

Against the lightning bolt view of mental illness

Families – primarily mothers – used to be blamed for their children’s mental illness (e. g., Bateson et al 1956). In the present day, a *lightning bolt view* of mental illness has become popular instead. Genetics make people vulnerable to mental illness, but ultimately, whether you end up ill or not is a matter of brute luck – like being struck by lightning. This latter view is supposedly *morally* better, since it does not place blame on anyone (Luhrmann 2000).

However, the lightning bolt view is profoundly apolitical (Plaskitt 2021). There is evidence that homelessness, insecurity, poverty, and racism contribute to mental illness (Luhrmann 2007; Bentall 2004: 474-477). Political decisions thus have the potential to affect, for better or worse, the frequency and seriousness of mental illness in the population, but the lightning bolt view blinds us to this possibility.

Furthermore, this view prompts us to replace the old model where hostile and overly critical families caused mental illness, with an equally simple but opposite one, where the mentally ill person causes hostility and dysfunction in their family (instead of a more nuanced picture, allowing causation to go both ways). This is a model where no one is *blamed*, since the mentally ill family member supposedly lacks moral responsibility. Thus, they are blameless for the family’s problems, even though they are supposed to cause them (the same goes for problems in the workplace or other areas).

I argue that blamelessness is of scant comfort when you are still labelled the cause.

In the moral responsibility literature, it is commonly supposed that being exempted from responsibility is problematic insofar as it means that people do not take you seriously. Nevertheless, escaping blame is seen, in itself, as beneficial, since being blamed comes with a special “sting” supposedly lacking when we judge someone to be the non-responsible cause of badness (e.g., Hutchison 2018).

However, first of all, we should doubt the descriptive accuracy of this picture. Bernard Williams writes of how we can feel terrible shame or agent-regret for things that we could not help (Williams 1981: 1993). A modern person who discovered, like Oedipus, that they had unknowingly slept with a parent, would not simply shrug it off because it was not their fault.

One might argue that shame and agent-regret are importantly different from guilt. But first, it is debated whether shame and guilt are phenomenologically distinct (Feldman Barrett 2017). Second, even if they are, shame might be as bad as guilt (Brekke Carlsson forthcoming).

Granting all this, we might insist, instead, that our psychological tendencies are irrational; people *ought to* feel particularly bad only for what is their fault. For bad aspects of me or bad

actions I could not help, I ought to feel the same way as I do about badness wholly unrelated to me. Still, even if this view could be defended, mentally ill people should not be expected to pioneer a new and more rational attitude to badness, in a society where most are prone to both shame and agent-regret for things out of their control.

For these two reasons – it is too apolitical, and it is hard for mentally ill people to be labelled the sole cause of their family troubles and other problems, even if they are not held responsible – we lack moral reasons to adopt the lightning bolt view on mental illness. Since this view is not supported by the empirical evidence either, it should not be promoted.

References

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