

# COMPOSITIONALITY, CONTEXT AND SEMANTIC VALUES

Essays in Honour of Ernie Lepore

edited by

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# Ernie

I met Ernie in 1965 on the wrestling mats of our high school in North Bergen, New Jersey, a township on top of the plateau overlooking Hoboken and across the Hudson River from Manhattan. Hoboken then was still the Hoboken of Elia Kazan’s “On the Waterfront” (1954).<sup>1</sup> Even though the Hudson was less than a mile across at that point, it was a wide spiritual divide. We were Jersey boys, not New Yorkers.

Ernie was as ambitious as I was about wrestling, and, so, after the season was over, we used to take a bus to Journal Square in Jersey City, and then walk about eight city blocks to a gym to lift weights. In those days, high schools didn’t have weight rooms; and gyms were scarce, men only, quite filthy, and entirely devoid of cardio equipment and Nautilus machines. They were all sweat, grunts, groans, and clanking iron. By 1968, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, after a grueling wrestling practice at the high school, we would take a bus to New York City (it took about a half hour to get into “the City” by bus, less if the Lincoln Tunnel was not crowded), and then a short subway ride up to the New York Athletic Club on 59th street, across from Central Park, to spend a couple of hours working out with former university wrestling stars—guys in their mid-twenties from places like Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Iowa—who were training to make the Olympic team. Even with all of this wrestling time, we were frustrated by the fact that there was nowhere to work out on Sundays. We investigated and found out that the Jersey City YMCA had a wrestling mat and was open on Sundays. We then spent our Sunday afternoons working out there, so as not to miss a day of wrestling. Wrestling was our savior: a healthy way to get out anger.<sup>2</sup>

But it wasn’t all wrestling. We did something else too: We talked. We spent many hours together introspecting out loud, and just trying to make sense of things. Ernie has mentioned in print one early topic of discussion: “We spent years trying to solve various logical *conundra* like how on earth the Virgin Mary could have been a virgin

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<sup>1</sup> The film has special meaning for me. My family lived near the building in which a man is thrown from the roof in an early scene, and my big brother Mike was an altar boy in the church in which the dock workers had their meeting. We moved from Hoboken to Union City and then, when I was 13, to more “upscale” North Bergen—the home town of the Cinderella Man, James J. Braddock.

<sup>2</sup> We are now faculty advisors to the Rutgers wrestling team.

and still have given birth to Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> Being Irish and Italian, respectively, we were, of course, Catholic boys, even though not quite good Catholic boys.

Ernie came up the hard way. He is part of our meritocracy, not our aristocracy. His father left when he was an infant. On welfare until he was 18 years old, he was raised by his mother, Irma, an Italian immigrant who never learned to read and write English. She loved him dearly. But at home at night no one nagged him to do his homework. He made sure he did his homework. In high school, during wrestling season, he did it after an exhausting 2-hour practice. And he did it even though he’d gone the whole day without much to eat, not because he needed to make weight for wrestling, but because he didn’t have any money. There were no free school lunches in those days. Making weight was easy.

Not that we never had money. There was plenty of work in the area, which was why it was so heavily populated. One way we earned money off-season was by working in a frozen food warehouse that was directly next to the Holland Tunnel in Jersey City. My cousin Riche McEnroe was the night foreman, and he let us work there part-time, from 8:00p.m. until midnight; we either loaded trucks or pulled carts full of boxes of frozen food out of the warehouse to be loaded onto trucks. It was the warehouse that Helene Stapinski’s father worked in.<sup>4</sup> He must have been working there when we worked there; in fact, I seem to remember him, but it may be a false memory. The full-time workers were members of the Teamster’s Union, and so we all got a twenty-minute break every hour and forty minutes. That made the warehouse a wonderful place to study. You could work on a textbook for twenty minutes, taking notes, and then spend the next hour and forty minutes mulling over what you had read while doing mindless labor, occasionally even pulling a crumpled piece of paper out of your pocket to glance at the notes you wrote. I can’t speak for Ernie, but of all the textbooks that I worked through in high school, I remember most the ones that I studied in the warehouse. We weren’t the only ones who treated the breaks as study hall. I remember one guy, Greg, who worked full time in the warehouse and also went to college full time; he slept about 4 hours a day. I also remember one early April night when we were both in the backroom of the warehouse, and he took off his boot and dropped the corner of a heavy box on his big toe to break it, so that he could go on disability and have time to write his final papers and study for his exams. He aced all of his courses that semester.

In high school, Ernie was determined to be a lawyer someday. What made college financially possible for him was a wrestling scholarship, student loans (which he researched and applied for all on his own), and a scholarship from the Italian-American Club. The men in the Club kept an eye on the smart Italian kids in the neighborhood and loved it whenever one of them wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer.

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<sup>3</sup> LePore, *Meaning and Argument* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Helene Stapinski, *Five-Finger Discount: A Crooked Family History* (New York: Random House, 2002). This is a wonderful book if you have any interest in Jersey City. It is loaded with information about the Hague political machine. The only mistake in the book is that she confuses the Immaculate Conception with the Virgin Birth. (She describes North Bergen as “a scary place.”)

They wanted the kids to be able to leave the city, to have houses instead of apartments, and to be able to wear suits instead of the blue uniforms most of the factories in Hoboken and Jersey City required their workers to wear. There's a better life, they'd say. Although Ernie never became a lawyer, doesn't wear suits, and now once again lives in an apartment in North Bergen, I'm sure he hasn't disappointed them. He's a university professor, they'd brag.

Not all the kids from the neighborhood have done well. We know from first-hand observation the sorts of horror stories you'd expect poor inner-city kids to know. Growing up on mean streets can make you sentimental. A favorite film of ours is the 1938 "Angels with Dirty Faces," which starred James Cagney, Pat O'Brien, Humphrey Bogart, and the Bowery Boys. It starts with two kids running away from the police; one makes it over the fence, the police catch the other kid's ankle before he makes it over. The kid who makes it over the fence, the Pat O'Brien character, grows up to become a priest, Father Jerry. The kid whose ankle gets snared, the James Cagney character, Rocky Sullivan, grows up to be public enemy number one. In that role, he is the hero of the Bowery Boys, a bunch of teen-aged hoods from Rocky's old neighborhood. Rocky is eventually captured and sentenced to death in the electric chair. Father Jerry visits him in his cell at Sing Sing, on the Hudson, and asks a favor of his childhood friend. He asks him to go to the chair looking like a coward, so that the Bowery Boys will no longer view him as a hero. Rocky explains why he just can't do that. But when the time comes for him to walk to the chair, he is sobbing and has to be dragged kicking and screaming. The newspapers report the cowardly way "tough guy" Rocky went out, and the Bowery Boys are crushed. Father Jerry visits them in their basement hangout. He talks to them gently, and the last line of the movie, which he utters as he leads them from the basement, is, "Let's go say a prayer for a kid who couldn't run as fast as I could." Ernie and I weren't quite good Catholic boys, and now we are no longer boys or Catholic. But we still sometimes say a prayer for the kids who couldn't run as fast as we could.

During his first year at the University of Massachusetts, someone told Ernie that philosophy is the best major for law school; and so he became a philosophy major. He soon loved philosophy for its own sake. I visited him one weekend after he had become a philosophy major, and we spent almost the entire time walking around talking about a metaphysics course he was taking with Bruce Aune. I returned from that weekend thinking about his new fascination, philosophy, something I knew only a little bit about from my mother, who, as an English major at Seton Hall University, had taken an epistemology course when she was pregnant with me. I felt Ernie's involvement with philosophy was making us drift apart. So I signed up for a philosophy course for the following semester to find out what it was all about. The course was taught by Chris Hill, now of Brown University.

Irma never got to see Ernie as a philosopher, or even as a philosophy major. She died at the age of 47. Ernie was at school in Amherst, Massachusetts when he heard that she had to be rushed to a hospital. He took a bus to the Port Authority in New York City, a bus from there to North Bergen, and then walked a number of city blocks. He made it to the hospital to see her just before she passed away. He was

heartbroken, all on his own, and 18 years old. He mourned deeply. Then, he picked himself up by his own bootstraps and embraced life.

Ernie is my remaining friend from high school. But ‘my remaining friend from high school’ would be an improper description in Ernie’s mouth. Once Ernie’s friend, you’re his friend for life. You don’t need to make the effort to stay in touch. He’ll take the initiative to stay in touch with you. By the early 1970s, Ernie had a network of correspondence that I matched only after I got email in the 1990s. But by then Ernie had gotten email too, and his correspondence reached astronomical proportions. Friends of Ernie might not reach the cardinality of Friends of Bill, but I wouldn’t bet on that. I’ve had a number of philosophers tell me with a smile how Ernie emails them regularly. They are part of a large crowd. Ernie also stays in regular email contact with Steve Herman, his beloved undergraduate mentor, who has been out of philosophy for over twenty five years. He keeps up with Michael Keating, a high school friend who also went on to major in philosophy at college, but then moved into the world of business. And he keeps tabs on the two Tabs: Ernie and Tony Tabbacino, fellow high school wrestlers who have devoted their lives to teaching high school students. I could go on and on. When I wonder how some mutual high school friend is doing, I ask Ernie.

Ernie genuinely enjoys the successes of his friends: it makes him feel larger. And he tries to make his friends sharers and partners in his own successes. He loves to help people, and does so from respect, feeling and affection.

Ernie is completely devoted to his students. His sphere of caring, however, extends well beyond his students. Since 2004 he has been one of the twelve members of the New Jersey State Board of Education. He spends over 40 Wednesdays a year in Trenton fighting for resources for inner-city schools. And he also finds time to mentor young professorial philosophers. He remembers how Barry Loewer and others helped him when he was a struggling young assistant professor, and he passes it on. He has a keen, unflinching eye for genuine philosophical talent, and is always on the lookout for it. He has called me up many times to talk excitedly about some talented young philosopher he just met at a conference or whose article he just read, saying: “I’m going to invite him/her to the workshop.” For over a decade, he has been running an annual (and occasionally semiannual) philosophy of language workshop at the Rutgers Cognitive Science Center, where he is Associate Director. The workshop brings together promising young philosophers of language and leading senior figures in the field such as Gilbert Harman and James Higginbotham. Most of the contributors to this volume have participated in one or more of Ernie’s workshops, affectionately called “Erniefests.”

What goes around comes around. Some of the good Ernie has spread around has now come back to him in this superb, richly deserved volume on his philosophical work. Irma would be proud.