

Psychiatry and Human Nature

In *Psychiatry and Human Nature*, Owen elegantly teases out alternative world views in psychiatry and mental health through the lens of the alternative classical and romantic traditions. Erudite, yet readable, it provides a refreshingly original take on the many controversies in how we conceptualise and respond to mental disorders.

*Professor Matthew Hotopf CBE FRCPsych FMedSci
Executive Dean
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This is a serious book. Professor Gareth Owen has written a compelling and masterly account of the interrelationship of mental disorder, human nature and human freedom. He takes a detailed, logical and comprehensive stance towards his subject. He is thoughtful, knowledgeable and, if I might say so, erudite. He examines his subject through classic and romantic perspectives. His elucidation of phenomenology, its place and role in psychiatry, its contributions to descriptive psychopathology and, through this, its influence on classification of psychiatric disorders was thorough and enviable.

Throughout, Professor Owen exemplifies his points by drawing from his own clinical cases and also from the literature. His analysis is always grounded in the phenomenology of Karl Jaspers, Max Scheler and others. I found his exposition on the problems of diagnostic practice persuasive and balanced. His discussion of the distinction to be made between 'Understanding' and 'Explanation' was helpful and illuminating. In his examination of the life of Leonardo da Vinci, he drew attention to what the differences were between a mere description of a life and an interpretation of critical events in a life, composed of the meanings and values determining action. This lesson is one that all psychiatrists should learn and apply in the context of clinical encounters.

Professor Owen's book is rich and enriching. It shows his absolute mastery of his subject and his total command of his field. It is a book that I will return to, again and again, because he has mined a deep and abundant seam.

*Femi Oyeboade
Professor of Psychiatry
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Gareth Owen has written a fascinating history of psychiatry. At once erudite and personally immediate, the book covers both the science and art of psychiatry, and the need for both in case formulation. The work is underpinned with a profound understanding of philosophical discussions about human nature and the historic tensions between philosophy and psychiatry. Case studies, informed by his Owen's clinical practice, are frequent and helpful pointers to the urgency of such issues in the lives of ordinary people. Richly interdisciplinary – there is a lovely chapter that uses fine art to elucidate one of the central themes: the difference between 'understanding' and 'explanation' in psychiatric terms – the book reminds us that human nature evolves with us, that we are never entirely 'rational' or 'emotional', never entirely 'classical' or 'romantic' (to use one of

Owen's classifications), and that even cutting-edge science must accommodate this. The book ends with a contemporary discussion of 'mental capacity' and what current understanding in psychiatry means with regard to justice for those suffering from mental disorders

Professor Carl Gombrich
Dean
The London Interdisciplinary School
London

Professor Owen has pulled off a remarkable feat. He has constructed a major intellectual work that springs from some old traditions yet speaks to our modern times. It is a book about psychiatry yet is neither conventional textbook nor fashionable critique. Owen shows that mental disorders stretch and buffet comfortable notions of human nature, what it is to be a free agent and what it is suffer and to care about the suffering of others. Those looking for easy positions on whether our mental health is simply a matter of biology, private introspection or the politics of how one group suppresses another will be disappointed. The book is a guide on how to bring out what's useful and true about many different perspectives and a way of integrating them, of balancing them. At the end we will certainly understand more about what psychiatry is trying to do but, more than that, we will have a fuller and deeper picture of what it means to be human.

In an age of polarisation and blinkeredness in our discourse about what really matters in life, *Psychiatry and Human Nature* is not only welcome but urgently needed.

Professor Anthony S. David
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Rich, erudite and thoughtful, Owen makes a compelling case for the necessity of engaging with human nature in all its complexity and ambiguity for both our understandings of psychiatry and of legal responses to mental illness/impaired capacity. The longitudinal perspective and the four-fold division into classic/romantic/right/left offers a new and helpful framing of the evolution of psychiatry and law. While this is not a book about the reform of mental health or capacity law, it provides those who advocate for such reform (from any perspective) with a valuable reminder of the importance of open debate and epistemic humility.

Professor Mary Donnelly
Law School
University College Cork
Ireland

Psychiatry and Human Nature is a tour de force; it is a comprehensive, fresh, rich and highly accessible treatment of the epistemology, methodology and ethics of psychiatry, including its history in Europe, the UK and the US since the nineteenth century, and contemporary political-legal controversies over patient freedom of decision-making in health care, which is particularly vexing in the context of mental disorder.

Owen argues that psychiatry needs to return to the concept of human nature, from two stances: the classical and the romantic. The distinction between these stances cross-cuts distinctions between mind and body, mind and brain, and psychology and biology; it is also more fruitful. The classical stance manifests in looking for causes, explanations, systematicity and intervention. The romantic manifests in looking for the meaning of a disturbed person's expressions, however bizarre, in order to understand them from within their world. The latter is illustrated by the *Verstehen* (understanding) method of psychiatry that was developed with the tools of the philosophical approach of German phenomenologists Husserl, Stein, Heidegger, Scheler and, especially, philosopher-psychiatrist Karl Jaspers. Owen argues for the ineliminability and fecundity of *Verstehen* psychiatry alongside our cause-seeking classical approaches. On this basis he makes strong recommendations about classification and formulation of a case in clinical practice.

On the ethical side, with suicide the psychiatric case with the highest stakes, the desire to protect often takes a classical form of seeking explanations and predictions, which is thwarted by our thorough inability to predict in the individual case. The romantic valuation of human freedom is compelling in the case of assisted suicide for people dying in pain. Yet, suicide prevention is a primary obligation of doctors and of the state. Policy and law in these areas are under rapid development, in the context of activism by patients and discoveries of the complexities of freedom of decision-making for people with disabilities deriving from mental disorders. There is no better introduction than Part II of this book, to the contemporary conversation in policy, law, and the interested public about freedom, authority and the doctor–patient relationship, a conversation in which Owen has played a leading role.

From theoretical, historical and methodological analysis, Owen derives one concrete recommendation after another, for clinical practice, research and discussions of policy. It is difficult to do justice to this book in any short summary. It is a landmark, and should be required reading in the training of every psychiatrist, whether clinician or researcher.

Sherrilyn Roush
Professor of Philosophy
University of California
Los Angeles (UCLA)

Professor Owen, a psychiatrist with a strong background in philosophy, presents a highly original approach using two perspectives or lenses – the ‘classic’ and the ‘romantic’ – to enrich our understanding of the nature of psychiatry, and, indeed, in turn, some key elements of human nature. The book is in the tradition of Karl Jaspers’s ‘General Psychopathology’ in the fundamental questions it tackles and in its wide scope. How the two perspectives work, and how in their complementarity they promise a fuller account of psychiatry, are illustrated across a broad range of that discipline’s essential features, including phenomenology, classification, diagnosis, the ‘understanding’/‘explanation’ distinction, case formulation and fundamental ethical challenges such as respect for patient autonomy and treatment without consent.

George Szukler
Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry and Society

Today, it takes a lot of courage to talk about human nature rather than about oppressed identities. Gareth Owen's new book is a welcome and deeply humanistic contribution to psychiatry. The book is extremely well-written, engaging and highly informative. The reader is exposed not only to the most relevant psychiatric viewpoints but also to enriching references to philosophy and literary sources. Inspired by Goethe, Owen distinguishes between two basic human attitudes or orientations: the classical and the romantic. The former is usually associated with the Enlightenment and thus with science, reason, reductionism, explanation and categorisation. The latter is characterised by a more holistic and dynamic approach, self-awareness, will, understanding and dynamism. These two attitudes must be understood as family resemblances or prototypes rather than rigidly demarcated orientations. They may be further subdivided according to their political outlook.

Owen's principal aim is the claim that the way we conceive of the 'psychiatric object' is intrinsically dependent on our view of human nature. The book consists of two parts. The first part deals with the development of psychiatry, the origin of classifications, and the permutation of psychiatric classifications, including DSM-IV and DSM-5. It also deals with biological approach to psychiatry, explanation and understanding. Additionally, it contains an exposition of descriptive and philosophical phenomenology.

Owen repeats his teacher John Cutting's motto: Psychopathology is applied philosophy. The essential point in Owen's description of clinical practice is the notion of case formulation which implies an evaluative matrix containing multiple aspects of the patient's history, resources, risk factors and psychopathology. For older psychiatrists such case formulation may seem to be obvious, but it is far from being evident in today's management-oriented psychiatric practice. This part of the book should be an obligatory reading for residents and other mental health professionals in psychiatry because it provides an easily accessible and thoughtful overview of psychiatry with its recent development and fundamental controversies. The second part of the book devoted to ethical issues in psychiatry deals with the problems and solutions concerning consent, suicide prevention, assisted dying, involuntary treatment, etc. Owen uses many clinical examples and exercises to illustrate the issues at stake. This part argues strongly for the notion of the patient's mental capacity to judge in situations involving constraint and legal issues. Mental capacity is a functional notion replacing the traditional description of psychopathological status and its potential consequences.

In sum, this is a highly welcome attempt at conveying a deep humanism in psychiatry, which is especially needed in our time of widespread and rampant reification of human beings.

*Josef Parnas, MD, Dr Med Sci
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Gareth Owen has given us a book that makes the reader think. We think about diagnosis, and what it means in psychiatry. We think about how we know, and what it means in psychiatry to know anything about anyone's mental states. We think about freedom, and what it means to restrict it in psychiatry. We think about our theories in psychiatry, and what they really mean. Usually, we don't think; we just do. Psychiatrists, mental health clinicians, and the general public have beliefs about mental illness and theories about mental health. But we don't think about those beliefs and theories; we just have them. Dr Owen invites us to think with him and, in the process, learn much that we didn't know, and to unlearn assumptions and even falsehoods we believed. Owen is in a small but golden tradition of thinkers in psychiatry, from Karl Jaspers a century ago onwards. Let us read, and think, with him, and grow wiser about ourselves.

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Psychiatry and Human Nature

Classic and Romantic Perspectives

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