

# BOOK REVIEW

## **The Virtuous Psychiatrist: Character Ethics in Psychiatric Practice.**

**By: Jennifer Radden and John Z. Sadler**

**Oxford University Press, 2010**

### **Three Reviews...Three Perspectives**

#### **Review II:**

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Many books on biomedical ethics in general and psychiatric ethics in particular focus on basic ethical principles: non-maleficence, autonomy and justice. In psychiatry there is also an extensive focus on rules related to maintaining boundaries, confidentiality and the duty to warn. *The Virtuous Psychiatrist: Character Ethics in Psychiatric Practice* written by both a philosopher and a clinician provides a fresh perspective on psychiatric bioethics by focusing on character rather than on principles or rules. The authors argue that the psychiatric care provided to patients with severe mental disorders is an emotionally exacting practice-it makes distinctive moral demands on the character of the professional psychiatric practitioner. Care for the severely mentally ill, the most vulnerable population within our society, calls for special character traits and greater virtue than other medical practice settings. The authors draw heavily on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which construes professional ethics in moral terms, and argue that virtues or character must be the cornerstone of psychiatric bioethics, from which rules and principles are ultimately derived.

Although many readers of books on psychiatric ethics expect pragmatic clinical applications informing them of what they should or should not do in a specific clinical case, this book offers guidance on what character traits should be cultivated and provides insights into the character of the "good psychiatrist". The authors share with Aristotle a belief that virtues can be deliberately cultivated, deepened and augmented through learning (habituation). The philosopher Hume noted that important virtues involving social and affective traits such as empathy can be inculcated and instilled through good parenting and moral education. This observation

has great relevance to psychiatric educators when we reflect on the informal or silent curriculum of residency training.

The first chapter provides a context for locating psychiatric ethics distinctly within professional and biomedical ethics and adopts a methodology employed by the APA's *Annotations With Particular Application to Psychiatry* (2001), in which special features of biomedical ethics are discussed in relation to the field of psychiatry. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 provide a cogent argument for why psychiatry is different and unique from other medical specialties. Unique features of psychiatry include: patient vulnerability, pervasive stigma and attitudes towards psychiatric symptoms, ongoing controversies over mental disorders in our society, the advent of the consumer movement and recent mental health care cost-containment initiatives by government and private industry. The authors argue for the application of virtue ethics to psychiatric clinical practice and emphasize an ethical framework based on moral leadership.

Chapter 4 focuses on the complex role of gender in psychiatry as it impacts on ethical concerns and argue for a gender-sensitive psychiatric practice. The authors touch on a number of important issues: the association of male heterosexuality with mental health, the gender biases inherent in a number of diagnostic categories and negative attitudes towards homosexuality and transgendered identity. Chapter 5 describes in more depth some of the character traits required by the psychiatrist in order to not only to possess virtue but also to convey this virtue to the public: trustworthiness, moral integrity, propriety, gender-sensitivity, moral leadership, fortitude, empathy, patience, self-knowledge and authenticity. In

the next chapter, the authors explore the ways in which adopting a virtue-based ethics framework can also pose specific challenges. Examples include the tension between the psychiatrist as healer and the psychiatrist who is expected to uphold criminal justice. Chapter 7 integrates the concepts discussed in previous chapters and tries to illustrate these concepts through the analysis of a number of vignettes related to real clinical practice and psychiatric supervision. The authors could have greatly enhanced the quality of this chapter by choosing more interesting clinical vignettes and making the dialogue more realistic. Dialogue from complex and ecologically valid vignettes in which a psychiatrist is successfully able to maintain boundaries with a sexually seductive patient, refuse a gift without hurting the feelings of a disadvantaged patient, sensitively refuses to commit fraud on behalf of poor patient who seeks to manipulate their insurance company would have been highly appreciated by the reader. A Vignettes that illustrate how a psychiatrist trainee addresses his or her own feelings when treating a patient that they genuinely dislike or that illustrates the emotional conflict experienced when behaving without full integrity or authenticity in one's private life would also be very powerful.

Overall, this is an excellent book and it is highly recommended to anyone interested in psychiatric bioethics including philosophers and clinicians but especially psychiatric educators. The book makes a compelling argument that by creating an ethics based on virtue rather than rules, psychiatric educators can and must inculcate these emotional and moral responses in the character of their own trainees.

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## References:

1. Aristotle. 1985. *Nicomachean ethics*, translated by T. Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett.
2. American Psychiatric Association (APA). 2001. *The principles of medical ethics: With annotations especially applicable to psychiatry*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

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**Competing Interests:** None.

**Acknowledgements:** None.

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