

the last few years have shown us how unregulated human greed has brought the Western world to near catastrophe, leaving ordinary people to suffer the consequences and pay the bills. State regulation is always required to engineer a just society, but government has to represent the interests of all its citizens, and not fall prey to the influence of particular groups – in this case the wealthy. In the area of mental welfare, a willingness to question the concept of

mental illness is necessary to understand whose interests are being weighed in the balance, and for what purposes, when 'mental illness' is being 'treated'.

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## SZASZ, REASON & RESPONSIBILITY

Ron Roberts

Thomas Szasz and Ronnie Laing may be destined to be forever bracketed together under the rubric of 'anti-psychiatry'. This despite their combined disapproval of the term (Szasz most recently in his book *Anti-Psychiatry: Quackery Squared*) and their at times different attitudes to psychological care. Szasz favoured consensual psychotherapy, by which he meant the contracted, non-medical meeting of two people, where one is designated as a psychotherapist to assist the other in dealing with his or her problems of living.

Whilst critical of mainstream psychiatry, RD Laing favoured his own version of the healing arts, which he still saw as belonging within the family of medicine. For him the central problem, and one which he was unable to solve, was how science – an enterprise premised on treating its objects of study as things – could be reconciled with a purely human, professional healing relationship. In Szasz's eyes this amounted to trying to have one's cake and eat it: psychology and psychiatry dressed in the language of science were nothing other than pseudo-sciences. And Laing was trapped within a knot of his own making.

The different perspectives which Szasz and Laing brought to their work has led to a marked split in how they are considered by those interested in the emancipation of mental health system users. Laing is widely considered to have furthered our understanding of the reasoning and experience of severely distressed individuals, particularly those on whom the label 'psychotic' is often fixed. As such, he is viewed as sympathetic to their plight. This often contrasts with a view of Szasz which agrees with his analysis of the politics and the myths of the mental health system, but sees his position as one which essentially lacks compassion.

It seems to me that the chief reason for this judgement on Szasz is his contention that people are responsible for their actions. This notion is central to Szasz's entire body of work, his lifelong critique of mainstream psychiatry. In rejecting the medical-psychiatric argument that human beings in psychological or social difficulty should be viewed primarily as bio-machines

gone wrong, Szasz is adamant that the only alternative is to begin from a premise that sees us all as active agents in the world, and therefore responsible for what we do.

I wish to consider some of the implications of this position. That we are responsible for what we do does not, of course, entail that we are responsible for what others do to us – though we may sometimes have a degree of influence on this. Similarly, as a consequence of what others – both individuals and institutions – do to us, our own field of possible actions may be limited to various degrees. For Szasz, the goal and the purpose of therapy – indeed of life – is to enlarge the sphere within which one may act freely and responsibly. Therefore, Szasz's arguments should not be mistaken for blaming people for being (or appearing) unable to move out of their current predicament. Essentially, what he argues is that if one is to have any hope of change one must first of all consider oneself as a person imbued with freedom and responsibility. This is consistent with his rejection of scientific language to describe the human condition, and with his employing an ethical rather than a supposedly medical-scientific vocabulary – one which offers an unknown and unknowable future, if we choose to embrace it. Szasz's take on existence – like that of the author of the theory of personal constructs, George Kelly – is that a human being cannot be 'fixed' by any description: everyone's life is always beyond the horizon of any attempt to describe it completely, especially since every such attempt is only ever rooted in past observations. Like Sartre, Szasz understood that a human life can only be defined once it is complete. Like Sartre, Szasz also took it as a given that we are all "condemned to be free" – thrown into the world, unasked, as free and responsible agents.

Of course, these are uncomfortable and challenging ideas. They allow little space for any of us to remain in the position of 'the victim', let alone enjoy it – even when, objectively speaking, one is a victim. In that case, though, the question is: What stance one can muster to appraise one's plight, and the present and future possibilities which may arise from it?

Szasz's view is that responsibility



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is something to continually strive for. Outright rejection of this perspective on responsibility cannot be anything but politically unhelpful. For a start, if service users are to achieve liberation from the tyranny of the mental health system, a position which embraces complete powerlessness is not going to help. One only needs to acknowledge, in the first place, that everyone always has at least a little room and a little choice. And from such small beginnings greater things might then grow.

Regrettably, Szasz had little to say about collective responsibility. This remains an area of his thought which needs further development. A potentially problematic relationship between individual and collective responsibility is evident in any political system. While he acknowledged the importance and the right to struggle for collective liberties, Szasz was distrustful of every kind of organised power. A witness to the totalitarian horrors of twentieth century, he

knew that collectivities can all too easily turn their attentions to suppressing the liberties of the individual. With the new 'post-modern' totalitarianism of the 21st century security state looming large, it is imperative that we not only get to grips with demarcating the boundaries between individual and collective responsibility but also set about exploring and elucidating the best practical relationships between them. (Milgram's famous experiments on obedience to authority stand as one of the few concerted attempts in the behavioural sciences to clarify thinking about these relationships.)

Szasz left a legacy of original and challenging ideas. A fitting tribute would be for all of us who clamour for a just world to build on this and take it in directions that Szasz could only dream of.

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