

An Unlit Candle

by Sajay Samuel

Ivan Illich: an Intellectual Journey is an astonishing book. From the first of over five-hundred pages of text and notes, the writing is limpid, learned without being academic, and engaging because Cayley brings a journalist's discerning eye for detail to his subject. Cayley situates Illich's ideas and books within their political, social, and cultural contexts. For instance, he points out that Illich proposed *Gender* as a heuristic device to radically rethink economics and was rewarded by being canceled by feminist academics who appropriated his term without grasping the concept. Cayley's book is packed with finely crafted sentences that deliver sharp insights. In discussing how Illich's concept of shadow work upends both Marxist and Neoclassical economic sciences, Cayley writes, 'the true universal class is the shadow workers — all those who toil 'unproductively' in the shadow of production' (p.189). A more succinct rebuke of years of misguided economic ideology would be hard to find. Cayley ably connects Illich's thought to a panoply of relevant thinkers from Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa to Wendell Berry and Catherine Pickstock and to intellectual currents from existentialism and environmentalism to third world Development and scientism. Embracing Illich's claim that biographies are impossible and indecent, Cayley nevertheless weaves an *intellectual journey* that unites Ivan the man with Illich the thinker. To have pulled off this feat with tasteful discretion is an appropriate gift of a friend to a pilgrim. For all these reasons and the one mentioned next, this book will remain the

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standard guide to Ivan Illich for years to come.

Intellectual Journey is both similar and distinct from Cayley's earlier writings on Illich. His introductions to *Ivan Illich in Conversation and Rivers North of the Future* rehearsed in broad strokes the arc of Illich's life and thought. This book is different not only because of its detailed consideration of the entirety of Illich's *oeuvre*, but also because Cayley concludes it with his incisive interpretation of Illich's thought. George Steiner once remarked that no work can be read without the commentary that prepares the way. When the commentator is David Cayley, it behooves those interested to pay close attention.

Encouraged by Heidegger's claim that 'every thinker thinks only one thought', Cayley proposes 'complementarity' as Illich's one thought (p.451). On the surface such a proposal appears unreasonable. The term complementarity makes its appearance in *Gender* and almost completely sinks out of view after that book. One or two passing references to complementarity occur in later speeches and texts—Cayley points one out when quoting Illich on the 'complementarity between critical and ascetical learning' from his 1989 reflections on *askesis* (p.303). But why should a term that is at the center of only one book be the master key to unlock the entirety of Illich's thought? Cayley anticipates this objection when he says that 'balance, proportion, boundary, limit, nemesis, threshold, and watershed are all terms that denote aspects of this "one thought"' (p.451). It is true that balance, limit, and nemesis are featured in many of Illich's earlier works, such as *Tools for Conviviality* and *Limits to Medicine* among others, while proportion and proportionality are only fleshed out in his 1994 lecture on *The Wisdom of Leopold Kohr* prepared in collaboration with Matthias Rieger. Yet this characterization invites further questions that are not fully dispelled by Cayley's effort to elucidate the relation between complementarity

and these terms (p.451-453). For instance, is proportionality an aspect of complementarity or are these terms synonyms (cf, p.412)? Cayley also anticipates what may seem hair-splitting by admitting that his proposal to treat complementarity as Illich's one thought is provisional (p.464). Accordingly, I follow Cayley's provisional discovery of 'Illich as a philosopher of complementarity' (p.450) to find where it leads.

Cayley presents complementarity as comprising three distinct but related facets. First, complementarity refers to '... the duality or doubleness that constitutes being-in-the-world' (p.450) or '...the condition of the world's existence and each thing [as] defined and sustained by its opposite...' (p.411). Nothing is self-sufficient because everything is constituted by its contrary or opposite— above and below, inside and outside, black and white, front and back. Second, awareness of this double-sided nature of reality entails being aware of the one-sided nature of all knowledge. As Cayley argues at length against the pretensions of Science, this aspect of complementarity requires accepting that complete knowledge of the whole is a human impossibility. Accordingly, awareness that opposites or contradictions constitute being-in-the-world does not dissolve them, except for such mystics as the Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezeritch for whom 'everything is revealed as its opposite' (p.236) and Nicholas of Cusa for whom God appears to us '...as a *coincidentia oppositorum*' (p.438). The third aspect of complementarity refers to the manner of conducting oneself in the awareness of the complementary nature of reality. Cayley says that complementarity not only 'forms the unifying foundation of Illich's work' (p.459) but also informs the way Illich lived. Illich walked the watershed from which the profoundly different and even contradictory opposites that appear nevertheless conjoined are perceived as such. To maintain this stance of the keeping to the middle way — to remain acutely alive to the ineradicable tension between

opposites —demands extraordinary *askesis*. Cayley helpfully notes that Illich's way of life reflected 'a clear understanding that "the kingdom of God" that Jesus preached was to be found *in* the world but that it was not "*of* the world"' (p.450). Doubtless more can be said about Cayley's discussion of complementarity, which I have compressed to almost breaking point. However, I want to pull on one thread of his argument to better grasp two consequences that flow from placing complementarity at the center of Illich's thought.

Cayley holds that because 'any principle pushed to its extreme may turn into its opposite, balance —opposites held together in tension—is therefore the best to which we can aspire' (p.450). This idea is stated repeatedly —'the poise between opposites [i]s an ideal...that could vary in practice from case to case'; 'hypertrophy in one domain will always lead to a loss in the corresponding and complementary sphere' (p.451) — and Cayley emphasizes that 'Illich's underlying worldly ideal was always balance' (p.458). Hence, for Cayley, maintaining opposing principles or contraries in balance without overwhelming either is the key to preserving the accord between all senses of complementarity — as a feature of the world, as a mode of awareness, and as a manner of living.

My first concern is that it is incomplete to speak of a balance between two opposing domains. To make this point I enroll to my cause Louis Dumont, who appears repeatedly in the footnotes of *Gender*. There, Illich refers to Dumont's essays on the Indian caste system and on the contrary principle of individualism that characterizes contemporary Western society. However, I will rely on a different book by Dumont, published after *Gender*, in which he carefully dissects the anthropological literature on Right/Left symbolism, a topic which is at the core of Illich's explication of complementarity in *Gender* (consult pp.70-75 and related footnotes).

In *Essays on Individualism* (1986/83), Dumont re-reads the same book edited by Rodney Needham titled *Right and Left: essays on symbolic classification* to which Illich refers. Dumont agrees with the extensive anthropological evidence that all pre-modern peoples grasped 'reality' through a series of binary oppositions or contraries. However, in contrast to Cayley, Dumont insists that it is erroneous to treat opposites as 'a simple "polarity" or "complementarity"', which is to say, as an epistemological issue (p.228). Contraries, argues Dumont, do not have the same status but are always already ranked in relation to each other. The right hand is typically considered superior to the left and the fact they are fit in a ranked relationship becomes obvious when one seeks to reverse the polarities by switching left and right. An example might serve. When a new bride steps into her husband's house in South India, she must do so with her right leg. To step in on her left leg brings ruin to the household even though, as Cayley notes, 'each move we make depends on the opposition of our limbs' (p.480). Though one leg inevitably follows the other and each depends on the other, right and left legs don't have the same effect on the house.

Accordingly, Dumont insists it is mistaken to analyze the R/L opposition as if it were made up of two equal parts: 'as though it displayed at its base a principle of symmetry more generally encountered and, superadded unto it, an asymmetry of direction to which value would be attached' (p.228). Such a bifurcated understanding of R/L symbolism smuggles in the principle of equality on the ground floor and throws from the top floor the ranked character of separate but related elements. Dumont uses the term 'hierarchy' to name this feature of a paired relation, where one of the pair occupies a superior position and is held in higher regard, usually because it encompasses the contrary. There are other modes in which the hierarchical relation between elements can be expressed.

In the case of reversal, as exemplified in the writings of Pope Gelasius, in matters of religion ‘the priest is superior to the king...but the priest will obey the king in matters of public order’ (p.252). These reversing hierarchical relations between priest and king are themselves grounded in religion occupying a higher rank than politics. In all such cases, the hierarchical element can be discerned only when the related pair is considered with respect to the whole of which it is a part. Accordingly, right and left are symbolically related not because they are simply opposed but, as Dumont says, because ‘right and left *do not have the same relationship to the whole of the body*’ (emphasis in original, p.228).

Dumont’s insistence on recognizing the hierarchical dimension in a paired relation sheds a different light on the balance that Cayley seeks to preserve. Cayley asks to maintain a balance between such heterogeneous domains as walking and being transported, between healing and being medically treated, between learning and being educated (p.451). Such a request presupposes that it is possible to discern when one or the other of the two opposing forces has exceeded its proper domain. However, there is no endogenous principle by which to identify ‘when any principle when pushed to its extreme may turn into its opposite’ (p.450). A balance between the opposites is not a matter of equalizing them on a weighing scale. Rather, it is a matter of containing what is inferior by what is superior, which in turn requires recognizing the whole with respect to which they are constituted in a hierarchical relation. Walking, healing, and dwelling are superior to their paired opposites precisely because they are related to a third and encompassing element, the body. Stated differently, Dumont points out that mutual limits between two opposed elements require a third element.

Recognizing this hierarchical aspect of distinct yet related elements as integral to ‘the complementary nature of

reality', helps to clarify several crucial if underappreciated aspects of *Gender*. I confine myself to the proposition that the gendered pair relate to each other not by themselves but only with respect to the house, which serves as the measure of and matrix for their fit. It is for this reason that Illich discovers the "house", which 'means the roof under which and the place in which the two genders meet: the kitchen, the goods, and the land; the children and the family as a whole, slaves and guests included', and argues that 'material life is created by the home, the main acting subject, through its men and women' (p.117). Those who still recall being born and bred into the house — for example, the Arabic *beit* or the Kerala *tharavadu* — may recognize something of themselves in Illich's claim that pre-modern and non-Western people are not historical subjects but rather only enact the demands of the house which was the 'ultimate subject of history' (p.118).

My second concern with casting Illich as a 'philosopher of complementarity' flows from the first. Illich posits the human being at the crux of his contrast between the gendered and neutered social pairs (see *Gender* footnotes 4-7, pp.9-15). Men are different from women and united by the house, whereas males and females are different manifestations of the same human being. In what respect are males and females the same? I rely on Dumont's *Essays on Individualism* again to make my point, but in an abridged and analytical way.

Like Illich, Dumont acknowledges the singularity of the 'West', which for him comes into view when contrasted with other cultures. In no other society, says Dumont, has the individual occupied the seat of paramount value or worth. It is important, he notes, to distinguish the two senses in which we mean 'individual': as object and as site of worth. He writes, 'when we speak of man as an individual, we designate two concepts at once... one, the *empirical* subject of speech, thought, and will, the individual sample of mankind, as found

in all societies, and two the independent, autonomous, and thus essentially nonsocial moral being, who carries our paramount values and is found primarily in our modern ideology of man and society' (Dumont, 1986, p.25). Males and females are the different versions of the same human being, which is to say of the individual understood in a non-empirical or metaphysical way.

The existence of nonsocial moral beings *is not* peculiar to the 'West'. Many cultures and peoples have understood the duality of man-in-the-world and individual-outside-the-world. Whereas the former is fully enmeshed in the worldly relationships that define and shape his field of possibilities, the latter is 'one who is after ultimate truth [and] forgoes social life and its constraints to devote himself to his own progress and destiny' (ibid). What *is* peculiar about the 'West' is the figure of 'individual-in-the-world.' Not unlike Illich, Dumont describes how the 'outworldly individual [became] the modern inworldly individual' (p.32) as the long slow result of Church doctrine and Christian history. In particular, he argues that what began with the early church as 'individual-in-relation-to-God' (p.27) ended up, with Calvin, as '*the individual...in the world... [wherein] individualistic value rules without restriction or limitation*' (p.51, emphasis in original). What I focus on here is not the steps of this transformation but rather its consequence, which, according to Dumont, is that 'hierarchical dualism is replaced by a flat continuum governed by an either/or choice' (p.31).

The nonsocial moral being —the individual —discovers itself in relation to the whole. The *outworldly* individual is one mode in which this being can manifest itself. Whether in the desert or under the banyan tree, whether in walled philosophical schools of ancient Greece or secluded Tibetan monasteries, this individual finds itself by renouncing the world and discovering the whole. The ties of kith and kin, of

rules of house and hearth, of laws of community and society now appear as nothing but parochial social conventions. Such individuals may make accommodations with the world but always hold the whole in higher regard than the world.

A second mode for the individual to manifest itself is to be *in the world and not of it*. By all anthropological accounts, this is a mode uniquely announced in the Christian gospels. Dumont names what he considers the core and secret of Christianity as the '*Incarnation of Value*' (p.45, emphasis in original). Illich alludes to this when he says 'the incarnation invites me to seek the face of God in the face of everybody whom I encounter... it makes me believe that there is something in our bodily encounter, which is outside of this world' and that 'our bodiliness takes on a metaphysical quality' (Illich in Cayley 2005, p.110). Though these individuals do not devalue the world or stand apart from it, they do maintain an inner distance from the world even while being plunged in it. Perhaps Illich's description of 'walking the watershed' reported in Cayley (p.236) is as good a description as any of this combination of spiritual distance from the world and physical presence in it. Even if it has, in this second mode, turned towards the world, the individual still maintains the hierarchical dualism or complementarity between the whole and the world. For those walking the watershed, being-in-the-world is judged from the vantage point of being-not-of-it. The candle on the table, the stance of understanding the one facing you, the openness to surprise, and more, reflect the complementarity between being in and not of the world.

The contemporary individual-in-the-world has been birthed by the community of outworldly Christian individuals. In this form, it offers no place for complementarity. To renounce the flat continuum of being individuals-in-the-world would entail recovering a measure of complementarity. Hierarchical duality, or what Cayley calls 'unity in difference'

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(p.411), is the signature of complementarity. It can be expressed in gendered relations, which does not exclude a caste society, or by individuals, whether outworldly, or who are in-the-world-and-not- of-it. Even if he lamented its loss, Illich firmly rejected any return to the gendered society without individuals. As Cayley notes, Illich thought it possible to recover a 'contemporary art of living' (p.243). Wouldn't that require me to light a candle?