

Philosophy of Psychopharmacology

By Dan J. Stein

Cambridge University Press, 2008

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What does psychopharmacology have to do with philosophy? If we consider philosophy to consist of epistemology, metaphysics, logic, and ethics—the traditional break-down—one might be puzzled, at first, by a book entitled, *Philosophy of Psychopharmacology*. Yet the burgeoning specialty known as the philosophy of science has much to contribute to the medical sciences, including psychiatry and its rather controversial scion, psychopharmacology. Indeed, if the primary purpose of the philosophy of science is “to analyze the methods of enquiry used in the various sciences,”¹ we should expect that a philosophical approach to psychopharmacology might be of considerable value. Dr. Dan Stein’s ambitious and thoughtful book amply fulfills this expectation. The book also makes clear that at least three of the traditional branches of philosophy—metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics—actually do have direct relevance to psychopharmacology. As Dr. Stein points out:

“A host of philosophical questions are raised by modern psychopharmacology...these can be divided into (1) conceptual or metaphysical questions about categories relevant to psychopharmacology; (2) explanatory or epistemological questions addressing our knowledge of how psychotropics work; and (3) moral or ethical questions about when psychotropics should be used...the rest of this volume will...consider each of these categories and questions in turn...” (p. 11).

In the course of six main chapters, Dr. Stein tackles a number of fundamental questions that have both philosophical and clinical implications; e.g., What is emotion? What is the self? Is treatment of psychiatric disorder a good thing? Is pharmacotherapy a good kind of intervention? Is pharmacotherapy for enhanced performance a good thing? Dr. Stein’s underlying goal in addressing these questions is to provide “...a model of the brain-mind that simultaneously provides explanations of mechanism and meaning; of symbols and their grounding; of context and its brain-mind embodiment...” (p.84). He rightly sees such a model as “...key for good medical practice, including good psychopharmacology.” (p. 84).

Stein aims to avoid simplistic dichotomies, such as the perennial conflict between “biological” and “psychological”

models of disorder. At the same time, he argues that “...we have to go beyond a natural science perspective on the way the body and the brain work, to include also a consideration of human practices and values.” (p. 91). This is clearly relevant to the controversies surrounding the nature and treatment of mood disorders, and whether, for example, depression has any “adaptive” value.² For Stein, we can and must develop “...sophisticated causal classifications of depression, based on a nuanced understanding of the interaction of biology and culture.” (p. 105). Yet Stein has a clear-eyed perspective on the deleterious effects of severe depression, noting that “...once symptoms of depression have achieved a particular level of severity, then compared with healthy volunteers, patients demonstrate marked changes in their underlying neurocircuitry, neurochemistry, and cognitive-affective processes.” (p. 105). One might also note the greatly elevated risk of suicide in such afflicted persons—not very “adaptive” at all.

Dr. Stein’s concerns are far from merely academic and theoretical. He deals with many questions of great practical interest to psychiatrists and other physicians who prescribe psychotropic agents; for example, how do we explain and make use of the interactive effects of psychotherapy and psychopharmacology? How do we understand and make use of the placebo response? What kind of ethical considerations should govern our use of psychotropics for those who don’t meet strict clinical criteria for a “disorder”—the realm of so-called “cosmetic psychopharmacology”?

This book could not be described as “light reading”, but it is lucidly-written and mercifully free of jargon. For practitioners who want to go beyond simplistic rationales for pharmacotherapy—such as the clichéd and misleading notion that mental disorders represent merely “chemical imbalances”—Dr. Stein’s book will provide a very sound philosophical foundation.

References

1. Okasha S: *Philosophy of Science*. Oxford University press, 2002.
2. Pies R: *Thy myth of depression's upside*. <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2010/03/01/the-myth-of-depressions-upside/>