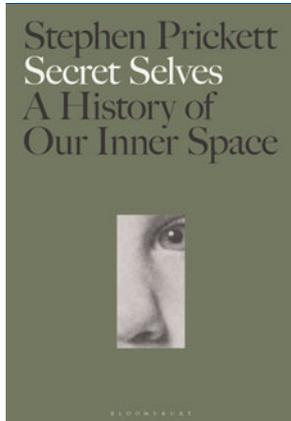


Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboade



Secret Selves: A History of Our Inner Space

By Stephen Prickett Bloomsbury Academic. 2021. £20 (hb). 272 pp. ISBN 9781501372469

Stephen Prickett (1939–2020) argued that concepts of our *Secret Selves* – our identity, individuality, imagination, consciousness and unconsciousness – our ‘infinite inner space’ – evolved over the centuries, shaped by changing external contexts. Long ago, our ancestors did not distinguish real and hallucinatory sensory inputs. In some eras, people explained dreams as external, supernatural or divinely inspired. Dreams have been used as vehicles of comedy and literary devices, as in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* and Carroll’s *Alice* books. They may also have inspired great artists: Hieronymus Bosch painted heaven and hell and, unusual for the 1500s, depicted hell as contemporary warfare, destruction and desolation created by humans.

As well as creations derived from our ‘inner space’, Prickett explored the etymology of pertinent words. ‘Identity’ has a ‘tortuous lexical history’, he wrote, from the Latin *idem*, meaning ‘the same’. It could mean a person being the same over time, or being the same as others, but by the mid-17th century, it came to mean ‘individuality’ or ‘personality’, i.e. difference rather than sameness. Nevertheless, it is still used collectively: an ‘identity card’ indicates group membership, often citizenship.

Many aspects of mind in Prickett’s book were new to me, and fascinating, but it was hardly an easy read. Perhaps I should not have been surprised, given that the author was a Professor of English and the dust jacket critiques were by experts in English and Christianity. To understand the book thoroughly demands greater preliminary understanding of those subjects than I have. To appreciate how Dante’s heaven, purgatory and hell in *The Divine Comedy* relate to Freud’s superego, ego and id requires some knowledge of Christianity, literature and psychoanalysis, before reading Prickett’s work.

The book covers a vast terrain of European Christian culture, but I was left feeling that the story was incomplete owing to the lack of other cultural and religious dimensions. The contents did not match the breadth implied by the title. Even when discussing ‘double consciousness’, an awareness of ourselves as individuals at the same time as seeing ourselves ‘as if we were external spectators of our own actions’, he used the example of lecturing to a public audience, rather than explaining that the term was derived from *fin de siècle* racialised oppression and social devaluation of African Americans in a White-dominated society.

Understanding of our individuality keeps shifting, and Prickett speculated on what the future might bring. One day we might all be cyborgs with cyberidentities and electronic brain implants. What would identity theft mean then? Might our inner space be hacked? How might we need to reconceptualise our inner selves? Whether Dante’s and Freud’s concepts are *passé*, remain the same

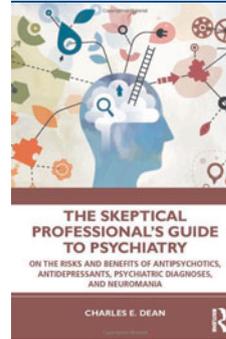
or are remodelled, history suggests that some fantasies derived from our secret selves may come to fruition.

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Declaration of interest

None.



The Skeptical Professional's Guide to Psychiatry: On the Risks and Benefits of Antipsychotics, Antidepressants, Psychiatric Diagnoses, and Neuromania

By Charles E. Dean
Routledge. 2020. £36.99 (pb). 348 pp.
ISBN 9780367469207

Professor Dean, a psychiatrist with expertise in psychopharmacology and neuroscience, introduces the context of his book by noting that he is adding to the increasing number of books critical of psychiatry that have been published in recent years. He further describes how, despite the heavy use of medication, there is no evidence that morbidity or mortality of mental disorders has dropped in recent decades. Indeed, mortality rates have risen in many disorders, and the outcome in schizophrenia has worsened. There is something badly rotten at the heart of mainstream psychiatric theory and practice, but despite the lack of scientific or clinical progress, practice is largely untouched by the troubling lack of empirical support for our diagnostic constructs and the widespread use of psychotropics. In this, Dean is in accord with the United Nations, in the person of its ‘special rapporteur’, and the World Health Organization, with both organisations recently publishing documents criticising the dominance of biomedicine in mental healthcare and recommending de-medicalised approaches. Perhaps it is now mainstream psychiatry that no longer holds the centre ground for mental health ideology.

The book examines the biological revolution in psychiatry and concludes that this has failed to deliver any meaningful improvement in mental healthcare. Much of the subsequent body of the book focuses on psychotropic medication, particularly antipsychotics and antidepressants, examining numerous studies on aspects such as efficacy, side-effects, polypharmacy and treatment resistance. Dean concludes each of these chapters with some ‘clinical notes’ for the practitioner, that generally urge a more cautious approach to prescribing. His final chapters deal with the failure of current diagnostic systems to establish their validity.

This is a worthwhile book for the breadth of studies (particularly on psychotropics) that it covers, but as a result critical analysis of important studies is missing. This made some of these middle chapters hard going as it felt at times like a long list of study abstracts. I also think that, good as the content of this book is, books by Robert Whitaker and Joanna Moncrieff deal with a similar subject matter with greater depth and coherence.

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Declaration of interest

None.