

Thomas S. Szasz MD



‘The myth of mental illness’

Transcript of lecture, held at UCE Birmingham
7th December 2003

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Thomas S. Szasz MD is Professor of Psychiatry Emeritus at the State University of New York Health Science Center in Syracuse, New York, Adjunct Scholar at the Cato Institute, Washington, D.C., author and lecturer. His classic *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1961) made him a figure of international fame and controversy. Many of his works, such as *Law, Liberty, and Psychiatry*, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, *Ceremonial Chemistry*, and *Our Right to Drugs*, are regarded as among the most influential in the 20th century by leaders in medicine, law, and the social sciences. Born in Budapest in 1920, Thomas Szasz came to this country in 1938 from his native Hungary and within a few months was admitted to the University of Cincinnati. After graduating with honors in Physics in 1941, he entered the College of Medicine of the University of Cincinnati and won his M.D. degree in 1944. Later, Szasz took his psychoanalytic training at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis and for the next five years was a member of its staff, taking twenty-four months out for active duty with the U.S. Navy. A FELLOW of the American Psychiatric Association and a LIFE member of the American Psychoanalytic Association, Dr. Szasz has published frequently in leading medical, psychiatric, and psychoanalytic journals.

NB: this edited transcript was typed from a tape recording and not copied from an original script; therefore, the Centre for Community Mental Health cannot vouch for its accuracy.

Let me try to summarise what it is that I have been believing and seeing for the better part of 50 years, and actually some of this I have believed for, I am now 83 years old, 73 years because some of these ideas seem, to me, quite simple. I hear you are particularly interested that I address the issue of psychiatric experience and what I call ‘pharmacocracy’. And I will approach that side-long not head-on.

Psychiatry and the idea of mental illness is one of those things, which, in my opinion, got off to a fundamentally wrong start. Now, as you know, the idea of illness, of being sick, is as old as mankind. It certainly goes back to ancient Greece and Rome; they had no idea, no concept such as rehabilitation of mental illness in fact even Shakespeare doesn’t have such a concept if you read his work. There is a concept of madness, of something being wrong, most dramatically expressed in *Macbeth* but the idea really is a modern idea. It was a 17th century idea, a contemporary in the uses of modern scientific thinking, materialistic scientific thinking.

Now, what is the root problem? It’s extremely simple. People have tried to explain why people do what they do forever and that’s a natural thing. We do that by looking for the reason why people do what they do. You are sitting here because you have a reason for wanting to hear me. So, you have some reason for being here, as I have. This is a skill we use generally, except when for some reason we decide that the person is mentally ill. Then we say they are unreasonable, and then we assign causes to this behaviour. Now, this is a fundamental dichotomy. Supposing you get Hepatitis and you will turn yellow. Someone could say that this means something, that the yellow is indicating something, a sign. But, of course, you are not giving a sign.

As Erving Goffman, who was very sensitive about human communication and language said, “You are giving *off* a sign; you are not giving a sign.” Same thing with a reflex; if you, for example, have a sore throat and you cough – you are not coughing to attract attention or as a mannerism; you are doing it involuntarily. And there is a cause for it. So, when you go to your doctor or physician they are looking for the cause of your illness or infection. If you break a leg; the cause is you fell over. This is a scheme they use in psychiatry. So, we say schizophrenia is an illness.

You can trace psychiatry all the way from imbalance of humours. What's the proper treatment for it? Blood-letting, cupping, purgatives, you have something wrong in you, your servant was tortured in this way for an illness, which, of course, was an organic physical illness called porphyria. So this is essentially what psychiatry is about – looking for the disease. And this has gone from bloodletting to hereditary then the modern days a famous theory was it was due to an electrical explanation of neurology, due to reverberating circuits in the brain. I hope you know what I am talking about. The men who discovered this got a Nobel Prize, so naturally people believe in mental illness. How much more legitimate can you be? And that led to the treatment by lobotomy. The cause was a reverberating circuit, so you interrupt the circuit. Now, of course, everybody knows that it is genetics. So, all you have to do every couple of months go and open a medical journal and it's on gene 'such and such' and they have found a schizophrenia gene. Well, they'll find a schizophrenia gene, as far as I'm concerned, when they find a gene for Catholicism! These are ways of being. It's a completely wrong idea.

For those of you, I can't go into details because I want to have lots of time for discussions, this is nothing new in science – in a way, the great breakthroughs in modern science have occurred when some very plausible explanations turn out to be false. For hundreds of years, they gave the scientists up until the 20th Century very often (and believed they were true) two classic examples which I have used in my writings over and over again are in chemistry, phlogiston. How many people know what I am talking about? Well, only four or five people. For hundreds of years, to put it very briefly, people tried to explain why something burns. You ignite a piece of wood, why does it burn? You want to try to begin to understand the natural science. Mind you, this was long before the discovery of the various elements; nobody knew what was in air, nobody knew about nitrogen, oxygen and so on. The theory was that there was something in the material substances that burned because obviously some things didn't burn. That they called phlogiston, and when you burn this thing it gives off phlogiston, it sounds very good!

Along come Lavoisier (Antoine) who was a French nobleman who was decapitated during the revolution when he was quite young, he was a great scientist from an early age and he did what scientists do; if something burns and it gives off phlogiston it ought to be lighter after it's burned. So, he burned, amongst other things, iron rods. If you burn an iron rod, if you heat it; you oxidize it, in our terms. It becomes ferric-oxide – it absorbs oxygen from the air and it becomes heavier.

Another example happened almost at the time when I was born in 1920, Aether, and any of you who have studied physics know there was a concept of Aether, and this was another plausible concept because how does radiation, the heat and the light from the Sun get to the Earth, which was known to be energy radiation. How does it get through empty space? It can't get through empty space; something has to be there. That was called Beta. But, modern physics got rid of that, especially Einstein. But great scientists believed that this was true, so why shouldn't they believe that mental illness exists? "Do I believe this man's crazy? Of course I believe he's crazy" but he's not ill.

Now, what about the various mental illnesses? Here I again, during my own lifetime this changed, and some jokes, and I don't mean to make light of it but I also don't see why one shouldn't make jokes about it too. If you now look at the DSM, one of the most fundamental distinctions in psychiatry which lasted for decades, throughout most of my professional career, have disappeared. There used to be two kinds of mental diseases – functional and organic and there used to be two other divisions, namely neurosis and psychosis. The idea of psychosis still appears, the word 'neurosis' doesn't appear anymore. What happened to it? The explanation is contained in a joke – 'The neurotic is someone who builds castles in the air. The psychotic lives in them and the psychiatrist collects the rent!' There are other similar jokes which capture this idea that this is not like hepatitis or pneumonia.

Let me dispose of the idea of psychosis in my way, in my dogmatic way! After all, how do people know that someone is psychotic? Well, just look in the textbooks. They are supposed to have two cardinal symptoms or manifestations; hallucination and delusion. Typically, just like doctors will ask you, 'Where does it hurt?' psychiatrists typically ask people, 'Do you hear voices?' Now what the heck does that mean? See, that already structures something. People who used to hear voices used to be called monks or prophets, hearing God's voice, hearing your conscience. Now, hearing voices has become kind of an entity, and there are now thousands of people who refer to themselves as 'voice hearers' even. And then psychologists and psychiatrists discovered that lots of normal people who were not psychotic will tell you in confidence that they hear voices.

There is a wonderful story about a famous great physicist of the age; Richard Fineman. He was a very young man at the time he was working on the atomic bomb, was also very down to earth and very humorous. When his work was finished on the Manhattan Project he was still in his mid-twenties I think, the war wasn't over yet but he went back to Cornell University and, naturally, wanted to pursue his studies, for which he got a Nobel Prize. So naturally he didn't want to go into Service and he was very broadly informed so he knew about the psychiatric game and knew it better than the psychiatrists. He was called into Service and went for his physical examination (which went fine) and then came the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist asked Richard if he heard voices. That was all that he was waiting for. Richard said 'Voices? I hear voices all the time.' The psychiatrist asked for an explanation. And he said, "Voices? I hear voices all the time." The doctor said, "What do you mean you hear voices?" Fineman replied "I can, right now, hear Doctor Teller's voice in his thick Hungarian accent telling me that this equation is wrong, and I tell him no you are wrong, it's right, and he keeps telling me louder that it is wrong", and so on. He was declared to be having hallucinations and declared unfit for Service! That's a true story.

So, what do we mean when we hear voices? Now let me tell you from a good scientific point of view what hearing voices is, in my opinion. It is well-documented. When somebody says they are hearing voices there is nobody talking to you. There are no voices around; nobody else can hear the voices. There is only one possibility; that he is talking to himself. And that is what hearing voices is, when you think about it. A psychotic person who hears voices is talking to himself and is disowning and rejecting the responsibility for hearing voices.

Let me illustrate it again comically. Such persons often do something violent; let's say a middle-aged man kills his wife. He goes to the psychiatrist and he asks the man what he did. The man says that God's voice told me to kill her, because she was poisoning me. I have never heard of a case ever, never seen in a psychiatrist textbook or journal where somebody says I am hearing voices and they are saying for me to get up and be especially nice to my wife and children today! It's always associated with something wrong; you know the devil is in somebody.

What about delusions? Delusions are not worth talking about! They are so idiotic. Delusions, after all, are defined as 'stubbornly held, false views'. Since I am not a religious person but I daresay that that defines any sincerely seriously held religious view which you don't hold. The other person has his or her own view obviously. Now we don't call it a delusion because millions of people hold the view. But if only one person holds the view you call it a delusion, so it becomes a kind of legitimation rather than some discreet phenomenon.

Now, we come to the symmetrical problem. So much for mental illness which doesn't exist; what does exist, of course, is psychiatry. Now that also is a new phenomenon because in my view, and this is a view I've held ever since I was a young child, when it dawned on me that freedom is a nice thing especially since, although I had a very good childhood, it felt like it was a kind of imprisonment and you have to wait until you are grown up and free. The only question is what kind of wardens did you have? If you have good wardens it's not so bad; if you had bad wardens you had a very bad childhood, but either way you are not free. You can't do all the things that grown-ups do. All the signs used to say you can't go in there, or do this, until you are 18 years old, not to mention the fact that children had to go to school, which later on I got to like but initially that wasn't my idea of a good time! So, why does one have to go to school? Because you have *cause* to go to school.

When I got a littler older I realised there were two ways that people got locked up. One is if they commit a crime and they got locked up in a prison. If they are called crazy they are locked up in a prison called a hospital. This is black and white, as far as I am concerned.

From a relatively early age Mark Twain happened to be a popular author, and I read all of his works and this was the way became interested in slavery, such as 'Huckleberry Finn'. It always seemed to me that this was a kind of slavery, and the slavery analogy is very apt because after all you have to keep in mind, throughout all of history, from years ago until the present time slavery still exists. For thousands of years it was taken for granted the normal way for people to work was as slaves. The free people don't work; I mean we celebrate Ancient Greece and its democracy well you didn't do any work if you were a free citizen of Athens; they had slaves to do the work. This existed, more or less, until the modern world. It was a very modern idea that if you want to have somebody to do work for you, you should pay them and they should want to do it willingly. So there is voluntary labour, involuntary servitude (slavery) and voluntary work, which is what we all do when we grow up, if we want something we have to work. We get paid for it and if we want something we pay somebody to give us that service. So we have commercial relations and voluntary relations.

Again, you don't need to know a great deal of science to realise that all of medicine, in the English-speaking world; the idea of a doctor treating somebody who does not want to be treated, having an involuntary patient, doesn't exist. You can have a broken leg, but you don't have to be treated. Nobody is going to come after you and say that you need to be treated. So it goes without saying that all medical relations are voluntary. All of them, except psychiatry. Now, why? Why can't that be voluntary? Here is the problem – it can be voluntary and it is voluntary and this is how the psychiatrists from the relatively early days, but this has become greatly accelerated, since the end of the 19th Century the advent of work from people like Freud and the psychoanalysts which then became co-mingled with psychiatry. And this became the double role of the psychiatrist; he is now a classical double agent, in the sense of 007. He's a double agent because on the one hand he is like any other Doctor to whom people may come and say 'I am unhappy in my marriage and I can't sleep can you help me?' and they may talk or the doctor may give him drugs but it is a voluntary relationship.

And his other job is to protect society from you. Why? Because mental illness is synonymous as dangerous to self and others. Now you see this all tied into law. Dangerousness to self is what I call a human right, again back to John Locke and English Law, "You have a right to yourself, to your own labour, to your own body." That's why a surgeon cannot cut you without your permission because it's your body. When you are dead they can cut you up without your permission or your proxy-permission, after you are dead you can have your last will you can decide what happens with your money, so this is you own yourself which includes dangerousness to self. Up until when I went to medical school that included taking all kinds of drugs.

When I went to medical school there were no discussions on drug abuse because it didn't exist. Drugs existed, people regularly took opium and cocaine, Freud himself experimented with cocaine but nobody thought anything of it as it was not illegal. What did become illegal, is very interesting, is the cardinal sin of the Judaism, Christian and Islamic religion. God created us and only God can take our life. So, as I understand it, Islam regards suicide as a graver sin than murder. Well this simply became transferred into psychiatry, and again, this is not an exception. What about homosexuality? What about oral sex? What about all those things we now do, they are all sins.

And homosexuality, by the way, was a tremendously popular mental illness when I was your age! It was almost better than schizophrenia because it was more easily identified, people admitted it and psychiatrists loved it and treated it and psychoanalysed it and gave the people electric shock treatment, hormones, you name it. Now it is a human right. Now we are discussing whether they have a right to get married, and this has all happened in my lifetime. Was there was any biological discovery about homosexuality that made this change? None! Anymore than there was a biological discovery about Jews being persecuted in Germany – years ago they were killed; now they are not. Nothing was discovered but laws, opinions and culture have changed and views have changed. So it is this double identity of the psychiatrist that I have opposed, not all my professional life, because I waited until I had tenure in my university position! This is not a joke, this is true!

I really didn't realise I was sitting on the idea of what I call the myth of mental illness for many years but I didn't quite realise the ruckus it would cause. But I thought that people are not going to be happy to hear this, psychiatrists, after I published my book. All the younger people who believed in my views in the university were simply let go of their contracts, they were not renewed. So they were purged and that's a story that doesn't belong here tonight.

I am uncompromising and this to me is like slavery and the fact that some people are helped by being locked up and treated in various ways, often very kindly and humanely, does not in any way impinge on my views because it is not based on the proposition that this is always bad; it is based on the proposition that, to my view, a fundamentally immoral means. Without trying to offend anyone here, there was a classic argument after a rape protest, that if sex is forced on them they enjoy it. That's got nothing to do with it. Force between adults is impermissible, in a civilised society. It doesn't matter whether the result is good or bad.

To use a personal example I was forced, fortunately my family and I left early enough, but in a manner of speaking I didn't leave Hungary voluntarily, fortunately my whole family left in 1938 and we are all very lucky. If it wasn't for Hitler I might still be in Hungary, so I was forced out. Now it was a wonderful thing that happened, the best thing that ever happened to me. And, as you know, Bertha Russell was imprisoned during the First World War and wrote books there. One can do good things in prison; prison is not necessarily a bad thing. Being punished is not necessarily a bad thing. If you have a tendency to speed with your car maybe it's good that you get a fine.

You ought to behave properly because society depends on civilised mutual co-operation. I am extremely conventional in this way. That's why I was always put off by anti-psychiatry, drug taking and this whole lifestyle. I think civilisation in society is a good thing, by and large especially a society like America or England. It's not perfect, far from it, but it's better than anything else we have.

Let me finish my remarks with this thought. There is really no need for involuntary psychiatry. Now, when I say that, that assumes two things. It assumes a willingness in society to do something which no modern society (especially American society but I think England is rapidly catching up with all the stupidities of America, all the wrong things seem likely to be imitated, and this is also something psychiatry is heavily responsible for historically) is that we are extremely loath to punish people who break the law. By breaking the law, I mean reasonable, old-fashioned rational laws, that is to say when one person deprives another person of life, liberty or property. Again, this is straight out of John Locke, the old English philosopher. You have a right to your life, your liberty and your property. It cannot be taken from you except by due process of law. You have to commit a crime and then the state can take it away. But no private person can deprive you of any of these things. To illustrate this is the Government takes away your money it's called taxation. If a private person takes away your money it's called theft or robbery. The state has a monopoly on force, that is what we mean by the state.

So, there is no need for involuntary psychiatry because a great deal of psychiatry, especially nowadays and in England it is growing in leaps and bounds, is devoted to punishing criminals. Except they don't call them criminals, they call them dangerous persons, they have this whole vocabulary: potentially dangerous persons, schizophrenics, psychotics and so on. In America also. So on the one hand; they would have to punish these people by imprisoning them. If anybody in prison thinks he is mentally sick I have no objection to his getting all the psychiatric help that he wants, just like he could get medical help if he wants.

I personally don't believe in most of this kind of thing because I believe the only thing that makes any sense is what they call psychotherapy, which happens to have nothing to do with the psyche, always therapy. A word just as bad as mental illness because what we call psychotherapy is a human relationship of a particular kind, which is another subject. On the one hand, it would be this: to do much more punishing and that is why many people think I am some kind of a sadist and that's correct, I would punish a lot of people who are not punished now!! On the other hand we would have to have a truly, truly voluntary system of psychiatry, which is also impossible because psychiatrists and society expect him somehow to do something when they are threatening.

You realise you can go to the Catholic confessional and, if you are a Catholic, tell the priest that tomorrow morning you are going to strangle your wife and he's not going to stop you. Nobody thinks he's a bad man, nobody thinks Catholics are bad for that reason. This is sanctioned; something that society ought to support this kind of privacy. Now we would need this kind of intimacy and privacy in a psychotherapy situation, which society no longer sanctions. There is that expectation that, yes, you can tell me anything you want but if you tell me the wrong thing then I'll do something, against your will. This has to be egalitarian, the psychiatrists should know more, we have the power to do something to the patient than the patient has to the psychiatrist. Why can't the patient lock up the psychiatrist? The psychiatrist could be nuts too! Why can't you lock him up? Because he has let no power. So the power relationship would have to be taken out of this.

Well thank you very much for your attention; now we can have a conversation.

(End of formal lecture – beginning of question & answer session)

Member of the audience asks a question regarding all citizens having a psychiatric will

Well, you know I invented that? Do you know what happened to it? You know what a psychiatric will is? I have a number of such things that I wrote about, that was about 25 years ago. On the analogy of the last will I suggested that since in modern, contemporary psychiatry, psychiatrists, unlike 50 years ago, now say that nobody screens you all the time. They give the neuroleptic drugs or hospitalise them for a couple of weeks and then they are ok, they can go back to the community. They are now in remission, they have all their legal rights, they can vote, they can marry, they can divorce, right? So I suggested they should now be able to write a will which says next time people think I am crazy, no psychiatrist should be able to touch me.

First of all no American psychiatric journal would publish this, which didn't surprise me by that time. It was published in American Psychologist which probably wouldn't publish it now either because the psychologists are now also want to commit people and give them drugs. It sank without a trace (this idea) because it would acknowledge that people who are mentally ill are bona fide human beings and can, in this way; get a permanent divorce from psychiatrists. No-one can permanently divorce a psychiatrist in modern society in America and, I think, in England too.

There's always this last possibility, so it's an idea whose time hasn't come. And you know I like to say this old saying that, 'nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come though nothing is more powerless than an idea whose time hasn't come!' So, thank you very much for asking that; it is a very simple idea and it's consistent with mainstream psychiatric thought that a person is now competent in every way; he can buy and sell stocks, he can make all kinds of life decisions, he can have children, not have children, divorce his wife and so on.

I mean we make many big decisions besides writing such a will. He can write a legal will, but he can't write a psychiatric one because society; let's assume he suffers another psychotic breakdown and his wife calls up the psychiatrist or a physician saying, "my husband is going around the house and saying 'finally I've really had enough of you; I'm going to kill myself'". This actually happened to Ernest Hemingway. I mean, these are not hypothetical questions. Ernest Hemingway was locked up; given electric shock treatment. Why was he so depressed? Why did he want to kill himself? I don't know, I am speculating, but you know Ernest Hemingway of course? I assume most of you have read some of his writings? He was getting old. His ideal was not John Stuart-Mill or David Hume; his ideal was a 20 year old Spanish matador. His ideal life was to have sex as much as possible with as many women as possible, to drink as much as possible. Now, he wasn't in any condition to do any of these things! So he wasn't too happy. He was married to his third wife, who, I presume, he didn't get along with too well. So he said I'm going to kill myself. She got him committed, to a very fine place; I won't mention the name of the place for very good reasons, though if you've read his biography it's not a secret; where he was given electric shock treatment by the best psychiatrist in the country and after a month or two, they couldn't keep him for ever, he went back to Idaho; two or three days later he blew his brains out. He was even more depressed because he then told all his friends now even whatever power I had to write, that's been taken from me by the electric shock treatment. It doesn't matter how many such cases there are, they make no dent. You see, the whole history of lobotomy has been completely written out of the history of psychiatry. You can go for psychiatric residence and nobody will mention it. I don't know how many of you knew that the inventor of this got the Nobel Prize for cutting off perfectly normal brains. Did you know that?

Member of the audience asks question regarding involuntary treatment

There is a model behind the idea of involuntary treatment. That the person, something is going on, which makes it impossible for him to make rational decisions. Where does the model fall down? God forbid this kind of thing is not so abstract especially when one gets as old as I am. Let's assume that I was lecturing to you and I had some kind of stroke and fell over or unconscious or had a heart attack. Then the principal of a law which is called Parents Patria, the patria (the country or society) becomes my parent which is a civilised way of dealing with it. I would be taken to the local hospital and an appropriate physician would treat me in the way in which that disease is treated. Now this is where the thing falls down. Given the present scenario (of knowing two people organising the lecture) I would imagine that by law they could claim that they know me and they should be able to decide what kind of treatment I should or shouldn't have.

But to make the thing even clearer let's assume this happens in the United States. It so happens I have two daughters, one of whom is a physician, who don't live in the same city where I do, but let's assume it happened in the same city. Even if they are not in the same city, physicians know about them and get their phone numbers and addresses in my wallet. They would have to call them and they would decide what treatment I get, not the attending physician. See, what is wrong with psychiatry is that the physician becomes the substitute caretaker automatically and he decides on the diagnosis and treatment and the relatives have to be extremely sophisticated to be able to override this and sometimes they can't, actually by law. So it simply doesn't work that way.

From a scientific point of view another problem is that in the medical cases there's objective evidence of some sort of disease. Where as in the case of psychosis it's a pure imputation, there is no evidence, there's no blood test for psychosis, there's no chemical test, no radiological test for depression or schizophrenia. There can't be. Because if there were then it would be a brain disease not a mental disease. I hope you haven't lost me or I haven't lost you. It's a semantic silliness because there'd be lots of such diseases. I mean the classic example is, historically, neurosyphilis and epilepsy – both of which were thought to be mental diseases. Now we now they are brain diseases, psychiatrists have nothing to do with them. Psychiatrists don't treat neurosyphilis or epilepsy. People are not locked up for these diseases. Does that answer your question because it is very important?

Member of the audience speaks about her experiences, terminology, society and the lack of addressing the issues early on when symptoms first appear.

Thank you. I am very uneasy and I try to make it a policy not to discuss actual problems of persons who are present. I don't want to say too much but you correctly point out something on which I already touched –the neurosis/psychosis set and this terminology has become quite popular; that there are people who feel disturbed, and people who are disturbing. This is a fluid distinction because most people who are disturbed (and again this depends on what you call 'society' or put more closely; family, friends or neighbours because it's not society at large, I mean somebody who does not know you is not bothered). Perhaps this isn't true; but it has never been tried, like abolishing slavery. My feeling is, is that psychiatry cannot begin its journey towards humaneness and science until such time as involuntary psychiatric treatment is abolished. Just as there cannot be such a thing as a modern civilised capitalist. I don't mean this in a capitalist/socialist conflict; in a voluntary society until slavery is abolished. While there is slavery there is no incentive to develop alternatives. We have this problem; new ways of managing, of responding to these things would develop, I'm convinced, in society if this safety belt didn't exist. This safety belt is for society, not for you.

Member of the audience asks question regarding A.D.H.D. and the high numbers of children being treated for it.

If you want to know my view on this, go back 50 years! Read the 'Myth of Mental Illness' and 'The Manufacture of Madness'. That book is 35 years old now. I mean look at the title I gave it then! This is a manufacturing process. Psychiatry, in a sense, has lost some of its treasured diseases- in particular, homosexuality. They had to replace it. And they always replace it with the most vulnerable members of society - children and old people; geriatric psychiatrists are flourishing, child psychiatrists.

Of course, these are purely made-up things. Smoking is now a disease. This is what I call the 'Therapeutic Street' in Pharmacracy. I made up this analogy, again, 35 years ago of theocracy, aristocracy, democracy – you know the roots. Pharmacracy – rule by doctors, by medicine, by prescription. This is what we have. Virtually any drug that anybody wants is illegal. I include illegal drugs those drugs that need a prescription. A prescription means it is illegal. A prescription is exactly like emigration from Stalinist Russia; you could always get out but you need permission from Stalin. And now you need permission from the doctor. Why should you need permission? For a beta-blocker or for insulin? Just find out what you need and buy it. You don't need prescription laws. Prescription laws are at the bottom which goes back to the early part of the last century.

I brought a few newspaper clippings along, because you can't open the paper without this: here is a cartoon in The Times two or three days ago. It shows a young woman and an elderly woman in the subway; the legend says Evening Standard: 'One in Seven Londoners Use Drugs to Cope'. I don't think it's one in seven, it's seven in seven! Here and everywhere else, we all use drugs: aspirin; coffee; tea; vitamins. How do we define a drug? That's become a political concept too. It's no longer a pharmacological concept. Caffeine is certainly one of the most powerful drugs; Coca-Cola Company fills its drinks full of caffeine and it is being sold to children in schools and they become hyperactive. Wonder of wonders!

Member of the audience asks question regarding the future of psychiatry, psychology and mental health

I am by nature not a pessimistic person, not emotionally. But cognitively, intellectually I am 'pessimistic'. As the saying goes, when people are married and they don't get along, especially other people say, 'they deserve each other'. It's similarly been said that people get the kind of government they deserve.

Well, as I see it the Western World (I am most familiar with USA and UK) people don't want to take too much responsibility for their lives and they want to medicalise everything. And that's the way things are going; period. That's why I think we are going from democracy, or whatever you want to call it, to Pharmacracy. In fact, we are in the middle of it. And that is getting worse, say I. Other people say it is getting better because this is what we need. We need more drugs to control more moods, more cosmetic surgery, and more of this and that.

They now take it for granted that people take Viagra. Well, we'll see what that does ten years from now. That's a very complicated organic compound. There's nitrogen in it. I would not recommend people take too much of that. It's not going to be without penalty. We have been through this with the female sex hormones. The fact that medical treatment is fashionable should be a warning unless there is some rationale behind it. Where is the evidence? I think all the evidence points to the fact that in the short-term we are at the beginning of this process.

This is just beginning and people are accepting, let me illustrate this to you, of what craziness people now accept in the false land of the free, which is what people call themselves in America. This is from the Herald Tribune; it is entitled 'Where an Ashtray Is a Crime and a Loaded Gun Is Legal; that's New York'. It's a fairly long article and the point of it is (it involves a very famous, well known person and magazine) Greedon Carter, Editor of Vanity Fair (I don't know if you know it; it has become quite an interesting and good magazine) received summons because of ashtrays in his Times Square office. Inspectors, who had gone there on a complaint about smoking, found no-one puffing away. But they did spot ashtrays – that was enough! 'I keep them around to remind me of my youth', Carter said, 'They had not been used and did not have cigarette butts in them when we were fined.' The article goes on, 'unlike the police (that is to say the drug police – the pharmacrats), they don't need a search warrant. They just walked in on an anonymous tip.' The class totalitarian thing. You want to give trouble to somebody; tell them you heard them utter anti-Stalinist comments and you disappear into the gulag. There are now endless stories of all kinds of houses being broke into because they are looking for heroin. Why shouldn't you possess heroin?

This is from The Daily Mail, 'Overweight? Then Blame Your Parents'. In America they are already suing McDonalds. Now think of it, think of what just happened to the concept of responsibility. I mean this is colossal, in my opinion. The loss of responsibility, which to my mind is synonymous to loss of liberty which is the same concept, is virtually total.

If you're not responsible for smoking and you're eating more calories than you need then what are you responsible for? The answer is nothing. It is a blame game. And where does this come from? Your insanity defence. This is a psychiatric idea. Nobody thought of it, hundreds of years ago, but there are some people who commit heinous crimes, but it's impossible that a human being like you and I should do that. So we reject this essential humanity of the act in saying he was crazy. He wasn't crazy! He was just like you and me, except he didn't control his impulses. The Greeks knew that, the Romans knew that.

Anybody is capable of anything, more or less, depending on how civilised or uncivilised he is. This is what we mean by becoming civilised; being unable to kill somebody. And some people are, especially in certain societies; you go to war and certainly you are able to kill people.

Member of the audience asks question regarding personality disorder

I hope you don't mind me saying this: they are just words out of a vocabulary made by Jonathan Swift. It's a gullible statement; it's a story, there's no personality disorder. First of all, although English is not my native language I like to be quite pedantically correct. There is no such thing as a *personality*; think about it. There is a *person*. There is no entity to which the noun corresponds. It sounds like something, what's a personality? And then you have multiple personalities, how can you have more than one at a time; I don't know!! Do actors have multiple personalities?

These have all become entities, we have a whole language, let me read you something, let me quote myself! Because I don't think it's a particularly new idea but I actually wrote a paper; kind of a re-hash which was published in this country of course because in the US I can't get these things published, but in this country I still can quite often. In the Journal of Medical Ethics in 2001 called Mental Illness: Psychiatrists Phlogiston; where I work out this analogy. I write, 'Once names and peers gain wide acceptance they exercise a powerful inference on those inculcated to believe that their existence forms an integral part of the way the world is constructed; in short, reality. New observations are then seen and perceived through the lens of the prevailing system of mental optics.' You then see the world through that so if you believe in personality disorder, you will find people who have it, or A.D.H.D. you will suddenly find children who've got it. If you don't believe in it, there aren't any.

An historical example would be witches. There was a big technology of diagnosing witches. Once belief in witches disappears nobody can find them. But there are still threatening-looking, perhaps, repulsive-looking old women who look unkempt and don't take care of themselves and, you know, perhaps the neighbours are afraid of her she would be called a witch.

Member of the audience asks question about what mental health services should be developed and what type of alternatives services should be on offer.

Since I believe in a truly voluntaristic society and in human reciprocity; in the most idealistic, commercial sense, it's a little bit like asking what kind of entertainment should people be offered. My approach would be to turn it around; what should be offered should depend on what the consumer wants. Exactly as in a capitalistic transaction.

Member of the audience comments that there is a Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health but there are also Sainsbury's that are supermarkets and is Thomas Szasz suggesting setting up a supermarket for services.

No, what I am suggesting is that before we do that we find out what people want. The people often say how do you help such a person. I have done that. Of course he never published it. Once, I was asked to do an interview for the 'New Yorker' and I suggested to the reporter that we go and talk to some of these cases, people who were sleeping in Central Park and were completely out of their minds. Like anyone else who relates to this person in a non-threatening way; we had got into a nice conversation and finally we got to say what kind of service do you want. He was living on social security and do you know what he said? I want to be left alone. So, that's a problem. The thing which people want, again look around, what is it that people to choose? Drugs of their own choice. The idea of self-medicating for what they call mental illness is as old as mankind and what have people chosen traditionally? Cigarettes, alcohol, opium. They're taking them away from people. The idea of religion; all kinds of human help which is voluntary. I can't really give an answer but it.....

Member of the audience interrupts and says that £30 million a year is spent on services

Well how much society wants to spend on this you see, that becomes another question. How much does society want to spend on imprisoning drug abusers or waging war in Iraq? I mean these are not for me or for you to decide. These are big political questions. I mean, what do we spend money on? What do we spend our taxes on? That's politics.

Member of the audience asks if Thomas Szasz is suggesting that if drugs like alcohol and cigarettes are restricted that people feel pushed into getting pharmaceutical drugs.

Yes, it's not my idea – it's self-evident. For example, cigarettes are very expensive and are becoming more and more so and the psychiatric drugs are free for poor people as the taxpayer pays for it. Of course they are being pushed; this is pharmacracy. I wrote a book on that with that title, which is only 2 years old, which I highly recommend!! And I have a much older book called 'Ceremonial Chemistry', which is about 35 years old, about pharmacracy. This is quite noticeable – it's a political phenomenon. It's very much like a religious society where people are being pushed towards being; if you are going to live in France, let's say, you better be a Catholic, if you want to be a Protestant go to America, you know; after the killing has stopped. And here, in the UK, being a Catholic up until the middle of the 19th Century. It's mind-boggling; it's a kind of handicap that they put the Catholics in this country up until 100 years ago. It boggles the mind. And this is the best of the best; this was or has been historically.

Member of the audience states that this is another example of hypocrisy – taking away the drugs people think they need and forcing them to take pharmaceutical drugs.

Yes. Is that a question?!! It's not a peculiar concept; it is a quintessence of paternalism. Do as I tell you; doctor knows best. The quintessence of paternalism is pushing people around. Making them do what they want you to do not what you want to do. Afterwards, why do people get into trouble in marriage? Because they tend to push each other around. They each want the other one to do what pleases them. This is a problem quite basic to human nature. We all want to have our own way and we have to make compromises and co-operate. But this pushing people around, pharmaceutically, is really quite glaring and out of control it seems to me. Of course then people tend to blame the more socialistically statist; I don't know a word to use which is not stigmatising, which is descriptive. Many people in America blame the drug companies for this. The drug companies are no more to be blamed for this, ad hoc, than psychiatrists are to be blamed, personally, for locking up people. This is part of the system. If one company wouldn't make it, another company would make it. I mean this is what society wants.

Member of the audience asks for further explanation.

Well, you see, life is very insomniuous, all this is very simple. And the longer we talk the more complicated it gets. And now I will show you where the complication comes in, which is insurmountable. And I don't want you to misinterpret my views. I am, politically-speaking, what is now called in America, a libertarian but I don't want you to think I am some kind of a heartless 19th century robber capitalist. First of all I am not that rich! Secondly, that is not what I am talking about.

You see, something has happened during my own lifetime, in fact long after I finished medical school. This has all happened; this really all began sometime after the end of the Second World War, what I'm going to point out to you. Until that time, by and large, in England, America and Western Europe people paid for what they wanted. You wanted a house; you paid for it. You wanted a car; you paid for it. You wanted to ride on the subway; you paid for it. If you wanted to go to Europe or America; you paid for it. Drugs; you paid for it. Medical care; you paid for it. If you were very poor then you were taken care of in a charity hospital. Nobody died on the streets, nobody was left with a broken leg, it was taken care of.

Now, there came a time when you (U.K.) got the National Health Service and we (USA) got Medi-Care and Medic-Aid; all kinds of schemes which amount to the same thing but they're called private practice. It's not private practice at all because the patient doesn't pay the doctor. Fortunately I didn't have too many medical problems; when I go to a doctor I go for a routine exam or an eye exam I don't pay a penny. Are you with me? This is the only commodity, the most important thing in the world, medical care, for which we don't pay. Now once we have this in place, listen carefully because this is a missing link in the problem. Once we have this system in place; let's assume I was an English citizen, and I would have a personal, financial interest in your health because if you make yourself sick I have to pay for it. You get it?

So this is why people don't want people to smoke, to eat too much and so on. When you do these things you make yourself sick, but of course it is completely arbitrary because you can still climb mountains and fall off and you can ride motorcycles, of course you have to ride with a helmet, as if that would make it safe! Is it safe riding a motorcycle with a helmet in this kind of traffic? Or in America? So it becomes then a game of making sure you don't get sick because your sickness is my expense. Once you get into this you're off to the races. There's no sign of anyone even dreaming of interpreting this or even wanting to see this. I mean I point out to people that this is not a profound insight.

In America(I don't know what's happening with the Iraqi war now that might change it) for the first time, probably in human history, the greatest part of the expenditure of the state, that is the greatest part of the total amount of tax monies taken in are paid out for health care; 15% of the GNP. In most European countries it's 6%, 8% or 10%. It's completely out of control; it's going up and up. But of course the drug companies make the schizophrenia drugs like Zyprexa. One month's supply is 250 dollars or something. Who pays for it? I pay for it. You pay for it if you pay taxes. So, naturally, they make more and more drugs and more expensive drugs. The doctor prescribes them; it doesn't cost him anything. And the patient; it doesn't cost him anything; by and large. Everybody has some kind of insurance. If you are not in one of these plans then you are working for General Motors or General Electric or somebody and you have health insurance. People now take jobs in order to get the health insurance coverage! Because that's not taxable.

A great many things are now moved by a law which was explicitly, unconstitutionally the original American Constitution. You know that the American Constitution does not prohibit the collection of federal income taxes? Did you know that? That was in the Constitution. The founding fathers, who were all Englishmen, realised that there were two things in which the state enslaves its citizens. One is religion, which they separated from the state and the other is taxation; which is expropriation. It's slavery. So they made that illegal too. There was no such thing as a federal tax from 1776 until 1913 or 1917. It was in relation to the First World War. I am now, momentarily, uncertain. But it was paying for the war that then brought it in and then there had to be a constitutional amendment; amending the constitution to allow the collection of federal income taxes which was then introduced on the basis that this would be an insignificant amount collected only around religious people.

Now the average American pays more income tax than the average feudal vassal did in mediaeval Europe, which was one-third. It is now more than one-third for the average American worker. They have an income tax date which is constantly moving forward and it is now around May, the 10th, the 15th. Whatever the date is, say May 15th, comes around the press officer announces that, "We have arrived at the date from which time what you earn will be your yours; until now it belonged to the Government." And where does this go? Partly to armourments but the health care service has outstripped it so once you get into this cycle then, naturally, this reinforces the pharmacocracy.

Member of the audience asks for Thomas Szasz's opinion on online-diagnosis and availability of psychiatric drugs online without a prescription.

A very good question. First of all, let me give you a philosophical answer. Freedom is dangerous; but secondly it's not that simple, certainly not in America. First of all freedom is dangerous but second point would be that it is interesting that you mention that this would be a parent who would give it to a child. I don't like to talk about that because as I indicated earlier parents can do awful things to children; with or without drugs. An adult doing it to him/her self? But that is a right I call self-poisoning.

Member of the audience asks about the scenario of parents being concerned about their 20 year old son, who is behaving strangely and want to buy psychiatric drugs for him online, from US websites.

Well he can't give it to their 20 year old son; the 20 year old son will refuse it. You tell me the situation in England; but I can tell you that if you do this on the internet in the US with a so-called controlled substance, let's say Valium, you run the risk of going to jail for 20 years. The same as if you brought it on the street; because this is illegal. This is de-facto illegal but it's not enforced, it can't be because internet so far is open season.

I realise that (that you can go onto websites and buy these drugs without prescription) but what you do on the website is not unavailable, potentially, to the spying apparatus of the US Government, that's what I'm saying. So, what you are saying is correct, this you can do. But you can also point out that you could buy it on the street.

Member of the audience states that you have to know the people on the streets to buy it.

Well, you have to know the neighbourhood and so on to buy it on the street but I don't know how it is done on the street!! But the saying is that the drugs are most abundant in prisons in America so I don't know how they do it. Again, it shows what people want they will get and they will essentially get it through voluntary exchange. They give something for it; money, sex, protection or something. It is a very good point you are making. The internet is, in some ways as many people have pointed out, is like the invention of the printing press. This is going to be a revolution.

Everyone now takes for granted now in America that on television, without exaggeration, virtually every other advert is for a drug. Viagra, anti-cholesterol drugs, anti-depressants, anti-hypertensives and so on. At the same time alcohol and tobacco ads are de-facto bad. Which means that legal drugs cannot be advertised, but illegal drugs not only can be but are the real business because a prescription drug, I cannot emphasise highly enough, is not a legal drug. If it was a legal drug you could go and buy it. If you need permission for it, it's not legal. This is elementary libertarian philosophy. You are not free if you need permission. The fact you can get permission is another issue but it's not that simple because you have to go to the doctor, get a prescription, the prescription has to be renewed (it's usually only for a very small dose), so it's a whole circus which also costs immense amounts of money. God knows how many people go to the doctor for the sole purpose of getting a prescription. So, if it was available they wouldn't go to a doctor, there wouldn't be that cost. So, you see everybody has their hands in their pocket. Everybody has an economical incentive to play this game. Doctor's with it would probably drop by 50% if you could get any drug you want. Why should you go to a Doctor?

Member of the audience asks about what help people can get.

That's a very big question. I don't know how to address that because people get all kinds of help. There is still a great deal of help that people get, especially in America, through religious channels and contacts. As you know America is a, peculiarly, religious country. So, that's one kind of help. People get a great deal of help by changing around their lives. Certainly divorce is high on the list; marriage, having children, changing jobs and you know, someone said and it is a very profound observation that the single most characteristic thing about America is, and I don't know how you would finish that sentence, but this person suggested (and it strikes me as very accurate) is space. Space. People do move around in America, in a way in which they certainly don't in Europe, well I don't believe they do here either. Very few people have grandchildren who live in the same city, for example.

Tape 2 cuts in.....Talking about Thomas Szasz's psychotherapy work.

.....very easy to do assuming that most people; the patient or client; most people have the temperament and interest of doing this. Not many people do. It's not particularly profitable especially nowadays with drugs and whatnot. It requires a certain kind of temperament, a kind of patience, a tolerance for a kind of intimacy which, if you like, it's 'psychoanalysis' although idealised because Freud never really quite meant it but it's something like that. It's nothing very esoteric; it's a particular kind of conversation, a dialogue. If you like, and I often do this when the discussion is this good after a lecture, it is not that different from what we are doing. Except, obviously, the questions you are raising are not personal questions.

But supposing they were and supposing we did that over a period of once or twice a week, or more often, for years on end. You would change, very likely, from whoever you are to some other kind of person who, by and large, perhaps has more self-control, more self-possessed, more serene. You wouldn't get cured of anything because there is nothing wrong. I wouldn't be treating anything and people sometimes say to me you would be charging money just for conversation and the answer is yes. What's wrong with that? It's better than doing some harm to someone by giving them a drug. Having an intimate personal relationship which is safe is an extremely rare commodity, in fact practically non-existent. This is different from having a wife or certainly having a child, someone with whom you are intimate. There are conflicting interests there. This is psychotherapy!

Member of the audience suggests Szasz believes society has unconstrained choices.

I reconcile it by simply not agreeing with that point of view! I believe in a fundamentalistic way, if you like, that we all have free will. For a non-religious person I am quite 'religious'. We all have free will; more or less. Of course we don't have unconstrained choices; what is that? Do I have a choice to speak with the same kind of accent that you have? No. Do I have a choice to flap my arms and fly? Of course not. But we have choices within the choices that we have, depending on who we are and we can expand or diminish them by what we do to ourselves, to other people, by learning. By learning we enlarge them; by getting drunk we diminish them; by getting LSD or getting a lobotomy we diminish them. There are various ways of enlarging and diminishing with choices. If people travel to see another culture, learn another language. Learning multiple languages really is an answer to your kind of question. We have different ways of seeing the world; different religions, different places of living. They are all free, in my opinion. Of course you could say that none of them are free.

Member of the audience states that not everyone can afford to go and see a psychotherapist.

You don't need psychotherapy for this. Psychotherapy can diminish your freedom too. In fact it has chances of becoming un-free by becoming excessively dependent on the therapy are extremely high. Life is in some ways, I'm tempted to say that almost everything you do from day to day enlarges or diminishes your choices, your freedom. Certainly getting sick diminishes your freedom. So, in that sense, staying healthy is a good idea and staying active. These are really quite simple concepts.

Member of the audience feels the concepts are over-simplified.

I tend to do that! I think it is better than over-mystifying them. I am very puristic about this. The pharmaceutical companies only have influence. No-one has power because I assume that they are all lying! I assume every advertisement is a lie. Everything The Guardian says is a lie. I learnt it at a young age. Most of what you read in the newspaper is a lie. And you should assume everything I say is a lie!! Figure it out for yourself. You are completely free. The idea that, somehow, you are a victim of advertising is what I call the rejection of responsibility. You have every right to what you believe in. It used to be called religion and everyone respected that. It used to be called evangelising, proselytising; what was that? See, now we have become so irreligious that we don't see this. This is a name of the game.

In some ways anybody who engages the public in any way is engaged in trying to convince them to see the world in his or her terms. Whether it's reading the editorial in the London Times or New York Times or listening to me reading psychiatric textbooks. They're all doing the same thing. And scepticism is good. Those are my heroes, people like Mencken and Jefferson (Thomas). Jefferson said, 'What's the answer to one line? Another line'. Freedom of speech. Why are we against censorship? If we know the truth then we could have censorship because we only need one truth.

But nobody is totally free from his own society. But some of those people; Jefferson (whom I admire greatly and to whom I have read about endlessly) at least had the decency to say, 'I tremble for my country when I think that God is just. I am waiting for a psychiatrist to say that they tremble for my patients when I think that involuntary hospitalisation is morally wrong.' See, most of those people knew that it was wrong but couldn't get out from under that burden and become the kind of political leaders they wanted to become. They had an internal conflict. I don't know how much you know about American history but the relationship between Jefferson and Adams (who was a great abolitionist) is a very interesting one. They had a lifelong friendship so I don't know what else to say on this. Nobody is outside of his own culture.

(End of question and answer session)