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Is there a Good Death?
Mark Fisher
Friday 14 September

Mark Fisher has an enviable depth of knowledge of the theory, practice and history of psychoanalysis and has previously spoken to us about the Kleinian Analyst Donald Meltzer. In this engaging seminar his knowledge was lightly worn.

Ordinarily our thoughts oscillate between the Imaginary and the Real. With death this is not possible. We all have one go at death and literally do not and cannot experience death. Importantly for Freud our unconscious does not believe in its own death. There is no time in the unconscious which behaves as if it is immortal. We may consciously talk about death but in the unconscious it is totally repressed.

We do talk about death and have developed complex ideologies. In classical civilisation there was a belief that it is good and honourable to die in battle. A Spartan would be ostracised if he returned home after a defeat rather than die in battle. For Romans being ready to die was a continuing aspiration.

In the Middle Ages there was a lot of time and effort expended in thinking about what is a good death. This was a time when there was a higher death rate than there is today. There was an emphasis on dying surrounded by family and accepting death with equanimity and in a calm, collected state of mind. All earthly affairs would be settled and the final sacrament given in anticipation of the afterlife. The promise of eternal salvation was accompanied by the dread of purgatory and hell.

Mark married into a Kurdish family. There the whole village gathers in and around the house of a dying person. Hence a good death is often dictated by the demands of others. In contemporary Britain and the USA the nature of our passing is increasingly seen as a matter of individual choice to be made before death and a celebration of a life rather than the more solemn mourning of a death. Rather than the Kurdish social event we are more likely to die isolated and surrounded by professionals rather than family.

Mark spoke about the deaths of people close to him. He prefaced this by saying that most of his experience is that death is ugly, messy and difficult and can emphasise all the family and personal conflicts that his dying family and friends had suffered during life. It is very difficult to be around dying people.

Mark has been influenced by Dame Cicely Mary Saunders (1918 – 2005) an English Anglican nurse, social worker, physician and writer. She is best known for her role in the birth of the hospice movement, emphasising the importance of palliative care in modern medicine.

He returned to the theme of thinking about death in terms of the Imaginary. In discussions of death actual real death does not get a look in. The artist Grayson Perry looked into rituals about death including cultures who kept embalmed bodies at home for a year until everybody was able to make a decision about burial. He asked

a man about how Perry could give him a good death. So this man had his funeral while he was still alive and could experience it.

The social pressures have changed from not talking about death to having a nice party and what a USA campaigning movement calls a positive death. For do it yourself funerals you hire a death doula. A doula works with the dying person and their family to decide what to do. For Mark this means that Death is not avoided but the dying person is. Living with the dying body is suppressed and repressed.

This talk about death and dying gives the sense of our having choice in a situation we cannot know and cannot control. It is common for hospice nurses to believe that patients wait to die either when everyone is present or nobody is present.

It is not uncommon for patients in induced comas in Intensive Care units to dream that their doctors and nurses are torturing them, which given the invasive nature of medical procedures is unconsciously true.

For psychoanalysts we are in love with life and also in love with destructiveness.

Thank you to Mark Fisher for a seminar of uncommon simplicity and resonant depth.