The following definitions combine insightful personal memories and personally memorable insights that I recall from, or associate with, Flavio Baroncelli (1944–2007) *qua* eloquent and witty teacher, brilliant and ingenious writer, fast and sharp conversationalist, generous and kind human being, and committed promoter of the teacher- and student exchange programmes linking together Iceland, my adoptive country, and the University of Genoa, my *alma mater*. Not all of them must be taken literally or too seriously; besides, I would not agree with some of them myself! All of them are, however, sincere tokens of gratitude, friendship and love to a truly remarkable individual, who enjoyed entertaining and shocking his audiences, but above all liked making them think, debate, and think some more. Furthermore, these definitions are a creative and inevitably poor attempt at exemplifying for the Anglophone public the sort of pithy and humorous style that, *inter alia*, made Baroncelli famous in Italy in his day.

Actuality

Another word for potentiality.

Addiction

A disease mistaken for moral failure.

Adulation

Causing pleasure by sly words, even when the listener knows that they are lies.
Philosophers, in their stately parlance, would call it a perlocutionary speech act.

Advertising

The daily demonstration of how little control we have over our own will.

Agnosticism

A polite way for educated people to be open-minded pluralists in theory but narrow-minded atheists in practice.

Analysis (of concepts)

The bizarre tendency to turn ambiguous profundity into unambiguous superficiality.

Analytic (philosophy)

A typically modern attempt at making self-conscious philosophers sound like respectable scientists.

Banking

The best way to acquire power in a capitalist society, especially if one wishes to destroy it.

Beauty (physical)

One of the most important life-defining characteristics that a person can have the good luck to possess and that philosophers keep stating not to matter.

Bedroom

A seemingly private place where both neighbours and State authorities seem often eager to enter.

Brotherhood

The least understood yet most important principle of the French Revolution: without a modicum of genuinely felt compassion among fellow citizens, both liberty and equality will get used to ruin someone else's life.

Censorship

A dangerous and stupid way not to listen to dangerous and stupid claims.

Chickens

When rasping hopelessly and continuously on a hard road surface, they exemplify instinctual behaviour as opposed to deliberate.

Cigarettes

Powerful, sweet, devious killers.

Clarity

The curse of any philosopher who may wish to come across as deep, original and worthy of enduring attention.

Coherence (aka consistency)

The unhealthy obsession with getting rid of all the instances of personal diversity, creativity, capriciousness and experimentalism that make individual life interesting and collective life possible.

Communism

The 20th-century political scarecrow that, for the duration of about one generation, made the *de iure* liberal countries of the world be actually a little more liberal than their *de facto* oligarchic past and present flag out.

Compassion

The most important virtue cultivated by Christianity.

Competition

A much-cherished liberal value, as long as it does not apply to oneself.

Complaining

Generally loathed by the very same people who have most reason to complain—an instance of slave morality.

Continental (philosophy)

A not-so-modern attempt at making self-important philosophers sound like profound mystics.

Courage

Someone else’s form of madness.

Culture

The folklore of the rich.

Daydreaming

Coping with far-too-real nightmares.

Defecation

Its training in infancy reveals how people prefer freedom to be qualified and circumscribed.

Discipline (and Punish)

The most important book by Michel Foucault, who taught us that the more societies publicly incense liberty and call themselves “liberal”, the less freedom common people truly enjoy in order to do as they please.

Dogs

The ideal sort of loyal, selfless, hard-working and simple-mindedly grateful employees that employers would like to have.

Economics (contemporary)

A branch of mathematics mistaken for empirical science.

Economics (modern)

A branch of philosophy mistaken for empirical science.

Elucidation

Clarification articulating possible meanings of a pithy expression, with consequent loss of aesthetic and thought-provoking value of the latter. Sterilisation by explanation. (E.g. paraphrasing a poem, explaining a joke.)

Emancipation

The possibility for all people to be as bad and as silly as the rich and powerful minorities frequently are.

Etiquette

Aristocracy’s last ditch at controlling modern society.

Euphemism

See “Get lost!” below.

Evolution

It is only after Darwin that people understood what the heck Lucretius and Telesio were talking about.

Exceptions (making)

The first step towards tolerance and pluralism.

Faith

An option generally available only to a person who stops doubting.

Folklore

The culture of the poor.

Geese

Birds that can be confused with swans, especially in Iceland.

Geometry

An exact formal science that can be used rhetorically as a persuasive labelling method for inexact metaphysical reasoning.

Get (lost!)

Uttered in a timely fashion, it can save a person the trouble of having to answer a difficult

question.

Greek

If ancient, it is an excellent way to display one’s own erudition.

Health

The true source of happiness, yet regularly forgotten until missing.

Hegel (Georg Friedrich)

A typical German philosopher, he wrote several tomes to demonstrate that nothing stays the same.

History (of ideas)

A way to find out why we think the way we think.

Homogenisation

The equalising social process deplored by anthropologists whereby identifying the poor, the outcast, the loathed, the derided and the downtrodden becomes a little less easy.

Hume (David)

An uncharacteristically prodigal Scotsman, he noticed that the only way to be sure that all matches in the box do work is to light them all up.

Hypocrisy

The misunderstood virtue of avoiding conflict in reality by accepting conflict in principle.

Ideology

A set of loosely interconnected concepts, some of which may be even mutually contradictory, that allow people to feel justified in their claims and actions, or at least to project an air of justification for them.

Illness

The demonstration of the bodily basis of the mind.

Indifference

The least acknowledged yet most important virtue in a pluralist society: by caring little about what other people believe or do, mutual tolerance can be the norm.

Insight (aka Intuition)

Prejudice we like.

Institutions

The remarkable social invention whereby to preserve the memory of past errors and make the inexorably ignorant new generations somewhat less likely to repeat them.

Intervention (by the State)

A much-loathed socialist value, which liberals accept as soon as they are in trouble.

Jokes

A valuable means of instruction that can reach even those who do not wish to be instructed.

Kant (Immanuel)

A typical German philosopher, he wrote two tomes to undo an earlier one.

Knowledge

That which philosophers seek and analyse most, and yet have the least of.

Language

The precious and inevitable source of all misunderstandings.

Lashes (by whip)

As long as someone else gets more than you do, most slaves will not rebel against slavery.

Latin

Another good way to show one’s own erudition.

Liberalism

The political wisdom teaching that State authority should be used only to protect a person from her worst enemies: her neighbours.

Life

A rather bothersome business, but also the only one in town.

Lust

An open motive among men; less so among women. Gender equality’s lewd horizon.

Magic

Another way to understand religion.

Marx (Karl)

A typical German philosopher, he wrote several tomes to demonstrate that, normally, if the employer gets more, the employee gets less—and vice versa.

Meritocracy

A neologism by the privileged.

Mixed (marriage)

The easiest and fastest way to explain why a marriage did not last. No such option is available for divorces between people of the same ethnic origin, the explanation of which may then take years of keen psychological scrutiny.

Montaigne (Michel de)

His essays became so famous and commonplace that later philosophers forgot to mention the source of the ideas that they discussed and, eventually, Montaigne himself. There can be such a thing as too much fame.

More (Thomas)

Great wisdom expressed with clarity.

Nietzsche (Friedrich)

An atypical German philosopher, he wrote aphorisms to acknowledge a major yet neglected motive of human thought and action: resentment.

Nothingness

The likeliest outcome of a person’s life, which we spend trying not to think about it.

Order

In practice, the supreme official principle of social life.

Originality

The future outcome of the present ignorance about the past.

Pain (and Pleasure)

The fabric of our inner tapestry.

Philosophy

When good, it is the playful use of our imagination and of our reason in order to break apart, toy with and recombine concepts, beliefs and habits of thought, in order to make better sense of them. When bad, it is the skillful use of our imagination and of our reason in order to do the same and, in the end, be even more confused.

Poetry

An artificial reminder of life’s beauty.

Political (correctness)

The ungainly social process whereby the less respected members of a community can have a chance to be paid a little more respect.

Pornography

A widespread yet uncomfortable signpost of liberal freedom.

Potentiality

Another word for actuality.

Poverty

A person’s attribute that, if conspicuous, makes other significant attributes deplorable or intolerable to the surrounding individuals: age, race, religious affiliation, ignorance, ugliness, etc.

Prejudice

Insights we dislike.

Pride

A vice leading frequently to virtuous behaviour.

Quality

Often confused with quantity.

Quantity

Often confused with quality.

Questions

The best instrument available to reveal how ignorant we are, no matter the number of university degrees we may have.

Race

A historically popular but unnecessary notion which justifies people being nasty to one another. In its absence, freckles or bad pronunciation can serve the same purpose.

Radicalism

The art of making outlandish ideas sound plausible, thus duly impressing unsuspecting young minds and potential sexual partners.

Reason

The perplexing faculty to take apart whatever solid conclusion we had reached before.

Rhetoric

The unjustly neglected study of how language shapes people’s life under all circumstances.

Righteousness

The most dangerous virtue cultivated by Christianity.

Scepticism

Unwise over-intelligent overthinking—it is by far too delightful an endeavour for most philosophers to resist the temptation of indulging in it despite their own better judgment.

Sparrows

A natural reminder of life’s beauty.

Spinoza (Baruch)

Great wisdom could be expressed with more clarity.

Stratification

Having someone below you is usually more important than having someone above—another instance of slave morality.

Straw-man (fallacies)

Mistaken by logicians as fictional errors, they are the far-too-real claims of ordinary men and women; if one is willing, and brave enough, to listen to real people.

Stupidity

The regularly underplayed yet visibly increased outcome of greater freedom in human societies.

Swans

Birds that can be confused with geese, especially in Iceland.

Syllogism

A structured way of thinking and talking that allows the person using it to come across as astoundingly intelligent and thereby force another to shut up, even if the latter may actually be right.

Tolerance

The socially crucial ability to endure people that we dislike.

Toleration

The perplexing notion whereby tolerance is not enough in society, for we must also like the people that we dislike.

Torture

The most efficient way to get bad information from innocent weaklings and no information at all from guilty brutes.

Transubstantiation

To modern eyes, an old form of cannibalism.

Ugliness (physical)

One of the most important life-defining characteristics that a person can have the ill luck to possess and that philosophers keep stating not to matter.

Unpleasantness

That from which all great ideologies wish to free us once and for all, but which all great historians tell us that we must accept for any human endeavour to have a chance to work at all.

Urination

See defecation.

Violence

Whether threatened or applied, it is in practice the supreme unofficial principle of social life.

Voltaire

The best example of how being a master of style condemns a man to being remembered as a minor thinker.

Wealth

A person’s attribute that, if conspicuous, makes other significant attributes invisible to the surrounding individuals: age, race, religious affiliation, ignorance, ugliness, etc.

Will

We like thinking of it as free, despite all contrary evidence.

Wittgenstein (Ludwig)

A Continental philosopher mistaken for an analytical one.

Xanadu

One of the many words for the imaginary place of endless joy that all cultures have concocted and that only some silly philosophers would state not to want to go to.

Youth

The time of peak performance in a person's life, the rest of which is spent trying to make use of ridiculous concepts that can help that person to enjoy some respect and self-respect: the wisdom of old age, the charm of grey hair, the value of experience, etc.

Zionist

Often confused with "Jewish" and "Israeli", it can be combined with them in the following matrix:

Jewish, Israeli and Zionist

Non-Jewish, Israeli and Zionist

Jewish, Non-Israeli and Zionist

Jewish, Israeli and Non-Zionist

Non-Jewish, Non-Israeli and Zionist

Jewish, Non-Israeli and Non-Zionist

Non-Jewish, Israeli and Non-Zionist

Non-Jewish, Non-Israeli and Non-Zionist