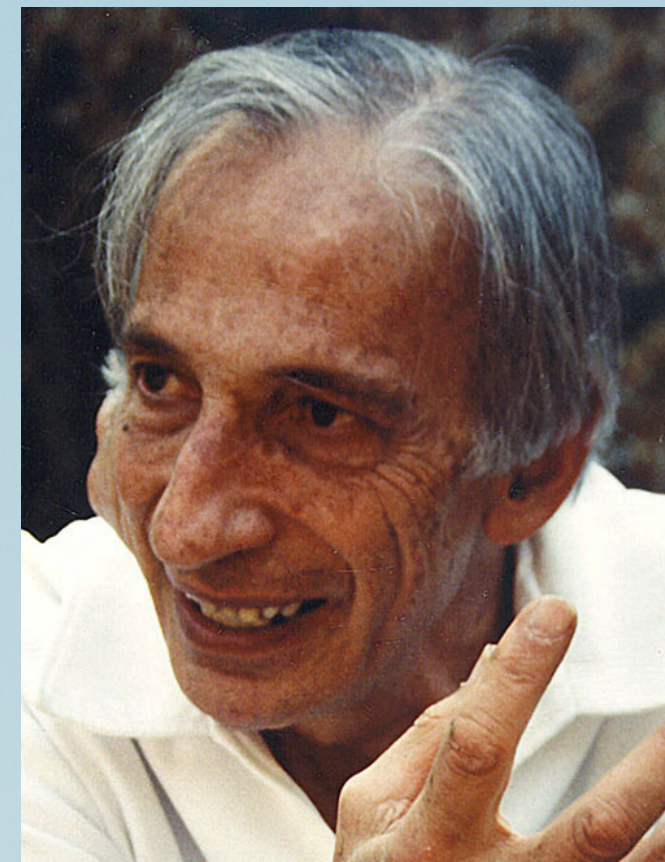


Ivan Illich

Ray Eccleston

Ivan Illich was born in 1926 to a Roman Catholic father and a Sephardi Jewish mother. Illich studied at the University of Florence and the University of Salzburg where he earned a PhD. A devout Christian, he was ordained in 1951. He was appointed head of the Centre for Intercultural Formation (CIF), and his time in Cuernavaca shaped is regarded as the basis of most of his critiques of the church and the healthcare system. His assessment of the current healthcare situation can best be seen in his book *Medical Nemesis, the Expropriation of Health*, published in 1974, as well as in lectures and interviews.



The Critique of Modern Medicine

Medical Nemesis is divided into four parts, the first three pertaining to his critiques of modern medicine. Parts one through three focus on three different iatrogenesis, or physician-originated diseases. The fourth part consists of Illich's political solutions to the problems presented in the first three parts.

Part one details the potential harm done to patients as a result of actions taken to prevent illness. Malpractice is a frequent issue in United States healthcare, especially considering the technological advancements and accomplishments along with a drastic increase in spending (O'Mahoney).

Part two details problems that arise from the societal arrangements in healthcare, and defends the efficacy of folk medicine. The term "Social Iatrogenesis" was used by Illich to describe the medicalization of Western society. Illich lamented the naivety of the healthcare professionals behind the creation of the National Health Service in the UK, who believed that a free healthcare system would lead to a healthier society. The main beneficiary of this shift in ideology has been the pharmaceutical industry. This is apparent in the current opioid epidemic, a byproduct of overreliance and widespread adoption of drugs whose side effects were lied about by the same industry that stood to profit billions of dollars.

Illich loathed the medicalization of life and death. Cultural iatrogenesis in his eyes was the most dangerous because of its ability to remove what it means to be human. Illich believed that there is a difference between pain and suffering, pain being a sensation and suffering being a practice. Modern medicine has robbed us of God's role in allowing us to persevere through the feelings of pain, removing the feeling of suffering, thus making pain meaningless.

Finally, part four described Illich's remedies to the problems described in parts one through three. To Illich, it is vital for the balance of medical power to once again shift to the people. Medicine should be less industrialized with more treatment authority given to individuals otherwise "...health care, however equitably distributed, will smother health-as-freedom." (Illich p. 242).



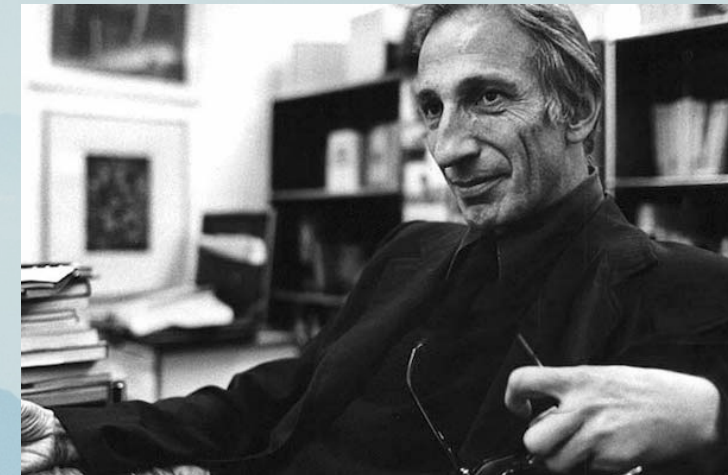
Life, and The Medicalization of Death

Illich lamented the steady reduction of patient agency due to the medicalization of death. To Illich, humans have been robbed of their ability to die a natural death, instead of succumbing to an industrialized death. The hospital has become a place for us to die. Through what Illich described as *corruptio optimi pessima*, or the corruption of the best is the worst, the over-industrialized medical system has also reduced the meaning of life to what Ray Downing called "bio-life" (Cayley, 22). To live is to suffer, and to suffer you must have the capacity to feel pain.



The Connection To Catholicism

The period from 1959-1968 can best be described as prolonged disobedience, according to Todd Harch. He asserts, "... What makes these years stand out is that during the entire period, Illich devoted himself to opposing the plans and desires of the American bishops, the Latin American bishops, and three popes" (Harch pp. 158). According to Harch, Illich attempted to subvert the missionary aims of his superiors which were based on uneducated assumptions about the financial and spiritual conditions of Latin Americans. However, Illich acted on the difference between the Church as "she" and the Church as "it", one being the kingdom of God that he swore his life to, the other being an overreaching bureaucracy (Cayley 27). The hospital can be described as the "she", and the bureaucracy behind its actions are the "it".



The Good Samaritan

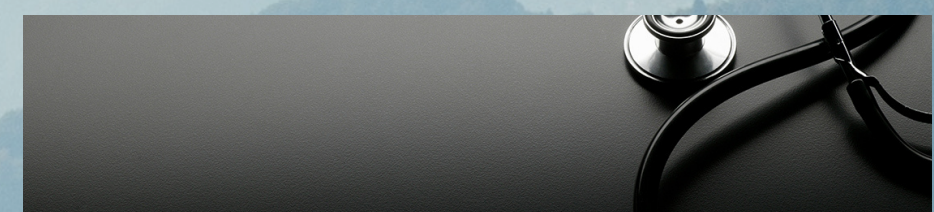
The story of the Good Samaritan, the man who helps his enemy when the enemy's friends would not, shows the best of what man can do. This can also be seen in the early years of Catholic empires, where homes would keep extra food and means to shelter in case someone with no food or no shelter happened across their home. However, a cultural shift occurred when the Church became a welfare center, removing the need for individual Good Samaritans, an example of institutionalizing, fixing a problem that was already under control. The over-industrialization of healthcare can be seen as further removing this cultural need for a Good Samaritan. No longer are family, friends, neighbors involved in caring for each other, the sick are shepherded to a hospital, losing the meaning of community.

Illich's Prediction of the Future

Much of what Illich warned us about came true. As a society, we view old age, death, and sickness as problems, as burdens of which we have handed over to the doctors in order to help us avoid the repercussions. Much of the problems listed in *Medical Nemesis* were already present, however with the need for healthcare ever-increasing so have the prevalence of the problems. For example, at the time of *Medical Nemesis's* publishing, United States Healthcare was 8% of GDP, now it is 18%. According to Atul Gawande's book *Complications*, in a study published by the *New England Journal of Medicine*, nearly 4% of patients in New York State suffered complications from treatment that required their hospital stays to be extended. Furthermore, one in four cases in this study involved negligence. It is estimated that currently more than 44,000 patients died each year at least partially because of complications due to medical blunders. (O'Mahoney, 2020).

The cultural effects were also accurately predicted. As a society, we have adapted this concept of "disease 'awareness'". It is not uncommon to see billboards or advertisements describing an illness and showcasing the cure. In a nearby shopping center close to where I live there is an advertisement for Shingles. On it says that a large percentage of Americans suffer from shingles. Large graphs take up the majority of the available space. Conveniently, however, listed underneath is the hospital chain where ideally you should be tested at is listed.

Illich's arguments have only gained strength over time. These trends will only continue to worsen as demand continues to grow. These trends will not be reversed until a social shift occurs understanding the efficacy of non-traditional medicine and the idea that dying is a natural fact of life, not something that needs to be avoided at all costs because public health is primarily a social and political issue, not only a medical one.



- Illich, Ivan. *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis, the Expropriation of Health*. London: Marion Boyars, 1976.
- Cayley, D. (n.d.). *IVAN ILLICH: A CANDLE IN THE DARK*.
- Biley, Francis C. "The 'Sickening' Search for Health: Ivan Illich's Revised Thoughts on the Medicalization of Life and Medical Iatrogenesis. " *Wholistic Healing Publications*, May 2010. <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/891f98f5/files/uploaded/Biley-10-2F.pdf>.
- Russell, Cormac. "Does More Medicine Make Us Sicker? Ivan Illich Revisited." *Gaceta Sanitaria*. Elsevier Doyma, February 2, 2019. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0213911119300032>.
- Bleakley, Alan, and Seamus O'Mahoney. "Medical Nemesis 40 Years On: The Enduring Legacy of Ivan Illich." Essay. In *Routledge Handbook of the Medical Humanities*. London: Routledge, 2020.
- BRUNO-JORRÉ, ROSA, and JON IGELMO ZALDIVAR. "Monsignor Ivan ILLICH'S Critique of the Institutional Church, 1960–1966." *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 67, no. 3 (2016): 568–86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022046915003383>.
- Harch, Todd. *The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.