



## **The Myth of Psychotherapy**

*Thomas Szasz*

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s/t: Mental Healing as Religion, Rhetoric & Repression

## The Myth of Psychotherapy Details

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## Carmen B says

Some interesting historical background to the advent of psychotherapy.

Flawed thinking when it comes to contemplating the nature of mental illness. Szasz assumes that patients are "fakers" and that they're deliberately "acting sick". It makes me wonder if he ever bothered to listen to people's experience of mental illness to test this assumption.

Even if mental illness is primarily a spiritual complaint as he asserts, surely it can still have an organic component? Where apart from our bodies would we be experiencing the symptoms of mental illness? In the air?

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## Blaise Aguirre says

I have become increasingly disillusioned with traditional "talk therapy". A colleague gave me this book 20 years ago and this week, on vacation, decided to read it. I dismissed the book as nonsense then, without reading it and now regret not having done so.

It seems to me that the stories we tell ourselves as to the reasons we got here may be initially satisfying, but the magic comes in how, given our journey to the present moment, we do things differently.

Simply telling the story over and over to a therapist can't be the answer. Szasz was ahead of his time in recognizing this simple truth.

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## Mothwing says

Partly illuminating, partly not very interesting, mostly because after agreeing with the central premise I was not that interested in the particular history and career of psychoanalytic leading figures.

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## John says

Read it.

[https://psychiatric survivors.wordpress...](https://psychiatric survivors.wordpress.com/)

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## Trevor Nash says

Great book, heavy material on psychology and psychotherapy. It was interesting to hear of research done and truths behind mentally problems and how people think. I highly recommend this book if you can handle it.

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## Roslyn says

"More specifically, I shall try to show how, with decline of religion and the growth of science in the 18th century, the cure of sinful souls--which had been an integral part of Christian religions--was recast as the cure of sick minds, and became an integral part of medical science. My aim in this enterprise has been to unmask the medical and therapeutic pretensions of psychiatry and psychotherapy. I have done so, not because I think that medicine and treatment are bad things, but rather because in the so-called mental health field, I know that the psychiatric and psychotherapeutic mythology is now used to disguise deception and conceal coercion by psychiatric, patients, politicians, jurists, journalists, and people in general. Since people need myths to sustain their existence however, there must be restraints on the pursuit of demythologizing. Accordingly I have, in my life and in my writings, tried to distinguish between the use of myth to sustain a person's own existence and its use to deceive and coerce others. Objecting to the personal use of mythology in private or between consenting adults, is objecting to religious freedom. Objecting to the legal and political use of force and fraud--concealed and justified by a mythology--is objecting to religious persecution. One can, of course, believe in and defend freedom of religion without believing in the truth of any particular religion--theological, medical, or psychiatric. And one can object to religious coercion even though one might believe that some or all of the goals of that particular religion (theological, medical, or psychiatric) are desirable. In either case, one would be for freedom and against coercion, not for or against religion or medicine or psychiatry."

"Instead of conquering what had been presented to him as mental diseases by curing these diseases, he conquered what is, in fact, the human condition by annexing it, in its entirety, to the medical profession."  
[On Freud]

"Psychotherapy is the name we give to a particular kind of personal influence. By means of communication one person identified as the psychotherapist exerts an ostensibly therapeutic influence on another person identified as the patient.... In countless other situations people influence one another but who is to say whether or when such interactions are helpful or harmful and to whom. The concept of psychotherapy betrays us by prejudging the interaction as therapeutic for the patient.... People try to influence one another constantly, the question that concerns those interested in psychotherapy is: what kind of influence do psychotherapists exert on their clients? People influence one another to support some values and oppose others. In the past they promoted such overt values as chastity, obedience, and thrift. Today they advocate such covert values as "the common good," "mental health," "welfare," blanks that may be filled in with any meaning the speaker or listener desires. Herein lies the great value of these vague terms for the demagogue, whether political or professional. Just as a presidential candidate may talk about "restoring the nation's economy to a healthy condition" without specifying whether he is promoting a balanced budget or deficit financing, so a psychiatrist may talk about mental health without revealing whether he is promoting individualism or collectivism, autonomy or heteronomy... Often, however, attempts to treat a patient are really efforts to alter his conduct from one mode to another."

"It is impossible to compel a person to confront himself as a moral agent.... Although a particular moral practice may be beneficial when undertaken voluntarily, it is worthless or harmful when it is imposed on a person against his will."

"If he is to eschew coercion, then he must exclude from his practice those patients who, because of their own coercive tactics, render peaceful conduct toward them impossible." [On Luther]

"What all these methods had in common, and what is most important about them, is that each was at bottom a conversation between patient and doctor, and that this simple fact was disguised by a scientific-sounding Greek term that legitimized them as therapeutic interventions."

"Because that proposition of Freud's is epistemological nonsense, and because Freud must have gradually realized that it was, he had only two choices: he could abandon it and admit that human affairs belonged in the realm of morals rather than medicine; or he could redouble his efforts and insist ever more stubbornly that in psychoanalysis he had created a science of "mental life," a science that is "like any other" in its power to offer causal explanations for what it observes and influences. Freud chose the latter path."

"In Freud's view, persons do not act; they are moved by impulses that are largely unconscious. They are moved, moreover, in directions that are generally venal and vile. Freud's contention that man has no free will is pivotal to the rest of his theory. ... Freud then cites Martin Luther's immortal exclamation: "Here I stand, I can do no other!" to prove his point. Freud here argues either from bad thinking or bad faith or both. For it is clear that Luther's statement was a figure of speech: It was precisely because he could have acted otherwise but did not that his decision had the irresistible moral force it had. Freud either misunderstands this or denies it; it is difficult to know which would put him in worse light."

"He reinterpreted the fact that Oedipus did not want to kill his father and marry his mother. Actually, Oedipus did all he could to avoid doing so. That circumstance Freud transformed into his famous formula that denial is a type of affirmation. In other words, had Oedipus deliberately set out to do what he did, this would have proved that he wanted to kill his father and marry his mother; and had he set out to avoid doing so, that also would have proved that he wanted to do so.

According to the "manifest content" of the legend, Oedipus did not know that the man he killed was his father or that the woman he married was his mother. Freud accounted for that too, by postulating that "unconsciously" Oedipus did know who they were. If he had not, of course, his act would have been a tragic mistake rather than true patricide and incest.

The most damaging evidence against Freud's case, however, is the fact that he never considered Laius's role in the Oedipus legend. If it is psychologically legitimate to interpret all of Oedipus' actions as intention, it is not just as legitimate to interpret Laius' actions in the same way? If so, we should have to conclude that the original motive in this legend is Laius' desire to kill his son--that is, filicide. But Freud never suggested that fathers had a "Laius complex," consisting of a desire to kill their sons and keep their wives solely to themselves, and that such a "complex" is a universal trait of the human psyche."

"The mind, for example, becomes the "psychic apparatus," the passions the "id," the self the "ego," and the conscience the "superego." One could easily construct an entire glossary of the equivalents in ordinary language of the Freudian semantic masquerading as science."

"People have no conflicts and conflicting desires: instead, they have "complexes" and "ambivalences."

"His [Freud's] life work, he says, has been devoted to lowering religion from the "upper floor" into the "basement"--that is, from inspiration to insanity. If he had only more time left in his life--says the base rhetorician posing as a scientific revolutionary--he would similarly degrade art and the other lofty accomplishments of the human spirit."

"The inconsistency between Freud's passionate anti-religious tirades and his profound commitment to Jewishness significantly highlights an important aspect of Freud's personality and productions, namely his anti-Gentilism.... Freud was, throughout his life, a [self-described] proud, chauvinistic, even vengeful Jew... Freud's son was a member of the Kadimah, a Zionist organization, and Freud himself was an honorary

member of it.... One of Freud's most powerful motives in life was the desire to inflict vengeance on Christianity for its traditional anti-Semitism."

"Clearly, the idea that disagreement is a disease, and that he who defies authority is deranged and should be disposed of by the methods of social repression then in vogue, is very old indeed."

"Religion can be replaced only by religion." [Jung]

"Here, then, was the issue that lay at the bottom of the inevitable break and subsequent bad feelings between Freud and Jung: Was psychotherapy ... to be defined, practiced, and merchandised as a medical, scientific enterprise, or as a religious, spiritual one? Freud, as we know, opted for the former answer--preferring a Platonic lie to a plain truth--and is considered a great scientist. Jung, predictably, opted for the latter--preferring a simple truth to a convenient obfuscation--and is considered a great mystic."

Jung: "I still stand up for the inalienable rights of the individual since he alone is the carrier of life and is gravely threatened by the social leveling process today."

"Jung regarded both respectfully--religion as collective mythologies and neuroses as individual ones."

"In Jung's view religions are indispensable spiritual supports, whereas in Freud's they are illusory crutches."

Jung: "Analytical psychology... only helps us to find the way to the religious experience that makes us whole."

"All this betokens still another aspect of the implacable resolve of psychotherapy to rob religion of as much as it can, and to destroy what it cannot: contrition, confession, prayer, faith, inner resolution, and countless other elements are expropriated and renamed as psychotherapy; whereas certain observances, rituals, taboos, and other elements of religion are demeaned and destroyed as the symptoms of neurotic psychotic illnesses."

"The result of psychotherapy can thus only be that the subject is, or is not, converted or persuaded to feel, think, or act differently than has been his habit."

"Religion (morals and ritual), rhetoric (speech and gestures), and repression (constraint and punishment) are all matters of the utmost concern to every legal and political system."

"Insofar as the role of the state in relation to health is examined and articulated, it is usually in the spirit of naive medicalism, reflecting the false premise that in the area of treatment, unlike that of salvation, there are no fundamental conflicts between the individual and the state. As a result, the most varied interests have sought, in the name of health, to enlist the support of the modern state. They have all succeeded. ... The idea that the preservation and promotion of health are obligations the government owes its citizens has become, the whole world over, an article of faith compared to which the Medieval belief in Christianity is veritable skepticism."

"As a result, most people now believe it is a good thing that the state defines what is sickness and what is treatment and that the state pays for whatever treatment people need. What most people do not understand, indeed seem disinclined to understand, is that the state may, and therefore will, define as sickness whatever the people might want to do for themselves; that it may, and therefore will, define as treatment whatever the government might want to do to the people; and that it may, and therefore will, tax the people for "medical" services that range from denying Laetrile to those persons who want it to imposing psychiatric imprisonment

on those who do not want it. Clearly, the future scope of such "services" promises to include an array of therapeutic prohibitions and prescriptions of truly Orwellian proportions."

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### **Barak says**

Interesting thesis if somewhat repetitive and somewhat all-inclusive. Also, there are times the author for instance go against theories by saying they do not provide corroborating scientific evidence, while doing exactly the same in respect to some of his own views.

The history of Mesmer, Freud and Jung as connected with the main thesis is rather interesting (though it would be better to read I believe separate books about them instead - Jung's autobiography as an example is an excellent book). It is a shame though that Szasz can mention so many times, contrastingly, "Religion" and "Science" without giving philosophic theories/definitions of the two, appealing rather to some commonsensical understanding of each and every reader.

Instead he is much more interested in reiterating exactly the same thing in gazillion different ways.

Looking at my own comments above, I should really have given this book only 2 stars, but since I appreciate the author's "guts" and some of his original ideas, I decided it merits a third one.

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### **Jay says**

You almost feel bad for Freud by the time Szasz is done with him. From time to time the author tries to connect dots that I'm not quite sure are connectable, but overall he does a great job in his criticism.

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