Book reviews

Caring and curing: a philosophy of medicine and social work
R S Downie and E Telfer London, Methuen, 1980, 174 pp £3·95

In recent years a number of disciplines outside the traditional range of biological sciences have staked modest claims in the medical curriculum. At a time of impressive developments in the natural sciences, claims of relevance to medicine by any new discipline need to appear very convincing indeed to achieve a sympathetic audience. This book is an attempt to demonstrate the value of philosophy not only to medical practitioners, but to the other 'caring professions' such as social work. The authors present their text as having two purposes — to introduce the reader to philosophy and to offer a philosophy of the caring professions.

The first chapter provides a discussion of the values and aims embodied in the professions of medicine and social work. This primarily revolves around a conceptual analysis of the meaning of 'health' and 'welfare'. The second chapter analyses some of the major moral principles which are claimed to govern the caring professions. They tease out the ethical issues that lie behind the apparent incompatibility of active concern for the welfare of the client and a respect for his liberty.

They then move into the realms of political philosophy and draw out a wide range of implications behind the moral advocacy of laissez-faire, pluralist and socialist systems of providing care. Their fourth chapter can be taken as an introduction to the philosophy of science in which the epistemological basis of the natural and social sciences are examined in turn, and it is concluded that the social sciences are of only limited value in training the professions to deal with individuals. The last chapter argues that the caring professions are, by virtue of their responsibilities, particularly compelled to consider questions regarding the meaning of life and the meaningful life. A brief discussion concludes that a meaningful life in the sense of one enriched by experience is essential to an understanding of the meaning of life and essential also to providing compassionate help.

The authors have attempted to cover an ambitious range of such profound issues in a short text, and the result, in my opinion is uneven. The discussion on the politics of the caring professions works well and, not coincidentally, is the longest chapter. Proponents of all persuasions will find their approach stimulating. Essentially they attempt to separate out matters of principle and empirical questions behind the various stances on the Welfare State in what is becoming an increasingly urgent debate in contemporary Britain. On the other hand the discussion on the knowledge base of the professions seems to ignore many important developments associated with writers such as Feyerabend and Lakatos that make their radical separation of the epistemology of natural and social sciences outmoded. Above all their brief but spirited advocacy of literature to educate the professions seems an odd and unsubstantiated conclusion. The last chapter is surely too ambitious in offering a philosopher's approach to an analysis of the meaning of life in 19 pages.

The authors have valiantly and clearly shown how philosophers attempt to throw light on moral and political problems by conceptual clarification. The caring professions confront such dilemmas in specific problems of daily work. I am not convinced that this text has successfully bridged the chasm between conceptual analysis and practice and would like to see philosophers drawn into more specific issues to prove themselves.

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Values in Social Policy: nine contradictions

This book explores a series of contrasts which the author sees as central to discussion of the basis of the welfare state and of social work and social policy within it: for example, authority versus liberation, bureaucracy versus professionalism, the individual versus the community. One aim of the book is to help welfare workers to come to terms with conflict, to learn that their work is essentially a field of competing values in which there are no routine answers and personal moral choices have to be made. In many ways it succeeds admirably in its aim: it is clearly written, provocative and reasonably jargon-free, and would form a useful basis for general seminars in most fields of medical work, though it is written with social workers particularly in mind. For its size it has very full notes and bibliography.

I have two main criticisms of Values in Social Policy. The first is that it is written in terms of various contrasts which are not themselves explicitly explored, particularly that between capitalism and 'welfare society'. It is assumed throughout that we agree what capitalism is, what its bearings are on other questions raised (for example, on the nature of authority or of the family) and that modern Britain is basically capitalist. Only in the final chapter, 'The personal versus the political', do we get a slightly more extended discussion of capitalism, and this does not inspire confidence. For example, it equates 'rational and economic man' with 'the man who is both educated and with possessions'. This is not what the classical economists meant by the phrase. If Ms Hardy wishes to maintain that their system nevertheless requires such an interpretation, she would need to produce arguments to
support her claim. Throughout the book there are far too many
tendentious assertions in this vein
without support or explanation, and a
tendency to use quotation instead of argument.

My second criticism is that
implications of concepts discussed are not really brought out. For
example: a particular kind of
individualism is criticised for being
'possessive'. But can any kind of
individualism avoid being possessive
in some measure, even if only of its
own ideas and beliefs? (But in many
ways I thought the chapter on the
individual and the community the
best in the book.) Again, if freedom
is to be defined as 'consciousness,
moral awareness and the capacity to
choose between actions and enter
into beliefs' (p 95), can anything
impart it, even the gross inequalities
which are said to damage it? These
and others like them are of course
large questions. I would not expect a
full scale discussion of them but
would have welcomed an ac
clnowledgement that they do arise
from any attempt to analyse the
concepts discussed in this book.

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Ethics in Nursing Practice and
Education
(American Nurses' Association) 1980
65 pp $4.50.

A nurse in the 1980s may be con
fronted with a variety of complex
issues, for which the custom and
practice of the past is no longer
a sufficient guide. Technical progress
has created dilemmas which did not
previously exist on the one hand,
and on the other there is diversity of
opinion where once there was a
consensus. In addition, the nurse
is also assuming an ever expanding
role, especially when functioning as
an independent practitioner away
from the hierarchical hospital
structure. The need for some kind
of comprehensive text, like that of
the British Medical Association's
Handbook of Medical Ethics is indisputable.
Any attempt to fill this gap must be
welcomed.

This collection of seven papers
from the American Nurses' Asso
ciation sets out to consider two
main areas, that of nursing practice
and of nursing education. In the
former the approach is mainly
academic and tends to avoid coming
to grips in a specific way with parti
cular issues. There is some over-
lapping in the different papers, par
ticularly in discussing a definition of
ethics. It has also to be remembered
that the training and context of
practice of health care in America is
at considerable variance with our
own in Britain, not least in the matter
of private funding. For any nurse
seeking guidance, the Royal College
of Nurses' Code of Professional
Conduct is likely to prove as helpful.

The papers in the Education
section are much more specific, and
recognise the need for including a
course of ethics in a nursing cur
riculum. The third paper, 'A
Bioethical Program for Baccalaureate
Nursing Students', gives an outline
of the sort of approach that might be
used in such a course. This is not only
excellent as a model in this subject
but is also valuable as an approach
for teaching in any subject.

The British Medical Association's
Handbook covers a whole range of
issues thoroughly and sensitively;
but only a page or so is devoted to
nurses, and that in the context of
their relationship to doctors. While
the RCN has gone some way to
meeting the need for a treatment of
the special problems of nurses with
such booklets as Guidelines on
Confidentiality there is still a lack of
a comprehensive British work on the
subject.

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Muted Consent
Jan Wojcik. Purdue University,
Indiana, USA, 1978. 164 pp £3.35.

This volume is one of a series on
science, technology and human
values from the Purdue University,
West Lafayette, Indiana, USA. The
author hopes that the book will be
used as a 'primer in the language of
medical ethics'. The book, in seven
chapters, looks at various topics in
medical ethics. Each chapter begins
with three fictional case histories
which illustrate the problems
analysed in each chapter. The debate
is clear and well illustrated with a
number of references to contempo
rary commentators. The treatment
of the material is mainly theoretical
and philosophical. The quality of the
case material is reduced by the fact
that cases are hypothetical and the
final outcome is not given. Often
the complexity of cases illustrates
the many principles that co-exist in
considering case material. This book
isolates the major stances taken in
debate on the issues covered.

It seems unclear if the book is
intended for doctors, medical
students, nurses, philosophers,
thelogians or the general public.
The cases and the discussion suffer
very much from bias towards the
United States. Indeed the involve-
ment of the courts of law both civil
and criminal is very different in the
two countries and the arguments
thus suffer. Certainly some of the
language is more suited to the
philosopher than the medical student
or young doctor trying to make sense
of the dilemmas which face him.

The basic theme of the book is
that all ethical problems have an
involvement with altered consent in
some form or other. Even if one
cannot go the whole way with this
interesting thesis it undoubtedly
emphasises a very important mes
sage. Consent in its widest sense is
essential for good ethical doctoring.
However, in some areas the problem
is not merely of consent but who can
give valid consent. Can the mother
give consent for the death of her
child or fetus? We accept that the
parents must be involved in deci
dions about their baby especially if
it is suffering from a serious con
genital malformation. In the area of
death and dying can the patient give
valid consent in a situation where he
is denied any real alternative? One
chapter explores at considerable
length the technical aspects of death.
Other aspects receive less attention;
in particular the development of the
hospice movement in this country.
The chapter on resource allocation is
clear and I enjoyed reading it very
much. Again it has a US bias
emphasising the close involvement of
the law courts.

I cannot advise any medical
student to buy this book or even
suggest it as a primer, but, for those
interested in medical ethics this is a
valuable source book. The references
are extensive and the arguments of
the various commentators are well
summarised. A book for the library
rather than for the private collection.

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