INPP 2026 Submission

Title: Making sense of self-illness ambiguity

Abstract:

Recent years have seen 'self-illness ambiguity' become an increasingly major topic of debate in the philosophy of psychiatry. Self-illness ambiguity is often described as a difficulty mental health service users may experience in attempting to distinguish their self from their mental illness. On the surface, expressions of self-illness ambiguity (e.g., 'Is this me or my mental illness?' or 'Does my illness make me do this?') seem to presuppose that self and mental illness are two separate entities and indeed sources of agency; self-illness ambiguity, on this picture, is merely a matter of determining where that line between self and illness (and actions attributable to one or the other) runs.

This talk asks: if we question the plausibility of this picture, how can we make sense of self-illness ambiguity discourse? I consider several options, including the idea that what looks like questions about a self-illness distinction are really questions about matters of responsibility. Honouring the theme of this year's INPP, I focus on the relationship between philosophical theory and mental health care practice in this context: how do philosophical questions about the metaphysics and semantics of self-illness ambiguity discourse relate to how service users and clinicians employ self-illness ambiguity talk?