

## Commentary

### Raymond Downing

A convenient and accurate way to understand medicine today is as technique, technique as Ellul defined it in 1963: “*Technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency . . . in every field of human activity.*”<sup>1</sup> Ivan Illich was the first of Ellul’s followers to spell out this understanding of medicine as technique and in so doing found medicine dangerous: “The medical establishment has become a major threat to health,”<sup>2</sup> his *Medical Nemesis*, published in 1976, begins. Eight years later, Arney and Bergen showed how we responded to this threat: instead of pushing back on medicine, we reinforced medical technique as a system, embracing all of its offerings as a “tyranny of harmony.”<sup>3</sup>

Ellul would likely have agreed with all of these analyses of medicine as technique, though he produced no complete analysis of medicine comparable to his studies of law, politics, economics, propaganda, and revolution—to say nothing of his three major books on technology itself. Instead, we have brief references to medicine in several of his books, and a few articles. The first was “Biblical Positions on Medicine,” (published here for the first time in English translation), which he published even before the blueprint for all of his subsequent writings in *Presence in the Modern World*.<sup>4</sup>

On careful reading, this article seems more of “biblical positions on illness” than on medicine. There is no positioning of medicine within a technological society, no exposure of its politics and propaganda, and no warnings of the dangers of medicine. Though all that came thirty years later with Illich, Ellul had a different goal in 1947. He wanted to establish the relationship that creatures have with their Creator. Illich returned to this same biblical foundation in his later writings.

This foundation is pivotal for understanding medicine itself. The human, Ellul writes, “is not an autonomous being” but rather “wholly dependent on the creator.”<sup>5</sup> And again: “Between the creature and the Creator there can be a right order of relation, and this is what can promote health best.”<sup>6</sup> Later, he expands a bit: “Left to ourselves, we will go immediately to death by the way of sickness. It is God’s hand that restores us continually to a state of relative health, which we do not deserve. Healing is thus nothing other, in every situation, than God’s merciful intervention in the course of nature.”<sup>7</sup>

It was this latter concept that Illich developed in his post-*Nemesis* writings. Referring to the medieval view that all of nature was alive, Illich says that between the fourth and fourteenth centuries, people believed that the “birthing power of nature was rooted in the world’s being contingent on the incessant creative will of God.”<sup>8</sup> (In the words of the old Spiritual, “He’s got the whole world in His hands.”) However, when people began no longer to believe in the incessant sustaining will of God, they developed tools to sustain the life and health they had previously believed was God’s realm.<sup>9</sup> Ellul calls this use of tools idolatry: “Sometimes medicine is even presented to us as completely contrary, opposed to God’s will, a sign of man’s revolt against God (2 Chr. 16:12, Jer. 17:5). This happens when medicine becomes an idol, a power that we petition independently of God. In this case, medicine . . . draws forth the praise and gratitude that are due only to God—it raises hope and stimulates faith. It truly takes the place of God and is for this very reason condemned.”<sup>10</sup>

As this attributing supernatural powers to medicine was true in Jeremiah’s time, it has been repeated throughout history. The title of a 1987 book on medicine and surgery in the nineteenth century was *The Age of Miracles*.<sup>11</sup> In 2003, announcing his \$15 billion for AIDS care in Africa and the Caribbean, President George Bush called this an “age of miraculous medicines”<sup>12</sup>; half of that money would pay for those “miraculous” drugs. These miracles “raise hope and stimulate faith”; they often end up “taking the place of God.” The more effective and efficient medicine becomes, the more likely we are to treat it as god.

Nevertheless, the bulk of Ellul’s article is not about medicine itself: the section titled “Remedies” is less than one quarter of the article. The largest sections are extended meditations on “Ideas of Life and Death” and “The Idea of Illness.” There is much to reflect on here; hopefully other commentators will. I will comment briefly only on a single aspect of this argument.

Using the story of Job, and Jesus’ phrase “This sickness is not unto death” (John 11:4), Ellul considers five meanings that sickness could have if it is “not unto death” and two meanings for when it is “unto death.” He is very clear that illness does have meaning. Thirty years later, in a long essay titled

“Illness as Metaphor,” Susan Sontag determined to strip illness of meaning. She proclaimed that “illness is *not* a metaphor,” using the phrase “just a disease” throughout.<sup>13</sup> A decade later she wrote a second essay, “AIDS and Its Metaphors,” proclaiming again that her purpose was “not to proclaim meaning . . . but to deprive something of meaning.”<sup>14</sup> Ellul assumed meaning because he believed in the incessant creative will of God. Sontag did not.

Near the end of the article, Ellul addresses one of the many questions that might arise about how to make practical use of his analysis. He mentions, almost in passing, the “exaggerations of Christian Science.” Here he is referring to the contention in Christian Science that “disease is symptomatic not of physical disorder but of underlying spiritual inadequacy. . . . [T]reatment . . . consists ‘entirely of heartfelt yet disciplined prayer.’”<sup>15</sup> Ellul’s view is that “Christian medicine cannot be spiritualistic, because man is not a pure spirit. The primary problem to pose is a spiritual problem, in general, and particular to the specific illness. But this does not exclude the material cure and physical healing.”<sup>16</sup>

Ellul, then, affirms attention to both the physical and the spiritual, but it can be difficult to get the balance right. We may be tempted to view a patient’s spiritual condition mechanistically: as the patient incrementally repairs the creature-Creator relationship, we hope for a corresponding improvement in the physical symptoms. But our physical and spiritual lives are not linked like gears, with movement in one causing immediate movement in the other.

Or, we can delink the gears and try to treat each part separately. We rely on the motto “We treat, Jesus heals,” but we actually imply that our treatment will catalyze Jesus’ healing. And while doctors may tell some stories that illustrate this, there are plenty of stories that show the opposite, the first of which is Job’s. We, like Job and his friends, have trouble getting it right.

Ellul, far from resolving this dilemma, simply affirms it: “Thus the healing of sin attains the cause of the illness, which is always a disobedience to this natural order that God established. Of course, the symptoms of the disease, its material consequences, are not ended thereby. . . . Thus the Christian notion of sickness indeed entails a material healing and activity as well.”<sup>17</sup>

As with most of Ellul’s writings, there is no agenda here, no program to follow, no principles that translate easily to the construction of a “Christian healthcare system.” He does not dramatically eschew the secular technologies of medicine but tells us only that “treatment is given to the doctor by God, that it is indeed a dedicated means of caring for the body.”<sup>18</sup> His task is not to eliminate medical technology but to help us see it in perspective.

Many scholars, Illich among them, view the period beginning with the close of World War II as marking a major development in medicine.<sup>19</sup> Ellul, at the dawn of this new period of medical progress, reminded us of the foundations not just of medicine but of illness itself. He must have foreseen that

as medicine became more effective, we would increasingly use it without addressing “the primary problem . . . a spiritual problem.” Seventy years later, our international idolatry of medicine has proven him correct.

### About the Author

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### Notes

1. Jacques Ellul, “Note to the Reader,” in *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1963): xxv. Emphasis in the original.
2. Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis* (New York: Pantheon, 1976): 3.
3. William Ray Arney and Bernard J. Bergen, *Medicine and the Management of Living* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984): 161.
4. Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016).
5. Ellul, “Biblical Positions on Medicine.”
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Ivan Illich, “Brave New Biocracy,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 11.1 (Winter 1994): 4.
9. Ivan Illich and David Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future* (Toronto: Anansi, 2005): 64–79.
10. Ellul, “Biblical Positions on Medicine.”
11. Guy Williams, *The Age of Miracles: Medicine and Surgery in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1987).
12. George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address,” 2003.
13. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York, Picador, 2001): 3.
14. Sontag, 102.
15. Peggy DesAutels, Margaret Battin, and Larry May, *Praying for a Cure: When Medical and Religious Practices Conflict* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).
16. Ellul, “Biblical Positions on Medicine.”
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 1–9; Arnold Relman, “The Future of Medical Practice,” <http://content.healthaffairs.org/cgi/reprint/2/2/5.pdf>; and Adele Clarke *et al.*, “Biomedicalization: Technoscientific Transformations of Health, Illness, and U.S. Biomedicine,” *American Sociological Review* 68 (April 2003): 161–194.