

A Nuanced Understanding of Western Modernity¹ Introduction to Ivan Illich

Charles Taylor

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Modern ethics illustrates the fetishism of rules and norms. Not just law but ethics is seen in terms of rules. According to Kant, for example, the principle is that we should put regulation by reason, or humanity as a rational agency, first. In contrast, the network of agape puts first the gut-driven response to a particular person. This response cannot be reduced to a general rule. Because we cannot live up to this – “Because the hardness of your hearts” – we need rules. It is not that we could just abolish them, but modern liberal civilization fetishizes them. We think we have to find the right system of rules, of norms, and then follow them through unflinching. We cannot see any more the awkward way these rules fit enfolded human beings, we fail to notice the dilemmas they have to sweep under the carpet: for instance, justice versus mercy; or justice versus renewed relations, as we saw in South Africa with its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a shining attempt to get beyond the existing codes of retribution.

Within this perspective (of codes), something crucial in the Good Samaritan story gets lost. A world ordered by

this system of rules, disciplines, and organizations can only see contingency as an obstacle, even an enemy and a threat. The ideal is to master it, to extend the web of control so that contingency is reduced to a minimum. By contrast, contingency is an essential feature of the story of the Good Samaritan as an answer to the question that prompted it. Who is my neighbour? The one you happen across, stumble across, who is wounded there on the road. Sheer accident also has a hand in shaping the proportionate, the appropriate response. It is telling us something, answering our deepest questions: this is your neighbour. But in order to hear this, we have to escape from the monomaniacal perspective in which contingency can only be an adversary requiring control.

This is why Illich’s work is so important to us today. I have found it more than useful, even inspiring, because I have been working over many years to find a nuanced understanding of Western modernity. This would be one which would both give a convincing account of how modernity arose and allow for a balanced account of what is good, even great, in it; and what is less good, even dangerous

¹ This essay is a shortened version of Charles Taylor’s “Foreword” to *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich (As Told to David Cayley)*, (Ed.) D. Cayley. Anansi, Toronto, 2005. The Following essay also comes from the same volume.

and destructive. Illich's understanding of our modern condition as a spin-off from a "corrupted" Christianity captures one of the important historical vectors that brought about the modern age and allows us to see how what is good and what is bad are closely interwoven in it. Ours is a civilization concerned to relieve suffering and enhance human well being, on a universal scale unprecedented in history, and which at the same time threatens to imprison us in forms that can turn alien and dehumanizing. Realizing this should take us beyond the facile and noisy boosters and knockers of modernity or the "Enlightenment project."

Illich, in his overall vision and in the penetrating historical detail of his arguments, offers a new road map a way of

coming to understand what has been jeopardized in our de-centered, objectifying, discarnate way of remaking ourselves, and he does so without simply falling into the clichés of anti-modernism.

Codes, even the best codes, can become idolatrous traps that tempt us to complicity in violence. Illich reminds us not to become totally invested in the code – even the best code of peace-loving, egalitarian variety – of liberalism. We should find the center of our spiritual lives beyond the code, deeper than the code, in networks of living concern, which are not to be sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time subvert it. This message comes out of a certain theology, but it should be heard by everybody.

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