

insight

South Africa Spain Holland
Malta



News and Views from the School

Welcome to Issue 29 - a special welcome to new readers.

We've recently returned from a visit to the Schools in South Africa - it was wonderful to see everyone there again. This time there were residential events in all three centres, Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. The School building in CT lies in the shadow of Table Mountain - spectacular! Many South Africans worry about the level of corruption that afflicts the country.



The School has operated in SA for over 50 years, right through the apartheid era. Students continue with their best efforts to realise the unity behind the obvious diversity.

The Distance Learning programme continues to expand, with more and more classes. Introductory philosophy is open to all comers free (admin charge \$10). For more information go to the NY School's website: [Distance Learning](#).

You may have noticed that there wasn't a December issue of Insight. In future, this newsletter will be sent out termly instead of

twice-termly. Sometimes people tell me they haven't had chance to read it before the next one comes. Hope you like the new header!

Go to [Schoolinsight](#) for back issues. All good wishes,
Christine Lambie, Editor



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Beginnings



Translators, all students in the School, have been working on the Latin letters of the renaissance Florentine philosopher, some for as long as 45 years. Last November, volume 10 was published, nearing the completion of the entire project. Arthur Farndell, senior student in London, has been in the translation group since its inception.

Translating Ficino

Arthur Farndell, London

Who was Ficino?

Marsilio Ficino lived in Italy in the 15th century. He acted as midwife to bring to a natural and easy birth that phenomenon which we now call the Italian Renaissance. Ficino was an outstanding philosopher, priest, scholar, translator, physician, and musician.

But he was no great shakes in the physical world, being small in stature and having slightly hunched shoulders. His moving eloquence in speech and his impressive singing to the lyre were counterbalanced by a stammer or lisp. He once declared that he had never enjoyed a good day's health in his whole life, and he attributed his bouts of melancholy to the influence of Saturn and excessive study!

Ficino received an excellent education at the expense of Cosimo de' Medici, who was the effective ruler of Florence and possibly the wealthiest private individual in Europe. Cosimo later gave Ficino the function of guiding a group of superlative artists, philosophers, and writers to express their talents in ways that would remind others of their divine nature. Cosimo also commissioned Ficino to translate the works of Plato and Hermes Trismegistus from Greek to Latin. In addition Ficino developed a remarkable circle of correspondents including John Colet, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral and founder of St Paul's School, and Matthias, King of Hungary. Ficino answered all the letters, keeping careful copies of everything he sent and frequently initiating correspondence himself. Later he published his letters in 12 volumes.

Why translate his letters?

This is a project that has not been undertaken before. The letters reveal a wealth of information about Ficino, his correspondents, and the stirring times in which they lived. But more importantly perhaps, they present us with a human being in whom there is the most beautiful balance of love, reason, intelligence, and sheer humanity. Marsilio is a figure we have come to love and appreciate more and more over the years, a figure who is beginning again to exert the calming, encouraging, and supportive influence that he imparted to our forebears.



The translation is all done without payment, because the work is undertaken initially as a service to the School, and subsequently as a privilege. How many Latin scholars are in the translation group?

We currently have 25 members in the Renaissance Group worldwide, but at our fullest extent the number was close to 40. How many of these would call themselves scholars? It's not a name I apply to myself. We have taken on members of the School (for various reasons) who have known no Latin at all, and in some cases they have stayed out of love for more than 20 years, after which time they still don't know enough to pass GCSE; but their love of philosophy and of English has made them valuable members and at the same time has helped to transform their own being. At the other extreme, we have members who have graduated in the classics. All others are at various points between these extremes.

Working in groups

Over the years, translation groups have been set up in the UK, the USA, and Australia, all co-ordinated from London, where a revision group oversees and polishes the group translations. There are presently 8 groups. Each consists of a tutor and one, two, or three 'students'. In some cases the 'group' is comprised of only two in total. Usually, though not exclusively, the tutor has a greater command of Latin and English than the others.

The group is issued with the Latin text of a letter from a central source (me). Each group has some freedom in how it proceeds, and the same tutor might try out different methods of work as the terms go by. But typically all members of the group are asked to do some preparation of a few lines prior to the next weekly meeting. At the next meeting the tutor reviews what has been done, and this obviously varies according to ability and time available. The tutor makes sure that the structure of each sentence is understood: what is the main clause? How are the dependent clauses related to the main clause and to each other? Until this structure is established, nothing much can happen.

Hearing Ficino's voice

In all the groups, emphasis has always been laid upon hearing Ficino's Latin read aloud again and again, and this very often clarifies both the structure of the sentence and its meaning. His Latin is probably 99% classical, and this cannot be said of all Renaissance writers - far from it. It's very beautiful to hear and has its own majesty. Likewise, when any translation has been prepared, the English is read aloud again and again. This shows up any flaws. These are corrected and the English is read again. It's a refining process that may last for many months before a letter is said to be properly translated.

I wouldn't use the word 'metre', but the rhythm of the sound is reckoned to be of great significance, because that's what will reverberate in the reader's mind. And we work very much with an appreciation of the reader.

Disagreements?

Oh, there are lots of these, thank goodness! This is where things get beaten out on the anvil of reason, good judgement, knowledge of the two languages and experience of Ficino himself. What is good to see in the heat of battle is the willingness to surrender attachment to one's own version once a superior version is clearly in evidence. These attachments to 'my understanding' can be very strong. Thus each translation group will produce its best English version of the letter assigned to it and will then move on to another letter. All the group translations are returned to the central source (me).

The revision group goes through the stock of group translations, with the aim of refining the translations, writing the notes (on the letters and the correspondents), preparing the Latin text as shown in the later volumes, composing the introduction (usually the editor's job), the index and all the other paraphernalia that goes to making up each volume.

Latin and English are so different

Yes, there are difficulties, but let's remember that 50% of English words come from Latin. More and greater difficulties for us come from the fact that Ficino is presenting a philosophical religion and a religious philosophy that deal with concepts that are no longer common currency.

The only clock we work against is that in which the Absolute rings the bell that sounds the final note for each of us! If necessary, we are prepared to take weeks over a single sentence, not because we are idle, but because we want that sentence to represent as well as may be what it represented to Ficino's Latin-speaking readers.

Has Ficino affected my life?

Whenever someone speaks to me of Marsilio Ficino, my eyes light up and my interest is perceptibly quickened. The same love that has prompted thousands of hours to be devoted to translation of his works has also taken me to various parts of the globe to present him and his teachings. Visitors to my home see his words in the hall: 'Let your house be a temple of God'. The dining-room is graced with his portrait and more words: 'Unless you live for others, you cannot live for yourself'. Whatever my body and mind may be engaged in, Marsilio Ficino remains ever undisturbed in my heart.

Buy the book at [SESBookshop](#)

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Top Tips: recommended by readers

1. Reading: *The Silo Effect* by Gillian Tett.

The author trained as an anthropologist and is now a leading financial journalist. By exploring modern rituals, her book examines how individuals, teams and whole organisations often work in silos of thought. A 'must' for both philosophers and economists. Order from Amazon: [Silos](#)



Gillian Tett speaks about her book

2. Listening: *History of Indian Philosophy* podcast.

Insight 27 recommended podcasts by Peter Adamson, Professor at Munich and KCL. He started with western philosophy and has now moved on to Indian philosophy. Subscribe or select episodes. Don't miss: Go to [HistPhil](#)

3. Sanskrit:

Gabriella Burnel, student in London, and Oxford graduate in Sanskrit has produced a CD of 'Sounds of Sanskrit'. It combines her expertise with language, her love of music and natural ability as an entertainer. Buy from [SESbookshop](#). Commendable, fun.

Isabel has attended the Sussex branch for around 10 years.

She works from home mostly recording voice-overs, while caring for her toddler Rose. Like everyone, she heard about the refugee crisis - and then was spurred to do something about it in the autumn.



Boxes of thermals for refugees

Refugee Crisis: Thermals for Calais Campers

Isabel Woods, Sussex

After hearing the news last August about the 4000 Refugees and migrants camping at Calais, I began to wonder how they would survive the winter. So I thought they will need some thermal underwear, especially to sleep in at night when the temperatures may go below freezing. I'm not exactly rich and could only really afford to buy about one set of thermals, so I thought perhaps if I have a whip-round and ask some friends, we could pool some money and buy a few more.

This is not something I've done before and asking people for money doesn't sit with me very well, but then I thought 'take myself out of the equation and focus on those poor people camping in Calais' which spurred me on to stop pontificating and just have a go. I asked myself what was holding me back and realized that it was just 'little me' worrying about what people may think of me, would they be cross about being put on the spot? Or worse, would I get criticism from those who don't think the same as me? But the initial desire to act remained strong. I put myself to one side and went ahead. I set up a JustGiving crowd funder page and sent an email out.

The response was encouraging, so still focusing on the refugees in need I created a Facebook page, took a big breath and shared it there. My target of £300 was quickly reached, then £500 and then £1000! A friend who knows a thermal clothing supplier warmed

to the idea and sent us £1000 of thermal underwear at wholesale price and a generous donation of thermal hats, gloves and socks.

My partner and I took these to the 'Jungle' at Calais in a van, a little nervous. But we arrived at the camp to smiling and welcoming people. We met up with some volunteers who live in the Jungle helping the refugees, who were very pleased to see us as they had just run out of hats and gloves and were being asked for them by many - and so we opened our van and the volunteers loaded up their backpacks and off they went immediately to distribute them to those most in need!

Whilst in the camp with the people there, the teaching 'the person in front of me is none other than myself' came to mind. I don't think I've ever felt more that I was where I was meant to be, carrying out the role given to me. My partner Steve and I got to give out what I had been squirreling away over the past few months, all sorts of things such as a yo-yo, blow up pillow, can opener...which I was able to give to the refugees personally - which I admit I was pleased to have been able to do! We left the camp with an empty van and feeling that the job had been carried out as well as it could have been, some people would be a little warmer and our hearts opened by the experience.

See Isabel's page: [GoFundMe](#)

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Reader Feedback

As always, thanks for reading!

There was an unusual reply to the last insight; here it is in full:

I recently had the misfortune to suffer a severe fall at work, which also resulted in a broken hip, half-replacement, two weeks in hospital and care from the care management team in Dorset.

I learnt much from the fall. The effect of shock took me to a place of dependency which could be carefully avoided when fit and well. Most noticeable was the transfer of trust between human beings by way of visual



contact. I had to trust the eyes of the Ambulance crew; the X- ray team; only by total surrender to their good will was I able to go through the processes of recovery.

The night nurses were a race of people I had never before encountered. Compassion for the plight of not being able to get out of bed; compassion for uncomfortable pillows; compassion for cleaning me up. Philosophy didn't go far enough! The recent reflection on the Brahman did help at the worst moments, but human compassion flowed freely between sufferer and helper. It was like a pure stream of Absolute love.

And it began with fixing my eyes on the other, and trusting. Recovery continues, slowly, slowly, but the lesson of this Unity will be with me for the rest of my life.

Anthony offered classes in Poland first in 1992, then again in 1998. He lives in Berlin with his German wife and 4 daughters.



Anthony Kula, Poland

Philosophy in Poland Anthony Kula,

I come from the south of Poland, the area of heavy industry, coal mines, steel works but also of mountains and very strong traditions. This part of Poland over the few last centuries has been under German, Czech, Polish, and Austrian rule. Throughout, it has managed to preserve its identity and culture; even the Silesian dialect is still spoken in some parts. The Silesian capital is Katowice, but Krakow (from where Pope John Paul II originated) is not far away. Just a little further is Prague and Vienna.

After my first year at university studying psychology, I found myself in the UK where I joined the London School in 1973. After initial misgivings as I thought I was enrolling for classical philosophy course, I decided to carry on due to my fascination with the element of Gurdjieff/Ouspensky then present in the material. In 1976 I was introduced to meditation; I found the process of the meditation system interesting and useful as a discipline for life.

Beginnings

In 1998 I asked Mr Lambie (head of the School in London) for the Introductory Philosophy material with a view to translating it into Polish and possibly offering it. Through a series of coincidences I ended up in a port town of some 500 000 inhabitants in north Poland called Szczecin offering Part 1 to a group mainly of friends who had already been meeting occasionally, and practising a spiritually-inspired dance form.

This was received with great interest and soon other material followed with more people joining in. The material is translated and adapted by myself. However the 1965 Conversations with Shantananda Sarasvati have been translated by the London Polish Group - this has been useful to us.

Practicalities

To get to Szczecin from Berlin where I live is 2 hours' drive. At the beginning some 8 years ago I drove down once a week to take groups during the day then returning late at night. Now I drive once every two weeks and when I am not there the senior group studies the Bhagavad Gita.

I would not claim the Polish set-up is a school as we are 24 people in three groups and no permanent premises or formal organisation. I rather see it as an association of people following as best as they can the advaita philosophy which includes meditation.

We have had several residential weekends, study days and weeks, usually held in the north of Poland. Almost three years ago we had Mr Bernard White and his wife coming over to introduce meditation. It was a splendid occasion with us renting a 14th century castle -with ghosts thrown in for free. The cellar in the castle was very spooky indeed but apart from that and the cold, it proved to be a great event with around 18 students being introduced to meditation.

Our students

Most of the students are professional people in their 30's. It's probably not an exclusively Polish phenomenon but there seems to be a number of spiritual movements, meditation, yoga, Buddhism etc. all claiming to provide an easy solution to the age-old problems of mankind. The senior students know there is no easy solution that lasts, however the junior students and potential students face these attractions. It is also a problem for us with limited financial assets, to reach students. So far, most of our new recruits are from recommendation but it would be nice at some time in the future to open up to a wider audience.

Poland and the future here

Many Poles are interested in the search for truth; Poland is a nation that has suffered a great deal over the last centuries. It is still a deeply religious nation. It is also a nation that has been betrayed. Whenever a teaching like the one we are offering is presented, this has to be taken into consideration.

I'd like to offer philosophy in other parts of Poland perhaps on a seminar basis - some attempts had been made in this respect. Most importantly the work must proceed on a practical level day by day as this is the basis of all right undertakings.

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Lily is the black labrador who lives with Donald Lambie, the leader of the School and his wife, the editor. She has become a popular contributor to this newsletter, with her own canine insights.

Letter from Lily

I know you've all been worrying about what happened to me when The People went to South Africa in December. Here's a photo of me at Algie's Inn. Algie is the skinny-looking lurcher but make no mistake, he's a mean entrepreneur. Algie runs an awesome 5-star Dog Spa - if you haven't been, you haven't lived.



The facilities are sensational: vast garden complete with pool, woodland, rabbits, foxes, twice-daily walks along swimmable river, and dog sofas in every room. And chickens too (although I didn't get one of them this time!). So I'd like all you gentle readers to think how you

can entice both My People away so I can go to Algie's Inn again soon. It definitely beats that dreary capital city with all its shops and cafes.



Treo awarded the Dickin Medal for bravery

I see recommendations in this newsletter. So here's a book from me: ***It's All about Treo*** by Dave Heyhoe. It's about a very brave dog who worked in Afghanistan in bomb detection. Well worth reading - you'll learn so much about what it was like out there from this noble dog, Treo. He looks like me, don't you think? Hugs and wags,
[Lily](#)

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