

# BOOK REVIEW

## Ethics and Mental Health: The Patient, Profession and Community

Michael Robertson and Garry Walter  
CRC Press, Boca Raton, 2013

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Reading this collaboration between two philosophically informed psychiatrists, it is frequently hard to discern what exactly the authors want to do in this book. For much of the first part of the book it appears to be an ambitious attempt to provide the reader with a whirlwind review of the history of ethics in the West and its applications to mental health ethics. As such it is both too much and too little. The reader with little background in philosophy would need much more clarification of basic concepts and terminology; whereas the philosophically sophisticated reader will find much of this unnecessary. Furthermore names and theories are presented with critiques that often minimize the complexity of the controversies involved and the presence of credible alternative interpretations.

At other points the book appears to center on a series of detailed studies of political, economic and sociological conditions at specific times and places, in which the authors' own political perspective becomes quite clear though never really critically examined. Eventually an attempt is made to relate each of these contexts to ethical challenges in mental health practice in each setting, but often not before the befuddled reader has begun to wonder why she is hearing in so much detail about subjects such as Argentine politics, the rise of Margaret Thatcher and neo-liberalism, the portrayal of mental illness in the media, and Australia's policies toward aboriginal peoples. In each case the ethical points pertaining to mental health practice could be made quite well with less digression, but more concerning is how often the conclusions drawn are presented with little supporting argument when they are often far from self evident. Is it unquestionably the case that the "intellectual preconditions" for the "murder of 70,000 patients by their psychiatrists" (p. xiv) in Nazi Germany include biological psychiatry, Kraepelin, Darwin and the emergence of a public health focus in German medicine? Or is it self-evident that neo-liberal health policy is responsible for a "model of medicine in which the focus is no longer on healthcare but on the enhancement or optimal functioning of a body part or system" (p.129)? Or is there clear consensus that "...the neuroscience revolution served as a Trojan horse for the infusion of neoliberalism into psychiatry, manifesting profound alterations of the conceptualization of psychiatric disorder and treatment." (p. 232)? While there may

be some truth in at least some of these assertions, the absence of critical argumentation and substantiation is troubling.

The authors' explicit goal in this book is to articulate and justify their own theory of how to conduct mental health related ethical inquiry. The full argument is presented in bits and pieces throughout this far ranging discussion, but there are three primary theses:

1. Moral agency in psychiatry, defined as the ability to formulate and carry out action in light of values, is determined by particular features in the concrete context in which the psychiatrist practices. That context includes several levels: "endo" (the individual values and experience of the psychiatrist and patient), "meso" (the community of psychiatrists and features of the mental health setting), and "exo" (the larger political, social and cultural context in which the psychiatrist practices). This is in contrast to more rule-oriented ethical approaches based on utilitarian or deontological principles.
2. "Virtually all" moral quandaries in psychiatry are rooted in the "dual role dilemma" defined as the conflict resulting from "...the responsibility to the individual patient versus to society or the community" (p. 47)
3. The best method for analyzing and resolving ethical quandaries in mental health must consider particulars in context and consists of two phases. A "reflective phase" consists in applying the principle of "reflective equilibrium" of John Rawls, which involves "...an iterative process of considering different judgments, maxims and beliefs in relation to a particular issue." (p.72) This is followed by a "deliberative phase" that is explicitly seen as an application of casuistic reasoning using "normative analogy" to relate a hierarchy of cases to a paradigm case. The second component of the deliberative phase "...is to formulate how the plan of action emerging from the casuistic paradigm fits within the dual-role dilemma rubric and where the mean between the extremes is located. ... [Then] the process of phronesis requires iteration between the casuistic and golden mean phases, as the casuistic paradigm often illuminates the pathway to the mean," (p. 74).

There is much intuitive appeal to an approach that considers the richness of context and eschews simple rule-driven thinking. The problem is that both the demonstration of how this approach works in practice and substantiation of how its premises and methods are justified are weak and thin. The few concrete examples provided are rather easy cases where ethicists from almost any approach are likely to reach the same conclusions. Furthermore, applying a label to a step in a process neither explains how it works nor justifies the procedure. Calling something phronesis says little about how it operates, nor is the golden mean a very helpful guide to analyzing a concrete ethical dilemma. Furthermore the dual-role dilemma would appear to fit some ethical quandaries better than others. It clearly applies in forensic matters or dealing with dangerousness or the treatment of minors. It seems less helpful in helping a therapist determine how to proceed when his own personal values conflict with those of the patient.

Some of the notions presented in this work are highly interesting and provoke much thought. The book would have been much more compelling if less time was spent reviewing the history of ethics and presenting detailed socio-political case studies, and more spent putting philosophical and clinical meat on the skeleton of a model.

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**Acknowledgements:**        *none*

**Competing interests:**      *none*

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**Date of Publication:**        *April 10, 2015*