

Report of June 2014 Meeting Royal Society Southern Highlands Branch

Speaker: Dr Hugh Mackay

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Topic: What is ‘the good life’?

At the June meeting of the Royal Society Southern Highlands Branch, an audience of 105 attendees streamed into Chevalier College’s Performing Arts Centre to hear Dr Hugh Mackay speak on his recent book, *The Good Life*.

Arguing that Western society, including Australia, is in the grip of a modern neurosis he calls the “Utopia complex”, Hugh Mackay presented an argument that modern obsessions with positivity, perfection, happiness and material prosperity are damaging our children and contradicting the very idea of ‘the good life’. He then drew on numerous examples from ancient wisdom and from modern psychology to show how goodness – in the moral sense – could never be about ‘me’, but only about the quality of our personal relationships and our responses to those in need.

As a social researcher, Hugh Mackay has spent his working life listening to many thousands of people tell their personal stories. His lecture drew heavily on those stories to demonstrate the conclusions he has reached about our Utopian fantasies, and our energetic attempts to turn them into reality. He spoke of our desires for the perfect investment vehicle, the perfect holiday, the perfect marriage, the perfect divorce, perfect offspring, perfect teeth etc. He then questioned whether these quests for perfection are truly satisfying for us, or whether they may in fact be simply fuelling our dreams while limiting our vision to the most trivial definition of ‘good’.

Dr Mackay was highly critical of the common view that, according to the Utopian complex, happiness is our default position, our natural state, where all aspects of our lives should demonstrate a perpetual state of wellbeing. He asked why so many parents declare that their greatest wish for their children is that they be permanently happy. He said he is tempted to ask: Is that *all* you want for them? Do you want them to be as emotionally deprived as that? He argued that we grow through pain, and without sadness we would never realize what happiness is.

He then drew on ancient wisdom to explore what we mean by the term ‘happiness’. In the fifth century BCE, Sophocles declared that wisdom was the chief element of happiness. A century later, philosopher Aristotle taught that the ideal life was the life of *eudaimonia*,

a word that has been popularly but simplistically translated as 'happiness'. Aristotle's idea of happiness included fulfilling one's sense of purpose, living virtuously and experiencing the richness of human love and friendship. In other words something that sounds very similar to the contemporary concept of 'wholeness'. Psychotherapist Carl Rogers, 1902-1987, when discussing his concept of wholeness referred to 'the fully functioning person'.

In concluding his provocative lecture, Hugh Mackay asserted that the good life is not the sum of our security, wealth, status, postcode, career success and levels of transitory happiness, as participants in the Utopian complex model would have us believe. Instead it is a life defined by our capacity for selflessness, the quality of our relationships and our willingness to connect with others in a useful and enriching way. Hugh Mackay used the old Russian proverb, 'Happiness is not a horse; you cannot harness it' to demonstrate that the pursuit of happiness for its own sake is a futile exercise. However, if you live the "good life", it will come to you.

Anne Wood