

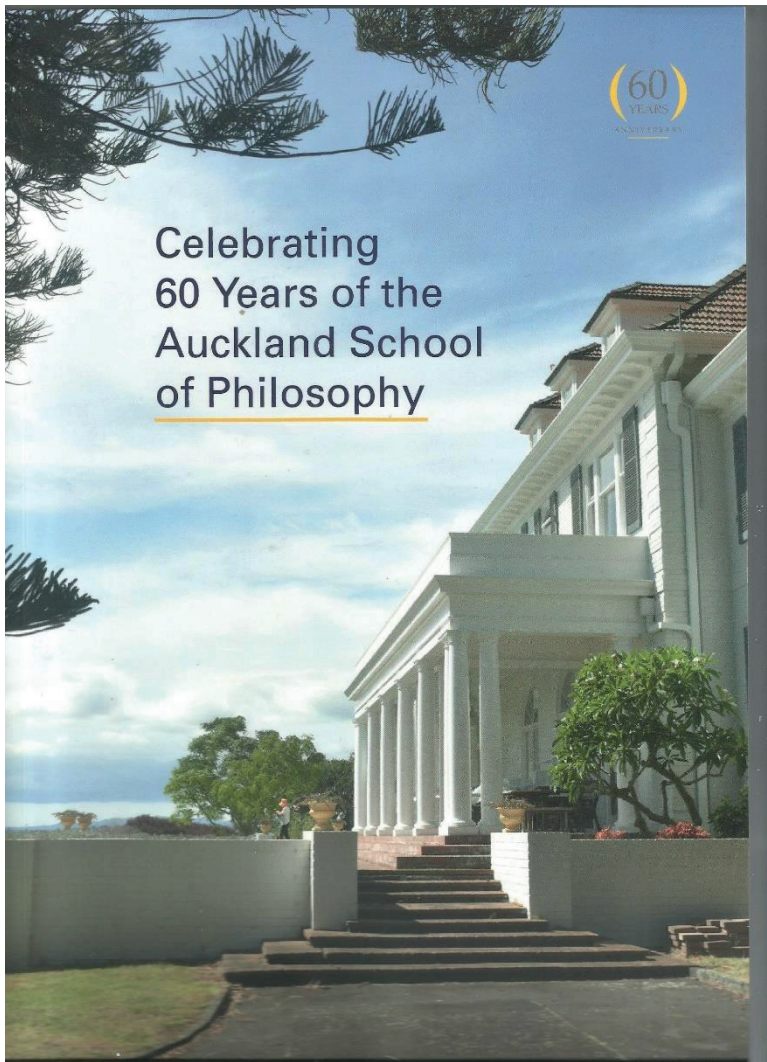
# *Vision*



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## Celebrating 60 Years of the Auckland School of Philosophy

A publication was prepared earlier in 2021 to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the establishment of the School of Philosophy in Auckland. Celebrations which had been planned to mark this anniversary were unable to be held in 2020 in the uncertain environment of the current Corona virus pandemic.

Budget was reallocated and a free copy of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary publication was offered to all current students of the Auckland branch of the School of Philosophy. Copies were also made available on request for past students.

A particular feature of the material compiled for the publication was the recognition of the enormous contribution of service over many years provided by dedicated students across a wide range of activities, all of which enabled the ongoing physical care and support needed for the care and maintenance of our

houses and their grounds, and the spiritual care and support by way of group tutoring and support for meditating students. We are blessed indeed to be able to meet in surroundings which reflect these years of dedicated service. The ambience of peace, care and stillness that pervades both 27 Esplanade Rd and 268 West Tamaki Rd is felt by all who visit.

Copies are still available and students are welcome to request a copy from their tutor.

## Survival of the Fittest or Continuous Improvement

### What is my body telling me?

Which of the two concepts in the title best describes your understanding of how society develops? and does the growth and health of your body give you any clues to help answer the question?

Recent readings and reflection have revealed some surprising insights into just how much instruction in the direction of good health and economic prosperity is available from this instrument of the body.

Evolution is a much debated topic with many viewpoints, the most prominent theory being that of Darwin. The book 'Spontaneous Evolution' (Lipton and Bhaerman) outlines a means for the positive evolutionary future of mankind. To begin with it presents an interesting insight into the origins of Darwin's theory and how subsequent attitudes and beliefs in society could have been very different.

The authors say that the naturalist Alfred Wallace, a commoner, sent a copy of his well-written 'theory of evolution' manuscript to Charles Darwin, the aristocrat. The divide of social class, pride and politics of the time resulted in Darwin plagiarising this manuscript and ensuring that only he was recognised as the father of the theory of evolution. Wallace, perhaps the real father of the theory, was side-lined and disappeared into oblivion. The consequence of this deception is profound based on their different interpretations. To quote the authors: *'Wallace recognised that evolution was driven by the elimination of the weakest, while Darwin interpreted that same data to mean that evolution resulted from the will to survive inherent in the fittest. The difference? In a Wallacean world, we would improve in order not to be the weakest, but in a Darwinian world, we struggle to acquire the status of being the best. In other words, had Wallace prevailed, there would be less focus on competition and more on cooperation.'*

Instead of the competitive 'survival of the fittest' attitude being the driving force for much of individual, social and business enterprise our behaviour as individuals and communities may have evolved differently if there had been greater emphasis on the more cooperative 'continuous improvement' attitude. We can illustrate the practical difference of these two approaches to living a long and healthy life in the example of a group of people running from a chasing tiger, - to survive it is not necessary to be the fittest, just not the slowest.

The authors look to the human body to explain the different outcomes of the two different practices. They describe the 37 trillion cells that make up the human body as a highly evolved and specialised community operating as a progressive harmony, subject only to the abuse of selfish indulgence imposed by the owner of the body. This situation is then contrasted to the often dysfunctional much

smaller community of humans, whether at family, national or international levels. What can we learn? What is my body telling me?

The evolutionist view is that simple single cells multiplied, assembled into multicellular colonies, evolving and specialising into complex organs and tissues catering for the multitude of different functions necessary to build, maintain and protect the human body. This process of assembling together and specialisation is mirrored in the evolution of human societies, developing from small simple villages to town, city and metropolis complete with local and global management organisations and intricate communication networks.

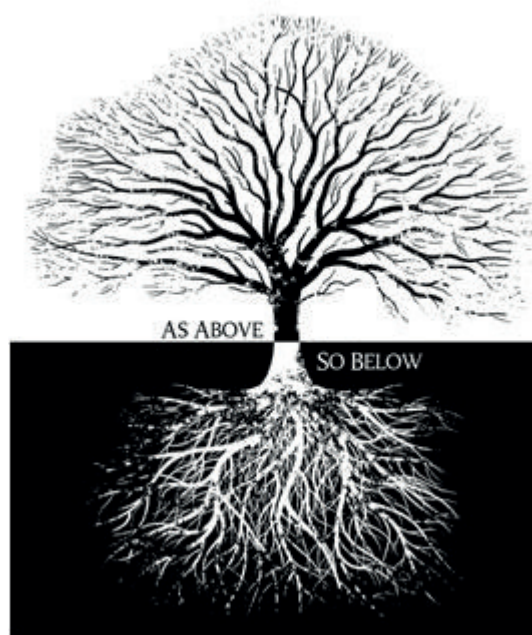
Specialisation of functions and development of organs at the micro-cellular level of the body is compared to the similar development at the macro-social level of modern society. The heart can be considered as the energy industry, the immune system as the Environmental Protection Agency, kidneys as the waste management system..... and the lesson we can learn? *'The success of these systems, as businesses, is not based on competitiveness with other organs and tissues. Rather, success is measured by how well each organ fulfils its job of cooperating with other systems. Cells are the equivalent of miniature people, each having personal lives while sharing the experience of community.'* (Lipton & Bhaerman)

Of course we have only one heart, but there are many competitive suppliers to the energy industry. To make sense of the comparison being drawn we need to consider the ideal of those suppliers working more cooperatively than competitively, that is working as one industry serving the whole community. This is the heart of the argument.

There is good reason and precedent for this

approach of reflection, looking within to the micro to better understand the macro. We have this advice from many sources. *'As above, so below, as within, so without, as the universe, so the soul...'* (Hermes Trismegistus) *'God created man in his own image.'* (Genesis 1:27) *'God made sense turn outward.....Now and again a daring soul, desiring immortality, has looked back and found Himself.'* (Katha Upanishad II.i.1) *'The vyaṣṭi (individual) reflects the samaṣṭi (universal) because being its cause the samaṣṭi is enshrined within it.'* (Conversations 74:1.1)

The 'spontaneous' positive future envisioned by Lipton and Bhaerman is based on adopting the 'golden rule' expressed in many ways including as 'love thy neighbour as thyself'. The practical application of this rule in society is an admirable aspirational recommendation, entirely in accord



with Advaita Vedanta. This would be a lifestyle of cooperative continuous improvement rather than one of competitive survival of the fittest, the must win so called dog eat dog attitude. But dogs don't eat dogs!

At least at a business enterprise level this more holistic approach was popular for a period in the '90s. Businesses large and small, became enthused to gain an internationally recognised quality certification in order to maintain a competitive presence in the global marketplace. Importantly this quality certification was of the production or delivery process employed, not the final product or service output from the process; it had to be secure and reliable by many different measures, including one of being subject to continuous improvement. During this period burgeoning Japanese businesses swept competition before them with ease for many years because of their near obsession with continuous quality improvement, in Japanese 'kaizen'. For many markets this was a surprise. The prevalent 'if it ain't broke don't fix it' attitude ignored the changing expectations of consumers in favour of trying to be the fittest, the most profitable survivor. Continuous improvement is far more appealing than mere survival, whether fit or not. Much good came from this enthusiasm but soon the focus switched to simply gaining the certificate without any change of attitude in order to compete, simply trying to win rather than improving the process. For a period 'TQM', total quality management, became a buzz-word in business, the flavour of the month.

Taking the micro-cellular reflection further, Lipton and Bhaerman explain the cooperative shared use of energy in the body thus: *'Cells in the body manage their energy needs by exchanging molecules of adenosine triphosphate (ATP), the molecular equivalent of a rechargeable battery. The ATP molecules are exchanged, like currency, among the body cells. ATP is the 'coin of the realm'. Excess energy, the equivalent of cellular profits, is stored as fat, a common account available for use by the entire community of cells. The specialisation of cells to evolve the nervous system represents the body's government, regulating the flow of information between the external environment and internal cells. The governing nervous system does not tell other body cells how to do their jobs, it is an interactive, intelligent learning system maintaining constant communication of information among the cells and organs of the body.'*

Would that our government did not tell businesses how to do their jobs. But perhaps firstly businesses, that is, the individuals who own, manage and staff each business should lift their game and do their jobs properly. There is need for more than a single minded, must win, quest for profit or shareholder returns and for more open honest communication. Social responsibility at a strategic corporate level is so very clearly needed in today's global environment. What has happened to the 'duty of care' responsibility? In practice, the myopic 'Who cares....?' attitude is far too prevalent. More honest cooperation towards the collective good is needed, shared endeavour to facilitate

continuous improvement rather than the environmental irresponsibility evident today. More 'where's Wallace' than 'Dar-win'.

Continuing to pursue the micro to macro reflection, that is, comparing the trillions of harmonious cells in the body to the millions of less than harmonious humans in society, we can enquire

*The micro-cellular organisational success of our bodies, based on cooperation, may afford insight for remedy of the macro-social organisational distress of society, largely based on competition.*

further. If energy (ATP) is considered as money, then having evolved our nervous system, that is, elected our government, how is the 'excess' money, the 'fat' collected, and spent by government for the good of all? The collective sharing without claim, and distribution without prejudice of the 'fat', by the organs and nervous system within the body seems to be based entirely on the needs of the whole body. The body and all its varied organs and systems, including the nervous system, functions as one family with one trading account, where 'thy neighbour is loved as thyself'. No taxation system is needed as there is no separate government. Is there a taxation basis for society that helps unify individual, business, and government endeavours to work more like a united family, rather than setting them in opposition, taking sides and bidding for financial favour?

The effect evident in society generated by the present taxation system strongly suggests that it is substandard, of poor quality. The systemic perpetuation of the polarisation of wealth in society unnecessarily generating the under-privileged and over-privileged does need fixing. A suggestion. Henry George in his classic masterpiece book 'Progress and Poverty' describes the savannah story, the beginnings of a society of co-operative individuals, sharing and trading their specialist skills. The centre-piece of this evolving society was the market-place, the place where goods were traded, exchanged. Today market-places range from individual to small shop, shopping mall, Amazon, Trade-Me, Google.... Coin of the realm has largely disappeared, EFTPOS and 'on-line' are so much more efficient. But specialisation of skills is of no use if the community cannot trade, cannot communicate accurately and efficiently. The added value that can lift a society is realised via its efficient communication, the market-place, the heart and engine room of the economy. So when we go to market, when we buy something, we should pay a tax to the community for the privilege of having the market available, of living in such a community, one that provides highly specialised goods and services and affords us access to such an evolved lifestyle.

Enter GST or something very similar where at each stage of the adding value supply chain, from raw materials to finished goods and services used by the community, the tax paid to the community

or government, is assessed only on the net amount of what is ‘taken’ from the community at the market-place. Efforts to continually improve and add value to what has been taken are not taxed. GST supports continuous improvement. However, the current practice by business enterprises, which are mostly non-human tax accountable entities seeking to minimise the tax assessed on their activity, reflects more of a survival of the fittest approach. This motivation ensures that vital resources are exhausted on the many and varied means of tax avoidance and evasion, misguidedly seeking to gain competitive advantage. Tax on business enterprise profits could be abolished, instead develop a means to tax only what the enterprise ‘takes’ from the community, that is the land, labour and capital consumed, removed from the market, not the goods or services generated through creative entrepreneurial endeavour.

Income tax, that is taxing the services rendered by employees, individual members of the community, is easily experienced as a burden, a disincentive to honest and faithful endeavour. *‘The harder I work to improve my income the more tax I pay and the higher the rate of tax’*. This attitude is doubly damning. It can both nullify a person’s competitive survival of the fittest efforts in life, trying to be the best, as well as depower any efforts towards continuous improvement. In the effort to survive some fail to thrive, they do not evolve possibly they devolve. Further, the cost of income tax assessment and collection to the government or community is immense. We could abolish personal income tax.

This is far from an exhaustive analysis of taxation, simply an attempt to further consider how the micro-cellular organisational success of our bodies, based on cooperation, may afford insight for remedy of the macro-social organisational distress of society, largely based on competition.

The attitude of ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’, the progressive solution

*“Love thy neighbour as thyself”*

encouraged by Lipton and Bhaerman, is a fine aspiration that does require a significant change in the bhāvanā (attitude, devotion) of each of us. This is a life’s work and can only be undertaken today, now (real, news), not tomorrow (false news) and it does require continuous improvement, abhyāsa (practice).

D Sinclair, a geneticist, argues in his book ‘Lifespan’ that old age is a disease and can be cured. He argues that with suitable lifestyle, diet and the inevitable supplements, the human body can live to at least twice the current average lifespan, with good health. Many current experiments are quoted in support of this view. There is no reason not to ‘eat well and live long’ (and even prosper) but of course this is only considering an approach to physical immortality. Why sweat the small stuff? If there is one supplement to be added to the daily diet let it be vairāgya (detachment), then who cares how long the body lives, I am life itself, simply watching, immortal.

In both the books mentioned above the initial evolving cells are described as being able to devote all available energy to multiplication, organisation and growth into higher life forms. Only when foreign bodies, predators of some kind enter does the cellular system need to devote energy and resources to defence and protection of its existence. Likewise, to the extent that our immune systems are compromised by various invasions and disease so we have less remaining energy for growth, maintenance and living the good healthy life. Thus the limited lifespan. This is a very current topic in the midst of a viral pandemic. An expression we are hearing often is that many people are at greater risk of serious infection because of their compromised immune system, meaning their body cells are already expending energy defending against disease and the consequences of unhealthy lifestyle habits. This micro effect in the human body is clearly reflected at the macro level of the community where, faced with this viral invasion, government needs to divert vast amounts of resource both human and financial to the protection and support of the community, necessarily depleting and delaying allocation of resources needed for maintenance and growth. Indeed, during the 'lockdown' periods the economy is effectively stalled, which means going backwards.

For any quality management system the earlier in the process that sub-standard quality can be detected and the process rectified the less the consequent loss and recovery cost. The worst case scenario of a complete recall of a product or service from the market-place is very expensive. In the same way our bodies require a good quality management system, that is, a disciplined lifestyle and constant careful surveillance, mindfulness. We do need to be vigilant with our personal quality management, caring for all the bodies, not just physical and not just to overcome a viral invasion but to overcome the plague of avidyā (ignorance). Being recalled and possibly reborn with another body to try again is equivalent to the worst case scenario. Good reason to consider, what is my body telling me now?

Irrespective of any alteration to the taxation system we can all pay our tax and play our part nicely in helping to evolve a more harmonious society by seeking to emulate the magical harmonious example of the community of cells that make up our body. Moderate our competitive endeavours with greater cooperation. Follow the advice of the Advaita Teaching, abhyāsa (continuous improvement) and vairāgya (de-tax-ment). Further encouragement for continuous improvement comes directly from Śāṅkara who tells us that *'they are indeed perfect who strive for perfection'* (*Gita VII. 3*). Continuous improvement is of course continuous, likewise the so-called journey of Self-Discovery. It is not an endurance test where at the end only the fittest survive, it is continuous and we do need to be fit for purpose. Self-Discovery, like improvement does not end.



## Cycling in Stillness

This body of mine craves physical exercise, and presently the main activity is cycling. This takes up many hours, and over the years I have learned to use these hours of cycling to a to practise a form of meditation that, given the right conditions, shifts me to a special place which gives awareness and connection with this creation.

Earlier this year I completed the cycle journey of Tour Aotearoa, a 3000km unsupported cycle ride from Cape Reinga to Bluff to be completed within 30 days.

Those riding days were full on, yet while riding there was plenty of time to reflect and to exercise stillness of mind and at times reach that sweet spot of awareness and connectivity with this creation.

For this to take place, I do need to be in the right frame of mind, my attitude needs to be right, the riding conditions need to be right.



Usually I would aim to start my riding day as the sun rose above the horizon. At that time of the day it is easier to be at peace with my self, the day is still fresh and roads are quiet.

The first half hour of riding is used to settle down and find the riding rhythm of the day.

The road needs to be uncomplicated, quiet, and be good for the next 30 to 50km so I can ride without a break. Then with reasonable weather, I can ride without my attention being distracted.

Then plug in my headphones, switch on Spotify and listen to Gaiea singing Sanskrit. Her voice has a soothing effect on me. I become still of mind, and let my eyes rest on the road ahead.

At this point life becomes very simple, all that needs to be achieved is to ride today's quota of kilometres to reach my day's destination, and be free of worry or concerns.

So with my heart at peace, I can be open to what is

to come, and be free to do as I wish.

Now there is a difference between being focussed on what is now, and the meditative riding I do.

Assuming a large hill climb needs to be overcome. The focus shifts to concentrate on applying this body at its optimum level to ride this loaded bike to the top of the hill. While exhausting it is also satisfying to achieve. However it is not meditative riding.

Having reached the top, in due course there will be a downhill ride, I can relax, take advantage of the gravity, let the bike roll, the mind be still, and the heart free, let Buddhi take control.

The loaded bike will pick up speed, sometimes huge speeds, yet let the body relax, let Buddhi decide with perfection the correct approach, correct speed, the correct lean into each corner. With the wind blowing, my senses aware, being perfectly calm, racing down hill at record speeds, is amazing, memorable, and an exhilarating experience.

Recognizing what is at play here, the body, mind, heart and the Self, it is however not meditative riding.

Assuming the road levels off, a long stretch of good road often lays ahead. Quiet and peaceful. Still listening to Gaiea Sanskrit singing, I bring myself back to the rhythms of riding, my arms need to relax, my body settles down, only the legs should be working.

Listening to Gaiea brings the mind to stillness, (my Sanskrit is way too inadequate to understand what she is singing about), the heart is again free and open, the eyes back at resting just ahead on the road.

My attention also takes in the scenery, of hills, rocks, and streams, they are ancient, way older than I Am. Then there is a shift, the same scenery is still there, but I sense the eternity of the landscape, the creation that simply is. A flight of birds adds to this sensation. Birds have been around way longer than mankind, they have a special eternal quality.

My attention now shifts to the living, the cattle, the sheep, the trees, and grasses, I am connected to these, a connection of One, I am alone on the road, yet surrounded by all that is One. I am part of something that is way larger than me. Time is non existing, distance meaningless.

Then there is me, merely a visitor passing through a landscape of eternity, I have no effect on any of this, insignificant, yet Me is One with all that surrounds Me.

My legs are still spinning, the bike still moving along, how long has it been?

To fill the many hours riding, often alone, there is only so much stillness of mind one can handle, even the flow of random thoughts gets boring and tedious. This creation offers so many possibilities, often unexplored ideas,



So I like to experiment and be playful with “what if”. I have come across this quote from a variety of different gurus, that “our thoughts create our environment”. Most of you will be familiar with the idea that having negative thoughts will result in a negative day, and positive thoughts will result in a positive day. But the gurus point to something bigger, deeper, in our abilities far greater than we think. So at times opportunities arise to look at this and approach it with a playful heart.

West coast, South island, mid morning, riding into a light head wind. I have just passed a sign stating that there is a cafe in the next town, 5 km away. It will be great stop for a coffee and the ever present food refuelling requirement.

Looking ahead I cannot see far ahead due to the hills and curves in the road, what I do see is a rain cloud, a big black rain cloud, I can see the water pouring out of it. It is still some distance away, but I am riding into the wind heading for this cloud. I do not wish to get wet, it is never a pleasant experience. Neither do I wish to stop and put rain gear on.

It is then that the thought comes up, "our thoughts create our environment"! I am up for this, lets play and see what happens.

I need to compose this though so that I can stay dry and do not encourage the rain. It comes out as; " I will ride in dry conditions till I get to this cafe".

I focus and drop into this meditative state, slowly repeating this thought in mind. I am aware of the road, the rain cloud, the action of cycling, yet the concepts of time and distance have disappeared.

" I will ride in dry conditions till I get to this cafe", without desire, without expectation, without any anxiety or fear of getting wet. I am just riding. And the big black rain cloud is getting closer.

The cafe comes into view, the rain is pouring onto the road beyond the cafe. We both are heading towards each other. Yet I need to remain without desire, without expectation, without any anxiety.

The odd rain drops are falling on me.

It is going be close, I get to the cafe and park my bike under the veranda, I open the door and step inside. It is at this point the rain has arrived, and it is coming down hard. I close the door, and as the door latch engages, the one and only lightning flash goes off, followed instantly by a clap of thunder.

"Wow" escapes from my mouth, a Wow for the volume of rain that comes down, a Wow for the timing of the rain, and a Wow for the one and only lightning that went off as I closed the door.

I stand there watching mother nature do its thing, so powerful, so impressive. I feel blessed, and I am blissfully happy. Did my thoughts really control the timing of the rain? Did the lightning go off as a response to this?

I do not know, I will never know. Sometimes we should not know and simply accept what is.

There is play within the creation, and maybe the creation will play with us. In ways that would surprise us.

How often do we approach something with nothing more in mind than play?

Enjoy what is, accept without understanding, the creation is based on love.



**Robert de Jong**

## Autumn

Silence pervaded my Being as I fixed my gaze on that forested place  
It was the trees that shared their beauty with me in that moment  
The freshly fallen leaves caressed the trees like some exquisite carpet  
A light breeze sprang up pervading the tranquillity of this majestic place  
And the leaves did their mysterious dance  
toward the earth  
Back and forth, to and fro they flew  
Bearing witness to this final act  
And at that moment my heart did leap  
A gift... nothing could surpass.



Geoff Taylor

## What is Love?

Stand in the rain  
Breathe in the rain  
Be rain

Dive into the Ocean  
Feel the Ocean  
Dissolve into the Ocean  
Become Ocean

Walk in the garden  
Marvel at the colours and shapes and scents  
Connect with the beauty  
Become Beauty

Love is to lose yourself *into* the presence of another thing  
To fleetingly become formless and to commune  
With a being, a sound, a rose, a droplet  
The Oneness

It is to step into your formless self and  
To both lose yourself and find Self  
In the blink of an eye!

Mary Poole

## Friends of Plotinus

On Thursday evenings, Matthew Roscoe facilitates a Zoom meeting to study Plotinus. This group is very much a mutual study amongst peers who have all had some prior exposure to Plotinus. It has an international flavour with people zooming in from as far afield as London, Buenos Aires and even Whakatane! The lady from Buenos Aires has to get up at 4:30am to join the meeting and for a couple of months, while travelling through the back blocks of Patagonia, was making a WhatsApp call to the cell phone of one of the London students which he would then place in front of his computer so she could hear the discussion. She would then text him comments and questions which he would read out to the group.



A lot of dedication on her part. After a recent meeting she was moved to write a 'spontaneous' poem and share it with us;

### Musings and Confusings caused by Plotinus.

It's reassuring to find that, through the ages,  
other minds have asked the same questions,  
and even arrived at similar answers  
(all credit to them, often reinventing the philosophical wheel).

I have inherited so much,  
a pretty complete system of knowledge,  
served up on a plate,  
even spoon-fed to me as a child!

But on deeper examination, (or even not so deep!)  
how much of it do I actually understand, know?  
Very little.

How much of it can I even just repeat precisely and clearly to someone else?  
Embarrassingly little, given the amount of decades,  
supposedly spent studying (and practising) it.

So many holes... (so many missed opportunities to wake up).

Luckily a little goes a long way, if practised,  
or so the master teachers seem to agree.

"I am" could be enough,  
if really held fast to!

When is my own mind going to stop  
putting obstacles in the way of practise and change?  
Will I ever have less than a million desires and distractions?  
"Contentment is the gatekeeper to liberation." But...

Māyā- even the faces of the group on the screen  
are just pixels, and I know that, but still  
through sound, through speech and listening,  
there can be yoga, jñāna, ānanda even.

Plotinus always leaves me feeling baffled,  
but somehow hugely energised and enthusiastic.  
Thank you Plotinus for all your dedication to enquiry and thought,  
for connecting with a muse to wake people up,  
and transmitting real poetry down through the centuries.

The School of Philosophy also runs "Meet the Greeks" introductory study sessions on Plato and Plotinus on Sunday mornings. Contact Russell Allen ([russell\\_allen84@hotmail.com](mailto:russell_allen84@hotmail.com)) or Matthew Roscoe ([matthewroscoe@icloud.com](mailto:matthewroscoe@icloud.com)) for details.

## Iceland

In 2019 I visited Iceland for ten days where I stayed with my sister and her Icelandic family in the capital Reykjavik.

For those who are geologists, volcanologists, landscape photographers, or who just enjoy the wonders of the natural world or outdoor adventures, this Nordic island nation would be a place of great interest.

Geographically, Iceland is situated immediately South of the Arctic Circle. It lies to the East of Greenland, is 801 miles North of Glasgow in Scotland and a three-hour flight from the UK. It sits on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge where The Eurasian and North American tectonic plates meet and is the only place in the world where the meeting of these can be seen above ground.

Widely known as the land of 'Fire and Ice' it is a land of dramatic landscapes: 130 volcanoes, lava fields, geysers, geothermal hot springs, icefields, 269 glaciers, mountain peaks, majestic waterfalls, plateaux, and a coastline marked by long deep fjords and vertical sea cliffs. The glaciers, which are protected in the Vatnajökull and Snæfellsjökull national parks, are some of the largest in Europe. Iceland is host to some of the world's most active volcanoes. Mount Hekla which erupts approximately every 15 years and Mount Katla are perhaps the most famous of these active volcanoes. In 2010, due to the ash and dust emitted from another of Iceland's erupting volcanoes, Mount Fagradalsfjall, 100,000 flights between Europe and North America were grounded. An area round one of the more remote stratovolcanoes Askja, is where the NASA astronauts trained for the first trip to the moon.

Iceland is also known as the land of light and darkness. It experiences long summer days with almost 24 hours of sunshine, where the birds are singing and nesting at 11.30pm. This is of course offset by short Winter days with very little daylight.

Between the months of September and March is the peak season for viewing the Northern Lights – Aurora Borealis.

The subpolar oceanic climate usually ensures cold Winters and cool Summers although, due to the warm Gulf Stream, the coastal areas experience a more temperate climate all year round.

You might wonder how this land received such a chilling name! It was originally called 'Snowland' however, a Norwegian Viking named Hrafna- Flóki who apparently, having experienced a challenging time, climbed a hill, spotted two ice floes, and proclaimed that Iceland was the more fitting name. Greenland on the other hand received its name from the Viking 'Erik the Red', who sought to attract other Viking settlers



**Fagradalsfjall erupting**

to a green less and treeless landscape consisting of eighty per cent permanent Ice Sheet. Iceland has just eleven per cent permanent Ice Sheet and is relatively green. The naming of these two lands are essentially misnomers!

As with other parts of Planet Earth, Iceland has been experiencing the effects of global warming; the melting of icefields & glaciers, the disappearance of water falls and the occasional polar bear arriving on an ice floe from Greenland.



**Kirkjufellsfoss- Snæfellnes peninsula**

Per capita, Iceland is the world's largest electricity producer. The abundance of electrical power is due to its huge geothermal and hydroelectric energy resources. It is one of the world leaders in the use of geothermal power to heat houses, swimming pools and hot houses.

The capital Reykjavik runs on geothermal power and most of Iceland's flowers and vegetables are cultivated in hot houses.

The geothermal activity which Iceland abounds with provides an abundant number of hot springs, spa lagoons, geothermal pools, and saunas in which to bathe and relax. Some of the outdoor lagoons are worth visiting for their spectacular views alone. A soak or swim in the natural, warm silky waters is an absolute treat for anyone, especially when it comes with a view. We visited such a one called the Mývatn Nature Baths. The Blue Lagoon is perhaps the most renowned natural spa pool visited by tourists.

The Icelanders visit their natural pools and saunas regularly and it is a very therapeutic and a squeaky-clean process. Everyone showers at the beginning, at the end and often in between as they move between pool and sauna. At one complex we visited there were pools of various temperatures and saunas situated outside as well as a larger indoor pool and gym, for those desiring more serious training.

Iceland is considered the least forested country in Europe and the absence of trees is most marked. Originally the land was 40 percent forested but deforestation happened over time with the early Viking settlers who needed the wood for building materials and fuel. The land was also cleared of trees to allow for crops and pasture. Unfortunately, the forests were reduced to less than one percent. Since 2015 the Icelandic government has made reforestation one of its priorities in the climate action plan and several million trees



have since been planted. The goal is to have five per cent forest cover in the next fifty years. It all takes time! While touring the peninsula a local proudly conducted a tour of a European birch forest in its infancy.

Iceland is the least populated country in Europe and 80 per cent of the country is uninhabited. Most of Iceland's population of 368,792 (Jan. 2021) resides in Reykjavik. It is also the home of the government and home to the National and Saga museums which trace Iceland's Viking history.



### Reykjavik

I enjoyed Reykjavik with its mixture of old and modern architecture. Previously being under Danish rule, many of the older homes and buildings have a Danish influence which is most attractive. In contrast, the stunning Harpa Concert and Conference Theatre is designed on very modern Scandinavian lines.

The original religious beliefs were in the Pagan gods but in the year 1000 the Althing, The Parliament of the time, declared Christianity to be the religion of choice. As with other Scandinavian countries, the Lutheran church is now the main religious influence. A stunning Lutheran Church sits on Reykjavik's hilltop above a



### Hallgrímskirkja Lutheran Church, Reykjavik

cobbled street that runs through the old part of the city. Its architecture, which was inspired by Iceland's basalt rock columns, is something to behold - inside and out. While visiting, we listened to a most moving classical music performance.

Iceland follows the Danish system of education which means they begin school at 7 years of age.

English is the predominant second language and Danish is also taught.

The Icelandic language, which is descended from old Norse, the official language of the country, of education and government. Due to the complex grammar structure and archaic vocabulary, it is one of the hardest languages for speakers of English to master. Modern Icelanders can usually read the medieval manuscripts and sagas of that region with little difficulty. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the integrity and purity of the language has been fiercely protected. Rather than importing words and expressions from other languages it is common practice to create compound words from Icelandic derivatives. For example, the Icelandic word for computer is ‘tölva’ which translates as ‘prophetess of numbers.’

In most Icelandic families, the ancient tradition of patronymics is still in use. This means that they reflect the immediate father of the child rather than the historic family lineage that we use. How does this translate?

My sister Jocelyn’s husband is named Kristjan. Their daughter is named Kristjana Kristjan’s dóttir (daughter) and their son is named Daniel Kristjan’s son. My sister keeps her maiden name under this system. The same system but taking the mothers name, matronymic, also occasionally occurs.

Icelandic horses are another interesting feature of this country. They came with the Viking pioneers in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries and have been the only breed in Iceland for over 1,000 years. Selective breeding over the centuries has developed the breed into its current form. Natural selection has also played its part with many not surviving the harsh Icelandic climate, the cold, the starvation, and the volcanic eruptions. These sturdily built smaller horses are renowned for their surefootedness on rough terrain, their large personalities, their friendliness, their long-life span, and their varied colour range. Other horses have three gaits or walks – walking, trotting, and galloping/ cantering. The Icelandic horses are unique in that they have five gaits which allows for a very smooth ride. No importing of horses or in fact any farm animals is permitted, and this has allowed these animals to be disease and vaccine free. Iceland has many horses, enough to have one per



family. They are bred for farming, leisure riding, competition, horse trekking, and for meat export to Japan and Northern Europe. Horse trekking is very popular with the tourists.

Elves, and trolls are very much part of the Icelandic folklore which is rich in legends and stories. These stories served as warnings to children as well as instilling fear and respect

for the harsh powers of nature.

Traditionally, 13 days before Christmas the children put their shoes by the window for the visits of the 13 Yule Tide Lads. A small gift is left if the children have been good but if the behaviour has been otherwise, a potato or note is left. The Yule Tide Lads, who are the sons of two Trolls, are known for different kinds of mischief.

Another tradition is that the whole Nation stops on Christmas Eve to celebrate with a festive feast and gifting. Christmas and Boxing days are traditionally times to relax at home or visit extended family members.

New Year's Eve is celebrated with bonfires, fireworks, singing and dancing.

By 930AD the Chieftains of Iceland had established a form of governance called the 'Althing', making it one of the world's oldest Parliaments. In the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Iceland fell to the rule of the then Dane - Norwegian Alliance and then in the 17<sup>th</sup> century came under Danish rule. In 1918 Iceland gained sovereignty but shared the Danish Monarchy until World War 2. By 1944 Iceland had declared itself a Republic.

Due to Iceland's strategic position in the North Atlantic and to forestall a Nazi occupation, in 1940 Great Britain peacefully occupied a base at Keflavik. In 1941 the USA took over peaceful occupation duties and even though it has had no military presence there since 2006 it still assumes responsibility over Iceland's defence through NATO, with a right to occupy the base should a war break out. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war Iceland was a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization NATO and joined the United Nations.

Iceland faced the Cod Wars as they extended their fishing territory, and in more recent times they faced bankruptcy after the 2008 financial crisis. They have survived both well.

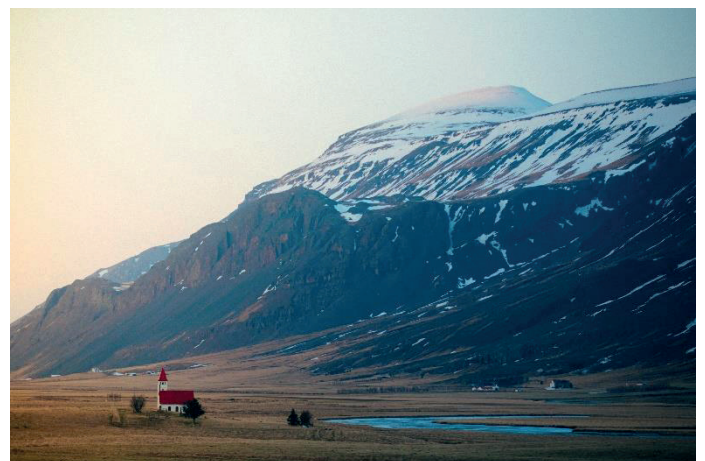
Today Iceland retains strong ties to the other Nordic countries and links to Europe for defence and rescue co-operation. Apart from a coast guard, Iceland does not have a defence force. The pillars of the economy are aluminium smelting, fishing, and tourism.

Politically today, the country has a President and is governed by a Prime minister and a multi-party coalition which are all democratically elected. It is a modern, progressive Nation and a global leader in gender equality.

They aim to have complete equality of status, influence and power for men and women and have policies and laws to reflect this. Men and women are paid equally for a job of equal value and businesses and organizations of more than 25 are required to have at least 40% women. Iceland has a maternity/paternity policy which gives men 3 months paternal leave (ladies have 9 months).

In Europe, they are only second to Norway with having the highest use of electric and hybrid cars. Globally, Iceland is the third most expensive country in the world to live in.

I was fortunate to be taken on two trips to view part of this unique environment. The first trip was around the Snaefellnes Peninsula which is Northwest of Reykjavik. It was a rare, stunningly still, and clear day on which to view a coastline of sheer cliffs and spectacular rock formations framing the sea and black sand beaches; some with seals basking on rocks or swimming. A day to



**Snaefellnes Peninsula**

view mountains, a multitude of waterfalls cascading out of nooks and crannies, unweathered lava flows, farms, fishing villages and odd shaped landforms. Whale watching is an attraction here too. This peninsula is also home to Snaefellnes, the sub-glacial stratovolcano which is the entrance to a passage leading to the centre of the earth, according to Jules Verne's novel, 'Journey to the centre of the Earth.'

Reykjavik is situated in the South, and the second trip was to Akureyri in the north of Iceland where we spent



a few days. It was situated on the edge of a fjord providing a very picturesque setting with a soothing ambiance. The trip there provided an opportunity to see a volcano at close quarters, a large geothermal energy plant, stunning waterfalls, an expanse of small lakes and ponds rich in bird life, rivers and streams prized for their salmon fishing,

### **The road to Akureyri**

traditional sheep farming in valleys bordered by mountain ranges, horse trekking, a troll's cave amidst a grotto of volcanically sculptured rock formations, a 356-day Christmas shop and much more.

When the allotted ten-day visit to Iceland had disappeared the departing flight to Europe soon revealed the beautifully ordered and cultivated Dutch landscape. It was all such a contrast to the 'Land of Fire and Ice'. Two utterly different worlds!

Jennifer Laird

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### **From the Editor:**

Many thanks to all those who have contributed to this issue of Vision. Contributions are most welcome from all members of the Auckland School of Philosophy. Please contact the editor at [lizgodfrey@gmail.com](mailto:lizgodfrey@gmail.com) for further information.

**It should be noted that the views expressed in this document are not necessarily those of the School of Philosophy, Auckland.**