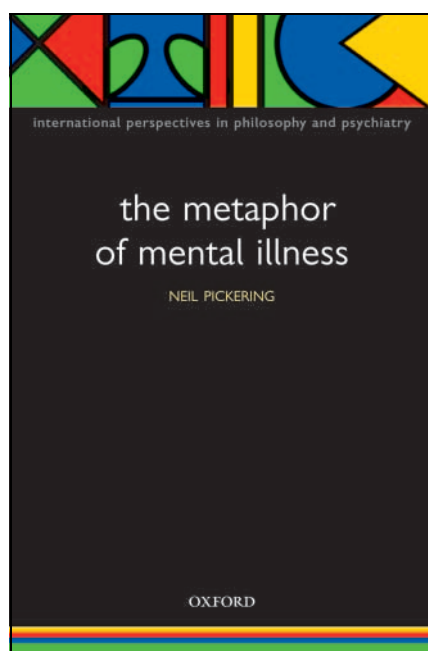


Book reviews

EDITED BY SIDNEY CROWN, FEMI OYEBODE and ROSALIND RAMSAY

The Metaphor of Mental Illness

By Neil Pickering. Oxford University Press.
2006. 194pp. £29.95 (pb). ISBN 0198530889



This book covers various issues concerning the concept of mental illness and its relation to general medical illness. It is a philosophical analysis, not a clinical or scientific one. The author considers the so-called likeness argument, which has various forms in the literature, according to which mental illnesses or disorders really are such because they are sufficiently similar to agreed physical illnesses. He criticises this form of argument on the grounds that the likenesses invoked typically recommend themselves as a result of the assimilation to the physical case, rather than being independent reasons for it. This criticism seems to work better for hypothesised likenesses, such as causation by disease, than evident ones such as distress and impairment of functioning. In any case, the author concludes that the categorisation of psychiatric conditions as illnesses is a matter of metaphor: ‘an imaginative shift into the illness category’.

The invocation of metaphor here explicitly refers to Szasz’s work on the concept of mental illness in the 1960s, specifically the charge that the concept is illegitimate: a metaphor or myth. Influential though this charge may have been, for example in shifting the terminology in the diagnostic manuals from mental illness to mental disorder, one can ask whether this issue of terminology matters much, compared with the clinical phenomena, the services and the science. For this reason, a book which targets this 40-year-old problem invented by Szasz starts somewhat at a disadvantage. The notion of metaphor is no doubt important and interesting, but at the same time it is also somewhat specialist and esoteric. Its value as a key to turn the great locks of problems in clinical practice, the science of psychopathology and the sociology of psychiatry is doubtful – and I’m inclined to think it bends and breaks, unable to withstand the forces. So to this reviewer’s mind this book on the metaphor of mental illness starts in the wrong place and uses the wrong tool. Nevertheless, it is a valuable update on several themes of conceptual analysis that run through the philosophy of psychiatry.

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Mood and Anxiety Disorders in Women

Edited by David J. Castle, Jayashri Kulkarni
& Kathryn M. Abel. Cambridge University
Press. 2006. 290pp. £27.99 (pb)
ISBN 0521547539

Interest in the area of women’s mental health has been slowly gathering pace. Women not surprisingly differ from men in terms of the epidemiology and pathophysiology of certain mental health problems, the treatments they respond to, the services they require and the issues they face. Women are almost twice as likely as men to suffer

from depressive and anxiety disorders. They are less likely than men to misuse alcohol and other substances but, when they do, the impact on the family is profound. Failure to address gender-specific differences in mental health not only burdens women themselves but also families, society in general and the mental health of future generations. In this book, a multinational group of authors crystallises work in this area to create an invaluable resource for all those involved in women’s mental health.

The contributors consider mood, anxiety and related disorders from a broad biopsychosocial perspective, charting gender differences and gender-specific issues through life from before puberty to old age. The volume’s range is wide, covering not only anxiety, depression and bipolar disorder, but also childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, gender-specific vulnerabilities to personality disorders, substance misuse, premenstrual syndrome, pregnancy, the post-partum period and the menopause. The authors appropriately round off the volume’s excellent collection by challenging clinicians’ *a priori* assumptions that women’s mood disorders in old age represent ‘the inevitable decline of dementia’, making instead a plea to redress that imbalance by challenging the view that a woman ‘has had her innings’.

Despite its attractive cover, the book is not quite coffee-table material. Most chapters are beautifully written while remaining rich in research information, but in some chapters, heavy biological, pharmacological and statistical terms might frustrate the efforts of the well-informed non-medical reader.

