The Errant Pilgrim

Ivan Illich's critique of medicine was prescient, even if it occasionally wandered off course.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are Illich's two primary objections with American medical practice and the "medical establishment" as a whole? Where might he have seen these harms in practice?

2. *Iatrogenesis* is defined as harm caused by medical care. Illich wrote about social and cultural iatrogenesis. What do you make of his arguments, and have you seen the effect of either of those in your life?

3. Dworkin argues that Illich employed "sleight of hand to play down the value of medical treatments." How do people of different generations approach medical problems differently, if at all? What do different generations have to say about injuries or unhappiness, for example?

4. Illich warned that "plastic words" such as "life" and "water" are overused and sapped of their true meanings. Do you agree? What are the plastic words of today?

5. Illich began his ministry among Puerto Rican communities in New York City, where he saw the harms of medical bureaucracy firsthand. Do you see the harms of medical bureaucracy in your community today? Do you see other forms of structural discrimination in your neighborhood or parish community? How does it manifest?

6. Throughout his work, Illich warned against "institutionalization." What is your image of the institutional Church at large, if you have one? Has it changed in the past few years?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

C. R. Calabria, "Back to the Lab Again," August 6, 2026:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/calabria-drug-testing-back-lab-again

Ronald W. Dworkin, "The Dangers of Doctor Bot," January 2026:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/artificial-intelligence-medicine-dworkin-perfection-doctors

Jessica Gregg, "Preventable Deaths," October 2023:
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/opioid-treatment-addiction-gregg-oxycodone-buprenorphine