The Meaning of \textit{Good}: A Framework

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to motivate a research program in a domain of metaethics. The program parallels work on the semantics of modals and its relevance for understanding normative sentences and thought that employ the word \textit{ought} and the correlative concept.\footnote{The literature here is large. But, for instance, cp. Ralph Wedgwood, "Conceptual Role Semantics for Moral Terms," \textit{Philosophical Review} 110 (2001) 1-30; ibid., \textit{The Nature of Normativity}, Oxford University Press, 2007; Mark Schroeder, "Ought, Agents, Actions," \textit{Philosophical Review} 120 (2011) 1-41; Matthew Chrisman, "On the Meaning of 'Ought'," \textit{Oxford Studies in Metaethics}, R. Shafier-Landau, ed., vol. 7, 2012, 304-32. Note that throughout I use italics when mentioning linguistic expressions. I use quotations when quoting from others as well as in citing articles and chapters.} My interest here is that other term, fundamental to ethical theory: \textit{good}. The special claim of this paper is that linguistics offers insights that have yet to be exploited by philosophers. My intent is to clarify the connection and to provide orientation so that inquiry may fruitfully proceed.

What does \textit{good} mean? And what does it mean to say of any \(x\) that \(x\) is good? I will advance answers to these questions. I say advance, not resolve. A number of deep problems, in a range of areas in and out of philosophy, must be resolved en route to full resolution.\footnote{I will return to this point in the conclusion.}

The inquiry gleans insight from work of recent decades in semantics and pragmatics, particularly with respect to gradable adjectives. It is a platitude that things can be better and worse, and a semantic fact that \textit{good} admits modification by various degree expressions. Gradability is one specification according to which a secure framework for the analysis of \textit{good} must be constructed.

Contemporary philosophical examinations of the meaning of \textit{good} have had almost nothing to say about gradability.\footnote{Robert Shanklin, \textit{On 'Good' and Good}, USC Dissertation, 2011, is an exception. For an early consideration, cp. J. O. Urmson, "On Grading," \textit{Mind} 59 (1950) 145-69.} They have focused on the so-called semantic incompleteness of \textit{good}. Linguists have had a great deal to say about gradability as well as incompleteness, although in the latter case usually not under that description. But they have had little to say about \textit{good} itself. Perhaps this is because the semantic properties of \textit{good} have not been thought special and important for a more general theory of modification. Although my aspiration is metaethical, I
intend to show that *good* does have some distinctive properties worthy of more concerted linguistic attention.4

From this perspective, the present paper advances understanding of the semantics and pragmatics of *good* by critically wedding and developing several strands of philosophical and linguistic inquiry. Such a synthetic enterprise has a special significance, for, as Zoltán Gendler Szabó notes in reference to Peter Geach’s classic paper "Good and Evil":

"It is a curious fact that contemporary views on the semantics of adjectives evolved from a debate in moral philosophy. In their effort to articulate theories of what goodness consists in, philosophers turned to questions about the semantics of 'good.'"5

In recent decades linguists have made important advances in the analysis of adjectives. These results can be fruitfully brought back to bear on the term that set the ball rolling.

My discussion begins with some background,6 first Geach’s pioneering move,7 then Szabó’s contribution of about a decade ago. Szabó’s paper, which in fact is not principally about *good*, but adjectives and compositionality,8 is engaged with certain formal semantic literature. On the other hand, it is silent on the point that *good* is gradable and thus on the linguistic theory pertinent to that topic. This philosophical literature largely serves to introduce the problem. However, it will ultimately be seen that both contributions, Szabó’s in particular, put their fingers on a central point whose explication is a key component in our answer to the governing questions.

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6 I will be focusing on and working within what is ostensibly the descriptivist or cognitivist literature. By "descriptivist" I understand the following: the use of "good" in sentences contributes to the truth-conditions of those sentences. By "cognitivist" I understand the following: the concept that "good" expresses contributes to truth-evaluable mental content. That "good" is to be explained descriptively is major assumption of the paper — at least if we ignore an expressivist meta-semantic interpretation of truth-conditional semantics. On this possibility, see Jussi Suikkanen, "Metaethics, Semantics, and Metasemantics", Pea Soup, 2009, <http://peasoup.typepad.com/peasoup/2009/07/metaethics semantics and metasemantics.html>.


8 Consideration of the semantics of *good* figures in a broader consideration of whether the role of context in the semantics of adjectives jeopardizes the principle of compositionality. *Good* features in the discussion because, as Szabó argues, it is a context-sensitive expression.
Following a critical presentation of these two philosophical papers, I turn to linguistic work on gradable adjectives. It must be emphasized that the literature in this field is vast and technical. To a large extent, I have chosen to focus on the most well-established and prominent positions and contributors. Among them is the work of Christopher Kennedy. At the same time, there is good reason to question a central feature of the theory to which Kennedy subscribes. In doing so, I am influenced by Jessica Rett's recent work. Ultimately, it is not crucial that I resolve Kennedy's and Rett's opposing views. But there is value in viewing their ideas as alternative solutions to a common problem.

I then turn to apply the linguistic theory on gradable adjectives to the interpretation of *good*. I argue that the preceding results resolve one aspect of the semantic incompleteness of *good*, but that unlike most adjectives that have featured in the linguistics literature, *good* is incomplete in two respects. In addressing this second respect, I draw on recent work in lexical pragmatics and the topic of polysemy. It is through consideration of this material that, I propose, we can view Geach's and Szabó's ideas in the proper light.

In conclusion, I show both the importance of linguistic theory to our problem and its limitations. In particular, I identify precisely where philosophy needs to intervene and carry the inquiry forward.

### Geach

The central contribution of Geach's paper is a striking metaphysical thesis about the putative property goodness. Geach advances the metaphysical thesis on the basis of a logical distinction he draws between two kinds of adjective: logically attributive and logically predicative. This terminology loosely relates to the traditional grammatical distinction between attributive and predicative adjectives. The traditional grammatical distinction is a syntactic one, between adjectives that modify nouns in phrases such as *nocturnal animal* and adjectives predicated of subjects such as *The animal is nocturnal*. Geach's distinction concerns distinct inference patterns that the two kinds of adjective admit. Compare the roles of *nocturnal* and *large* in the following arguments:

- All bats are animals.
- Bibi is a nocturnal bat.
- Bibi is a nocturnal animal.

- All mice are animals.
- Mimi is a large mouse.
- Mimi is a large animal. (?)

In the minor premises *nocturnal* and *large* are both in syntactically attributive position. But they have distinct logical properties. Geach argues that the failure of the inference in the second argument owes to the fact that *large* logically depends on the noun it modifies. Hence, he characterizes such adjectives as logically attributive.⁹

Geach claims that *good* is a logically attributive adjective. Consider the following argument, adapted from Geach:

- Seggie is a man.
- Seggie is a good hunter.

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⁹ Cp. Miles Rind and Lauren Tillinghast, "What is an Attributive Adjective?" *Philosophy* 83 (2008) 77-88, at 86: "A [logically] attributive adjective may be defined as an adjective that cannot be used to make a logically complete predication unless it modifies some substantive; or, in slightly different phrasing, as an adjective that forms predicable terms through, and only through, combination with substantives."
Seggie is a good man. (??)

Given that *good* is a logically attributive adjective, Geach asserts the following metaphysical thesis: there is no such thing as the property goodness; there are only the properties of being a good *F* and being a good *G*. Whether the metaphysical thesis follows from the thesis that *good* is logically attributive, and if so, how, are matters I presently table. Here I want to focus on Geach's argument for the logico-syntactic thesis that *good* is a logically attributive adjective. Strictly, Geach's argument indicates that in many of its uses *good* operates as a logically attributive adjective. The argument does not exclude the possibility that there are logically predicative uses of *good*. However, it shifts the burden of proof to any defender of such a position. Moreover — it warrants emphasis — the defender must embrace the view that *good* is semantically disunified.

Assume Geach's logico-syntactic thesis is correct. Shortly, we will challenge this assumption. Is the identity of the syntactic or logico-syntactic category of *good* at all constitutive of its semantic content? At best, the thesis that *good* is a logically attributive adjective informs us about the kind of the semantic content that *good* possesses. Evidently, much remains to be said about the meaning of *good*.

Szabó

Some philosophers have claimed that *good* is semantically incomplete. However, none has offered a general description of semantic incompleteness. But consider Szabó's remarks:

10 "There is no such things as being good or bad, there is only being a good or bad so-and-so." (34)

11 For instance, Zoltán Szabó claims that *good* expresses a predicate that is incomplete in that it is "associated with a set of individuals only if additional information is provided." Moreover, "'Good' can be completed in many different ways; for example under one completion it is associated with a set of those individuals who are good at dancing, under another with the set of those individuals who are good at playing the piano." (2001, 133-34) Cp. Stephen Finlay: "[The semantic incompleteness of *good* is a] source of semantic flexibility … as exemplified by the adjectives 'old,' 'tall,' 'fast,' 'cold,' and 'eager.' These incomplete predicates are used to make reference to relational properties, which consist in standing in some relation *R* to one or more other things. Unlike complete relational predicates, which involve a relation to one particular thing (as being terrestrial is always to be related to Earth, and being Martian is always to be related to Mars) these have in their logical forms one or more argument-places that can take different parameters. There is no such thing as being old, tall, fast, cold, or eager simpliciter, but only particular ways or relative to a particular class of objects." (Confusion of Tongues, ms., 2013, chapter 2, p.3)

12 The phrase *semantic incompleteness* appears traceable at least to Kent Bach, "Conversational Impliciture," *Mind and Language* 9 (1994) 124-62; cp. ibid., "Semantic Slack: What is Said and More," in *Foundations of Speech Act Theory*, S. Tsohadzidis, ed., Routledge, 1994, 267-291. Bach notes that the property in question was familiar at that time under the description semantic underdetermination. (He also mentions (1994, 126) earlier use of the phrases semantic generality and semantic nonspecificity in J. D. Atlas, "Negation, Ambiguity, and Presupposition," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 1 (1977) 321-36 and Kent Bach, "Semantic Nonspecificity and Mixed Quantifiers," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 4 (1982) 593-605, respectively.) More recently, Bach describes semantic incompleteness as follows: "The idea of semantic incompleteness is straightforward if you think in terms of (structured) propositions rather than truth-conditions. Since [structured propositions] are made up of building blocks assembled in a particular way, it makes sense to suppose that in some cases such an assemblage, put together compositionally from a sentence's constituents according to its syntactic structure, might fail to comprise a proposition. I call what is thus built up a 'propositional radical' to indicate that, although it comprises the entire semantic content of the sentence, it lacks at least one constituent needed for
**good** expresses a predicate that is incomplete in that it is "associated with a set of individuals only if additional information is provided."\(^{13}\) Here Szabó characterizes the incompleteness of **good** in terms of the predicate that the adjective **good** expresses.\(^{14}\) Let's refer to this predicate as \(G\). \(G\) is a

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\(^{13}\) ("The Excluded Middle: Semantic Minimalism without Minimal Propositions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73 (2006) 435-42, at 436) According to this description, semantic incompleteness is a property of sentences and the propositions they express. Indeed, in "Conversational Impliciture" Bach states that, in contrast to properties such as lexical homonymy, ambiguity, and vagueness, semantic underdetermination is a property of sentences. (1994, 127) Cp. Emma Borg’s recent description of incompleteness: "Some sentences on their own fail to express complete propositions so there is no 'minimal proposition' for these sentences to express. For instance, there is no proposition expressed by the sentences 'Steel isn't strong enough' or 'Jill is ready.'" ("Minimalism versus Contextualism in Semantics," in *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism*, G. Preyer and G. Peter, eds., Oxford University Press, 2007, 339-59, at 341) Consequently, the concept of a semantically incomplete adjective or predicate expression must be understood derivatively as an adjective that contributes to a propositional radical in contrast to a determinate or complete proposition. In "Conversational Impliciture," Bach distinguishes two different sources of propositional incompleteness: constituent and structural underdetermination. In the former case, "an additional propositional constituent is needed to complete the proposition." (1994, 127) For example, in the sentence *Tipper is ready* an event description is needed to specify what Tipper is ready for. Since it is the adjective *ready* that prompts this need, a sentence of the form \(x\) is **good** may be understood as prompting an analogous need: something or other is needed to complete the proposition that the sentence expresses; for instance, a description of the way in which \(x\) is good. In one important respect — to be clarified momentarily — this is, indeed, the way the philosophers have understood **good** as a semantically incomplete adjective. On the other hand, it is perhaps worth emphasizing that they do not necessarily and indeed needn't subscribe to Bach’s so-called Radical Semantic Minimalism, according to which there are propositional radicals. (For instance, Szabó definitely opposes that view in J. Stanley and Z. Szabó, "On Quantifier Domain Restriction," *Mind and Language* 15 (2000) 219-61.) Instead, Szabó and others, such as Finlay and Shanklin, take the adjective to be a context-sensitive expression. More precisely, they hold that the predicate that **good** expresses contains in its logical form at least one variable or argument place and that the context of tokenings of **good** provides the value for that variable. In sharp contrast, Bach holds that semantic incompleteness is not context-sensitivity. (Cp. Bach (2006) 435-37 and Borg (2007) 347-48) Incomplete sentences can, to be sure, contain indexicals and thereby be context-sensitive; but they are not context-sensitive per se. (Whether such a view is defensible and also whether it does not in fact collapse into contextualism are debatable matters. But those matters are not our concern. Cp. R. Carston, "Relevance Theory, Grice and the Neo-Griceans: A Response to Laurence Horn’s 'Current Issues in Neo-Gricean Pragmatics,'" *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 2-3 (2005) 303-19, and J. Stanley, "Review of Recanatî’s *Literal Meaning*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, on-line. I owe both references to Borg (2007) 348, n.18.) To clarify now the respect in which the philosophers’ conception of the incompleteness of **good** is akin to Bach’s conception of semantic incompleteness — assume that one kind of predicate expression \(F\) denotes an extension and that this extension is a set of individuals that possess the property \(F\)-ness. In contrast, another kind of predicate expression \(G\) does not by itself — in other words, in virtue of its context-invariant or lexical or linguistic meaning — denote an extension. Rather, precisely because the logical form of \(G\) contains a variable whose value must be supplied by context, \(G\) only denotes an extension in a context. A sentence of the form \(x\) is **good** is grammatically well formed. But, again, absent context, such a sentence — like Bach’s incomplete sentence — is not truth-evaluable. \(^{13}\) (2001) 133-34.

\(^{14}\) Unfortunately, the word *predicate* is used in two ways throughout the linguistics and philosophical literature. In one way, it refers to a syntactical category of English or some other natural language, namely, what syntactically complements a subject expression to form a
logical type, one of the basic types in the artificial language of predicate logic. In predicate logic, regular one-place predicates are associated with extensions, sets of individuals. Szabó maintains that \( G \) is a one-place predicate. However, he holds that \( G \) differs from regular one-place predicates. Regular one-place predicates are associated with sets of individuals without the provision of additional information. Evidently, it is this thought, that \( G \)'s association with a set of individuals requires the provision of certain additional information, that makes \( G \) a semantically incomplete predicate.

Szabó speaks of predicates being "associated" with extensions. Provision of additional information makes the association in question seem psychological, as if, for instance, an audience could not associate the predicate with an extension unless a speaker provided additional information. Exactly what role psychology plays in informing designation is an important question. We will return to it later in the paper. For now, regular one-place predicates like \( G \) do not. Call a predicate that designates an extension by itself independently designating. Then, according to Szabó, \( good \) is semantically incomplete in that the predicate \( G \) that \( good \) expresses does not independently designate an extension.

Geach never speaks of \( good \) as semantically incomplete. Indeed, that phrase only came into philosophical currency decades later. Nevertheless, Geach's denial that \( good \) denotes a property, goodness, and assertion that there are only the properties of being a good \( F, G \), and so on, indicates a commitment to the semantic incompleteness of \( good \).

In terms of the language of predicate logic, Geach's thesis suggests that \( good \) expresses a predicate modifier. Predicate modifiers are functions from predicate extensions to predicate extensions.\(^{15}\) For example, arguably, in the phrase \( \text{large mouse} \), \( \text{large} \) expresses a function from the set of mice to some subset of mice, the large ones. Assuming that \( \text{good} \) expresses a predicate modifier, an open sentence such as \( x \text{ is a good man} \) may be formalized as: \( (G(M))x \). In contrast, if \( \text{good} \) expressed a one-place predicate, the sentence would be formalized as: \( Gx \& Mx \). The attraction of the predicate modifier interpretation comes out in cases such as the Seggie argument. If \( \text{good} \) did express a one-place predicate, the conjunction of \( \text{Seggie is a man} \) and \( \text{Seggie is a good hunter} \) would entail \( \text{Seggie is a good man} \).

This in turn raises the question of how Szabó distinguishes his position from Geach's. Precisely, how does Szabó conceive of \( good \) as semantically incomplete, yet also as a one-place predicate? Szabó maintains that the logical form that the adjective \( good \) expresses contains a contextually sensitive variable. Hence, Szabó holds that the source of the completing information is context. But context includes intra- as well as extra-sentential information. In the sentence \( \text{Fred is a good dancer} \), the noun in the predicate expression typically provides the completing information.\(^{16}\) But consider a situation in which one is seeking an object to prop up a television set; one finds a thick book and proclaims: \( \text{This book is good} \). Here, context is extra-sentential.

Evidently, examples like Fred the dancer inform Geach's analysis. That is, according to the predicate modifier interpretation, the nominal expression \( N \) that the adjective \( A \) modifies

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sentence. In another way, it refers to a logical category. Cp. Szabó (2001, 126): "There is a certain difficulty about pronouncements that 'good' is a predicate or a predicate-modifier. Categories like 'noun,' 'verb,' 'determiner,' 'pronoun,' 'adjective,' or 'sentence' are syntactic, and categories like 'predicate,' 'connective,' 'quantifier,' 'predicate-modifier,' 'variable,' or 'formula' are logical. These logical categories, though they are syntactic categories of certain formalized languages, are certainly not syntactic categories of English."


\(^{16}\) (2001) 135. "I suggest that the content of certain expressions within the utterance may be part of the context that contributes to determining the content of other expressions within the same utterance. The content of 'good' in an utterance of 'Sue is a good dancer' may depend, in part, on the content of 'dancer'." (ibid.)
expresses a predicate that serves as an argument of the function of the predicate modifier that therewith determines the extension of the compound expression \( AN \). In contrast, according to Szabó's interpretation, the adjective need not modify any nominal expression in order to determine an extension. Indeed, Szabó claims that the contextually derived completing information need not even be computable as a nominal expression. He offers the following example to support this claim. Students in a chemistry class are trying to produce a substance that can be used in a later experiment. "The teacher points to a certain blue liquid and says ... 'This is good.'" Szabó denies that in order to interpret the teacher's statement the students must be able to distinguish some \( N \) such that the blue liquid is a good \( N \). All they know is that the blue liquid is good for the purposes of the experiment. A Geachean might object here that "the [\( N \)] in question is something like 'stuff that can be used in a later experiment'." To this, Szabó responds: "Why should we believe that standards of goodness are provided by the content of this complex noun, rather than simply by the context in which the teacher's utterance was made?"\(^{17}\) This response is not quite satisfactory as stated. What Szabó presumably intended to say or needs to say is that the information that context provides needn't be computable as a noun-phrase \( N \) such that one understands that \( x \) is a good \( N \). Phrases such as \( \text{good for purpose } P \) are well-formed; hence, context need only be informative as such. Minimally, what Szabó's response suggests is that further argument is needed to support the view that \( \text{good} \) must modify a noun-phrase in order to designate an extension.

So far, then, Szabó's position differs from Geach's in the following two respects. The completing information may derive from the extra- or intra-sentential context, and that information needn't be computable as a noun-phrase.

Finally, Szabó maintains that the contextually sensitive variable in the logical form of \( \text{good} \) "stands for a certain role in which something can be good."\(^{18}\) With respect to this aspect of the semantic content of \( \text{good} \), Szabó is here taking a leaf from Judith Jarvis Thomson. In her paper "On Some Ways in Which a Thing Can Be Good," Thomson maintains that there are various ways of being good and that being good entails being good in some way. Thus, whatever completing information \( \text{good} \) requires determines a particular way of being good.\(^{19}\) Szabó's use of \( \text{role} \) is equivalent to Thomson's \( \text{way} \). But Szabó emphasizes that \( \text{role} \) here is merely a place-holder:

"'Role' is used here as a more or less technical term. An actor can be good in a given role. Stretching the meaning of 'role' a little, one can say that a good dancer, or pianist is good in that role. Perhaps one can say that a good pencil is good in a role, but it certainly makes no sense to say that a good nap, a good sunset, or a good painting is good in some role. The variable 'R' [in the logical form of the predicate \( G \)] stands for some contextual information that specifies the incomplete predicate 'good'."\(^{20}\)

\(^{17}\) ibid. 133.

\(^{18}\) "An advantage of this sort of semantics for 'good' is that it can account easily for the intuition that 'Sue is a good dancer' entails 'There is a way in which Sue is good' or 'Sue is good in some respect.' On the incomplete predicate analysis, the latter sentences can be regarded as existentially quantifying over the variable within the logical form of 'good' whose value is normally fixed by the context." (ibid. 134)

\(^{19}\) "On Some Ways in Which a Thing Can Be Good," Social Philosophy and Policy 9 (1992) 96-117, at 96. Thomson herself is inspired by Georg Henrik von Wright, The Varieties of Goodness, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963. She writes of von Wright: 'He divides the territory into what he calls forms of goodness. My division into ways of being good is finer-grained: he aims at a list of forms such that no one form is reducible to any other, whereas the ways I will mention include some that are reducible to others." (96, n.1)

\(^{20}\) (2001) n.31, p.142. Note that Szabó schematizes the logical form of the incomplete predicate as: \((G(R))(x)\). This looks very similar to the way he schematizes Geach's predicate modifier interpretation: \((G(F))(x)\). Evidently, \( R \) and \( F \) have different content. But Szabó insists that on his
Whatever else may be said of it, then, Szabó's analysis leaves a significant semantic lacuna. We will return to the lacuna below. En route, we turn to formal analyses of gradable adjectives to see what light they throw on the semantic incompleteness of *good*.

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view *good* expresses a one-place predicate, whereas on Geach's view it expresses a predicate modifier. One may wonder whether Szabó's formalization adequately captures this distinction. To be clear, I do not mean this as a criticism of Szabó's contribution. The goal of his paper is not to offer a fully satisfactory semantic analysis of *good*.