaucrat, or news anchor would. By managing himself and Mary as they would, he is transmogrified into a statistical instance of Life.¹⁹ To fully appreciate the disjuncture between living and Life and the confusion into which Joe is invited to fall, consider the effort to “flatten the curve” — a staple of pandemic management. Flattening the curve is the popular way to explain the mechanics of managing death by Sars-cov-2. A curve shows the expected number of infected humans over a period. By instituting such behavioral controls as “handwashing, teleworking, limiting large gatherings...”, the cases can be kept at or below the healthcare “system capacity”, which includes nurses, doctors, ICUs, ventilators, and the like. Calibrating the number of expected deaths by available hospital resources is an exert for work or play were toned indoors on fossil fueled machines. With its inhabitants on such life-support systems, the house functioned as an ICU for the healthy. In the age of logistics, saving Lives is a management program that jointly optimizes both human and technical resources. Flattening the curve by fitting humans into the available healthcare capacity reinforces the illusion that living is a scarce resource, maintained by machines, and metered out by professionals. Millions of men and women all over the world accepted, and even actively demanded, to live as statistical instances of Life. Accepting Life as coextensive with living entails accepting the illusion that living and dying are manageable objects. It is only when living is thought to be Life that dying becomes the consequence of administrative incompetence. Little wonder that questioning the protocols of pandemic management was, for many people,

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tantamount to promoting death. Life elicits sentimental attachment only from those blind to the distinction between concrete persons and what the UN calls ‘human assets.’ The methods involved in flattening the curve make visible what Illich presciently argued forty years ago. He then wrote that “only within the matrix which Jacques Ellul calls ‘the technological system’ has this new type of human condition come to full fruition.”²⁰ According to Ellul, the technological system constitutes a self-augmenting ensemble of techniques that is tightly coordinated. In the technological system, not only do technical artifacts constitute the environment of living, but living is shaped within their ambit.²¹ The new human condition of which Illich spoke is not simply the thoroughgoing embeddedness of humanity in technique. Rather, it refers primarily to the growing incapacity of men and women to see the difference between living and Life. A telling detail from the archives of pandemic management offers a clue of how deep this blindness goes. Sanjay Gupta, the doctor on call to CNN, sought the counsel of an astronaut, Scott Kelly, on how to deal with the physical and psychological effects of pandemic management. It is not without interest that a man who spent time in a man-made shell in outer space should be the one called on to give advice on living in the time of pandemic.²²

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The Ted K Archive

Sajay Samuel
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Some sections of this paper were previously published in Sajay Samuel, “On Corona Days,” *The International Journal of Illich Studies* 7, no. 1 (2020): 70–98.

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