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Right and wrong: from philosophy to everyday discourse

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1. Introduction

One of the most intriguing phenomena in the history of the English language is the spectacular rise of the word right, in its many interrelated senses and uses.

I will illustrate this with three fragments from informal interviews tape-recorded by the sociologist Douglas Porpora (2001), with the occurrences of right numbered:

(a) I ask Peter why he feels he should treat people as he does. "You said you were raised to treat people like this?"
"Right." (1)
"Okay, that sort of explains why you have those values ..."
"But why were they taught to me?"
"No. Not why they were taught to you, but do you think those are values ... I mean different people are taught different values, right?" (2)
"Right." (3)
"Somebody else might be taught a different set of values ..."
"Mm-hm."
"Than what you were taught ... So, do you think your values are right (4) rather than ... Do you think those are the right (5) values to have?"
"I don't know if it's really a matter of right (6) or wrong." (p. 79)

(b) "Go ahead," says Eli. "You tell me what you believe so maybe you'll give me a hint. I'll give you an answer from my ..."
"I believe in ... Jesus. I believe that ... uh ... God is good, that there's a God who made the universe."
"That's right (7)," replies Guzia. "One God is for everybody." (pp. 111-112)

(c) "Okay," Frederick continues. "The Old Testament. …but the book of Revelations only mentions twelve thousand from each tribe. Or hundred and forty-four thousand."
"Right." I am familiar with the belief among Seventh Day Adventists that when Jesus comes again, there will be exactly one hundred and forty four thousand Jews who will be saved by their conversion to Christ. (pp. 143-144)

It would be very difficult to translate these fragments into other European languages because there would be no words in these languages to match right — in any of the senses illustrated above. All the bilingual native speakers of German, French, Italian and Russian whom I have asked found themselves embarrassed and unexpectedly confounded by the task, and proposed either renderings like "yes" and "true", or various ad hoc solutions, for example, for German, stimmt (1), oder?, ja (3), rechten (4 and 5), richtigen (6), and genau so (7). Yet in English all these uses are very common and all these senses function as basic tools for thinking, talking, and interacting with other people.

How many different senses of right are there? Leaving aside right as a countable noun (as in human rights), right as an adverb (e.g. right then, right there) and right as opposed to left, we can distinguish three major senses of right, all illustrated in the fragments above. For the sake of convenience, I will call these senses "moral", "intellectual", and "conversational". The moral sense of right can be illustrated with the following sentence:

> In all the world and in all of life there is nothing more important to determine than what is right. (Lewis 1955:3)

The intellectual sense of right comes into play, above all, in the phrase that's right, which endorses a belief (as in 1b). Used as a conversational response, "Right." indicates that the speaker understands what the other person is saying (as in 1c).

In this paper, I will argue that these three different uses of right, "moral", "intellectual" and "conversational", are related, and that the emergence and expansion of the second ("intellectual") and the third ("conversational") is linked with the rise of the first ("moral"). More generally, I will argue that salient conversational routines (such as those involving the use of "Right") are related to ways of thinking deeply entrenched in a given society; and that changes in conversational routines follow changes in attitudes, values, and world view.

What needs to be emphasized at the outset is that this rise of the conversational right in English is a language-specific and cultural-specific phenomenon, which couldn't possibly be explained in terms of putative universal rules of politeness, logic of conversation, or maxims of interaction, in the spirit of Grice (1975), Brown and Levinson (1987) or Leech (1983). Of course, quasi-parallels to the conversational right can be found in many languages, and without close semantic analysis such parallels may seem close enough for some functional pragmatic explanations to appear to be applicable to them all. But when one does engage in close semantic analysis, one discovers that the differences between the supposed parallels are as real as the similarities, and that these differences can offer us valuable clues in our search for valid explanations.

When one looks, from a broader European perspective, at the rise of the contrastive use "right" and "wrong", and of the use of right as a discourse marker, both these phenomena must be seen as innovations which set English apart from the other European languages. Generally speaking, those other languages tend to rely, in moral discourse, on the universal concepts GOOD and BAD, and in

conversational contexts, on the universal concept TRUE. I believe that some four or five centuries ago English was closer to other European languages in this respect than it is now.

2. The changing frequencies of "true", "truth", "right" and "wrong"

Let us compare, for example, the frequencies of the words true, truth, right (adjective) and wrong (adjective) in the concordances to the works of two English playwrights, separated by three centuries, Shakespeare (Spevack 1970) and Bernard Shaw (Bevan 1971) (figures per one million words):

	True	Truth	Adj. Right	(Total Right)	Adj. Wrong	(Total Wrong)
Shakespeare	959	391	180	(420)	17	(288)
Shaw	324	215	448	(890)	148	(206)

What these figures suggest is that the use of both true and truth declined significantly, whereas the use of right and wrong (as adjectives) increased. They also suggest that wrong, which Shakespeare used primarily as a noun or a verb, over the centuries greatly expanded its use as an adjective — not on a scale comparable with the use of right as an adjective but nonetheless coming far closer to it than it was in Shakespeare's use. These figures are consistent with the hypothesis that the "discourse of truth" declined in English over the centuries; that the use of "right" and "wrong" as parallel concepts (and opposites) increased; and they also show that the use of right as an adjective increased enormously in relation to the use of true.

If we now extend our comparison and include in the table figures for spoken English ("UK Spoken") from the contemporary "Bank of English (COBUILD), we will see, first of all, that in comparison with Shaw (let alone Shakespeare) the figures for true and truth are extremely low. Furthermore, we will note that the figure for right is higher than in Shaw, and the figure for wrong, lower.

	True	Truth	Adj. Right	Adj. Wrong
Shakespeare	959	391	180	17
Shaw	324	215	448	148
COBUILD: UK Spoken	40	7	629	56

The very high frequency of right in contemporary spoken English differs markedly from its frequency in the contemporary corpus of written English ("UK Books"):

	True	Truth	Adj. Right	Adj. Wrong
UK Books	60	37	96	50
UK Spoken	40	7	629	56

Presumably, this explosion of "right" in spoken English is linked with the rise of conversational responses such as "that's right", "right you are", "too right", "you're right" (in the sense 'I don't mind'), and simply "right". Of course, we do not have at our disposal a corpus of spoken English for the times of Shakespeare, or even the times of Bernard Shaw, and dialogue in plays cannot be regarded as a functional equivalent of such a corpus. We cannot, therefore, prove an increase in the use of "right" in spoken English on a statistical basis. What we can show, however, is the emergence of new conversational routines in nineteenth-and twentieth-century spoken discourse.

These routines include, first of all, the expression all right, the first example of which cited by the OED comes from Dickens' Pickwick Papers (1837), and the expression that's right, the first example of which cited by the OED is dated as 1905. Relatively recent conversational routines include also such expressions as "right you are!", described by the OED as "recent slang use", "too right", labelled by the OED as "Australian and New Zealand colloquial", "she'll be right" (also described as "Australian and New Zealand colloquial") and the interrogative "... right?", described by the OED as "originally U.S." and illustrated only with twentieth-century examples, and also several distinct uses of "Right." as a response in dialogue. I will discuss some of these conversational routines later. First, however, let us consider the use of "right" and "wrong" as opposites, especially in moral discourse.

3. "Right" and "wrong" – a basis for ethics?

The distinction between "right" and "wrong" occupies a central place in the English moral lexicon, and indeed in Anglo moral discourse generally — so much so that many Anglophone philosophers, theorists of education and even anthropologists regard it as fundamental to human nature. The very first example of the use of right offered by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (dated from 1737) reads:

> You must acknowledge a Distinction betwixt Right and Wrong, founded in Nature.

At the turn of the twenty-first century the distinction between "right" and "wrong" continues to be evoked frequently in theoretical discussions and to be used as a frame of reference for talking about moral development and moral norms across cultures and societies — as if this distinction were indeed "founded in nature" itself. (Cf. e.g. Harrison 1979, Johnson 1959, Lewis 1955, Snell 1988.) The point which is overlooked in such discussions is that "right" and "wrong" are not universal human concepts but English words without equivalents in other European languages, let alone in languages of more remote cultures and societies.

I hasten to emphasize that in saying this I am not taking the position of a cultural, moral or linguistic relativist. On the contrary: colleagues and I have tried to document in many publications the existence of linguistic universals (cf. e.g., Wierzbicka 1996, Goddard 1998), and we have argued, on the basis of empirical cross-linguistic research, that these universals include the concepts GOOD and BAD.

Moreover, we have argued and sought to demonstrate that the concept TRUE is a linguistic

universal and that in all languages people can say the exact semantic equivalent of "this is true" and "this is not true". Thus, the English words good, bad, and true can be seen as English exponents of the universal human concepts GOOD, BAD, and TRUE, with exact semantic equivalents in other languages. For example (see Goddard and Wierzbicka eds. 1994 and In press)[1]:

	GOOD	BAD	TRUE
Spanish	bueno	malo	verdad
Malay	baik	buruk	benar
Mandarin Chinese	håo	huài	zhēn

But what applies to good, bad and true does not apply to right and wrong; and given the central role of right and wrong in Anglo moral discourse, the question must be asked what precisely these two English words mean and how and why the language-specific concepts encoded in them have become so salient in modern Anglo culture.

Both "right" and "wrong" are modern Anglo concepts, conceptual constructs of Anglo culture and the English language. The words right and wrong are often used in English translations of classic Greek and Roman writers, but the words they are used to translate are usually the semantic equivalents of 'good' and 'bad' (or 'better' and 'worse'). One example (from Stevenson 1958):

> I see the right, and I approve it too,
> Condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue.
> (Video meliora probaque, deteriora sequor.
> Ovid, Metamorphoses. Bk. vii, l.20. Translated by Samuel Garth).

To speakers of English, however, "right" and "wrong" often appear to be fundamental, rooted in nature itself. According to some scholars, even animals have a sense of "right" and "wrong". For example, Frans de Waal (1996:2), the author of the book entitled Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals, states: "A society lacking notions of right and wrong is about the worst thing we can imagine — if we can imagine it at all." Well, sometimes our imagination needs to be stretched on the basis of cross-linguistic evidence; in this case, cross-linguistic evidence shows us that most societies don't have the notions of "right" and "wrong", and that in fact these notions are peculiar to, roughly speaking, Anglo culture. What may indeed be universal is the sense that "people can do bad things" and "people can do good things". (cf. Wierzbicka 2001a:165).

For example, from a "Russian" cultural point of view, the key choice is definitely that between "xorošo" ('good') and "ploxo" ('bad'), as set out in Mayakovsky's children's poem, "What is good and what is bad" (Marshall 1955:80-83):

Tiny toddler told his Dad:
'I am puzzled so!
What is good and what is bad?
Answer if you know!'

The Dad in the poem has some very definite answers to the question, with the desired result:

Tiny toddler understood.
Tiny told his Dad:
'I will always do what's good,
Never what is bad.'

A Russian Dad could not talk similarly to his child about "right" and "wrong", because there are no such words in Russian.[2]

Moral discourse based on the notions of "good" and "bad" is of course not absent from Anglo culture either. To take one example (from Stevenson 1958):

The Bad among the Good are here mixt ever:
The Good without the Bad are here plac'd never.
(Robert Herrick, "Good and Bad"; 17th century).

It is interesting to note, however, how often the contrasting use of the words good and bad in modern English (in a moral context) is linked with a desire to distance oneself from the use of these words as moral absolutes. By contrast, the words right and wrong are often contrasted in modern (at least pre-twentieth-century) Anglo discourse sharply and confidently, as the following quotes (also from Stevenson 1958) illustrate:

My principle is to do whatever is right... (Thomas Jefferson; 18th/19th century)

They say that if you do this you will be standing with the Abolitionists. I say stand with anybody that stands right. Stand with him while he is right and part with him when he goes wrong. (Abraham Lincoln; 19th century)

The passionate love of Right, the burning hate of Wrong. (Lewis Morris; 19th century)

If one looks at the use of "right" and "wrong" in English in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century, one is struck both by the ascendancy of "right" and "wrong" over "good" and "bad" and by the confident tone in which the former pair is often referred to, in contrast to the latter.

Where did this confidence in the human ability to distinguish "right" from "wrong" come from in modern Anglo culture? And where did the interest come from in distinguishing "right" from "wrong" rather than simply "good" from "bad"?

I will consider these questions more closely in the next section. First, however, let us note that collocations linking right with wrong appear to have spread in English in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For Shakespeare, wrong was primarily a verb, or a noun derived from the verb, as in the following examples:

> He hath done me wrong. (Shakespeare, I Henry VI, Act IV, sc. i, l. 85)

> You wrong me, sir, thus still to haunt my house. (Shakespeare, The Merry Wives of Windsor, Act III, sc. iv, l. 67)

> Knowing my mind, you wrong me, Master Fenton. (Shakespeare, The Merry Wives of Windsor, Act III, sc. iv, l. 75)

At that stage, then, "wrong" was not seen, primarily, as an opposite of "right", and human conduct was not seen as, predominantly, a series of binary choices - choices between "wrong" and "right". Furthermore, the idea of "doing wrong (to someone)" was not linked, inherently, with the idea of "conscious choice". However, when the two words - right and wrong - were juxtaposed, an additional semantic element appears to have come into play: the element of thinking, of discernment (which of the two, good or bad). Presumably, the image behind the two words conceived of as a pair of opposites was that of a person's two hands, and two sides, right and left, lending itself so readily to an interpretation in terms of a thoughtful binary choice: which of the two hands? which of two sides? which of the two ways? To quote Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress:

> Better, though difficult, the right way to go,
> than wrong, tho' easy, when the end is woe.

Here, it is not a question of wronging other people, but of choosing, consciously, one of two (clearly distinguishable) ways to act ("right" and "wrong").

A few early examples of the contrastive use of "right" and "wrong" can already be found in Shakespeare. Later on in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries such a contrastive use of right and wrong appears to have increased. Gradually, the image of two hands (or sides) and two ways (right and left, right and wrong) appears to have replaced in English an earlier image of a "right line" in the sense of a "straight line", and of possible deviations from that straight line. For example:

> Of lines there be two principal kinds, ...a right or straight line, and ... a crooked line.
> (1551, OED)

The "right way" was originally conceived of not as opposed to the symmetrical "wrong way" (one of the two possibilities), but as a kind of ideal which one should seek to approximate, and which one may approximate to different degrees. Certainly, the use of the superlative (rightest) and comparative (righter) seems very common in English up to the seventeenth century.

> This is the rightest way and fittest order to serve God. (1561, OED)
>
> ... then with a few to walk the rightest way. (1590, OED)
>
> That negative and contradictory humour, of thinking they are the rightest when they are unlikest the Papacy. (1599, OED)
>
> I would ask you whether in all these great points the Papists are righter than the Reformed Churches? (1665, OED)
>
> He observes that Hollenshede is righter than Parker. (1716, OED)

But as the pair of opposites "right" and "wrong" spread, the use of "righter" and "rightest" appears to have decreased, the idea of a binary choice gradually replacing that of trying to approximate an ideal. When the poet Cowper says at the end of the eighteenth century,

> Grace leads the right way: if you choose the wrong,
> Take it and perish. (1781)

he seems to be using right in the new sense, in which it is no longer gradable (as "right" and "left" are not gradable). How could life's choices appear to the seventeenth and eighteenth century speakers of English in the form of such clear-cut alternatives? The answer seems to be that life's problems came to be viewed increasingly as decidable by reason, like scientific problems, on the basis of clear, objective criteria.

4. The link between "right" and "reason"

To pursue these questions further, we need to engage in a certain amount of careful semantic analysis. We can't ask what the words good and bad mean because (as colleagues and I argue, cf. e.g. Wierzbicka 1996a, Goddard 1998) these are unanalyzable conceptual primes. We can, however, ask about the meaning of the words right and wrong; and here, it can help to consider two expressions which do have semantic equivalents in many other European languages: "you (we, they, etc.) are (were) right" and "you (we, they, etc.) are (were) wrong", that is, expressions which link the adjectives right and wrong used as predicates with human subjects. Interestingly, in several European languages

the exact semantic equivalents of these expressions include a word which can also mean 'reason'. For example:

tu as raison (French)
you have reason
[tu] hai ragione (Italian)
you have reason

What does it mean to say to someone "you're right" (hai ragione, tu as raison)? Roughly speaking, it means, I think, to express one's approval of this person's thinking, with reference to some potential interpersonal knowledge (or evidence). Thus:

you're right =
(a) you say you think something
(b) I say: you say something good
(c) you think well
(d) if someone thinks about it not like this, this someone doesn't think well
(e) other people can know this

Component (a) acknowledges the interlocutor's opinion, component (b) approves of the interlocutor's words, components (c) and (d) approve of the interlocutor's thinking (contrasting it with a different way of thinking), and component (e) implies that this evaluation can be supported with reference to some interpersonally valid criteria (or reasons). Thus, the sentence "you are right" implies that what "you" think is objectively valid, and that in principle other people can know this.

The expression "this is right" can be analyzed along similar lines:

this is right =
(a) if someone thinks about this like this, this person thinks well
(b) if someone thinks about this not like this, this person doesn't think well
(c) other people can know this

I believe that this analysis can also be extended to English collocations like the right decision, the right choice or the right solution: the decision, the choice, or the solution, are the outcomes of someone's thinking, and in the speaker's view, this way of thinking about the matter at hand, in contrast to other ways of thinking about it, is good — an evaluation which, the speaker thinks, could be somehow objectively validated.

Jefferson's principle "to do whatever is right" seems to reflect a belief that in any given situation there is one good way of acting that can be reached by rational thought (i.e. by "good thinking"). The importance of the idea of "good thinking" (i.e. of "thinking well") in Anglo folk-

philosophy is reflected in the colloquial conversational response "Good thinking!", without parallels in other European languages. For example (examples from a novel by Kathrine Kerr, taken from the COBUILD corpus of "UK Books"):

> Enj considered for a moment. Since they hunt by sight, we should make a run for the base of the cliff now. "Good thinking," Rhodry said.

It is particularly interesting to note that the phrase "good thinking" is often combined overtly with the word right and is used, as it were, as its partial folk-explication, as in the following example:

> "She know [sic] how you got the money?" "Oh, yeah. That was the whole idea. So the money couldn't be traced back to me." "Right," Kevin said approvingly. "Good thinking."

In this last example, right is used in a conversational sense, and the actions approved of by the speaker are not exactly "moral" in the usual sense of the word; yet the combination of approval for someone's actions and for the thinking behind the actions is very clear, and it illuminates other uses of the word right as well.

Another English conversational formula which expresses the speaker's approval for somebody else's thinking is "Good idea!", which also readily combines with "Right.", as in the following examples from COBUILD ("UK Spoken"):

> Right. (…) I think it's a very good idea.
> Right. And a year was also a good idea.
> Right. You use telekinesis to extend its range. Good idea.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the distinction between "right" and "wrong", so entrenched in the English language, is that these concepts appear to span moral and intellectual domains. Thus, one can "do the right thing", one can "do something wrong", but one can also "give the right (or wrong) answer", or "use the right (or wrong) method". The common denominator appears to be something like "problem solving": something to do with thinking, with procedures, with rules. It is interesting to recall in this context Benjamin Franklin's discussion of "the Science of Virtue" (quoted in Levin 1963:32), in which he likened "a Man of Sense", that is, "a virtuous man" (contrasted with "a vicious man"), to an arithmetician.

Thus, the ascendancy of "right" and "wrong" over "good" and "bad" seems to reflect a more "rational", more "procedural", more "reason-based" approach to human life, and a retreat from a pure distinction between "good" and "bad" unsupported by any appeal to reason, procedures, methods, or intersubjectively available evidence. An ethics of "right and wrong" is an ethics in which the choice between "good and "bad" is seen as something that can be decided by reason, by good thinking, and

something that can be interpersonally validated — like science. It is a "rational ethics", an ethics which doesn't need to be grounded in metaphysics (in particular, in God) but can be grounded in reason.

Emphasising the influence of the 17th and 18th centuries' British empiricism on the general intellectual climate of the time, Fernández-Armesto (1998:153) writes:

> Newton's work was both genuinely pioneering and embedded in a broader context of English and Scottish thought of the time: empiricism – the doctrine that reality is observable and verifiable by sense-perception. The success of science surely made possible this distrust of metaphysics.

I have argued elsewhere (Wierzbicka, Forthcoming a) that this "distrust of metaphysics" may have contributed to the decline of British people's interest in "truth" and may have made them feel less comfortable with saying "that's true" than their contemporaries on the continent did (and continue to do). I would like to suggest that the same "distrust of metaphysics" may also have led to an avoidance of moral judgments unsupported by references to justification. The use of "right" may have been felt to be preferable to both the use of "true" and the use of "good", for in contrast to both "true" and "good", "right" appealed, implicitly, to some rational grounds for the expressed judgment. (I will return to this convergence between "good" and "true" in "right" in section 5.)

Fernández-Armesto writes further: "The ascendancy of the senses over other means of truth-finding did not last long, even in the west, but while it endured it made a vital difference: it gave science unique prestige — a place in the prevailing scale of values unmatched in other cultures" (ibid.:155). In my view, the "ascendancy of the senses" is better described in terms of "knowledge-finding" than "truth-finding"; in the climate of empiricism people became increasingly inclined to replace the "search for truth" (the title of one of Descartes' works) with a "search for knowledge" (based on the evidence of the senses, as well as reason). The spread of "that's right" as a conversational response in modern English may be a reflection of this more general trend. (Another reflection of this trend is the rise of "really" and "evidence"; see Wierzbicka, Forthcoming a.)It is important to note in this connection that in Britain, empiricism was not opposed to rationalism, as it often was elsewhere, but rather tended to be identified with it.

The combination of empiricism with an emphasis on "reason" in British thought is stressed in Charles Taylor's (1989) classic Sources of the Self, with special reference to John Locke. Significantly, Locke's book on religion bears the title: The Reasonableness of Christianity. For Locke, the empiricist, both ethics and religion had to be grounded in reason (as was science) — not "speculative" but "procedural" reason. They both had to be "reasonable".

When a child does mathematical sums, or answers questions about dates or capitals of far-away countries, the teacher can respond with the phrases "that's right" and "that's not right". An Italian or a French teacher could not make a similar response, because there are no similar phrases in these languages. What an Italian or a French teacher could say in such a situation would be bene! and bien! 'well' (and, if the response is "wrong", no and non 'no'). Of course, an English-speaking teacher could

also praise a student by saying "Good!"; but a "procedural", factual-sounding response "that's right" is also available. The availability, and wide use, of this response is a peculiarity of modern English, related, I would argue, to the intellectual climate influenced by empirical and "anti-metaphysical" thinkers like John Locke and David Hume.

But before contemplating any further the cultural and philosophical underpinnings of the rise of the "that's right"-routine let us first examine the semantics of this expression. If one asks native speakers what the phrase the phrase "that's right" means they are likely to reply either that it means "that's true" or that it means "I agree" (i.e., in universal concepts, "I think the same"). But while such ad hoc glosses may seem to fit some contexts, they would not fit others, and so they cannot represent the semantic invariant of this expression. For example, neither "I agree" nor "I think the same" could be substituted for "that's right" in the following exchange from a play by the Australian writer Alex Buzo (1973[1970]:28):

THOMO: Oh, you must be the new typist.
SUNDRA: That's right. [? I agree; ? that's true]

In saying "that's right" Sundra confirms as it were Thomo's guess: she doesn't say that Thomo is making "a true statement" but rather, that he is making "a right guess"; and "a right guess" implies "good thinking" (as do also "right solution", "right decision", and "right method").

<u>That's right</u>. =
(a) you say that you think something now
(b) when you say this you say something good
(c) you think well
(d) other people can know this

Component (a) shows that when used as a conversational response, "that's right" refers to the interlocutor's words. Component (b) shows the responding speaker's approval of those words. Component (c) refers to the thinking behind the words and expresses approval of this thinking, and component (d) shows that this approval is based on some generally valid standard. A symmetrical component "if someone thinks something else about this, this someone doesn't think well" has not been included in this explication, because the conversational response "that's right" does not have a negative counterpart (the expression "that's wrong" is not used in English as a standard conversational routine). The absence of such a component contributes to the less "intellectual" and more "conversational" character of "that's right" as compared with either "you are right" or "this is right".

The asymmetry between "that's right" and "that's wrong" matches the increasingly asymmetrical use of "right" and "wrong" in a moral sense (a question to which I will return later). With the growth of individualism and "decline of conviction" (cf. Bellah et al 1985; Fernández-Armesto 1998), calling somebody else's thoughts "wrong" has increasingly come to be seen as

inappropriate. To say to another person "that's wrong" could be offensive; saying "that's right" is not similarly offensive, because it supports the other person.

5. "Right" as a neutral ground between "good" and "true"

In any language, assessments framed in terms of TRUE appear to be quite different from those framed in terms of GOOD: there seems to be a clear-cut line between the two. But English phrases like the right decision, the right answer, or the right solution somehow cross that line: they seem to combine the element of approval (good) with an element of intellectual judgment.

Consider, for example, the slogan: do the right thing, put it in the bin. Clearly, the slogan does not present the action of putting some rubbish in the bin as a "good deed", nor does it depict the person who always does it as a "do-gooder". Rather, the action of putting rubbish in the bin is presented here as something rational: it IS a good thing to put rubbish in the bin, but not because of any intangible moral imperative; rather, it is a good thing to do so — and a bad thing not to — because of certain rules which apply to everyone and which can be rationally explained and justified.

In this sense, it is comparable to arriving at the "right" answer to a problem in arithmetics: it is not a question of anybody's moral judgment but of certain objectively valid procedures, methods, and criteria. A person could reject metaphysics and religion and still say that putting rubbish in the bin is the "right" thing to do. From this perspective, reflected in modern English, human conduct can be seen and assessed "objectively", "rationally", and in accordance with "evidence". There are "rules", there are "procedures", there are objective criteria that people can refer to. As the nineteenth century English philosopher Herbert Spencer (Social Statics, ch. 32, sc. 4) put it,

> Rightness expresses of actions, what straightness does of lines; and there can no more be two kinds of right action than there can be two kinds of straight line.

Many similar statements have come from the pen of English and American writers, with the word right both reflecting and presumably encouraging this culture-specific way of thinking: that deciding what to do — or what to say — can be a matter of following certain straightforward, public, rationally justifiable procedures; that ethics can be analogous to geometry. (As Emerson put it (1932[1869]:52): "The axioms of geometry translate the laws of ethics"). Consider, for example, the following sentence (from spoken English): "I can't go [to tap dancing] because I don't have the right shoes". "Right" could be replaced here with "appropriate", "suitable", or "fitting", but it is not a separate meaning of the word right. Rather, it is the same meaning as in the case of a right decision, right answer, or a right solution: a meaning (unavailable in Italian, French, or German) which allows the speaker to stay on a "philosophically neutral" ground, without laying any claims to knowing "what is true" or "what is (inherently, intrinsically, unaccountably) good". To identify a pair of shoes as "the right shoes" one needs to assess the fit between a kind of shoes and a kind of situation, between the features of the shoes and the requirements of the situation. Thus, the evaluation of the shoes has to involve some objective, interpersonally valid criteria. A particular kind of shoes is good for tap dancing because the

properties of the shoes "fit" the purpose (tap dancing): these shoes are a good "means" from the point of view of the purpose, and people can say why they are a good means (because they can say how the properties of the shoes "fit" the purpose of tap dancing). The shoes are not intrinsically good, but they are "instrumentally" good; and the claim that they are good (for tap dancing) is not a matter of faith, or taste, but can be rationally justified. Evaluation and rational justification go here hand in hand. And so, it seems, it is generally the case with "right", as compared to "good". The "right" answer, and the "right" solution, too, are "good" because they can be rationally justified; and so is the "right" choice, the "right" decision, and also, the "right" action. Truth doesn't come into it, not even in the case of the "right" answer: what matters is the justification. To do the "right thing" means to do something that is not simply "good" but that can be rationally justified.

6. Procedural morality

The ascendancy of "right" and "wrong" in the English language can be linked with the rise of "procedural morality" in Anglo culture. According to Porpora (2001:72), "To say that modern morality is mainly procedural is to say that it focusses on the means we adopt to pursue our ends." For many of Porpora's respondents, ethics means not lying, cheating, hurting other people, in accordance with the principle "Do your own thing as long as you don't hurt anyone". As long as they don't hurt other people, they feel that everyone should be free "to do their own thing". Porpora comments: "That is fine, but what should 'our own thing' be? A morality reduced solely to procedural constraints totally removes 'our own thing' from moral discourse. For such a morality, whatever 'our own thing' is, it will by definition lack moral purpose. Instead, whatever ends we choose to pursue within the procedural constraints will have the appearance of morally neutral preferences."

As I see it, the emergence of this "procedural ethics" is related to the linguistic phenomenon of the emergence and spread of the concepts of "right" and "wrong". The rise of "procedural ethics" is linked with the rise of "rational ethics"; and the separation of morality from its religious roots is linked with the idea that all beliefs require rational justification. A "right" decision is like a "right" solution to a problem (mathematical, logical, ethical, or practical): it can be justified with reference to a set of procedures, rules, criteria. As Porpora argues, one's purpose in life can hardly be thought of in terms of "right" or "wrong" — or in terms of procedures, rules, ethical "standards".

How exactly is the emergence and spread of "procedural morality" related to changes in the English language? Needless to say, I am not suggesting that the rise of "right" and "wrong" has somehow narrowed down English speakers' conceptual options or determined their ways of thinking. Rather, I am suggesting that the rise of new ways of thinking has led to the emergence of new linguistic and conceptual tools: "right" and "wrong" (not instead of but in addition to "good" and "bad"), "fair" and "unfair" (not instead of, but in addition to) "just" and "unjust"), and so on.

The idea of a "rational ethics", an ethics based on the notions of "right" and "wrong", was linked with the broader ideas of a "rational religion", favoured by the Enlightenment and perhaps congenial to the "spirit of capitalism" (as suggested originally by Weber (1995[1930]), and discussed recently by Charles Taylor 1989).

Drawing on Max Weber, Charles Taylor examines in considerable detail the links between the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and changes in everyday ways of thinking. Weber saw in the Calvinist doctrine of predestination "the dogmatic background of the Puritan morality in the sense of methodically rationalized ethical conduct"; and he emphasized as "the most important result of ascetic Protestanism (...) a systematic, rational ordering of the moral life as a whole". Taylor's thesis that modern (Anglo) culture "emphasizes what is right or wrong to do as opposed to what it is good or bad to value or be" closely accords with linguistic facts, and in particular, with the career of the words right and wrong in the English language. Especially, right.

8. "Right" and "wrong": increasingly asymmetrical

As we have seen, for a long time the concepts "right" and "wrong" were perceived by speakers of English as symmetrical, and the two words were often juxtaposed, analogously to right and left. During the twentieth century, however, (if not earlier), the use of wrong appears to have declined, in comparison with right, and many speakers of English appear to have become increasingly uncomfortable with the word wrong. One might venture to suggest that the decline of wrong (in relation to right) paralleled (and perhaps was related to) the spread of the pejorative word judgmental: it is bad to be "judgmental", and to call anyone or anything "wrong" seems to have increasingly been felt to be smacking of "judgmentalism". Consider for example the following fragment from one of Porpora's (2001:90) interviews:

> "... We were just talking about whether or not there is a supreme being."
> "Okay."
> "Do you think that there is ... I have my opinion, you have your opinion. Do you think that one of us could be right and the other could be wrong?"
> "Sure."
> "Both of us could be wrong?"
> "We could both be right."
> "Oh," I agree, "And we could both be right."
> "Well, exactly. I mean, you know, but that ... that's what this world is made up of: Different people with differences of opinions."
> "And how do we arrive at the truth?"
> "I have no idea. I think if we knew that, we'd be the supreme being."

Characteristically, the interviewee (not comfortable with the notion of "truth") does not feel any qualms about describing some opinions as possibly "right"; he does, however, seem reluctant to call somebody else's opinions "wrong": for him, two people who hold contrary opinions could both be "right" but they could not both be "wrong".

From a modern Anglo point of view, there is a big difference between saying to one's interlocutor "you're right" and saying to them "you're wrong". Whatever one thinks of the merits of

one's interlocutor's argument, "you're right" is culturally more appropriate than "you're wrong". The reason for this asymmetry lies not in any universal "logic of conversation" or "principles of politeness" but in culture-specific Anglo norms of social interaction. Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography is highly illuminating on this point.

> I made it a rule to forbear all direct contradiction to the sentiments of others (...) When another asserted something that I thought an error, I denied myself the pleasure of contradicting him abruptly and of showing immediately some absurdity in his proposition; and in answering I began by observing that in certain cases or circumstances his opinion would be right, but that in the present case there "appeared" or "seemed to me" some difference, etc. (quoted in Levin 1963:20).

According to Franklin, this avoidance of a direct "you are wrong"-approach proved, pragmatically, most effective in his interaction with other people. Presumably, large numbers of Franklin's compatriots must have shared his experience to some extent, for with time the avoidance of "you are wrong" and the like became a salient cultural script. To quote Eva Hoffman (1989), who as a teenager emigrated with her family from Poland to America and who had to learn the unspoken "cultural scripts" of her new country:

> I learn also that certain kinds of truth are impolite. One shouldn't criticize the person one is with, at least not directly. You shouldn't say, "You are wrong about that" — though you may say, "On the other hand, there is that to consider." You shouldn't say, "This doesn't look good on you," though you may say, "I like you better in that other outfit." I learn to tone down my sharpness, to do a more careful conversational minuet. (p.146)

It is interesting to compare Hoffman's perception of avoidance of "you are wrong" in Anglo-American culture with Blum-Kulka's (1982) comment on the use of ata to'e 'you're wrong' in Israeli culture:

> Generally speaking, Israeli society seems to allow for even more directness in social interaction than the American one ... It is not uncommon to hear people around a conference table in Israel disagreeing with each other bluntly (saying things like ata to'e 'You're wrong', or lo naxon! 'Not true!). Such directness in a similar setting in American society would probably be considered rude. (pp.30-31)

The avoidance of "you are wrong" in contemporary Anglo culture is reflected, in a spectacular way, in the relative frequencies of "you are right" (and "you're right") and "you are wrong" (and "you're wrong") in the COBUILD Bank of English: for both UK Books and US Books, the frequency of "you're right" is five times higher than that of "you're wrong", and in UK Spoken English, ten times

higher. It seems that in contemporary (Anglo) American culture "wrong" in general tends to be increasingly avoided, as "presumptuous" and, as it were, "undemocratic". "Right" fares better, because while there are cultural scripts operating against both "right" and "wrong", there are other scripts operating in favour of "right" — especially in conversational routines where "right" refers to something said by the addressee, as in "that's right", but also in conversational responses like "right", "right you are", "too right", and so on. I will discuss these conversational routines in more detail in section 10.

8. "Right" as a response in dialogue

The use of "Right." as a "response signal" in dialogue goes back to 16th and 17th century, as the entry on right in the OED illustrates.

Chiron: O 'tis a verse in Horace, I know it well (...)
Aaron: Ay just, a verse in Horace; right, you have it.
(Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus, Act IV, sc. ii, ll. 22,24)

Dalyell: She's .... A princess of the blood, and I a subject
Huntly: Right, but a noble subject (Ford, 1968[1634]:22)

The OED defines this use of "Right." as "You are right; you say well". I think this definition is, essentially, quite apt: the first speaker expresses an opinion, and the second speaker agrees with and approves of what the first speaker says and thinks.

What the OED doesn't make clear is that "Right." as a dialogical response has other uses, and other meanings as well, and that some of these uses are quite recent. There is the use of the response "Right." in the spirit of "conversational cooperation", and then a number of other apparently recent uses of this response, not documented in the OED at all, which can all be characterized, roughly, in terms of "cooperation". Consider for example the following four exchanges from a play by the contemporary English playwright Simon Gray:

MELANIE (exiting): Off we go, St. John.
QUARTERMAINE: Right. (p. 274)

MELANIE (exiting): Jolly good – give her my love.
MEADLE: Right, Melanie, right. (p.265)

WINDSCAPE (off): Actually, I've just finished [a game], I'm afraid — perhaps next week.
QUARTERMAINE (off): Right, I'll hold you to that. 'Night. (p.239)

SACKLING: St. John, I'd be grateful if you'd stop referring to him as little Tom (...) — it makes him sound like something out of the workhouse.

QUARTERMAINE: O right — right. (p.256)

What happens in such exchanges can be schematically summarised as follows:

A says to B: I want something to happen
I want you to do something
B says to A: you say you want something to happen
you say you want me to do something
I know why you say it
you say it because you think it will be good if it happens
I think you say something good
I think you think well
because of this, I will do it

It could be argued that here, too, the addressee approves of what the speaker has said, and of the thinking behind the words. But this characterization, lumping together the Shakespearean and the modern usage, would fail to show the specific features of this new usage. I would argue that it would also prevent us from gleaning the cultural underpinnings of the new conversational routine. The term "cooperation" is more useful here, because it points to new types of social relations in a democratic society: the use of "Right." in response to a request, suggestion, direction or instruction signals a willingness to comply with another person's will while remaining on an equal footing. The assumption is that I will do what you say you want me to do because I know why you say it: I know that you are not trying to give me an order, to arbitrarily impose your will on me, but rather, because you think it will be good if what you want to happen happens. I see your request is rational — not necessarily because I agree that it will be good if this thing happens but because I can know what you want me to do and why. I do not have to express any satisfaction at your request but I do want to show that I know what you want to say and why. I accept your request as reasonable. (And so I will comply with it.)

Here is a characteristic Australian example — an employee ("Robbo") speaking on the phone to his boss, Barry Anderson:

Hello? Oh, g'day. Yes. Can do. Will do. Right. (Buzo 1973[1970]:57)

Robbo is almost caricaturally eager to comply with his boss's wishes, and while he would never say to the boss anything like "Yes sir", the expression "Right." serves him well. The use of "Right." indicates that both the boss and the subordinates link compliance with a spirit of equality and

cooperation, rather than any submissiveness or subservience.[3]

Conversational routines expressing something like "cooperation" are useful in a society where people have to take directions and instructions from others without treating those others as their masters. By saying "Right." in response to somebody else' expression of will the responder shows how he or she interprets that will: not as an order or a command but an understandable, rational thought that something is desirable.

In addition to expressing a willingness to cooperate, "Right." can also be used to acknowledge cooperation which has already taken place, and to express satisfaction. For example, in Alex Buzo's play "The front room boys" Pammy is collecting money from her colleagues in the office for various "causes" (somebody's birthday, somebody else's new baby and so on):

PAMMY:	Come on now ... dig deep ... pay up ... Craig Hiscock's birthday ... (...)
PAMMY:	That's all ....
ALL:	Thank you ...
PAMMY:	Right, that's the lot. That's it for today. (Buzo 1973[1970]:87)

Here, the speaker interprets her own earlier utterance as follows:

Interpretation
I said I wanted something to happen
I said I wanted you to do something
you could know why I said it
I said it because I thought it would be good if it happened

Now, Pammy is acknowledging, with satisfaction, her colleagues' compliance with her expressed wish and she interprets this compliance as based on the assumption that her wish was reasonable and made sense to her colleagues:

Response proper
you thought I said something good
you thought I thought well
because of this, you have done it
now I know that it has happened
this is good

9. "Right" and cultural scripts

Different cultures have different "cultural scripts" — different unwritten rules about how to behave, how to speak, and also, how to think and how to feel. Often, these cultural scripts include guidelines concerning appropriate ways to respond to what other people say. In other cases, there are

no specific scripts for how to respond to other people but there are implicit norms which follow from certain more general scripts (Wierzbicka 1991, 1994, 2001b).

For example, the Russian language offers ample evidence for the existence, and salience, of the following cultural script:

[people think:]
people say two kinds of things to other people
things of one kind are true
it is good if a person wants to say things of this kind to other people
things of the other kind are not true
it is bad if a person wants to say things of this other kind to other people

The existence and common colloquial use of the word nepravda ('untruth'), alongside pravda ('truth'), and the symmetrical use of phrases like govorit' pravdu ('to speak truth') and govorit' nepravdu ('to speak untruth'), is perhaps the clearest piece of evidence supporting this script; but there are others. (Cf. Apresjan 2000; Wierzbicka, Forthcoming b.)

In modern Anglo culture, a salient script enshrines the belief in the "freedom of expression":

[people think:]
if I think something about something I can say what I think
everyone can do this

As noted by Carbaugh (1988:29), this script and its various offshoots are repeatedly rehearsed on popular American TV shows like Donahue. Furthermore, while one can voice disagreement (though preferably, only partial disagreement), one cannot do it, to use Carbaugh's term, "impositionally":

[people think:]
when I say to another person what I think about something
I can't say something like this at the same time:
"you have to think the same"

The marked asymmetry between the use of right and wrong in English conversational routines suggests the following script:

[people think:]
when a person says to me what this person thinks about something
I can't say something like this to this person:
"it is bad if a person thinks like this about this"

What this means, in effect, is that while one can openly disagree with another person's opinion, one can't criticise it or condemn it (without violating a familiar cultural script): to do so would mean to set oneself above the other person and to refuse them the right to have their own opinion.

10. Retrospect and Conclusion: The Puritans, the Enlightenment, the growth of democracy

Let me try to sketch a short history of right (and to a lesser degree, wrong) in a very broad outline.

To begin with, right meant 'straight', as in a right line ('straight line'). Figuratively, perhaps, this right in the sense 'straight' was also used in an evaluative sense: 'good', with an additional component building on the geometrical image: 'clearly good', 'demonstrably good', 'one-could-say-why good'. Spoken of somebody else's words, "right" was linked (implicitly or explicitly) with "true", as in these three examples from Shakespeare:

> Thou'st spoken right. 'Tis true. (King Lear, Act V, sc. iii, l. 164)
> Most true, 'tis right, you were so, Alisander. (Love's Labour's Lost, Act V, sc. ii, l. 566)
> Right, you say true. (Richard II, Act II, sc. i, l. 146)

"Right" appears to mean here, essentially, 'good' or 'well', 'you speak well', 'you say well' — an evaluation supported with a reference to truth: 'because what you say is true'.

But in the course of the 17th and 18th century right appears to have begun to be used more and more with reference to thinking rather than speaking. The spread of the grammatical pattern linking "right" (and "wrong") as a predicate with persons as subjects is a reflection of this new emphasis on "right thinking". A sentence like "you are right" (or "he is right" etc.) combines an approval of what someone says with an approval of their thinking ("you speak well, you think well"). (The earliest examples that are cited in the OED of "wrong" as in "you are wrong" go back no further than the end of the 17th century.)

Generally speaking, the association of "right" with thinking seems to have spread in parallel with a contrastive use of "right" and "wrong" — a trend apparently encouraged by the influence of the Reformation, especially within its Calvinist wing. The substitution of the Bible and the individual conscience for the church was a key feature of the Protestant Reformation, and especially Calvinism. "In founding ethics on the Bible rather than on the leadership of the Catholic Church, Calvin opened the way to a decrease in the authority of human rulers and an increase in the authority of intellectual judgments" (Snell 1988:24). This emphasis on individual conscience and judgment was very much part of the Puritans' stand in England and then America. "The Puritan could rely only on his own reading of Scripture and his own conscience for light". As vividly depicted in Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, the key problem of every person's life is the great "either-or" of salvation vs. damnation. This "either-or", which is a matter of supreme importance, depends on distinguishing "the right" and "the wrong":

> Look before thee; dost thou see this narrow way? That is the way thou must go. (..) there are many ways butt down upon this; and they are crooked and wide; but thus thou may'st distinguish the right from the wrong [emphasis added] that only being straight and narrow.

As Bunyan's key image of the two ways illustrates, the Puritans had a highly polarised view of human life, which they saw as a choice between, on the one hand, a progress towards the Celestial City, linked with "the right way to go", and on the other, the path towards damnation, that is, the "wrong [way], tho' easy, when the end is woe". As Edmund Morgan writes in his book The Puritan Dilemma (1958:81), "the Puritans were extraordinarily reasonable men. The zeal with which they studied the Bible sprang from supreme confidence in the ability of reason to find the truth there. (…) Therefore they listened with respect to every man who could give reasons for his opinions, and if they thought his reason faulty, they used every possible argument to persuade him".

It is widely held that the impact of the Puritans on English culture went far beyond their purely religious influence. As Roger Sharrock (1965:13) says in his introduction to The Pilgrim's Progress, "through their Calvinistic preaching and commenting on the English Bible they had effected a cultural revolution and created a new type of Englishman, endowed with an earnestness and a sense of mission not present in his medieval ancestors". The Puritans' polarized view of life, seen as a choice between "the right way" and "the wrong way", may well have contributed to the emergence of "right" and "wrong" as key opposites in the English language and in the world of thought associated with it. In this respect, as in others, their influence may have meshed well with the influence of the Enlightenment's emphasis on "reason". In the age of Enlightenment, ethics came increasingly to be seen in terms of reason, and reason was linked with the notions of "right" and "wrong".

In 18th century America, Benjamin Franklin, whose Autobiography has been described as "the secular version of John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress" (Bellah et al. 1985:32), preached "the reasonable Science of Virtue", likening "the Science of Virtue" to other sciences (Levin 1963:32-33). Thus, for a long time reason became, for many speakers of English, a linchpin holding together religion, morality, and a "modern" scientific outlook.

It appears, however, that as democracy became more and more entrenched, first in America and then England, many speakers of English became less and less interested in denouncing other people's opinions as "wrong"; and the freedom of thought and expression began to be felt to be more important than the identification of any "wrong" opinions.

Thus, over the last two centuries or so, the discourse of "right and wrong" appears to have found a competitor in a discourse of "cooperation" and mutual concessions. Judging by both the frequency and range of its use, the word right flourished in this atmosphere, whereas wrong was increasingly left behind.

Speaking of the contemporary "death of conviction", Fernández-Armesto writes: "In a society of concessions to rival viewpoints, in which citizens hesitate to demand what is true and denounce what is false, it becomes impossible to defend the traditional moral distinctions between right and wrong,

which are relativized in turn." These remarks are consistent with the linguistic history of "right" and "wrong". The great career that "right" has made in spoken English does not mean that people are necessarily more confident about what they regard, and want to defend, as "right". Rather, we are witnessing an explosion of a purely conversational "right" — a conversational routine serving a pragmatic goal of conversational harmony and cooperation unrelated to any deeper consensus or conviction.

Everybody can say what they think, and therefore, whatever they say can be responded to with the cooperative conversational "Right.". It is not a question of truth, and not even, primarily, a question of agreement. Rather, it is a question of getting along together. Two centuries ago in his monumental study "Democracy in America", Tocqueville wrote:

> The political institutions of the United States put citizens of all classes in constant contact and compel them to carry out great undertakings together. People busy in this way have hardly time to think about the details of etiquette, and they also have too great an interest in living in harmony to stop for that. (1966:543)

The birth and triumphant spread (first in America and then elsewhere) of the various conversational routines based on the word okay (yet to be studied in depth from a semantic point of view) clearly supports Tocqueville's brilliant insight; but in a way, so does the expansion of the conversational "right" in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (recorded by the OED). As we have seen, "right" can be used to acknowledge one's interlocutor's words as "good" and valid, not because they are true, and not even because one agrees with them, but because they express, quite legitimately, the other person's point of view. It can also be used to acknowledge and accept what another person wants us to do, on an "equal footing" and in the spirit of voluntary cooperation.

Donal Carbaugh (1988) rightly links the common Anglo-American assumption that "individuals have rights" with common American conversational routines, when he says that "…not only do individuals, or Americans, have rights, but also Americans, as individuals, preserve and protect their rights through their routine verbal performances" (p. 25). The common conversational routine of responding to another person's expressed view with "Right." is, I suggest, one of those routine verbal performances. It is a response which reaffirms the value of the practice of expressing one's opinions and of listening, willingly, to other people's views. If I can't say that I think that "you think well" I can at least say that you have expressed yourself well because I now know what you think (or: want to say) – and "this is good, too".[5]

The transition from the Shakespearean response "Right.", described by the OED as "you are right; you speak well", to the present-day "Right." of non-committal acknowledgement can be represented as follows:

A. you say you think something
you speak well
[because what you say is true]

B. you say you think / want something
you speak well
[because I now know what you think / want-to-say]

In Shakespeare's usage, the approval of someone else's words, expressed with "Right." refers, explicitly or implicitly, to truth; in present-day English, the approval of someone's else words expressed with "Right." refers to a successful act of communication. The implications are:

A. Right → it is true (this is good)

B. Right → I know what you think / want-to-say (this is good)

While noting these changes in the conversational routines involving the word right, we should at the same time note that the distinction between "right" and "wrong" as opposites continues to be taken for granted in the world of thought associated with the English language — both on the level of theory and scholarship (in philosophy, education, and so on) and in everyday life. In order to understand this peculiar feature of English, and Anglo, discourse, we need, inter alia, to take up some of Max Weber's searching questions, and "attempt to penetrate into the peculiar characteristics of and the differences between those great worlds of religious thought which have existed historically in the various branches of Christianity" (Weber 1995:45). To understand the continuing salience of the concepts "right" and "wrong" in English/Anglo discourse, we need to try to enter not only the world of John Locke, David Hume, and other British thinkers who influenced the intellectual climate in Britain in the 17th and 18th century (and, indirectly, in North America), but also the world of thought of the English and American Puritans.

In his well-known book After Virtue Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) writes that "the Enlightenment project" of basing morality on reason has failed. Indeed, MacIntyre takes this failure for granted. It should be recognized, however, that the continued use, in colloquial English, of the words right and wrong as a basic yardstick with which to evaluate human conduct continues, in a sense, "the Enlightenment project". For speakers of English, the opposites "right" and "wrong" are still important conceptual tools, available for use, and indeed widely used, in everyday life (not to mention Anglophone philosophy, education, developmental psychology, and so on). There is also the word evil, but this tends to be reserved for situations thought of as extreme. In daily life, human conduct still tends to be evaluated, by speakers of English, in terms of "right" and "wrong". My point is that this way of speaking, and thinking, about human life is profoundly culture-specific. Three centuries after the Enlightenment, everyday moral discourse in French and German, and in other European languages, is still based on the notions GOOD and BAD, not on any putative equivalents of the English right and wrong. For this there must be reasons; and these reasons appear to include the religious roots of modern Anglo culture, and the influence of the Puritans. Both "the distrust of metaphysics" and the belief in reason as the basis for a "good life" continue to live on in everyday

Anglo discourse in the form of the key cultural concepts "right" and "wrong".

The continued presence, and salience, of the words right and wrong in English/Anglo discourse suggests the continued presence of some cultural scripts linking evaluation of human action with critical thinking and the need for justification.

In her essay "Losing your concepts", philosopher Cora Diamond explores the idea of "living with concepts", and speaks of "a human good [of] having a range of concepts through which the characterizing facts of human life enter our sense of who we are and what we experience" (1998:26, quoted in Besemeres, In press). For speakers of English, living means, inter alia, living with the concepts "right" and "wrong". It also means living with cultural scripts related to these key concepts. Culture-specific key concepts (cf. Wierzbicka 1997) and cultural scripts are usually inter-related, and often the links between the two are most clearly visible in everyday conversational routines: in greetings, in swearing, in forms of address, in the give-and-take of everyday verbal exchanges (cf. Wierzbicka 2001b). The use of right in English conversational routines is related to the use of "right" and "wrong" in English folk-philosophy. Conversational routines – like key cultural concepts – reflect historically shaped values, attitudes, and ways of thinking.

NOTE

1. The full set of universal human concepts which has emerged from cross-linguistic investigations undertaken by many scholars over the last few decades can be presented in the form of the following table (for fuller discussion, see Wierzbicka 1996a, Goddard 1998, Goddard and Wierzbicka, eds. 1994 and In press):

English version

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE(PERSON), SOMETHING(THING), PEOPLE, BODY
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, SOME, MANY/MUCH, ALL,
Attributes:	GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech:	SAY, WORD, TRUE
Actions, events, movements	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence, and possession:	THERE IS, HAVE
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Time:	WHEN(TIME), NOW, AFTER, BEFORE, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME
Space:	WHERE(PLACE), HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE
Intensifier, augmentor:	VERY, MORE
Taxonomy, partonomy:	KIND OF, PART OF
Similarity:	LIKE (HOW, AS)

These elements have their own, language-independent syntax, giving us in effect a mini-language. This mini-language – the so-called "natural semantic metalanguage" (NSM) – is used throughout this paper as a basic methodological and descriptive tool. This means that all the formulae given in this paper are phrased in NSM – the mini-language of universal human concepts.

2. It could be suggested that the Russian words pravil'no and nepravil'no match the English right and wrong (especially in the moral sense), but this is an illusion. For example, these words could never be used in contexts like "the origins of right and wrong in humans and other animals" or "you must acknowledge a distinction between right and wrong, founded in nature".

3. In addition to the common use of Right. as a signal of cooperation, Australian English has also developed its own routines, based on the characteristically Australian forms righto and rightio. Roughly speaking, the meaning of these words includes – in addition to the meaning of right – components of good humour and relaxed light-heartedness, which can be represented as follows:

when I say this to you I feel something good
I don't think: "this is a big thing"

4. The theory of "cultural scripts" cannot be discussed here in more detail for reasons of space; see, however, Wierzbicka 1991, 1994, 1996b, 1998, 2001b; Goddard (1997, 2001).

5. One characteristic conversational routine featuring "wrong" rather than "right" is "don't get me wrong". Here, the implications are that "I want you to know what I want to say with these words" (the value of successful "communication") and that I realize that what I am saying could be misleading. Since the speaker is referring to the addressee's potential rather than actual thoughts, and is implicitly accepting responsibility for any possible misinterpretation, there is no reason why the addressee should feel offended by such a use of "wrong'.

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