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Review of: Thomas Szasz, *Fatal Freedom: The Ethics and Politics of Suicide*

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Thomas Szasz, *Fatal Freedom: The Ethics and Politics of Suicide* (Praeger Publishers 1999). Preface, acknowledgments, appendix, notes, selected bibliography, indexes. ISBN 0-275-96646-1 [178 pp. \$25.95. Hardbound, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881].

All living beings eventually die. Death is a biological certainty. The right of individuals to choose when and how to die is the thesis of this well organized and logically written treatise on suicide.

Thomas Szasz, a renowned author, psychiatrist, and Professor of Psychiatry, writes that, although we have many terms for killing another, there is only one used for killing oneself. The word "suicide" is used to describe the mode of death, the taking of life by a deliberate act or choice, and also to denounce the act as evil, illegal, fanatical, and indefensible.

The author's historical research into self-killing reveals differing beliefs, even within a single society. For example, he notes that:

Because self-killing is an act with serious consequences not only for oneself, but for others as well, the Greeks and Romans judged it to be courageous or cowardly, noble or ignoble, legitimate or illegitimate, depending on the circumstances. Socrates believed that man was the property of the gods: Without their permission, self-killing was wrongful; with it, it was permissible, perhaps even praiseworthy.¹

The author explains that although the Bible describes instances of justifiable self-killing, Christianity changed the Romans' views as the Church adopted the belief that only God may give and take life, and that suicide is an evil sin, an act orchestrated by the Devil.² Suicide was later treated as a criminal offence, and today it is widely considered the result of mental illness and a problem that must be treated and cured.

With clarity and logical reasoning, Dr. Szasz discusses some of the most important ethical questions of this time:

¹ Thomas Szasz, *Fatal Freedom: The Ethics and Politics of Suicide* 10 (1999).

² See *id.* at 12.

- Is suicide a voluntary choice and right of each individual, or an act of mental illness?
- What is the role of physicians in preventing or assisting it?
- How might suicide be viewed in the future?

Fatal Freedom is a book for all that wish to expand their awareness of the historical and modern attitudes toward suicide, and explore differing views on this sensitive topic. Definitely written and efficiently organized, this book would be of interest to medical and legal professionals, the clergy, students of these disciplines, as well as lay people.

The book is interesting, easy to read and understand. It contains short quotes and historical references that add interest and clarification. The book, containing only 177 pages, may seem short, but a longer treatise on this daunting subject might deter some readers. An ample list of footnotes and a selected bibliography, totaling 29 pages, offer the reader many opportunities for further study. An appendix is also included that provides the reader different perceptions of suicide as viewed by five individuals from various times and places: Thomas Jefferson, Sir Leslie Stephen, Henry L. Mencken, King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and Sir William Osler. These accounts are quite intriguing and whet the appetite for more.

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