CONCERNING LIFE: AN OPEN LETTER TO JEAN PIERRE DUPUY AND WOLFGANG PALAVER*

by David Cayley

> And the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the men of Gilead said to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" When he said, "No," they said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right; then then seized him and slew him in the fords of the Jordan. And there fell at that time forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites. (Judges 12: 3-6)

A shibboleth is a dividing line, and dividing lines are sharpest when they are razor thin. For the Ephraimites the price of forty-two thousand lives was nothing more than what linguists call an unvoiced fricative. Things are not yet quite so bad with us, but the pandemic has certainly brought division between friends. (And how great, after all, were the differences between Ephraimites and Gileadites, if all that distinguished them was the ability to make this crucial sound?) One of the shibboleths dividing us seems to be *life*. Recently two admired friends have taken issue with me over this word and the interpretation I have given of Ivan Illich's views on the subject. Theologian Wolfgang Palaver, in an interview in the German weekly *Die Zeit* for Dec. 23, 2020, expresses concern that Illich's claim that *life* has become "a fetish" is being abused as a justification for "sacrificing the weak." And French philosopher Jean Pierre Dupuy, in an article for the

* Editor's note: This is an edited version of Cayley's longer piece of the same title available on DavidCayley.com website and is used with his permission.

David Cayley, dccayley@gmail.com
Cayley, D. Concerning life: an open letter to Jean Pierre Dupuy and Wolfgang Palaver. Conspiratio, Fall 2021, p.59-74.

website AOC called "The True Legacy of Ivan Illich," argues, similarly, that those who follow "the fashion of covidoscepticism" misunderstand and misappropriate Illich's strictures on "the idolization of life." Dupuy's article is the second of two on the "alleged 'sacralisation of life.'" The first denounces what Dupuy calls "the blindness of the intellectuals."

In Dupuy's essay I am named in a way that flatters my achievements as an interlocutor of Illich's before I "succumbed to the times." "Alas, a thousand times alas," he says, wringing his hands sweetly over my fallen form, that "David Cayley himself" has "succumbed to the times" and now "multiplies his clichés and manifests his ignorance" while engaging in a "classic minimization of the severity of the pandemic." Palaver is milder and doesn't name me directly, but since I have been prominent amongst those who have tried to argue that "the idolization of life" has played a pernicious part in political responses to the pandemic, I include myself within that company whom he thinks have pushed Illich into dangerous territory, far beyond Illich's intention. The stakes are high here. "Saving lives" has justified every policy adopted to counteract the pandemic during the last year, and *life* is likely to continue as the sacred sign in which the revised social order that emerges from the pandemic will root its legitimacy. Accordingly, it seems important to seek some clarity on what is now meant by this word. (I hope my frequent resort to italics will be understood as a way of marking the usage I want to question). I will begin by trying to understand what is worrying Palaver and Dupuy, then present what I take to be Illich's view, and conclude with some reflection on the role of *life* in the present, and emerging, social order.

Palaver and Dupuy are concerned with what they call the protection or preservation of life. Both argue that those who "minimize" the pandemic, criticize the measures taken against it, or flout the rules for its containment are reckless-

ly endangering their neighbours. Both focus particularly on Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben as the epitome of this recklessness. Agamben has argued throughout the pandemic that the official response has amounted to destroying the village in order to save it. By leaving the old to die alone and unconsoled, by making people afraid of one another, and by banning funerals, church services and other elementary forms of social and cultural life, he has written, we have eviscerated what is left of our way of life, and allowed medicine to establish itself as an all-powerful and virtually incontestable religious cult. Dupuy is outspoken in his criticisms. Agamben's "intellectual posturing," he writes, is the "soft version" of the same "reactionary violence" as one sees in "American far-right groups…shouting, guns in hand, in front of the steps of their legislatures." This is already unfair and entirely *ad hominem*, but then Dupuy goes further. With respect to Agamben's concept of "bare life," by which Agamben clearly and explicitly means life without the cultural qualifications that give life narrative shape and dignity, Dupuy claims as an implication of this concept that Agamben must "despise… the simple, 'animal' life of the poor landless peasants of the Brazilian northeast." This seems to me to verge on slander as well as willful misreading.

Palaver, again, is milder and more temperate, but he too says that he is "upset" with Agamben. The relevant passage in Palaver's interview with *Die Zeit*: where he expresses this consternation is worth quoting in full:

> Agamben really upsets me. He is more papal than the Pope and more ecclesiastical than the Church. He claims that the Church has given up salvation and sacrificed it to health: because it sought salvation in history, it could only end in health. Nonsense! Why did Jesus heal people and take care of physical ailments? The many healings alone contradict Agamben's theological escape from the

> world. I am the LORD, your doctor. Or think of the miracle of the multiplication of bread. When people are hungry, you have to do something! Agamben practices bad theology when he tears salvation and health apart.
>
> …Agamben rightly laments an attitude for which health and survival are the most important things in life. But here one would have to ask: is it about my own life? Or is it the concern that applies to other people?

I can't overlook the possibility that this is mistranscribed, mistranslated, or just spoken hastily off the cuff, but, if this is what Palaver meant to say, I think he goes too far. Jesus certainly fed people and healed people, but he didn't heal everyone or feed everyone. Indeed he fed and healed people so sparingly that it seems fair to say that such actions, when he performed them, were intended illustratively rather than administratively or programmatically. This is the great issue in Dostoevsky's fable of the Grand Inquisitor. The Inquisitor reproaches his Lord for not turning stones into bread when he was challenged to do so. Because of this failure to allow for the weakness of suffering humanity, which cries always, "Enslave [us] but feed us!," the Inquisitor says, it was necessary for the Church to step in to "correct and improve" the Gospel. I don't mean to imply that Palaver takes his stand with the Grand Inquisitor, but only to point to a profound ambiguity in the Gospel view of Jesus as physician. Yes, there are feedings and healings, but there are also declarations that the Kingdom is "not of this world" and references to a way or a path so narrow or so arduous that "few find it." It seems unwise therefore for Palaver to accuse Agamben of a "theological escape from the world." Agamben has never claimed to be a theologian, and his defence of particular "forms of life," like funerals for the dead or human solace for the dying, seems to me eminently worldly. What he lays at the Church's door is

to have forgotten the messianic and therefore to have lost a necessary "dialectical tension" between history and what exceeds or interrupts history. It is only between "these poles," Agamben claimed in an address to "the Church of our Lord" in Paris in 2009, that "a community can form and last." Palaver may disagree, but, in that case, I would expect arguments rather than irritation and dismissal ("Nonsense!")

The second point that Palaver makes is that the masked and distanced citizen is not necessarily concerned with his own life, but with the lives of others. Dupuy says just the same – it is not for myself that I take precautions but for others. Some of this is quite uncontroversial. Long before COVID I would have declined to go out into society with an infectious disease, and hoped for the same courtesy from others. But in a world where everyone is a danger to everyone else, and the threat of "asymptomatic transmission" inhibits all social interaction without exception, it seems to me that a limit of "responsibilization" has been reached and surpassed. Reconceptualizing society as an immune system writ large is a formula for social dissolution.

Palaver argues further that those who argue against lockdown and similar measures are preparing to "sacrifice the weak." Behind this willingness he says stands "scapegoat logic" – the logic of the High Priest when he says, in the Gospel narratives of the Passion, that "it is better that one man should die than that the whole people should perish." In the understanding that Palaver shares with his teacher René Girard, this was the archaic principle — timely sacrifice preserves social order — that first Judaism and then Christianity began to question and overturn. All "utility thinking," Palaver says, reasserts "scapegoat logic." "Only life can provide orientation," he concludes. I agree, but much turns, as we shall see, on what is meant by *life*.

Before turning to Illich I can't avoid saying, though

with some trepidation, that in both Palaver and Dupuy, I feel I detect a note of panic. Once, long ago, after a lecture of Illich's on *Medical Nemesis*, a member of his audience turned to a friend of Illich's and asked in innocent perplexity, "What does he want? Let people die?" Both Dupuy and Palaver are more sophisticated, and more conversant with Illich's work, than was this bemused young man, and yet both seem, finally, to have reached the same sticking point. Lives must be saved – more or less at all costs – and anyone who argues otherwise has blindly forsaken "the height of humanism" (Dupuy) and succumbed to "scapegoat logic" and "social Darwinism." (Palaver)

Both my interlocutors believe that Illich's claim that *life* has become "an idol" and "a fetish" is being mistaken and abused by "covidosceptics." Palaver admits that Illich issued a salutary warning, but feels that Illich is being taken too prescriptively. Dupuy claims that Illich's strictures on the "idolization of life" were intended only to prevent life's degradation, not to in any way limit its protection and preservation. To get to the bottom of this we will first have to establish what Illich, in fact, said.

Sometime in 1985 a Baptist minister by the name of Will Campbell approached Illich after a lecture to a group of social workers in Macon, Georgia. In his private papers, Illich left behind a brief account, written ten years later, of this fateful meeting:

> [Following the lecture] I noticed [a] man with…a… knotted walking stick coming towards me. He introduced himself as a preacher: "Will Campbell…who has to ask you for a great favour." I gasped, because that name I knew, "If you are the one who animated Martin Luther King, do not ask me but simply command, I obey." He mumbled something which ended in "…you darn papists" and then said, "You refused to speak about

> 'life'. You see, 'life' is tearing our churches apart. "There are those who condemn capital punishment, but not the A-bomb, and others who call for the execution of abortionists. I will gather the representatives of our Churches so that you can talk to them."
>
> I was frightened. I cast about in my mind what to make of such a call. Many months later, somewhere in Ohio, I faced the room full of 'church leaders' that Campbell had assembled. The mood was tense. A clergyman in the front row identified himself as the representative of the Catholic Bishop's Conference and urged me to start with a prayer. This trap I had to refuse; I told him that I would start with a solemn, formal curse and asked those who did not stand for such a ceremony to leave. Then, dramatically, I raised my hands and repeated three times, "To Hell With Life."

Beyond the curse I do not know what Illich said on this occasion – Ohio is a big place, the meeting left no further trace in Illich's papers, and I've never encountered anyone who can tell me anything more about it – but four years later, in Chicago, Illich addressed a conference convened by the American Lutheran Church on the same subject. This lecture, called "The Institutional Construction of a New Fetish: Human Life" was published, three years later, in Illich's book, In the *Mirror of the Past*. On that occasion Illich told his auditors, without qualification, that "life is the most powerful idol the Church has had to face in her history." "More than the ideology of empire or feudal order, more than nationalism or progress, more than Gnosticism or enlightenment, the acceptance of substantive life as a God-given reality lends itself to a new corruption of the Christian faith." The word "substantive" is important here, and I will return to it in a moment, but first I want to examine the claim that contem-

porary reverence for life corrupts Christian faith.

In the gospels, Jesus asserts, repeatedly, that He is Life. "He does not say, 'I am a life,'" Illich comments. "He says, 'I am Life,' *tout court*." What is meant is more than merely being alive. The Life which Jesus incarnates and exemplifies can be given and received, Illich says, only as a gift. As such, it can be encountered, celebrated and shared, but it can never be ours to define or delimit, administer or control. This way of thinking and speaking about life, in which the word always implies a relationship to the One in whose gift Life lies, saturated the culture of Christendom for many centuries. "For much more than a millennium," Illich says, "it was quite clear that people can be among the living and be dead, and other people can be dead and have life. This is not simply a religious statement; this…became an ordinary everyday assumption." This everyday character is significant because it was Illich's argument that the "preconditions for modernity" were created by this acculturation of "Gospel truths." Modernity bent, folded and mutilated these truths, in his view, but it could never have come to be without them. This is why Illich dares to say that contemporary usage "abuses the word for the Incarnate God." He considered this a historical rather than a theological judgment. Trace the word *life* back through its many expressions in the Western theological, philosophical and scientific tradition, he said, and it will become evident that its meaning, however altered, continues to be shaped within the field that emanates from Latin Christendom.

The way we speak of life is rooted in a civilization once suffused with belief in the Incarnation. And this "Christian ancestry," is shared with "other key verities defining secular society." But at the same time the word's meaning has completely changed. It has become "substantive," Illich says. By this he means both that it has taken on the

character of a stuff – of something palpable – and that it has acquired substance in the more philosophical and theological sense of something that can exist in itself – it has become self-standing and self-sufficient. That life has become a stuff can be seen, Illich claims, in the discourses of law, medicine, economics and ecology – all of which claim this stuff as both their jurisdiction and their justification. The law protects it – in several U.S. states one can even sue for "wrongful life" – medicine extends it – corporations administer it – as manpower or human resources – and ecology studies it. The science of genetics now knows its "language." Demography and journalism tirelessly count its units. Lives lost index disaster; lives saved index social progress. The pursuit of health prolongs it; technology enhances it. Life is known, as never before and it is managed, as never before.

But, at the same time, life transcends all management as what Illich calls a "fetish." This was a favourite word, chosen more for its power to shock than for any particular anthropological resonance. A fetish is a magical object with the power of channelling or fixating certain feelings. "Technological society," he says, "is singularly incapable of generating myths to which people can form deep and rich attachments." And yet such a society, just for its "rudimentary maintenance," requires some way of commanding sentimental and not just rational allegiance. This is the role of the fetish. It is "a Linus blanket…that we can drag around to feel like decent defenders of sacred values." Life is managed as a biopolitical resource, but, as a fetish, it is also something that can be "spoken about in hushed tones as something mysterious, polymorphic, weak, demanding tender protection." What Illich calls 'epistemic sentimentality" can thus attach itself to *life*, at the same time that *life* is being intensively managed. To live under the sign of *life* is to become adept at eliding these seemingly contradictory connotations. One learns to slide

smoothly from one to the other without this operation ever having to come into consciousness as such. With a single verbal gesture, we revere what we manage, and manage what we revere.

Life, Illich says, "tends to void" both the moral and the legal "concept of a person." For him, it is in "the notion of 'person' [that] the humanism of Western humanism is anchored." A person possesses a clear boundary, and an inviolable integrity. A life does not. One is a person; one can, as the saying goes, "get a life." Lives can be evaluated and improved in ways that persons cannot. A doctor, facing me as a person, faces a certain story and a certain unknown destiny – there is a lot he or she must learn in order to treat me. A doctor facing me as a life can discern everything he or she needs to know from my test results. Lives vary, of course, as the skillful physician will recognize, but not quite in the same way that persons vary.

Life, for Illich, was also the sign of a profound change in "religiosity" – a term that he used to refer to the feelings, gestures and barely conscious dispositions that might not be captured by the more formal word religion. "My nose, my intuition, and also my reason tell me," he said in 1992, "that we might be at a historical threshold, a watershed, a point of transition to a new stage of religiosity." This idea had first taken hold of him a couple of years earlier, he told me, while he stood in the kitchen of the apartment of a group of graduate students whom he was visiting:

> On the icebox door two pictures were pasted. One was the blue planet and one was the fertilized egg. Two circles of roughly the same size – one bluish, the other one pink. One of the students said to me, "These are our doorways to the understanding of life." The term *doorway* struck me profoundly. This stuck with me for quite a few months, until, for a totally different reason, I…took down

> a book of Mircea Eliade['s]. Eliade has been for many of us a teacher of religious science…And, going though this book, I came to the conclusion that better than anyone else I had studied he brings out the concept of *sacrum*. The term *sacrum*, the Latin noun corresponding to our *sacred*, has been used by religious scientists to describe a particular place in the topology of any culture. It refers to an object, a locality, or a sign which, within that culture, is believed to be – this young lady was right – a doorway. I had always thought of it as a threshold, a threshold at which the ultimate appears, that which, within that society, is considered to be true otherness, that which, within a given society, is considered transcendent. For Eliade, a society becomes a conscious unity not just in relation to neighboring societies – we are not *you* – but also by defining itself in relation to what's beyond.

The pink disk and the blue disk, Illich concluded, performed, very precisely, the function Eliade described. Just as much as the megaliths at Stonehenge, the Ka'bah in Mecca, or the *omphalos* of the earth at ancient Delphi, they were *sacrums*. But, as "emblems for scientific facts," they were *sacrums* of an entirely new kind. The "ultimate '' which appeared at earlier "doorways" beckoned from a beyond that was transcendent – the opposite and other of this world with which it was understood to be radically discontinuous. What appears in the doorway of the two disks is more of the same – a realm of the invisibly small or the invisibly large to which we can gain access only with electron microscopes or the vast explosive power required to overcome gravity but which is yet no different than what is at hand. The doorways at which *life* is experienced and understood are, in Illich's words, "a frontier with no beyond." Like the endless virtuality that extends beyond the computer screen, they open to an infinity without difference. The new religiosity he had discovered was a "spir-

ituality" of pure immanence, in which virtual objects, conjured out of the womb of technology, present both a here and a beyond at once.

Life as pure immanence is uniquely available – it opens itself to microphones and cameras, microscopes and scanners. *Life* is at our command, even as we are at *life*'s command. We manage what we praise, administer what we venerate. Both aspects are at play in the notion of responsibility for *life* which has played such an important role in the discourses of the pandemic and which seems to be the main concern of both my interlocutors. Palaver says, "We are responsible for each other's life. It is our highest responsibility, for which we may even have to sacrifice our lives." Dupuy evokes "the risk of infecting one's loved ones" as the standard one should apply to one's own behaviour. To criticize either the ideological construction of the pandemic or the counter-productive measures adopted against it is to flirt with irresponsibility – the reckless disregard for the lives of others which both Dupuy and Palaver deprecate and fear. But the word *responsibility*, according to Illich, is something of a trap – a word that's easier to get into than to get out of. The key issue for him is whether the thing for which I am said to be responsible is within my reach, within my power, and within my understanding. "*Responsibility* catches," he says, by imputing to the one being made responsible some imaginary power– it might be the power to overcome racism, save life on earth, or end the pandemic by staying home. But very often Illich says this power "turns out to be phoney." And that makes responsibility "the ideal base on which to build the new religiosity of which I speak, in the name of which people become more than ever administrable, manageable."

No challenge is offered here to behaviour that is prudent, considerate or courteous. Illich's concern was with illusion, moral grandiosity and epistemological confusion. Illich

regarded *life* as an idol – a man-made god in whose form we worship ourselves, while at the same time generating a sacred which mandates and justifies our manipulation of living. He claimed that *life* had become the object and anchor of "a new stage of religiosity" – a further perversion of the Biblical understanding of life as an implication of God's breath. He thought that life had become a "substantive" – a stuff to be counted and conserved, a resource to be enhanced and administered. He held that the idea of each one as a person – an unrepeatable and inscrutable being pervaded by a "mysterious historicity" – was being replaced by system concepts in which individuality dissolves. And he believed finally that the word *life* had become the site of a fateful "conceptual collapse of the borderline" between "model and reality" and between "process and substance." This collapse is expressed in our thinking that in becoming the protectors, champions and devotees of life we have touched *life itself* without remainder, reservation or detour.

How does all this pertain to the present situation, and to the fears of my interlocutors that Illich is being recklessly misappropriated by Dupuy's "covidoskeptics." Illich's "new stage of religiosity," centred on *life*, is not easy to perceive as such. Some committed members of the Abrahamic faiths that centre life in the One in whom "we live and move and have our being" may notice it, since, for them, the preservation and prolongation of life is neither an exclusive good nor the highest good. But,.for those who live within the horizons of the new religiosity, *life* must necessarily take the form of something obvious and unquestionable. When I spoke recently to a surgeon who wanted to convince me to have a surgery which he believed would extend my "life expectancy," I had the impression that he simply could not understand how any other object – a seeking after the proper "hour of my death" for example – was even possible. Life, for him, is an

unlimited good, death an unqualified evil. Whatever is made sacred becomes untouchable and unquestionable. Before *life*, as that precious stuff which we must at all hazards save, all must bow and fall silent. This allows government to go on *behind a veil*, as it were. The image is precise inasmuch as it was a veil which sheltered the Holy of Holies from view in the Second Temple in Jerusalem. (And even more precise when one considers that it was this veil which the Gospels say was torn in two at the hour of the Crucifixion, profaning the old sacred and opening the door, eventually, to our reverence for life-in-itself, life as its own god.) I believe that during the last year people have been made less competent, less aware, more frightened and more prone to ritualism and sentimentality. Fatal myths, like the myth of Science, have been strengthened. More people have been consigned to the new proletariat whose only remaining job is to collect welfare, consume entertainment and cheer on command. The World Economic Forum has been emboldened to cook up its Great Reset by which monopoly capitalism will be finally made indistinguishable from socialism. Disabling professional hegemonies have been reinforced. Difficult conversations – about vaccination, let's say – have been made more difficult, if not impossible, by reckless polarization. The sovereign who authorizes these developments is *Life*, and the attendant minor divinities who carry its train, like risk, safety and management. I believe that Illich saw this coming, and that I remain in tune with him on this point.

Earlier I told the story of the young man who wondered, after listening to Illich lecture on *Medical Nemesis* whether Illich's proposal was to "let people die." I'm sure the same question could now be asked of me. It's a strange question become it implies that it's up to me, or Illich, or whoever else might be challenged in this way, to allow or not allow death. Ancient images of the Fates show them spinning and

cutting the cloth of destiny, allotting each one an unchangeable portion at birth. The contemporary image is the opposite. Nothing determines our fates except the vigilance of the institutions that protect us. We will live until, at the termination of treatment, we are "let" die. The hubris of this image mirrors the fatalism of the earlier one. Illich was a man of "the middle way," which for him meant not mediocrity but the razor's edge of constantly renewed discernment. He did not advocate wantonly letting people die, and no more did he advocate keeping them alive whatever the cost. Nothing will tell us in advance where the balance should lie, but we will certainly never find it by outlawing discussion.

The idea that life and death, or good and evil are inextricably tangled in the world is not a new idea and should not be a controversial one. Christians have the parable of the wheat and the tares to teach it to them; Buddhists have the idea that good and evil are of "co-dependent origin." Only in a civilization completely seized by what Illich once called "a compulsion to do good" would this idea require defense or explication. But, having to defend it puts the defender in the peculiar position of seeming to speak for whatever evil the latest war is supposedly rooting out. I believe it was Illich's view, expressed in his wonderful essay "Research by People," that a rough and ready distinction can be drawn between technology that "remedies" certain ills and incommodities of the human condition and technology that aims, in Francis Bacon's words, at "mastery over nature." This idea of technology as remedy which he ascribes to Hugh of St. Victor, is as close as he ever came, and as close as he thought he was ever likely to come, to specifying a principle of enoughness, sufficiency or limit on which a new post-Promethean, post-Baconian philosophy of technology could be founded. However, this principle is construed it will certainly stipulate things not to be done as well as things to be done. *Life*, on the other

hand, exerts an unlimited demand. It is the monotonous, unshadowed and endless good that corrupted Christianity bequeaths to modernity. In the last year we have pursued it as never before and without even noticing the watershed that is being crossed. To "save lives" we have turned the world upside down, accepting censorship and intrusive social control, abandoning the old, and immolating the economically marginal. We have allowed a further mythification of what was already badly mythified – Science as an immaculately conceived and infallible oracle. We have opened the door to intensive virtualization, increased fear, and injured conviviality. Was it worth it? I would try to start the debate if only the new sovereign had not made debate illegal during a war.