

Commento a *The Myth of Mental Illness* di Thomas S. Szasz

di Murray N. Rothbard

Thomas S. Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness* (Hoebner-Harper, 1961) is certainly a highly original and unique work. It is a treatise on psychiatry and psychotherapy, and yet scattered throughout are intriguing libertarian points, often used for illustration, often used in themselves: attacks on governmental responsibility for inflation, on progressive income tax, on exploitation of one group by another, on totalitarianism, and on infringement of civil liberties, particularly in the practice of compulsory commitment of the (non-criminal) “mentally ill.” There is also certainly much value in criticizing the prevalent use of the cliché of “mental illness” and the consequent linkage with somatic medicine. There are precious-few books on psychiatry, furthermore, which refer to Hayek’s *Constitution of Liberty* or to Popper’s *Poverty of Historicism*. There is also value in Szasz’ opposition to any sort of manipulation, or lying to, any individuals, whether they be patients or anyone else.

Yet, despite these merits, the book must be set down as an overall failure, for the bulk of the book consists in the setting forth of Szasz’ own positive theories, which must be considered totally erroneous. Szasz’ thought is embedded in, in the first place, in the most fashionable of modern positivistic-behaviorist scientific thought – especially in such modern sociological fashions as the “theory of language,” “communication theory,” “role playing,” and “game theory.” Being a behaviorist and positivist, Szasz tosses out the crucial concepts of “consciousness” and the “unconscious.” Instead, he speaks of “body sign language,” “affective communication” via neurosis, etc. There are many weird results of this: one is that the crucial philosophic-psychologic concepts of individual will, responsibility, the line between the willed and the unwilled, etc., are tossed away, to be replaced by the apparent view that everyone is (a) “playing a game” – and that everything is some form of “game,” with “rules,” etc., and (b) is engaged in purposeful communication, though only meaningful in “body signs,” and that this language-game is being (consciously?) conducted by the neurotic as well as the man using rational verbal communication. The result is that Szasz in effect denounces neurotics for their symptoms as really being not “ill” but malingering, and, worse, using their symptoms to manipulate others. Without endorsing the “mental illness” cliché, this seems to me to set psychiatry back a hundred years; in addition to that, it eliminates the whole problem of moral responsibility for actions because it eliminates the whole problem of whether an act is consciously willed or decided upon, or not. While Szasz says that he favors the injection of ethics into psychiatry, it has nothing to do with the traditional concept of ethics, but is instead involved in his preposterous “games” and their “rules,” and is hardly a conscious ethical system of any sort.

Furthermore, in a fashion rather reminiscent of Ayn Rand, Dr. Szasz is almost fanatically anti-religion, and especially anti-Christian. Religion, and especially Christianity, are held to be responsible for a large part of the world’s neuroses, for fostering “childish dependency,” as well as for encouraging behavior not proper to man’s life: e.g., humility, meekness, naiveté, etc., all of which add up, in Szasz’ view to “incompetence.” Ministers and priests parasitically exploit their supporters, keeping them in this dependence, etc. An example of Szasz’ technique may be seen in his, to say the least, oversimplified interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount: of “Blessed are the poor in spirit”: “i.e. stupid, submissive. Do not be smart, well-informed, or assertive”; of “Blessed are the pure in heart”: “i.e. naive, unquestioningly loyal: Do not entertain doubt (about God) and do not [be] critical!” The “lilies in the field” and “take no thought for the morrow” quotations are heavily attacked, etc. In general, “the beliefs and practices of Christianity... are best suited for slaves.” Nietzsche rides again! and indeed, there are many indications that Szasz wants to return to the old barbaric precepts of Social Darwinism. The idea of helping the sick, for example, (let alone treating the “mentally ill”) is attacked by Szasz as fostering illness itself, and malingering, and also [for] fostering attitudes of superiority and mastery by the physician and therapist over the patient,

thus setting up a relation of mastery-dependence-exploitation rather than a mutual equality and self-respect. While some doctors might be psychic exploiters and some patients malingerers, to issue a blanket attack on aid to one's fellows as inherently [such] seems to me a fallacious and barbaric position.

Also, Szasz is unfortunately heavily influenced by the "interpersonal" psychiatric theories of Harry Stack Sullivan, with the result that everything becomes a question of "interpersonal communication," including neuroses! As an escape-hatch if one pressed him about neuroses that were not dependent on others, Szasz would talk of "internal others," which of course makes the concept question-begging. Szasz' fundamental philosophic error, perhaps, is his deliberate overthrowing of thinking in terms of "entities" and "substances," i.e. 18th-century, natural-law, Aristotelian thinking, and his replacement of them by all the modern fashions, especially "thinking in terms of processes," and therefore games, roles, etc.

Szasz' attempted positive psychiatric theory, therefore, must be set down as a complete failure, based completely as it is on fallacious and even mischievous modern developments in philosophy and in the social sciences.