

The Therapeutic State | Thomas Szasz

[The Illegitimacy of the “Psychiatric Bible”](#)

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“Mental health experts ask: Will anyone be normal?” So read the title of a July 27 Reuters report. The “experts” warned that the fifth version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), scheduled for publication in 2013, “could mean that soon no-one will be classed as normal. . . . [M]any people previously seen as perfectly healthy could in future be told they are ill.”

This is not news. More than 200 hundred years ago Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) warned: “I believe that in the end humanitarianism will triumph, but I fear that, at the same time, the world will become a big hospital, each person acting as the other’s humane nurse.”

Moreover, Goethe foresaw the moral hollowness of the “humanitarian science” on which such therapeutic tyranny would rest: “I could never have known so well how paltry men are, and how little they care for really high aims, if I had not tested them by my scientific researches. Thus I saw that most men only care for science so far as they get a living by it, and that they worship even error when it affords them a subsistence.”

The depths to which such men would happily sink when worshiping error brings them fame and fortune became obvious only in the twentieth century.

Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839–1908), the great Brazilian novelist and playwright, advanced the prescient literary satirization of the dark art of psychiatric diagnosis and the engine that drives it: the phony expert’s insatiable vanity and thirst for controlling his fellow man. His short story “O alienista” (1882, “The psychiatrist”) is a fable of a celebrated doctor retiring to a small town to pursue his scientific investigation of the human mind, gradually finding more and more of the townsfolk insane and needing to be incarcerated in his private asylum. Eventually he alone is left at liberty. As soon as modern psychiatry became a legitimate branch of medicine, Machado de Assis recognized and exposed its quintessentially unscientific-sadistic character.

It remained for the French playwright Jules Romains (1885–1972) to call public attention to the corruption of modern medicine by political power. “It’s a matter of principle with me,” declares his protagonist, “Dr. Knock” (1923), “to regard the entire population as our patients. . . . ‘Health’ is a word we could just as well erase from our vocabularies. . . . If you think it over, you’ll be struck by its relation to the admirable

concept of the nation in arms, a concept from which our modern states derive their strength.”

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), too, has played an important part in persuading people that health is an abnormal state. This old joke is illustrative: “If the patient is early for his appointment, he is anxious; if he is on time, he is obsessive-compulsive; if he is late, he is hostile.”

Particular psychiatric diagnoses have not escaped professional criticism. Wishing to make a name for themselves as psychiatrists, “critics” object to one or another diagnosis (homosexuality)—or to “overdiagnosis” (ADHD)—but continue to respect the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as a scientific organization and regard the various incarnations of the DSM as respectable legitimating documents. This is dishonest. Confronted with the DSM, the challenge we face is to delegitimize the authenticators, the APA and DSM, not distract attention from their fundamental phoniness by ridiculing one or another “diagnosis” and trying to remove it from the magical list.

I have consistently rejected this piecemeal approach. In my essay “The Myth of Mental Illness,” published in 1960, and in my book with the same title that appeared a year later, I stated my view forthrightly. I proposed that we view the phenomena conventionally called “mental diseases” as behaviors that disturb others (or sometimes the self), reject the image of “mental patients” as helpless victims of patho-biological events outside their control, and refuse to participate in coercive psychiatric practices as incompatible with the foundational moral ideals of free societies. In short, I rejected the authority of the APA as a legitimating organization and of the DSM as a legitimating document. I believe nothing less can undo the mischief wrought by the successive editions of the “psychiatric bible.”

Settled by Political Power

But times have changed. Fifty years ago it made sense to assert that mental illnesses are not diseases. It makes no sense to do so today. Professional debate about what counts as mental illness has been replaced by political-judicial decree. The controversy about the nature of so-called mental diseases/disorders has been settled by the holders of political power: They have decreed that “mental illness is a disease like any other.” Political power and professional self-interest have united in turning false beliefs into lying facts: “Mental illness can be accurately diagnosed, successfully treated, just as physical illness” (President William Clinton, 1999). “Just as things go wrong with the heart and kidneys and liver, so things go wrong with the brain” (Surgeon General David Satcher, 1999).

The claim that “mental illnesses are diagnosable disorders of the brain” is not based on scientific research; it is a deception and perhaps self-deception. My claim that mental illnesses are fictitious illnesses is also not based on scientific research; it rests on the

pathologist's materialist-scientific definition of illness as the structural or functional alteration of cells, tissues, and organs. If we accept this definition of disease, then it follows that mental illness is a metaphor, and asserting that view is stating an analytic truth not subject to empirical falsification.

For centuries the theocratic State exercised authority and used force in the name of God. The Founders sought to protect the American people from the religious tyranny of the State. They did not anticipate, and could not have anticipated, that one day medicine would become a religion and that the alliance between medicine and the State would then threaten personal liberty and responsibility exactly as they had been threatened by the alliance between church and State.

The Founders faced the challenge of separating the cure of souls by priests from the control of people by politicians. Today the therapeutic State exercises authority and uses force in the name of health. We face the challenge of separating the consensual treatment of patients by medical doctors from the coercive control of persons by agents of the State pretending to be healers.

When psychiatry was in its infancy the belief that all human "dysfunctions" are manifestations of brain diseases was a naive error. In its maturity the mistake was treated as a valid scientific theory and the justification for a powerful ideology and the powerful institutions based on it. Today, in its senescence, psychiatry is deceit and self-deceit—coercion concealed as objective science ("medical diagnosis") and benevolent help ("medical treatment"). As a result, paraphrasing Orwell, telling the truth becomes "a revolutionary act."

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