Deschooling and the Ascendant Technosophy

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Introduction

"Children should sometimes be released from the narrow constraint of school, otherwise their natural joyousness will soon be quenched. When the child is set free, he soon recovers his natural elasticity" (Kant 2001, 92). On the surface, these musings might seem like the stirrings of deschooling sentiments such as those pronounced and refined by Ivan Illich. At some later date, the Kantian overtones of Illich's work might make for an intriguing study. However, the peril of the present is such that one feels compelled to put aside discretionary curiosity in favor of the imminent critique. The imminent critique, in Freire's terms, consists of a dialogic relation (Freire 2017, 79). Under scrutiny in the pages that follow is not the relation of the revolutionary subject to the dehumanized community, per Freire's original meaning. Nor does this paper intend to demonstrate the asymmetric returns in the relation between technology and education. Rather, what follows concerns strictly the relation between Ivan Illich's concept of deschooling and the present crisis in education. Has the distance learning revolution instigated by the pandemic perverted the ideas presented in *Deschooling Society*, thereby demonstrating the limits of deschooling? If so, how does this fulfill or illuminate Illich's later reflections on schooling and society?

These questions arise from a moment in time Ivan Illich anticipated decades ago. This is a moment of medical, technological, and educational crisis. Parents and guardians of

schoolchildren in such a time as this might find themselves wondering whether Kant's notion of joyous and spontaneous children was prescience or delusion. This past year, tens of millions of American school children found their daily institutionalization relocated from the symbolic structure of incarceration, the school, to the intimacy of their own homes. Hundreds of millions of children around the world found themselves in possession of a disfigured freedom. Admittedly, these young people were released from the narrow constraints of their daily schedules, their creaking desks, and their aging school buildings. However, schooling left the building with the students. Aphorisms like the one quoted at the outset of this paper refract in a subsequent crisis in one of two ways: as prophecy or irony. A stupefying liberator has, in fact, arrived to release the young from the "narrow constraint of school." But, sending students home has hardly opened the way to a deschooled utopia. Instead, in a monumental stroke of irony, the distance learning revolution resembles deschooling, but only as a distorted parody. Observant parents, teachers, and students see the educational response to COVID-19 not only as a colossal step away from freedom in education, but as proof of Illich's mantra "*Corruptio optimi quae est pessima* [the corruption of the best is the worst]" (Cayley and Illich 2005, xv).

Without a bit of additional context, any analysis that addresses this corruption is senseless. Both Illich's educational vision and the crisis unfolding before us warrant elaboration. Prior to the publication of *Deschooling Society* and Illich's crash into education theory, observers of education saw schools undertaking ever greater schemes of disproportionality. This increasing disproportionality was the immediate context of Illich's philosophy of education. In the terms Illich later used to define proportionality, "the appropriateness of [the] relationship" in schools was decaying beyond remedy (Illich 1994). Illich surveyed the relationships between student and school, student and teacher, student and peer, and student and curriculum, and saw that each was

disfigured. The peril posed by this disintegration compelled the publication of *Deschooling Society* five decades ago, a text which students of Ivan Illich consider an indispensable introduction to the themes of his philosophy. *Deschooling Society* offers a diagnosis for this disintegration, a discussion of the illusions and alienations innate to the schooling system, and a handful of modest proposals toward a society without schooling.

The peril of the alienation that results from such disproportionality has been amplified to new extremes in the wake of COVID-19. The crisis in education now is not one of gradual disfigurement, but a rapid transmutation of one kind of institution into another much more sinister kind. Illich identified the universalization and compulsion of schooling as the reasons for its disorientation, but the menace that has appeared today as students are schooled in utter alienation brings with it the dawning of a new, all-encompassing disfigurement. In Illich's time, the school had taken part in the institutionalizing trend afflicting medicine, vocational work, and society at large. In our time, novel forms of oppressive institutionalization, the imperializing tentacles of technology, and the stakes of global health have empowered the greatest possible perversion of deschooling.

As state and local governments shuttered schools, these institutions were compelled to change in a manner more rapid and dramatic than any other time in the century and a half of compulsory schooling. Despite the fact that commentators and analysts concurred that the "US education system was not built to deal with extended shutdowns like those imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic," American schools were unwilling (or unable) to leave schoolchildren alone (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, and Viruleg 2020, 2). In the process, schools found an even bolder means of oppressing the individual: direct invasion of the home. Technology has been promoted from a privileged flourish to the sole medium of instruction. In this sense, the

pandemic now presents to the coteries of institutional education and their technocratic friends a most powerful ally, as this new context has catalyzed a technological imperialism over schooling, home, and society. In short, the threat of the normality facing Illich in 1970 quickly evolved this year into the gravest educational crisis since *Deschooling Society* was published.

The analysis that follows aims to consider the problematic implementation of distance learning-as-deschooling within several frameworks. First, it is timely to ask whether the events of the past year and the new normal of distance learning in any sense followed the prescriptions of Illich's first critiques in *Deschooling Society*. Second, it is proper to ask how Illich's later reflections and concessions regarding the limitations of deschooling – especially as expressed in *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom* - explain the dysfunction of the educational services offered in the spring and fall of 2020. Third, it is worthwhile to remark on the ways in which the transformation of our social imagination regarding knowledge in the age of digital learning parallels the transformation of our social imagining of water as Illich described in *H_2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness.* Finally, some conclusions and cautious gestures forward might be achieved through consideration of what Illich himself might say to this crisis.

Mechanisms of *Deschooling* and Distance Learning

In 1970, the rebuked radical Monsignor Ivan Illich published his diagnostic critique of and propositions regarding the emerging normalcy of compulsory institutional education. His concerns bear repeating, and the provisions offered in *Deschooling Society* regarding a path toward deschooling are especially timely. The question in discussion in the passage that follows is whether Illich's suggestions in that text in any fashion resemble the present educational

landscape. If so, does the ersatz solution of distance learning resemble the guidance

recommended in *Deschooling Society* out of sincerity, or as a parody?

Illich's basic critiques in *Deschooling Society* continue to ring true, despite later

retractions from Illich himself. Recent scholarship on the evolving philosophy of Ivan Illich

notes his shifting attitude toward those initial criticisms: "in the early 1980s… he refocused his

quest toward the roots (origins) of modern certitudes, such as those related to education by

engaging himself in historical analysis rather than concentrating on responses to specific

contemporary problems" (Bruno-Jofré and Zaldívar 2012, 575). Illich himself even went so far

as to say later of his work, "While my criticism of schooling in that book may have helped some

people reflect on the unwanted social side effects of that institution — and perhaps pursue

meaningful alternatives to it — I now realize that I was largely barking up the wrong tree" (Illich

1996, vii). Even so, the principal relevance of *Deschooling Society* in this paper prioritizes the

relation between the learning webs proposed in its latter passages and the digital communities

formed to replace schools shuttered by the global pandemic. The two may, in fact, relate to one

another perversely, as will be demonstrated.

The proposals offered in the 1970 pamphlet represent a rehabilitation of education in four

parts. Each of the components for deschooling explicated in *Deschooling Society* aims to

introduce students to the tools, wisdom, and connections that could, as Gert Biesta might say,

help along in the formation of "a human being who exists differently in the world" (Biesta 2019).

The four alternatives to "schooling" are, in order, Reference Services to Educational Objects,

Skill Exchanges, Peer Matching, and Reference Services to Educators-at-Large (Illich 1972, 34).

The purpose of these mechanisms was to free the world of the crippling restraints of education:

in other words, to facilitate the deschooling of society. Widely available educational objects and

networks might help reorient education away from the limits of the school toward the freedom to learn: "It must not start with the question, "What should someone learn?" but with the question, "What kinds of things and people might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?" (Illich 1972, 34). It is now fitting to ask: has the new normal of at-home education made use of these "learning webs," or merely warped them in order to further the disproportionality of education?

Briefly, let us consider each of the four deschooling mechanisms and its relation to the new distance learning systems implemented across the United States, even around the world. First, the Reference Services to Educational Objects. "Things are basic resources for learning" claims Illich, but what of "things" in a pandemic (Illich 1972, 34)? What becomes of "things" When "things" might carry the contagion? Schooling placed things – lab equipment, textbooks, even basic toys for games – within the circumscribed authority of the institution. "Control of school over educational equipment" represented to Illich, as it still does to many, the counterproductive supervision typical of disproportionality (Illich 1972, 35). Limited access to educational objects persisted as the reigning normality into the 21st century, but with the arrival of this pandemic, has distance learning created a system for interacting freely with these tools?

Not quite. Ironically, school districts throughout the United States and around the globe instituted compulsory tool distribution. Students were not offered the freedom of choice in the context of their home to learn, touch, or experiment according to the movements of their mind. Rather, schools extended the most extreme form of technocratic intervention in modern educational history. Primary and secondary schools distributed millions of laptops in order to extend their direct control over the contours of learning, even within the home (Herold 2020). Microscopes and globes and jump ropes sat unused for months at a time while students (many of

whom still lack access to the internet) found themselves waiting in long lines to pick up laptops

they did not ask for, the targets of ever-increasing technological deployment (Puranam 2020).

Schools have been closed, and many remain so, yet deschooling with respect to educational

objects has not been accomplished, but perverted.

Second, Illich proposed Skill Exchanges as a convivial means of deschooling societies. The new normality of remote teaching might have forced a question into the civic sphere: are teachers still the best means of educating children? Ivan Illich understood the natural assumption that teachers ought to represent the ordinary means of educating, but questioned the universality of this perspective. *Deschooling Society* proposed new kinds of networks which might connect learners to an individual "who possesses a skill and is willing to demonstrate its practice" (Illich 1972, 38). The repudiation of teachers as educational autocrats would, according to *Deschooling Society*, represent an opportunity to introduce new figures into the educational regime. On the utility of these individuals, Illich observed,

> The parents' insistence that the teacher and the person with skills be combined in one person is understandable, if no longer defensible. But for all parents to aspire to have Aristotle for their Alexander is obviously self-defeating. The person who can both inspire students and demonstrate a technique is so rare, and so hard to recognize, that even princelings more often get a sophist than a true philosopher. (Illich 1972, 38)

If such exchanges had been broadly implemented in the 20th century, the normalcy left behind by

the pandemic might have been a better one and one more readily maintained in quarantine.

However, through the end of the 20th century into this one, schooling remained

disproportionate., the teacher-student relation perhaps most of all. The new normal of distance

learning has only made this even more so. Skill exchanges could exist easily in the world of

Zoom, Teams, Skype, and Hangouts. These channels and others allow millions to contact

strangers simply on the condition that one desires to learn and the other desires to teach. Yet, as

this new era in education dawns, one notes a stale and stolid reality: no new actors have been

introduced. With the near endless possibilities opened by tools like Zoom, schooling has gone on

as before. Teachers control student learning, gauge student success, and pass on to them the

skills and content determined by state agencies as best they can. So, with respect to Illich's

second deschooling mechanism – Skill Exchanges – the crisis of distance learning has created an opportunity but squandered it by maintaining the role of old pedagogues.

Third, Peer Matching. Much the same can be said regarding this proposal as was said above. Even as young people were set free by the pandemic to pursue their own aims, the system in place to connect students to their peers remained unchanged. Millions of elementary school children saw the same faces that they saw in a classroom only weeks prior now looking bewildered back at them through a screen. The methods of selecting and aggregating peers have remained the same, even as the means of interaction have changed dramatically. Ivan Illich imagined a world in which someone, animated by the freedom of the Good Samaritan, identifies and loves his or her neighbor in freedom. Yet, such freedom to identify and love one's classmates at will remains out of reach for students, despite the opportunity this pandemic presents.

Deschooling has very near its center the availability of Peer Matching networks. In the most succinct terms, "To deschool means to abolish the power of one person to oblige another person to attend a meeting. It also means recognizing the right of any person, of any age or sex, to call a meeting" (Illich 1972, 40). Yet, in the hopeless pursuit of normalcy, meetings were called by the same authorities each week, or even each day, to the same networks of peers. This perversion represents, in view of Illich's proposal, a parody of the deschooling mission.

Fourth, and finally, *Deschooling* Society recommended Reference Services to Educators-at-Large. Though the work of these entities are anomalous, certain reference services to join educators and students have grown during this pandemic. One example of such a service is the SchoolHouse microschool initiative (Keates 2020). Such initiatives connect individual families and local, highly qualified educators. If, in freedom, the two choose to enter a relationship as

teacher and class, then a microschool is established. Ventures like this deserve attention from devotees to deschooling, as one can speculate with some confidence that Ivan Illich would have considered such an endeavor promising. Aspiring toward a deschooled future, Illich wrote, "As citizens have new choices, new chances for learning, their willingness to seek leadership should increase" (Illich 1972, 42). This willingness is given a vehicle through initiatives like this one, although they remain far from common. School districts, dioceses, and private school networks have kept clutched hands around educational objects, control of peer groups, and educational hierarchies. Thus, a relation between deschooling and the present crisis can only be properly described with a single term: perversion.

The new normal is a perversion, or at best a poor imitation, of these deschooling mechanisms. Rather than allow students and educators to connect freely, the compulsion and assignment of relations remains. Rather than connect students to the tools and individuals who might help them learn on their own terms, the imposition of the school system goes on through technological means. The technological dimension of this new normal constitutes the second portion of this analysis.

Limitations of *Deschooling* and the Technosophic Ascendency

If the tools to create a deschooled society are so easily distorted, does this undermine Ivan Illich's entire educational perspective? Given Illich's own admission of this possibility in *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom*, contemporary commentators ought to read his later sense of the limitations of the deschooling concept sympathetically. Along with Etienne Verne, Illich begins the opening passage of *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom* with a dreary admission: "An analysis of the defects of the school system no longer stirs anyone to action" (Illich and Verne

1981, 9). The reigning normality of the preceding decades was one of change – namely, increasing technological dependence in the classroom. Observers of this change cried out, but as Illich predicted no one was stirred to action (Young 2006). This gradual transformation, however, has been surpassed by a new normal. In light of the current pandemic, technology is not simply one tool among several available to the educator. As stated above, remote teaching looks to the machine as the indispensable medium through which education takes place. This is not merely a mutilation of deschooling, but consideration of this technological dependence will prove the limits of the deschooling concept and identify the rise of a "technosophic" perspective, both of which Illich anticipated clearly.

Imprisoned in the Global Classroom includes reflections on lifelong learning, a concept used by many and rebuked by a few. Beyond Illich and Verne, contemporary scholars such as Gert Biesta as well as David and Catherine Matheson have also contested the legitimacy of this notion (Biesta 2017, Matheson and Matheson, 1996). The two essays of *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom* specifically question the utility of new compulsory training for French workers, and Illich uses this development as an occasion to reflect back on his claims about deschooling from the decade prior. In the course of this reflection, he not only names some of the limitations to deschooling afflicting current distance learners, but also identifies an entirely novel threat, one most relevant to the educational norms of 2020: the technosophic illusion.

First, as stated earlier, Illich himself repudiated at the very least the broader aims of *Deschooling Society*. In *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom*, Illich and Verne anticipate certain shortcomings or possible abuses in projects to deschool society, and these shortcomings align precisely with the failures of the new normal which is virtual education. In particular, Illich and Verne note that "deschooling" understood in a vacuum might allow for the complete imperialism

of educational institutions over one's life. This process was underway in France in the form of new, ongoing training standards required of industrial workers. Comparing the plight of such a worker with that of the student, Illich sees that the threat of deschooling is that it might invite "permanent education" as a new norm (Illich and Verne 1981, 11). One alternative to schooling, Illich foresaw, was the introduction of a new regime without buildings or walls to restrain it. The schooling regime Illich warned of in this text would require that schooling follow the individual for the rest of his or her life, as he saw before him: "two complementary aims: the deschooling of educational processes and the introduction of permanent education" (Illich and Verne 1981, 11).

While distance learning has yet to require permanent diligence of its students, the prediction that deschooling can be warped was made by Illich decades prior to the consequences on schools brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. "Education without schools and schools without walls" might be adopted as the slogan of the technocratic elites benefitting the most from universal dependence on their products, but this is a phrase introduced critically by Illich in *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom* (Illich and Verne 1981, 12). One reads this text and comes away with an overwhelming sense of Illich's foresight of the perversion of deschooling. The trap whereby deschooling opens a kind of Pandora's box was visible to Illich in 1981, as he wrote of "a most dangerous and well-concealed trap, laid for it by those who wish to utilize it to justify the educational mega-machine of the year 2000" (Illich and Verne 1981, 12). Here in 2020, the educational mega-machine has placed machines in every home.

The passages quoted follow references to various parties invested in bringing about this parody of deschooling. Often, Illich describes these individuals simply as "technocrats", but in the latter portions of the text Illich ascribes to these individuals a particular mythology which he terms "technosophie" (Illich 1981, 43). Technosophy instructs its adherents in a simple truth: the

victory of technology is achieved when that technology necessitates universal, compulsory use. "Technosophs would like to do away with cars to improve transportation," Illich writes, just as the technosophs of the present crisis would like to do away with schools to improve education (Illich 1981, 45). While some technosophs are simply technocrats, both iterations of the technocratic elite have profited immensely and will continue to profit in the midst of this new normal. Technosophs and technocrats around the world have increased their wealth by billions of dollars during the pandemic, and technology corporations have increased their value as a result of the new, universal dependence of students on virtual learning (Rushe and Chalabi 2020).

The ascendant technosophy represents an illusion, a trap. The trap is tempting: why not put aside obsolete institutions if we have the technology to accomplish their goals more effectively? Illich might pose an unnerving question in response to such thinking. Which is truly the more insidious contagion: COVID-19, or the technology societies have relied upon in order to keep themselves safe from it? While the impassioned and myopic perspective would note that COVID separates students while technology brings them together, Ivan Illich would find this dichotomy too simple. Technology, as evidenced in the current crisis, is a kind of contagion of its own. The infection began through small exposures, and the period of incubation was long. And yet, in the new normal of pandemic pedagogy, one sees that the deeper invasion is perhaps not the virus which has infected tens of millions, but the technologies suddenly needed by hundreds of millions simply to see the face of their friend, read a text, or go to school. The technosophic ascendency is, in these terms, a contagion deserving its own concern.

Readers of Ivan Illich find precisely this concern guiding the claims of *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom*. This work of mid-career Illich represents an evolution, and an acknowledgement of the potential abuse of deschooling mechanisms as described above. While

Deschooling Society posited the means and channels whereby 21st century technocrats could extend their reach into the homes of schoolchildren, *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom* shows an older Illich foretelling and warning against such a future.

The New Waters of Knowledge

The final analysis of this discussion proposes a relation between Illich's later work on the of philosophy of science and a change taking place in this new educational model. By the middle of the 1980s, Illich's work turned to urban planning, social imagination, and the common sense of "stuff" to answer questions about the assumptions of society. One example of this study is Illich's work with the Dallas Institute of the Humanities and Culture, which produced the research which became *H₂O And the Waters of Forgetfulness: Reflections on the Historicity of "Stuff"*. This work offers a final opportunity for speculative reflection, as the transformation of water noted in that address parallels a present transformation of knowledge in the new normal of pandemic schooling.

Throughout his works, Illich often turns to the concept of "imagination". Even in *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom*, Illich recognizes the power of collective social imagination as the freedom of a people to think and aspire to other ways of life (Illich 1981, 49). Relatedly, the notion of imagination in *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* owes much to Gaston Bachelard, who Illich writes noted a "formal" and "material" basis for imagination (Illich 1985, 6). Imagination in these two senses refers to the capacity of a people to think of new structures, models, or forms, and the basis of their current thinking about structures, models, or forms. In both senses, Illich argues that water has undergone an imaginative revolution. Likewise, the

social imagination of "knowledge" is undergoing an imaginative revolution due to the technological means by which students around the globe are continuing their schooling.

In *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, Ivan Illich extended his incisive analysis to the change of water in the social imagination of modern people. In short, Illich argues that where water once represented a barrier or repository, it has come to be nothing more than a fluid which bears particular duties and functions. Whereas to the Greek of antiquity water possessed a "dual nature" with the capacity "to purify as well as to clean", to the modern individual water exists simply and flatly as just another commodity (Illich 1985, 27). Water had, in Illich's analysis, lost its potency, meaning, and gravity in its movement from antiquity to the present. Water was, Illich claimed, an "elusive" thing that might be "divided" in the imagination of the ancient and medieval person, but in the modern era it was now imagined merely as H_2O. Water is now merely a chemical, distinguished only by function and method of transport.

Before concluding this paper with the humblest of gestures toward the future, the role of knowledge in the social imagination must be placed alongside this change in the conception of water, as the two run parallel. Specifically, how will the new mode of acquiring knowledge, contemplating knowledge, and disseminating knowledge change its place in our formal and material imagination? Prior to the present peril, knowledge has been imagined and described by poet and pauper alike as "power" – the adage "Knowledge is Power" adorns the walls of countless school buildings in the United States. Knowledge, by this reckoning, was imagined as a thing with potency, or the means of agency. Knowledge, like a barrier, distinguished the scholar from the amateur. In the formal imagination, knowledge occupied a role like water; knowledge and water both could be imagined as a barrier, a repository, or as something elusive. Knowledge, furthermore, offered itself as a component of the material imagination. In the

material imagination, various cultural traditions around the world ascribe to deities or other mythical figures associated with knowledge a subtle wisdom and power. Yet, like water, it seems inevitable that remote learning will complete the commodification of knowledge, whose mythical embodiments in the future – and, in fact, already include - the likes of Tim Cook, Mark Zuckerberg, and Eric Yuan. Hardly figures of wisdom and power.

As students use electricity to connect virtually to a poorly animated class of peers, the knowledge shared between teacher, student, and peer is like a poorly flowing fluid. One wonders how this generation of young people will grow up to imagine the knowledge given to them as children during this pandemic. As potency and barrier? As a repository and means of agency? Or, perhaps this pandemic will succeed in ushering in a new normal: knowledge as a fluid commodity. This new normal must inspire a critical response. The devolution of such a powerful imaginative entity as knowledge to the level of mere digital fluid transferred from pedagogue to virtual peer group and back again cries out for a modern Illich to name and deconstruct this system.

Conclusion

The preceding arguments of this paper related Illich's notion of deschooling to the new normal of remote learning, acknowledged Illich's sense of the limits of deschooling and the rise of a technosophic elite, and made a speculative comparison between Illich's sense of the imagination of water and the emergence of a new role for knowledge in the imaginative scheme. These arguments rest on nothing other than the material produced by Illich himself in the past five decades, and the purpose of this discussion is simple: to show once more the clarity and foresight of Illich's criticism, especially in the realm of education. The imminent critique of the

new normal in education is best served by employing the same frameworks utilized by Illich in *Deschooling Society*: a consideration of proportionality, freedom, and learning in order to exist rightly in the world.

What might Illich say to the perils of the present? This speculation is surely outside a strictly academic line of inquiry, but his suggestions might look something like these. Reestablish vernacular modes and methods of learning. Eschew the technosophic illusion that technology can always replace the physical institution with a permanent, omnipresent option. Finally, Ivan Illich would have us reorient our genuine, well-grounded fear. The new normal has brought with it a terror, a sense of popular horror at the unknown, and for many around the world this virus has brought unspeakable loss. As Illich would say, this is nothing short of a true crisis: an opportunity to make a decision. This is an opportunity not just for educators, but for all. Will this fear and atomization remain the new normal, or might this be an opportunity to pursue an authentic deschooling of society?

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