

Charles Parsons: A personal Appreciation
By Gila Sher

This is a personal appreciation of Charles Parsons as a teacher, a dissertation advisor, and a mentor.

When I moved to the United States from Israel, I thought I might go to graduate school in philosophy, but had no idea where to go. I decided to look for someone to work with based on my acquaintance with his/her writings at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where I studied earlier. Charles was one philosopher that immediately came to mind. I read his paper on substitutional quantification and three characteristics stood out for me: his interest in Kant, which I shared, his interest in logic, which I also shared, and a certain depth and philosophical integrity, which I admired.

When I joined the graduate program at Columbia University, I was delighted to find out that everyone took me to be a Parsons student. But I didn't talk to Charles much. Both he and I were very shy in interpersonal relations (though not in philosophy), both of us were terrible at small talk, and I had two small children at home, in North Bergen County, New Jersey, so I came to Columbia only for classes and colloquia and left right away. Charles, too, came to all the colloquia, and since both of us often participated in the discussion, this was another opportunity to get to know each other. Sometimes, I was invited by the faculty to join them for dinner after the colloquium, and that was another way to meet. But throughout my time at Columbia Charles and I limited our conversations to philosophy.

I took two classes with Charles plus an independent study. The first class was a graduate seminar on early analytical philosophy, where we started with Meinong. Isaac Levi, who was also very significant for me at Columbia, came to the seminar too. Everyone in the seminar admired Charles, and all the students were also a bit afraid of him. We all took our presentations very seriously. I was the first to give a presentation, on Meinong. I was nervous, but both Charles and Isaac seemed to like it. Since that time I always felt comfortable with Charles in class. My second class with Charles was in set theory, and the independent study was on model theory (we read the Chang and Keisler book).

Every time I wrote a seminar paper in my first years at Columbia I showed it to Charles and we talked about whether it would be a suitable topic for my dissertation. And every time we decided it would not. We both agreed that the right topic would be positive and constructive, but could not come up with one. Then, one day, out of the blue (so it felt to me) Charles suggested that I read a paper on generalized quantifiers by Andrzej Mostowski. I don't know how he came up with this suggestion, but reading this paper was transformative for me. It showed me a way to approach a topic that I never thought I would be able to approach. Both Charles and I thought that the foundation of logic is an amazing topic, but how do you approach such a basic topic? What definite and precise standpoint is there to approach such a topic? Mostowski found such an entry point. No one before him gave a systematic answer to the question what are all the logical constants of predicate logic. The only way philosophers described the logical constants was "by a list": identity, the existential/universal quantifiers, the truth-functional connectives, and constants

definable from these . But Mostowski found a universal principle for logical quantifiers, which could be expanded to all logical constants. This, I thought, was an ingenious entrance point to the question "What is logic". I wrote a paper on it and Charles enthusiastically accepted it as my dissertation prospectus.

But then came the hard part: How do I determine whether Mostowski's principle is right? I myself didn't believe in relying on my personal intuition, so the answer would have to be based on rational considerations. But how does one go about finding out what the right rational answer is?

Here, again, Charles did something incredible for me. He suggested that I read John Etchemendy's dissertation on logical consequence. How he realized that this would be a turning point for me I don't know. Etchemendy's dissertation presented a skeptical view on logic and a dismissive view on the topic of logical constants. This was far away from what I was looking for. But Charles somehow realized that this might help me solve my problem. And indeed, Etchemendy's challenge led me back to Tarski's original paper on logical consequence, and this, in turn, helped me to find my way to a systematic rational answer to the question what is a logical constant and an opening to thinking constructively about "What is logic?", or so I thought and still think. (All this happened before Tarski's own unknown paper on logical constants was posthumously published.) As you can see, Charles was a "magical" mentor for me. Writing my dissertation with him as my mentor was an exciting process of discovery, challenges, and more discoveries.

How did we work together? We didn't meet often. After writing each chapter Charles read it and wrote critical comments. Then we would meet and conduct what can best be described as a "defense" of the chapter. Following the meeting, I would make the required revisions and move on to the next chapter.

How did it feel to sit opposite Charles and talk about my dissertation? Both Ned Block and Tim Scanlon mentioned in the blog the difficulty of talking with Charles. Ned mentioned how slow Charles was in answering questions, and both of them said they were scared of him or found him intimidating. Indeed, Charles's "silences" were notorious. Students were terrified of them. More deeply, they were intimidated by his brilliance. I remember several of my peers saying that they wanted to work with Parsons (we all called him "Professor Parsons", never "Charles"), but they would rather wait until they wrote a paper he really liked, and then tell him they wanted to work with him. I was a bit scared, too, but I knew I didn't have a choice. I came to Columbia to work with Charles, and I might as well show myself to him as I was. If that would not be good enough, I would leave.

What did I do then when, sitting opposite Charles in his office, he would sink into one of his silences? My solution to the problem was simple. I would ask: "Professor Parsons, what do you think?". And he would always tell me.

My relationship with Charles Parsons at Columbia, limited to pure philosophy as it was, was one of the most important relationships in my life, both intellectually and in terms of connecting with

someone over something we were both enormously passionate about and was a center of our lives. I will forever be indebted to Charles for that time. I cannot think of a better mentor to a student than he was. I came to Columbia admiring Charles and left it admiring him even more.