**The Semantics of *Good* and *Right* as Gradable Adjectives – 6.11.20**

**Abstract**

I argue that *good* and *right* are gradable adjectives as that is understood in the current linguistic theory of gradable adjectives. According that theory, gradable adjectives do not denote properties but contribute meaning in a different yet cognitive way; and if that applies to *good* and *right*, then those words contribute meaning and provide evaluativity and normativity by means other than denoting properties. If that is true, significant consequences follow for metaethics, both because of the lack of properties good and right, and because of specific features of the gradable adjective semantics. I outline the theory of *good* and *right* as gradable adjectives and explore some of those consequences, attempting to give a sense of what changes we may expect in metaethics.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Key words: semantics of *good, right, correct* and *certain;* evaluativity*;* normativity;normative adjectives; semantics of gradable adjectives

**1.0 Introduction**

1.1 *Good* as a gradable adjective

Several writers now argue that *good* is a gradable adjective and takes a semantics of the type taken by paradigmatically gradable adjectives[[2]](#footnote-2) like *tall* and *dense* and *wide* and *fast*. David Wolfsdorf’s presentation of the theory of *good* as a gradable adjective (Wolfsdorf 2015, 2019[[3]](#footnote-3)) is the most fully developed and consequential and I think it is quite important. It is outstandingly significant that, on his account, the adjective *good,* in the semantics of the typical sentences in which it occurs*,* does not denote a property or a relation but makes a different contribution to the semantics of those sentences. In linguistic semantic theory, normal adjectives are or are parts of predicate functions which denote properties, while gradable adjectives are measure functions which denote measures or values on a scale. As a gradable adjective, *good* is an evaluative term, and what it denotes in typical uses is the measure or value assigned to the evaluated thing on the occasion of utterance. This is true of all gradable adjectives: when one says ‘John is tall’ one is evaluating how tall John is against the scale of tallness, and assigning a degree of tallness to John.

Wolfsdorf’s (2015, 2019) is the first clear and rigorous treatment of *good* as a gradable adjective I’m aware of in which both the linguistic and the philosophical issues are taken seriously. He is a philosopher and that is where his interests lie, although he has clearly studied the linguists carefully. I will offer only a few comments on Wolfsdorf’s paper, and book, since in the main I agree with him, differing in only one significant respect, which I discuss in Section 3.5 below. However, I will present the theory of *good* as a gradable adjective in my own terms not because I differ with him, but because I am looking ahead to the additional points I want to argue, primarily that *right* is also a gradable adjective. Because of that goal I will be taking the gradable adjective argument in a somewhat different direction and I need to prepare the ground for that extension from *good* to *right*.

As I said, Wolfdorf’s (2015, 2019) is the most developed account. Shanklin’s (2011) is an interesting earlier attempt. Shanklin knows that *good* is a gradable adjective but he has only partly taken to heart the semantics the linguists are proposing, so when he attempts to draw philosophical implications, he sometimes falls back into forms of the problem that fit only with good as a property. Dean Pettit in “The Meaning of *Good*” (2015) also uses resources from contemporary linguistic semantic theory to launch an attempt at the semantics of *good*, but he takes his exploration in a yet different direction. There are parallels between his account and Wolfsdorf’s and Shanklin’s and mine, but I will not pursue those similarities here. Finlay (2014) offers an account of good and *good* that, although beginning from quite a different place, ends in a theoretical account of the semantics of *good* that significantly parallels the gradable adjective account in interesting ways, yet without using that semantics. However, it lacks the support of the evidence which a theory based in the empirical science of linguistics may be expected to bring. Alex Silk’s paper Evaluational Adjectives (2017) is important too and his book *Discourse Contextualism* (2016) is significant. Silk groups *good* with the gradable adjectives but he is pursuing other interests and so does not investigate deeply what the word *good* being a gradable adjective means for the metaethical questions. And his focus is broader, in a way, looking as it does at the class of adjectives which he calls the evaluational adjectives, of which *good* is a member. Silk’s work helps clarify some of the pragmatic and context-dependence issues that arise for *good* and for all the evaluationals.

There are of course precursor attempts to understanding the semantics of *good*, but few have really attempted to separate semantic from substantive questions. It would be interesting and perhaps worthwhile to conduct a historical investigation on that question; but I will not. I will instead start with Moore (1993, 1903), looming gigantic at the beginning of the 20th century, who tells us that the word *good* denotes the property good, and that the property good is a one-place property that it is simple and unanalyzable (this discussion takes place in Chapter 1, pp. 53-87 in the 1993 edition). We know that many of his contemporaries found this useful and even liberating. Yet at this distance in time, invoking an unanalyzable property good seems mere mystery-mongering. How can something as consequential as good not have any working parts? How can it be that how the property good achieves its effects of evaluating and deontically necessitating, so that it guides and constrains us in our actions, is utterly opaque to us? Yet that is the Moorean account.

Skipping past the expressivist years, which were given over to a program-driven theorizing that did not attend to the actual linguistic semantics of *good* and *right*, I jump all the way to Geach (1956) and Ziff (1960), and then Katz (1964), Thomson (1997 and 2008) and Szabo (2001). There were of course many others thinking and writing on good and *good* in that time but these names are often cited, are important, and are enough to indicate a line of development. All are concerned with the meaning of *good* in the sense of the formal linguistic semantics of the word. I will not discuss their individual contributions since they are all previous to or in some way independent of the gradable adjective theory. Then, sometime in the late 20th century there began to appear papers in linguistics saying that *good* is a gradable adjective. By the 1970s important papers on gradable adjectives began to appear, including the classic papers of Bartsch and Vennemann (1972), Cresswell (1976), Bierwisch (1989) and others. Bierwisch (1989, p. 91) mentions *good* as a gradable adjective and there are other mentions, e.g., Staab and Han (1997). Kennedy (1999) and Morzycki (2015) are more recent works on gradable adjectives and are excellent survey resources and guides to the literature.

After setting out the semantics of *good* as a gradable adjective, I will attempt to show that *right* is also a gradable adjective. The key to the extension from *good* to *right* is to see that gradable adjectives as the linguists understand them are a special case of grading, in the sense of the letter grades and the pass/fail grades in academia, and the grades assigned to fruits and vegetables and meats and gems and hurricane wind speed – the British apple grading system, US Prime beef, carats, Force 5 and so on. Here I will be drawing heavily on Urmson’s (1950) paper On Grading. Gradable adjectives as the linguists understand them, adjectives invoking some gradient property, i.e. a property with a more/less structure that forms a gradient, will be a subclass of what I will call grading adjectives. Gradable adjectives as the linguists understand them are marked out by a grade scale that is many-valued, at least ordinally ordered but often cardinally, and is based on some property which is or forms a gradient. Most commonly the scales are dense with always a value between any two values, as is *tall*, and in those cases its ordering is cardinal. In these types of scale there are indefinitely many values (degrees, grades) on the scale. But there are other possibilities: the scale for *expensive* is in currency units and so is ordinal and not dense but has indefinitely many values; the letter grade set defines a scale that is ordinal and is not dense and has just five values (ignoring pluses and minuses), and the pass/fail grade set is ordinal with only two values.

I will be arguing that *right* has two values, right and not-right, and that it is paired with *wrong*, just as *good* is paired with *bad*. (R*ight* and *wrong* also have epistemic senses, it should be noted.) This parallels the good/bad grouping for *good*, but the difference is that the *good*-grouping is based on a more/less ranking of degrees of goodness while the *right*-group is not. The challenge for my argument will be to make it plausible and probable that *right* functions as a gradable adjective, i.e., that the word *right* is or invokes a measure-function and not a regular predicate function, and so that *right* denotes a degree or value or grade and not a property. That is a problem for me because the linguistic arguments to the conclusion that, e.g., *tall* denotes a measure function and not a regular predicate all depend on the comparative more/less and gradient scales. And of course *good* does and *right* does not have such a scale. (See, e.g., Kennedy (1999, pp. 31-40) for an exposition of the argument that gradiently gradable adjectives denote degrees on a scale.) Because of this limitation on the linguistic argument, I need to assemble other arguments to support my case for *right*.

I could have titled my paper ‘The Normative Evaluative Adjectives *Good* and *Right*’ but I did not. Normativity is a confused and confusing matter. The word seems to reference a relation to a norm or standard or benchmark, as in, e.g., “does this paper meet the standard (norm) for an A-paper in philosophy”? Yet it is commonly used more broadly to indicate all of the ways in which the evaluative words – the “normative” words, merging the two kinds, perhaps illicitly – such as *good* and *right* and *ought* and *must* are used to evaluate, guide, direct, commend, censure and otherwise constrain our actions. Based on Finlay’s (2010) very useful survey of the subject of normativity and on his own later contribution to the subject (Finlay 2019), it seems to me that the truth here is that we can, if not define or strictly demarcate it, at least locate the phenomenon in a general way, and I take that phenomenon to be how *good* and *right* and *ought* and *must,* as uttered in sincere sentences among persons, purport justifiably (one big part of the argument is what this means) to evaluate situations and our choices, and guide, direct and constrain our actions. There are many theories as to what this means and how it is done but none seem to me obviously clear and correct. I will use *normative* to call out the phenomenon and I will offer an account of it, but in the account I offer, evaluativity comes first and I give an account of evaluativity that builds from and extends the linguists’ account as it is embedded in the theory of gradable adjectives. I then develop an account of normativity as arising from, and to be understood in terms of, evaluativity. But the word *normative* is, really, a term of art having little or no natural use in English, and so my account will be in the nature of an investigation of what normativity might be if the theory of *good* and *right* as gradable adjectives is correct. Evaluativity is a clearer and I think a more basic concept, and can be explained in what I think is an intuitively attractive way.

If this new theory of the semantics of a particular class of adjectives is true of *good*, that will lead to changes which reverberate throughout our thinking about *good* and good, and, as I will argue, about *right* and right. Without a property good, all the old Moorean issues about that supposed property simply do not arise – yet parallels and counterparts of the problems and issues do arise, although in significantly altered forms, for our evaluative, normative and metaphysical concerns remain and our linguistic uses of *good* are as central to our lives as ever they were. But the arguments about the nature of good change radically. Moorean claims about analyzing good become irrelevant; without the question how to analyze some supposed property good, the naturalism vs. non-naturalism contrast seems to fade to a degree of insignificance; and without some property good, what we are doing in saying of something that it is good becomes a significantly different thing. I don’t think that non-cognitivism, i.e., emotivism, is reinforced, quite the opposite: gradable *good* will yield cognitive and truth-apt utterances. But cognitivism will become divorced from non-naturalism and yet will not lead to a naturalism. The whole linguistic and metaethical landscape will shift dramatically. So in addition to setting out the theory of *good* and *right* as gradable adjectives, I will be investigating some of these changes and trying to understand their significance.

1.2 How I will proceed

In what follows, I will first set out the linguists’ theory of the semantics of gradable adjectives, using *tall* as my example. Getting very clear on what is supposed to be going on in the simple cases will help us stay straight as we apply the theory to the complex cases. Next, I apply the semantics to the adjective *smart*. The key point about *smart* as opposed to *tall* is that while the meaning of *tall* has some context dependence, the word *smart* is much more significantly context-dependent. Given the sense I intend, *smart* has something to do with intellectual acuity and not with how one dresses or how a burn stings. But there are many different “ways of being smart” intellectually, as for instance smart at chess but not at scanning poetry, smart at scanning poetry but not at programming, smart at philosophy but not at mathematics, smart at industrial design but not at understanding music – and so on, and so on. People are smart in different ways and about different things. So, in addition to the comparison class and the benchmark – which are the areas where *tall* is context sensitive – for *smart,* context must convey to the hearer the “way of being smart” the speaker is intending to invoke on the particular speech occasion. This will be provided contextually and is included as additional semantic material that supplements what is carried in the lexical meaning of the word *smart*, and it is needed to complete the semantic content of the utterance. The received view among linguists is that Gricean conversational implicature (Grice 1975 and 1989) is the primary mechanism that is used to effect these contextual additions. And finally, of course, I intend “ways of being smart” as an allusion to Thomson’s (1997 and 2008) “ways of being good” because *good* shows this same extreme linguistic context dependence and, apparently, makes use of this same pragmatic supplementation to lexical meaning.

Then I apply the semantics of gradable adjectives to the word *good*. After the initial presentation of the treatment of *good* as a gradable adjective, I take up some problematic features, most centrally how, taken naively, the first response to the theory of *good* as a gradable adjective can be just to say ‘Of course it is a gradable adjective! Something can be more or less good and it is said to be good only if it is good enough, and goodness is the gradable property’. This cannot be right, for many reasons, but the claim that it is not needs detailed argument. Then there are a number of other related matters to be explored concerning how the semantics of *good* taken to be a gradable adjective play themselves out.

I next consider Urmson’s (1950) paper On Grading at some length. I will be making the argument that gradable adjectives are in fact a special case of the phenomenon of grading: that the general case is that of grading adjectives, i.e., evaluative adjectives. In grading, the graded or evaluated thing is ranked on a scale and is assigned a grade (or value, measure or degree; which word sounds right seems to depend on features of the grade scale in question). This is seen in the academic grades A B C D F, in seeing a piece of meat labeled ‘US Prime’ – or in saying of a thing that it is good. Grades are used to report evaluations, they are values or measures on some scale, and a thing is evaluated by being assigned a value on the indicated scale. There is one difference: for the academic letter grades, and for a number of other grades, there seems to be no related adjective that occurs naturally in English, but of course what we intend is to measure academic quality and that can function as the adjective.

In grading, we are assigning the graded thing to a value on the indicated scale. This is true for all cases of grading. (I speak to the ambiguity in *gradable* in the next paragraph.) Gradable adjectives such as *tall* differ from e.g., the academic quality grading because the scales are different and the criteria that the scales are based on are different. The scales are different in substance, and they differ in their formal properties, and both together explain differences in the semantic behaviors of the adjectives. Formally, the academic letter grades are 1) discrete, i.e. not continuous, 2) they are ranked ordinally, not cardinally, and 3) they are finite, indeed few in number; and substantively, the criteria are about features of academic performance not tallness. The scale for *tall*, by contrast, formally is 1) continuous (and so dense, or infinite in number of degrees) and 2) ranked cardinally so that it makes sense to talk about how much taller; and 3) the criterion is height (vertical distance from a reference base).

Of course there is an ambiguity in *grade* and *grading* and *gradable* here. The term *gradable adjective* as used in linguistics in fact is derived from the way some of those adjectives are built on a property that forms a gradient, i.e., a clear more/less structure. For some property P, things manifesting that property can be ordered by how much P they exhibit. This is why P is called the base gradable property. The common gradable adjectives, e.g. *tall*, *heavy*, *dense*, *expensive, cheap*, take a scale that is ordered and is sometimes ordinal, more often cardinal and if cardinal, dense. But this is just one grouping of kinds of scales, for again consider the letter grades. Assigning a grade to a thing is assigning a particular value on a scale to the thing, and that is the commonality with gradiently gradable adjectives. But the scale need not be cardinal and it need not be dense and it can be very limited in the number of grades. The letter grades are ordered ordinally, they are not dense and there are only five of them (not counting pluses and minuses). They do not form a gradient in the sense the linguists mean. And pass/fail has only two grades. The food-grading systems tend to be like the letter grades, with three to five grades and suggestive names for easier memory. So, if we understand *gradable* as meaning the same as *grade-assigning* rather than the narrower *gradient-grade assigning* we will have identified the broader class of adjective.

1.3 The philosophic oddity

Finally, I want to comment on the oddity of this. The theory of gradable adjectives as applied to the semantics of a class of words is a conjecture about a feature of natural language and therefore it is an empirical matter whether it is true or false. And it appears to be true of *good* since that word has all the characteristics of the regular gradable adjectives. But that, tautologically, has large consequences for what we mean when we say “X is good.” I do not know quite what to make of this situation, wherein a matter that looks straightforwardly empirical, a matter of how language in fact works, has potentially such large consequences for a topic, namely the nature of good, which had previously seemed a matter for pure philosophical theorizing. Rather than devalue philosophy here, my inclination is to say that we were led into misguided philosophical speculation by a too-simple and probably erroneous understanding of the semantics of our language – we failed to understand how the word *good* is actually used, and once we got that wrong, the rest of our mistakes followed in train. So what will we say about the nature of good once we begin taking seriously the idea that *good* may not denote a property yet our statements using it be not emotivist but rather truth-apt? That is what I’m exploring here. There is probably a broader lesson in this, but narrowly, getting the semantics of what we say right, at least in broad outline, is surely the necessary beginning to useful philosophizing.

**2.0 Tall and *tall* and smart and *smart***

2.11 *Tall* - the linguistic facts to be handled

First I want to display some of the semantic and syntactic properties of adjectives like *tall* that have led linguists to propose the gradable adjective hypothesis.

1. John is tall
2. Sam is tall
3. John is taller than Sam
4. John is 6’4” feet tall
5. John is a tall ten year old
6. John is tall for a ten year old
7. John is a tall boy considering how short his parents are
8. John is not tall for a basketball player
9. John is tall considered as a member of a soccer team
10. Sam is taller for a jockey than John is for a basketball player

Finding a semantics for *tall* that works for these ten sentences is what has led to the degree-type semantics currently favored among linguists for gradable adjectives. If both John and Sam are tall yet their heights differ significantly, then the positive form *is tall* must depend on factors other than just height or vertical distance. And if the comparative works also, as in sentences 3) and 10), the requirements are even more complex. Linguists say that in the positive form, *tall* in an utterance indicates a specific degree of tallness and in the comparative *is taller than* compares degrees of tallness. Yet in the measure phrase “is 6’4” feet tall”, *tall* is being modified by the measure phrase to yield a specific degree of tallness, 6’4” feet tall. And in 5) and 6), the qualification that John is ten years old serves to restrict the comparison class to ten year olds (the importance of comparison classes is discussed shortly). Meeting these requirements leads the linguists to propose that *tall* is a function that, applied to some x, denotes x’s degree-location on a tallness scale, and then is supplemented with a benchmark value such that to be tall, John must have tallness equal to or greater than the benchmark. And benchmarks are linked to comparison classes: basketball players have a different standard for tallness than ten year olds. In the comparative the two things being compared are being ranked by their respective degree locations on the tallness scale, and in the measure phrase construction such as 4), a particular value on the tallness scale is denoted. We had thought, when we said of John that he was tall, that we were saying that he had the property of having vertical distance measured from foot to head in some significant amount; and he does, but the linguists are telling us that the semantics does not work if we read, e.g., sentence 1) as attributing a property and rather it must denote a degree, a measure, a value.

Because *tall* has this degree-denoting feature, *tall* is a measure function, that is, it takes the sentence-subject as its argument and yields a measure or degree. Whereas, a regular adjective (which is a regular predicate function) denotes a property and takes the sentence-subject as argument and yields the True or the False as truth value. A gradable adjective α, as a measure function, maps each member of the comparison class, i.e., the members of the class of actual and possible α-things, to a value on the α-scale. [[4]](#footnote-4) Sometimes the scale for an adjective α is the α-scale, as the scale for *dense* is density, i.e., values of weight (or mass) per unit volume: something has density if it has some positive measure of weight per volume. But sometimes not, as in the more complex gradable adjectives the scale is formed from a complex of other properties; but see my discussion of *smart*, below.

Consider sentence 3). If we do a straightforward comparison with no qualifying remarks, we presume (we have no information that leads us to presume otherwise) that the speaker means just that and so is invoking a scale of tallness that both John and Sam will fit, the scale for men generally, perhaps. Sentence 10) explicitly removes that presumption, and therefore has an additional complication, since we are told they don’t share the same scale. If we compare how tall John is for a jockey to how tall Sam is for a basketball player, we have invoked some further scale of tallness. This scale must presumably be based on the idea that John is high on the tallness scale for jockeys, while Sam is only medium on the scale of tallness for basketball players. But to compare them, we are assuming – creating – a new scale, a more abstract second-level scale, which is based perhaps on relative deviation from the benchmark heights for each comparison class. Sentences 5), 6) and 7) display a different feature: how various qualifying phrases help to specify the comparison class. This will be very important in understanding *good*: when we say “X is good for doing Y” what the “for doing Y” is doing is specifying something about the criteria that define the scale and the comparison class; we are not introducing any different sense of *good* or different kind of good. I will be arguing that the criteria that define the scale on which the degree of goodness is located in any particular occasion of use is what determines the way of being good.

2.12 The semantics

There are two schools of thought on implementing a degree-based semantics for gradable adjectives. One approach[[5]](#footnote-5), let us call it the relational scalar approach, holds that *tall* is or invokes a relation between the degree of tallness of the entity said to be tall and the benchmark degree of tallness for that comparison class. The other school of thought, following Kennedy (1999, pp. 84-105) argues that *tall* denotes a measure function which when satisfied denotes a degree on the tallness scale; the comparison to the benchmark is handled outside the lexical meaning of *tall*, by the POS element, but see below. I am convinced by Kennedy’s arguments that his approach is superior to the relational scalar approach and will use it in my discussion, but nothing essential to my purposes depends on Kennedy being right about this.

The elements of the semantics of “John is tall” as I have set them out so far – they are as yet incomplete – are as follows:

-*John*, which denotes John

-*is tall*, which

-is a measure function which, when satisfied by John, denotes a degree on the tallness scale (the Kennedy approach)

-provides the link to height through the lexical meaning of *tall*

But this is incomplete because it isn’t integrating properly in the syntax. This much, if we apply the adjective “is tall” (which on Kennedy’s account is of the form or schematic λx.tallx in the linguists’ notation) to John, just picks out some degree of height: the measure function λx.tallx is satisfied by John and yields John’s degree of height. But once satisfied by John it ought to yield true/false if it is to be or express a proposition, and so be a complete utterance. And the comparison class and the benchmark have also to be included or attached somehow in or to the semantic representation, even though we are supposing that they are provided by context and in particular by speakers’ implicature[[6]](#footnote-6). The scalar approach in which *tall* denotes a relation between the subject’s degree of tallness and the benchmark degree is similarly incomplete, because the subject’s degree of tallness is an unbound variable. This can be seen because if *tall* is to denote a relation there must be two relata, one a variable and one the benchmark degree, and so *tall* is λxλd.tall(x,d). The benchmark degree is not a variable but a constant and so its comparison to d is shown simply as a conjunct & d ≥ db, where db is the benchmark value. But that leaves d as an unbound variable and so again the expression is incomplete; and of course we still need to account for the source of the benchmark degree.

There are two different proposals in the literature as to how to proceed from this point. There is the “POS” solution, and the “pragmatic” solution.[[7]](#footnote-7) POS is the more usual and I will explain it first. It is postulated to be an invisible syntactic element in that it is not represented by anything physical in utterances or sentences, yet it plays a syntactic and semantic role. POS does several things: (1), it provides the way to bring in the benchmark db and the benchmark condition that d ≥ db; (2), it turns the measure function into a normal predicate function (so that, satisfied by John, it denotes the True), and (3), for the relational theory of gradable adjectives in which *tall* is λxλd.tall(x,d) and so in which there is an unbound variable d, POS brings an existential quantifier that binds the free variable d, leaving x to be bound by the sentence subject.

There is no third element for Kennedy’s measure function account because on that account *tall* is not relational, it is λx.tall(x) and so has only the variable x. But for either account, (1) and (2) together convert the measure function tall(x) or the relation tall(x,d) into a regular predicate-function that has the meaning “…has John’s degree d of tallness and d is equal to or greater than the benchmark degree db.” Thus on either Kennedy’s measure function account or on the relational account, POS + *tall* is a function that when satisfied by John, yields the value True if indeed John’s degree of tallness is equal to or greater than the benchmark degree. The exact constitution of POS is different on the two accounts, to fit the differences with the two accounts of *tall*, but the function it performs is the same. So POS does what it is supposed to do. But how could it fail, since it was designed to do just that? One suspects there must be some better, some underlying explanation. But let that pass. It is a problem all gradable adjectives share, and so presumably the solution will apply to all gradable adjectives and so won’t affect the outcome of my investigation into the semantics of *good*.

The second solution to the problem is Rett’s (2015, pp. 26-32). Hers is a pragmatic solution and is more satisfying yet also more puzzling. It says (greatly oversimplifying) that all the POS-elements both syntactic and semantic are conveyed pragmatically, by conversational implicature. It seems that if you can postulate POS, you can equally postulate a greater role for pragmatics so that it does what POS does. Or maybe you combine them: the whole thing is done pragmatically, but you represent that with POS? I suspect that eventually we will be clearer on this but I won’t spend more time on it here.

2.13 What is tallness?

Tallness certainly appears to be a property, the property of being tall to some degree, and that is how I have been using it. Just because *tall* and *taller* denote measure functions, doesn’t mean there is no related property.[[8]](#footnote-8) The property tallness of course is closely related to the property of height, that is, of having vertical distance between a reference bottom and a reference top. And this latter is perhaps really the base gradable property for *tall*, the one that sets the degree scale for the measure function. But why is height or vertical distance from bottom-to-top reference points the base gradable property and not tallness?

First, tallness is not identical to either height or to vertical distance: the words/phrases don’t have the same extensions because e.g., airplanes aren’t tall above the earth but they do have height or vertical distance above the earth. So *vertical distance* applies to some things that *tall* doesn’t. Thus *tall* has a somewhat more restricted use than *vertical distance* and this makes the properties not the same. Yet it would seem we can compare things as, e.g., between their degree of tallness and degree of vertical distance above the earth, as in “look, that model airplane is flying just as far above the ground as John is tall” and this I think shows they are operating with the same degree scale and hence the same base gradable property. There seems to be a feature here of comparing to the maximum extent possible, and hence the scale invoked is set by the base gradable property that provides the lowest common denominator for comparison.

2.2 *Smart* and Smart

But now consider *smart* and smartness. S*mart* in contrast to *tall* does not in its lexical meaning specify a unique scale: it is ambiguous, and even once limited to intellectual smartness, there are many ways of being smart. It is the criterial conditions provided by context that disambiguate it and they do that precisely by specifying the base gradable property or set of properties and so specifying the measure scale and the particular way of being smart intended.

*Smart* is important because I am looking forward to *good* and good and to “ways of being good” as Judith Thomson[[9]](#footnote-9) develops that idea. Understand *smart* here to be about intellectual acuity. There are multiple ways of being intellectually smart just as there are multiple ways of being good. Someone can be smart at math, smart at languages, smart at crossword puzzles, smart at programming, and someone can be smart for a five-year-old or smart for a 90-year-old, and so on and so on. And while it is plausible to say that *smart* as used about an intellectual matter has a different lexical meaning from *smart* as used to describe how a burn smarts, or how a person dresses who dresses smartly, it is just not plausible to suppose that each of the ways of being intellectually smart is registered by the same word-form but a different lexical meaning, a different word that is to say. All the uses are so obviously related that the theoretical cost of supposing massive polysemy would be extreme.

But we know already that *smart* is a gradable adjective and by the time we fully develop the implications of that, we will see that the polysemy question no longer arises. It does not, because in all cases of gradable adjectives, the lexical element is constant and the additional and varying semantic element is brought by context, typically by conversational implicature, and that is how the differences in utterance-meaning are effected. In the minimally context-sensitive case, e.g., an adjective like *tall*, what is provided by context is the benchmark degree and comparison class such that if the benchmark degree is met or exceeded, the material is said to be dense, the person tall. The base gradable property, the property that defines the scale, is given by the lexical meaning of *tall*. The upshot is that the lexical meaning of *tall* does not vary from use to use although the comparison class and benchmark value do vary. *Smart* is different, in that the base gradable property, the property that forms the scale of degrees of smartness, is only partly given by the lexical meaning. The way of being smart is given by context, again speaker’s implicature, so that the base gradable property that results is, for example, having intellectual acuity with regard to cross-word puzzles, and this is the property which defines the particular degree scale of smartness. The upshot is that *smart* has a much greater context-dependence than, e.g., *tall*. For *smart*, context provides the way of being smart as well as the comparison class and benchmark. The contextually provided semantic information is added to what the lexical meaning of *smart* contributes, together to form the semantic contribution we attribute to the word *smart* operating in that context.

**3.0 *Good***

3.1 The account of *good* as a gradable adjective

1. This lawnmower is good
2. This lawnmower is better than that one
3. This lawnmower is a good electrically powered one
4. This lawnmower is good for a gasoline powered one
5. This lawnmower is good for mowing golf greens
6. This lawnmower is good for John to mow his lawn with
7. This lawnmower is good if your lawn is large
8. This lawnmower is good at mowing rough lawns
9. This lawnmower is good, considering its price
10. Electrically powered lawnmowers are better than gasoline powered lawnmowers
11. This gasoline mower is better than that electrical mower
12. That you chose an electric lawnmower is good given your dislike of gasoline fumes
13. It is good that you chose an electric lawnmower given your dislike of gasoline fumes

Suppose you are shopping for a lawnmower and as your friend and a long-time homeowner who is experienced with lawns, I go with you. You are a new homeowner and you need to mow your lawn. You know you want an electric mower, for environmental reasons and to avoid having to deal with keeping small gasoline motors in tune, but beyond that you are open. We have looked at a number of machines. “That’s a good one” I say, “The best we’ve seen so far.” The criteria are that the mower is electric and that it will be efficient and effective at mowing your lawn. Saying the mower is efficient and effective summarizes a great deal in a few words. That the mower is efficient means that it does the job with minimal costs in terms of its impact on your other goals, e.g., you don’t have to work too hard, it doesn’t take too long, and it doesn’t cost too much; and effectiveness is about how well it does the job of mowing your lawn. “That’s a good one,” I say and so we stop to consider it more closely. You may be especially cost-sensitive or you may have theories about industrial design or you may have other special concerns, and all of those would be incorporated.

The lexical meaning of *good* has to be minimal, given the wide range of use. It merely signals positive evaluation (which is usually but not always commendation) and all the rest comes via context and conversational implicature. Following the pattern for *smart*, in the sentence “X is good” we expect that: (1) *good* denotes a measure function, (2) a comparison class and a benchmark is provided by context, and (3), we need the contextually provided semantic content that determines the way of being good intended in the case, and thereby the criteria that, as applied to the comparison class, determine the particular measure scale for this utterance. In the lawnmower example, the comparison class will be something like all lawnmowers practically available to you for purchase, taking into account the amount of effort and cost required to consider and possibly acquire the machine (e.g., no fancy experimental machines not available on the standard commercial market). The benchmark will be some measure or value of lawnmower goodness that is high enough to function as justification for the homeowner to say “this one is good, I’ll buy it.” The content that determines the way of being good intended in my use of *good* in my utterance is our shared knowledge that you are looking to buy a lawnmower to mow your lawn and all the criteria which go with that. They are the criteria such that, when applied to the comparison class, order the members of that class as better than and so generate the ordering of the class and the measure scale.

The criteria will differ from case to case and kind to kind, of course. What makes for a good lawnmower is not at all the same things that make for a good fountain pen or a good bicycle or a good cup of coffee. But let’s stay with the lawnmower example. To repeat, you are my neighbor and I know you are in need of a lawnmower. You are a new homeowner and you have a lawn. You have been hiring the neighbor boy with his parents’ mower but now you decide to do it yourself. We are at the garden store looking at models. “This one gets a good review” you say. “The review says it cuts well, pushes easily, and is electric so you don’t need to worry about keeping small gasoline motors in tune.” I nod agreement. “And it is in the mid-price range and has a good record on maintenance” you conclude. I say “I think it is a good one, certainly the best we’ve seen today.”

The criteria for the judgement are those you just named – in the most general terms, efficiency and effectiveness in relation to your end of keeping your grass mowed and doing it yourself, and in relation to your other ends. But what turns that – those empirical facts about that machine in relation to your ends – into an evaluation as good? What I say locates that lawnmower at or above the benchmark on a scale of degrees of meeting the criteria, it says that lawnmower meets the criteria to a salient degree, salience to be judged against your goal of mowing your lawn and your other goals and general considerations of efficiency and effectiveness. I’m saying that that lawnmower meets your goals to a high enough degree, with small enough collateral costs to your achievement of your other goals, to be located at a point on the degree scale that is high enough to be evaluated as good. And that in turn entails that it is reasonable for you to choose to buy it. That is how *good* works in cases of instrumental goodness. In general terms, it reports the results of an evaluation of a thing as both of some particular degree of criteria-realization, and that that degree of realization is large enough to be salient for the purposes at hand. The meaning of the utterance, however, is simpler, just that X has a “good” degree of criteria realization. All the rest of the semantics is in the background, in the presumptions and assumptions, not in the utterance-meaning proper.

3.2 Syntactic differences among *good*-sentences

I began by listing a number of different syntactic sentence-forms using *good*. There are the syntactic forms “X is good,” “X is a good ϕ,” “X is good for/at ψ-ing,” “X is good at ψ-ing,” “X is good for Y,” “X is good as a ϕ,” “X is good to Y.” And there is “That p is good” and “It is good that p.” And there are also the comparatives with “better than.” There may be more forms but these are enough. The key thing here is that there is no reason to think that the word *good* means anything different in the various forms: it is an adjective and in each case it is modifying something, often but not always the subject-term, X. Reading the sentence-forms that way, we get, as syntactic variations, the simple modification of *X,* the modification of *ϕ*, the modification of X as it is for Y, the modification of X considered as a ϕ, the modification of X in relation to X’s acting towards Y. And notice that each one is a modification by the adjective *good*, but of something from a point of view, and that the phrases “good as a ϕ,” “good to Y” and so on serve to delimit the way of being good intended and help to set the criteria. And, the last example, in modifying the noun phrase “the state of affairs that p,” *good* is doing just what an adjective does, it is again modifying something. There is no need to suppose different meanings of *good* because of the different syntactic forms.

3.3 Ways of being good – semantic and metaphysical differences

The primary means by which ways of being good are differentiated is not syntactic but semantic and the primary division here is between instrumental and intrinsic ways of being good.

Things that are instrumentally good are characterized by their relation to and dependence on an end or termination condition: instrumental goods are good in that and insofar as they contribute to realization of that end or termination condition. In the lawnmower case, we look first to our ends, which typically are or involve a particular application falling under the design criteria for lawnmowers – mowing our lawns – and then to other goals or constraints that we may feel apply, and we put those all in the criteria. The degree of realization of the criteria by the actual and possible members of the comparison class, i.e., the lawnmowers of the sort available for purchase, define the scale, and when we say “X is good” we are assigning X to a degree on that scale. This works for all instrumental uses of *good*.

Intrinsic *good* works somewhat differently. Suppose you say “coffee in the morning is good” or “happiness is good.” Everyone prefers happiness, but not because it is good for producing some additional outcome. The goodness of happiness is not an instrumental one, it is good in itself just because we find it good. As a gradable adjective, absent a property good, all we can say about intrinsic good is that it is what is meant when we say something is good but not as a means to some other good thing. (That means all one’s primary ends are considered by one as good in themselves. This seems both intuitive and necessary but I will not try to defend it here.)

Just plain good is discussed in the literature, in an attempt to argue that it is not any “way” of being good, but is quite without additional qualification. While this seems to be a possibility if *good* denotes a property and if there is a property plain good, it is not possible if *good* is a gradable adjective. In that case there will always be the criteria defining the scale, and the comparison class and the benchmark, hence there will always be a “way”. All of the various forms and variations on good and *good* can be accommodated within the gradable adjective thesis, all except for just plain good which is not possible on the gradable adjective understanding of the semantics of *good*. If it is to be intelligible, just plain good requires there to be a property just plain good.

Intrinsic vs. instrumental good is the main contrast, but there is a further, overarching differentiation, namely between a good that can be declined by the rational agent and one that cannot. Good lawnmowers can be declined: “Alright, I’m just tired of this, I’m going to continue to hire the neighbor’s son to mow my lawn” you say and thereby deny all claims that the relative goodnesses of the different lawnmowers make on you. Most instrumental goods are conditionally action-guiding, since for most, you can decline the antecedent. (Declining the antecedent: “If you want an X-kind of thing, you ought to choose one like X because you’ve judged that X is a good one.” “But I don’t want an X-kind of thing,” I say, “so I don’t need to choose one like X.” I’m declining the antecedent and so the related *ought*-sentence does not apply to me.)

A conception of good which cannot rationally be declined is necessarily action-guiding, and so is necessary and inescapable for the rational agent. This way of being good can in principle be either instrumental or intrinsic. It can be instrumental based on a necessary end and intrinsic because it is the goodness of a necessary end. Without a property moral or rational good, there is nothing to provide the necessity, the non-declinability feature except an end which itself cannot be declined. For the Moorean, in contrast, the possession of the property moral good, if there were one, is the sole source and ground of the deontic necessity that we ought to pursue the good thing, and so for a rational agent it is morally and rationally necessary that we pursue the morally and rationally good thing.

Of course you may fail, irrationally but nevertheless, to take up that necessary goal, although you should take it up. But then you could, irrationally, fail to be motivated by apprehension of a Moorean property good, if there were such. So a necessary good implies and supports a necessary end and the reverse is also true[[10]](#footnote-10). The question is, which is the grounding element, the metaphysically fundamental thing, and on the theory of the good I am pursuing here, the necessary end – again, if there is such – is the grounding element and the necessary way of being good is consequent on the end and is the derived thing. The situation is reversed for property good. This is not to say that I know how to argue that there are such necessary ends and ways of being good. I am pointing out the formal parallels and offering them as a counter to the “fundamentally action-guiding good” objection to the gradable adjectives account of the semantics of *good*. And of course defenders of the (fundamental, intrinsic) property good believe they have to have it because it is a way, the only way, they fear, to establish normatively and rationally necessary evaluations as good. Kant, on the other hand, would have been happy in this regard with my account, since he thought he knew how to identify necessary ends of action[[11]](#footnote-11) using (what he thought was) the rationally necessary rule of the Categorical Imperative.

3.4 Disagreements

Consider the sentence

Meditation is good for you

said by me to you. Suppose you respond

No it isn’t, I don’t believe in that junk

If we were talking about a property good, we would be led into a discussion of a supposed difference between objective good and subjective good. Objective good for me is good for me even if I don’t know it or even disagree that it is. Subjective good depends on my perceiving it so. Yet if my well-being is to be explained in terms of achievement of my ends, tensions develop quickly, since I can’t, without qualification, be said to have an end I don’t acknowledge or in some sense affirm; otherwise it is a feature of my unconscious or not mental at all, and so is an obsession or compulsion.

On the gradable adjective account, what does the use of *good* in the first sentence do? As said by me, the essential criterion that forms the base gradable property set is something about meditation being beneficial to you, calming you, clearing the mind, helping you “focus” and “center”. These things, let us suppose, are good for you. I believe those things to be true and that is why I said what I did. You don’t believe that meditation has those consequences; you believe that the practitioners are merely deluding themselves, that it is the placebo fallacy. So what is the status of the truth of my sentence, and what is the status of your denial of it in your reply? Silk’s work (2017, 2016) is useful here. He makes the case that sometimes what seems to be a denial of truth should be seen as an argument over underlying presuppositions, in this case the appropriateness of the intended criteria for being good. I propose a certain set of criteria and you in effect deny that they are appropriate. In our interchange, the goodness of the thing is as it were in limbo while we debate what are the appropriate criteria.

The gradable adjective theory thus both creates the possibility of these kinds of disagreements about criteria, and offers a way to understand what is going on within the disagreements. And notice that these kinds of disagreement are not unique to *good* but can arise for any gradable adjective: “Tall, you consider John tall? He’s just mid-sized for an NBA player.” And you go on to, in effect, argue whether e.g., all basketball players are the correct comparison class or whether only college players and not NBA players, who are on average taller.

3.5 Non-action-guiding good

I think there are non-action-guiding uses of *good*. All the ways of being good I’ve been discussing involved our goals or desires or preferences, contingent or necessary as may be. But contrary to Wolfsdorf (2015 pp. 25-28) and in agreement with Finlay (2014 pp. 28-34), gradable adjective goodness does not always involve some person’s or some purposive creature’s goals and preferences. Finlay agrees with me in this matter, although what I call the termination-condition he calls an end, which I think misuses the concept of end because he includes as ends things that are not goals of purposive entities.

I want to argue for a way of being good that does not depend on us or on other goal-seeking entities in any way. Suppose I say:

The rain today was good, it will see the garden through another week

By that I mean there was enough rain to provide enough moisture to keep the garden healthy for another week. Of course I say that because we care about the state of our garden, but that is not part of the truth conditions of the utterance and rather explains why I make the statement. We could say the same sort of thing about, e.g., the second cascade on the local waterfall becoming active – ‘the rain was good enough to generate the second cascade’. To say why the utterance is true we do not need to invoke our purposes in asserting it but merely the criterion for its truth – keeping the garden healthy for a week, causing the second cascade to appear. That is enough to provide a degree scale of garden healthiness or waterfall magnitude, which provides the basis for the evaluation as good. Our purposes enter not to establish the truth conditions for the utterance but to establish the point of it, to explain why I said it and want you to know it. It is not normative, in the sense of setting us a norm or standard we should keep in mind in choosing how to act, but it is evaluative and in that respect of the same semantic kind as action-guiding *good* so it is deontic. The difference is that the criteria of goodness do not include reference to ends or goals.

Because it is not action-guiding it is not normative, I will say (in effect a stipulation about the use of *normative*); but it is evaluative, because we are evaluating the amount of rain that fell on the scale of keeping the garden watered for how long and the benchmark or norm of one week: we are saying that a rain is good because it keeps the garden watered for about a week. We are evaluating the rain as good because it achieves the termination-condition of seeing the garden through another week. Evaluation is a semantic and psychological activity that is different from and precedes the normative. As I suggested above, and will argue below, certain kinds of evaluative semantic constructions are normative, namely those in which the criteria make essential reference to the goals and preferences of agents. Evaluative uses are normative when and because they deontically constrain our future choices in the following manner: if you have evaluated X as good, and if in the future you should come to want an X-kind of thing, you ought (the deontic necessity) to choose one that is as good or better than X, otherwise you are being inconsistent with your earlier evaluation.

In the cases of the rain and the garden and the waterfall, our goals and choices are not involved. Yet these uses of *good* are deontic, I am saying, because they are evaluative. The link to *ought* illustrates this. From the previous sentence above evaluating the rain as good, we can infer the sentence below:

The garden now ought to have enough water to keep it healthy for another week

It may be tempting to try to read this *ought*-sentence as epistemic or aberrant but I think either is a mistake. In a different context, where the question is whether we are justified in believing the garden got enough water, the epistemic reading might be right. But that is not what is going on here. This is the characteristic deontic *ought* and I understand it according to the Kratzer-semantics (Kratzer 1977 and 2012). But it is not normative because it has no action-guiding element at all. In brief, according to the Kratzer-semantics, in all the “good” worlds, the garden has enough water to keep it alive for another week, so evaluating the quantity of rain in our world as good means it was enough to keep the garden healthy for another week. So, continuing on to *ought*, if this world with our garden is one of the good worlds, then the garden in this world ought to be healthy for another week – i.e., it is deontically *ought*-necessary that the garden is healthy for another week. But it is not action-guiding because the criteria are not based on some entity’s goal and so does not impose an ought on any agent – although it is still of the kind of deontic necessitation that all deontic *ought*-statements share.

I suggest that the only reason you feel an obstacle here, if you do, is that you are fixated on the action-guiding roles of *good* and *ought*. But some uses of *good* aren’t action-guiding; although most are and so most uses of deontic *ought* also are action-guiding. It depends on whether the criteria for *good* in the instance invokes a goal or preference, as contrasted to some non-purposive termination-condition. So I hold that not all (assertive) uses of *good* are action-guiding, i.e., normative, but all are evaluative. Some are used merely to state facts – to state facts in a perhaps perverse way, agreed. In the watering the garden example, I am describing the amount of rain that fell by means of evaluating that amount of rain against the criterion of keeping the garden watered for another week: I’m telling you how much rain fell, expressed in terms of its adequacy to keep the garden healthy for another week. I evaluate the amount of rain as good enough to do that, and so I report that to you in the exhibited sentence above.

3.6 The degree of goodness scale: what is goodness?

We talk about degrees of goodness and that makes it sound like goodness is the property that defines the scale. So are we back with Moore again? In simple adjectives, e.g., *dense*, the base gradable property is indeed denseness – so for any gradable adjective α the base gradable property would seem to be α-ness[[12]](#footnote-12). But the degree scale of goodness for the gradable adjective *good* is the scale of the degrees to which the comparison class realizes the criteria, the “degree-of-realization scale”, as I’ve called it, and, I will argue, does not invoke a property goodness

If the gradable property is Moorean goodness, then the scale is degrees-of-goodness. But goodness is not the base gradable property for *good*. The criteria that make for good lawnmowers, good cups of coffee, good fountain pens, good whatevers, are always something about e.g., lawnmowers and how they mow, cups of coffee and how they taste, pens and how they write. *Good* is not like *dense*: it is only in the cases of the simple adjectives where the α/α-ness, adjective/property relation holds. All the more complex adjectives have base gradable properties that are complexes of properties functioning as criteria. We can see this by considering a good fountain pen. A fountain pen needs to write well, but there are many combinations of the base properties of weight, balance, point smoothness and responsiveness, ink flow, ink capacity, appearance, and many other things that, in differing combinations, can all yield a good fountain pen: there are many “ways” to be (to achieve being) a good fountain pen. We determine the goodness of fountain pens in terms of combinations of those properties; but to define *good* in terms of them, we would have to offer a huge disjunct of the various sets of properties in their various proportions, each one of which can make a good fountain pen. Or consider wine. The disjunct of all the taste combinations that yield a good wine will be huge. But huge disjuncts are not plausible as definitions or as analyses, and so we see that we are not analyzing some property goodness, nor defining the meaning of *goodness* in terms of the criteria. They are criteria, not elements of a definition. Urmson (1950) makes this point and in the Section to follow I explore his ideas.

Here is another argument. Suppose the goodness of degrees of goodness is indeed the Moorean property goodness. There is a different scale for every distinct combination of a set of criteria and comparison class. These are the defining features of each individual way of being good – good coffee, good fountain pen, good lawnmower, good athlete, good dancer, good for making cheesecake. So, if we think of goodness here as a property, there will have to be a different property goodness for each “way of being good” even if there is some Moorean common element in them all. *Goodness* will have indefinitely many meanings that enable the indefinitely multiple denotings of indefinitely many distinct properties of goodness. And all that has to be carried by a single word, requiring somehow to be disambiguated. So presumably conversational implicature will be invoked to provide the needed meaning-elements that provide the disambiguation. And so each distinct use of *goodness*, so supplemented semantically, will denote a distinct but similar property goodness, and we use conversational implicature because we don’t have different names for all these different kinds of goodness.

The real question, then, is should we prefer the theory of gradable-adjective-without-property-goodness to the theory that invokes property-goodness (if there is such)? The answer is that we should prefer the gradable adjective theory because these supposed goodness-properties are metaphysically and semantically redundant. Consider the lawnmower example. Supposing there is lawnmower goodness that may or may not be possessed by a lawnmower we are considering adds nothing that is needed to understanding what my neighbor and I are saying and doing. We can accomplish just what we need working with the criteria that form the scale, which are all natural and familiar properties. The account of the semantics of *good* is complete without supposing there is a property goodness. Such a property adds nothing necessary to the semantics of *good*. Such a property is semantically and metaphysically unneeded, and therefore there is no reason to suppose there is such a property. A property good (goodness) is seen to be redundant once we understand that what we are doing in using *good* is evaluating, grading on or against a scale of grades or values, and that good is a grade. And this is the upshot: judging that something is good has to be both the performance of an evaluation and a reporting of the results of the evaluation. But the attribution of a property good cannot do either of these things. It cannot evaluate because evaluation is an assessment against a scale and results in the assignment of a valuation; and it cannot report the results of an evaluation since the property good is not itself a value or a grade.

What there is, of course, is the property of being such as to be correctly evaluated as a good lawnmower, and this is what the goodness of the lawnmower consists in. The use of *goodness* arises, I suggest, because we want sometimes to refer to that scale of degrees of realization of the criteria – and that, following the α/α-ness pattern for simple adjectives, is naturally called the goodness scale. But we need to understand it is an after-the-fact naming, that *goodness* is the name we give to the degree-scale, and it is defined by the scale and is not determinative of it.

3.7 What is normativity on this account?

Uses of *good* are typically normative, in the sense of being action-guiding; but see Section 3.5 above for the exception. The nature of normativity is a puzzle; see Finlay’s (2010) very useful survey article on the topic. As I said, we feel confident that we can identify the phenomenon of normativity but giving a theoretical account of it is perhaps less certain.[[13]](#footnote-13)

My hypothesis is that normativity arises from a relationship between the thing one evaluates as good, one’s goals or preferences as they enter into the criteria for that evaluation as good, and the constraint created by that evaluative judgement on one’s future actions. It is, broadly speaking, a relation of consistency: if you judge a thing X to be good, and then come at some time in the future to need or want a thing of the X-kind, you are obliged to choose something that is as good as X or better, if it is available, for otherwise you are being inconsistent with your earlier judgement that X is good. Of course you could in the interim have changed your view of what are the appropriate criteria for goodness in X and the constraint is gone. But supposing you haven’t, then if you are rational, you will choose an X-or-better thing if one is available. Normativity is this constraint, and this makes normativity a matter of the pragmatics of evaluative judgement.

We can treat this a little more formally. Judging that e.g., X is a good ϕ is judging X against the criteria embedded in the semantics of that use of *good* and placing X on a degree on the scale created by those criteria as applied to the comparison class. The scale models in abstract the ordering that would result by ranking all the actual and possible members of the comparison class based on the degree to which each realizes the criteria. It is a positive scale for *good* since for *good* more criteria realization means a higher ranking and there has to be enough criteria realization for the X to count as good; it is the reverse for *bad*. On this account, therefore, normativity arises because of the way higher ranking, in context, leads to a rational requirement to prefer the higher over the lower ranked object and not to choose the too-low ranked object. If these are the criteria for ranking, and if criteria realization is what you are judging on, then if you rank X as better than Y, you are constrained by that judgement to pick X over Y, other things being equal, if you come to need an X-kind of thing in the future.

This works for advice-giving also. Suppose “X is good” is said in a context of shopping for lawnmowers where it means roughly “X has enough of what is required by the criteria for efficient and effective lawnmowers to be highly enough ranked to be salient.” It has evaluative import because it reports an evaluation on a scale and against a benchmark or norm. It is action-guiding because of the pragmatics of the situation – because you are shopping for a lawnmower and the criteria are selected to be relevant to your goal. We know you are shopping for a lawnmower and we know what your goals are (e.g., acquiring a lawnmower that mows well, pushes easily, is low maintenance, is economical to buy and to operate). Your hearing me say that X is good puts you in the situation of either 1) agreeing with my evaluation and so pursuing your goals by putting X high on your list of choices, 2) disagreeing with my evaluation, or 3) deciding you don’t care that it’s good, you just don’t like it, you like a less good one, and so in the instance you will be irrational in the pursuit of your goals.

3.8 Semantics for *bad*

If *good* is a gradable adjective then so must *bad* be. All the arguments for *good* work for *bad*, the difference seems to be one of direction or valence, since badness is on an increasing scale of worse and worse, and that scale moves in the opposite direction from *good*’s scale of better and better, and there is a neutral point in between. Otherwise, there seems to be a symmetry. It is the fact of sharing the same scale, but with a different directionality, that supports the entailments “X is good” entails “X is not bad” and “X is better than Y” entails “Y is worse that X.”

Kennedy (1999, Chapter 3) believes that the difference in direction requires that the degree-scales for antonyms like *good/bad* must be distinguished by representing the elements of the scale, which must in some way be shared and yet different, not as points, i.e., as dimensionless values on the scale, but as dimensionless vector increments and so having directionality as well as location on the scale. I believe there is a suitable mathematical concept to be made use of that will give direction and yet be dimensionless but will not pursue it. There are other similar theories, e.g., Seuren (1978). Otherwise, the semantics of *bad* seems to be fully parallel with that of *good*.

3.9 Some consequences

What are some of the philosophical implications if *good* and *bad* are indeed gradable adjectives with a semantics as sketched?

The main consequence, I think, is a significant change in how we are to think about something’s being good. Previously, metaethics knew two possibilities[[14]](#footnote-14) for the semantics of *good*: a semantics featuring denotation of a non-natural property good[[15]](#footnote-15), and an expressivist semantics in which *good*-sentences are neither true nor false but serve to express our attitudes or feelings. Now there is a third, the semantics of *good* as a gradable adjective. If good were a property, a thing is good because it possesses that property. If the meaning of good is (only) expressive, then we express our emotional attitudes and likes and dislikes in using the word but don’t assert anything. But if a thing is good because it meets the criteria relevant for being correctly evaluated as good in the instance, then the goodness lies in the thing’s meeting the criteria to a salient degree, and the word *good* in use denotes a value on a scale. Judging that something is good is therefore to evaluate it, and to evaluate is to locate it to a value on the scale of values, and to evaluate it as good is to locate it at a value that is sufficiently high to meet the benchmark or norm. Furthermore, now that the linguists have entered the field, what is the correct theory of the semantics of the word *good* is become a matter of the empirical science of linguistics, and this gives a distinctly new and different dimension to the old arguments.

The outstanding virtues of the gradable adjective account of *good*, as I see it – aside from being true, if indeed it is, as it appears to be – are as follows: 1) no mystery property good, 2) a really clean account of all types of non-moral instrumental and intrinsic good and uses of *good*, 3) an understanding of both instrumental and intrinsic normativity in terms of evaluativity, and 4), a direction to go to find an account of moral and rational good.

Let me end this Section by saying again that I am not so much defending a view as working out the best – most consistent, most plausible – account of *good* as a gradable adjective. I think the account does work and is probably true, but as I’ve said we must wait for the linguists because whether it is true that *good* is a gradable adjective is for the empirical study of linguistics to determine. Still, could we have had a theory in which our words denoted or attempted to denote a property goodness? Well, perhaps. But if so, we then would have had to deal with all the semantic, epistemological and metaphysical problems the Mooreans face. But the real thing to see is that if the linguistic theory is correct, we have been happily using *good* as a non-property - denoting gradable adjective all this time and haven’t suffered because of it. And last, I think that getting an account of *good* to work well for all the non-moral uses of the word, which I think the gradable adjective account does, puts tremendous pressure on us to suppose that some extension of the apparently correct account for non-moral uses will work for the moral uses as well.

**4.0 J. O. Urmson’s On Grading**

4.1 Grading adjectives: the general case

J.O. Urmson, in his paper On Grading (1950) offers a very interesting discussion of matters that seem to parallel features of the linguists’ theory of gradable adjectives. Urmson is attempting to understand grades and grading – grading apples, grading tea, grading performances, grading philosophy papers – and only at the end suggests that saying that a thing is good is to grade it. He doesn’t argue for that extensively and most importantly he doesn’t seem to have a theory of the semantics of grade-talk so it is hard to see how to extend his work or to argue for it rigorously. But the amount of relevant evidence he offers regarding our grading talk and practices and how they work, although anecdotal, is revealing.

What Urmson is pursuing is the idea that grading, i.e., evaluating, is a distinct sort of human and semantic activity and that many of the evaluative words that we use and that trouble us – outstandingly, the word *good* – are actually grades and used to grade, and if understood so become much less mysterious. My aim here is to link *gradable* in *gradable adjective* to our activities of evaluating and grading. I will argue that the general case is that of the grading adjective – i.e., adjectives used to grade and whose semantics involve projecting the thing being evaluated to a measure, value, degree, or grade. Thus, gradable adjectives as per the linguists are seen to be a special case of grading distinguished by certain formal features of the grade scale used, namely that the scale is based on a base gradable property that establishes a gradient, i.e., a clear more/less structure. The linguists consider all gradable adjectives as evaluatives because in using them one is evaluating the indicated object against a degree scale and a benchmark. One is evaluating or grading the object in terms of how well or to what degree the object manifests the criteria that form the degree scale, and on whether it meets the norm or benchmark. Seen that way, the link to grading in the ordinary sense of the word is clear. There is a grade scale and there are criteria, and grades are assigned based on the degree to which the graded thing manifests or realizes the criteria. The structure of the scale reflects the degrees of manifestation, and the scale I” the grades in relation to one another.

Once we are into the broader world of grades and grading, we will find many different kinds of grade-scales. The grade scale for *tall* is dense, i.e., continuous, and it is closed at the bottom and open at the top. It is ordered cardinally so it makes sense to talk about how much taller x is than y. The ordering would be ordinal if “how much taller” was not defined mathematically but only “taller than”. The letter grades are used to evaluate the quality of things, and in the case of the academic grades, the quality of academic performance. But the grade scale is not a scale of the goodness of academic performance because the letter grade scale is not the same as the goodness scale: we take the goodness scale to be continuous or dense, with always a degree of goodness between any two instances of goodness, and so it is ordered cardinally. The letter grade scale is not continuous, and it is ordered ordinally. So how should we think of it? Also, if the letter grades are the degrees or values of the scale, what is the adjective for the academic letter grade scale? There is no corresponding adjective in English but what we are evaluating is academic quality, the quality of an academic performance on the A through F scale. So, this paper is A-quality, that B-quality and so on.

But is it really true that the A-F grades don’t grade goodness but something else? Could it still be goodness but with various kinds of scales? Some dense and cardinal, some ordinal and finite? I don’t know, but I suspect not. I suspect good-scales just are continuous and dense. Letter grades are the grades of some other positive evaluative concept and scale. Because of human limitations both in assigning degrees of goodness and in understanding what such assignments mean, we use a much coarser scale to represent and measure academic quality, and that is the academic letter grade system of A B C D F. The letter-grade scale has five values (fifteen if you count all the pluses and minuses). It is discrete, not continuous, and it is ordered ordinally because strictly speaking the breadths of the letter grades are not defined, i.e., how much better an A is than a B is not defined, only that A is better than B. But this is not quite true, and a continuous or semi-continuous scale of academic quality sometimes emerges, as for instance in the general rule that an A paper should be as much better than a B paper as a B paper is compared to a C paper – although the F category seems to take up about the bottom 50 or 60% of the quality range of performances. This suggested underlay of cardinality is not explicitly realized in the letter grade definitions, but offers the grader pragmatic guidance. If you want more you must go to a 0 – 100 scale, which is viewed by some as manageable, others as not; or to a continuous scale of degrees of academic goodness, which almost all of us feel incompetent to deal with. But all the scales, and grades, are about positive evaluation.

4.2 Grading and gradable adjectives

Urmson starts with simple and obvious examples. He discusses apple grading, according to the standards established by the British government to facilitate trade, and the academic letter grades used to grade student performance. The apple grading scale has three grades – Super, Extra Fancy, and Domestic (or four, since we presume there is Reject), and of course the academic letter grade scale has five.

He dwells on the relation between the grade correctly assignable and the underlying criteria for correct assignment of the grade. He quotes at length from the British Agricultural Produce Grading and Marketing Acts of 1928 and 1931 to show the criteria assigned to each grade according to the Acts. He also emphasizes that grading based on criteria is a human skill that is readily learned by normal persons. He quotes approvingly a spokesman of the Ministry of Agriculture saying “proficiency in grading to the most rigid standards is easily secured in practice, although a precise, and at the same time, simple definition of those standards in words or pictures is a matter of difficulty.” We are good at this sort of thing, good at distinguishing likeness and unlikeness and sorting and ordering based on established or agreed-upon considerations.

Urmson’s discussion and examples are compelling; one wonders how this paper did not have a major influence on the subsequent course of metaethics. But it did not: it is referenced occasionally but the standard presumption that the moral words must either denote properties or express emotions or attitudes did not falter. I think the reason is that Urmson had no suitable semantics to use in explaining and formalizing his observations about grading, so the paper and its insights had no theoretical underpinnings. There is now such a semantic theory, the theory of the gradable adjectives, and Urmson now has something very important to say. If his observations are correct, then grades of all kinds are aspects of gradable adjectives, they are the degrees, values or grades.

Does it matter that there is no specific word in English that is an adjective and that invokes the ϕ-ness scale of the British apple quality grading scale? Or a single word that invokes the quality-of-academic-performance-letter-grade-scale? I don’t think it does. Both these scales and grading schemes have been consciously created by us to serve particular purposes. There is no reason there should be native English adjectives that invoke just those scales. We create grading scales to serve our purposes, and we should expect there are many of them and indeed there are. Our evaluative purposes are many and far-reaching, and they change depending on our interests and our technology.

But what we mean by e.g., “Extra Fancy” in context just is “the grade assigned to this sort of apple by the British apple grading system criteria.” And if that is true, there is an underlying ϕ-ness scale and it is created by applying the criteria of the British apple grading system to apples: the resultant ordering of all actual and possible apples exemplifies that scale. There is the grade, and there are the criteria, it is just the native English word invoking the British apple grading ϕ-ness scale that is missing.

5.3 Grades and definitions

Urmson is aiming ultimately at understanding ethical concepts and is pursuing the deep and important idea that, for grades and for evaluations in general including ethical evaluations, the relata of grade and criteria do not relate as thing defined to definition. That is to say, the criteria for a grade are not a definition of the grade. If X is the grade and if A, B and C are the considerations on which we assign the grade, then what? Suppose we interpret this configuration as indicating that A, B and C are the elements of the meaning of X. Urmson says (1950, p. 154):

The facts noticed in the last paragraph tempt us to say that ‘this is X’ is just an ordinary empirical statement, that X is just an abbreviation for A B C

But this claim, which he says is a close relative of ethical naturalism, is clearly false for grading apples. An apple might properly be graded Extra Fancy for any number of widely differing combinations of manifestations of A, B and C. That is not the sort of thing that can be captured in a definition – “Extra Fancy” does not mean some long disjunct of multiple sets of degrees of manifestation of A, B and C (either as a normal definition of a word or concept, or as some sort of real definition). This is a familiar problem in naturalistic definitions of *good* – the ways of being good seem indefinitely many, and realizable by many different combinations of features.

Next he considers whether the relation between grade and criteria might be akin to ethical intuitionism, upon which the property of being an Extra Fancy is a non-natural, unanalyzable but intuitable property linked somehow to the set of empirical properties in the criteria; but he faults that approach for its deep mysteriousness and lack of any explanation. Finally he considers grades in the light of emotivist theories of the ethical, offering as a counterexample the fact that while grading some particular cuvee′ of Bordeaux as of high quality, the professional wine taster may not like it at all, may really like only Bitter, and is merely reporting what the accepted grading standards say is the quality of the wine[[16]](#footnote-16). That there is some relation – far in the background – between someone’s feeling or expressing approval and a positive grade is undeniable, because someone somewhere, in established the grading standards for Bordeaux, had to like the wines graded highly else the whole thing is nonsense – yet that does not make expressing approval or commending essential to the meaningful utterance of a grading sentence. And, we should add, not all grades even purport to express commendation – e.g., grading hurricane wind speed, where we are reporting facts expressed as evaluations.

But Urmson is finally unable to bring his argument to a conclusion because he has no semantic theory that might explain the relation between a grade and the criteria for the grade. I expect that is why his paper, for all its attractiveness and promise of insight, had so little influence on the course of philosophy in the 20th century. But we do now see what such a semantic theory would be like, it is the theory of the gradable adjectives, broadly construed, and so we can now benefit from Urmson’s insights.

**5.0 *Right* and right**

5.1 The word *right* is an adjective

1. This lawnmower is the right choice
2. This lawnmower is right for you
3. This lawnmower is the right choice for a gasoline-powered one
4. This lawnmower is the right choice for mowing golf greens
5. This lawnmower is right for John because it’s easy to push
6. This lawnmower is the right one for you, considering its price
7. That this is an electric lawnmower makes it right for you
8. It is right that you choose an electric lawnmower given your dislike of gasoline fumes
9. #This lawnmower is righter than that one

To begin, I want to make the obvious point that *right* is usually an adjective – although sometimes a noun. The example sentences above demonstrate that: they are, except for 9), proper sentences in English and in them *right* functions as an adjective. Sentence 9) is improper because rightness is not a matter of more/less but of yes/no. In the sentences I chose, the sense of *right* is deontic, not epistemic, to avoid clouding the issue, although there of course are sentences in which *right* has an epistemic reading.

*Right* is primarily an adjective; yet this is apparently ignored or denied in an important account of the good and the right. I have in mind particularly J.J. Thomson in her paper The Good and the Right (1997, p. 286) where she indicates she intends to discuss *right* and right but starts immediately to discuss what is required and the deontic modal verb *required to*. And she never explicitly says that “It is right that p” entails “It is required that p’, which she implies is true and which I believe is true but which is nonetheless a contested position. Now plausibly there is some close relation between *right* and *required to* and between what is right and what is required and that is indeed what I argue in my paper on the topic (Beebe 2017). But they are not the same word, do not express the same concept, and have different meanings and truth conditions. That close relationship may be why Thomson proceeds as she does, but in not addressing the differences between *right* and *required to*, it can seem that she thinks that *right* is in fact a deontic modal verb – yet surely she must know it is not. Regardless, *right* is an adjective, it is of the class of evaluative adjectives and in that is very like, indeed almost fully parallel with, *good*. My question is, whether it is also a gradable adjective. But before I take up that question, there is another.

5.2 The relation between *right* and *good* and right and good

The relation between *right* and *good* and what is right and what is good is a deeply puzzling matter, and one with an unclear lineage in the literature. I will start first with the utilitarians and Bentham who say that what is right is what brings the most happiness/utility; but he does not explore the semantics of that definition. Ross (2002, 1930) in his *The Right and the Good* is typical but no help since although he denies the utilitarians, he says that *right* is undefinable and moves immediately to trying to determine what is right. G.E. Moore at least attempts to articulate the relationship between *good* and *right* and what is good and what right. He says (1993 pp. 69-71) that what is the right thing is what is the best thing everything considered. So, on his account, the semantics of *right* are to be derived from the semantics of *good* and he does offer a semantics for *good*. Holding that something is the right thing when it is the best thing is a fairly common position, and when coupled with the idea that we are required to do what is best, everything considered, we see that the meaning of *right* is specified in terms of the meaning of *good* (e.g. Feldman 1986). However, Moore’s definition and related ones depend on the claim that we are required to do the best thing, meaning the most good thing. And that is either a tautology[[17]](#footnote-17), or we are back to the utilitarian view. Still, Moore, and indeed the most of us, are surely right that there is some close relationship between being good and being right.

I am going to propose the following relationship. Let “Right(p)” stand for “It is right that p”

and so for “Good(p)” and “Bad(p)” and “Wrong(p)”, “Required(p)”, “Permitted(p)” and “Forbidden(p).” Then:

Right(p) iff Good(p) and Bad(~p)

This says that some state of affairs p is right if and only if it is good and its negation is bad.

How does this configuration arise? Suppose we are considering this in the light of the idea of Kantian imperfect obligations. You are driving on a lonely road and you see someone ahead of you have a solo accident. You slow, it is an older person who seems somewhat stunned but not injured; they were going slowly, looking for an address perhaps, and veered off the road at a low speed. The person does not seem injured but perhaps in shock and confused; but you have no pressing engagements so it would, based on the balance of the costs to you and the benefits to another, be good if you stopped and rendered assistance and bad if you did not; so stopping is the right thing to do. Contrast this with a situation in which you are the second car to witness the accident, someone else is already helping, and you have a pressing engagement. You are then arguably permitted to continue on your way because although it is good if you stop to offer additional help if needed, it is not bad if you do not. Of course the “good(p) & bad(~p)” condition can arise in other ways, it is not just an aspect of imperfect obligation. For instance it can arise directly from some duty-creating act or condition as for instance if you promise. The promise creates the “good(p) & bad(~p)” configuration, and so it works for any duty-creating act, condition or relation.

And there is a consideration which seems to indicate that this configuration is not an accident. It appears that if the “good(p) & bad(~p)” condition obtains, there is no way for one to do what one ought except by doing p, and that certainly seems to say that in addition to being what you ought to do, you are required to do p. For we are bound as below:

We ought to pursue the good

and

We ought to avoid the bad

One ought (prima facie) to pursue the good and avoid the bad. Yet when the configuration

good(p) and bad(~p)

obtains, there is no way to do what one ought except by doing p. So you have to do p; which is to say you are required to do p; which is to say that p is the right thing to do.[[18]](#footnote-18)

What I have shown, that in the “good(p) & bad(~p) configuration p is required, is surely true. But is that the whole story about *right* and right? I think it is but I do not know how to prove that. So although I do not have a fully general argument for this definition of *right* in terms of *good* and *bad*, the examples are suggestive. And, importantly, there is the general theoretical consideration that this definition works from, namely the idea that the right arises from the good in those instances in which the only way in which one can follow the deontic necessity to pursue the good and avoid the bad is to do p and that is what makes p right and what makes it required.

5.3 Evaluation and grading



If right is defined in terms of good and bad, that would seem to make it a gradable adjective since they are. But is there a direct argument to that conclusion? I said earlier that I would be arguing that *right* is a grading adjective and so a gradable adjective, just as *good* is. This can seem perverse, since for *right* there is only right/not-right. There is also the related adjective wrong, and the constructed third value neither-right-nor-wrong. But there is nothing “gradable” to it, no more/less gradient – as we see in 9) above which shows the absence of a comparative form. Yet if we expand the concept of being gradable to being evaluable against a grade-scale, if we think of being gradable as an instance of what we are doing in assigning e.g., a degree of tallness or a letter grade, the puzzle is removed. The general point is that a grade scale can be a continuous, dense, cardinal, more/less type of scale, a bounded more/less scale, a more/less ordinal scale that is not dense, or a scale that takes a finite number of discrete values and orders them ordinally, as do Urmson’s apple grades and the scholastic A B C D F letter grades, and as does a right/not-right grade scale.

The key point is that all evaluation is a matter of grading, and vice versa: whenever some adjective is evaluational, that is, when the correct application of the adjective depends on evaluated object’s meeting or surpassing some norm, standard or benchmark on a scale, then the semantics of the adjective is that of a gradable adjective. This is the critical point: when we evaluate something we are not judging that it is of a kind, we are not judging that it possesses that kind’s key property or properties, but rather we are judging that the thing manifests a sufficient degree of some criterial property or properties, a degree equal to or greater than the norm or benchmark; and that is a measure, expressed as a grade or degree. When we evaluate something against some set of criteria C, we are judging what degree of C-ness the thing manifests. And so, according to the linguists’ argument, gradable adjectives denote degrees because when, e.g., Adam is tall, he has tallness to a degree equal to or greater than the standard for tallness.

There are many possible scales of value in terms of which we can express our evaluations. The extremes are a grade on a continuous scale vs. a grade on a pair of yes/no values, but anywhere in between can also be a grade structure. The structure of the scale is not the deciding thing: evaluation is the key, evaluating that the degree of manifestation of the criterial properties, expressed on the scale involved in the evaluation, is sufficient to meet or exceed the norm.

And so for right/not-right and wrong/not-wrong: they are used to perform evaluations, on scales and against benchmarks, and therefore they are gradable adjectives. There is no theoretical obstacle here: the linguists say that a gradable adjective is a function that maps the evaluated object to a degree on a scale. Said more abstractly, there is the domain of the function, meaning the objects evaluated, and the codomain of the function, meaning the objects that the function maps the objects of the domain onto, which are the values or measures. The elements and the relations among the elements of the codomain can be continuous or ordinal, closed or open, infinite or finite and dense or discrete. And so the scale can be cardinal and dense as for expected value, or there can be just five values in the domain as for the letter grades A, B, C, D, F, or there can be two values, as for right/not-right and correct/not-correct – and all the other variations that we use or could use in grading things.



5.4 Epistemic *right*; *correct; probable, likely* and *certain*

Epistemic *right*, because of the bivalence of truth, takes two values. Not-right is wrong, which of course is not true for deontic *right* which is two-valued as right/not-right but three-valued for the whole set, right, neither-right-nor-wrong and wrong. Epistemic right occurs in sentences like

That’s the right answer

where what makes the answer right is that it’s the true answer to the question, the true solution to the equation. This is handled in the semantics because the criteria that establish the grade-scale are cast in terms of the answer’s being true or failing to be so. On the account of *right* as a gradable adjective, there is no difference in lexical meaning in the two uses of the word *right*: it is a very general-purpose evaluative word. The difference between the deontic and the epistemic uses lies in the pragmatics, in the differences in the criteria which determine the scales.

*Correct[[19]](#footnote-19)* is very like epistemic right and takes the same sort of two-valued semantics. But it may not be exactly the same – it seems easier, for instance, to say “that’s the correct answer to the question but it’s not really right” as a comment on a badly designed test question. Whereas, when you say “that’s the right answer” you can’t then say it’s not without at least some lack of aptness. *Correct* seems to suggest or at least to countenance an answer-syllabus sort of correctness, as opposed to the thorough-going sort, while *right* does not.

A more interesting question about *correct* is whether in addition to the epistemic, there is also a deontic use – generally it is taken to be solely an epistemic evaluative word. If the criteria which form the scale invoke something involving instrumental correctness, or moral correctness, that would seem to give *correct* a deontic sense, and so the semantic parallel to *right* would be complete, each taking a deontic or an epistemic sense depending on the criteria invoked by the speaker. I think this may be right. Consider these two sentences:

The correct choice of lawnmower is that one, no other lawnmower we’ve looked at is remotely as good

The right choice of lawnmower is that one, no other lawnmower we’ve looked at is remotely as good

You will certainly take the second sentence using *right* to be deontic since it tells you the single best choice. Yet the use of *correct* in the first sentence is exactly parallel and is just as correct (!) as an English sentence – and “correct as an English sentence” also seems deontic, not epistemic. I think *correct* takes both epistemic and deontic uses and the semantics makes plain how, just like *right*, it can do that.

*Probable* is an utterly typical gradable adjective, taking a range between 0 and 1 in the usual numeric representation of probability. Its value-range is bounded top and bottom and is continuous.And *likely* is similar in the comparative but can also be used like *good* to indicate a salient level of likelihood, some measure perhaps above the middle of the probability range or two-thirds of the way up, but that is obviously highly context sensitive.

Epistemic *certain* is typically taken to be the same as probability = 1, unless some other contrast is intended, e.g., such as psychological felt certainty. But there are also ways to talk about things being more/less certain. Kennedy (1999, pp. 164-166) discusses *certain* as a bounded gradable adjective and as one which takes extreme values as, e.g., “no certainty at all” vs. “completely certain.”

5.5 A final comment: *true* as a gradable adjective

I’m going to close with this final comment. I am not arguing for the point of view below, I merely point it out as a consequence. It is unnerving in its extreme reach. Here is the issue. If (epistemic and deontic) *correct* is a gradable adjective, and if my argument connecting gradability with evaluation indeed works, then the evaluative adjective *true* is also a gradable adjective. Bierwisch (1989, p. 91) comments in passing that *true* is a gradable adjective, apparently thinking it of no consequence. But if *true* is a gradable adjective, the usual consequence follows of a semantics based on evaluation against criteria and the absence of a property true. And in that case, the criteria will not be metaphysically determined and determinate, as they would be if *true* denoted a property. They will be criteria which we assemble and use for our purposes, and those purposes presumably relate closely to our problem of what to believe. True beliefs about the world are true because the world is as it is believed to be, we want to say. This is how we evaluate beliefs and our criteria for truth presumably implement this view of what true belief is. That we ought to believe the true is, we think, a rational deontic requirement binding on all rational agents; and agents rational and otherwise usually and typically make efforts, consistent with their means and epistemic capacities, to believe the true rather than the false. Of course there will be many complications in any development of this view of things. But one thing that won’t arise is the apparent paradoxes of truth threatening some supposed property truth with logical incoherence. If a set of criteria are discovered to be inconsistent, we are free to amend them as required, keeping in mind any necessary requirements derived from the natures of rationality and belief. Of course we would like to understand why, e.g., self-referential constructions can lead to paradox, but on the gradable adjective view of *true*, we can, for instance, choose to blame the self-referential syntactical construction and not the evaluative true, yet suffer no metaphysical embarrassment.

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1. This paper was posted in an earlier version at Academia.edu in August 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are many names in the linguistics research literature associated with gradable adjectives. Bartsch and Vennemann (1972), Cresswell (1976), Bierwisch (1989), Kennedy (1999, 2007) and Morzycki (2015) are some of the more widely referenced. Kennedy’s book (1999) is a useful summary of the theory and related arguments, as is Morzycki’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Wolfsdorf’s book *On Goodness* (2019) was issued in September 2019. In it he develops much more fully the topics he first raised in his 2015 paper. I do not see a need to address his book here because on the issues that concern me, his treatment in his book does not differ in substance from the earlier paper. Of course the development is much fuller and richer. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. How does this work? First, all the actual and possible α-things are ordered as to their degree of α-ness. Then a scale composed of abstract things called degrees is constructed. The degrees are ordered as more/less in such a way that the ordering of the degrees is isomorphic to the ordering of the objects of the comparison class as to their degree of α-ness. Each degree, because of its location in the ordering, acts as a measure of the degree of α-ness of the object at the isomorphic location in the ordering. If the ordering is cardinal, then the ordering is isomorphic to the rational numbers, if ordinal, to the natural numbers. I am aware of the weaknesses in this explanation. It is meant to be intuitive, and while it is by no means mathematically proper, I hope it will serve to give some feel for the ideas of degree and scale. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There are many contributors here, but see Kennedy (1999, pp. 42-56) for an overview of the issues and references to the literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Grice’s work on conversational implicature has become extremely important in contemporary linguistic semantic theory; see H.P. Grice, *The Logic of Conversation* (1975 and 1989). Language use and conversation are social activities and depend for their success on a very great deal of shared knowledge and mutual understanding of shared beliefs and intentions and Grice demonstrates how those provide the means to convey additional semantic material to supplement the lexical meanings, and in other ways to structure, enable and regulate conversation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rett (2015) is the originator of the pragmatic solution and I also refer to her (2015, pp. 26-32 and indeed all of chapter 2) for an explanation of POS for the relational account of gradable adjectives. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Frederike Moltmann in her book *Abstract Objects in Natural Language Semantics* (2014) argues that adjectival nominalizations like *tallness* or *goodness* do not denote (regular) properties. It is an interesting argument, but for now I want to leave it with the linguists for further development. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. J.J. Thomson, The Right and the Good (1997), *Normativity* (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Suppose there is a property Moorean moral good. Suppose that property is instantiated in some situation S (In S a’s ϕing is good), which makes it true that a ought to ϕ in S. Therefore it is metaphysically necessary that in S, a ought to ϕ (because in S ϕing is good). Therefore a ought to have the end of ϕing in S, and it is metaphysically necessary that a ought to have the end of ϕing in S. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, e.g., Sullivan (1989, pp. 63-72) on Kant on morally necessary ends. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. But again, see Moltmann (2013) for an argument to the effect that adjectival nominalizations, i.e., α-ness, should not automatically be interpreted substantively. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Finlay (2019) offers an account of normativity but I am unconvinced that it fits with the theory of gradable adjectives and suspect that it depends on Finlay’s prior and different theory of *good*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. There are other attempts, e.g., Finlay (2014), appearing as outliers, but none of these has received much support. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. There are naturalist accounts of *good* but none of those actually offer a semantics able to explain *good*’s evaluativity and normativity. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. We could protest, say that while the grader isn’t commending, the grade he assigns is a commendation; but that breaks the link to expressivism as a theory of non-cognitive meaning because then no “expressing” has taken place, so leaving unexplained how the word is a commendation. It is conventionally used to commend, but if no expression of liking has taken place, what results? The theory seems unclear here. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Doing the best thing requires making comparisons and ranking this thing as better than that and indeed as the best. But such ranking does not imply utilitarianism is true, merely that the good-making components of situations can be compared.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. There seems to be an apparent lesser strength of *ought*-statements compared to *required to*, *have to*, and *must*-statements. It appears that we can say ‘I ought to do this good act but it’s not as if it were *required*’ and that can make sense, e.g., in the context of discussion of a Kantian imperfect obligation. Whereas, one can’t properly say ‘I must do this good act but it’s not as if I ought’. The greater strength of *must* over *ought* makes that sentence improper. *Must*-statements seem to entail *ought*-statements but not vice versa. See Beebe (2017) for more discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Thomson (2007, pp.83-124) has a useful discussion of *correct*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)