The Meanings of "Right" and "Wrong"

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1. Introduction

In English, the orthographic form "right" occurs as a verb, a noun, and an adverb as well as an adjective. In each case, the orthographic form has at least two senses and in some cases several more. To illustrate, consider the following pairs of senses associated with the verbal, nominal, and adverbial forms respectively:

One can right a ship.[1]
One can right a wrong.

A driver can take a right.
A government can take a right away.

One can do something right.
One can do something right in front of you.

The focus of this paper is on the orthographic form "right" in its adjectival occurrences.[2]

In section 2, I offer semantic and grammatical reasons in support of the claim that there are at least five adjectives "right." I call these five adjectives "directional,"

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[1] Throughout the paper I use Arial font for linguistic examples offset from the main text.
[2] Remarkably little compelling work on this subject has be done. Cp. W.D. Ross, "The Meaning of 'Right'," in *The Right and the Good*, Clarendon Press, 1930, 1-15; C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, Yale University Press, 1944, 97; A.C. Ewing, *The Definition of Good*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948, 123-24; R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, Oxford University Press, 1952, 150-53, 181-83; J. O. Urmson, *The Emotive Theory of Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 1968, 92-97; and more recently, but also more tangentially, J. J. Thomson, "The Right and the Good," *Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1997) 273-98; A. Wierzbicka, "*Right* and *Wrong*: from philosophy to everyday discourse," *Discourse Studies* 4 (2002) 225-52; B. Schwarz, "Attributive *Wrong*," *Proceedings of the 25th West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*, eds. D. Baumer, D. Montero, M. Scanlon, Cascadilla Proceedings Project, 2006, 362-70.

"political," "geometrical," "healthful," and "normative" "right" respectively. The most philosophically important adjective "right" is normative "right"; and this adjective is the focus of the remainder of the paper (sections 3-10).

　　　　In discussing the semantic and grammatical properties of normative "right," I compare it with the adjectives "good" (section 5), "correct" (section 8), and "true" (sections 9-10). My central claims are the following. The normativity of normative "right" entails non-gradable purposiveness. In contrast, "good" entails gradable purposiveness. Furthermore, the non-gradable purposiveness that "right" entails strongly prefers, although it does not require, what I call "uniformity" of purposiveness. A kind of purposiveness is uniform if there is only one way that the purpose in question can be served. In contrast, "correct," which is also normative and whose normativity also entails non-gradable purposiveness, does not strongly prefer, let alone require, uniformity of purposiveness. Finally, the relevant sense of "true" – for "true" is at least three ways ambiguous – is both non-normative and, in contrast to normative "right" and "correct," only applicable to propositional entities.