talent is extraordinarily entertaining."

— *New York Times Book Review*

CRUEL COMPASSION

Psychiatric Control of Society's Unwanted

THOMAS SZASZ

author of INSANITY

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PSYCHIATRIC CONTROL OF SOCIETY'S UNWANTED

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Insanity
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Our Right to Drugs
A Lexicon of Lunacy

For Isobel

I must be cruel only to be kind.
Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind.

—*William Shakespeare*[1]

PREFACE

A further objection to force is that you impair the object by your very endeavours to preserve it. The thing you fought for is not the thing which you recover; but depreciated, sunk, wasted, and consumed in the contest.

—*Edmund Burke*[1]

We can influence others in two radically different ways—with the sword or the pen, the stick or the carrot. Coercion is the threat or use of force to compel the other's submission. If it is legally authorized, we call it "law enforcement"; if it is not, we call it "crime." Shunning coercion, we can employ verbal, sexual, financial, and other enticements to secure the other's cooperation. We call these modes of influence by a variety of names, such as advertising, persuasion, psychotherapy, treatment, brainwashing, seduction, payment for services, and so forth.

We assume that people influence others to improve their own lives. The self-interest of the person who coerces is manifest: He compels the other to do his bidding. The self-interest of the person who eschews coercion is more subtle: Albeit the merchant's business is to satisfy his customers' needs, his basic motivation, as Adam Smith acknowledged, is still self-interest.

Nevertheless, people often claim that they are coercing the other to satisfy *his* needs. Parents, priests, politicians, and psychiatrists typically

assume this paternalistic posture vis-à-vis their beneficiaries.* As the term implies, the prototype of avowedly altruistic domination-coercion is the relationship between parent and young child. Acknowledging that parents must sometimes use force to control and protect their children, and that the use of such force is therefore morally justified, does not compel us to believe that parents act this way solely in the best interest of their children. In the first place, they might be satisfying their own needs (as well). Or the interests of parent and child may be so intertwined that the distinction is irrelevant. Indeed, ideally the child's dependence on his parents, and the parents' attachment to him, mesh so well that their interests largely coincide. If the child suffers, the parents suffer by proxy. However, if the child misbehaves, he may enjoy his rebellion, whereas the parents are likely to be angered and embarrassed by it. Thus, what appears to be the parents' altruistic behavior must, in part, be based on self-interest.[2]

How do people justify the coercive-paternalistic domination of one adult by another? Typically, by appealing to the moral-religious maxim that we are our brothers' keepers. It is a treacherous and unsatisfactory metaphor. Interpreted literally, the maxim justifies only meddling, not coercing. Moreover, in the family, only an older and stronger brother has the option of coercing his younger and weaker sibling. The weaker brother must make do with verbal (noncoercive) helping-meddling.

The dilemma that members of the helping professions find particularly disturbing is this: If they coerce their clients, they cannot really help them; to help their clients noncoercively, the helpers must enlist the clients' cooperation; and they cannot enlist the clients' cooperation without respecting, and appealing to, their clients' self-interest, as the clients define it. If the helper refuses to respect the client's view of his world, or if the client rejects cooperating with the helper, the two are at an impasse that can be resolved in one of two ways. Either the helper must leave the client alone; or the state must grant the helper the power, and indeed impose on him the duty, to coerce the client to accept help, as the state defines help. Today, leaving a person authoritatively designated as "in need of professional help" (albeit legally competent) to his own devices is considered to be unfeeling, inhumane, perhaps even a neglect of professional duties. In ancient Greece, coercing him would have been considered undignified meddling, inappropriate for relations among free adults. We revere Socrates as a powerful persuader, not as a compassionate coercer.

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* A paternalistic relationship—one person treating another as a child—may or may not entail the use of force.

Ours is a Christian world, and to Christianity we owe the moral foundations of some of our most important institutions. But there is a dark underside to Christian—as well as Jewish and Islamic—-monotheism. If there is only one God, and if He is a perfect and perfectly Benevolent Being, then individuals who reject His Will are rightly coerced, in their own best interest. In a theocracy, there is no need for political checks and balances; indeed, such counterweights are synonymous with heresy. Similarly, in a therapeutic autocracy, there is no need for safeguards against the guardians; in the psychiatric hospital, the desire for checks and balances against absolute power is synonymous with madness.

Saint Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo in Roman Africa, is usually credited with being among the first to articulate the Christian duty to persecute heretics, in their own best interest. The clarity of his argument for clerical coercion and its striking similarities to the modern psychiatric argument for clinical coercion merit quoting his relevant views in full. In a letter addressed "To Vincentius, My Brother Dearly Beloved," Augustine writes: "You are of the opinion that . . . no coercion is to be used with any man in order to [hasten] his deliverance from the fatal consequences of error; and yet you see that, in examples which cannot be disputed, this is done by God, who loves us with more real regard for our profit than any other can."[3] God, the coercer, is a loving parent. Man, the coerced, is a wayward child. Grant divine authority to God's deputy, and his right to righteously persecute such errants is unchallengeable. Augustine continues:

> You now see therefore, I suppose, that the thing to be considered when any one is coerced, is not the mere fact of the coercion, but the nature of that to which he is coerced, whether it be good or bad. . . . I have therefore yielded to the evidence afforded by these instances which my colleagues have laid before me. For originally my opinion was, that no one should be coerced into the unity of Christ, that we must act only by words, fight only by arguments, and prevail by force of reason . . . . But this opinion of mine was overcome . . . by the conclusive instances to which they could point.[4]

In pre-Christian antiquity, coercing the person who offended against the City of Man was considered to be justified by his offense. He was punished not to improve him, but to improve society. In the Christian world, coercing the person who offended against the City of God was considered to be justified by concern for his soul. He was coerced in order to perfect him, not merely to protect society. Thus originated the authorization for the "therapeutic" use of force.

Some time between the Reformation and the French Revolution, this meliorist rationalization became secularized. Error ceased to be deviation

from religion (iconoclasm, heresy) and became deviation from reason (irrationality, insanity); doctors of divinity diagnosing error were replaced by doctors of medicine diagnosing madness; forcible religious conversion was transformed into involuntary psychiatric treatment; the Theological State was replaced by the Therapeutic State.

In this book, I examine the growing practice of coercing individuals, especially adults economically dependent on others, allegedly in their own best interest. Adult dependency, as we now know it, is a relatively recent social phenomenon. In the remote past, dependents were supported in extended families or perished. In the more recent past, adult dependents were called beggars, drifters, panhandlers, tramps, vagrants, hoboes, and so forth. Today, we call them homeless and mentally ill.

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, adult dependents were coerced primarily on economic grounds, because they were a financial burden on the productive members of society. Since then, they have increasingly been coerced on therapeutic grounds, because they are mentally ill and hence are a danger to themselves and others. Both remedies aggravate the problem. Even charity devoid of coercion demeans and antagonizes its recipient and pits him against his patron. Combine charity with coercion, and the result is a recipe for feeding the beneficiary's resentment of his benefactor, guaranteeing the perpetuation of adult dependency and counterproductive efforts to combat it.[5]

In war, those who wield force can achieve great things, because war *is* the use of force. That is what makes the war metaphor—as in the War on Poverty, the War on Drugs, or the War on Mental Illness—both effective and repellent. In peace, however, only those who eschew force can do great things, because peace *is* security from violence. By separating church and state, the Founding Fathers uncoupled coercion from the cure of souls and laid the foundations for the greatest political success story in history. Unfortunately, the power the Founders took away from the clerics, their twentieth-century followers handed back to the clerks, the bureaucrats of the Welfare State and of the Therapeutic State. As a result, many of the liberties secured in 1787 are now but a dim memory. Either we must revive the Founders' Great Experiment in liberty by separating coercion from the cure of bodies and minds, or we shall have to relinquish our much-vaunted claim to being a free people.

Regardless of the names or diagnoses attached to adult dependents, most post-Enlightenment efforts to remedy their condition have rested on the benefactor's self-interest disguised as philanthropy. More than a century ago, James Fitzjames Stephen, the great Victorian jurist, warned against this pious self-deception:

> Philanthropic pursuits have many indisputable advantages, but it is doubtful whether they can be truly said to humanize or soften the minds of those who are most addicted to them. . . . The grand objection to them all is that people create them for themselves. . . . Benevolence is constantly cultivated by philanthropists at the expense of modesty, truthfulness, and consideration for the rights and feelings of others; for by the very fact that a man devotes himself to conscious efforts to make other people happier and better than they are, he asserts that he knows better than they what are the necessary constituent elements of happiness and goodness. In other words, he sets himself up as their guide and superior.[6]

No one, myself included, has a solution for the problem of adult dependency. However, I am persuaded that coercing competent adults solely because of their dependency or dangerousness to themselves—in an effort to make them more virtuous, industrious, or healthy—injures their dignity and liberty, is counterproductive, and is morally wrong.* Only in this century, and only begrudgingly, did we stop treating blacks and women as quasi children. Perhaps in the next century, we will extend fully human stature to the so-called mentally ill as well. If so, we must begin to give serious consideration to the moral and political justifications of psychiatric coercions and excuses. I have long maintained that we should reject infantilizing mental patients and the coercive psychiatric paternalism that goes with it, and accord the same rights to, and impose the same responsibilities on, these patients as we accord to and impose on patients with bodily illness or with no illness.

I believe we should condone coercive paternalism as morally legitimate only in the case of (young) children and persons legally declared to be incompetent.† For the care and control of incompetent adults, the principle of *parens patriae*, as applied to the comatose patient, suffices, and is the sole appropriate mechanism. The ostensibly altruistic coercion of a protesting, legally competent adult should always arouse our suspicion. We must never forget that adults—even immature, irrational, or insane adults—are not children.[7]

Finally, two brief caveats. In this book, I use many terms and phrases—such as mental illness, mental patient, mental hospital, schizophrenia, psychiatric treatment, and others—whose customary implications and

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* I believe our economic magnanimity toward able-bodied dependents, especially those labeled mentally ill, is also counterproductive. But that is another story.

† By incompetent, I refer to adults who are severely mentally retarded or who have been rendered temporarily or permanently unconscious, delirious, or demented by injury or illness. Insanity and incompetence are separate and discrete legal categories. A committed mental patient is not legally incompetent, unless—like a nonmental patient—he is declared incompetent by a court.

conventional meanings I reject. To avoid defacing the text, I have refrained from placing such prejudging expressions between quotation marks each time they appear. Also, I use the masculine pronoun to refer to both men and women, and the terms *psychiatrist* and *mental patient* to refer to all mental health professionals and their clients.

THOMAS SZASZ

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T.S.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

A man receiving charity practically always hates his benefactor—it is a fixed characteristic of human nature.

—*George Orwell*[1]

Most people today believe that certain persons ought to be deprived of liberty, in their own best interest. Psychiatrists implement this belief by incarcerating such individuals in mental hospitals, and for doing so society authenticates them as scientifically enlightened physicians and compassionate healers. Suppose, however, that psychiatrists deprived certain persons of life or property, in their own best interest. Would society applaud them for those interventions as well? The analogy is not absurd, or even far-fetched. The right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to property are the sacred values of the Western liberal tradition, the American political system, and Anglo-American law. Their importance is reflected in the three types of criminal sanctions—deprivation of life, deprivation of liberty, and deprivation of property. The person who is executed, imprisoned, or fined experiences what is done to him—regardless of how the doers define it—as a punishment.

THE HAZARDS OF HELPING AND BEING HELPED

It is axiomatic that we ought to help persons who need help, such as children, elderly persons, the poor, and the sick. Some persons we call

"mentally ill" belong on this list because they are or are perceived to be like helpless children, needy indigents, or suffering patients. Note, however, that these diverse individuals share only one basic feature, namely, dependency.

We fear being dependent on others because we rightly associate dependency with loss of control and hence the risk of having to submit to a treatment—in the widest sense of the term—whose consequences might be inimical to our best interests, as we see them. This apprehension accounts for the fact that the persons most dependent on others for help are often the ones who most fiercely resist being helped.

All the same, when faced with a suffering human being, most of us are moved to help him. Out of this noble impulse arises a treacherous personal temptation and a vexing political problem. How can we be sure that a benefactor is a genuine supporter who respects his beneficiary, and not an existential exploiter who imparts meaning to his life by demeaning his ward? How can the beneficiary be protected from the benefactor's coercion, ostensibly in the recipient's own best interest? Who shall guard the guardians? Thousands of years of human history have given us a resounding answer to this last question: No one.

The root of this perennial dilemma lies in our prolonged childhood, when care and coercion are inevitably intertwined. As a result, when our health or well-being is jeopardized, we re-experience an intense need for protectors and become vulnerable to our dependence on them. The maxim that there are no atheists in the foxholes illustrates this phenomenon. Moreover, it is probably also our prolonged childhood dependence that makes young adults so prone to coerce and demean others, as the brutal history of youthful revolutionaries bent on improving mankind illustrates.

The Ambiguity of Aid

How do we help a starving person? Confucius taught that we can give him a fish or teach him to fish. If we feed him, we are likely to make him dependent on us. If we refuse to feed him, he may die. We cannot hedge and say it all depends on circumstances, on the victim's ability or inability to help himself. It is precisely his ability or inability to help himself that we typically cannot assess in advance. Moreover, since everyone is responsive to the way he is treated, the hypothetical starving person's behavior will be influenced by the way we respond to him.

Similar dilemmas abound. A person is troubled, agitated, feels guilty, cannot sleep, suspects others of evil deeds. How do we help Othello, consumed with jealousy? Hamlet, tortured by the suspicion that his mother