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Physician Versus Humanist

Phillip R. Slavney and Paul R. McHugh
Psychiatric Polarieties: Methodology and Practice
ISBN 0-8018-3428-7. $17.50

Phillip R. Slavney is associate professor and director of residency education in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and attending psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins Hospital. He is coauthor, with P. R. McHugh, of The Perspectives of Psychiatry. ■ Paul R. McHugh is the Henry Phipps Professor and director of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and psychiatrist-in-chief at Johns Hopkins Hospital. ■ Eric Turkheimer, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, is coeditor, with E. D. Bigler and R. A. Yeo, of the forthcoming book Neuropsychological Function and Brain Imaging.

This is a textbook for an introductory course in psychiatry. Its style is that of a well-read senior psychiatrist addressing an incoming class. As a nonphysician, I felt as if I had stepped into a lecture at a medical school. The philosophical issues were familiar, but the collegial form of address (e.g., "But as physicians, we want to do more . . ."); p. 5) made me feel like an intruder.

The book is built around the characterization of six debates in psychiatry as polarities: mind versus brain, explanation versus understanding, conscious versus unconscious, Hebraic versus Hellenic, patient versus client, and autonomy versus paternalism. The authors attempt to show that each is a consequence of a fundamental polarity between human as subject and human as object.

The goal of the book is to promote open-mindedness as an alternative to parochialism, and when addressing issues of philosophy and social science, it is refreshingly successful. Slavney and McHugh face the complexities of mind, brain, consciousness, and the philosophy of science by adopting the stance of well-informed laypersons, eager to explore the possibilities of competing views without endorsing or rejecting them, content instead to explicate their varied applications to psychiatry.

The book is less satisfying when it turns from the ambiguities of psychiatry as a discipline in the humanities to the difficulties of practicing it as a species of medicine. The physician-to-physician style becomes more problematic: Although the authors continue to expound both sides of the issues, their fundamentally medical assumptions lie closer to the surface and provide the nonmedical reader with reason to object.

This is illustrated by the discussion of suicide in the penultimate chapter, "Autonomy vs. Paternalism." Slavney and McHugh begin by summarily dismissing radical views that insist the prevention of suicide is necessarily a denial of liberty. They go on to argue that while the principle of liberty is of supreme importance, it is not absolute: Children, for example, are not free to act against the judgment of their parents. Illness, they suggest, represents a limitation of liberty; and the physician, in acting to overcome illness, may have to limit freedom in the cause of its eventual preservation. They then present the "fact" that most suicidal people are mentally ill and conclude forcefully: "Treat every suicide attempt as an inauthentic act of an individual who has been deprived of his [or her] autonomy by illness" (p. 114).

This is a provocative position, but it provokes argument as well as thought. What of suicidal patients who are not ill? How can one decide which suicidal patients are ill and which are not? The disarming tone of open-minded uncertainty in the first chapters is replaced with the familiar sound of like-minded people agreeing with each other. This spoils the uncontentious mood the authors initially created, but the book would nonetheless make a fine catalyst for discussion in an introductory class in mental illness and its treatment.

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