

GRATUITY

CAYLEY: I'd like to conclude with your reflections on living in what I remember you once calling "a world immune to grace." What practices, what dispositions are necessary to live with faith in a world which is itself a perversion of faith?

ILlich: We ended our last conversation with your request that I interpret that which quite commonly today is called the beginning of postmodernity. I've explained why I don't want to be pulled into the discourse that goes under that title. Another way in which I can speak, as an observer and an historian, about the threshold over which many people had the sense of having passed in the early 1980s, is to call it the end of the age of dominant instrumentality. This makes sense only when you look at the concept of *instrumentum*, "tool," as an historian of ideas — something we have already discussed. Together with Professor Carl Mitcham and others, I am by now pretty certain that the idea of the tool, in the narrow sense, is something which appears only in the high European Middle Ages. Just to repeat and sum up: when Plato or Pliny talk about tools, or devices, they call them *organon*. They call the hand an *organon*, the hammer an *organon*, and the hammering hand an *organon*. The tool is an extension of the human body. In the twelfth century we notice that an increasing awareness appears, partly under Arab influence, that certain material objects can incorporate, can be given

human intentions. The intention to do something can pass from the hand into the hammer. The hammer can be seen as something made for hammering, and the sword something for killing, no matter if the hammer is taken in hand by a craftsman, or by a little girl, or by a mill — it's that way that in the twelfth century they begin to speak about it. The sword can serve for killing, or for war-making, no matter if he who touches it is a noble born to the sword or any peasant trained to the sword. I believe this distinction between tool and user is characteristic of the epoch which I claim came to an end with the 1980s. There is a distance — I use the specific term “distality” — between the hand, the operator, and the instrument that performs the task. This distality disappears again when the hammer and the man, or the dog and the leash held by the man, are conceived as a system. You can no longer say that there is a distance between the operator and the device, because according to systems theory the operator is part of the system within which he operates and regulates.

Now, why do I begin by once more calling to your attention my reflections on the age of instrumentality and my claim that it has come to an end? With the increasing dominance of instrumentality during this 800-year period, it became certain, obvious, natural, that wherever something is achieved, it is achieved by means of an instrument. The eye is perceived as an instrument for recording what's before me, the hand is conceived and spoken about as an instrument shaped by evolutionary development. Love is an instrument for satisfaction. Just as it becomes almost unthinkable that I should be guided by an “ought” that is not determined by some kind of norm, so it becomes unthinkable that I should pursue a goal without using an instrument for that purpose. In other terms, instrumentality implies an extraordinary intensity of purposefulness within society. And hand-in-hand with the increasing intensity of instrumentalization in Western society goes a lack of attention to what one traditionally called gratuity. Is there another word for the nonpurposeful action, which is only performed because it's beautiful, it's good, it's fitting, and not because it's meant to achieve, to construct, to change, to manage? You asked me to speak about a grace-less world, and it seems to me that the traditional word for the opposite

of the purposeful act is the gratuitous act. In German I invented the word *Umsonstigkeit*, for no purpose at all, and it seems to have stuck, though it's in no dictionary.

So it is my strong belief, and I can back it up by referring to many important thinkers and authors of our century, that one aspect of modernity was the loss of gratuity. One of the profound reasons for this is that with the Enlightenment, philosophers largely stopped speaking about ethics and morals as the search for the good and increasingly spoke instead about the valuable. The replacement of the good by the valuable we have already discussed. The valuable always implies some relationship to effectiveness, to efficiency, therefore to device, to tool, to purpose. It has become very difficult at the end of the modern time to imagine actions which are good and beautiful without in any way being purposeful. What I meant when I spoke to you about the absence of a sense for grace referred to this absence of a sense for gratuity. To go back to our main image, our guiding *topos*, the Samaritan, the Samaritan acts because his action is good, not because this man can be saved or not saved, not because this man needs medical attention, or needs food, but because, imagining that I am the Samaritan, he needs me. What the beaten-up Jew's presence evokes in the Samaritan's belly is a response which is not purposeful but gratuitous and good. And I claim that the recovery of this possibility is the basic issue we are discussing here — the possibility that a beautiful and good life is primarily a life of gratuity, and that gratuity is not something which can flow out of me unless it is opened and challenged through you.

CAYLEY: The end of instrumentality, the recognition that when I walk my dog, I constitute a man-dog system, has been taken by many as a liberating perspective, as an overcoming of alienation, in which I see myself once again as part of the world, and as part of nature. I at first, when younger, took systems theory as liberating . . .

ILLICH: . . . Bateson . . .¹

CAYLEY: . . . Bateson, etc. So why do you see it so differently?

ILLICH: Well, my first answer, from my belly, would be, I'm the master of that beast. It's not Mr. Dog. I once needed a dog to defend me, and I treated the beast which I had to train to watch and defend me as Mr. Dog. I had to give him up because that's not the way you deal with a beast. But, on a deeper level, I would simply say that I can't be resumed into a system. I am not a system, neither an immune system, which is an independent subsystem in the world-system, nor fully absorbable in that which can be analyzed by systems analysis. Systems analysis would explain love, charity, as a feedback; and, in fact, I've recently read some theological nonsense by reputable people explaining what special kinds of feedback go on when you engage in acts of faith, hope, and charity. These people have lost the concrete sense of themselves as this mysterious thing which we are, an "I" which is somatic — my whole *soma* is "I" — free and independent. Systems theory is a good instrument for analysis of certain things, but, unless you draw limits to it, you have the gooiest outlook which ever has been invented . . . Draw three boxes and four arrows to show how they inter-relate with each other.

CAYLEY: So how can one live gratuitously in a world like this?

ILLICH: Friends, friends . . . gratuity, just so, for the fun of it, for your sake . . .

CAYLEY: Does this require a certain asceticism?

ILLICH: Well, *ascesis* is the old word for training, for repetition. I would say what is required is a word which is difficult to pronounce today — virtue — repeated acts of faith, hope, and love which slowly create in you, psycho-physically, an ease in performing them; and, in order to sustain yourself in a disciplined way, *ascesis*, self-training, is of a certain importance, although it has to be said again that training for our contemporaries always implies instrumental purposes, which is not what I'm taking about. It's strange that in modern Californian English it's easier to speak of *yoga* than of *ascesis*, but what the word

ascesis meant for 2,000 years is something like what *yoga* now signifies in our Western world.

CAYLEY: You suggested earlier that a new possibility has been opened by the ending of the age of instrumentality . . .

ILLICH: I think so. In this world I couldn't find a better situation in which to live with those I love, and those are exactly people who are overwhelmingly aware of the fact that they have passed beyond a threshold. And because they are no longer so deeply imbued by the spirit of instrumentality, or of futility, they can understand what I mean by gratuity. I do believe that there is a way of being understood today when you speak about gratuity, and gratuity in its most beautiful flowering, is praise, mutual enjoyment; and what some people, such as those who propose a new orthodoxy,² discover, is that the message of Christianity is that we live together, praising the fact that we are where we are and who we are, and that contrition and forgiveness are part of that which we celebrate, doxologically.

CAYLEY: With praise . . .

ILLICH: Yea.

CAYLEY: I have no more questions.

ILLICH: Thank you.

CAYLEY: Do you have any more answers?

ILLICH: I hope nobody takes what I said for answers.