

Focus Essay

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Virus, Vaccine, and Value in a Curved Universe

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Abstract

Don't we need to flatten the death rate that results from our differential valuation of human beings? In a curved universe, everyone is both in front of us and behind us, and always within our reach. I want to say that our wealth, our income, and our value accrue to us simply because we are all human beings – parts of a whole. Human beings have a right to life.

Key words: Coronavirus, capitalism, curved universe, labor, poverty.

I was in my hotel room on the 12th floor enjoying the south and southwest view of the San Diego coastline. It was two days before the beginning of the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, in 2012. The next morning, I was giving my talk at a workshop when suddenly my heart began to race and I could not stop sweating. Somehow, I finished and excused myself from the catered lunch. My Ithaca doctor spoke to me by phone and kept me calm for many hours. Eventually he called the ambulance.

Three, perhaps four, paramedics worked on me as I continued to sweat and panic through irregular heartrates. It was my first time in an ambulance and I feared I was going to die. I pleaded

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with them. "I have children," I said, as if they were not already doing their best. The head EMT was in contact with the emergency room doctor who asked them to defer the next step until he could see me in the hospital. In the ER, I was given intravenous medication. I dropped out of the world. I woke up in a deep calmness that, no doubt, was drug induced. The kind nurse told me that my heart had been shocked back into rhythm. They were ready to discharge me.

I was overjoyed and already thinking about the next day's panels. The paramedics visited me and I thanked them for saving me. I memorized their names and planned to write them each a personal note. My arrhythmia was a mystery, but its treatment went as well as it could have. Smoothly. Luckily.

My first-year roommate to be, TB, made the fateful decisions. He aimed to be a doctor, so he was assigned to the pre-med dorm. He wanted a foreign student, so he got me. Foreign in passport and outlook but also foreign to his idea of a foreigner. I spoke English with a mixed accent. Mine from Bloomington by way of Peshawar; his from Columbus, Ohio.

Half the 1200 inhabitants of the dorm were preparing for medical school. Many of my floormates on the East wing of the 4th floor eventually became doctors. BC who remained a life-long friend, eventually worked the emergency rooms in Detroit hospitals. When my wife and I last visited him many years ago, he said he loved his job, but he was tired of patching up patients who returned with another overdose and new bullet holes. He wanted to move into hospital administration and then, ultimately, into politics so he could treat the cause and not merely the symptoms. He started his path in a curved universe.

We honor and cheer those who are medically trained to treat Covid-19. We are fond of using war terminology to describe their efforts: they "battle" the virus, they are in the "frontlines" of the "fight" against this indifferent "enemy." We professors are useless in comparison, reduced to the goal of not occupying

hospital beds. When I expressed my sense of futility to my student, Hannah Gignoux, she said, “At least you have a job to do. I feel more inadequate than you.”

Usefulness, it turns out, is a function of space and of time. If we elongate space/time, usefulness shifts its shape and makes quantum jumps.

In the moment of an emergency, no one is more valuable than medical professionals. But their value dissipates as we elongate the moment. For example, the ambulance driver, too, contributes. Not to mention the mechanic responsible for the servicing the vehicle. And in this way, we are off, tracing our finite tracks on an infinite connectivity. The EMTs, nurses, and doctors must be correctly deployed, thus making the hospital administrator decisive – as my friend BC understood.

All these people (to skip many steps) must eat. So, the grocer, the transporter, and the farmer are crucial. All medical professionals must be properly outfitted, so those who produce and allocate medical equipment are essential. Of course, hospitals need electricity, water, phone and internet service. And hospitals must be kept disinfected and kept clean--janitors are heroes. Bodies must be removed, refrigerated, and buried. All that labor is indispensable. And since much of the required material is dispersed and produced globally, our connectivity circumnavigates the planet.

If we consider not just this pandemic but the next one, then all the labor I have mentioned so far seems ancillary, and our hope jumps to scientists, researchers, and theoreticians. But then we are reminded that our modern relationship to nature might well be causing these pandemics. To sort this out, we need critics, metaphysicians, and cosmologists. Even professors and students might be of value if the next generation is to take up these foundational questions.

Still, humans do not live by work alone. We philosophize, we make and appreciate art, we worry if there is a god, many gods, or none at all. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is one of the most pernicious ideas ever conceived, if what his hierarchy implies is

that we fill one need before we fill the next one. People dying of hunger, of pain, of loneliness, do not fail to simultaneously consider theology, art, and metaphysics. To live is to live for wonder, for awe, for beauty. Nurses and doctors need food and rest, but they also need nourishment for their souls. Don't we all? Hence actors, musicians, dancers, poets.

When I was working on my dissertation, I could not understand why the division of labor was called the division of *labor*. The technical division of labor, the sexual division of labor, the social division of labor, the global division of labor. Why labor? Why not the division of capital? Did not Marx, in his magnum opus, show that the commodity is capital, money is capital, machinery is capital, labor is capital?

Now, more than 30 years later, I think I understand. Labor is capital only in capitalism. It is a division of *labor* because, prior to capitalism, labor was seen as the vivifying force that created value. Those hands that bring me my news, my food, and my books, my *everything* – that's labor. (I understand that labor can be performed also with feet, legs, and the entire body. So if I think of labor as the work of "hands," you might give me poetic license.) Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Karl Marx and hundreds of theorists that preceded them were just highlighting that laboring hands create the wealth of nations.

The pandemic dilated my pupils and sharpened my understanding. I went to get the newspaper and thought, whose hands have put this in my mailbox? Whose hands assembled the newspaper so that it could be delivered to my mailbox? In the grocery store, I wondered whose hands (from what part of the world) had touched my lettuce, my eggs, my bread? *Laboring hands*. The virus travels along paths already smoothed by all those hands.

I am troubled by the sudden liberal discovery of the global division of labor, as if Covid-19 created the revelation, as if theoreticians had not been working on these connections for hundreds of years. I'm also complicit. Until now, I did not bother

to think of all the hands that brought me my daily sustenance. I focused on the thing, not the process. I am guilty of reification – the turning of processes into things.

And yet, my reification, this turning processes into things, is not merely a negation of insight. It is also a respite from critical alertness. Reification is a shortcut that provides rest, without which we couldn't go on. So, two cheers for the glory of all those entertainers, including our sports heroes, who provide an "off-mode" that allows us to regenerate our "on-mode." They, too, have their place in our value tracing exercise. And when entertainers become artists, well, we thrive – quite a few jumps beyond surviving. Life without art? Unbearable.

Given an adjustable sense of space and time, whose labor is *not* essential?

Even if by some alchemy we can devise a formula that measures usefulness and essentialness (and therefore uselessness and non-essentialness), can we really say that *only* those who can articulate their usefulness are vital to our future? Surely, astronauts bring us more than moon rocks. What about those laying fallow, waiting for the next apple to drop? Those whose sleepy dreams will, one day, make Silicon Valley obsolete. There are those whose value we cannot ascertain within our current time horizon. Why is their right to income, their right to life, tied to serving others in the here and now? If we can envision an elongated duration, their seeming uselessness might just be a fullness. (I recognize that even this alchemy of differential value retains a sense of hierarchy that we would want to question.)

Science tells us that the Covid-19 generated death rate can be flattened by physical distancing. I'm a believer. I am eager to comply and cocoon myself in safety. But for others, their relative lack of means requires engaging in risks that could leave them infected and dead. Poverty strikes first, depriving the virus of a living host. Don't we need to flatten the death rate that results from our differential valuation of human beings? In a curved universe, everyone is both in front of us and behind us, and always within our reach. I want to say that our wealth, our income, and our value accrue to us simply because we are all

human beings – parts of a whole. Human beings have a right to life. *This* vaccine is ready and available. Indeed, it begins its treatment as soon as we recognize that the deadliest infection is valuing humans according to their presumed use.

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