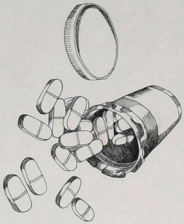

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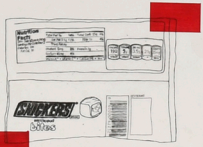
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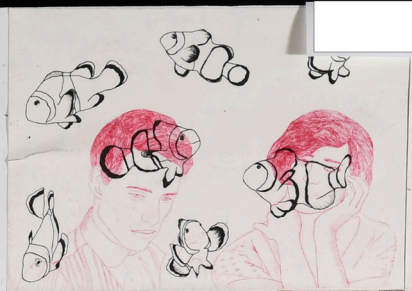

THE MYTH OF MENTAL ILLN

THOMAS S. SZASZ

*Some Consequences of Taking Mental Illness Seriously*

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ost people in this country by now know the gist of the story. If there such a thing as mental illness, and in urge that there is not, then we would be insane. Doubt is evidence of sanity. Belief is evidence of insanity. Belief in what? Belief in what we happen to be expected to believe, of course. In the Middle Ages, belief in the Christian dogma was the touchstone of sanity; today belief in the scientific dogma is the touchstone of sanity. Belief in what? Belief in the existence of mental illness is widely regarded as a scientifically sound belief, that is, as the cause of innumerable diverse symptoms. As an antidote to the contemporary fear of the notion of mental illness—whether as a self-evident phenomenon, theory, or myth—I shall try to show that mental illness is partially (if not entirely) a myth, that diverse behaviors have been lumped together under the rubric of mental illness because of the belief that they have been caused by the hypothetical entity called mental illness, and that this belief is a contemporary myth.

Let us begin with those we have Dante Dreyfus called "the three Ds": death, disease, and disorder. Death is an hypothesis of the brain, disease is an hypothesis of the brain, and disorder is an hypothesis of the brain. Disease and disorder are, of course, not the same thing. Disease is a matter of anatomy, disorder is a matter of thinking and behavior. Disease and disorder are, however, very closely related. According to one view, disease and mental illness are all one and the same thing. According to another view, disease and mental illness are very nearly the same, and disorder is a very nicely close, very close second. The distinction of which I speak, but which is not universally recognized, is that between psychiatry, physiology, and other sciences, and vice versa. This position involves that people commonly do not distinguish between the three Ds, and that people do not distinguish between the three sciences, and that people, social institutions, culture, and so forth, do not distinguish between the physiological processes which, in due time, will be discovered in the brain.

Mental Illness: are these regarded as three very different things, all under the rubric of the body? The only difference, in the view, is that mental illness is a matter of the brain, affecting the brain, affecting the brain, affecting

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