The Myth of Mental Illness. By Thomas S. Szasz. (Secker & Warburg, 1960)

Over a century and a half ago Pinel removed the chains from the insane in Paris. John Conolly in England introduced more humane methods of treatment for them, and since the days of Charcot, Kraepelin and Freud, mental illness has been the subject of scientific enquiry like other illnesses.

The author of The Myth of Mental Illness puts forward the view that patients with mental disorders should, after all, not be regarded as ill, because they do not suffer from any demonstrable physico-chemical disorders of their bodies, but regard as people who develop symptoms mimicking bodily illness as a form of communication to obtain certain special advantages from society and persons in their environment. There is a serious danger in this approach, quite apart from its very doubtful scientific validity, because it could easily be abused by those who are unsympathetic in their attitude to the mentally sick—and there are still many of them both in and outside the medical profession—to lead them to advocate a return to the days before Pinel’s reform when mental patients were not regarded as sick but as people whose conduct was undesirable, if not reprehensible.

The author’s arguments, which he elaborates in 310 pages, run briefly as follows. He uses the word ‘illness’ as synonymous with a physico-chemical disorder of the body and, taking hysteria as if it were representative of all forms of mental disorder, he argues that neither it nor they are illnesses at all. Charcot and Freud, he claims, by wrongly calling hysteria an illness, merely made it medically and socially acceptable.

He then makes the surprising statement that Christianity, by promising rewards to those who are helpless and infirm, actually encourages the development of hysteria. This point of view is based on such a naive over-simplification, if not misunderstanding of what Christianity actually stands for—and incidentally he speaks of the ‘Judaic-Christian’ attitude as if Judaism and Christianity were almost identical—that one cannot help asking oneself what the author’s personal motivation might be in putting forward these views.

Szasz then proceeds to make use of concepts borrowed from symbolic logic and communication theory and arrives at the conclusion that mental disorder should be regarded as a form of indirect communication or as a ‘game’ which the patient plays by means of symptoms used as signs to get special attention and to escape from his responsibilities. Hysteria, he claims, is thus much more closely related to malingering and cheating than is usually admitted by psychiatrists. Psychotherapy should be ‘systematised as a theory of human relationships, involving special social arrangements and fostering certain values and types of learning’. Its aim should be to teach the patient that his symptoms are undesirable forms of communication and that he must instead learn to deal with his personal, social and ethical problems in accordance with the accepted rules of behaviour laid down by society.

It is true that in many mental illnesses and particularly in hysteria, the assumption of various false roles is an important feature, and that the symptoms are often used to achieve certain gains—but this is, of course, by no means a new discovery. Szasz’s description of this ‘game-playing’ behaviour of the hysteric makes fascinating reading, but it is surprising and disappointing that a psycho-analyst should not go beyond the role-playing and behavioural aspects of mental illness. The real problem is not that the patient assumes these roles but why he does so. Freud’s important discovery was that there are inner conflicts which make the patient behave as he does. The real aim of psychotherapy is to understand and resolve these so that the patient no longer needs to play these roles. Szasz, by laying all the stress on making the patient learn new and better forms of behaviour, ignores this fundamental psychotherapeutic approach.

Even if Szasz’s thesis were correct where hysteria is concerned, it is surely unjustified to assume that what applies to hysteria must automatically apply to other forms of mental disorder. It would also seem to be a retrograde step.
especially for someone like the author who has contributed so much to our understanding of the body-mind relationship, to regard illness as something that pertains to the body only instead of adopting a more unified concept of illness as a disorder which affects the whole person as he exists within his physical and social environment.

It is particularly unfortunate that these basic errors should pervade a book which is in other respects such a lucid and stimulating work to read. The social significance of the rôle-playing behaviour is brilliantly described and fundamental questions concerning the relationship between medicine, psychiatry and psychoanalysis in our society and culture are discussed with unusual frankness and understanding. No one who reads it can fail to be impressed by its outspokenness and its courageous attempt to ask basic questions about the nature of mental illness and psychiatry.

H. H. Wolff

**Law and Psychiatry.** By Sheldon Glueck. (Tavistock Publications, 38/-.)

This book is based on the Isaac Ray Award Lectures delivered by Professor Glueck in 1962. It is therefore naturally divided into four parts, corresponding with the number of lectures. Although the book deals with American Law it is nonetheless interesting to the British reader. Professor Glueck examines the problems which arise between members of the legal and medical professions and analyses them with rare skill and sympathetic impartiality. Much has been written on this subject but it has never been better done than here.

In parts 2 and 3 the problems of criminal responsibility are reviewed, and again I have never read a better and more erudite criticism of the deficiencies of the M'Nahten rules in the light of modern psychiatric thought. We are taken right up to modern times and the Durham decision of 1954 in the District of Columbia is discussed in detail.

In the last part we are given a glimpse of the future, and suggestions are made for better and clearer concepts of criminal responsibility in the mentally ill. It is perhaps unfortunate that Professor Glueck's far-seeing recommendations on sentencing and treatment of criminals, which must inevitably be adopted some day, are likely to be introduced much more slowly than many of us would like to see.

This is a well-written book, easy to read and with a wealth of references. No student of forensic psychiatry, be he doctor or lawyer, American or British, should miss reading this extremely useful exposition of a difficult subject hitherto beset by prejudice on both sides.

F. H. Taylor

**Delinquency and Child Neglect.** By Harriett Wilson. (The Sir Halley Stewart Trust, and George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 25s.).

On the dust sheet this book is described as "the first comprehensive study of a group of families often referred to as 'problem families'". But, although the book does make a contribution to the already considerable literature on this topic, it is far from being as comprehensive a study as the publishers claim.

It is, in fact, a study which is essentially sociological in discipline; and it suffers from the limitations which are inevitable when a multi-disciplinary complex problem of this type is studied from a single professional angle, rather than by a team approach. Unfortunately, therefore, what is obviously a useful piece of research in its own professional field is made to appear unconvincing because of its apparent failure to appreciate the significance of the other possible, and necessary, disciplinary approaches to the problem.

The research is based on the study of a series of families, in "Seaport", which reached certain pre-determined levels of "performance-inadequacy". Much time and thought obviously went into the selection of these families; but the techniques used for this selection were not of necessity the most suitable for a comprehensive study of the families' structure, functioning and relationships. The emphasis throughout is on the material condition of the families' setting and finances; and on the parental