Flavio Baroncelli: A Personal Recollection
by Mikael M. Karlsson

Flavio Baroncelli was a formidable philosopher, albeit an unusual—and even “disquieting”—one. His work is well known in Italy, but little known in other countries. The obvious explanation for this is that Flavio wrote and published almost exclusively in Italian. And that was no accident, for he knew English well and could easily have written much more in English in order to raise his international profile. But for Flavio, the Italian language was a basic philosophical instrument. He employed a great deal of straightforward (and clever) analytical argument. But he also argued (like Nietzsche) by means of humor, irony, story-telling and various forms of linguistic artistry. For this, he needed Italian, in which language he was a master craftsman.

Flavio understood and cultivated the rhetorical aspect of philosophical writing. He seems not to have viewed rhetoric and reasoning as disjoint enterprises, in the manner of Socrates. In the fable of Rawls and Hume mentioned earlier, Hume confronts Rawls in the following manner:

“Mr. Baroncelli, I ask you to explain why philosophy should concern itself with the question of the basis of justice. It is not for me to tell you that the passions create a minimum of stability, of similarity between us…as well as a semblance…of brotherhood. It is for me to explain that the passions create a minimum of stability, of similarity between us…as well as a semblance…of brotherhood.”

Flavio imagines a conversation between Hume and Rawls upon the latter’s arrival at the Elysian Fields.

In his last book, Viaggio al termine degli Stati Uniti, Flavio follows a formula very similar to the one used in the preceding book: he intertwines a narrative description of a long trip to the United States (written in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he was intermittently treated for the protracted illness that ultimately killed him) with philosophical reflections on the opposition between the liberal culture and the neo-conservative culture that was at its apex at the time.

In 2006, Flavio changed the institutional disciplinary area of his professorship to political philosophy.

Flavio died on February 20th, 2007, at Saint Martin’s Hospital of Genoa after a long battle with leukemia. He was in his 64th year.
I have given a somewhat kaleidoscopic recounting of Flavio as a human being. This was the only way I could think of to present him to the reader, not as an academic, but as a person of Flavio faced illness and death bravely, and was able, despite weakness and pain, to write out of his experience a remarkable book (before he became terminally ill—was disquieted by death. He was afraid of contracting breast cancer, as had one of his male relatives. Philosophy for Flavio was not a preparation for an earthly life: a life of language, culture, history, society—and in short what I have twice referred to as “human intercourse”. I know from our personal conversations that Flavio—long was inseparably discursive, sentimental and sympathetic, with human rationality encompassing all of these elements. This, I maintained, was a Humean vision. Flavio did not better than they do. This curiosity and hope guided his personal life, his interaction with friends, students, and colleagues, his choice of a career, and his philosophical humanism: the work, and are moved by his influence. We will be the better for it.

Flavio the Human Being

Flavio's philosophy and philosophical humanism were of course reflections of the soul of Flavio the man. Like the author of this memoir, Flavio was in certain respects a superannuated hippy. He was, after all, 24 years old in 1968. There were no doubt many earlier occasions; but the only time that I actually saw Flavio dressed in a dark suit was when I paid my respects to him, or rather to his earthly remains, in the hospital morgue. He most often appeared at the university dressed in blue jeans and a sports shirt. He confronted people on a social, intellectual and emotional basis—not a sartorial one. And Flavio was a biker! Of course, many if not most younger Italians are devotees of scooters and cycles, but Flavio continued to ride and travel on his motorcycle long after most of his colleagues had moved over to their more comfortable Lancias (or whatnot). In 1988, Flavio had a serious motorcycle accident while traveling in Turkey that incapacitated him for more than a year and kept him from teaching and research. Right up until his death, he suffered from pain in his foot and leg that made it difficult for him to walk for long distances and sometimes kept him in bed. Flavio was not a sotile. He set severe standards for himself and others but was generally (although not always!) gentle in applying them. Humor, irony and sometimes sarcasm were his weapons, rather than aggression or intimidation.

He was typically acerbic by his students and had the ability to get them deeply engaged in philosophical questions. A class with Flavio did not end when everyone left the room; some of his classes may never end, even now that he's gone.

The highlights of Flavio's personal life were his marriage to Annalisa Siri and the adoption of Gurol, their Turkish son. I met them both at the hospital on a very sad day in February, 2007. In 1997, Annalisa had arranged for my own son to participate in cancer research at the institute where she worked as part of his medical education. This was an indirect consequence of my cooperation with Flavio in the Erasmus program, discussed further below. During his long, final illness, Flavio was often unable to work at the university. His colleagues missed him and his influence in university affairs, and they were mostly in denial about what from the outside looked clearly like a terminal sickness. "When is Flavio going to come back to work?" one of his close colleagues complained; "We need him!" Of course, I had no answer.

The final period of Flavio's life was unfortunate for more reasons than one. He had had to spend a number of years caring for his aged, and rather difficult, father, which prevented him from traveling and, often, from working as he wished. And when at last liberated from the duties of a faithful son, he became aware of the illness that eventually ended his life.

Being unable to travel was a serious loss for Flavio. He was fascinated by the similarities and differences among peoples and nations and relished international contact in a way that could not be fully served by the Internet. In 1991-92 he was an honorary fellow at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and he was a Visiting Professor at the University of Iceland (1994), Glasgow University (1994) and the University of Bergen (1996). He was also instrumental in organizing Erasmus exchanges for students and colleagues in philosophy.

It was through the Erasmus program that I first met Flavio; and it was also through this program that he visited—and became a friend of–Iceland. We went together with a group of students to a country retreat in mid-winter. Ever the speculator about human motivation, Flavio gazed wonderingly out of the window of our bus at the bleak, frozen landscape. "What did those people think when they came here?" he asked, referring to the settlement of Iceland, which began in 874. "What could they have been thinking of?" He also warned me, "I hope that you are not sleeping with me in the same cabin. I snore like a bear!" He did snore a bit, but not really with bear-like intensity (as I imagine it). The Icelandic students were as inspired by him as his Italian students, and discussions continued far into the night. Flavio arranged to send students, and a number of colleagues to Iceland, and to receive Icelandic students and colleagues in Genoa. Eventually, others took over this work, but the lively exchanges between the University of Iceland and the University of Genoa continue.

Socrates described philosophy as a preparation for death. But Socrates viewed the body as a kind of prison for the soul, and daily life (and perhaps even human intercourse generally) as a distraction—at least so Plato tells us. Socrates looked forward to bodily death as a liberation of the soul. This was not Flavio's view. For Flavio, as I maintained earlier, human nature was inseparably discursive, sentimental and sympathetic, with human rationality encompassing all of these elements. This, I maintained, was a Humean vision. Flavio did not believe as Socrates did that it would be better to die than to live. He was afraid of contracting breast cancer, as had one of his male relatives. Philosophy for Flavio was not a preparation for death; it was a preparation for continuing, deepening and advancing the dialogue.

Flavio faced illness and death bravely, and was able, despite weakness and pain, to write out of his experience a remarkable book (Viaggio al termine degli Stati Uniti) but I doubt that he "went gentle into that good night", and why should he have?

Flavio Altogether

I have given a somewhat kaleidoscopic recounting of Flavio as a human being. This was the only way I could think of to present him to the reader, not as an academic, but as a person of flesh and blood. But what unified the kaleidoscopic Flavio was his curiosity about the human animal and about human relations and his passionate hope that people might grow to treat one another better than they do. This curiosity and hope guided his personal life, his interaction with friends, students, and colleagues, his choice of a career, and his philosophical humanism: the honest instrument of his life pursuit.

We have now lost the bodily Flavio, but the spiritual Flavio lives on—not in the fifth dimension, but in Flavio's own way, in this world. He lives on as long as we remember him, study his work, and are moved by what he has said.
I express my special thanks to Valeria Ottonelli, who helped me to collect together some of the essential material concerning Flavio's life and work.

A bibliography of Flavio's most important work can be found here:

Un inquietante filosofo perbene. Saggio su David Hume, La Nuova Italia, Firenze
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Published in Emilio Mazza & Emanuele Ronchetti, eds. New Essays on David Hume (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2007), pp. 259-63, and originally presented in Italian at the seminar "La filosofia è politica", held in honor of John Rawls at the University of Milan, 31 January 2003.

"Rawls and Hume: A Fable", p. 260.

"Rawls and Hume: A Fable", p. 261.

Others who know Flavio's work may think differently than I about how it should be understood. This piece reflects my personal view, and should at least be of help to those who have yet to encounter Flavio's philosophy.