

Szaszfest Report

by
Professor Michael Scott Fontaine
Cornell University

This "Szaszfest Report" is from Dr. Michael Scott Fontaine, Professor of Classics at Cornell University. He kindly sent this at my request, a summary of the August 8, 2014, "[Celebration of the Life and Work of Thomas Szasz](#)", Everson Museum, in Syracuse, New York. [Note: In my opinion, Michael's perspective on Tom's suicide is written in a most beautiful and accurate way. Tom's suicide should have been the centerpiece of the symposium. I have received some strong criticism from friends of mine and of Tom's for mentioning that he died by his own hand in my "[Kaddish for Thomas Szasz](#)." I have no regrets. I hope I will always remember what Tom wrote about political sin and virtue in *Ceremonial Chemistry*: "There is only one political sin: independence; and only one political virtue: obedience. To put it differently, there is only one offense against authority: self-control; and only one obeisance to it: submission to control by authority . . . [T]he person who controls himself . . . has no need for an authority . . . This, then, renders authority unemployed. . . . Autonomy is the death knell of authority, and authority knows it: hence the ceaseless warfare of authority against the exercise, both real and symbolic, of autonomy—that is, against suicide" (p. 175. JAS)]

August 8, 2014

Dear Jeff,

I'm just back from Szaszfest in Syracuse today and I am about to sack out, but before I do I want to drop you a quick note and say "it was fantastic." The folks at SUNY really put together an impressive show and as you told me, they are incredibly friendly. I'd guess there were 200 people in the audience, give or take. I made a pest of myself several times, asking a bunch of questions from Tom's point of view, and I wasn't surprised to find that his views are all still as challenging as they ever were. It sounds like a great number of people agree, albeit quietly, with what he had to say.

The morning started just right. Eugene Kaplan warmed us up with a nice string of vignettes about Szasz the man. Nietzsche's quip of "Human, all too human" came to mind. It was the right way to start. Ronald Pies then offered an overview of Szasz' view of mental illness and, toward the end, his own critique. In the Q and A I suggested the issue dividing them is not so much the meaning of illness (cellular pathology vs. more expansive definitions) as the meaning of mind. As it turned out, philosophy of mind is clearly an issue both of them have thought a great deal about and I enjoyed chatting with Dr. Pies about that afterward.

Bob Daly gave a fascinating discussion of agency, moral and otherwise, in decision-making. It was wide-ranging and by bringing in various forms of duress, challenged us to think of how many of our choices are really, in any meaningful sense, "free".

Over the lunch break a Syracuse University graduate student who has been tasked with going through Tom's papers in the library there held a special sneak peek of an exhibit. From 240 linear feet of papers he culled some gems from the correspondence. Really interesting stuff. I was most struck by a handwritten letter from a young woman to Tom in 1975. From the follow-up telegram it looks like he ended up calling the police when she showed up at his house, or something like that. In the letter the woman said another woman at college was stealing her identity, having plastic surgery to look like her, was going to have her brain swapped out for hers, and so on. A very nice psychiatrist next to me who was reading the same letter took all this as evidence the letter writer was psychotic. I remarked that the penmanship was some of the most steady and beautiful I'd ever seen, and that sure didn't look like something you could do with a broken brain. The psychiatrist told me, "Oh no, that's common." I didn't know that.

We rushed back just in time for the start of the afternoon session. In the first talk, Fred Cohen gave a wide-ranging talk on the legal aspects and realities of psychiatry. He suggested that Tom's efforts against the insanity defense were largely misdirected because in reality, that defense really only shows up in celebrity cases. He certainly seems well positioned to know that.

The last talk, by Mantosh Dewan, was a deeply informed, detailed, and fascinating conceptual overview of schizophrenia as Tom understood it. I thought it was a highlight of the day.

I haven't mentioned yet one of the talks I should say a little more about. Dr. Knoll's discussion of suicide was eloquent and moving. He reminded us that suicide is an individual decision but one with communal consequences, sometimes disastrous. He did a fine job of laying out some of Szasz's own thoughts about suicide as culled from, *Suicide Prohibition*, Tom's last book. When he reached the end of his presentation without having mentioned the fact that Szasz killed himself, it was, I thought, the elephant in the room. I asked for the microphone and asked Dr. Knoll why he had not mentioned it. He replied that he had expected the question but that as a close friend of some of Tom's family members, it's impossible for him to be dispassionate. I accept that reasoning entirely, and if I were in his situation (or at a funeral) I would not have brought it up, either. But in the context of our symposium -- which was not to praise Tom but to consider his ideas for good or ill -- I thought, and said, that it would have been inappropriate *not* to bring up the manner in which he died. So let me take this opportunity to repeat the point I made and to provide some classical context for it.

After the symposium, by the way, several audience members told me they had not known that Tom committed suicide. It's true that it had been kept out of the

newspapers, but [your obituary on Szasz.com](#) made it public nearly two years ago. Let me start by quoting it:

Thomas Stephen Szasz died by his own hand on September 8, 2012, at his home in Manlius, New York, after a fall that occurred less than a week earlier. When he fell at home, he broke T-10, the tenth thoracic vertebrae in his spine, confirmed by a physician at a local hospital using x-ray. The hospital physician wanted to admit him and put him on what would likely have been a morphine drip, and proposed surgery to help heal the break -- there was talk about inserting a piece of plastic to hold the vertebral fracture together so it could heal, but Tom would have none of that.

I think it's clear that in choosing the time and means of his death, Tom saw himself as a participant in a long tradition. In 399 BC the Athenian philosopher [Socrates](#) (469-399 BC) was tried and found guilty of atheism and "corrupting the youth," whatever that means. He was the first "gadfly" for whom all dissidents since have been named and from whom many have taken their bearings, Tom included (as he periodically hinted). His greatest student, Plato, later made Socrates a character in his dialogues and used his end-of-life predicament as a feature in several of them. The dramatic setting of one of those dialogues, [Crito](#), finds Socrates in jail on death row. In it the prison guard has been bribed to look the other way so a wealthy friend can smuggle Socrates out to safety. To the friend's surprise, however, Socrates refuses to leave, and the dialogue becomes a discussion of why death is preferable to breaking the law. At one point Socrates contemplates fleeing his beloved Athens to the backwater frontier of Thessaly, only to imagine the sarcastic reaction that locals might have if he turns up there (53d-e):

Perhaps they'd enjoy hearing of the ludicrous way in which you ran away from prison by dressing up in a disguise, a peasant's leather cloak or some other such escapee's outfit, and changing your appearance. And will no one say that you, an old man, who probably only had a short time left to live, clung to life with such shameless greed that you dared to violate the most important laws?

Like Socrates, Tom preferred dignity and consistency of principle to death. I am *sure* these were his thoughts when he refused the surgical intervention you refer to.

What makes me sure of that? One Latin word for a tomb is *monumentum*, a monument. The son of Christopher Wren had that meaning in mind when he composed Wren's epitaph in St. Paul's Cathedral, his father's architectural masterpiece. The simple tombstone reads *Lector, si monumentum requiris, circumspice* – "Dear reader, if you're looking for the *monumentum*, look around

you!” Just so, we might give Tom a similar epitaph: *Si notam requiris, tolle lege* -- “If you’re looking for a note, go read his books!” Any private note he may or may not have left is none of our business. He had long since made his thoughts on suicide a matter of public record.

What does his suicide mean? I see four immediate lessons, three minor and one major.

- First, Tom thought suicide was not something to be ashamed of. On the contrary, he thought it could preserve one’s dignity.
- Second, it proves that he really did consider (as he often said) freedom and dignity, rather than health, his paramount virtue. He did not waver in the end.
- Third, by doing it in his own home, he emphasized his belief that suicide should be a measured and private matter. He implicitly raises the question, therefore, of whether public suicides are *necessarily* impulsive rather than the outcome of a due reflection. If so, perhaps loved ones should redouble their efforts in preventing them. (I do not know whether Tom would agree with this point but I'm sure he would have at least considered it.)
- Fourth and most importantly, by committing suicide as he did Tom made a point he could not have made any other way. Several of Plato’s dialogues end by forcing readers into a double bind, or *aporia*, and are designed to make them question the premises of what they believe. Tom's masterstroke, the capstone to his activist career, was to force psychiatrists and legislators worldwide into a double bind. Many today believe suicide is the ultimate proof of mental illness. Was Szasz mentally ill? No one thought so when he was alive. But if he wasn’t mentally ill when he was alive, how could his suicide be a symptom of mental illness?

Making these points does *not* mean I endorse them. I do think these are the ideas Tom had in mind in the end, and I think they are the question he would have wanted us to raise at a symposium devoted to his life and work.

As I said at the start of this note, it was a super event, one of the best such symposia I’ve attended in any field.

Several people told me they weren't familiar with Szasz.com or you or your work, which I thought was pretty bizarre, but anyhow you may see an uptick in traffic soon.

Best,

Mike