

Psychiatry: The science of lies  
Thomas Szasz

Surprisingly repetitive and narrow. Though the fundamental premise is sound, goes overboard in particulars.

Thomas Szasz has been fighting psychiatry since 1960. He has structured this battle campaign as a set piece confrontation. My sense is that he is fighting the enemy as it appeared a few decades ago. Though I agree with all of his points, they seem unnecessarily labored, and there are some seemingly obvious modern wrinkles which are omitted from the discussion.

The first point he hammers home is that psychiatry and psychology are not sciences. The subject of their theories and theses, mental illness, is not something which can be measured by the tools of science. Although some maladies affecting the brain do have physiological bases, such as Alzheimer's, Lou Gehrig's disease, and epilepsy, they cease being considered mental illnesses once their physiological basis has been described. At that point they are treatable by the therapies of true medicine such as drugs and surgery. The things that remain in the category of "mental illness," neurosis and hysteria and the like, have several things in common. First, the diagnosis is the same as the disease. Calling somebody a psychotic makes him a psychotic, because there is no underlying condition which can be found, proven or disproven.

Secondly, because there is no material substance to a supposed mental disease, the identification of diseases is arbitrary. The psychiatry business Bible, the DSM or diagnostic and statistical manual changes the definitions of disease very frequently, as fads sweep in and out. Homosexuality was dropped once it became chic, and attention deficit disorder came in.

Third, diagnosis and treatment are not objective. A psychiatrist needs to build a subjective relationship with the patient, one which often involves the practice of deceit, in order to come up with a diagnosis. On the contrary, a true medical condition such as diabetes may be misdiagnosed, but that does not affect the underlying physiological condition.

Fourth, in a true medical condition, the interests of the patient and the doctor are the same. They want to cure the condition. In a psychiatric relationship, they are often at odds. The psychiatrist is employed to keep the patient under control, institutionalized or whatever. Government and psychiatrists ally themselves to deprive people of freedom. Conversely, psychiatrists plead diminished capability to exculpate the guilty which leads to....

Psychiatry being a system which denies free will. It makes excuses for people. Szasz goes on at excessive length about the way in which psychiatry has excused malingerers, especially during war. It also is used systematically to excuse antisocial behavior in schools and many other settings. Richard Arum makes the case in "Judging School Discipline" that psychiatrist said lawyers have so destroyed discipline and

order in schools that learning is often impossible, the problem being worst among precisely those minority populations which are worst served by schools in the first place.

This is a good place to begin a catalog of the things one would expect Szasz to mention. The 1950s and 60s are, in my recollection, the high water mark of psychiatry. That is when psychobabble entered the common vocabulary. I have been called "anal-retentive" by all of my grown children, none of whom know what it means, and even after reading the definition I don't have much of a clue myself. Children's boorish behavior is excused as their right to "vent their feelings." In the final analysis, manners and the other civilized conventions which allow us to live together in harmony have gone by the wayside. All manner of behavior is now permitted. Szasz does not investigate psychiatry's obvious culpability in this.

Going on about psychiatry and popular culture, it would be worth a note about the incessant reference to psychiatry in movies starting about the 1950s, and as a recurrent theme in Woody Allen movies. It would be worth a mention that psychiatry is a very Jewish phenomenon starting with Sigmund Freud. Kevin Mac Donald posits that it is even used as a device by the Jewish community to tear at the fabric of the Christian community. It has certainly weakened Christian society, though in my view it is that equally damaging to the Jews themselves.

Szasz goes on at length about how psychiatry is used as a tool of oppression by the state. I believe that that is less true than it used to be in the United States, and he should say as much. He makes no mention of the Soviet Union which was certainly the biggest offender in this realm. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that in four years of living in Ukraine I have never heard mention of a psychiatrist. Googling the Ukrainian Psychiatric Association I find that it has only 800 members. An article I found says that most work for the government, dealing with drug and alcohol abuse. Written by psychiatrists, a quite expectedly decries the unavailability of treatment for people with mental health problems. Even if one reduces this to a simple lack of drug and alcohol counselors, I think it is a meaningful lacuna in the system. It seems extreme to me to contend that people do not benefit from professional help in dealing with drugs and alcohol. It is true that the success rates are low, and results unpredictable, but I think that there is enough benefit to warrant having people working in the field.

This leads to another point which is not well covered. There is a need in society for drug and alcohol counseling. Right now it is in the province of mental health experts, which seems as good a place as any. Although drugs probably should be decriminalized, there remains a need to deal with people who want to end their dependence on alcohol and illegal drugs. Or legal ones for that matter.

There are many medical conditions which are diagnosed by mental-type testing and benefit from medication. Clinical studies show that psychoactive drugs such as Prozac seem to help certain conditions. There appear to be legitimate uses for marijuana, and there certainly are for opiates. Whatever bipolar disorder is – Szasz says it is a phantom - some people swear by lithium. Somebody should make sure they get it, and understand it. There are some conditions which are indisputably physical in nature, such as Alzheimer's, which should be diagnosed by somebody with a background in mental health rather than merely bodily health. There remains a need to be able to diagnose childhood

conditions such as autism, Tourette's, and other situations which are treatable by drugs and other therapies. To categorically dismiss the whole field of mental health seems to me to be going overboard, even if one readily grants points one through four above.

Szasz has little use for religion, lumping it with phrenology, mesmerism, hypnosis and psychoanalysis as a sop to console men and women in face of the ordinary tribulations that come with being human. Like psychiatry, religion is not based on any empirically verifiable facts, only belief, or received superstition. I would invite him to think of it more deeply. As a scientist. The essence of evolutionary fitness is the ability of a population to reproduce itself. Religion was an important part of my Christian ancestors' belief system; it instructed them to be fruitful and multiply, and to treat each other civilly. It didn't always work, but in retrospect it worked a lot better than that which has replaced it, which is largely influenced by psychiatry. The same is true for Szasz' Jewish forebears. They certainly enjoyed more reproductive success, which equates to evolutionary fitness, when they had religion.

There is very little in the realm of human experience that lends itself to the kind of objective proofs one finds in mathematics or physics. We all harbor a large number of beliefs founded on unprovable a priori. In other words, religion is not an aberration; it is a reflection of the human condition. We have replaced religion with beliefs in global warming, yoga, homeopathic medicines, astrology, Scientology saving whales, the right to great sex, and a vast number of others which are likewise unsupported by evidence. Rather than reject unreason out of hand, I would ask that Szasz acknowledge that it is going to exist everywhere, and ask a more relevant question, which brands of unbelief are more beneficial to the bearer. I would argue that religion is useful, and go with Szasz in arguing that psychiatry, the denial of free will, is generally harmful.

The book's strength is its history of the field of mental health, especially his colorful descriptions of the personalities who founded the field: Charcot, Freud and their colleagues. He has located a plethora of early detractors who would be shocked at the respectability this pseudoscience has achieved.