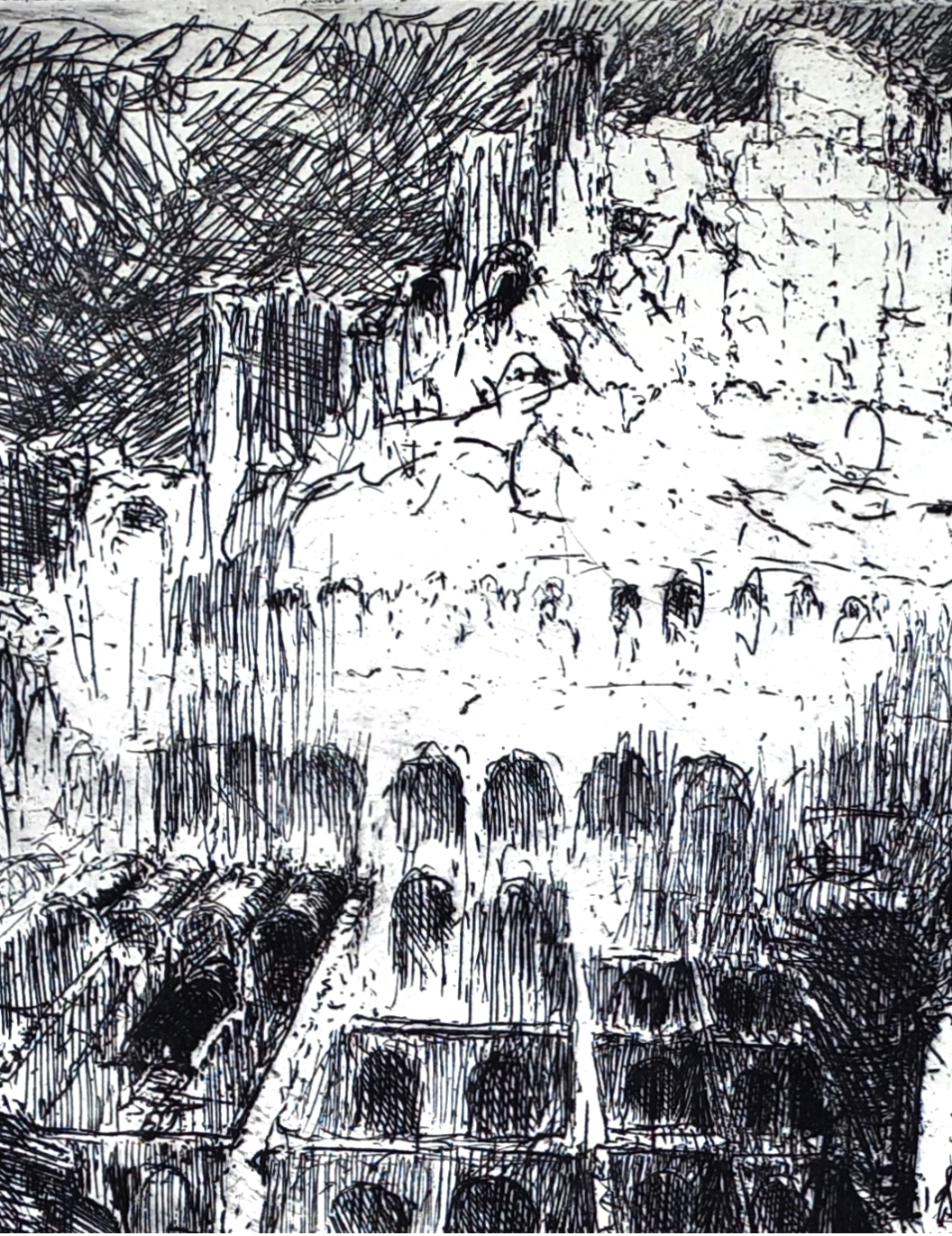




CONSPIRATIO

2025/26



Periodical for  
Thinking With Ivan Illich



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the quest for truth cannot thrive  
outside the nourishment  
of mutual trust

Ivan Illich

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# On Surprise and the Indirectness of the Theological in the Work of Ivan Illich

by Simon Ravenscroft

*I strongly suspect that a contemporary art of living can be recovered... The hope for such a life rests upon the rejection of sentimentality and an openness to surprise – Ivan Illich<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction: The difficulty of reading Illich

In an address given in 1996, six years before his death, Ivan Illich describes himself as a “hedge-straddler, a *zaunreiter*, which is an old name for a witch”.<sup>2</sup> He is referring to his having one foot in his “home ground” of Catholic philosophy, while the other is “dangling on the outside... heavy with mud clots and scented by exotic herbs through which I have tramped”.<sup>3</sup> If Illich is often invigorating to read, this ‘hedge-straddling’ has rarely made him straightforward to interpret. His published writings address a vast range of subjects,<sup>4</sup> and the challenge presented by this polymathic breadth is compounded by the fact that, despite commenting incisively on many issues, it cannot ultimately be said that Illich left behind a unified body of theory. His writings are far more fragmented, marked by key changes in argument and approach over the course of his life, with his final

1 Ivan Illich, *Gender* (London: Marion Boyars, 1983), 179

2 Ivan Illich, “Philosophy... Artifacts... Friendship – – and the History of the Gaze”, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 70 (1996): 59.

3 Illich, “Philosophy... Artifacts... Friendship”, 59.

4 An incomplete list would range from the grand themes of the political economy of modern societies, the intellectual and cultural history of the West, and the theological origins of modernity, to the specific topics of development, schooling, healthcare, transport, energy use, technology, work, gender, popular literacy, the history of the senses, materiality and embodiment, and friendship.

meaning often expressed in enigmatic terms, especially in later work. Indeed, his expression was especially enigmatic when it came to his theological commitments, which has left the question of how these relate to his ideas about history, politics, society, and the self, mired in difficulty. There can be no question that these interpretive challenges have hampered Illich's reception in a number of fields. Another factor hampering Illich's reception is the extraordinary success of the earlier writings for which he remains best known. As Giorgio Agamben has written, if the reception of Illich's 1970s work "assured its widespread diffusion and success... it also contributed to its misunderstanding", a consequence of it having been "inscribed without difficulty in the context of the critique of institutions that had characterised the long wave of 1968".<sup>5</sup> As a result, Illich has remained a "very famous thinker who has been kept, nonetheless, obstinately at the margins of academic debate".<sup>6</sup> In this context, what has been needed for some time, especially in English, is a work that conducts a thorough ground-clearing exercise, summarising Illich's life and thought from a broader perspective, relating it to itself, and beginning to develop its significance as a whole for related fields. David Cayley's recent book, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*, provides the beginnings of this and should form the basis for other, more focussed studies. In this vein, here I wish to supplement Cayley's own analysis by exploring a theme that he himself does not develop at any length, namely, the significance of the form and style of Illich's work for an interpretation of its meaning.<sup>7</sup>

5 Giorgio Agamben, introduction to *Genere: Per una critica storica dell'uguaglianza*, by Ivan Illich, ed. Fabio Milana, trans. Ettore Caprioli (Milan: Neri Pozza, 2013), §1. Introduction trans. Beniamino Barrese and Simon Ravenscroft.

6 Agamben, introduction, §1.

7 I know that Cayley is familiar with the possibility of reading Illich in this way, however, as we have discussed it together several times.

In what follows, I focus chiefly on what I call Illich's theological indirectness, though his work has other formal and stylistic characteristics that are worth exploring in addition, mentioned throughout. The first part of the essay (sections I-III) deals with matters of interpretation: why and how one might go about reading Illich in such a way that matters of form and style are rendered meaningful, with theology as the chief example. I argue that for the theological aspects of Illich's work to fully resonate, one has to attend to the specific form the theological takes. Illich's theological indirectness has to do with his refusal of a certain kind of ecclesio-juridical power, since secularised in the dominant institutions of Western modernity, and his affirmation of a mode of faith anchored in an openness to surprise and mystery. Illich's ideas do not, in this respect, need to be 'decoded' and expressed in an explicit theological idiom, as some have previously proposed, for them to yield a theological sense. Rather, by emphasising their form and elaborating upon it, this theological sense comes through all the more strongly, and in a way that reveals a greater degree of unity between his theological commitments and his more explicit social, political, and philosophical concerns than may initially be apparent. In the second part of the essay (section IV), I seek to demonstrate this by offering a constructive interpretation of surprise as a unifying theme in his work, showing how the theological here reinforces rather than displaces the social, political, and philosophical aspects of his thinking. Here we see how Illich's theological indirectness, and the open form of his work generally, dovetails with his broader emphasis on relationality, the interpersonal, particularity, and otherness, over against the depersonalising, disembodiment, homogenising pressures of late modernity. We also see how this has to do, obliquely, with a cultivated receptivity to the unforced and unexpected appearing of divine grace within the world,

an outlook of faith.<sup>8</sup>

This essay is therefore a proposal for a fresh interpretive approach to Illich, applied here to one specific area of his work, but with general relevance for all of it. I see this as a corrective to several heavy-footed earlier interpretations, discussed in section III, though more as a supplement than a corrective to Cayley's, who in his book intertwines the theological with the social, political, and philosophical with considerable subtlety and sensitivity, placing specific, positive emphasis on points of ambivalence and contradiction.<sup>9</sup> Illich frequently claimed not to speak as a theologian; as Cayley points out, this is a claim that raises ambiguities, which to some extent "[turn] on whether one takes theology to refer to any words about God or only the authoritative pronouncements of authorized theologians".<sup>10</sup> It has also given rise to charges of disingenuousness and dissimulation on Illich's part, or (less alarmingly) a regrettable lack of lucidity.<sup>11</sup> Attending to the indirect form the theological takes in Illich can help avoid such misunderstandings, because it allows the reader to grasp the ambiguities at play in his work without needing to resolve them. As we shall see, when it comes to how Illich deals with the theological, the ambiguities, knots, and tensions do themselves prove peculiarly fruitful.

## **I. Preamble: Form and Content in Illich**

It is helpful to begin with some general remarks on form and content. Why and how does form matter for the task of interpretation? On this, Martha Nussbaum has written

8 This reading of surprise goes further than Cayley's in the direction of a theological and metaphysical account of nature and grace (Cayley explores surprise via the theme of the messianic in Agamben and Benjamin, which I also mention in passing).

9 Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 446-441; 467-468 (and *passim*).

10 Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 89; cf. 430-434.

11 See Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 122 and 430 (we deal directly with Todd Hartch in section III).

as follows:

Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.<sup>12</sup>

The bifurcation of form and content that Nussbaum rejects here, in which the form in which ideas are expressed is treated as separate from the ideas themselves, is sometimes uncritically assumed in modern ways of reading texts (in much of the analytic tradition, perhaps). It is characteristic of a dualistic aesthetics, utilitarian in the sense that means and ends are separated because form and style are instrumentalised, becoming merely a means of packaging up or embroidering ideas to achieve a certain effect. Form is from this perspective incidental for meaning. One can readily decode the meaning of a poem into linear prose, say, or conceive a novel merely as a vehicle for depicting a certain set of predetermined political or social values in emotionally affecting ways. Nussbaum's position, in contrast, is that content is in a sense *always-already* formal; the way in which something is said, its style and genre, is part of what it says. Mikhail Bakhtin, commenting on the open-ended, polyphonic character of Dostoevsky's novels, wrote that, "Artistic form, correctly understood, does not shape already prepared and found content, but rather permits content to be found and seen for the first time".<sup>13</sup> Nussbaum is of like mind, and therefore continues:

...this suggests, too, that there may be some views of the

12 Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

13 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 43. Bakhtin's argument here can be read as an indirect critique of Socialist Realism.

world and how one should live in it--views, especially, that emphasize the world's surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty--that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder--but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars. Not perhaps, either, in the expository structure conventional to philosophy, which sets out to establish something and then does so, without surprise, without incident--but only in a form that itself implies that life contains significant surprises...<sup>14</sup>

Nussbaum's focus in the above is on the philosophical significance of literature, but her observations explain generally how form is bound up with meaning, and how particular sorts of meaning are inseparable from certain modes of expression (in a way that cannot be 'decoded' or fully expressed otherwise, though much can of course be said *about* them).

There is already a hint here of why this perspective might be relevant for reading Illich in Nussbaum's reference to surprise, mystery, and attentiveness to particulars, all of which are central concerns of his. It is at least conceivable, noting the above, that some of the features of Illich's body of work that have made it difficult to interpret – such as its non-systematicity or fragmentariness – might be connected with his concern for surprise and mystery. Simply being attentive to this kind of possibility will change the way in which we approach his work. For example, in one essay, Carl Mitcham notes how Illich, “despite fervent views across a complex spectrum of issues, nevertheless often chooses to speak elliptically and circuitously”, and adds that in many of Illich's

14 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 3.

“highly compact” publications, the “extended development of a position is replaced largely by anecdote and allusion”.<sup>15</sup> Faced with this apparent difficulty, it can be a temptation for a commentator to want to give Illich’s ideas a more systematic or organised presentation, one that will fill in the gaps and tie up the loose ends (as Mitcham then attempts with his own five-fold thematization).<sup>16</sup> While a more systematic presentation may not always be a mistake, there is a risk that one elides the significance of the form and style itself in reformulating Illich’s work in this manner. One assumes the form and style are accidental and inconsequential, for example. In his essay, Mitcham does not consider how the elliptical, anecdotal, allusive style of Illich’s work might be relevant to its interpretation; how its ‘medium’ bears upon its ‘message’.

The fact that Illich did not write novels or poetry (specifically ‘literary’ styles) is not the point here. Philosophers – and here I am agreeing with Agamben’s suggestion that Illich’s work is “genuinely philosophical” – have often used form and style in ways that bear heavily on the interpretation of their ideas, from Plato up to Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, or Adorno.<sup>17</sup> This is true as well of the monastic tradition that we know contributed to Illich’s own intellectu-

15 Carl Mitcham, “The Challenges of this Collection”, in Hoinacki and Mitcham (eds), *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*, 13-15.

16 Mitcham, “Challenges”, 15-18.

17 “If philosophy necessarily implies an interrogation of the humanity and in-humanity of man, then his investigation, as it confronts the fate of humankind in a decisive moment of its history, is genuinely philosophical – and so is his method, ‘archaeology’, which he develops autonomously from Foucault” (Agamben, introduction, §1). Illich’s work is also philosophical in the sense that it amounts to an extended reflection on the nature of the ‘good life’, and what he sometimes calls the ‘art of living’. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso, 2014); Miles Hollingworth, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

al formation: one's entire interpretation of the role and purpose of Anselm's so-called 'ontological' argument in the *Proslogion* can rest on the significance one places on the form of the text as a prayer and spiritual exercise.<sup>18</sup> David Cayley has noted how Illich was formed in the theological milieu of *ressourcement*.<sup>19</sup> One of the key figures in that movement, Henri de Lubac, explains his preference for a fragmentary style in *Paradoxes of Faith* as follows:

If the expression of a thought is inevitably partial, in the sense that it is incomplete, its elaboration in connected discourse may sometimes mislead and make it appear partial in the other sense of the word. It is hope that such a risk will in some measure be avoided by a fragmentary presentation. How can fragments be otherwise than incomplete?<sup>20</sup>

De Lubac had his own challenges with the Roman Catholic hierarchy over the course of his life, and his theological imaginary does, I think, resonate with Illich's in important ways (including with respect to paradox and faith and the relation between nature and grace, themes explored below). The quotation above gives one brief explanation as to why more modest and perhaps interpretively difficult forms might, for considered theological and philosophical reasons, be preferred over a drive for absolute clarity in systematic prose; namely, that one's work not be misread as a totalising system, but instead express the provisional and unfinished nature of

18 Regarding Anselm, one can compare an analytic, 'rationalist' interpretation of the ontological argument with that of Karl Barth and perhaps most convincingly that of someone like Marilyn McCord Adams, "Praying the Proslogion: Anselm's Theological Method," 13-39 in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. Thomas D. Senor (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). See further below for the monastic resonances in Illich.

19 Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 64-65.

20 de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 7.

any search for and statement of truth.

There are a range of formal characteristics in Illich's work that merit extended reflection in this context. Given Illich's own emphasis on, for example, particularity, it would make sense for him to resist any kind of universalising drift in his own writings. Deploying elliptical formulations, anecdote, and allusion, as Mitcham outlined above, would all contribute to that. Others include the *ad hoc* and occasional character of many of his publications – the fact they issued from specific invitations, collaborations, personal or cultural moments – or their open-endedness, including in Illich's explicit reluctance, especially in later writings, to offer definitive 'answers' to the social, cultural, existential problems his critiques brought to light.<sup>21</sup> An exhaustive analysis is well beyond the remit of this essay, and in what follows, I focus on Illich's theological indirectness. By 'theological indirectness' I mean both Illich's renunciation of direct theological speech – that is, his refusal after a certain point in his life to develop theological ideas in explicitly theological terms – as well as his tendency to gesture to theological themes obliquely while addressing other topics. A specific example will help to illustrate what I mean by this.<sup>22</sup>

Illich's 1988 book written with Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*, is explicitly about changes in perception that resulted from the development of alphabetised language, the book, and growth in public literacy. It deals in particular with the historical transition from oral to written cultures. Obliquely and in fragments, however, *ABC* also draws attention to a contemporary shift from writ-

21 The last line of *The Rivers North of the Future* is, "I hope nobody takes what I said for answers" (Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich, as Told to David Cayley*, w/David Cayley [Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005], 229). See also Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (London: Marion Boyars, 1988), ix-x; Illich, *Gender*, 179; and there are other examples of different kinds. See also Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 431: "he refused to prescribe for society generally".

22 Illich himself lists some others in "Philosophy... Artifacts... Friendship", 62-63.

ten culture to one of information systems. The apparent subtext is the impact of this shift, in language and the popular imaginary, on social relations. As the book draws to a close, Illich and Sanders warn in this regard of ways of perceiving that reduce “an encounter with another person into an exchange of information between two elements of a system”.<sup>23</sup> In the postscript, they discuss different senses of the personal pronoun ‘we’, and explore the notion of a contemporary “analytic we”, which is abstract, depersonalised, and devoid of specificity.<sup>24</sup> With this in the background, in the last line of the book, Illich and Sanders raise directly for the first time the theme of friendship, and convey their hope that the space of friendship may remain open in an age of systems and the ‘analytic we’.<sup>25</sup> In a note beneath, the reader is referred for a definition of friendship to the book’s epigraph, which is a letter of the twelfth century theologian Hugh of St Victor, left untranslated in Latin and undiscussed in the main text, on the subject of *caritas* (love/charity).<sup>26</sup> The attentive reader is left with the impression that this book about the cultural history of writing and literacy has been gesturing all along at questions about human relationality and the loss of the personal in the present day, and moreover that these latter themes are theologically inflected. One cannot, however, be sure about the details: Illich and Sanders leave them merely as gestures.

We will return to *ABC* below, but in cases like this, it is tempting simply to try to render Illich’s meaning (theological or otherwise) in plainer terms. However, if the meaningfulness of the elliptical style itself, and its relevance for Illich’s

23 Illich and Sanders, *ABC*, 114-115.

24 Illich and Sanders, *ABC*, 120-127.

25 Illich and Sanders, *ABC*, 127.

26 The passage is later included, with translation, in Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 26n53.

ideas, is overlooked in this process, then something important will inevitably be lost. To understand why we must look more closely at Illich's way of dealing with the theological.

## II. Reading Illich theologically: An interpretive paradox

Illich's attitude to theological discourse is rendered complex by his biography. For much of his life, and partly in response to his strained relations with the Catholic hierarchy, Illich deliberately veiled this dimension of his thinking. In the late-1960s, while still an active priest, Illich was called to the Vatican to answer certain questionable charges made against him arising from his activities in Latin America. At the time, he refused to defend himself, and although no formal punishment ensued, he subsequently renounced his priestly ministry and from then on largely refrained from direct theological speech.<sup>27</sup> As he says in 1996, "I did not want to be taken for a proselytizer, a fundamentalist -- or worse", he adds sarcastically, "a Catholic theologian; I do not have that mission".<sup>28</sup> Even in later works, in which he refers openly to Christianity's role in shaping Western modernity, he insists that he speaks as an historian, albeit also a believer, rather than as a theologian.<sup>29</sup> David Cayley handles this well in his recent book, criticising in particular the notion that Illich was somehow disingenuous in the way he dealt with theological matters. He did not "write in secret ciphers", Cayley argues, and insofar as he sometimes shrouded his 'ultimate motive', "this expressed only discretion not deception".<sup>30</sup> I agree, but want to add further subtlety to Cayley's account, by exploring how the indi-

27 See Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 73-93; Francine du Plessix Gray, *Divine Disobedience: Profiles in Catholic Radicalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 231-321.

28 Illich, "Philosophy... Artifacts... Friendship", 63.

29 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 48; Ivan Illich, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, w/David Cayley (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1992), 242; and see below.

30 Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 430-432.

rect form theology takes in his work is meaningful in itself and in ways that resonate with ideas that he did express more explicitly.

An unusually candid statement of Illich's to this effect occurs in an interview with Jean-Marie Domenach in 1972 for French television. Domenach notes that Illich has not "mentioned the name of Christ", and asks, "Is that on purpose?" Illich replies:

Well, you see, I don't like to speak about my friends in a superficial way. And, to take it one step further, I think that nowadays, people tend to use the name of God in vain, usually to justify something. *I would rather make it known that I love him without talking about it.* It's almost impossible to do that these days without getting trapped in very dangerous ambiguities.<sup>31</sup>

Cryptic as this comment remains, it is one of Illich's clearest admissions that his unwillingness to speak in overtly theological terms had a specifically theological rationale: to resist using the name of God as a means of justification, which he implies would be a kind of blasphemy (or misappropriation of divine power). Illich was well aware that he could make known his faith or devotion without being explicit about it, and this was to be his preferred path: "I would rather make it known that I love him without talking about it".

We can develop this thought further with reference to one of Illich's conversations with David Cayley, in which Cayley raises Lee Hoinacki's suggestion (to which we return below) that Illich might be "doing theology in a new way". Cayley points out that Illich describes himself conspicuously as an historian rather than a theologian, and Illich responds

31 Ivan Illich, "Un Certain Regard: Ivan Illich", w/Jean-Marie Domenach, television interview (RTF, Paris, 1972), <http://vimeo.com/66948476>, unpagged. Transcript trans. Clarke Mackey and Marty Kent. My emphasis.

with a comment about authority: if he were speaking as a theologian, he says, he would “start from revelation which you must accept before you can follow me”.<sup>32</sup> The conversation continues:

CAYLEY: So the position of the historian is part of your embraced powerlessness.

ILLICH: Yes! That you got right!

CAYLEY: It seems to me that in a way, your work is a form of iconoclasm, a form of image-breaking that clears the way for surprise and for mystery.

ILLICH: For mystery and what in the Old Testament tradition we call the attempt to walk beneath his nose. *In facie tua...*

CAYLEY: I don't know the phrase. Beneath the nose of God?

ILLICH: Yes, beneath the nose of God. God has a nose as big as mine, seemingly...<sup>33</sup>

In giving up direct theological speech, then, Illich was distancing himself from a particular kind of institutional authority but doing so precisely in order to nurture the kind of openness to surprise and mystery that he regarded as a necessary feature of the life of faith, or the attempt to ‘walk beneath the nose of God.’ In other words, he demurs from speaking theologically in order, paradoxically, to make room for God.

The position just summarised implies that, for Illich, direct theological speech might to some extent be antithetical to that openness to surprise and mystery that he regard-

32 Illich, *In Conversation*, 241. Cf. “For thirty years I have declined to speak as a theologian because, in the Roman Catholic Church’s more recent tradition, one thereby claims an institutional authority” (Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 48). For a useful sense of what might be meant by ‘mystery’ here, not simply as the unexplored or unknown, but as luminous, inexplorable enigma, see de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 60-61.

33 Illich, *In Conversation*, 242. Cf. Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 431.

ed as essential to faith, which is to say an obstacle ultimately to the experience of God. This is an important reason for thinking through the significance of the indirect form of the theological in his work, because evidently, it was neither accidental nor incidental. Considered together with his cryptic remarks to Domenach, it seems that Illich understood well the risks inherent in theological discourse, in the sense of it being potentially a rather dubious and indeed dangerous exercise. Silence, the refusal of theological speech, can be pregnant with meaning in this context, especially bearing in mind Illich's own biography.<sup>34</sup>

In one place Illich associates his posture of embraced powerlessness with an old ascetical Christian saying, to be "nakedly following the naked Christ".<sup>35</sup> This saying has its origin in St Jerome and signifies an acceptance of human fragility and refusal of earthly power for the sake of trust in God, in imitation of Jesus of Nazareth. The connection between Illich and Jerome has been explored in a short essay by Domenico Farias.<sup>36</sup> Therein, Farias links the shape of Illich's life and work with a longer passage from Jerome that concludes with John 12:24, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit".<sup>37</sup> I agree with Farias that this verse is key to understanding Illich, and specifically the paradoxical way he dealt with the theological after his disputes with the Vatican: that in giving it up, it would return many times over. The movement, as Farias rightly identifies, is of that which "saves

34 Illich wrote early on about the 'eloquence of silence' (Ivan Illich, *Celebration of Awareness: A Call to Institutional Revolution* [London: Calder and Boyars, 1971], 41-52).

35 Illich, *In Conversation*, 283.

36 Domenico Farias, "In the Shadow of Jerome", in Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham (eds.), *The Challenges of Ivan Illich* (Albany: SUNY Press 2002), 59-70.

37 Farias, "Shadow of Jerome", 65-66.

itself by appearing to lose itself”<sup>38</sup> The point of this for reading Illich is that his work does not need to be made ‘explicitly’ theological as some (below) have proposed; rather, it must be read in and through its theologically indirect form for its theological meaning to resonate in its full paradoxicality, reflecting this cardinal paradox of faith.<sup>39</sup> In short, in Illich, the theological returns as it is given up.

To begin to fathom the theological depth of Illich’s work, therefore, one must attend to the indirect form the theological takes. The fruit this yields will become more apparent towards the end of this essay, but it demands a different order of attention from the reader, one less concerned with how to make his work instrumentally useful, whether for building a social programme, a critical theory, or indeed a theological or philosophical system. To appreciate the difference of this approach, it will help to contrast it with another method for dealing with the theological in Illich, first proposed by Lee Hoinacki.

### III. Misreadings

A question lurking in the background of this essay so far is to what extent it is the task of the interpreter to render Illich’s ideas in explicitly theological terms. Here, I have in mind a specific response to Illich’s work first proposed by his friend,

38 Farias, “Shadow of Jerome”, 59.

39 This paradoxical movement of faith is given famous expression by Johannes de Silentio (Søren Kierkegaard) in *Fear and Trembling*. Here, for the ‘knight of faith’, renunciation is merely the staging post for non-identical return, by virtue of the absurd: “By faith I do not renounce anything; on the contrary, by faith I receive everything exactly in the sense in which it is said that one who has faith like a mustard seed can move mountains. ...By faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac, but by faith Abraham received Isaac. By virtue of resignation, that rich young man should have given away everything, but if he had done so, then the knight of faith would have said to him: By virtue of the absurd, you will get every penny back again – believe it!” (Søren Kierkegaard [Johannes de Silentio], “Fear and Trembling”, in *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1983], 48-49).

Lee Hoinacki, and drawn on more recently by Todd Hartch. Hoinacki held that Illich was doing theology in a ‘new way’, which he considered a kind of apophatic or negative mode.<sup>40</sup> He writes,

In the books and articles published after 1970, Illich proceeded in an apophatic mode out of which he gradually emerged toward the end of his life... Illich wrote as a theologian...his books were really apophatic explorations about God, the Church, and the believer’s movement toward God.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, *Deschooling Society* is described by way of example as “principally a theological study of the Christian life, not a sociological analysis of schools”.<sup>42</sup> To read Illich as an apophatic theologian, according to Hoinacki, is to claim that when he was writing about, say, schools, he was only doing so on a surface level; he was really, underneath this, concerned with God and with faith. “Ignorant of this perspective”, Hoinacki writes, “a reader can achieve only a superficial understanding of Illich’s writings”.<sup>43</sup> The idea that there is some kind of secret religious message in Illich’s work has been adopted by Todd Hartch who, following Hoinacki, claims that Illich “obscured his apophatic writings by using social and political critique as a sort of code”, describing this as a kind of “camouflage” that concealed a “hidden purpose”.<sup>44</sup> By implication, on this view

40 Apophaticism is that form of theology that speaks of God only via negation, or by saying what God is not.

41 Lee Hoinacki, “The Trajectory of Ivan Illich”, *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 23 (2003), 384-5.

42 Hoinacki, “Trajectory”, 385.

43 Hoinacki, “Trajectory”, 384.

44 Todd Hartch, *The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 146-157. Hartch briefly approaches a better framing of this issue when discussing some comments of James Morton, but his ex-

a fulsome theological reading of Illich would literally consist in a process of decryption or decoding, which would displace the 'superficial', 'secular' content of his work for the sake of the 'real', 'religious' content.

It is important to acknowledge that Hoinacki and Hartch are wrestling with an issue of some subtlety here, but there are at least two major related problems with their framing of it. The first is that it fundamentally misrepresents the apophatic tradition in Christian theology and the metaphysical principles from which it draws its sense. Apophaticism has simply never been about encoded or camouflaged theology, such that one's reflections appear to be about one topic but with a concealed religious message. In Pseudo-Dionysius, for example, by confessing that God is *not* like any finite thing, the apophatic or negative mode is a way of affirming the absolute ontological difference between God and the created order, while also acknowledging the paradox that God may to some extent be spoken about indirectly through all finite things, because all finite things are held in being God as their cause.<sup>45</sup> Illich's own reflections on creation and contingency in *Rivers North of the Future* indicate that he was familiar with the metaphysical framework behind this.<sup>46</sup> Among other things, apophaticism provides a helpful example of where theolog-

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planation is generally muddled, and as Cayley says comes close to accusing Illich of an "inept and clouded esotericism that confused even his friends", an account which I agree is "partial, obtuse, and strangely unsympathetic" (Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 430).

45 "...as for the Super-Essence of the Supreme Godhead... it is not lawful to any lover of that Truth which is above all truth to celebrate It as Reason or Power or Mind or Life or Being, but rather as most utterly surpassing all condition, movement, life, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, thought, conception, being, rest, dwelling, union, limit, infinity, everything that exists. And yet since, as the Subsistence of goodness, It, by the very fact of Its existence, is the Cause of all things, in celebrating the bountiful Providence of the Supreme Godhead we must draw upon the whole creation... Conscious of this, the Sacred Writers celebrate It by every Name while yet they call It Nameless" (Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, trans. C.E. Rolt [Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004], 185; 60-61).

46 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 64-79.

ical 'content' is very evidently formal, given that one cannot develop a negative theology except in the negative mode. It is precisely this intertwining of form and content that is lost in Hoinacki and Hartch's emphasis on theological codes, since the point of decoding is to dispense with the original form by deciphering the meaningful content hidden within.

This leads to a second, connected point: Hoinacki and Hartch's approach also neglects the intrinsic significance of Illich's *own* mode of theological indirectness which, as suggested above, 'speaks' paradoxically to his posture of embraced powerlessness as an expression of faith anchored in an openness to surprise and mystery. The point is not that many of Illich's writings are superficially 'secular' and could be rewritten in an explicit theological idiom, but that the indirect theological form is itself theologically disclosive. To put it another way, something like a literary rather than technological hermeneutic is needed. Moreover, it is itself entirely consistent with the apophatic tradition properly understood that Illich could write about all manner of things and *still all the same* be talking about God, without one ever needing to displace the original content, because the apophatic tradition teaches that God can be spoken about indirectly through all finite things. This is something Illich would have well understood given the extent of his own theological education and his familiarity and indeed affinity with medieval monastic thought especially.<sup>47</sup> It brings the argument full circle in the sense that we can therefore say that Illich's way of dealing with the theological *is* consistent with apophaticism, and *for that reason* his work does not need to be theologically decoded, but its theological sense only (if anything) elaborated upon. This has nothing to do with Illich having been disingenuous; it is an entirely con-

47 Most fulsomely expressed perhaps in his book on Hugh of St Victor's *Didascalicon*, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, but also in many places in *Ivan Illich in Conversation* and *Rivers North of the Future*.

sistent way of dealing with theological matters, which aligns with an important, albeit subtle and easily misunderstood, trajectory of thinking within the Christian tradition.

In grasping these principles, it can become clearer how Illich's theological indirectness, and the theological commitments that lie behind it, reinforce rather than displace the social, political, and philosophical commitments that are more explicitly stated in his work. This interpretative approach therefore has the potential to reveal a much greater degree of unity in Illich's work than has typically been apparent, albeit that this unity emerges in and through – rather than in spite of – its somewhat oblique, open, and fragmentary form. I will demonstrate this by elaborating upon one central, consistent theme of his: the emphasis upon surprise, which is intertwined with his persistent concern for the interpersonal, and has deep theological resonance.

#### IV. On Surprise

##### *a. Mutuality and incarnation*

Despite its thematic and stylistic diversity, across his body of published writings Illich shows a consistent concern for the erosion of social bonds under the conditions of economic modernity. Whether writing of “society-wide obstacles to mutual presence”, of that which “isolates people from each other [and] undermines the texture of community”, or of conviviality, friendship, and the conditions for enhancing the ability “to tend and care and wait upon the other”, much of his thought revolves around the fate of the interpersonal in the modern era.<sup>48</sup> This is also for Illich clearly a theological issue: it has to do, as he said in a late paper, with “those char-

48 Ivan Illich, *Toward a History of Needs* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), xii; Ivan Illich, *Tools For Conviviality* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1975), 11; Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Marion Boyars, 2002), 116.

acteristics in contemporary artefacts that need to be faced fearlessly as issues of charity” – charity being conceived here not in its modern usage as unilateral philanthropic gesture but in its traditional Catholic sense as love and social bond.<sup>49</sup> He has sought, he says, to “dispel the illusion that power or organisation can ever enhance the practice of charity”.<sup>50</sup> This dovetails of course with his historical argument about the institutionalisation of charity: that the formalising, depersonalising, alienating, atomising pressures that to a large extent determine modern institutions have their ambiguous origins in the Church’s own much earlier attempts to give “this-worldly power, social visibility, and permanence to the performance of ortho-dox, right faith, and to the performance of Christian charity”.<sup>51</sup> Illich reads modernity as an “extension of Church history” in this sense.<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, insofar as Illich’s work is also, as described above, “a form of image-breaking that clears the way for surprise and for mystery”, and for the “attempt to walk beneath” the nose of God, it is also concerned (theologically) with how to practice conviviality and mutual presence in the here and now. In this regard, the fate of charity, the question of the *quality* of our social relations, is for Illich of urgent ethical and existential importance. This too is part of what it means to face contemporary artefacts “fearlessly as issues of charity”, and is what gives much of his work its distinctive sense of immediacy: “What can I do”, he asks in one place, “at this very moment, in the unique *hic et nunc*, here and now, in which I am? What can I do to get out of this world of need-satisfac-

49 Illich, “Philosophy... Artefacts... Friendship”, 63; Simon Ravenscroft, “Modernity and the Economics of Gift and Charity: On Ivan Illich’s Critique of Abstract Philanthropy”, *Telos* 174 (2016), 167-168.

50 Illich, “Philosophy... Artefacts... Friendship”, 62.

51 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 179.

52 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 169.

tion... and feel free to hear, to sense, to intuit what the other wants from me...?”<sup>53</sup>

Why is the category of surprise so relevant in this context? For this, one has to appreciate the connection Illich draws between surprise, otherness, and personal relationality, informed by central features of the Christian theological imaginary. In a late interview with Majid Rahnema, Illich argues that “neither navel-gazing nor flight from the city” are appropriate responses to contemporary challenges, but “only a risky presence to the Other, together with openness to an absent loved third”; however, he warns that there is no possibility of achieving this “so long as the candle near our samovar stands for ‘everyone’”.<sup>54</sup> The personal, the particular, and the embodied are, in other words, essential. “The most destructive effect of development”, he goes on, “is its tendency to distract my eye from your face with the phantom, humanity, that I ought to love”. This ‘phantom’ is humanity reduced to a universalizable, predictable abstraction, for which “the I who experiences is replaced by an abstract point where many different statistical charts intersect”.<sup>55</sup> These remarks provide useful context for understanding one of Illich’s more programmatic statements in *The Rivers North of the Future*:

Only by taking the predictability out of the face of the other can I be surprised by him. And this is what I’ve tried to do. I’ve tried to encourage people to envision this possibility – even when I couldn’t talk to them explicitly

53 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 222.

54 Ivan Illich, “Twenty-Six Years Later: Ivan Illich in Conversation with Majid Rahnema”, in Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (eds), *The Post-Development Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 106. The practice of lighting a candle to represent the other (who may be Christ) when meeting with friends is something Illich seems to have borrowed from Aelred of Rievaulx (Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 150-151).

55 Illich, “Twenty-Six Years Later”, 106.

about who my model is.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, Illich understood his work as concerned with restoring a sense of surprise and mystery – we might say ‘wonder’ – to the embodied encounter with another person, by reinforcing the idea that in their uniqueness and particularity they are irreducible to any abstract characterisation.

His ‘model’, in the immediate context of the quotation, is the incarnate Christ. The incarnation, Illich says, is “something which to ordinary human reasoning is absurd”; as such, it “is a surprise, remains a surprise, and could not exist as anything else”.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, it “makes possible a surprising and entirely new flowering of love and knowledge”;<sup>58</sup> it can, in other words, be ‘prolonged’, for “just as God became flesh and in the flesh relates to each one of us”, he says, “so you are capable of relating in the flesh”.<sup>59</sup> This has to do with the possibility of seeing uniquely in anyone, regardless of *ethnos* or other categorisation, the “face of Christ”,<sup>60</sup> and each such meeting repeats differently or non-identically that archetypal surprise of the incarnation, which is to say that the incarnation is, as it were, gathered up into it. The experience of time here is not linear and homogenous but kairotic: to pilfer from Benjamin, every instant is “the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter”.<sup>61</sup> An essential feature of the “unimaginable and unpredictable horizon” that Illich calls faith, therefore, is a kind of disciplined openness to otherness, and a cul-

56 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 57.

57 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 57.

58 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 47-49.

59 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 207.

60 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 56.

61 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 255; cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom*, trans. Leland De La Durantaye (London: Seagull Books, 2012); Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 267-271.

tivated receptivity to surprise in the present moment.<sup>62</sup> Such a mode of attention necessarily includes a refusal to regard the other simply as a predictable instance of some generic, abstract ‘humanity’, and a critical attitude to institutional and technological modes of thinking and acting that would shape perception in the latter direction, and so become means by which we “distract ourselves from becoming fully present to those close enough to touch”.<sup>63</sup>

There is striking continuity between these later comments on surprise, the other, and the incarnation and some of Illich’s earliest theological remarks made while he was still a practising priest. In a piece from 1967 in which he appraises the role of the Church in relation to programmes of development, Illich comments, “the Christian wants to remain free to find through the gospel a dimension of effective surprise beyond and above the humanistic reason which motivated social action”.<sup>64</sup> This entails “faith in the other rather than prediction”.<sup>65</sup> The significance of the incarnation, in this context, is that it enables one to affirm “the autonomy of the ludicrous in the face of the useful, of the gratuitous as opposed to the purposeful, of the spontaneous as opposed to the rationalised and planned”.<sup>66</sup> “We cannot”, he says, “*plan* our way to humanity”.<sup>67</sup> Here we see how Illich’s theological emphasis upon surprise, even in this early work, opens out to a thorough-going social, political, and indeed philosophical attitude, in critical opposition to the ‘rationalist social planning’ that he

62 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 57. Cf. Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 406–407.

63 Illich, “Twenty-Six Years Later”, 106.

64 Ivan Illich, *The Powerless Church and Other Selected Writings: 1955–1985*, assembled Valentina Borremans and Sajay Samuel (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 138.

65 Illich, *Powerless Church*, 136.

66 Illich, *Powerless Church*, 139.

67 Illich, *Powerless Church*, 136.

associated with the development agenda. This 'ludicrous' posture (from *ludo*, to play) has, as Giorgio Agamben has recently highlighted, a distinct note of levity about it.<sup>68</sup> Here we might also recall Illich's description of his institute in Mexico around this same time as being "a free club for the search of surprise... where we are chiefly concerned with becoming humorists".<sup>69</sup> We will return to the theme of levity below in the conclusion.

What becomes ever clearer in Illich's later work, however, is that in a late-modern context this ludicrous openness to surprise in the present moment also demands a serious kind of *askesis*: "We have to engage in an asceticism", he says in one place, "that makes it possible to savour now-ness and here-ness – here is a place, here is that which is between us, as the Kingdom is... if we are to save what remains in us of a sense of meaning, of metaphor, of flesh, of touch, of gaze".<sup>70</sup> He says elsewhere, "By *askesis* I mean the acquisition of habits that foster contemplation. For the believer, contemplation means the conversion to God's human face".<sup>71</sup>

To revisit the question of form against this background, we can venture that Illich's giving up of direct theological speech – and indeed other related stylistic characteristics, such as his refusal to offer final 'answers' – constitute a kind of literary *askesis* for the keeping open of this readiness for surprise. By refusing to explicitly and exhaustively explicate itself, his work resists reduction to a totalising system, expresses the provisionality of its own project, and remains open to that which is not itself, to a future that he preferred to leave "in the hands of God", and to the

68 Giorgio Agamben, "Laughter and the Kingdom", foreword to Illich, *Powerless Church*, vii-xii.

69 Plessix Gray, *Divine Disobedience*, 282;

70 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 182.

71 Illich, "Philosophy... Artifacts... Friendship", 59.

activity and “extraordinary creativity” of his readers.<sup>72</sup> This indirect and open-ended style is oriented towards dialogue and mutuality, in other words, and against what we might call (after Bakhtin) the monological, authoritarian word that brooks no response and no exception, whether that be ecclesiastical and theological in character, or economic, scientific, political, or technological. With a book like *ABC* that we mentioned above, therefore, one can observe an essential coherence between its underlying concern for relationality and friendship, and its enigmatic and gestural form, including with respect to the theological. This is one reason why the question of form is so important in Illich, because his use of form and style can be read as consistent in generative ways with his central concerns. All of this, moreover, is something in which the reader in a certain sense participates. We might see this as an aspect of what Farias meant when, referring to the difficulty Illich presents for ordinary readers, he writes that they cannot escape “the labor and risks of a hermeneutic leap”.<sup>73</sup> If complete answers are not found in abstract form in Illich’s texts, then they must be found out in the world, in the embodied, lived encounter with another: one task of Illich’s readers is to grasp this point, else they fall into a “misplaced concreteness”.<sup>74</sup>

*b. Nature and grace*

We can develop the theological background to this little further, for insofar as the horizon of faith has to do, for Illich, with a readiness to be surprised by that which escapes our prior formulations and expectations, it draws obliquely

72 Illich, *In Conversation*, 217; 117.

73 Farias, “Shadows of Jerome”, 59.

74 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 178, 210; *In Conversation*, 287.

on a traditional Catholic conception of the world as contingent in gratuitous but non-arbitrary ways upon God.<sup>75</sup> In *The Rivers North of the Future*, Illich explains how, perceived within this frame, “The world which is around me, the cat over there and the four red roses which bloomed during the night are a gift, something which is a grace”.<sup>76</sup> Implicit in this quotation is a specific theological and metaphysical formulation of the relation between nature and grace, namely that grace is related to nature intrinsically rather than extrinsically. That is, grace does not impose itself upon nature arbitrarily from outside but rather is mysteriously manifest within it as the spark of the divine. From this perspective— and this is one place where Illich is close to Henri de Lubac —the supernatural is at the heart of the natural as that which is most real within it, holding it in existence; the extra-ordinary is at the heart of the ordinary.<sup>77</sup> Paradoxically, however, this ‘extra’ is not simply ‘given’ but can only be received as a surprising gift, as a grace. Faith entails a readiness to be surprised to encounter grace in the world in this way, through innumerable, seemingly mundane specificities, from which nothing is excluded as ‘merely’ or ‘purely’ natural, since all creation is graced. Illich knew all this: he speaks of the “aliveness” of nature when it is perceived as resting contingently in divine hands, linked “with the constant creative activity of God”.<sup>78</sup> These finite mediations are however always necessarily *indirect* encounters with the divine, since – as per the apophatic tradition above – divinity

75 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 64-70.

76 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 65.

77 For a good treatment of de Lubac on this point and the debate generally, see John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (London: SCM Press, 2005), especially 5-6.

78 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 69. Illich delineates a shift in the meaning of contingency after Aquinas in Franciscan theology towards arbitrariness and divine voluntarism, which helps to pave the way for modernity, an aspect of his historical narrative that shares ground with de Lubac, Milbank, and others.

is infinite and other and therefore ultimately *unlike* any finite thing, despite being bound up intimately with it, holding it in being. Illich argues that in its best expression contingency pertains to a realm of divine gratuity that is reducible neither to the arbitrariness of chance nor causal necessity.<sup>79</sup> One encounters divine grace in partial and enigmatic ways, then, and must simply be open to being surprised by it; one cannot force it into being or produce it by human power, nor specify it absolutely. This would be hubris.

Illich's focus on personal and particular encounters as at any moment being a surprising means of grace makes particular sense against this background. Illich comments on how in a Christian conception, the practice of virtue requires divine help, "God's help of grace", and that "any reasonable reader of the Gospel will understand that that help comes to me through the other who faces me".<sup>80</sup> As such, for Illich, "the neighbour, the stranger, the man on the road are reminders that our lives are enveloped by grace, that love, even salvation, is an event that appears unexpectedly".<sup>81</sup> We should add that it is not only in these occasional encounters, but also in the cultivation of the more persistent bonds of friendship and convivial community that this applies for Illich, given his strong emphasis on these. Indeed, his celebratory affirmation of human life is also best understood in this context: his call to "enjoy consciously, ritually, openly, the permission to be alive at this moment, with all our pains and with all our miseries", bears out his faith in the graced character of human

79 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 49.

80 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 95.

81 Eric Gregory and Leah Hunt-Hendrix, "Enfleshment and the Time of Ethics: Taylor and Illich on the Parable of the Good Samaritan", in Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen (eds), *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 235.

existence, with all its joys and sorrows.<sup>82</sup> Already in 1967 he had written that the significance of the incarnation was “an ability to say one great ‘Yes’ to the experience of life”.<sup>83</sup> Insofar as Illich advocates a kind of asceticism, therefore, we see that this is by no means puritanical or life-denying, but provides a framework precisely within which to celebrate life, beyond mere utilitarian usefulness; as he says, “a sense of being able to celebrate the present and celebrate it by *using* it as little as possible”.<sup>84</sup> What I have called Illich’s literary *askesis* is oriented towards this kind of openness to the present moment, too.

*c. Form and critique*

So much for the positive account of faith. There is of course the other side to this coin, suggested when Illich describes his call to celebrate the ‘permission to be alive at this moment’ as “an antidote to despair or religiosity – religiosity of that very evil kind”.<sup>85</sup> The corruption of Christianity that Illich regards as synonymous with the emergence of Western modernity has to do with the “decision to make faith into something that is subject to the power of the world”.<sup>86</sup> This is the story of the institutionalisation of charity most fully set out in *The Rivers North of the Future*, with all its apocalyptic overtones around the *mysterium iniquitatis*. If we return to Illich’s earlier conversation with Cayley quoted in section II above, though, we find Illich already describing how this per-

82 Illich, *In Conversation*, 284.

83 Illich, *Powerless Church*, 139. This chimes once again with the dynamics of faith as described in *Fear and Trembling*: “it takes a paradoxical and humble courage to grasp the whole temporal realm now by virtue of the absurd, and this is the courage of faith” (Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling”, 49).

84 Illich, *In Conversation*, 282–283. My emphasis.

85 Illich, *In Conversation*, 284.

86 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 57.

spective has informed his thinking:

my work is an attempt to accept with great sadness the fact of Western culture. Dawson has a passage where he says that the Church is Europe and Europe is the Church, and I say *yes! Corruptio optimi quae est pessima*. Through the attempt to insure, to guarantee, to regulate Revelation, the best becomes the worst.<sup>87</sup>

He is left “with a sense of profound ambiguity”:

I cannot do without tradition, but I have to recognise that its institutionalisation is the root of an evil deeper than any evil I could have known with my unaided eyes and mind. This is what I would call the West. By studying and accepting the West as the perversion of Revelation, I become increasingly tentative, but also more curious and totally engaged in searching for its origin, which is the voice of him who speaks.<sup>88</sup>

We should remember that Illich articulates this in the context of his explanation as to why he takes the position of an historian rather than of a theologian, even while continuing to search for ‘the voice of him who speaks’. For Illich, the seemingly benevolent but depersonalising and brutalising structures of modern society are rooted in a corruption of, a kind of unfaithfulness to, Christian ideals that began in the Church, in the attempt to make faith and charity subject to ‘the power of the world’. His refusal of direct theological speech is part of his renunciation and critique of this claim to power and control.

In his interview with Jean-Marie Domenach in 1972, Illich remarks gnomically that, “Present-day institutions, and

87 Illich, *In Conversation*, 242. His emphasis.

88 Illich, *In Conversation*, 242-243.

even the Church, are trying to *produce grace*, whereas they should be tables around which we can find each other, in a mysterious way”.<sup>89</sup> The meaning of this becomes clearer in light of our reflections above, for if divine grace is abroad within the world, but always mediated in unexpected, mysterious, and irreducibly specific ways, then at the same time it cannot be grasped *as such*, in direct or exhaustive fashion. As that which must be received as a surprising gift, grace cannot be made subject to merely finite modes of power, it cannot be ‘produced’ through a predictable process of which the end result is a causal necessity. This is the difference between grace as Illich understands it, as manifest within nature, but always mysteriously so, and grace as an extrinsic addition, wherein it can appear as a “purely nominal change in status by the decree of an arbitrary God mediated by the power structure of a church... the mask for mere worldly ecclesiastical dominion”.<sup>90</sup> It is this claim to worldly ‘dominion’ – a claim essentially to a monopoly over the operations of the divine within the world – that Illich rejects.

Illich’s overarching narrative of the institutionalisation of charity has everything to do with the hubristic belief that grace and charity can be exhaustively *administered*, as opposed to the traditional idea, consequent upon an intrinsic conception of nature and grace, that “*wherever* love and mercy are shown, there divine charity is present”.<sup>91</sup> The latter rather than the former makes necessary the waiting upon the other, the ‘universal’ attentiveness to specifics and particulars, that are such primary themes in Illich’s various writings. For Illich, as an institution intent on ‘producing’ grace, the Roman Church has been guilty of the same propensity to fetish-

89 Illich, “*Un Certain Regard*”, unpagged. My emphasis.

90 Milbank, *Suspended Middle*, 22.

91 Milbank, *Suspended Middle*, 22. His emphasis.

ise organisation and formal process as its 'secular' progeny, resulting in a perversion of faith, its fall into something juridical and depersonalised.<sup>92</sup> Illich's theological indirectness – an outcome of his personal conflicts with the Roman hierarchy, and explicitly associated by him with his renunciation of ecclesiastical power – is part of his response to this complex problem. The elliptical form discloses the substantive theological point that divine grace and charity, though abroad within the world, are never approached directly or grasped *in toto*. One cannot 'produce' these gifts, and if they are to be encountered, then this will be by indirect means, as mediated mysteriously through innumerable particulars, and received by way of surprise. In refusing to bring forth the theological directly, his work paradoxically lies open to its unforced and gratuitous appearing: saving itself by appearing to lose itself. It therefore contributes to that openness to finding the divine in unexpected places that for Illich is the essence of faith, but which is stifled by the mistaken notion that a regulated process can substitute for this "spiritual substance".<sup>93</sup>

### Conclusion: Levity and the Art of Living

This essay has sought to bring a different order of attention to bear on Illich's work by attending to its form and style, and thereby to say something distinctive about the place of theology in the thought of a man as deeply traditioned as Illich was. The Pauline phrase that is repeated throughout Hugh of St Victor's untranslated letter at the front of *ABC*, is *Charitas nunquam excidit*, or 'Charity never ends'. In the tradition from which Illich draws, here, grace and charity are a divine plenitude. This means they are not a scarce resource to be mastered and manipulated by human hands. To assert any

92 Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 59-63, 80-94.

93 Ivan Illich, "The Cultivation of Conspiracy", in Hoinacki and Mitcham (eds), *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*, 241.

kind of monopoly over or totalising knowledge of the workings of grace and charity is therefore to risk a kind of idolatry, to deify humanity.<sup>94</sup>

For Illich, this has an ecclesiastical manifestation, but also a 'secularised' one; to repeat his remark to Domenach, "Present-day institutions, and even the Church, are trying to *produce grace*, whereas they should be tables around which we can find each other, in a mysterious way". In such a context, Illich calls us to relinquish our pretensions to control and mastery, in order to cultivate a disciplined openness to the surprising and the unexpected within this graced world. This issues in a different mode of attention: somewhat ludic or playful insofar as it demands that one's settled sense of things be held continually in question, as it is only then that one can be receptive to the enigmatic presence of divine otherness within ordinary reality as surprise and mystery. "We should be looking to the message of the gospel", he says, "for inspiration, for courage, a sense of humour, a sense of the relativity of things... the fear of God".<sup>95</sup> Elsewhere, he indicates that what the gospel contributes is like the laughter in the joke.<sup>96</sup> The practiced openness to otherness for which Illich calls therefore carries with it a sense of lightness and play, rather than the heaviness of an austere kind of piety. Any code, including any ecclesiastical code, that asserts simply how the world

94 Illich refers to the risk of "depersonalization by idolatry" in *Powerless Church*, 136.

95 Illich, "*Un Certain Regard*", unpagged. He says shortly afterwards that the 'fear of God'; here, is the "friendly fear... [of] not wanting anything to come between us".

96 Illich, *Powerless Church*, 136. The relevance of humour for critical perception is evident fairly widely in Illich; early on, he argues that "real revolutionaries are men who look with a deep sense of humour, with sarcasm, upon their institutions" (in Plessix Gray, *Divine Disobedience*, 274), and writes in *Tools for Conviviality* that, "Poets and clowns have always risen up against the oppression of creative thought by dogma. They expose literal-mindedness with metaphor. They demonstrate the follies of seriousness in a framework of humour" (*Tools for Conviviality*, 75). See also his reference to the virtue of *eutrapelia*, drawing on the Jesuit theologian Hugo Rahner's work on play, in *Tools for Conviviality* (13).

predictably is, must be rigorously avoided, as then there are no more surprises. Ultimately, this is about a way of being in the present, then, and celebrating it with others: an art of living. As Agamben comments, “for Illich, the experience of the event of the Kingdom...fully coincides with the present moment, in which the one who understands the message bears witness to it by laughing”.<sup>97</sup> Illich’s indirect way of dealing with the theological is intertwined with this outlook, forming part of his ‘iconoclastic’ response to a “world immune to grace”, as he describes the closed circuits of late-modern existence at one point.<sup>98</sup> It contributes to an openness to the divine beyond juridical formulas—grace and charity as mysteriously *an-archic*, unconstrained by all-too-human laws.

Other stylistic characteristics of his work that I have not had room to explore in as much detail here are similarly significant. Its unfinished, elliptical, fragmentary, *ad hoc* character—aspects that often make its interpretation difficult—are all ways in which his work remains *open*, rather than at risk of becoming its own kind of closed circuit, its own absolutizing or totalising system, or something that might substitute for that practiced readiness for surprise that he hoped to encourage. In large part, Illich’s thought is centrally concerned with processes of social mediation, in the sense of the relation of the interpersonal to the organised and to formal structures of power; by mediating differently, his work contributes to the undoing of over-organisation in modernity for the sake of the interpersonal, for the sake of friendship and charity.

97 Agamben, “Laughter and the Kingdom”, xii. Cf. Cayley, *Ivan Illich*, 406-407.

98 Cited by Cayley in Illich, *Rivers North of the Future*, 225.

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