Syndrome Foundation knows of ten thousand families that have been damaged by therapists using this concept. This tragedy has occurred despite the fact that there have been a number of reviews (2) of the concept of repression that conclude that its existence is based on a very shaky scientific foundation. These poorly funded hypotheses, and sometimes quackeries, I admit, are not unrelated to psychiatric power. It could be argued that the only reason therapists get away with it is because the psychiatric establishment, with which all therapists are at least loosely connected, has unassailable power to do almost anything it wants. At least it was unassailable until Dr Szasz’s devastating critiques. The fact, however, that psychiatry has clung to Freudian concepts despite a profound lack of scientific evidence points up the shady science problem in psychiatry as an independent cause of psychiatric abuse.

Let us imagine for a moment a Szaszian world in which psychiatry has been completely written off the law books. There is no such thing as a civil commitment or an insanity verdict. All therapy is contractual and autonomous; the prescription of drugs is left to ‘medical doctors’. ‘Mental illness’ and diagnosis have been replaced by counselling for ‘problems in living’. Psychiatrists have no more social influence than say, chemists. Will this result in the elimination of psychiatric abuse? The psychiatrist, still a scientist or expert of some sort (perhaps in interpersonal relationships), will still be suggesting solutions to the client’s problem. Courts will still call upon them for expert testimony, just as they do criminologists, anthropologists, etc. Are these new world order psychiatrists going to make unfounded, if not ludicrous, assertions to their clients or to the courts? Any expert can cause serious problems by offering hairbrained advice. This is why we had a man imprisoned for years in San Diego after four-year-olds testified that he carved up an elephant and a giraffe in a church. Therapists testified that the children were credible. Dr Szasz’s admonition about diagnoses not being diseases continues to be penetrating and topical in this age of the Menendez brothers and similar court cases. But a diagnosis might be considered a theory. Multiple Personality Disorder, for instance, is a theory to explain an individual’s quixotic behaviour. We can agree that it is not a disease but some other class of phenomena even if it turns out to be essentially well founded, but being well founded is a matter of empirical test. The problem with MPD is twofold: psychiatry has appropriated the alleged condition as another example of a ‘mental illness’, and it has never been subjected to adequate empirical testing. What would such a test look like? For openers, the patient would have to be questioned carefully, in the manner of a police investigator, to ensure that the individual tells a consistent story. Sybil should be easy to trip up, unless, of course, she is telling an accurate story.

Dr Szasz is correct, of course, in his warning that being scientific is not a guarantee of fairness. He gives us the example of slave owners classifying certain persons as Negroes. Dr Szasz says it was scientific but not fair. Other examples come to mind: Nazi Germany, and arguably Skinner’s Walden Two society. It is a point well taken. In defence of science, however, I must point out that a simple colour classification such as the slave owners’ system is not very scientific. Had they conferred with a real scientist, perhaps Mendel or Darwin, they might have seen that interbreeding and other factors make ‘race’ a more complicated issue than mere skin colour. The colour classification system was perhaps passably taxonomic, but it was driven mainly by mores.

To sum it up, while the thrust of Dr Szasz’s argument about psychiatric power continues, in my view, to be an invaluable contribution, I think he should not slight the problem of substandard science in psychiatry.

References
