The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

Over the years, I have had the good fortune to teach a lot of graduate students, mostly in philosophy, and have noticed a recurring fact. Behind every new graduate student stands an undergraduate teacher. This is someone who opened the student’s eyes and ears to the possibility of the life of the mind that they had perhaps imagined but scarcely believed was within their reach. Someone who, through the force of their example, animated a desire to read more, study more and know more. Someone in whom the student heard something fascinating or funny or just downright strange. Someone who heard something significant in what the student said in a way that gave them confidence and self-belief. Such teachers are the often unknown and usually unacknowledged (and underpaid) heroes of the world of higher education.

Some lucky people have several such teachers. This was the case with me. But there is usually one teacher who sticks out and stays in one’s mind, and whose words resound down through the years. These are teachers who become repositories for all sorts of anecdotes, who are fondly recalled through multiple bon mots and jokes told by their former students. It is also very often the case that the really good teachers don’t write or don’t write that much. They are not engaged in “research,” whatever that benighted term means with respect to the humanities. They teach. They talk. Sometimes they even listen and ask questions.

In relation to philosophy, this phenomenon is hardly new. The activity of philosophy begins with Socrates, who didn’t write and about whom many stories
Plato and others, like Xenophon, wrote them down and we still read them. It is very often the case that the center of a vivid philosophical culture is held by figures who don’t write but who exist only through the stories that are told about them. One thinks of Sidney Morgenbesser, long-time philosophy professor at Columbia, whom I once heard described as a “mind on the loose.” The philosopher Robert Nozick said of his undergraduate education that he “majored in Sidney Morgenbesser.” On his deathbed, Morgenbesser is said to have asked: “Why is God making me suffer so much? Just because I don’t believe in him?”

These anecdotes seem incidental, but they are very important. They become a way of both revering the teacher and humanizing them, both building them up and belittling them, giving us a feeling of intimacy with them, keeping them within human reach. Often the litmus test of an interesting philosopher is how many stories circulate about them.

I want to talk here about an undergraduate teacher of mine about whom many stories were told, but who is not so widely known. His name was Frank Cioffi (1928-2012), an Italian-American from a peasant family who spent his early years close to Washington Square. His mother died giving birth to him, and his distraught father died when Frank was an infant. He was then brought up by his grandparents, who spoke in a Neapolitan dialect. He dropped out of high school, spent time with the United States Army in Japan and then in France trying to identify dug-up corpses of American soldiers for the war grave commission. In 1950, he somehow managed to get into Ruskin College, Oxford, on the G.I. Bill, where he began to study philosophy and discovered the work of Wittgenstein, whose later thinking was just then beginning to circulate. After teaching in Singapore and Kent, he became the founding professor of the philosophy department at the University of Essex in the early 1970s. I encountered him there in 1982. It was memorable.

Frank (which is how he was always referred to) has recently become the subject of an interesting book by David Ellis, “Frank Cioffi: The Philosopher in Shirt Sleeves.” It gives a very good sense of what it felt like to be in a room with Frank. Truth to tell, Ellis’s title is deceptive, as I never recall Frank in shirtsleeves. He wore a sweater, usually inside out. He never had laces in the work boots he always wore, and strangest of all, because of an acute sensitivity to fabrics, he wore
pajamas underneath his clothes at all times. The word “disheveled” doesn’t begin
to describe the visual effect that Frank had on the senses. He was a physically large,
strong-looking man, about 6-foot-4. The pajamas were clearly visible at the edges
of his sweater, his fly was often undone (some years later, his only word of teaching
advice to me was “always check your fly”) and he sometimes seemed to hold his
pants up with a piece of string. In his pockets would be scraps of paper with
typewritten quotations from favorite writers like George Eliot, Tolstoy or Arthur
Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, whom he revered.

He walked the few miles to the brutal architectural dystopia that was the
University of Essex from his home in Colchester wearing an early version of a Sony
Walkman. I always assumed he was listening to music, only to discover years later
that he was listening to recordings of himself reading out passages from books. I
remember him saying during a lecture that he was “not a publishing philosopher.”
This is not quite true, but although his books, like “Wittgenstein on Freud and
Frazer” (1998), are fascinating, his rather tangled prose gives no sense of what it
was like to listen to one of his lectures. They were amazing, unscripted and hugely
funny performances, where he would move about over a vast range of quotations
and reflections, his considerable bulk straining to control the passion of his
thinking. Occasionally he would suddenly perch himself on the edge of a student’s
desk, smoking a small, Indian cigarette (yes, it was that long ago). We were at once
terrified and enthralled.

I was studying English and European literature in my first year at college, but
my friend Will and I were considering switching to philosophy, partly because of
Frank. We went to see him in his office for advice. I don’t remember him giving
any. We sat with him for about an hour and I remember a story about how, when
he had been teaching in Singapore, he used to put down poison to deal with the
many cockroaches that infested his office. One day, while watching an insect die in
agony in the corner of his room, he thought to himself: “There is a problem with
other minds after all. It is a real issue. I knew that the bug was dying in pain and
felt profound sympathy and stopped doing it.” Will and I both switched to
philosophy immediately and never looked back.

Some years later, I went back into his office to ask permission to switch from
one course to another. “Which courses?” he said indifferently. “I’m meant to be
reading Foucault, but I want to do a course on Derrida.” “Man” he replied “that’s like going from horseshit to bullshit.” In fact, as others can confirm, the latter word was his most common term of reference and it also expresses his approach to philosophy: No BS.

In the preface to “Varieties of Religious Experience,” William James said that it was his belief that “a large acquaintance with particulars makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas, however deep.” This was Frank’s pedagogical credo and his teaching moved from particular to particular, often working from the quotations written on small slips of paper and stuck into his pockets, to be pulled out with great dramatic effect. He hated big theories and any kind of metaphysical pretention and he would use little quotations to pick away relentlessly at grand explanations. He used the particular to scratch away at the general, like picking at a scab.

Frank’s special loathing was reserved for Freud, whom he thought a writer of great perceptiveness and expressive power but completely deluded about the theoretical consequences of his views. “Imagine a world in which, like ours,” Frank wrote in “Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer,” “people laughed at jokes, but unlike ours did not know what they were laughing at until they discovered the unconscious energetic processes hypothesized by Freud.” For Frank, such was the world that Freud beguiled himself and us into believing he was living in. He compared the 20th-century fascination with psychoanalysis to the 19th-century fascination with phrenology, the “science” of bumps on the head. I think he would have come to very similar conclusions about the early 21st-century fad for neuroscience and our insatiable obsession with the brain.

Despite the astonishing breadth of his interests, Frank’s core obsession in teaching turned on the relation between science and the humanities. More particularly, his concern was with the relation between the causal explanations offered by science and the kinds of humanistic description we find, say, in the novels of Dickens or Dostoevsky, or in the sociological writings of Erving Goffman and David Riesman. His quest was to try and clarify the occasions when a scientific explanation was appropriate and when it was not, and we need instead a
humanistic remark. His conviction was that our confusions about science and the humanities had wide-ranging and malign societal consequences.

Let me give an example. Imagine that you depressed, because of the death of a loved one, heartbreak or just too much hard and seemingly pointless work. You go to see a doctor. After trying to explain what ails you, with the doctor fidgeting and looking at his watch, he exclaims: “Ah, I see the problem. Take this blue pill and you will be cured.” However efficacious the blue pill might be, in this instance the doctor’s causal diagnosis is the wrong one. What is required is for you to be able to talk, to feel that someone understands your problems and perhaps can offer some insight or even suggestions on how you might move forward in your life. This, one imagines, is why people go into therapy.

But let’s flip it around. Let’s imagine that you are on a ferry crossing the English Channel during a terrible winter storm. Your nausea is uncontrollable and you run out onto the deck to vomit the contents of your lunch, breakfast and the remains of the previous evening’s dinner. You feel so wretched that you no longer fear death — you wish you were dead. Suddenly, on the storm-tossed deck, appears R.D. Laing, the most skilled, charismatic and rhetorically gifted existential psychiatrist of his generation, in a blue velvet suit. He proceeds to give you an intense phenomenological description of how your guts feel, the sense of disorientation, the corpse-like coldness of your flesh, the sudden loss of the will to live. This is also an error. On a ferry you want a blue pill that is going to alleviate the symptoms of seasickness and make you feel better.

Frank’s point is that our society is deeply confused by the occasions when a blue pill is required and not required, or when we need a causal explanation and when we need a further description, clarification or elucidation. We tend to get muddled and imagine that one kind of explanation (usually the causal one) is appropriate in all occasions when it is not.

What is in play here is the classical distinction made by Max Weber between explanation and clarification, between causal or causal-sounding hypotheses and interpretation. Weber’s idea is that natural phenomena require causal explanation, of the kind given by physics, say, whereas social phenomena require elucidation — richer, more expressive descriptions. In Frank’s view, one major task of philosophy
is help us get clear on this distinction and to provide the right response at the right time. This, of course, requires judgment, which is no easy thing to teach.

Let me push this a little further. At the end of his book on Wittgenstein, Frank tells a story about a philosophical paper (imagined or real, it is not clear) with the title “Qualia and Materialism — Closing the Explanatory Gap.” The premise of the paper is twofold: first, there is a gap between how we experience the world — our subjective, conscious experiences (qualia) — and the scientific explanation of the material forces that constitute nature; and, second, that such a gap can potentially be closed through one, overarching theoretical explanation. Frank goes on to point out that if we can imagine such a paper, then we can also imagine papers called “The Big Bang and Me — Closing the Explanatory Gap” or “Natural Selection and Me — Closing the Explanatory Gap.”

This is the risk of what some call “scientism” — the belief that natural science can explain everything, right down to the detail of our subjective and social lives. All we need is a better form of science, a more complete theory, a theory of everything. Lord knows, there are even Oscar-winning Hollywood movies made about this topic. Frank’s point, which is still hugely important, is that there is no theory of everything, nor should there be. There is a gap between nature and society. The mistake, for which scientism is the name, is the belief that this gap can or should be filled.

One huge problem with scientism is that it invites, as an almost allergic reaction, the total rejection of science. As we know to our cost, we witness this every day with climate change deniers, flat-earthers and religious fundamentalists. This is what is called obscurantism, namely that the way things are is not explained by science, but with reference to occult forces like God, all-conquering Zeus, the benign earth goddess or fairies at the bottom of my garden. Now, in order to confront the challenge of obscurantism, we do not simply need to run into the arms of scientism. What is needed is a clearer overview of the occasions when a scientific remark is appropriate and when we need something else, the kind of elucidation we find in stories, poetry or indeed when we watch a movie or good TV (Frank watched a lot of TV).
People often wonder why there appears to be no progress in philosophy, unlike in natural science, and why it is that after some three millennia of philosophical activity no dramatic changes seem to have been made to the questions philosophers ask. The reason is because people keep asking the same questions and perplexed by the same difficulties. Wittgenstein puts the point rather directly: “Philosophy hasn’t made any progress? If somebody scratches the spot where he has an itch, do we have to see some progress?” Philosophy scratches at the various itches we have, not in order that we might find some cure for what ails us, but in order to scratch in the right place and begin to understand why we engage in such apparently irritating activity. Philosophy is not Neosporin. It is not some healing balm. It is an irritant, which is why Socrates described himself as a gadfly.

This is one way of approaching the question of life’s meaning. Human beings have been asking the same kinds of questions for millenniums and this is not an error. It testifies to the fact that human being are rightly perplexed by their lives. The mistake is to believe that there is an answer to the question of life’s meaning. As Douglas Adams established quite some time ago, the answer to the question of life, the universe and everything will always be “42” or some variation of 42. Namely, it will be something really rather disappointing.

The point, then, is not to seek an answer to the meaning of life, but to continue to ask the question. This is what Frank did in his life and teaching. David Ellis tells a story of when Frank was in hospital, and a friend came to visit him. When the friend could not find Frank’s room, he asked a nurse where he might find Professor Cioffi. “Oh,” the nurse replied, “you mean the patient that knows all the answers.” At which point, a voice was heard from under some nearby bedclothes, “No, I know all the questions.”

We don’t need an answer to the question of life’s meaning, just as we don’t need a theory of everything. What we need are multifarious descriptions of many things, further descriptions of phenomena that change the aspect under which they are seen, that light them up and let us see them anew. That is what Frank was doing with his quotations, with his rich variety of particulars. They allow us to momentarily clarify and focus the bewilderment that is often what passes for our “inner life” and give us an overview on things. We might feel refreshed and illuminated, even slightly transformed, but it doesn’t mean we are going to stop
scratching that itch. In 1948, Wittgenstein wrote, “When you are philosophizing you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there.”

Allow me an odd postscript. Shortly after I learned the news of Frank’s death in 2012, I opened my email one morning to find a message from “Frank Cioffi.” I suddenly paused, as if someone had walked over my grave or scratched my skin with their nails. I then discovered that his namesake was Frank’s nephew, a professor of English at City University of New York, who was doing research into his uncle’s work. But that’s the great thing about one’s teachers. They never really die. They live on in the stories that we tell about them.

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