

## Illich: contingency and transcendence.

(Paper related to my lecture at 29-10-2010 during the 'Conference on Culture and Transcendence' at the Free University, Amsterdam)

Dr. J. van Diest

### Introduction

In his 'A Secular Age'<sup>1</sup>, Charles Taylor introduces Ivan Illich (1926-2002) as a writer who has a lot to say about the cultural/religious condition of our age (p. 737 ff.). Illich<sup>2</sup> expresses a central thought that inspired Taylor to tell his story. In my contribution I want to explore that thought to a certain extend.

It seems not easy to do that. Illich recognizes this when he warns for 'the extreme difficulty many people will have in understanding' it. (e.g.: 81, 9) I try to interpret the nucleus of this thought by using the concept of 'contingency'. For me, it appeared to be helpful to make a clear distinction between two concepts of contingency: contingency of '*being*', and contingency of '*determination*'. This distinction will lead us to different concepts of 'immanence', and as a consequence, of 'transcendence'.

The on-liner: 'the corruption of the best is the worst' (*Corruptio optimi quae est pessima*) can be considered as the pivot in Illich's thinking. It can be summarized in terms of a dialectical reversal, namely that in trying to realize the 'best', the 'worst' will result.

This theme is present in Illich's analyses of different phenomenon's of modern western society, such as schooling, the modern church, scientification of culture and economics. But it constitutes an element too in the conceptual frame of his studies on medieval thinking (e.g. that of Hugh of Saint Victor (1078-1141)).

First of all I will introduce his 'paradigm' on which Illich bases himself again and again in trying to make clear his thoughts: the Samaritan Story. In this context I will consider his interpretation of sin and give a first description of the just mentioned corruption. Then I will introduce two concepts of contingency and will make plausible that these concepts stretch to the substance of his thought. I interpret his concept of corruption as a process in which these two concepts of contingency become intertwined and confused. In the next paragraph I will pay some attention to the way in which this corruption, that is: this confusion, is the center of rotation in his analyses of modern western institutions. In my conclusion I will reflect on some possible implications of this distinction for analyzing immanence and transcendence.

---

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, C., 2007 *A Secular Time*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge/London.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor refers to: Illich, I, Cayley, D. 2005, *The rivers North of the Future. The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley*. House of Asiani Press Inc., Toronto, in which Illich reflects on the substance of his own thinking. I will use this text; the numbers in this text refer to pages of this book.

## The Samaritan story

For Illich, the familiar Samaritan parable is paradigmatic. This story of the Good Samaritan is about an outsider who helps a wounded Jew in a ditch. Jesus told this story when he was asked : Who is my neighbor? For Illich, the Samaritan acts because his action is good and gratuitous and *not* because this man can or has to be saved in conformity with a norm. According to Illich, Jesus discloses a new and unrestricted ability to relate ourselves to others. (147) The neighbor is the 'other' to whom you as a free human being establish your personal proportionality by turning to him in love, and inviting him to the mutuality of love ('friendship'). Illich describes the mutuality of this relation as follows: 'I am "I" in the deepest and fullest sense in which it is given to me to be "I" precisely because you, by allowing me to love you, give me the possibility to be co-relative to you, to be dysymmetrically proportionate to you.' (197)

In Illich's opinion this mutual act is an act which prolongs the Incarnation. Just as God became flesh and in the flesh relates to each one of us, so human beings are capable of relating to each other in the flesh. This 'innovative' experience is for him exemplified in the Christian practice of establishing a bodily community through an equal contribution of every one of the spirit within (217), in which human flesh gains a new dignity. Human beings become worthy of a new respect, not as social entities but as uniquely enfleshed persons. (107) According to Illich, we are led to discover God in one another, to encounter God in Christ and Christ in the unknown one who knocks at your door. (64) 'He who knocks at the door, asking for hospitality will be treated by me as Christ, not as if he were, but as Christ.' (110) "The Incarnation invites me to seek the face of God in the face of everybody whom I encounter.' (l.c.) Then, a "we" can come into existence that is outside of time and living in the time of the Spirit. 'Our bodiliness takes on a metaphysical quality, which it makes more than just an accident of the moment.' (110)

Jesus expands the horizon of the possible (contingency) by the answer which he gives to the Pharisees: to create the supreme form of relatedness which is 'as such' not given by creation but created by you as (created) human being. (207) '... [T]here was nothing of this kind before Christ revealed it... .' (177)

Before I analyze this concept of possibility or contingency I will make some remarks on the concept of sin.

## Sin

According to Illich, the original idea of sin is: by not responding to you, when you call upon my fidelity, I thereby personally offend God. (62) In the clarity of faith, sin is the betrayal of a gracious love of which I was made capable by Jesus (Incarnation), but which goes beyond anything I could expect, predict or produce. 'Sin is refusing to honor that relationship which came into existence between the Samaritan and the Jew, which comes into existence through the exercise of freedom, and which constitutes an "ought" because I feel called by you, called to you, called to this tie between human beings, or between beings and God'...'it can only exist through the denial of this graciousness.' (189) So, by Jesus, a new kind of "ought" has been established which is not related to a norm: it aims at mutuality, a community, a free contribution of each one. Sin is an offence against this 'ought' that cannot be eliminated by a psychologist or psychiatrist (97) or enforced by law.

However, with 'criminalization of sin' (Prodi) the idea of sin changes. When man has to accuse himself before a priest ('judge') of having transgressed a Christian law, the meaning of sin is transformed. Now, it addresses the transgression of a norm or law. This criminalization prepares the 'corruption' of sin: the law now governs what is good and bad (truth), and not the free, gracious, mutual acting of 'enfleshed' people.

## Contingency

Illich refers to an article of Blumenberg on contingency in his tentative to make clear his thoughts. (p. 64 ff.) There is no room here to scrutinize that article; the following remarks must suffice. According to Illich contingency is related to the Christian concept of creation, and expresses the state of being of the world as created from nothing and is upheld in its existence by the will of God. It does not bear within itself a reason or right to exist, so it seems to be destined to disappear if it is left to itself. However, and at the same time, this given (contingent) existence stands for the (more or less) independent functioning of the created world; it has its own 'logos' or structure, so that it's events ought to be structured as far as they are chaotic, and possibly transgressing norms.

So, the concept contingency has two meanings.

First it indicates what I call *contingency of being* (I). Contingency refers to than 'what is', but 'can not be'. When something contingent 'is', its being is not necessary but 'gracious'. Illich addresses to this concept of contingency when he writes: '... our being together ['mutual act'] ... isn't chance [arbitrary], isn't logically necessary, but rather is a pure gift.' (p. 65) Illich's aim is a recovery of this contingency ('Umsonstigkeit', 'gift') of inter-subjective-being. (p. 227)

Illich distinguishes grace ('Umsonstigkeit') and chance (determined arbitrarily). To me this implies that contingency has still another meaning: *contingency of determination* (II), i.e. 'what is in 'this' way, but could also have been in another way, i.e.: what is determined 'by chance'.

This distinction expresses the thought, that 'reality' or 'being' is not exhausted by being determined or stipulated (necessarily or by chance), for instance in terms of efficiency, effectiveness or moral procedures.<sup>3</sup>

I conjecture that, because Illich does not make this distinction explicit, he passes over a possibility to make more clear his one-liner. In my opinion Illich's 'perversion' implies a reduction of contingency (I) to contingency (II). The meaning of 'Umsonstigkeit' is transformed in: the absence of a reason why something is in 'this' way and not in 'another'. The consequence is that that which is a good or end in itself (a gift or grace) becomes something that is situated in the shadow -side of being: the world of chance, instability, or even chaos.

## Interpretation: corruption and institutionalization

This thought can be inverted: that which is necessary or stable (as opposition or elimination of contingency (II)) becomes a good or end in itself. So 'realizing' the good (here: grace or gift) implies

---

<sup>3</sup> This distinction negates N. Luhmann's slogan or a priori that what cannot be determined or controlled (by 'system-rationality') is not real.

the realization of something necessary and stable, for instance a law, procedure or institution. However, this eliminates that what is intended by 'Umsonstigkeit' (graciousness). The room for corruption is created: '... the idea of acting out of a love which is a gift gets corrupted by being defined as something which can be institutionalized...'. (64) By understanding love, agape etc. as contingent (II) they are primarily seen as unstable and unsure, 'chaotic'. For that reason they seem to 'demand' stabilization and assurance. But in fulfilling this demand, this love and agape (to which we are called by God) become corrupted because of the fact that their contingency (I) is stifled in giving them this worldly solidity and permanence, for instance by a contractual regulation. Fulfilling this is the 'institutionalization, or normalization, of something which to ordinary human reasoning is absurd'. (57) '... hand-in-hand with the increasing intensity of instrumentalization in Western society goes a lack of attention to what one traditionally called gratuity.' (226)

Different religious and social themes of Illich can be interpreted in this perspective. The history of 'the Church' itself is an example. The Church attempted to safeguard the newness of the Gospel (contingency (I)) by institutionalizing it through giving it 'this worldly' solidity, clarity and definition. It created, according to Illich, a procedural mentality 'into the very heart of love ['inter-subjectivity']'. More generally, man designed institutions for realizing 'agape' (social services). These institutions realize a universality and necessity of serving people 'in need'. But the consequence was a stifling of the capacity for graciousness. People projected themselves 'into abstracta or abstract notions' (222) with the result that a cold and calculative behavior originated between them. In trying to safeguard the 'best' (agape), it is corrupted or perverted. Man tries by means of rules and procedures to safeguard (determinate) contingency (I) - the gift of agape. But in the tentative of 'organizing' this safeguarding, this gift is interpreted as something irregular, unpredictable, unsure ('chaotic') and even undesirable (contingency II). It has to be organized as something 'stable' by putting up a 'logos' or structure of laws and procedures. In other words: by elimination ('its') contingency (II), agape seems to be 'safeguarded'. But this implies, according to Illich, its perversion<sup>4</sup>.

## **Conclusion: on transcendence and immanence.**

By way of a conclusion I'll present a reflection/suggestion.

Every tentative to fix contingency (I) by human means (institutions, procedures) implies a perversion of it. That contingency addresses the dimension of gift or graciousness: that what can be, but also can not be. This can be expressed at two levels: 1) the gift of graciousness (contingency) of the world 'as such' (creation by God), and 2) the gracious acts of human beings. This seems to suggest that human graciousness can be considered as analogous to Gods graciousness (man as 'image of God'). This would imply that in Illich's thinking 'transcendence' is ('analogously') immanent (see: paper Stoker). Statements like '... he who knocks at the door, asking for hospitality will be treated by me as Christ, not as if he were, but as Christ.' (110), and: 'We are led to discover God in one another, to encounter God in Christ and Christ in the unknown one who knocks at your door.' (64) support this interpretation.

---

<sup>4</sup> As far as 'creativity' must be considered as gracious, this thought is of importance in the context of management of innovation within organizations. If modern society excels in rational determining (organizing) its processes, then 'risk' in the context of 'risk society' (Beck) can - maybe - be interpreted as (perversion) of contingency (I) of (e.g.) nature as necessarily posited by these processes.

But then 'perversion' comes in. Rational procedures, dogma's, institutions etc. have to fix contingency (II) - in the false 'intention' to fix contingency (I). They are interpreted as earthly realizations of transcendence. In their completeness these rules, procedures and institutions can be considered as transcendence's real, fixed and 'eternal' manifestation in which contingency (II) is eliminated. This line of thought comes near to Hegel's *immanent transcendence* as elimination of contingency (II). One can disagree here about the significance of the idea of transcendence and reject it: the idea of a *radical immanence* can be developed (Marx). Conceived of as closed and/or alienated, this 'rational' world can be considered in turn as the 'total other' of transcendence. In other words: transcendence becomes *radical transcendence* (Kierkegaard). I guess that these basic ways of conceptualizing transcendence (including Hegel's immanent transcendence) are - in the eyes of Illich - 'perversions' of transcendence (and immanence) in so far as they are formulated in terms of (the elimination of) contingency (II) while neglecting contingency (I).