



'Imagine the Perfect Polis: Creating Health in the City'

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Overview:

The opening lecture of the seminar series, given by Prof Anthony Grayling, looked at the history of the city and what it can teach us about the search for the good life. Central to this was consideration of what a 'community setting' should best be like to ensure that individual flourishing and wellbeing happens.

Key Ideas:

- Eudaimonia – the state of well-being and well-doing, usually (although inadequately) translated as 'happiness'.
- There is such a thing as 'the good life'.
- Each individual and each community has an 'ethos'.
- 'Civic conversation' and how it might be developed.

Summary:

Prof Grayling introduced his lecture against the background of E M Forster's phrase "only connect" i.e. if only one seeks the connections between things that at first appear different, they will gain insights. The lecture was based on a connection between the idea of 'the ethic of a civil community' (a 'civil community' being defined as "an identifiable, more or less integrated, self-aware community of people", not necessarily geographical, but sociological) and 'individual health'.

The chief thought pursued throughout the lecture was that the enhancement of the quality of civil community life has an effect on individual health within that community.

Prof Grayling spoke of the belief of Ancient Greek society that a community is built on a form of social contract. The Ancient Greeks recognised the benefits that accrue from membership of the community and that the community cannot function without co-operation and trust. Most importantly they recognised that the social contract on which the community is based is premised on the idea of a 'civic conversation' ("the conversation we have with ourselves about what is right and what we should do"). Prof Grayling argued that, unless there is the opportunity in a civil community for a civic debate about what leads to innovation and change, decay will occur and the collapse of social order is even possible.

The concept of 'eudaimonia' was introduced and defined as "the state of well-being and well-doing, usually (although inadequately) translated as 'happiness'". A eudemonic community is considered to be flourishing, satisfying and worthwhile, whilst 'the good life' is thought to be the life of flourishing, achievement and satisfaction.

Prof Grayling drew the distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality'. Drawing on the work of Aristotle and Plato, Grayling spoke of morality as part of ethics: perhaps the central part, but not the whole of it. Morality was described as "a narrowly conceived set of considerations about our interpersonal relations and our responsibilities and obligations to one another". Ethics was presented as a broader matter about what sort of people we are, how we live our lives and what choices we make in general. Therefore your ethos is about the kind of person you are and the kind of life you live. This in turn says something about who you are, what you do, and what kinds of

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choices you make beyond moral considerations about your responsibility for, and your consideration for, others. Ethos, argued Grayling, is inclusive and applies both at the individual and the civil community levels and, at community level, is about the attitude that organises how people behave in the community space.

Thus ethos underlies health profile. Looking at individual health and community health, central questions are “what is the ethos of the community?” and “what counts as acceptable health-related behaviour and what does not?”. If the prevailing attitude is such that it encourages, or at very least tolerates, kinds of behaviour inimical to individual health and therefore to a positive community health profile, the first task has to be to change the ethos. Grayling suggests this is done by challenging it, attacking it, working at getting people to see things differently, and by acquiring different attitudes towards what is acceptable and appropriate. The community/city has to make good health a central value in its ethos. This is recognised as a huge challenge.

Prof Grayling explained that community ethos is changed by generating and sustaining a conversation in the civil community. In this context, ‘conversation’ was described as cultural life: television, the media, books, the arts, theatre, etc - all of which comment on the human condition, reflect aspects of individual experience, provide understanding of other ways of life and insights into alternative human possibilities, and shape ideas about what is worth doing. Therefore culture helps individuals to formulate a personal ethos that tends towards the satisfaction and fulfilment which Aristotle called ‘eudaimonia’. To change the ethos, and thus the behaviour of individuals in a community, you need to change the conversation.

Careful consideration should be given to whom it is most effective to target in beginning to change the conversation. Younger people (particularly secondary school age young people) and established role models are thought to be potentially effective target groups.

A way in which to encourage people into the civic conversation is to challenge them about ‘the good life’ (“the life worth living”). Grayling introduced “The Myth of Sisyphus” to demonstrate this. In the myth, Sisyphus asked the question: “Should I, or should I not, commit suicide?”. If the answer is no, the assumption is that there must be something worth living for and that life is worthwhile, and thus the whole of life has to be worthwhile.

The Greeks thought of health as wholeness or integrated-ness. Therefore, individual health is not just a matter of avoiding cardiovascular disease, or preventing lung cancer, or changing diet and exercise habits. Instead, consideration should be given to helping people to become ‘wholer’: feeling involved and valued, being self-aware and reflective, wanting to read and be educated, and capitalising on the connection between the healthy mind and the healthy body first celebrated by the ancient Greeks. Grayling concluded that this gradual change in thinking about striving for eudaimonia and the good life is the starting point to generating a civic conversation that shapes the community ethos, connects it with community health and leads to changes in behaviour.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.