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New Writings on the Psychoses

Dr Mark Fisher

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Summary by Frank Kelley

For many years Dr Mark Fisher was professional lead in an NHS psychotherapy service. In 2013 he entered private practice as both a supervisor and psychoanalyst working in Liverpool and online. His website is <https://rodneystpsychoanalyticpractice.blogspot.com/>

In his Zoom talk Mark presented an insightful overview of new writings on the psychoses including schizophrenia, paranoia and melancholia.

This reading is also a dialogue with Mark's past. For many years psychoanalysts treated psychoses as a medical term. Analysts used to make a tremendous distinction between psychotics and neurotics and would not offer psychoanalysis to people who suffered from psychotic illnesses.

This older view saw a psychotic delusion as fully formed and with a logical structure. Mark gave an example of a man who believed he was surrounded by a paedophilic ring who were scanning him. Neurotics have fantasies but not this kind of delusion.

Early in his career psychoanalysts would deal with the obsessional, hysteric and phobic neuroses but would not offer treatment for the psychoses which were then categorised as schizophrenia, dementia praecox and manic depression. These psychotic illnesses were seen as lifelong, unlikely to get better and could only be treated medically with surgery or medication. Psychoanalysis had little to offer. For Freud falling in love is the nearest neurotics get to psychosis.

Repression is central to neurosis. Neurotics suffer from memories they can't get rid of. They suffer from the return of the repressed and from the failure of repression. Psychotics have a different presentation.

Freud had little patience for psychotics and most psychoanalysts followed his example. This was true up to the 1950s when analysis was seen at best as an adjunct treatment to medication. However he had a good relationship with the psychiatrist Binswanger who had a celebrity asylum in Switzerland. Freud also wrote a case study of Judge Schreber in 1911. This eminent jurist believed he had been turned into a woman to be God's whore. Freud based this case study not on an analysis but on Schreber's published memoir.

In 1930 Princess Alice of Battenburg suffered schizophrenia and paranoia in a manner reminiscent of Schreber, claiming to have irregular messages from Jesus and Buddha. Freud offered advice to the Asylum staff which helped with her recovery.

However Freud still insisted on this division of neurotic and psychotic. Psychoanalysis could treat neurosis to the point where it became ordinary human unhappiness but effective treatment for psychosis needed to wait for medical progress.

From the 1950s onward this division became relativized. Melanie Klein advanced the idea that infant development moves from the paranoid schizoid position to the depressive position. Hence a normal process of development which encompasses the psychotic and the neurotic.

Psychoanalysts were often also doctors and psychiatrists and increasingly began to notice people they saw who were neither neurotic nor psychotic. Often they were fragile and chaotic but had no major symptoms of psychosis. The analysis of people called ordinary psychotics became widespread particularly among continental psychoanalysts and in free analytic clinics.

This period, from the 1950s onwards, saw an incredible flowering of psychoanalysis. Mark worked in the NHS and found this new approach very useful. Related changes included the open dialogue movement in Sweden where a group of sufferers would regularly meet in a nursing home with a group of staff who were there to listen,

The Soteria Network is international and attempts to support people diagnosed with schizophrenia spectrum disorders using a minimal medication approach. Similar work began in this country with Healing Homes and the Hearing Voices Network. These changes were part of a long term change which helped and depathologised sufferers.

Thank you to Dr Mark Fisher. As usual his presentation was a cornucopia of thoughts drawn from a lifetime of psychoanalysis and a world of wide interests.