

The Story of RIGHT and WRONG and Its Cultural Implications

3.1. Introduction

One of the most interesting phenomena in the history of the English language is the remarkable rise of the word *right*, in its many interrelated senses and uses. It is not the purpose of this chapter to document this rise in detail but rather to draw attention to it, to raise questions about its cultural underpinnings, and to formulate some hypotheses for future investigations.

I begin with two fragments from informal interviews tape-recorded by the sociologist Douglas Porpora, with the occurrences of *right* numbered:

1. 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." (Porpora 2001: 79)

2. "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." (Porpora 2001, 111–112)

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 here. All the bilingual native speakers of German, French, and Italian I've asked found themselves embarrassed and unexpectedly confounded by the task and proposed either renderings like *yes* and *true* (*ja*, *oui*, *sí*; *wahr*, *vrais*, *vero*) 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 two previous fragments. For the sake of convenience, I will call these senses "moral," "intellectual," and "conversational."

The "moral" sense of *right* is linked, in particular, with the phrase "right or wrong" and related phrases like "a sense of right and wrong," "how to tell right from wrong," and so on. It is also manifested in sentences like the following one, which opens a book on ethics (based on a series of public lectures given at Columbia University in 1954): "In all the world and in all of life there is nothing more important to determine than what is right" (Lewis 1955, 3).

It has often been said, and justly so, that *right* in this sense refers to what a person does. To quote another philosopher, Ross (1955, 7), "right" and "wrong" refer entirely to the thing done." The "thing" in question can be mental rather than physical, as in the case of a *right choice* or *right decision*, but the mental acts involved can also be interpreted as a person *doing something*. To be called "right" or "wrong," however, the *doing* has to involve some thinking. To quote Lewis (1955) again, "No manner of behavior wholly untouched by thinking could be right or wrong" (p. 79), and "whatever is decidable or can be determined by deliberation is right or wrong" (p. 20).

The entry for *right* in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (1995, 75) reads:

right, the. What is right to do, as distinct from what is good to do. One of the traditional problems of moral philosophy is that of relating the right and the good.

What this entry doesn't say is that the problem of "relating the right and the good" is a problem restricted to *Anglo* moral philosophy: in other philosophical traditions, the problem does not present itself (at least not in this form) because there is no word corresponding to *right*. This is a good example of "philosophical problems" that originate in the philosopher's native language.

Similarly, the entry on *right action* in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* reads: "No subject is more central to moral philosophy or ethics than that of right and wrong action" (1995, 775). Expressing a certain impatience with the "linguistic philosophy" of the second half of the twentieth century, the author of the article goes on to comment:

During the hey-day of Anglo-American meta-ethics, philosophers were often on principle more interested in defining ethical notions than in offering a substantive view of what actions are right and what actions are wrong. . . . But over the

longer history of philosophy and certainly nowadays as well, a greater interest has been taken in giving a substantive account of rightness.

The assumption behind these statements is that it is possible in principle to give a “substantive account of rightness” without paying any attention to the word *rightness* itself—as if “rightness” were a phenomenon “out there,” independent of the English language, and one that could be discussed in any other language.

Philosopher Jonathan Harrison, in his book *Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, writes:

The fact with which second-order moral philosophy starts is that we have in the English language, together with equivalents in other languages, words such as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘duty’, ‘ought’, and so on, which words have, roughly, the function of appraising people and things and the status of affairs and of directing behaviour. It is, of course, just a matter of fact that languages possess words which have this function. (Harrison 1971, 18)

Harrison is mistaken: it is actually a matter of fact that many languages *don’t* have words like the English *right* and *wrong* (or, for that matter, *duty* and *ought*). They all have, however, equivalents of *good* and *bad*, and they also have equivalents of *true* (though not of *false*). I discuss these differences and similarities between different languages further in the next section.

The “intellectual” sense of *right* comes into play, above all, in the phrase *that’s right*. Because this phrase is normally used in dialogue, as a response to somebody else’s words, it may seem difficult to distinguish it from the use labeled here as “conversational.” But “That’s right” (unlike the purely conversational response “Right.”) endorses a belief. For example, when Guzia says, “That’s right. One God is for everybody,” she is saying, in effect, that the *belief* expressed by her interlocutor is “right.” By contrast, the conversational response “Right.” may not indicate that the speaker regards the belief expressed by another person as “right” but only that he or she understands what the other person is saying. This potentially “noncommittal” character of “Right.” is particularly clear in the following fragment:

“Okay,” Frederick continues. “The Old Testament . . . but the book of Revelations only mentions twelve thousand from each tribe. Or a hundred and forty-four thousand.”

“Right.” I am familiar with the belief among Seventh Day Adventists and some other fundamentalist groups that when Jesus comes again, there will be exactly one hundred and forty thousand Jews who will be saved by their conversion to Christ. (Porpora 2001, 143–144)

It is clear from the context that the interviewer does not share the interviewee’s belief, and so cannot regard it as “right.” What appears to be “right” in this third sense is neither an action nor a belief, but rather an understanding of what one’s interlocutor is saying. As I discuss later, the conversational “Right.” can also be seen as voicing the speaker’s satisfaction with what has just been said, perhaps because it is clear.

In this chapter, I argue that the “moral,” “intellectual,” and “conversational” uses of *right* are related and that the emergence and expansion of the second (“intellectual”) and the third (“conversational”) are linked with the rise of the first (“moral”). More generally, I argue that salient conversational routines are related to deeply

entrenched ways of thinking and that changes in conversational routines follow changes in attitudes, values, and worldview.

The rise of the conversational *right* in English is a language-specific and culture-specific phenomenon that could not possibly be explained in terms of supposedly universal rules of politeness, conversational logic, or maxims of interaction, in the spirit of Grice (1975), Brown and Levinson (1987), or Leech (1983). Of course, quasiparallels to the conversational *right* can be found in many languages, and without rigorous semantic analysis, such parallels may seem close enough for some pragmatic explanations to appear 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 distinction between *right* and *wrong* and the emergence of *right* as a discourse marker, both phenomena must be seen as innovations that set English apart from 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.

3.2. “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 scholars, including 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 invoked frequently in theoretical discussions and 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. For example, philosopher Oliver Johnson, the author of a book entitled *Rightness and Goodness* (1959, 1), writes of “ethical intuitionism” as “the theory which holds that rightness—with its opposite, wrongness—is a fundamental, irreducible, and immediately apprehended ethical concept.” Contrasting this theory with “axiological theories,” which, he says, “make goodness—with its opposite, badness—the single fundamental ethical concept and rightness subordinate to, and derivative from it” (p. 1), Johnson affirms that “both concepts—rightness and goodness—are of fundamental importance to the moral life of man” (p. 2).

Psychologists, too, often take the notions of right and wrong for granted and regard them as human universals. For example, according to Kohlberg’s (1981) “cognitive developmental theory”:

The development of the idea of a moral obligation is related to the development of general skills of rational reasoning. . . . Movement through the stages is related

to the cognitive ability to construct, and to transcend to, a detached, impartial vantage point from which one evaluates right and wrong objectively. (Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1990, 131)

The point 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. To use these English words as one’s basic tools for describing and comparing different cultures—or for talking about “children’s moral development” (not English-speaking children but human children in general)—means to introduce into the discussion an unjustified Anglocentric bias.

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, and we have argued, on the basis of empirical cross-linguistic research, that these universals include the concepts GOOD and BAD. We have also argued that while GOOD and BAD can be used across a wide range of domains and are by no means restricted to moral discourse, they can occur in all languages in combinations like “I (you, someone, this person) did something bad/good” or “it is good/bad if someone does something like this” (see Wierzbicka 2001, 161–169).

Moreover, we have argued 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. Table 3.1 shows some examples (see Goddard and Wierzbicka, eds., 1994, 2002).

But what applies to *good*, *bad*, and *true* does not apply to *right* and *wrong*,¹ and given the central role of *right* and *wrong* in Anglo moral discourse, the questions 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, 1727):

I see the right, and I approve it too,
Condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue.

TABLE 3.1 GOOD, BAD, and TRUE in Spanish, Malay, and Mandarin Chinese

	Good	Bad	True
Spanish	bueno	malo	verdad
Malay	baik	buruk	benar
Mandarin Chinese	hǎo	huài	zhēn

(*Video meliora probaque, deteriora sequor.*)
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. Bk. vii, l.20. Translated by Samuel Garth)

The tendency to take the concepts ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ for granted, as if they were universal and not dependent on language and culture, can also be illustrated with standard definitions of concepts like “conscience.” For example (*Oxford Companion to Philosophy* 1995, 152):

Conscience. By “conscience” is meant the sense of right and wrong in an individual; described variously by philosophers as a reflection of the voice of God, as a human faculty, as the voice of reason, or as a special moral sense.

The author of this entry refers here to St. Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of “conscience.” But for Aquinas, conscience was *not* “the sense of right and wrong” but rather the sense of *bonum* and *malum*, that is, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 2ae, Q, 19, arts. 5 and 6). For speakers of most modern European languages, too, ‘conscience’ is usually linked with the notions ‘good’ and ‘bad’, rather than ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993, 89) speaks about the “conscience” as follows (quoting the document of the Second Vatican Council entitled “Gaudium et Spes”):

In the depths of his conscience man detects a law which he does not impose on himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: “do this, shun that.” For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged (cf. Rom 2:14–6).

The English translation of the Latin original uses here the words *good* and *evil* (rather than *good* and *bad*), *evil* being a more specialized concept referring to “wanting to do bad things” rather than simply *doing* them. But again, in most other translations, the original simple equivalents of the Latin *bonum* and *malum* (i.e., *good* and *bad*) have been used (in German, *das Gute* and *das Böse*; in French, *le bien* and *le mal*; in Italian, *il bene* and *il male*; in Spanish, *el bien* and *el mal*, and so on) because, as noted earlier, GOOD and BAD—in contrast to ‘right’ and ‘wrong’—are universal human concepts, with semantically equivalent exponents in all languages.

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 *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” (see Wierzbicka 2001, 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.

Thus, I would not dispute de Waal’s claim that “Morality is as firmly grounded in neurobiology as anything else we do or are” (1996, 217). But to make such claims plausible, one must be careful to find the right (!) way of expressing them. For example, when de Waal says, “Once thought of as purely spiritual matters, honesty, guilt, and the weighing of ethical dilemmas are traceable to specific areas of the brain” (1996, 217), he doesn’t take into account the fact that ‘honesty’ and ‘guilt’, too, are culture-specific conceptual constructs, without exact equivalents in languages other than English. *Right* and *wrong* are, in this respect, like *honesty* and *guilt*. The question of whether they may be “traceable to specific areas of the brain” can be raised only by scholars whose native language includes the words *right* and *wrong*. A better (less language-dependent) question to ask would be whether the notion that “people can do bad [or good] things” can be traced to specific areas of the brain, or whether it has animal parallels.

Moral discourse based on the notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is, of course, not absent from Anglo culture either. To take some examples 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,” seventeenth century)

There is no Good, there is no Bad; these be the whim of moral will.
 (Sir Richard Burton, nineteenth century)

There are two kinds of people on earth to-day
 Just two kinds of people, no more, I say.
 Not the good and the bad, for ’tis well understood
 That the good are half bad and the bad are half good. . . .
 (Ella Wheeler Wilcox, nineteenth–twentieth centuries)

For good ye are and bad, and like to coins,
 Some true, some light.
 (Tennyson, nineteenth century)

The greater part of what my neighbours call good
 I believe in my soul to be bad.
 (H. D. Thoreau, *Walden*, nineteenth century)

It is interesting to note 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, and leave consequences to him who has the disposal of them. (Thomas Jefferson, eighteenth–nineteenth centuries)

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, nineteenth century)

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

It is particularly interesting to recall here the following passage from the classic document of American culture, the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (“long regarded at home and abroad as the quintessential American,” Bellah et al. 1985, 32), which was written in 1784:

It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. (Franklin 1964, 148)

Admittedly, these quotes, which express their authors’ confidence in their ability to distinguish the ‘right’ from the ‘wrong’, sound dated today: in the postmodern world, many people would hesitate to speak in similar tones. But if one looks at the use of *right* and *wrong* in English in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, 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 for distinguishing right from wrong rather than simply good from bad?

We will consider these questions more closely in the next section. First, however, let us note that collocations linking *right* with *wrong* in English 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”; it was only linked with the *ability to know* that one was doing something bad (to someone else). 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. 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 (“good” or “bad”)? 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. (Bunyan 1965, 74)

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

A few early examples of the contrastive use of *right* and *wrong* (no longer linked with the idea of wronging someone) can already be found in Shakespeare, to wit:

Force should be right, or rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides.
(Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Act I, sc. iii, ll. 116–117)

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)

Thus, 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 that one should seek to approximate and that 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.

3.3. 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 these are (as colleagues and I have shown; see, e.g., Wierzbicka 1996c; Goddard 1998) unanalyzable conceptual primes. We can, however, ask about the meaning of the words *right* and *wrong* (as in the previous quotes), and here it can help to consider two expressions that do have equivalents in many other European languages: “you (we, they, etc.) are (were) right” and “you (we, they, etc.) are (were) wrong,” that is, expressions that link the adjectives *right* and *wrong* used as predicates with human subjects. Interestingly, in several European languages, the literal equivalents of these expressions include a word that can also mean “reason.” For example:

tu as raison (French)
you have reason
“you’re right”

[tu] hai ragione (Italian)
[you] have reason
“you’re right”

What does it mean to say to someone “you’re right” (*tu as raison*, *hai ragione*)? 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: “I think (now) that it is like this”
b. when you think like this you think well
c. it is like this
d. if someone thinks that it is not like this, this someone doesn’t think well
e. people can know that it is like this

Component (a) acknowledges the interlocutor’s current opinion, component (b) approves of the interlocutor’s thinking, component (c) confirms that this thinking corresponds to the way things are, component (d) contrasts this way of thinking

with a different (wrong) one, and component (e) shows that this evaluation can be supported with reference to some interpersonally valid criteria (or reasons).

For a person to be “right” does not mean to think what most people think, because one can readily say in English: “I believe that she is right, although most people disagree with her.” At the same time, the sentence “she is right” implies that what “she” thinks is objectively valid and that in principle other people *can* know this. If this is right, then what does it mean to say about something that “this is right” (an expression that, in contrast to “you/they/we etc. are right,” does not have equivalents in other European languages)? Presumably, it means something analogous to “you (they, we, etc.) are right”:

This is right. =

- a. if someone thinks that it is like this, this person thinks well
- b. if someone thinks that it is not like this, this person doesn’t think well
- c. it is like this
- d. people can know that it is like this

I believe that this analysis can also be extended to English collocations like *the right decision* or *the right choice* or *the right solution*: the decision, the choice, or the solution is the outcome 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 that, the speaker thinks, could be somehow objectively validated.

But if this is what *the right decision*, *the right choice*, or *the right solution* means, *the right thing to do* would seem to mean something very similar—or perhaps even the same. 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!” that is 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.

“We can send other men when I see the army approaching, for the final warning, like, but this way the banadar will know our situation.” “Good thinking,” Dar said.

“You know, I was thinking. We’d best tether the mule close, in here if that’s possible. I don’t want it being chased away in the night and having Otho insist on chasing after.” “Good thinking. We’ll do that.”

It is particularly interesting to note cases where the phrase *good thinking* is combined overtly with the word *right* and 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 that 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 “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,” in which he likened “a Man of Sense,” that is, “a virtuous man” (contrasted with “a vicious man”), to an arithmetician:

There seems no necessity that to be a Man of Sense, he should never make a Slip in the Path of Virtue, or in Point of Morality; provided he is sensible of his Failing and diligently applies himself to rectify what is done amiss, and to prevent the like for the future. The best Arithmetician may err in casting up a long Account; but having found that Error, he *knows how* to mend it, and immediately does so; and is, notwithstanding that Error, an Arithmetician; But he who *always* blunders, and cannot correct his Faults in Accounting, is no Arithmetician; nor is the habitually-vicious Man a Man of Sense. (quoted in Levin 1963, 32)

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 that doesn’t need to be grounded in metaphysics (in particular, in God) but can be grounded in reason.

Emphasizing the influence of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ British empiricism on the general intellectual climate of the time, Fernández-Armesto, the author of *Truth: A History and Guide for the Perplexed*, 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. (Fernández-Armesto 1998, 153)

As I discussed elsewhere (Wierzbicka 2002d), 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). Here, 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 return to this convergence between *good* and *true* in *right* in section 3.6.)

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” (1998, 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’s 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 2002d.) 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.

Although the use of reason is as old as the history of mankind, its spells of preponderance succeed those of the truth you feel and the truth you are told. Reason provides a means of escaping from the constraints of belief-systems backed by authority and from the resentment which clever people feel at the power of their own passions. Because reason—in admittedly varying degrees—is available to everybody, it has a potential advantage over the truth you feel and the truth you are told. . . .

Reason means different things to different people. To some people—a lot of them, a hundred years ago—it has meant thought purged of metaphysics and dogma. In the powerful tradition known as “pure rationalism” it means thought opposed to other kinds of experience. In that known as empiricism, it means the opposite: thought disciplined by the evidence of sense. (Fernández-Armesto 1998, 85–86)

The peculiar character of the British rationalism (rationalism cum empiricism), combining thinking with knowing, is reflected in the key English word *mind*. The meaning of this word is revealingly different from the French *esprit* or the German *Geist*, neither of which includes a similar combination. Only the English *mind* contrasts the “body” (matched by the French *corps* and the German *Körper*) with an organ of thinking and knowing. (For further discussion, see Wierzbicka 1992, chapter 1.)

The combination of empiricism with an emphasis on reason in British thought is stressed in Charles Taylor’s classic *Sources of the Self*, with special reference to John Locke, of whom he wrote:

What probably made Locke the great teacher of the Enlightenment was his combination of these two factors: that he offered a plausible account of the new science as valid knowledge, intertwined with a theory of rational control of the self; and that he brought the two together under the ideal of rational self-responsibility.

Many things have been declared authoritatively true, both in science and in practice, which have no real title to the name. The rational, self-responsible subject can break with them, suspend his adhesion to them, and by submitting them to the test of their validity, remake or replace them.

Holding the package together is an ideal of freedom or independence, backed by a conception of disengagement and procedural reason. This has given Locke’s outlook its tremendous influence, not only in the eighteenth century, but right through to today. (Taylor 1989, 174)

Significantly, Locke’s book on religion bears the title *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1999 [1696]). 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.”

The two key words of modern Anglo culture, *evidence* (in the modern sense) and *reasonable*, have spread in parallel in the intellectual climate created by the British philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Evidence* (in the modern sense of the word) has no semantic counterpart in other European languages at all (as discussed in Wierzbicka 2002d, forthcoming) and does not appear, for example, in Shakespeare’s work. *Reasonable* and *reasonably* don’t have exact counterparts in French, and in German, Italian, or other European languages, neither *reasonable* nor *reasonably* has any semantic equivalent at all (see chapter 4).

It is also interesting to note how “pragmatic” the words *reasonable* and *reasonably* sound in modern English. Fernández-Armesto (1998, 86) writes: “‘Be reasonable,’ we say when we want someone to sacrifice an opinion in the interests of consensus.” This may not be a very accurate analysis of what *reasonable* means, but in essence, the observation is surely apt, pointing to a kind of convergence between folk rationalism and folk pragmatism in modern Anglo culture: to be “reasonable,” one needs to know not only how to think well but also how to interact, pragmatically, with other people. As we will see when we look more closely at the conversational routines based on the word *right*, these routines point to a similar convergence.

3.4. “That’s Right”

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 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!* or “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 “antimetaphysical” 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 *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 "that's true" nor "I think the same" could be substituted for "that's right" in the following exchange from the Australian writer Alex Buzo's play *The Front Room Boys*:

THOMO: Oh, you must be the new typist.

SUNDRA: That's right. [? I agree; ? that's true] (p. 28)

Neither would the glosses "I agree" or "that's true" fit the following exchange from the English playwright Simon Gray's play *Quartermaine's Terms*:

LOOMIS: Yes, yes, of course, you're right, my dear, thank you, thank you. And a little rest—and I'll try to make Thomas have one, too—

MELANIE: That's right [? that's true], Eddie, you both need it. (Gray 1986, 244)

Is "that's right" analogous to "you're right"? Yes and no. Of the two, "that's right" sounds more factual and also more conversational. Typically, the word *that* refers in this phrase to the interlocutor's words immediately preceding the response and only indirectly to the thinking behind it:

That's right. =

- a. you say: "I think that it is like this"
- b. when you think like this you think well
- c. it is like this
- d. people can know that it is like this

Component (a) shows that when used as a conversational response, *that's right* refers to the interlocutor's words. Component (b) refers to the thinking behind the words and expresses approval of this thinking, component (c) confirms that this way of thinking corresponds to the way things are, 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 signal "that's right" does not have a negative counterpart ("that's wrong"). 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 spread of conversational routines based on *right* goes hand in hand in English with the ascendancy of *really* over *truly*. Arguably, both *really* and *right* have occupied in English some of the ground still covered in other European languages (and earlier, in English) by *truth*. In saying "that's right" rather than "that's true," the speaker implies that there is some evidence, some procedure, or some commonly recognized standard to appeal to. It is not a matter of some "metaphysical truth" but rather a matter of "facts" that the speaker has access to. It is not surprising, therefore, that "that's right" is often used in response to questions concerning the speaker himself or herself (as in Sundra's response to Thomo). In particular, this phrase is often

used to confirm other people's suppositions concerning what we think or what we are trying to say. Some examples from Porpora's interviews:

I try to bring the conversation back to God's collective purpose for us. "Why, do you think that God . . . You think that God created human beings?" "That's right," says Frederick. (Porpora 2001, 143)

Like others, Martha has once again reduced the question of our collective human purpose to God's individual purpose for her. I try to make certain of her position. "Now, and when you say that we're all here for a purpose, you mean we each individually have a different purpose?"

"That's right" says Martha. "I think . . ."

"Yeah," Frederick echoes. "We each have a purpose to be here." (Porpora 2001, 143)

"Do you remember when you first had that . . . belief?"

"Yes, since I came here. I'm telling you."

"What . . . Can you describe, though, the incident?" I'm pressing my luck.

"The incident? Yes, when my kid was born."

"That was the first time you started to believe in something?"

"That's right. That's right. It was a miracle. I start building . . . what we lost in the old country. I start building a new generation." (Porpora 2001, 109)

As noted earlier, the conversational response "that's right," which, roughly speaking, endorses another person's belief, has no opposite; the expression "that's wrong" is not similarly used in English as a standard conversational routine. This 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 return later). With the growth of individualism and "decline of conviction" (see Bellah et al. 1985; Fernández-Armesto 1998), calling somebody else's thoughts "wrong" has increasingly come to be seen as inappropriate (even "totalitarian"; see Crossan 1980)—as inappropriate as calling somebody else's *actions* "wrong." 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. Moreover, it does not sound patronizing because it implicitly appeals to some evidence.

3.5. An Illustration: English vs. Italian

Consider the use of the word *vero* ("true") in the following exchange from Giovanni Arpino's novel *La Suora Giovane*:

"Non è peccato, vero?" "No," riuscii a spicciare. (Arpino 1973, 45)

"It is not a sin, true?" "No," I managed to utter.

Although literally *vero* would be translated as "true," normally "true" (or "is it true?") would not be used in English in such a context. Instead, a "reverse word order, opposite polarity" tag question would probably be used: "It is not a sin, is it?" A tag question of this kind would be checking the opinion of the interlocutor, not the truth of the sentence. Yet in Italian, the use of *vero?* in such nonfactual sentences is very common. A few more examples (from the same novel):

Sei mesi fa mia madre è venuta a trovarmi. . . . Pativo e mi vergagnavo con lei. È brutto questo, vero? (p. 54)

“Six months ago my mother came to visit me. . . . I suffered and was ashamed of her. This is pretty bad, isn’t it?” (Lit. “true?”)

Antonino, insegnami, ti prego. Vero che mi insegnerai? (p. 61)

“Antonio, teach me, I beg you. You *will* teach me, won’t you?”

(Lit. “True that you’ll teach me?”)

Per mesi ho sperato di vederti con loro. È stupido, vero? (p. 64)

“For months I hoped to see you with them. Stupid, isn’t it?”

(Lit. “It is stupid, true?”)

As I have discussed in my *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics* (Wierzbicka 1991/2003a, 37), the extensive use of tag questions is a characteristic feature of modern English, with important cultural implications. But the semantic content of the typical (reverse word order, opposite polarity) English tag questions is as revealing as their frequency. In most other European languages (including Italian, Spanish, German, Polish, Russian, and Finnish), tag questions typically involve the word for *true*, as in Italian, and by using them, the speaker is asking the addressee to confirm that the sentence is true. In English, on the other hand, the speaker does not refer to the sentence’s truth but rather asks the addressee to confirm (or disconfirm) the speaker’s expectation that the addressee would say “it is like this” or “it is not like this.” For example:

Stupid, isn’t it? =

- a. when I think about it I think that it is like this
- b. I think that you will say: “it is like this”
- c. I know that you can say: “it is not like this”

The tag question “right?” (which is less common in English and which is described by the OED as “originally US”) sounds more forceful, sometimes even hectoring, because it refers, obliquely, to evidence: “right?” indicates that the addressee will have no choice but to confirm the speaker’s expectation. I will propose two different (though symmetrical) explications for “right?” linked with different contexts.

A. with declaratives

Example

I mean different people are taught different values, right? (from Porpora 2001, 79)

Explication

(I mean different people are taught different values, right?) =

- a. when I think about it I think that it is like this [different people have different values]
- b. I think that you will say something like this now:
- c. “when you think like this you think well
- d. it is like this
- e. people can know that it is like this”
- f. I want you to say it

B. with instructions

Example

ROBBO: Now, cross-check the registration column in that index and see if it matches up with the number of dates of reports received up until this date here, right? (from p. 26)

Explication

(Now, cross-check . . . and see . . . , right?)

- a. I think that you can know what I want to say
- b. I think that you can know what I want you to do
- c. I think that you will say something like this now:
- d. “when you think like this you think well
- e. it is like this
- f. I know what you want to say
- g. I know what you want me to do”

Because the word *right* implies the availability of rational justification when it is used as a tag question, it does not combine with an expression of purely subjective opinion (see Wierzbicka 1991/2003a, 42), for example:

She is nice, isn’t she?

She is nice, right?

As we have seen, the interrogative *right?* can be added to declarative sentences, too, but only with reference to statements or instructions that imply a clear factual basis, as in the following examples (from the OED):

He was just doing his job, right? (1969)

I was living alone on the West Side, in a one-room apartment . . . , right? (1977)

You been here before, right? (1981)

“Right?” implies here that what the speaker says is verifiable, factual, precise—it can be *known* rather than merely *thought*, as in the case of “she is nice.” Thus, the use of *right* as a tag presupposes a distinction between facts and opinions, a distinction that is not similarly made in languages that use an equivalent of *true* for both opinions and facts. I suggest that what applies to *right?* as a tag question applies also to *right* in other contexts: it is a word that implies a possibility of interpersonal agreement based on some objective basis, for example, on an explicit procedure for verification or validation of what is being said.²

3.6. “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 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. At the same time, they seem to avoid both the “subjectivity” of (unsupported) moral evaluation and the “arrogance” of truth-judgments (as opposed to statements of opinion).

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.” 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 that apply to everyone and that can be rationally explained and justified.

In this sense, it is comparable to arriving at the right answer to a problem in arithmetic: 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,” and there are objective criteria that people can refer to. As the nineteenth-century English philosopher Herbert Spencer 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. (*Social Statics* 1892, chap. 32, sc. 4)

Many similar statements have come from the pens 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 (Emerson 1932, 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 *right solution*: a meaning (unavailable in Italian, French, or German) that 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.

- These are the right shoes (for tap dancing).* =
- if someone says: “I think that these shoes are good (for tap dancing)” this someone thinks well
 - it is like this
 - people can know that it is like this
 - people can say why it is like this

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 a matter that can be rationally justified. Evaluation and rational justification go hand in hand here. And so, it seems, 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 something that can be rationally justified.

3.7. 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 focuses on the means we adopt to pursue our ends.” For many of Porpora’s respondents, ethics means not lying, cheating, or 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 think that everyone should be free to do their own thing. Porpora (2001, 72) 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.

In his discussion of this problem, Porpora (2001, 9) draws on the work of Charles Taylor, who argues that with regard to morality modern culture emphasizes “what is right or wrong to do” as opposed to “what it is good or bad for us to be.” Taylor links “proceduralist ethics” with “a procedural conception of the right, whereby what we ought to do can be generated by some canonical procedure” (Taylor 1989, 503). Drawing on Taylor and speaking specifically about contemporary American culture, Porpora comments on the separation of morality from its religious roots—even among the religious (2001, 106). He links this separation with a pervasive loss of purpose and larger, moral vision and, among the Christians, who are some 85% of the population, “the routinization of Jesus’ charismatic ethics” (p.166).

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, or 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, and ethical “standards.”

To speak of the ultimate good is to speak of that good that concerns us ultimately, the good that constitutes the ultimate purpose of our lives. The problem in the modern or postmodern world is a pervasive loss of emotionally moving contact with a good that is ultimate, a contact that was once provided by the sacred. . . . As a consequence, the whole of our lives is without any overarching moral purpose. . . . This hardly means that we are all immoral. It does mean that our sense of morality has become largely procedural. (Porpora 2001, 71–72)

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.

As discussed by Porpora, the Gospel ethics is not procedural ethics, and it is not an ethics of right and wrong. For example, the injunctions to turn the other cheek, to love one’s enemies and to do good to those who hate us were not put forward as the right things to do. Rather, they meant, “it will be good if you turn the other cheek”; “it will be good if you love your enemies”; “it will be good if you do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27–29); not *right* but *good*, and the only reason offered for these injunctions is that this is what God wants and does (“be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful,” Luke 6:36). There is no “rational” justification. (For discussion, see Wierzbicka 2004)

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,” favored by the Enlightenment and perhaps congenial to the “spirit of capitalism” (as suggested originally by Weber 1968 [1930] and discussed recently by Charles Taylor 1989). Locke argued in his Second Treatise (quoted by Taylor 1989, 238), that “God . . . hath . . . given them [mankind] reason to make use of it to the best advantage of Life, and convenience.” According to Taylor (p. 239), Locke “is in fact a crucial hinge figure in the evolution of the ethic of ordinary life . . . , which has both facilitated and been entrenched by the rise of capitalism.” Locke did not reject God but, as discussed by Taylor, he linked religion and ethics with “living rationally.”

Rising from passion, blind prejudice, and unthinking custom to reason confers the two related transformations: it gives our own productive life order and dignity, and it releases us from egoism and destructiveness to benefit others. Disengaged procedural reason raises us from destruction to beneficence because it breaks the shackles of illusion, blind custom, and superstition. . . . This high view of the morally transformatory power of reason . . . will be developed into one of the major organizing ideas of the Enlightenment. . . . Instrumental rationality, properly conducted, is of the essence of our service of God. . . . The rationality in question is now procedural: in practical affairs, instrumental, in theoretical, involving the careful, disengaged scrutiny of our ideas and their assembly according to the canons of mathematical deduction, and empirical probability. (Taylor 1989, 242–243).

Drawing on Weber, Taylor examines in considerable detail the links between the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, the rise of capitalism, 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” (1989, 125), and he emphasized as “the most important result of ascetic Protestantism . . . a systematic, rational ordering of the moral life as a whole” (p. 126). Lutheranism, according to Weber, “lacked a psychological sanction of systematic conduct to compel the methodical rationalization of life” (p. 128). Invoking Weber’s notion of a “disenchanted world,” Taylor writes:

The cosmos is no longer seen as the embodiment of meaningful order which can define the good for us. . . . We demystify the cosmos as a setter of ends by grasping it mechanistically and functionally as a domain of possible means. Gaining insight into the world as mechanism is inseparable from seeing it as a domain of potential instrumental control. (Taylor 1989, 148)

Porpora (2001, 199, 200) summarizes Taylor’s thesis as affirming that “ours is a disenchanted age that affirms ordinary life over transcendental meaning,” “an age in which everyday life is valorized, not some higher plane of transcendent purpose.” 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*.

3.8. “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 interviews:

“ . . . Let’s say 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." (Porpora 2001, 90)

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." The same reluctance to describe anything (and, in particular, any opinion) as "wrong" is reflected in the following interview:

"I do," Peter says, "consider the two very similar: values and preferences. Just because some values aren't mine, that doesn't mean they're wrong or mine are more right than others."

"So," I press him, "You wouldn't say that somebody who, who is a neo-Nazi . . . neo-Nazi values . . . You wouldn't say those values are wrong?"

"Well . . ."

"Any more than you wouldn't, you wouldn't say that I'm wrong if I didn't like vanilla ice cream, actually . . ."

"Exactly . . . I'm going through the definition of how I see wrong in relation to my values. Believing in my values, neo-Nazis are wrong, but, I mean, who's to say? It's kind of difficult. I would say yes and no on that. neo-Nazis are not wrong, but in my value system they're wrong." (Porpora 2001, 80–81)

Fernández-Armesto notes the growing reluctance of many people in Western culture to call any opinion wrong and links it with what he calls "the retreat from truth":

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 distinction between right and wrong, which are relativized in turn. . . . Unless it is true, what status is left for a statement like "X is wrong" where X is, say, adultery, infanticide, euthanasia, drug-dealing, Nazism, paedophilia, sadism or any other wickedness due, in today's climate, for relativization into the ranks of the acceptable? It becomes, like everything else in western society today, a matter of opinion. (Fernández-Armesto 1998, 165–166)

The point is debatable: instead of saying, "The statement 'infanticide is wrong' is true," one might prefer to say, "It is bad to kill babies." But the observation that in Anglo societies many English-speaking people are increasingly reluctant to call any personal opinion wrong is indisputable (though politically correct injunctions and prohibitions may have come to form an exception to this). Above all, this applies, of course, to the opinions of one's interlocutors.

From a strictly logical point of view, it would seem that "right" and "wrong" should be—for anyone—equally acceptable or equally unacceptable. In fact, however, *wrong* appears to be, for many speakers, less acceptable than *right*—presumably, because *wrong* is more likely to give offense than *right*. What is involved, then, is not only the degree of confidence in one's ability to make moral judgments but also the cultural norms requiring the speakers to avoid unnecessary confrontation and offense and encouraging them to seek good relations with their interlocutors. 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. Again, 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:

I soon found the advantage of this change in my manners: The conversations I engaged in went on more pleasantly; the modest way in which I proposed my opinions procured them a readier reception and less contradiction . . . And to this habit . . . I think it principally owing that I had early so much weight with my fellow citizens when I proposed new institutions or alterations in the old, and so much influence in public councils when I became a member. For I was but a bad speaker, never eloquent, subject to much hesitation in my choice of words, hardly ever correct in language, and yet I generally carried my point. (quoted in Levin 1963, 20)

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. (Hoffman 1989, 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. (Blum-Kulka 1982, 30–31)

Both Hoffman and Blum-Kulka are talking here about saying "*you* are wrong," rather than "*he* or *she* is wrong," and in contemporary Anglo (American) culture the pres-

sure to avoid “you are wrong” is no doubt stronger than that to avoid saying “he or she is wrong” or “it (e.g., infanticide) is wrong.” It seems, however, that *wrong* in general tends to be increasingly avoided, as “presumptuous” and, as it were, “undemocratic.” *Right* fares better: although there are some cultural scripts operating against both *right* and *wrong*, there are other scripts operating in favor of *right*—especially in conversational routines where *right* is addressed to the addressee, as in *that’s right*, but also in conversational responses like *right*, *right you are*, *too right*, and so on. I discuss these conversational routines in more detail in section 10. First, however, I will present the reader with some statistics.

3.9. The Changing Frequencies of *True*, *Truth*, *Right*, and *Wrong*

Let us first compare in Table 3.2 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 1 million words).

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 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 Table 3.3 figures for spoken English (“UK Spoken”) from the contemporary Cobuild Bank of English, we will see, first of all, that in comparison with Shaw (let alone Shakespeare) the figures for *true* and *truth* are extremely low. Furthermore, the figure for *right* is higher than in Shaw, and the figure for *wrong*, lower.

The very high frequency of *right* in contemporary spoken English differs markedly from its frequency in the contemporary corpus of written English (Cobuild’s “UK Books”), as shown in Table 3.4.

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,” and simply “right.” Of course, we do not have at our disposal a corpus of spoken English for

TABLE 3.2 Frequencies of *true*, *truth*, *right*, and *wrong* in Shakespeare and Shaw

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

TABLE 3.3 Frequencies of *true*, *truth*, *right*, and *wrong* in Shakespeare, Shaw, and Cobuild’s corpus of Spoken UK English

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

the times of Shakespeare, or even the times of Bernard Shaw, and dialogue in plays couldn’t possibly 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, for one thing, the expression *all right* (used, according to the OED, “to express acquiescence or assent”), the first example of which cited by the OED comes from Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* (1837). Another important relatively recent conversational routine involves the expression *that’s right* (“used to express affirmation or agreement,” OED), the first example of which cited by the OED is dated as 1905:

The President’s address was frequently interrupted with applause and cries of “That’s right.”

Relatively recent conversational routines include also such expressions as “right you are!” (described by the OED as “recent slang use”), “too right” (labeled 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?” (“inviting agreement or approval”), described by the OED as “originally U.S.” and illustrated with only twentieth-century examples. In Australia, a particularly common conversational routine is the interactive-reassuring use of the phrase *you’re right*, indicating that the speaker doesn’t mind what the addressee is doing. I would argue that these recent conversational routines involving *right* include also several distinct uses of “Right” as a response in dialogue, to which I will now turn.

TABLE 3.4 Frequencies of *true*, *truth*, *right*, and *wrong* in spoken and written UK English (from Cobuild)

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

3.10. "Right." as a Response in Dialogue

The use of "Right." as a "response signal" in dialogue goes back to sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 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 approves of what the first speaker says and endorses it as true. Formulaically:

A says to B: it is like this
 B says to A: you say something good (you speak well)
 it is true

Seemingly, in contemporary English, the response "Right!" can still be used in a similar way (often with exclamatory intonation), as in the following example from the Donahue show (Carbaugh 1988, 28):

AM: When we get to be senior citizens I think we should have the right to do what we want.
 DONAHUE: Yeah.
 A WOMAN SENIOR GUEST: Right!
 AM: And I'm for these people.
 AUDIENCE: (Applause).

Yet when we look at the whole spectrum of contemporary uses of *right*, it transpires that there are some important differences between the Shakespearean "Right!" of approval and the present-day one: whereas in Shakespeare's usage, "Right!" implies "you speak well, what you say is true," in present-day usage the approval refers to the previous speaker's thinking and to "the way things are": "you think well, it is like this."

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. The OED itself includes at least one (twentieth-century) example that appears to be different in meaning from the previous examples from Shakespeare and Ford. Roughly speaking, those earlier examples illustrate "agreement with a statement (regarded as true)," whereas the twentieth-century example illustrates "confirmation of a supposition":

—"Have you ever thought of working for the Foreign Office?"
 —"The British one?"
 —"Right." (Gadney 1970)

Here, "Right." conveys something like "I confirm your guess." In the early examples, both speakers say what they think, not what they know; in the "confirmation" example,

however, the person who says "Right." *knows* something that the other person doesn't know, and he or she confirms the other person's supposition or guess. Schematically:

A. I want to know what you wanted to say
 I think that you wanted to say this [the British one]
 B. when you think like this you think well
 it is like this
 you know what I wanted to say

How far back does this use of "Right." as a confirmation go in the history of English? The matter requires investigation. It seems likely, however, that the earlier routine of "factual" confirmation of guesses or suppositions has led to routines of "conversational" ("metatextual") confirmation, as illustrated in the following exchange from Porpora's (2001, 79) interviews:

A. "You said you were raised to treat people like this?"
 B. "Right."

Here, the interviewer (A) seems to be checking his understanding of what the interviewee (B) has said, in the spirit of conversational cooperation, and the interviewee confirms the supposition in the same spirit:

A. I want to know what you wanted to say
 I think that you wanted to say this [. . .]
 B. you say "I want to know what you wanted to say
 I think that you wanted to say this [. . .]"
 when you think like this you think well
 it is like this
 you know what I wanted to say

This use of the response "Right." in the spirit of conversational cooperation brings us to 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 (1986):

1. MELANIE (exiting): Off we go, St. John.
 QUARTERMAINE: Right. (p. 274)
 2. MELANIE (exiting): Jolly good—give her my love.
 MEADLE: Right, Melanie, right. (p. 265)
 3. 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)
 4. 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 summarized as follows:

A SAYS TO B: "I want something to happen
I want you to do something because of this"
B SAYS TO A: you say: "I want something to happen
I want you to do something because of this
I think that you can know what I want you to do"
when you think like this you think well
I know what you want to say
I know what you want to happen
I know what you want me to do

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 if I will do what you say you want me to do, I will do it 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 probably comply with it, though this is not as clear in the case of "Right." as it would be if I said "All right.")

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

ROBBO: Hello? Oh, g'day. Yes. Can do. Will do. Right. Beauty. For sure. Right you are. See you. [Hangs up.] That was Barry Anderson. He wants report number 10777443101837392 taken to Alan White immediately. (Buzo 1973, 57)

Robbo is almost caricaturally eager to comply with his boss's wishes, and although 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. The following exchange between another employee and their boss highlights the egalitarian character of the relationship:

GIBBO's phone rings.

GIBBO: Hello? Oh, g'day. Yes. Yes. Can do. Will do. Right. Beauty. For sure. Right you are. See you [Hangs up] That was Barry Anderson. Said he'd be down at the pub tonight for a few quiet beers. (Buzo 1973: 57)

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's 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. By saying "Right." in response, I acknowledge the first speaker's words as reasonable and as focused on a desirable state of affairs, rather than on any desire to impose their will on me.

There are several other conversational routines involving the response "Right." that can be seen as variations on the same theme. For example, the first speaker may want to do something himself or herself, and the second speaker may be simply expressing a willingness to help, as in the following exchange in the play *Who?* by the Australian playwright Jack Hibberd:

PADDY: Think I'd better lie down for a while.

ALEX: Right.

[ALEX *helps* PADDY *to his bed*] (Hibberd 1973 [1970], 147)

Virtually the same formula applies here; the only difference lies in who is going to do what.

In addition to expressing a willingness to cooperate, "Right." can also be used to acknowledge cooperation that has already taken place and to express satisfaction at the completion of a task. 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, 87)

Here, 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 them. At the same time, she is expressing satisfaction with her own thought processes: everything has gone according to plan.

Right, that's the lot.

- a. I wanted something to happen
- b. I wanted you to do something because of this
- c. I thought that you could know what I wanted you to do
- d. when I thought like this I thought well
- e. it has happened now
- f. this is good

The last two components in this explication seem significant: the speaker's satisfaction ("this is good") is linked with the realization that what she wanted to happen has happened. And another analogous example from the same play:

THOMO: . . . Here, put those flowers round the wreath. . . . [they finish the wreath, GIBBO hands it to THOMO.]

GIBBO: Here you are, Thomo.

THOMO: Thanks, Gibbo. Right, now get your coats on and look smart. (Buzo 1973, 93)

This brings us back to the examples adduced at the outset of this chapter: “Right.” as a conversational response expressing one’s satisfaction with what one’s interlocutor has just said in response to one’s question. Here, too, cooperation is acknowledged, with a certain satisfaction, but this cooperation is purely verbal (at the level of saying rather than doing). As quoted earlier, in an interview with Porpora (2001, 143–144), one of the interviewees, Frederick, expresses his belief that 144,000 Jews will be saved, and the interviewer responds “Right.” commenting for the reader’s benefit that he is familiar with the belief in question. Here, Frederick has complied with the interviewer’s wish to find out what he [the interviewee] thinks. If we replace “do” in the previous explication with “say,” we can see that a similar explication applies there, too:

“Right.” I am familiar with the belief . . .

- a. I wanted you to say something
- b. because I wanted to know what you wanted to say
- c. I thought that you could know what I wanted you to do
- d. when I thought like this I thought well
- e. you said this now
- f. now I know what you wanted to say
- g. this is good

Thus, the interviewer acknowledges that the interviewee has done what the interviewer wanted him to do and that he has done it in the spirit of cooperation, on the assumption that the interviewer’s wish made sense to him. In this case, the speaker’s satisfaction (“this is good”) is linked with the realization that his wish has been satisfied: he now knows that what he wanted to happen has happened; that is, he now knows what he wanted to know (i.e., what the interviewee wanted to say).

And two more examples (from a British novel)—seemingly dissimilar but in fact amenable to the same interpretation:

“I’m not actually *from* India, you know,” said Samad . . .
 Poppy Burt-Jones looked surprised and disappointed. “You’re not?”
 “No. I’m from Bangladesh.”
 “Bangladesh.”
 “Previously Pakistan. Previous to that, Bengal.”
 “Oh, right. . . .” (Zadie Smith 2000, 133)

Here, too, “Right.” (often, *Oh, right*) implies “now I know [what you wanted to say], this is good.” It also implies that Poppy’s interlocutor (Samad) has interpreted her query as a reasonable and understandable quest for information and has responded to it in the spirit of cooperation. Essentially, the same applies to the following exchange from the same novel:

“ . . . I was saying to my brother Abdul —”
 “Which Abdul?” . . .
 “Abdul-Colin.”
 “Right.” (Zadie Smith 2000, 186)

Here, “right” (which could be expanded to “Oh, right”) conveys something like “now I know what you wanted to say.” The utterance implies that there was something incomplete about the previous sentence (because there are several men named Abdul in the family) but that now the proper clarification has been supplied, and the interlocutor can be satisfied:

now I know what you wanted to say
 this is good

Although the first part of the gloss offered for “Right” in the OED (“you are right”) does not apply here at all, the second part (“you say well”) does apply, to some extent at least, but it seems contrastive: “what you say *now* (in contrast to what you said before) is good (satisfactory).” For convenience, we could call this kind of use “the ‘Right’ of conversational satisfaction.”

I wanted you to say something (more)
 because I wanted to know what you wanted to say (what you meant)
 you said this now
 now I know what you wanted to say
 this is good

3.11. “Right” and Cultural Scripts

As discussed in chapter 2, 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 that follow from certain more general scripts.

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

[people think like this:]
 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 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. (See V. Apresjan 2000; Wierzbicka 2002c.)

In Japanese culture, there is evidence for scripts that, roughly speaking, discourage expression of disagreement and encourage expression of agreement (see, e.g., Asano 2003):

[people think like this:]
when a person says to me about something: “I think about it like this”
it is not good to say something like this to this person:
“I don’t think the same”

[people think like this:]
when I say to another person about something: “I think about it like this”
it is good to say something like this to this person at the same time:
“I think that you will say: ‘I think the same’”

By contrast, Jewish culture (as described in Schiffrin 1984; see also Blum-Kulka 1982) places a special value on expressing disagreement—because it is good to say to another person what one really thinks, and also because it is interesting and enjoyable to talk with people who disagree with you.

[people think like this:]
when someone says something to me about something
if I think that this something is not true
it is good to say it to this person
it is good if this person knows what I think

[people think like this:]
when someone says to me about something: “I think about it like this”
if I think that this person doesn’t think well
it is good to say it to this person
it is good if this person knows what I think

[people think like this:]
when someone says something to me about something
it can be good if I say something like this to this person:
“I don’t think the same”

In modern Anglo culture, the most salient cultural scripts are different again. One important script enshrines the belief in “freedom of expression”:

[people think like this:]
if I think something about something I can say: “I think about it like this”
everyone can do this

As noted by Carbaugh (1988), this script and its various offshoots are repeatedly rehearsed on popular American TV shows like Donahue. For example, “Donahue asked a woman audience member to react to a group of feminist guests: ‘How do you feel about these women?’ Her response was: ‘Each woman has her own opinion, and if that’s what they believe in, fine.’ The tone of her utterance indicated an implicit

disagreement, but she stated explicitly the cultural premise: Everyone has the right to say and do what they want” (Carbaugh 1988, 29).

[people think like this:]
when someone says to me about something: “I think about it like this”
if I don’t think the same
I can say to this person: “I don’t think the same”

But although disagreement can be voiced openly, there is also a script that says that it is good to soften it with a partial agreement, along the following lines:

[people think like this:]
when I want to say to another person about something:
“I don’t think the same [as you]”
it is good to say something like this at the same time:
“I think the same [as you] about some of these things”
I don’t think the same [as you] about all these things”

But while one can voice disagreement (though preferably, only partial disagreement), one cannot do it, to use Carbaugh’s term, “impositionally”:

[people think like this:]
when I say to another person about something: “I think about it like this”
I can’t say something like this at the same time:
“you have to think the same” / “I want you to think the same”

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

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

What this means, in effect, is that although one can openly disagree with another person’s opinion, one can’t criticize it or condemn it: to do so would mean to set oneself above the other person and to refuse them the right to have their own opinion.

As noted earlier, one might think that the same would apply to expressing *approval* of another person’s opinion: whether I disapprove or approve of another person’s opinion, I can be seen as setting myself above this other person. In fact, however, it doesn’t work like that (in modern Anglo culture): there is no taboo on expressing approval of another person’s opinion—as long as this approval refers implicitly to some objective criteria. And this is what the expression *that’s right* does: it conveys approval of what the other person has just said and approval of the thinking behind this person’s words; at the same time, however, it appeals to some criteria, some evidence, to which other people could have access.

The component “you think well” conveys, indirectly, a goodwill toward the addressee and a friendly attitude, and the components “it is like this” and “people can know that it is like this” suggest some objective factual basis for my endorsement of your words and way of thinking, as well as the availability of a rational justifica-

tion. Thus, although my approval of your way of thinking suggests my personal goodwill toward you, it doesn't really place me above you, because it appeals to something rational and demonstrable. Implicitly, the speaker is appealing to a shared ground: a respect for rational thinking and for evidence. There is no pressure in modern Anglo culture to praise or endorse one's interlocutor's words regardless of what one thinks about them; presumably, a requirement of this kind would be felt as a restriction on one's freedom to say what one thinks. At the same time, however, it is seen as desirable that one should try to "validate" the interlocutor's words *if one can*—in the interest of conversational cooperation and good rapport. In expressing this validation, however, one must be careful not to appear to be patting the interlocutor on the head, hence the need to appeal to some general criteria of good thinking and accountability.

3.12. Retrospect and conclusion: The Puritans, the Enlightenment, the Growth of Democracy

Let us 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 of "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." For example, 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 Lost*, Act V, sc. ii, l. 566)
Right, you say true. (*Richard the Second*, 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 seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *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"). As noted earlier, the Shakespearean "'tis right" or "thou'st spoken right" was (implicitly or explicitly) truth-oriented and did not similarly refer to thinking. For a person, "being right" can be opposed to "being wrong." Although the earliest example of "you are right" included in the OED is dated 1597, the earliest examples that are cited in the OED of *wrong* referring to persons go back no further than the end of the seventeenth 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, 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" (Slotkin 1973, 52, quoted in Barnstone, Manson, and Singley 1997, xv). 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 versus 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 but down upon this; and they are crooked and wide; but thus *thou may'st distinguish the right from the wrong* that only being straight and narrow" (Bunyan 1965, 59, emphasis added).

As Bunyan's key image of the two ways illustrates, the Puritans had a highly polarized view of human life, which they saw as a choice between, on the one hand, a progress toward the Celestial City, linked with "the right way to go," and on the other, the path toward damnation, that is, the "wrong [way], tho' easy, when the end is woe" (1965, 74). Not surprisingly, therefore, the Puritans—like the "just man" in Milton's vision in *Paradise Lost*—spoke much of right and wrong:

Of middle age one rising, eminent
In wise deport, spake much of right and wrong,
Of justice, of religion, truth, and peace,
And Judgment from above. (Milton 1989, Book XI)

And in the words of the eighteenth-century English poet, Cowper:

Grace leads the right way: if you choose the wrong,
Take it and perish. (1781, quoted in Stevenson 1958)

For Milton, as for other Puritans, religion was linked with the notions of 'right' and 'wrong'; reason, which was the basis for distinguishing between right and wrong, was sacred. (In *Paradise Lost*, Bk. VII, l. 507, the first man, Adam, is described as "a creature . . . endowed with sanctity of reason.") 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 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’ (see Weber 1968, 198). 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 the words of the seventeenth–eighteenth century poet, Congreve:

... Reason, the power to guess at right and wrong. (quoted in Stevenson 1958)

The close (perceived) link between the notions of ‘right’, ‘wrong’, and ‘reason’ is also seen clearly in the following quote from the eighteenth–nineteenth century poet Robert Southey:

To prove by reason, in reason’s despite,
That right is wrong, and wrong is right,
And white is black, and black is white. (Robert Southey, 1728, quoted in Stevenson 1958)

In eighteenth-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); in nineteenth-century England, the poet and essayist Matthew Arnold, in his work *St. Paul and Protestantism* (in which he argues *against* the Puritans and *for* Anglicanism) ascribes “sweet reasonableness” to Christ, using the phrase no fewer than eleven times in a short essay.³

Thus, for a long time *reason* became, for many speakers of English, a linchpin holding together religion, morality, and a “modern” scientific outlook. The following late-nineteenth-century citation included in the OED is characteristic in this respect:

Clear and consecutive wrong-thinking is the next best thing to right-thinking.
(Thomas Huxley 1877)

For Huxley, the quintessential agnostic scientist, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are primarily properties of thinking—and in a way, so they were for the Puritans and for Locke. The Puritans wanted to think “rightly” (rationally) about God, Locke about both God and nature, and Huxley wanted to think “rightly” (rationally) about nature, and nature alone.

It appears, however, that as democracy became more and more entrenched, first in America and then in England, many speakers of English became less and less interested in denouncing other people’s opinions as “wrong,” and freedom of thought and expression began to be felt to be more important than the identification of any “wrong” opinions. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the English historian Thomas Macauley wrote in his *Essays: Southey’s Colloquies*: “Men are never so likely to settle a question rightly as when they discuss it freely” (quoted in Stevenson 1958). Thus Macauley linked “right thinking” with freedom of discussion. In the early twentieth century, the American lawyer Harry Weinberger (1917; also quoted in Stevenson 1958) went further when he wrote: “The greatest right in the world is the right to be

wrong.” This statement expresses the logical next step in the history of right and wrong: under the conditions of liberal democracy, it may be important to be right, but it is more important to be free to say what one thinks and to be able to hold on to one’s opinions, whether others regard them as right or wrong.

There is an easy transition from thinking that everyone has the inalienable “right to be wrong” to thinking that no one can, or should, tell another person that he or she is wrong. As one of Porpora’s interviewees puts it (2001, 90), “that’s what this world is made up of: different people with differences of opinions.”⁴

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” and of the consequences of “classroom programmes, worthy in themselves, designed to equip students with . . . social virtues such as tolerance and mutual respect,” 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” (1998, 165). 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*, de 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 harmony to stop for that. (de Tocqueville 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 from a semantic point of view) clearly supports de 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 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” (1988, 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 that reaffirms the value of the practice of expressing one’s opinions and of listening, willingly, to other people’s opinions. 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.”

The transition from (A) the Shakespearean response “Right.” described by the OED as “you are right; you speak well,” to (B) the present-day “Right.” of noncommittal acknowledgment can be schematically represented as follows:

- A. you say: “I think like this”
you speak well
[because what you say is true]
- B. you say: “I think like this / want to say this”
I now know what you think / want-to-say
this is good

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. 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 seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (and, indirectly, in North America) but also the world of thought of the English and American Puritans (see Wierzbicka 2004).

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, as shown by chapter titles like “Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail” (chapter 5) and “Some Consequences of the Failure of the Enlightenment Project” (chapter 6). 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, German, and 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’.⁵

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. The scripts appear to include these two:

[people think like this:]
when a person wants to do something
it is good if this person thinks about it like this:
I want to know if it will be good if I do it
if I think about it I can know it

[people think like this:]
I can’t say about someone: “I think that this someone did something bad”
if I can’t say why I think like this

The reliance on ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and the apparent avoidance of absolute moral judgments unsupported by rational justifications highlight the absence from modern Anglo culture of the cultural script reflected in Mayakovsky’s children’s poem quoted earlier, and arguably very salient in Russian culture as a whole:⁶

The Russian “good versus bad” script
[people think like this:]
people do things of two kinds
things of one kind are good
it is good if people want to do things of this kind
things of the other kind are bad
it is bad if people want to do things of this other kind

In its polarized dichotomy, this script parallels the Russian script opposing truth to untruth. (For discussion of polarized dichotomic models of thought in Russian culture, see Uspenskij 1996; for discussion of the penchant for absolute moral judgments reflected in the Russian language, see Wierzbicka 1992, 435–440, and 2002c.)

The English language—in contrast to Russian—does not encourage this type of extreme and absolute moral evaluation, and it does not provide its speakers with

convenient colloquial tools for evaluating human conduct in this way. To illustrate, let me quote the following sentence from a Russian novel (Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*) and its English translation:

I udivilsja by on [Efrem] esli b drugoj mužik stal emu ser'ezno dokazyvat', čto on ploxo postupael s babami. (Solzhenitsyn n.d., 116)
And he'd been amazed if some other fellow had seriously tried to tell him he treated women badly. (Solzhenitsyn 1969, 104)

The Russian sentence refers, in simple colloquial words, to a man's (Efrem's) moral conduct and condemns it, unequivocally, as "bad." The judgment is as clear and as simple as the judgment that "he did something bad," but it is extended to the man's conduct as a whole (in relation to women). There is no way to convey the same absolute judgment in colloquial English. Perhaps the following would be the closest: "his moral conduct in relation to women was bad." But this is, of course, not colloquial, and a simple uneducated man like Solzhenitsyn's Efrem could neither speak nor think in such terms. The word for women used in the Russian sentence is crude and slangy. The focus of the Russian sentence is not on how Efrem treats women (as in the English translation "he treated women badly") but on the fact that what he is doing is "wrong"—except that in Russian, it is not "wrong" but "bad." The Russian verb *postupat'* is not transitive, like the English *treat*, but intransitive, like *behave*. One could therefore try to convey the sense of the Russian sentence by saying of Efrem that "he behaved badly (in relation to women)" or that "his behavior in relation to women was bad." This, however, would not convey the moral force of the Russian sentence. *Behavior*, unlike *conduct*, is a word that can be used about animals ("animal behavior" vs. "animal conduct"). One could also say of a little boy that he "behaved badly" but not that "his conduct was bad." *Postupat'* is, in this respect, like *conduct*, not like *behavior*. Thus, *postupat' ploxo* conveys a negative moral evaluation that simply cannot be conveyed in colloquial English. It would not help to say "he treats women like dirt" because this, too, would refer to how he treats others, not to his own moral conduct as such.

A folk ethics based on the notions of 'right' and 'wrong' does not encourage categorizing people, as well as actions, into two diametrically opposed categories: one cannot speak in English of "right people" and "wrong people," one can speak only of "good people" and "bad people"—a categorization lying outside an "ethics of right and wrong." By contrast, Russian cultural scripts are fully compatible with such a categorization. To illustrate again from the *Cancer Ward*:

ěto byl daleko ne samyj ploxož čelovek, iz vstrečavšixsja Olegu v žizni.
(Solzhenitsyn n.d., 31)
he was far from the worst man he'd met in his life. (Solzhenitsyn 1969, 209)

Significantly, modern English—unlike Russian—doesn't have words evaluating people as "very bad people" (or, indeed, "very good people"), that is, semantic equivalents of descriptive Russian words like *podlec*, *negodjaj*, *merzavec*, although it does, of course, have, as does Russian, swearwords like *bastard*, animal metaphors like *swine*, and the like. (Note also the archaic status of words like *rascal*, *scoundrel*, or *villain*; cf. Wierzbicka 1992: 436.)

Nor does English have a verb like the Russian *osuzdat'*, which combines in its meaning semantic components of several English verbs (*to judge*, *to try*, *to condemn*, and *to convict*), and which can refer to both everyday talk (as in "she judges / condemns / convicts him") and to court activities (as in "Joe Bloggs was tried, convicted, and sentenced").

I have mentioned earlier, with reference to Porpora, that an ethics based on the concepts 'right' and 'wrong' is different from the ethics presented in the Gospels. It hardly needs to be added that an ethics of "judging and condemning" (*osuzdat'*) other people is also different from the ethics of the Gospels and that dividing people into two categories, "good people" and "bad people," is in fact incompatible with it. (For detailed discussion, see Wierzbicka 2001.) From a semantic point of view, however, we need to note that the expressions *good people* and *bad people* seem possible in all natural languages and, from a cultural point of view, that the English words *right* and *wrong* and the Russian word *osuzdat'*, *podlec*, *merzavec*, and *negodjaj* point to different cultural traditions.

The extreme moral absolutes of Russian folk ethics go no doubt beyond the cultural scripts found in many other European languages, but English differs from those other languages, too, in basing its folk ethics on 'right' and 'wrong' rather than 'good' and 'bad'. The result is that to speak, for example, of Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot, English speakers have to go beyond their basic concepts of 'right' and 'wrong' and reach for the more extreme word *evil*. The implication seems to be that (for English speakers) truly terrible actions and regimes are beyond the ordinary human world, where 'right' and 'wrong' can be used as basic guideposts.

In her essay "Losing Your Concepts," philosopher Cora Diamond explores the idea of "living with concepts" and speaks of "a human good of our having a range of concepts through which the characterizing facets of human life enter our sense of who we are and what we experience" (1998, 269, quoted in Besemeres 2002, 25). For speakers of English, living means, inter alia, living with the concepts 'right' and 'wrong'.⁷ It also means living with cultural scripts related to these key concepts. Culture-specific key concepts and cultural scripts are usually interrelated, 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. 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.