

THOMAS SZASZ: ASKING SIMPLE QUESTIONS

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Professor Thomas S. Szasz celebrates his eightieth birthday on 15 April 2000. He was born in Budapest in 1920. He escaped in 1938 to the United States. He graduated with honours in Physics in 1941, and gained his M.D. degree in 1944, from the University of Cincinnati. He trained at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. For the next five years, he was a member of its staff. He took twenty-four months out for active duty with the U.S. Navy. He is a Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and a Life Member of the American Psychoanalytic Association. He is Professor of Psychiatry Emeritus at the State University of New York Health Science Center in Syracuse, New York, and Adjunct Scholar at the Cato Institute, Washington, D.C.

At eighty he is as active as ever. His many books and articles show the extraordinary range and depth of his interests, not to mention his sense of humour and irony. His most famous book is *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1960). He followed it with others, such as *Law, Liberty and Psychiatry* (1963), which demonstrate the inquisitorial, persecutory nature of traditional psychiatry. He calls for the abolition of compulsory psychiatry, along with what he calls its 'Siamese twin', the insanity defence. He insists on the human right to buy or sell drugs, to commit suicide, and to engage in consensual, contractual psychotherapy and psychiatry. He rejects the term 'antipsychiatry', and has written a severe criticism of that ideology. He denounces child psychotherapy as an 'oxymoron', since children cannot make contracts.

Szasz is a fierce fighter. But he is a warm, friendly, humorous, responsible and considerate man. His opponents say he is heartless and so obsessed with abstract justice, freedom and responsibility that he denies the real medical problems of suffering 'patients' whose 'severe mental illnesses' make them incapable of taking responsibility. But Szasz is concerned with true compassion, not the sentimental appearance of it. One of his recent books is titled *Cruel Compassion*. He demonstrates, again and again, how institutional psychiatrists start from an inquisitorial position in which they *presume* the incompetence, irrationality and irresponsibility of their patients. He exposes the condescending 'compassion' of institutional psychiatry as a sham.

Szasz is, incidentally, a good doctor. It is by the standards of real medicine, as well as from the existential standpoint of autonomy and responsibility, dignity and decency, that he accuses psychiatrists of being fake 'doctors' treating fake 'illnesses' of fake 'patients' with fake 'treatments'. His daughter, Suzy, in her book, *Living With It: Why You Don't Have to be Healthy to be Happy*, describes how her father diagnosed her serious physical illness, systemic lupus erythematosus, which the medical specialists had missed.

Szasz's position is utterly different from Jeffrey Masson's. Masson calls, at the end of *Against Therapy*, for the abolition of psychotherapy. But what does he mean? When I asked him, at a conference of the Society for Existential Analysis, he could only

waffle. There have, I pointed out, been countries, like Czechoslovakia, that made psychoanalysis illegal, just as Albania made religion illegal. These were tyrannies, police states. Did Masson want this? No, but perhaps psychotherapy could just fade away . . .

Szasz's proposals, by contrast, are in earnest. He knows exactly what he means. The last thing he wants is to make contractual psychotherapy illegal. He believes in good psychotherapy, yet defends the right of consenting adults to engage in voluntary psychotherapy in even its silliest forms. He defends the right of consenting adults even to destructive psychiatric treatment, provided it is voluntary. But his call for the abolition of both compulsory psychiatry and the insanity defence is a serious legal and political programme, fitting for liberal democracy, as realistic and practical as the abolition of slavery.

The touchstone of all Szasz's arguments is human freedom, agency, responsibility, autonomy and dignity. This is the true compassion that he opposes to the patronising, infantilising compassion of what he calls the 'therapeutic state'.

He was one of the first therapists to be celebrated by a conference of the Society for Existential Analysis. But many of those present seemed disquieted that he was *serious* about the existential concepts of freedom and responsibility. For him these were not just nice topics for an essay or dissertation. His books, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* and *The Myth of Psychotherapy*, are important contributions to existential psychotherapy. As for what to call the therapy he practises, he has tried 'autonomous psychotherapy' or 'iatrologic'; but he dislikes pretentious terms.

Szasz did not publish psychotherapy case-studies after *The Myth of Mental Illness*. But, when I tried out his early case-study of 'Prisoner "K."' (1959) on the students in my course 'Great Case-Histories of Psychotherapy', they gave him top marks, along with Freud-with-Katharina and Esterson, as a therapist of integrity whom they would trust enough to go to. Bottom in the vote were Freud-with-Dora and Winnicott-with-the-Piggle: both examples of the kind of therapy Szasz rejects, since Dora was coerced by her father and the Piggle was a child.

I have had the honour of being invited to give a paper at a symposium on Szasz's eightieth birthday, *Liberty and/or Psychiatry?: 40 years since 'The Myth of Mental Illness'*, at Syracuse, New York. His birthday falls on the first anniversary of the death of his British friend and colleague, Aaron Esterson. Both worked on 'schizophrenia' as the paradigmatic 'mental illness'. Szasz analysed the contribution of institutional psychiatry, and Esterson that of family relationships, to the *diagnosis* of this alleged 'illness'. The heart of their method, of both research and therapy, is asking simple questions. The difficulty is to see that there is something to ask. My paper will be called 'Asking Simple Questions'. I shall discuss their method, and sketch how I have tried to use it in my own practice of psychotherapy and in my research on: first, the paradigm cases of Freud, Jungians, Boss and others; second, the techniques the Nazis developed to mystify and deceive their victims in the Holocaust.

The following selection of Thomas Szasz's writings represents a small fraction of his complete works.

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