

**Sebastian Trapp**

**You, me, and human beings in general  
Some thoughts before the first Ivan Illich symposium  
in Bremen, Dec. 2003**

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## **You, me, and human beings in general**

### **Some thoughts before the first Ivan Illich symposium in Bremen, Dec. 2003**

The four of us sit around this table, because we want to speak about an issue that is of concern for us. It is, as you know, *philia*. Ivan was talking about *philia* a lot in his presentations. There is one aspect in this that for me is of the greatest importance, which is why I want to talk about it today. It is connected to the good Samaritan and Italian pasta.

Ivan spoke Italian like he spoke German, and the Italians were just as surprised to hear their Italian friend to be fluent in the harsh Teutonic tongue as we stared at him when he was joking in the Mediterranean language. Actually he had a lot of friends and relatives in Italy, and therefore it just seemed fitting that an evening in a *ristorante* quickly turned into a feast.

But this is not the whole truth, strictly speaking. What really made these feasts so special weren't his old friends but the way in which the people who were unknown to all of us before that evening blended in and completed the round. Nowhere else I have ever experienced this warmth, this feeling of belonging, of togetherness. Tables were moved, orders for the bunch given out and many bottles of wine ordered. And above all, there was talking, discussing and laughing.

Ivan had a very special ability to cause this kind of feast, this strange feeling of belonging to each other. I admired and enjoyed this ability immensely. Only after Ivan's death I understood, how crucial these feasts have been for his philosophy and his faith. The interviews David Cayley did with Ivan in the late nineties in Mexico helped me enormously.

One theme that was central in Ivan's presentations during the last years was the biblical story of the good Samaritan. Jesus tells it when he is asked; "Master, who is my neighbor?" You remember how the story goes: A Jew is robbed and beaten up and left bleeding in a ditch. Some Jews pass by without caring for him. Then there comes the Samaritan – Ivan insisted on calling him a Palestinian – and picks him up, cares for his wounds and delivers him to a place where he is taken care of. Traditionally, the Samaritan is the enemy of the Jew. This story has become a stereotype, it always has been understood as explaining the proper, the good behavior one should show towards one's neighbor.

For Ivan, it means something much more radical: for his own contemporaries the behavior of the Samaritan was completely wrong, because he was ignoring the boundaries of his own ethos, he was doing something impossible. Jesus, "the great disturber", was preaching the freedom to do just that. To *choose* the one with whom you want to be befriended, not just someone inside the boundaries that your ethnos dictates.

By doing this he did two things: he gave a new, unforeseen freedom to the single person. And he took the defining power of the ethnos away.

This freedom is a wonderful burden. This friendship means curiosity, curiosity for the unknown in an old acquaintance. It means to be able to see the unknown in the eyes of an old friend and to look into the eyes of a stranger as if you had been friends for a long time. It is

the hope for an “I-thou-relationship”, as Ivan called it, a hope for the ability and the wish to listen and again and again the curiosity for what somebody has to say, for that somebody.

But the other side in our modern-day society may be even more important. We are used to belonging to an all-embracing, all-including ethnos. This ethnos is called “human being”.

In my opinion we should see clearly that this is a biologism. Biologically seen we all belong to the species *Homo sapiens*, that is true. But in our everyday life this can only be meaningful if we ascribe meaning to it, because we are used to categorizations. All too easily we sort the one we talk to into a category, be it historian, physician, Englishman, bus driver, Iranian or man or woman. Our life consists of categories, of belonging to groups, regardless if it is the group of newspaper readers, SUV drivers or habitual airplane passengers. We even are accustomed to the assumption that statistics say something about a single, actual person, even though this is a grave misunderstanding of mathematics. We can define a person by the unique assemblage of groups that he or she belongs to.

These categories make it difficult to really look at the other. And they make a lot of things simpler. This simplicity eases our life and saves a lot of effort. But unfortunately it fosters the impression that the other is simple. It spares us from the adventure to be curious beyond our prejudices, to dare to live an “I-thou-relationship”, as Ivan called it, it spares us from the adventure of *philia*.

Here I feel uneasiness creeping up my back. “My goodness, but I just can’t look at everybody like he would touch my innermost!” This is true. But it is not what I was talking about.

Ivan said that the parable of the good Samaritan gives us the freedom to *choose* our neighbor. The idea that we have to look at *everybody* like he would be our neighbor is a modern misunderstanding.

Actually this are two misunderstandings. The first one is about what Jesus wanted to tell us with this story, that he has acclaimed a *freedom* to us, the freedom to choose who is our neighbor. The second one is that we have to treat all humans *qua genus* equally, in a way as if everybody would belong to our *ethnos*. If we accept this we are guilty of *hybris*, we try something that is impossible for us. And by this rendering an “I-Thou-relationship”, the very idea of *philia*, impossible.

For me *philia* is deeply personal, it is something that you do with me and I do with you when we choose each other as a friend.

Perhaps the crisis of the trustworthiness of modern institutions makes it easier to go beyond the categorization. Ivan hold this opinion. In any case does a glass of wine help, much more than an Audimax at the university. This is why I look forward to talking with some of you, with some old friends and some other people whom I equally do not really know, yet.