

Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboade



A Profession Without Reason

The Crisis of Contemporary Psychiatry
Untangled and Solved by Spinoza,
Freethinking, and Radical Enlightenment

Bruce E. Levine

A Profession Without Reason: The Crisis of Contemporary Psychiatry Untangled and Solved by Spinoza, Freethinking and Radical Enlightenment

By Bruce E. Levine.
AK Press. 2022.
£17.00 (pb). 270 pp.
ISBN 9781849354608

This book is quite a challenge to psychiatrists, as before having a chance to form their own take on the contemporary 'crisis of psychiatry' the book's front page blasts out the author's verdict on the matter: psychiatry is 'a dead man walking'.

The author tackles contemporary psychiatry through the lens of Baruch Spinoza, a philosopher charged with heresy in the mid-17th century. Today, Baruch Spinoza is lauded as one of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment. Spinoza was the first writer who dared to separate philosophy from theology, and religion from politics. For him, the Bible was a man-made instrument forcing believers into subjugation.

The author posits that Spinoza, if alive today, would be the ideal character to raise decisive questions on psychiatry, such as whether psychiatrists and psychologists are being used by authorities to compel individuals to adjust to an unjust dehumanising society. Are biological theories of mental illness diverting attention from societal ills causing emotional suffering and behavioural disturbances, with doctors pathologising dissenters? Are psychiatrists undermining mutual aid and non-hierarchical organisations? Quite a provocative start for a book, which I recommend, despite its flaws, to clinical colleagues.

Bruce Levine is a practising clinical psychologist in the USA, and a radical, sophisticated writer. On mental health issues, he is known to condemn technological and pharmaceutical approaches to mental crises.

Taking the original approach of bringing the medieval philosopher to life, Levine provides an eloquent and fact-based review on the 'evidence-based' saga of brain-only-based biological research, and the deeply rooted hierarchical power of psychiatric associations. This book could raise professionals' awareness of the internationally widespread, ongoing complicity of psychiatrists and psychologists in medical experiments on human participants including torture, isolation, enforced psychotropic drugging and new technologies of brain control.

The book is also a fresh take on the enormous breadth of human behaviour, expression and creativity – avoiding labels of illness while confronting professionals with our illness-ridden and rigid ICD/DSM terminology for our fellow humans. The book also provides encouragement for doctors, families and communities to acknowledge our share in the breakdown of interaction that leads to individual 'illness'.

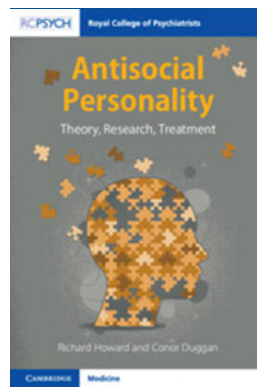
The book thus offers a radical critique of present psychiatric practice, but nevertheless suffers from the overblown claim to have untangled the 'Gordian Knot' of psychiatric illness (grounded

in professionals' rigid belief of what normality should look like). Its stance on everyday community and emergency psychiatry is also too distanced: avoiding the complex handling of mental aspects of violence-, alcohol- and drug-related turmoil, abuse issues and serious crime. It fails to address what roles present psychiatrists should have – leaving me guessing that the profession should vanish in an abyss between a widely tolerant psychology and a well-equipped neuro(bio)logy.

Levine has produced a well-written and well-meaning critical approach to an institution, but sadly it does not transcend the divide between anti-psychiatry and the bio-psychiatric establishment. Psychiatry is neither a culture-only based science nor a purely empirical one, but remains on the border of both.

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Antisocial Personality: Theory, Research, Treatment

By Richard Howard and Conor Duggan
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ISBN 9781911623984

There are currently 28 core texts on my shelf on personality disorder, spanning from Theophrastus in 200 BCE to Tyrer & Mulder (*Personality Disorder: From Evidence to Understanding*, Cambridge University Press) and Howard & Duggan in 2022. *Antisocial Personality: Theory, Research, Treatment* stands up well against its predecessors. Strengths include its salience, breadth and command. It is clichéd to say that its strengths are also its weaknesses, but at times the narrowness and the meticulously argued recommendations of this book prompt me to look longingly back at the differing perspectives of some of the other 27 works. Most important, this book is contemporary. Unlike Howard & Duggan, the great publications by the late Theodore Millon and Larry Siever can never again shed light on the specifics of the most recent national clinical guidelines, international diagnostic classification systems, university research and ethically illuminating political missteps.


The amount of detail and breadth packed into 165 pages of text is skilful. Fundamental concepts, latest research, guidance on assessment, recommendations on treatment and ethical pitfalls are all well covered. The three chapters on developmental, interpersonal and brain perspectives neatly span divides between the mind and brain, eschewing unnecessary rabbit holes that less pragmatic authors have gone down in the past. There is no sacrifice of neuroscientific realities on the altar of recommendations to deliver more psychological treatment and prescribe less psychopharmacological medications. A slight weak point is that brain imaging and electrophysiology are focused on but not other foundations of

neuroscience, such as biochemistry, pharmacological challenge and genetics.

The tiered chapters separating general from specialist approaches are commanding. Here the strength of the recommendations and the detailed appeal to evidence are particularly strong. Building directly on Livesley's many summaries on pragmatic staged care, Howard & Duggan stamp their own personal but empirically informed opinions, with a focus on offenders with personality disorder, who understandably have some different and particular needs in contrast to patients who are not detained in prison custody or live life under the supervision of probation officers in the community. Like the increasingly popular structured clinical management for people with high levels of negative affectivity and suicidal crises, these two chapters offer general adult psychiatrists realistic achievable ways to work with patients with antisocial personalities who we might otherwise be too scared to treat. For me the best nuggets for all practitioners are the five principles tucked away at the back of the chapter on specialist approaches. Perhaps here the thinness of the book does struggle to grapple with specific guidance navigating the full panoply of different tested psychotherapeutic treatments for personality disorder.

There are multiple incisive and stimulating questions focusing on specialist debates, such as the comparisons between the group-based cognitive-behavioural treatment recommended by NICE

guidelines and broader interventions, concerns about treatability, the particular challenges of sexual sadism and the potential harms of intervention. The chapter on ethics is particularly illuminating about the impact of the political oversights of the 2000s, which continue to affect the lives of thousands enmeshed by the 'dangerous and severe personality disorder' and indeterminate 'imprisonment for public protection' policies of the UK government. In this chapter Howard & Duggan perhaps go too far in their directiveness to not assess personality disorder needs prior to sentencing. Sidestepping matters of criminal responsibility and the impact of sentencing on mental health management perhaps represents where pragmatism meets avoidance. This outspoken tone of the book makes it more stimulating and valuable. The thread of discontent about the loss of individual narratives and other potential harms of diagnostic classification is healthy. When books dare to write the words personality and antisocial in 2022, uproar from lively critical activists is perhaps inevitable, but the contents of this book lead me to imagine that the authors welcome such challenge and debate.

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