How to Blame Less but Excuse Not: A Relational Approach

It is commonly thought that a psychiatric condition does not, and should not, automatically excuse a person from wrongdoing. Doing so denies the heterogeneity of conditions, and may belittle and victimize the person. Yet it is also commonly accepted that psychiatric conditions urge us to be cautious and reluctant to blame, since our standards about what is right and wrong are often biased towards neurotypical persons, and psychiatric conditions indicate that abilities somehow may be compromised.

How might we do justice to both these considerations without collapsing into inconsistency or empty rhetoric? Philosophical literature suggest that we should either 'blame better' i.e., blame in ways that are detached, scaffolding, and non-retributive, or else should excuse while still aiming to empower or enable.

But these responses abstract away from uncertainty about standards and abilities. Presumptuous judgments about what others can do or ought to do may damage the therapeutic relationship**.** I develop a third approach which incorporates epistemic humility and aims to diminish this risk of relational harm. From this stance one suspends both blame and exculpation, and appeals to a shared responsibility to make sense of what happened.