



Suicide Prohibition: The Shame of Medicine

Thomas Stephen Szasz

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In Western thought, suicide has evolved from sin to sin-and-crime, to crime, to mental illness, and to semilegal act. A legal act is one we are free to think and speak about and plan and perform, without penalty by agents of the state.

While dying voluntarily is ostensibly legal, suicide attempts and even suicidal thoughts are routinely punished by incarceration in a psychiatric institution. Although many people believe the prevention of suicide is one of the duties the modern state owes its citizens, Szasz argues that suicide is a basic human right and that the lengths to which the medical industry goes to prevent it represent a deprivation of that right.

Drawing on his general theory of the myth of mental illness, Szasz makes a compelling case that the voluntary termination of one's own life is the result of a decision, not a disease. He presents an in-depth examination and critique of contemporary anti-suicide policies, which are based on the notion that voluntary death is a mental health problem, and systematically lays out the dehumanizing consequences of psychiatrizing suicide prevention.

If suicide be deemed a problem, it is not a medical problem. Managing it as if it were a disease, or the result of a disease, will succeed only in debasing medicine and corrupting the law. Pretending to be the pride of medicine, psychiatry is its shame.

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