On Religious and Psychiatric Atheism:

The Success of Epicurus,

The Failure of Thomas Szasz

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**Epicurus** (341-270 BC), founder in ancient Greece of Epicureanism, a scientific philosophy that was functionally atheist and premised on free will

**Thomas Szasz** (1920-2012), psychiatrist at SUNY Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, NY, and advocate of a philosophy that was both theologically and psychiatrically atheist and premised on free will

 

Epicureanism was a missionary, dogmatic, world philosophy. It was materialist (functionally atheist), denying the existence of the afterlife, heaven, or hell. Its basis was science and it advocated talk therapy to achieve mental health (*ataraxia*). It flourished for seven centuries, from the 4th c. BC to the 4th c. AD.

**Three models of mental illness** (its causes, treatments, and philosophy of mind):

1. The **shamanistic** model (devil possession; exorcism; dualist)

2. The **medical** model (brain disease; excision; reductive materialist)

3. The **Epicurean-Szaszian** model (personal problems; exercise; emergent materialist)

The first is common among religious people; the second is common among scientists, doctors, governments, and nonreligious people. The two models seem starkly at odds with each other.

The third model offers a combination of the two. Like the medical model, the Epicurean model is atheist (“materialist”); like the shamanistic model, the Epicurean model refuses to reduce free will, choice, and personal responsibility to brain chemistry.

**Reductive vs. emergent materialism**



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*Does equating the mind with the brain prevent us from seeing the difference between a pornographic picture and the binary code or pigments that generate it?*

References and recommended reading

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*The Last Interview of Thomas Szasz*. 2013. Directed by Philip Singer, PhD. Documentary. 50 minutes, clip of minutes 41:57 – 41:30 (shown by permission). A Traditional Healing Productions Film. Witness Films. ***The complete film is available from Witness Films at*** [www.witnessfilms.com](http://www.witnessfilms.com" \t "_blank).

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