

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is meant to serve two purposes. The first is to provide a book-length resource on the philosophy of medicine in general. I believe that books should be useful, and to this end have sought to organise and present the material in a way that is as accessible and interesting as I can manage. I have sought to include enough novel material for the work to be stimulating for professional philosophers of medicine, and for their advanced students. But I also have in mind medics, including advanced medical students.

Authoritative texts on biomedical ethics exist, but it is much harder to find a text that can be used as a guide to the philosophy of medicine beyond ethical questions. The text can be used as the basis of a course, and advice on how to use it in this way is given below.

The second purpose is to arrive at some sort of unifying vision, both of the philosophy of medicine, and of medicine itself. Philosophical books that argue for a single thesis are often hard going, and rarely useful for the student or the scholar from another discipline; while, for the expert, they are often irritating, since the expert usually disagrees.

This second goal—that of advancing and defending a philosophical thesis—is at odds with the goal of providing a resource, whether for teaching or reference. However, for this field, it is a necessity. A book about the philosophy of medicine that considered only the existing literature and sought to describe it as-is would be at the mercy of the current state of development of that patchy literature. It would devote much time to areas where the literature was large, and without a guiding idea that was independent of the literature, it would be unable to uncover gaps, and suggest areas for development. These are contributions that the field sorely needs, and that a book is well-suited to attempt. If a resource is to serve its purpose, whether for instruction or research, it must not only summarise the field: it must also level it, prune the bits that have outgrown their importance, uncover the areas that are fertile but shaded, and place it in the context of some larger map.

My own ideas may be entirely mistaken, but I try to be fair, and moreover in philosophy it is often more productive to disagree with your guide than to be convinced by everything that they say. Finding a good point on which to disagree with somebody is very often the way into a philosophical topic.

This book understands the philosophy of medicine as the study of philosophical topics arising in connection with medicine, and organises itself around the guiding question, “What is medicine?” For this reason, and because they are already well-treated elsewhere, the book does not foreground ethical questions, and does not treat the well-worn discussions of biomedical ethics. However, normative questions do play some role, for example in discussing decolonisation and medicine, or social determinants of health. The book is thus not a *completely* comprehensive treatment of the philosophy of medicine; but the guiding question provides a lens of wide enough angle to cover a large area, without losing focus. At least, that is my intention.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The book is designed to assist further study, which I hope is useful for the professional scholar and the student alike. Every chapter ends with key definitions and distinctions, and a list of readings. The definitions are also bolded as they appear in the text. The readings are divided into essential and further readings, with the former list being as short as I can make it, and the latter being much more inclusive. Because of the state of the field, some of the reading lists are considerably longer than others.

If used as the basis of a taught course, the chapters and accompanying reading can each be the basis of one or two lectures or seminar. The text is meant to be accessible, both for philosophers with no medical background, and medics with no philosophical background. Philosophical technicalities are kept to a minimum (they are rarely needed anyway, in my view). Nonetheless, by its nature, philosophical argumentation can be difficult, and there are times when it becomes impossible to pull the punches. My approach is to keep the big picture in view, since an argument is always easier to follow if we have some idea what we are fighting for. Losing sight of the wood for the trees is something that philosophers are often criticised for, and, much as I love my trade, I often feel the charge is justified. I have tried my best to keep the larger tune audible; if you find some passages difficult, as my supervisor used to tell me, just hum along.