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High Standards

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Correspondence: Pekka Väyrynen (p.vayrynen@leeds.ac.uk)**Received:** 5 December 2025 | **Revised:** 12 May 2026 | **Accepted:** 26 May 2026**Keywords:** gradable adjectives | normative and evaluative language | predicates and context-dependence | supererogation

ABSTRACT

Evaluative adjectives are gradable. The standard for falling under a gradable adjective “*F*” is either context-relative or absolute. Some philosophers have recently used general linguistic tests to argue that “rational” and (moral) “good” are maximum-degree absolute gradable adjectives: Only what’s perfectly morally good strictly counts as morally “good,” and only what’s optimally rational strictly counts as “rational.” Against maximalism, I defend a novel “high standards” account: counting as “rational” or morally “good” doesn’t require the maximum degree of the relevant property, but “rational” and moral “good” are systematically associated with normatively demanding standards. Unlike maximalism, this account allows for scales of infinite value and that supererogation talk is coherent in its literal interpretation. One part of my argument draws on a broader range of linguistic phenomena than the debate has so far considered to undermine the linguistic case for maximalism. My results challenge the prevailing classification of gradable adjectives in linguistics into relative, maximum-degree, and minimum-degree absolute adjectives. Another part of my argument draws on special features of evaluative and normative discourse, which suggest that its standards tend to be demanding even when non-maximal.

1 | Introduction

I’m not perfectly morally good. Nor are my beliefs and choices always completely rational. I don’t think this means that I cannot be morally good or that none of those beliefs and choices count as rational. The standards of morality and rationality are demanding but don’t require perfection. Some recent linguistic arguments imply otherwise: Only what’s perfectly morally good strictly counts as morally “good,” and only what’s optimally rational strictly counts as “rational” (Mankowitz 2024; Siscoe 2021, 2023). I’ll argue that there’s hope for people like me: claims about what’s “rational” or morally “good” tend to be associated with demanding standards but typically don’t require having the maximum degree of the relevant property. My overall argument has more general significance. I’ll challenge the prevailing classification of gradable adjectives in linguistics by drawing on a broader range of linguistic phenomena than the debate has so far considered, including special features of evaluative and norma-

tive discourse that are relevant to its semantics. The argument also highlights that the ways in which linguistic conventions may interact with potential discourse-specific assumptions in determining semantic content merit more attention. Although I’ll focus on “rational” and moral “good,” my argument strategies apply more generally, whatever results they might yield with other evaluative and normative expressions. Semantics for such expressions doesn’t settle normative and metanormative issues about value, rationality, and morality. But its results bear on how apt such terms are, in their ordinary meanings, for stating various positions about value, rationality, and morality and for debating their truth.

2 | Evaluative Adjectives and Gradability

Evaluative adjectives span a wide range. Typical examples in English include “delicious,” “beautiful,” “fun,” “generous,”

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“selfish,” “despicable,” “good,” “wrong,” “rational,” ... the list goes on. Which adjectives count as evaluative depends on the relevant notion of evaluativity (Stojanovic 2025). Paradigm evaluative adjectives are *valenced*: they at least typically say something positive (“good”) or negative (“bad”) about their objects, be that in virtue of their meaning or assumptions governing discourses in which they feature. An adjective needn’t be valenced to *attribute value*. For example, “expensive” and “cheap” concern commercial value, but being cheap may be pro, con, or indifferent depending on context. (This might go even for “beautiful” and “ugly.”) Nor need an adjective attribute value to be used in a valenced way.¹ For example, “south-facing” is positively valenced in real estate talk in the Northern Hemisphere. This article doesn’t turn on whether evaluative adjectives in either sense constitute a real linguistic category or various adjectives just are more or less characteristically used evaluatively.

Most evaluative adjectives are *gradable*: They admit degree modifiers and comparative constructions. Things can be *more or less* fair, *better or worse*, *extremely* beautiful, or *somewhat* generous. The prevailing view in linguistics is that gradable adjectives denote a function from individuals to degrees on scales.² A *scale* is a set of degrees ordered with respect to some dimension, such as cost for “expensive” or height for “tall.” The scale is thus based on a gradable property. The scale may not always be a total order, but it should be rich enough to support quantitative comparisons such as “*a* is *much better* than *b*” (Lassiter 2017, 177).³ The unmodified form of a gradable adjective is also associated (typically covertly) with a *standard* that specifies the degree on the relevant scale that an individual must reach in order for the adjective to be truly predicated of it. Not just any amount of height is enough to count as “tall,” for example.

The standard classification of gradable adjectives appeals to *scale structure* and *standard type*. *Relative* gradable adjectives are associated with a standard that specifies different degrees on the relevant scale in different contexts. Tommy (height: 128 cm) is tall for a first-grader but not for a basketball player. The truth-conditions of “Tommy is tall” vary accordingly. When first-graders are the salient class, Tommy is mapped to a degree on the scale of tallness that reaches the standard for tallness in those contexts. When basketball players are the salient class, the degree to which Tommy is mapped doesn’t reach the standard for tallness in those contexts. That the standard is relative to context may have to do with scale structure: The scale of tallness has no upper bound. *Absolute* gradable adjectives are associated with a standard that supplies a fixed degree for all contexts. For a *minimum-standard* absolute adjective, the standard is always the minimum degree on the relevant scale. Strictly speaking, even a slightly bent line is bent. For a *maximum-standard* absolute adjective, the standard is always the maximum degree on the relevant scale. A slightly open door isn’t truly closed. Strictly speaking, the gold isn’t pure unless it’s perfectly pure, and you aren’t certain if you could be more certain. Each standard type

places requirements on scale structure. The scale of a minimum-standard absolute adjective must be closed at the lower end; that of a maximum-standard absolute adjective must be closed at the upper end. Some absolute adjectives, such as “open” and “closed,” share a fully closed scale (one bound at both ends).

The prevailing view in linguistics asserts a strong correlation between fully open scales and relative standards and closed scales and absolute standards (see, e.g., Kennedy and McNally 2005; Kennedy 2007; McNally et al. 2011).⁴ Specifically relevant to my purposes is this implication:

Maximalist Correlation: There’s a strong tendency for adjectives with upper-closed scales (e.g. “full,” “straight”) to have maximum-degree standards.

In principle closed scale adjectives could have either absolute or relative standards (Kennedy 2007, 36). The standard argument for why closed scales strongly favor maximal or minimal interpretations appeals to the following principle:

Interpretive Economy: Maximize the contribution of the conventional meanings of the elements of a sentence to the computation of its truth conditions. (Kennedy 2007, 36.)

Insofar as relative adjectives have no conventionally provided degree to serve as a standard, the principle of Interpretive Economy predicts that the standard has to be chosen contextually. When the conventional meaning of an adjective provides a closed scale, the principle ensures that a conventionally supplied standard will be preferred over a contextually determined standard. Absolute standards are preferred where available because in avoiding contextual standard-setting they’re cognitively simpler (Kennedy and McNally 2005, 361). Maximal or minimal degrees in turn seem to be the only principled “fixed values” for absolute standards on closed scales. On the flip side, if open scale adjectives cannot (or strongly tend not to) have absolute standards, this would be well explained if absolute standards must be either maximal or minimal values on a scale; open scale adjectives have no maximal or minimal degree (McNally et al. 2011, 154).

These distinctions can matter a great deal in evaluative discourse, the different areas of which may themselves vary. For relative gradable adjectives, the threshold for how *F* something needs to be to count as “*F*” is context-sensitive. The demands of ethics shift in different situations as their morally relevant features vary: the more is at stake for others, the more I may be required to sacrifice; the more I stand to lose if I keep a promise, the more lenient my promissory obligation may be; and so on. But neither moral standards themselves nor the threshold degree for counting as morally “good” varies with agents’ values or preferences in the way that standards for counting as “delicious” vary with

¹ Warriner et al. (2013) survey nearly 14,000 English expressions and find that speakers in the survey are happy to assign positive/negative valence to all sorts of expressions; for example, “tall” is more positively valenced than “short.”

² Kennedy (2007) is a standard-bearing development of the degree-based semantics of gradable adjectives.

³ Linguists standardly assume that the scales associated with gradable adjectives are total orders. In value theory, it’s very controversial that evaluative scales are total orders. Hence, there is a hedge in the main text.

⁴ Kennedy thinks the correlation between scale structure and standard type holds virtually without exception (Kennedy 2007, 35–37). McNally acknowledges that a small number of relative gradable adjectives (e.g., “familiar”) are associated with partially closed scales (McNally 2011; cf., Hansen and Chemla 2017).

subjects' tastes. Nor does the standard for morally "good" travel as freely on the scale as the standard for "expensive" does, as a function of whether we happen to be concerned with whether a given toothbrush is expensive or a certain car is expensive. Claims about what's good *simpliciter* seem also to suggest an absolute standard (Mankowitz 2024, 644–645). So if core uses of evaluative adjectives were best analyzed as relative across the board, our methods of normative inquiry might need retooling in areas like ethics. The extent of retooling would be a further question. Semantic values of many relative gradable adjectives are plausibly not determined only or even primarily by speaker-relative contextual factors such as speaker intentions; many other factors may matter as well.⁵ So the claim that an evaluative adjective is associated with a relative standard doesn't by itself imply the kinds of subject-relativity that are typically associated with metaethical and moral relativism (Dreier 1990; Harman 1996).

Implications of maximum-degree absoluteness in an evaluative adjective are also notable. Robert Siscoe argues that "rational" (as applied to beliefs, choices, and actions, not persons) is a maximum-standard absolute adjective that denotes the absence of any irrationalities (Siscoe 2021, 2023; see also Sorensen 2006). Strictly speaking only what's at the top of the scale of rationality can be rational; any act that's less than completely rational is positively irrational (Siscoe 2023, 118, 125).⁶ Poppy Mankowitz argues that "good" is ambiguous between moral and non-moral senses, non-moral "good" is a relative adjective, and moral "good" is a maximum-standard absolute adjective.⁷ It follows that "agents and acts can only count as strictly morally 'good' if they have the maximum degree of moral goodness" (Mankowitz 2024, 665).⁸ These analyses allow things to be "good *simpliciter*" or "rational, period." But they also imply that no or very few actual things count strictly as "rational" or morally "good," and positive ascriptions of these terms will systematically involve loose talk (see Section 8).⁹ If counting as "rational" or morally "good" requires perfection, certain claims of supererogation will be incoherent: no pair of items can be such that each is morally good, and one is morally better but optional.¹⁰ Only the better alternative can count as strictly morally "good." These implications of the claim that "rational" and moral "good" are maximum-standard absolute adjectives mark a startling departure from ordinary thought. I'll call this view "maximalism."

The maximalist thesis is surprising. For example, a YouGov word sentiment study tested 40 thin evaluative adjectives in English

ranging from "abysmal" to "perfect" on a scale of 0–10 with 0 as "very negative" and 10 as "very positive." The average score was 6.92 for "good," 7.78 for "very good," 8.95 for "excellent," and 9.16 for "perfect" (YouGov 2018). Although the study didn't test "perfectly good," the distance between "good" and "perfect" suggests that ordinary speakers don't map "good" to the endpoint of a seemingly relevant scale.¹¹ It's not clear how the degree of goodness and the degree of the associated sentiment could come that far apart.

But the recent arguments for maximalism apply standard linguistic tests for whether a gradable adjective is relative or absolute and appeal to the prevailing classification of gradable adjectives in linguistics introduced above.¹² The tests are supposed to be reliable across the board, not just in prototypical cases like "tall" and "straight." What should we then think if the results of applying these tests to certain evaluative adjectives conflict with features of a discourse that deploys them? Should we question the tests? Should we question their application to evaluative adjectives? Or should we dismiss or reinterpret the relevant features of evaluative discourse? On the one hand, there's significant theoretical pressure not to treat evaluative adjectives as formally exceptional. So if the relevant general tests best support maximalism about "rational" and moral "good," that's powerful evidence for maximalism. On the other hand, when semantic analysis starts from simple, more tractable cases, it leaves hostages to fortune. General tests that have been devised by reference to prototypical cases may not be reliable in all cases.

I'll first argue that three tests for whether a gradable adjective is relative or absolute that have been used to support maximalism about "rational" and moral "good" actually deliver mixed results (Sections 3–5). I'll then argue that (given plausible assumptions) further linguistic evidence and certain functions of evaluative discourse speak against maximalism about "rational" and moral "good": These adjectives may be associated with upper-closed or upper-open scales in different contexts but needn't have maximum-degree standards even when the scale is upper closed (Sections 6–8). These considerations challenge the standard classification of gradable adjectives introduced above. I'll then argue, based on certain characteristic features of evaluative and normative discourse, that a novel positive hypothesis does better than maximalism and merits further scrutiny: "rational" and moral "good" are better analyzed as being associated with demanding (absolute or relative) non-maximal standards irrespective of whether the scale is upper-closed or upper-open

⁵ Metasemantics of context-sensitivity, including the question of just which features of linguistic and extra-linguistic context may determine the threshold for counting as "F" and how they combine to do so, is in general under-explored; for some different perspectives, see Kennedy (2007), Glanzberg (2007, 2020), and King (2020). For some exploration of the issue in deontic discourse, see Väyrynen (2022, §4). For some thorny issues concerning how even to specify context in moral discourse, see Sinnott-Armstrong (2025).

⁶ Siscoe (2021, 73) assumes that "rational" and "irrational" are contradictories on the same scale. A full account should consider what kind of gradable adjective "irrational" is, but I don't have the space here.

⁷ Contrast Wolfsdorf (2019): "Good" is a three-way ambiguous gradable adjective, but in all cases relative. I won't discuss either ambiguity thesis here. Lassiter (2017, Ch. 7) argues that "good" is a relative adjective, but his arguments against maximality (2017, 181ff.) don't consider Mankowitz's ambiguity thesis.

⁸ A full account should consider what kind of gradable adjective "bad" is, but I don't have the space here. For some options, see Mankowitz (2024, 663n26). I'll assume that "good" and "bad" are contraries: things may be neutral, neither good nor bad. We can validate inferences such as "a is good. b is bad. So a is better than b" if we also take "good" and "bad" to order things on the same scale in inverse directions.

⁹ This is true for "good" even under maximizing act-consequentialism in ethics. That an option maximizes value relative to the available alternatives doesn't mean that it maps to the maximum degree of value. A maximally good act is hardly ever an option.

¹⁰ Typical characterizations of supererogation involve deontic vocabulary: The inferior alternative is permissible. Supererogation as such doesn't require either alternative to be good. If all options are bad, the least bad option can be supererogatory if some worse alternative is also permissible. Hence, the caveat "certain claims."

¹¹ The study didn't disambiguate non-moral and moral "good," which I would expect Mankowitz to emphasize.

¹² Mankowitz and Siscoe both endorse at least a very strong correlation between scale structure and standard type (Mankowitz 2024, 657; Siscoe 2023, 116).

(Section 9). Since my concern is maximalism, I'll largely bracket the question of whether either "rational" or moral "good" might be a minimum-standard absolute adjective.¹³

3 | The Degree Modification Test

According to the *degree modification test*, maximum-degree absolute adjectives combine felicitously with two types of degree modifier: *maximizers* (maximum degree modifiers) and *approximators*. By contrast, relative gradable adjectives don't combine felicitously with these modifiers. I'll argue that "rational" and moral "good" don't fit neatly under the features by which this test classifies gradable adjectives as absolute or relative.

Maximizers such as "completely," "totally," "absolutely," "perfectly," and "100%" indicate that an endpoint has been reached. Accepting modification by maximizers is thus evidence that an adjective has an upper-closed scale, and not accepting them is evidence of an upper-open scale (since such scales have no endpoint). The test correctly classifies the scales associated with "straight" and "large" as upper-closed and upper-open, respectively:

- (1) a. The stick is (perfectly / completely / totally / 100%) straight.
- b. The fox is (#perfectly / #completely / #totally / #100%) large.

Siscoe and Mankowitz observe that "rational" and moral "good" combine with maximizers:¹⁴

- (2) a. The husband did not do what was (perfectly / completely / ideally / 100%) rational. (Siscoe 2023, 117.)
- b. Mary is completely rational in her belief. (Siscoe 2021, 73)
- c. It was (perfectly / fully / completely) rational to take the train.
- d. No humans are (completely / totally / absolutely / fully / perfectly) good. (Mankowitz 2024, 660.)
- e. Your hastiness to put women into the totally good or evil sociopath categories is shortsighted.
- f. I'm helping you out, but... I'm not a completely good guy.
- g. In the "Imagined" environment, man can be perfectly good and happy when he isn't influenced by the boundaries which cause competition, strife, and war.¹⁵

On the basis of data such as (2d–g), Mankowitz claims that "the character of moral 'good' in contemporary English specifies an upper-closed scale in any context" (Mankowitz 2024, 660).

In the first instance, the degree modification test concerns scale structure. But it's typically interpreted as testing also for the standard type, given the prevailing classification of gradable adjectives in linguistics introduced in Section 2. The sentences in (1) are indirect evidence that "straight" is a maximum-degree absolute adjective and "large" is a relative adjective. Insofar as the Maximalist Correlation (that adjectives with upper-closed scales have a strong tendency to have maximum-degree standards) holds also for "rational" and moral "good," the sentences in (2) should be equally strong evidence that these adjectives are maximum-standard absolute adjectives. So conclude Siscoe and Mankowitz for "rational" and moral "good," respectively.

The examples involving negation don't strike me as providing such evidence. If "*F*" is a maximum-degree absolute adjective, then "*x* is not completely *F*" should entail "*x* is not *F*," provided we take care to focus on strict truth-conditions. This prediction seems to be borne out for "straight" and "clean," but to my ears, the inference is shaky with "rational" and moral "good":

- (3) a. The line is not (completely / totally) straight. ⇒ The line is not (strictly speaking) straight.
- b. The teaspoon is not (completely / totally) clean. ⇒ The teaspoon is not (strictly speaking) clean.
- c. The husband did not do what was (perfectly / completely / ideally) rational. ?⇒ The husband did not do what was (strictly speaking) rational.
- d. I'm not a completely good guy. ?⇒ I'm not (strictly speaking) a good guy.

(3c) also doesn't seem to entail that what the husband did was positively irrational, which it should if "rational" and "irrational" are contradictories (Siscoe 2021, 73). Thus, (3c–d) allow that "rational" and moral "good" may be associated with upper-closed scales without having maximum-degree standards. Insofar as the data in (2) are mixed in this way, the acceptability of sentences where "rational" and moral "good" are arguments of maximizers is correspondingly weaker evidence for maximalism.

Approximators such as "almost" and "nearly" indicate proximity to an endpoint. Accepting modification by approximators is thus evidence of an upper-closed scale with a maximum-degree standard, whereas relative adjectives shouldn't accept such modification, at least not without special contextual measures. Consider "straight" and "tall":

- (4) a. The stick is (almost / nearly) straight.
- b. Timmy is (#almost / #nearly) tall.

¹³ A semantics that analyzes "good" as a minimum-standard adjective seems to imply, to my mind implausibly, that "good" and "bad" don't order things on the same scale in inverse directions (see footnote 8). If they do, an axiological posit of zero degree of goodness won't be the lower bound on the linguistic scale. For "rational," one question is whether "His reaction to the news was minimally rational" sounds fine.

¹⁴ The relevant readings are those where "perfectly," "totally," etc., function as maximum degree modifiers. These words have non-maximizer uses as well. "It's perfectly fine" often functions as a colloquial way to express acceptability for present purposes. There are various kinds of expressive intensification: "It's totally awesome" typically strengthens the speaker's commitment to the utterance (Beltrama 2018). And "He's totally rich" typically means something like "He's unquestionably / obviously rich." There's threshold confirmation: "You don't need more money—you're perfectly rich" means that you fully satisfy the relevant standard of richness, not that you're maximally rich. There's also a quantificational use: "It's perfectly good" can be used to mean "It's good in every respect" (cf., Faroldi and Soria-Ruiz 2017). The availability of non-maximizer readings wouldn't seem to challenge the degree modification test so long as felicitous maximizer readings are also available.

¹⁵ Mankowitz (2024, 661) reports (2e–g) from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. I'm not convinced that (2e) and (2g) are best read as maximizer uses. Wolford argues that "good" doesn't admit maximizers, but his examples all feature what Mankowitz would classify as non-moral "good" (Wolford 2019, 59).

(4a) makes sense without rich contextual information, which is to be expected if the standard is absolute. By contrast, (4b) is felicitous at best in special contexts, such as when a child must be 130 cm tall to ride a roller coaster or to be selected for a task at school and Timmy is 128 cm tall. Siscoe and Mankowitz don't consider whether "rational" and moral "good" accept approximators. But these combine much less well.¹⁶ Consider:

- (5) a. Mary is (?almost / ?nearly) rational in her belief.
- b. What she's doing for others is (?almost / ?nearly) good.

(5a-b) are at the very least questionable, short of information that will identify a contextual threshold that's approximated. Thus, overall, the degree modifier test yields mixed results regarding whether "rational" and moral "good" are maximum-degree absolute adjectives.

4 | The Question Felicity Test

The *question felicity test* "checks whether the question 'Is (it / he / she) *F*?' makes sense without rich contextual information" (Mankowitz 2024, 660). If you're presented with a line, the question "Is it straight?" makes sense, and you should be able to answer it without rich contextual information, as the standard is absolute. But if you're "presented with Xiuying, the question 'Is she tall?' does not make sense without information that will identify a contextual threshold for counting as 'tall'" (Mankowitz 2024, 660). Mankowitz argues that this test supports an absolute interpretation of moral "good":

[If] we are presented with an agent or an act, the question "Is (he / she / it) good?" makes sense without rich contextual information, provided the question is understood to involve the moral disambiguation. Of course, answering the question is unlikely to be straightforward. But if we are presented with a knife, the question "Is it good?" does not even make sense unless further contextual information is supplied, and will otherwise prompt puzzled responses like "In what sense?" or "Compared to what?". (Mankowitz 2024, 664.)

Given the Maximalist Correlation, these claims also support maximalism about moral "good."

I would, however, expect speakers to vary in their reactions to these claims. Many may find the question "Is that knife good?" more intelligible on its own than "Is what she did good?" The former is readily interpreted (based on world knowledge) as asking whether the object is good for cutting, even as that's not the question in all contexts. The latter interrogative sentence has

a fairly trivial interpretation: does her act satisfy the standards of moral goodness (whatever they may be)? This we can make sense of without rich information (contextual or otherwise) irrespective of whether moral "good" is an absolute or relative adjective. Beyond that, I would expect many to struggle with just what "Is her act good?" is used to ask. If moral "good" is an absolute adjective, that alone doesn't tell us anything significantly more specific about what we're asking when we ask whether a person or an act is good. The scale associated with moral "good" isn't supplied by lexical knowledge (in contrast to "straight") or mutually shared world knowledge. But a threshold needs a scale. The substantive moral issues that make answering the question not straightforward also complicate even interpreting the question.

There are other reasons to doubt that "rational" and "good" match neatly with what the question felicity test says about absolute and relative adjectives. Consider (6):

- (6) Was her response rational?

This question seems to be underspecified without further information. I think I would need to ask something like "In what way do you mean?" As regards "good," consider:

- (7) Is Emma good?

What (7) asks in the first place depends on whether "Emma" refers to a person—say, someone we're considering trusting—or mattress-in-a-box from the sleep brand Emma. Fixing the question that (7) is used to ask already imparts information that helps the question make sense under either interpretation. Interpreting the question as involving non-moral "good" yields information about what non-moral way of being good is likely to be at issue given the nature of the object. Interpreting the question as involving moral "good" already tells us that we're asking whether a human person satisfies a moral standard. Moreover, following up on (7) with a question like "Compared to (what / who)?" can be both odd and unnecessary in certain contexts even if moral "good" is a relative adjective. The follow-up can sound odd if (7) is asking whether a human person satisfies a moral standard. It may be unclear how the domain of human persons allows for computing a threshold degree that provides a meaningful standard for moral "good."¹⁷ For example, those who treat moral "good" as a relative adjective needn't think that such utterances of (7) typically ask whether Emma "stands out" from a comparison class of human persons.¹⁸ Whether Emma is good or not doesn't depend on whether everyone else is rotten or a saint; truth-conditions for positive ascriptions of moral "good" won't be distributional even if it's a relative adjective. The follow-up can be unnecessary insofar as it's generally assumed that moral uses of "good" invoke relatively demanding standards irrespective of whether the standards are maximal. (I return to this idea in Section 9.) So even on a non-maximal interpretation of moral

¹⁶ Thanks to Gabe Dupre here.

¹⁷ The follow-up can sound fine (e.g.) in contexts that supply more specific contrast classes. Suppose Emma lived in Germany in 1938. Was she (morally) good compared to a modern liberal? Maybe not. Compared to committed Nazis? Perhaps yes. (I owe this observation to an anonymous reviewer.) I'll leave it for maximalists to provide their preferred explanation of the data here. One possible general explanation for felicity is that these questions are slightly unusually phrased "Is *a* better than *b*?" questions.

¹⁸ Contra Kennedy (2007) who characterizes the threshold for relative adjectives in terms of "standing out" in a comparison and argues that when "*F*" is an open-scale adjective, fixing truth-conditions for the predicate requires considering "the distribution of objects in some domain (a comparison class) relative to the measure function the adjective expresses" (Kennedy 2007, 17).

“good,” we can typically make sense of questions like (7) without rich contextual information beyond what’s already provided by fixing the question.

5 | The Selection Test

The *selection test* works on the assumption that absolute and relative adjectives differ in their ability to distinguish objects in different regions of the scale. Standard relative adjectives can be used to distinguish objects in the middle of the scale. Suppose you show me two sticks that are both (not) long and differ in nothing but length. It’s felicitous to request “Point to the long one.” But imagine two partially full jars, where one is fuller than the other. The request “Point to the full one” is infelicitous. Maximum-standard adjectives can only be used to distinguish objects at the upper end of scale: the request “Point to the full one” is felicitous only when the fuller jar is full or very nearly so. This test also delivers mixed results for “rational” and moral “good.”

Siscoe relies heavily on the selection test in arguing that “rational” is a maximum-standard absolute adjective (Siscoe 2021, 72; 2023, 118). He asks us to “suppose that, upon looking out the window and seeing no rain outside, Mary forms the belief that it is raining. John, on the other hand, forms the belief that it is not only cloudy and raining, but also hailing” (Siscoe 2021, 72). Mary’s beliefs are more rational than John’s. Siscoe reports that (8) is an infelicitous request:

(8) # Point to the one who believed rationally.

Similarly, suppose Cheech and Chong have decidedly mixed moral characters, although Cheech is (distinguishably) morally better than Chong. (9) again sounds very odd:

(9) # Point to the morally good one.

So “rational” and moral “good” seem to be unlike relative adjectives in that their unmodified form cannot easily be used to distinguish between objects in the middle of the associated scale.

However, we don’t need to assume that “rational” and moral “good” are associated with maximum-degree standards to explain these data. We only need to assume that the standards tend to be demanding enough to serve normative functions such as justifying commendation or approval. As I’ll explain in Section 9, these are plausible assumptions about how “rational” and moral “good” function in evaluative discourse and related non-linguistic practices.¹⁹ Given these assumptions, it’s little wonder that you typically cannot take two middling things on the scale of rationality or moral goodness and felicitously request “Point to the (rational / morally good) one.” Using “rational” to distinguish

Mary from John or moral “good” to distinguish Cheech from Chong would at least tend to imply (contrary to what we think) that Mary and Cheech merit commendation or approval.

These considerations say little by themselves about whether “rational” and moral “good” are relative or absolute adjectives. But the Maximalist Correlation treats them as evidence that these adjectives aren’t absolute. This helps to sharpen up the theoretical options. If maximalist semantics withheld the application of the Maximalist Correlation to “rational” and moral “good,” then the degree modifier test in Section 3 and the question felicity test in Section 4 would also fail to support maximalism even if “rational” and moral “good” fit neatly into the classifications these tests draw. The degree modifier test tests in the first instance for an upper-closed scale; the question felicity test for an absolute standard. Inference from a positive result from either test to a maximum-degree standard is supported by the Maximalist Correlation or its underlying theoretical rationale.²⁰ My discussion so far therefore presses the following questions: How plausible is the Maximalist Correlation? And how strong is the evidence overall that “rational” and moral “good” are upper-closed adjectives? I’ll first argue that these adjectives aren’t lexically bound to an upper closed scale. I’ll then argue that even a qualified version of the Maximalist Correlation is false of “rational” and moral “good,” whatever its plausibility may be outside of these cases.

6 | Infinite Value and Scale Structure

Prototypical gradable adjectives are conventionally associated with a single dimension that’s often expressible in independently intelligible non-trivial terms—“tall” with height, “expensive” with cost, and so on. It’s much less clear that the scales that are conventionally associated with “rational” and moral “good” are like that. My question in this section is to what extent the conventions of the language determine the structure of the scale associated with “rational” and moral “good.” (In Section 7, I’ll ask the same about the dimensions of the scale.) My answer is that the scale structure may vary contextually: even if many contexts associate “rational” and moral “good” with upper-closed scales, in other contexts the scale may have no upper bound.

Maximalist semantics for a gradable adjective “*F*” entails that allowing “*F*” to occur on an unbounded scale is incoherent. A scale that has no upper bound has no maximum degree. As we’d then expect, maximum-degree absolute adjectives don’t admit modification by “infinitely”:

(10) a. # The line is infinitely straight.

b. # The door is infinitely closed.²¹

¹⁹ Many non-moral uses of “good” are also characteristically used to commend, approve, or the like. The *OED* characterizes “good” as the most general adjective of commendation in English. But “good” can also easily stand in for non-evaluative adjectives, as in “Swimmer A was 6 seconds better [= faster] than Swimmer B.”

²⁰ Mankowitz (2024) considers two further tests. As we’ll see, she agrees that maximalism has trouble with the *entailment test* and appeals to imprecision to explain the data (Section 8). I won’t discuss the *comparison class test*, since (as noted toward the end of Section 4) the threshold for moral “good” may not be aptly characterized in terms of standing out in a comparison even if it’s a relative adjective.

²¹ One complication is that “full” is standardly classified as a maximum-degree absolute adjective, but, as an anonymous reviewer observes, “The jar is infinitely full” is fine for an infinitely tall jar. A conservative explanation treats such scale associations as derivative: “full” is a maximum-degree absolute adjective in its conventional meaning, but when “full” is predicated of an infinitely sized object, making sense of the utterance forces a shift to an upper-open scale. One alternative is parallel to the view I’ll defend about “rational” and moral “good”: “full” isn’t lexically bound to an upper-closed or upper-open scale and may be associated with either in different contexts. I won’t try to settle this issue about “full.”

However, the examples in (11) suggest that “rational” and moral “good” pattern more like relative adjectives than the maximum-degree adjectives in (10):

- (11) God is infinitely (tall / big / old / good / ?rational).

In (11), “infinitely good” sounds acceptable even when “good” is used in its moral sense. For reasons I’ll explain shortly, I wouldn’t take this as evidence that “rational” or moral “good” *always* occur on open scales. Hence, I wouldn’t go all the way with Daniel Lassiter when he writes: “Intuitively, [the scale of goodness] does not have an intrinsic maximum or minimum: like kindness and beauty, there is no conceptual limitation on how good (or bad) a proposition could be” (Lassiter 2017, 177). It may be less clear that “infinitely rational” is judged acceptable. This might be because we’re unsure what exactly “A is infinitely rational” might mean. Infinite value raises deep puzzles in axiology and decision theory. But this isn’t usually taken to mean that talk of unbounded utilities and infinite expected value is incoherent (cf., Easwaran et al. 2024, §7).²² Whether “good” and “rational” combine felicitously with “infinitely” is independent from figuring out what those phrasal combinations might mean. An adequate semantics for evaluative adjectives should figure in plausible explanations for the use-facts we find, which include their uses to state and debate a wide variety of views about value, morality, and rationality.²³ We do seem to allow that “rational” and “good” (including its moral uses) may coherently occur on a scale that has no upper bound and thus no maximum degree.

A possible complication is that “infinitely” may be more commonly found in scientific, religious, and philosophical discourse than in ordinary discourse. One might take this to suggest that “rational” and moral “good” don’t occur in (11) in their ordinary meaning. But consider:

- (12) a. ? The ladder is completely tall.
b. The ladder is infinitely tall.

(12a) is a well-formed sentence, so “completely” can compose syntactically with “tall.” So why is (12a) judged unacceptable and (12b) acceptable? A plausible explanation is that “completely” and “infinitely” differ as to which concepts they can compose semantically with, and the measure of height expressed by “tall” is one such point of difference (Wellwood 2020, 10). Since no actual ladder could be infinitely tall, (12b) would typically be an unusual thing to say, but ordinary meaning imposes no conceptual limitation. Similarly, if “infinitely” doesn’t commonly combine with “rational” or “good” in ordinary discourse, this doesn’t show that combining them activates a different meaning. Meanings are one thing; things we can do with them are another.

If “rational” and moral “good” can occur on unbounded scales consistently with their conventional meanings, that’s evidence not only against maximalist semantics for these adjectives but also against the claim that “the character of moral ‘good’ in contemporary English specifies an upper-closed scale in any context” (Mankowitz 2024, 660). This has a broader upshot. We saw in Section 2 that the correlation between upper-closed scales and maximal standards is supported by an interpretive economy principle that tells us to maximize the contribution of conventional meanings when computing truth conditions. That principle fails to support the Maximalist Correlation in cases where the conventional meaning of an adjective doesn’t determine an upper closed scale. This argument complements existing concerns about the strength of the correlation between open scales and relative adjectives and closed scales and absolute adjectives. For example, Lassiter presents convincing evidence that many relative adjectives occur on scales that are bounded on one or both ends; but focuses on those with a lower bound (“likely,” “probable,” “cheap,” “slow,” “quiet,” “poor”) (Lassiter 2017, 107–114).

A novelty of my argument is to question the standard assumption that scale structure is always conventionally determined, for example, always upper-closed or upper-open. We’ve yet to see compelling evidence against the possibility that “rational” and moral “good” may be associated with upper open scales in some contexts but upper closed scales in others. The data concerning maximum-degree modifiers in Section 3 may still be evidence that “rational” and moral “good” have upper-closed scales in many contexts. A maximalist might then appeal to a more limited version of the Maximalist Correlation to claim that “rational” or moral “good” are associated with maximum-degree standards in contexts where they’re associated with upper-closed scales. In Sections 7 and 8, I give two arguments for why even this more limited claim is too strong. Note that the view that an adjective “F” may be associated with differently structured scales in different contexts may take at least two forms. One is that “F” is polysemous between a meaning associated with an open scale and one associated with a closed scale.²⁴ (This view allows each distinct sense to be associated with context-invariant scale structure.) Another is that “F” is associated with a contextual function from objects to degrees on a scale which may differ with respect to scale structure.²⁵ I cannot explore the questions that arise here. Are any other gradable adjectives polysemous in the former way? How are we to model polysemy with respect to scale structure? Just when do different uses of a word involve polysemy versus metasemantic differences in how semantic variables get constrained or fixed? Can a stable lexical meaning for a gradable adjective be underspecified to the extent required by the second view?²⁶ Could scale structure be a semantic variable that contexts fix or constrain in different ways?

²² Siscoe takes “rational” to have expected utility as its scale, so infinite expected utility is also dialectically relevant. But as I’ll note below, “rational” isn’t conventionally associated with the scale of expected utility.

²³ Here I draw on Janice Dowell’s remarks on semantics for deontic modals (Dowell 2025, 494–495). I don’t intend the constraint in the text to be extremely strong. Our best evidence of the conventions of the language might not be fully neutral even among all coherent substantive views (Mankowitz 2024). On the other hand, some patterns in ordinary use that might be interpreted as reflecting conventional linguistic facts may instead reflect general discourse assumptions or other empirical facts about discourses or extra-linguistic world (cf., Silk 2021, 152).

²⁴ Given my arguments above, this view would have to say that even *moral* “good” is polysemous in this way, not merely (as Mankowitz thinks) that moral and non-moral “good” are polysemous in this way. On the distinction between, and criteria for, polysemy and context-sensitivity, see, for example, Viebahn and Vetter (2016).

²⁵ See Silk (2021) for a view that associates evaluative adjectives in general with contextual functions. It’s not clear to me whether that view allows a single adjective to vary contextually in scale structure.

²⁶ Glanzberg (2018) is a nuanced consideration of these issues that seems to leave room for this view.

7 | Multidimensionality

Prototypical gradable adjectives (“tall,” “expensive”) lexicalize a single, typically measurable dimension (height, cost). But some gradable adjectives are *multidimensional*. An adjective “*F*” is multidimensional if whether “is *F*” applies to an object and whether “is *F*er than” applies to a pair of objects depends on how the objects stand along multiple underlying dimensions, or respects, of *F*ness (D’Ambrosio and Hedden 2024). Verdicts about *F*ness depend on what the dimensions are (dimensional specification) and how orderings along the dimensions are combined into a scale (dimensional aggregation). I’ll argue that “rational” and moral “good” can be associated with multidimensional scales and that such contexts often preclude a maximal interpretation. It may not be surprising that multidimensionality complicates matters. Mankowitz reports that she has some doubts that moral “good” is multidimensional but doesn’t say what these are (2024, 664n28). Siscoe explicitly assumes that “rational” (as applied to acts) is unidimensional: “With practical rationality [...] the scale is composed of degrees of expected utility” (2023, 120).²⁷

Semantic multidimensionality is distinct from the informal point that a judgment of whether something is *F* may depend on multiple factors (Solt 2018, 76; Silk 2021, 137). For example, judging what’s red may take into account hue, saturation, and brilliance, but “red” isn’t semantically multidimensional. The standard linguistic test for semantic multidimensionality appeals to syntactic or formal features: multidimensional adjectives admit “respect-denoting” propositional phrases and quantificational phrases such as “with respect to” or “except for” (Sassoon 2013). Observe the following contrasts:

- (13) a. Neo is intelligent with respect to mathematical abilities.
b. # Teo is (tall / heavy) with respect to ...
- (14) a. In what (way / respects) is Neo (intelligent / healthy)?
b. # In what (way / respects) is Teo (tall / heavy)?
- (15) a. Neo is healthy except for their blood pressure.
b. # Teo is (tall / heavy) except for ...

Now consider that the sentences in (16) would seem to be judged acceptable:

- (16) a. He’s a good person, except for his (impatience / cold demeanor).
b. In what (way / respects) is progressive taxation good?
c. The outcome was good except with respect to inequality.

- d. It was a rational solution except for his procrastination.
- e. His beliefs are rational with respect to how coherent they are but not with respect to how well-proportioned they are to the evidence.
- f. Except for your mixed motives, you did (otherwise / all in all) a good thing.
- g. Your route choice was (mostly / largely / relatively) rational, except for the predictable rush hour traffic on that stretch of A65.
- h. The updated policy is not good in (most / some / three) (ways / respects).²⁸

Philosophical analysis of claims like “The outcome is good/better in this way/respect: it’s fair” may, of course, be unobvious, but such sentences sound acceptable. The acceptability of (16a–h) is evidence that moral “good” and “rational” are semantically multidimensional. Note that this allows dimensions to serve also as reasons for judgment: If kindness is a dimension of moral goodness, it’s also possible to judge that something is “good” because it’s kind.

There’s more for semantic theory to say about how the dimension-sensitivity of “rational” and moral “good” is best understood.²⁹ Their linguistic scales should be compatible with a wide range of substantive views about what rationality or moral goodness consists in. As the relevant dimensions are one topic of substantive dispute, they won’t be specified in the semantics but must be modeled in some other way. We’ll then want also to understand what aspects of the meaning of “rational” or moral “good” stay constant in such disputes. A common view is that the commendatory role of “good” is a constant aspect of its meaning (Hare 1952; Solt 2018). Even if that’s right, a commendatory role is insufficient to induce even a unidimensional scale, as two parties to a univocal dispute may rank (and thus commend) things differently.

Philosophical complications aside, the sentences in (16) are evidence that a semantics for “rational” and moral “good” should allow them to have multidimensional uses.³⁰ As applied to acts, “rational” may be used to measure composite qualities such as responsiveness to reasons. For example, akratic actions involve a high degree of *recognizing* reasons but a low degree of *reacting* to reasons. As applied to beliefs, “rational” may be used to measure an aggregate of coherence and proportion to evidence. So its conventional meaning doesn’t bind it to a scale of expected utility. Nor are “rational” and moral “good” unusual; dimensional specification is often not conventionally determined. In different contexts, “intelligent” may be associated with mathematical intelligence, verbal-linguistic intelligence, emotional intelligence, street smarts, or some mixture of these or other potential dimensions

²⁷ The discussion of dimensional specification of “good” in Wolfsdorf (2019, Ch. 5) is limited to which single dimension of value (moral value, use value, etc.) “good” is associated with in a context. He neither considers that the scale for “good” in a context might be multidimensional scale nor mentions dimensional aggregation.

²⁸ (16c) and (16e) come from D’Ambrosio and Hedden (2024, 254).

²⁹ See Väyrynen (2026) for some further discussion of the multidimensionality of “good.”

³⁰ Some (e.g., Sassoon 2013) think that semantic multidimensionality must be detectable through such syntactic or formal features. However, others think that some adjectives are “conceptually multidimensional” in that “we can conceptually distinguish different dimensions that may affect the ordering induced by an adjective even though the adjective may not appear [quantificationally] multidimensional” (Soria-Ruiz and Faroldi 2022, 896; Solt 2018, 74). The idea isn’t merely that conceptual multidimensionality matters epistemically in evaluating various sentences for their truth, but that different relative weightings of the dimensions may induce different orderings and thus generate different truth conditions. So even if many speakers found (16a–h) less acceptable, I would have a backup option: argue that “rational” and moral “good” are conceptually multidimensional in this sense.

of intelligence. The same goes for “healthy” and qualities like musculoskeletal health, cardiovascular health, freedom from disease, and more. At most, conventional meaning constrains dimensional specification; perhaps dimensions of health must have to do with the functioning of an organism. So compositional semantic value of sentences involving multidimensional uses of “rational” and moral “good” will be a function of dimensions that are somehow represented more abstractly than by specification.

If “rational” and moral “good” are semantically multidimensional, that’s a problem for maximalism. Given independently plausible assumptions about dimensional aggregation, contexts where “rational” or moral “good” is associated with a multidimensional scale often preclude a maximal interpretation of the adjective even if the scale is upper-closed.

Let an *aggregation function* be a function from a set of dimensions of F_{ness} to a ranking of objects in terms of overall F_{ness} . Justin D’Ambrosio and Brian Hedden argue that multidimensional adjectives often admit multiple aggregation functions, where “admissibility is determined by axioms governing dimensional aggregation together with further features specific to the context” (D’Ambrosio and Hedden 2024, 254).³¹ “ a is F ” and “ a is more F than b ” may be true relative to one aggregation function but false relative to another. For example, a pair of functions may treat different dimensions as more important than others. If a is F (or more F than b) on one admissible function but not all, a plausible treatment is that such a use of “ a is F ” (or “ a is more F than b ”) is neither determinately true nor determinately false. Such uses of F are indeterminate in both the positive and the comparative forms, even if determinate in other uses.

The flexibility of “rational” and moral “good” makes it plausible that the conventions of the language as well as many contexts leave room for multiple admissible aggregation functions. The problem for maximalist semantics for these adjectives is that semantic indeterminacy arising from multiple admissible aggregation functions appears to preclude a maximal interpretation. The degree that closes the scale of F_{ness} provides a sharp cut-off and thus cannot be a borderline instance of “ F ”. Consider prototypical maximum-standard: if to be full is to be completely full and to be dry is to maximally dry, precise uses of “full” and “dry” won’t be semantically indeterminate.³² An adjective that admits indeterminate uses thus cannot receive a maximal interpretation in those uses. This can be so even if the adjective is associated with an upper-closed scale. The link that the

Maximalist Correlation asserts between upper-closed scales and maximum-degree standards is severed in these cases of semantic indeterminacy.³³

8 | Talk of Supererogation and Imprecision

Maximalism cannot adequately explain uses of “rational” and moral “good” to express supererogation. Rational supererogation is impossible if only what’s optimally rational is rational. Equally clearly, maximalism about moral “good” rules out the thought that one can fail to do what’s maximally morally good while still doing something genuinely morally good. But many paradigm cases of moral supererogation have this character. Suppose you can save two people from death with a minor risk to your own life or save six people from death with a significant risk to your own life. Intuitively, saving two people is not just morally permissible but also morally good, although saving six people would be morally better. Many moral theorists agree, and those who don’t agree may use “good” to state their disagreements and arguments. Or consider an example of rational supererogation from Claire Benn and Adam Bales:

The Mathematician: Omari, who enjoys a full and balanced life, wants to be the best mathematician in his school. One day, his school is closed because of snow. His parents tell him he may make a snowman in the garden. Although tempted, Omari instead spends two hours revising maths, bringing him closer to realising his mathematical goal. (Benn and Bales 2020, 924.)

As they comment, “Assuming that the benefits of extra revision outweigh the costs, revising is rationally optimal. Yet, common sense suggests that it would also be rationally permissible for Omari to give revision a miss” (Benn and Bales 2020, 924). That supererogation is at least a coherent notion is thus a staple of both common sense and many normative or metanormative views regarding rationality and morality, which one wouldn’t expect semantics to rule out.³⁴

The standard maximalist response is that most positive ascriptions of absolute adjectives are *imprecise*: when something isn’t strictly F , “This is F ” is strictly speaking false, but it can be felicitous to assert, for example, by implicating the truth that the object is sufficiently F for current purposes.³⁵ Consider:

³¹ Sassoon’s (2013) semantics requires an object to attain a certain standard on *every* dimension (“conjunctive” adjectives, e.g., “healthy”) or *some* dimensions (“disjunctive” adjectives, e.g., “sick”), depending on the adjective. Accepting modification by “except for” is used as evidence that an adjective is conjunctive. But insofar as the Maximalist Correlation is questionable, these semantics also won’t entail that “rational” and moral “good” would require objects to satisfy a *maximum-degree* standard on all of the relevant scales. D’Ambrosio and Hedden (2024) raise significant problems for Sassoon’s semantics and argue instead that the axioms governing dimensional aggregation are analogous to those that govern preference aggregation in social choice theory.

³² Siscoe (2021, 65, 67, 73–4) agrees that a maximum-degree standard won’t be vague or indeterminate.

³³ I don’t claim that *no* multidimensional adjective is a maximum-standard adjective. On Sassoon’s (2013) semantics (see footnote 31), it’s possible for some adjectives to require an object to reach the maximum degree on *every* dimension of F_{ness} to truly count as F . If that’s what the maximalist *requires* of any object that truly counts as “rational” or morally “good,” the view strikes me as extremely strong. Even the semantic possibility may be unlikely. If dimensions needn’t be weighted equally, even these adjectives would plausibly still exhibit comparative indeterminacy. Here maximalism would require adjectives that are determinate in positive form but indeterminate in comparative form. I know of no other adjectives that exhibit this combination of features. The criticisms of Sassoon’s semantics cited in footnote 31 are also relevant to this point.

³⁴ Rational supererogation isn’t possible in orthodox normative decision theory. If Omari’s preference-ordering satisfies the axioms of the expected utility theory, then making a snowman would be irrational in that sense. But again, the conventional meaning of “rational” doesn’t bind it to a scale of expected utility. Some claims of rational supererogation should then be coherent. Maximizing act-consequentialism in ethics allows that it’s coherent to say of an act that it’s morally supererogatory. Its thesis that there are no morally supererogatory acts is a substantive thesis.

³⁵ This is the standard account of imprecision, adopted by Mankowitz (2024, 659, 665). Siscoe (2023, 122n10) takes a different view. An imprecise use of “ a is F ” is true if the uppermost degree on the scale is sufficiently coarse-grained for something that’s roughly F and something that’s completely F to map to the same degree. In precise uses, the uppermost degree on the scale is finer grained. But in the relevant cases of supererogation, a is *notably* or *significantly* better or more rational than b . On this view, we

- (17) a. The fridge is empty but not completely empty.
 b. Saving two people when you could save six is good but not perfectly good.

The idea is that in utterances of (17a-b), an imprecise use of a gradable adjective in the first half shifts to a precise use in the second half.³⁶ Siscoe suggests that if a person who is overall highly rational procrastinates, this needn't count against her rationality in ordinary loose talk (Siscoe 2023, 121). Mankowitz doesn't mention supererogation but takes imprecise uses of moral "good" to be very common. As hardly anything attains the maximal degree of moral goodness, hardly anything "will meet the threshold to count as strictly 'good'," whereas "contexts with reduced expectations of precision will allow agents and acts to be felicitously described as morally 'good' even when they do not strictly count as such" (Mankowitz 2024, 665; see also 659, 662).

Appeal to widespread imprecision is independently important to maximalism. Mankowitz acknowledges that the results of the *entailment test* seem to conflict with maximalism about moral "good." When "*F*" is a maximum-standard absolute adjective, a comparative construction of the form "*x* is (more *F* / *Fer*) than *y*" should entail "*y* is not *F*" (having a non-maximal amount of *Fness* is supposed to preclude counting as "*F*" in any context). This is borne out for "clean" (which is maximum-standard) but is unclear with moral "good":

- (18) The floor is cleaner than the table. $\nRightarrow$ The floor is clean. $\Rightarrow$ The table is not clean.
 (19) a. What she did is (better / more good) than what he did.
 $\Rightarrow$ What she did is good.
 $? \Rightarrow$ / $? \nRightarrow$ What he did is not good.
 b. Donating as much as one is able to charity is (better / more good) than donating a small fraction of what one can donate to charity.
 $\Rightarrow$ Donating as much as one is able to charity is good.
 $? \Rightarrow$ / $? \nRightarrow$ Donating a small fraction of what one can donate to charity is not good. (Cf., Mankowitz 2024, 662.)

In (19a-b), the last entailment seems difficult to decide either way, contrary to what maximalism seems to predict. One plank of Mankowitz's argument that maximalism is compatible with the results of the entailment test is that when a maximum-standard adjective "*F*" is used imprecisely, it seems as if "*x* is more *F* than *y*" is compatible with "*y* is *F*," although we can block this by adding "strictly" to force a precise reading.³⁷ "What she did is better than what he did" seems compatible with "What he did is good" but does seem to entail "What he did is not strictly good"; what he did could have been morally better (cf., Mankowitz 2024, 662).

Maximalists appeal to imprecision to explain the acceptability of utterances in (20)–(21):

- (20) a. The stick is straight, but it isn't completely straight.
 b. What she's doing is good, but it could be better. (Here's how.)
 c. What he did is rational, but what she did is more rational.³⁸
 (21) a. Both options A and B are good, but A is (notably / significantly) better.
 b. Both options A and B are rational, but A is (notably / significantly) more so.

The maximalist analysis is that each option is loosely speaking "rational" or morally "good." The sentences in (20) are felicitous to assert in contexts where the left-hand conjunct is false but felicitous to assert, which is the standard account of what's going in loose talk. This seems to allow that the better option is better than its lesser alternative even if neither option is strictly morally "good." As (21) suggests, this analysis could be extended to supererogation.

This analysis of ascriptions of supererogation runs into a conceptual problem. I don't see how an imprecise use of moral "good" may *both* pragmatically convey true content *and* distinguish supererogatory acts from merely permissible alternatives. For example, a supererogatory act must be sufficiently morally good to be praiseworthy, whereas its merely permissible alternative often isn't. If imprecisely describing one option as "good" conveys that it's sufficiently morally good for current purposes, then imprecisely describing the other as "good" should do the same. If we dealt with this by forcing a strict context, we would lose the ability to explain how each option may often be felicitously described as "good," as often neither would count as strictly speaking good. I find it more generally unclear whether the characteristic commendatory aspect of "rational" and moral "good" is present in their loose uses.

The maximalist analysis relies crucially on mid-sentence context shifts. For example, in (21) it requires that the intensification effected by "notably" or "significantly" raise the standards of precision. So unless one assumes a mid-sentence context shift, either the first or the second conjunct will come out false. This raises several problems. First of all, in (21b) the ellipsis precludes the possibility of a context shift. You can't interpret the "more so" precisely but the initial "rational" imprecisely, as the maximalist analysis requires. Moreover, consider:

- (22) Strictly speaking, what he did is morally good, and what she did is morally even better.

This sounds fine to me, but that cannot be explained by a mid-sentence context shift.

cannot say this while keeping context fixed so that both count as good or rational. Only a precise context licenses the comparative we need. But in those contexts the worse but permissible option cannot count as "good" or "rational," as it's not strictly so.

³⁶ There are many accounts of *how* such a shift happens. Recent theories include Carter (2021) and Dinges (2024).

³⁷ The other planks appeal to non-moral disambiguations of "good" and to the fact that describing something as "not good" typically conversationally implicates that it is bad, whereas the speaker might consider it merely morally neutral, and hence might be reluctant to judge that "*x* is better than *y*" entails "*y* is not good."

³⁸ Mankowitz's examples here feature objects that we tend to be independently opinionated about (e.g., Gandhi and Mother Theresa). As this can distort linguistic intuitions, I use examples one cannot be prejudiced about.

Even when mid-sentence context shifts are possible to posit, they're difficult and special. Consider:

(23) John is here and Mary is here.

This sentence is nearly impossible to interpret as referring to two different locations without a context-shifting operation such as pointing to two different places for John and Mary or a pointed use of tone or emphasis. So having to posit widespread mid-sentence context shifts seems like a large burden for the maximalist.

Many accounts of imprecision imply that if the sentences in (20) involved a mid-sentence shift in the standards of precision, we should expect the order of conjuncts to matter with respect to felicity for loose utterances (Carter 2021, 174–175). Witness (24):

(24) a. The stick is straight, but it isn't completely straight.
(=20a)

b. ?? The stick isn't completely straight, but it's straight.

(24a) is felicitous to assert when the left-hand conjunct is false but felicitously assertable, but this is much less clear in (24b) (Carter 2021, 174–175).³⁹ Moral “good” and “rational” seem not to exhibit similar sensitivity to the order of conjuncts:

(25) a. Taking a week off because of burnout is rational, but it isn't completely rational (it's more rational to take a week off to prevent burnout).

b. Taking a week off because of burnout isn't completely rational (it's more rational to take a week off to prevent burnout), but it is rational.

(26) a. Doing the right thing through strength of will is good, but it's not completely good (it's better not to be tempted at all).

b. Doing the right thing through strength of will isn't completely good (it's better not to be tempted at all) but it is good.

This difference from paradigm maximum-standard adjectives like “straight” is also evidence against interpreting the left-hand conjuncts in (21) above as instances of imprecise loose talk.

Finally, embedding a sentence under a belief operator seems to preclude a mid-sentence context shift in the embedded sentence. Thus, consider:

(27) a. ? Mary believes that both jars are full, but the blue jar is significantly fuller.

b. Mary believes that both options A and B are good but A is significantly better.

(27a) sounds off, but (27b) can be used to attribute a coherent belief (cf., Siu 2021). Even if context shifts can sometimes occur when a sentence is embedded under a belief operator, that doesn't seem to be what's going on in (27b).

To sum up: expressions of supererogation cannot be adequately explained as imprecise uses of “rational” and moral “good” and there are also more general problems with the maximalist claim that almost all ordinary positive ascriptions of “rational” and moral “good” are imprecise.

9 | A “High Standards” Account

My positive proposal is that “rational” and moral “good” (1) typically have semantically *non-maximal* standards irrespective of whether the associated scale has an upper bound and (2) these standards are at least typically *demanding* (in a sense I'll explain), for systematic reasons. I hope to show that this “high standards” analysis of “rational” and moral “good” merits serious further consideration. So far I've defended (1). Its chief novelty for semantic theory is the result that even when “rational” and moral “good” are associated with upper-closed scales, they don't thereby have a strong tendency to have maximum-degree standards.⁴⁰ This challenges the standard classification of gradable adjectives in linguistics. I noted some questions that remain open at the end of Section 6, such as whether “rational” and moral “good” are polysemous between a meaning associated with an open scale and one associated with a closed scale, or associated with contextual functions from objects to degrees on a scale that may be open or closed in different contexts. I incline towards the latter, but my proposal can take either form.

The distinctive element of my proposal is (2). This claim is speculative. I won't be able to develop it here into a form that would generate testable predictions. But I take the claim to be supported by a general normative function of discourses involving “rational” and (moral) “good.” These (and many other) evaluative adjectives are characteristically used to commend, approve, prescribe, praise, guide attitudes and choices, and so on. Given this, describing something as “rational” or morally “good” tends to be informative only insofar as the standard value is sufficiently high to support some such positive attitudes.⁴¹ Commendation or praise typically isn't informative if it's insufficiently discriminative. For example, moral judgments won't guide choices or attitudes if they fail to discriminate among options. To do so, moral judgments need to be associated with standards that (at least often) aren't all that easy to meet.⁴² So a characteristic function of evaluative discourse provides reason to think that “rational” and moral “good” are least typically

³⁹ Against Carter, Dinges (2024, 358n18) suggests that the asymmetry in (24) is unconnected to loose talk. For example, (24b) improves markedly if we add “nonetheless” in the end, and we observe parallel improvements in cases that don't involve loose talk. But note: (25) and (26) don't require such amendments to be acceptable. I should note that the data may be messy in other ways. For example, an anonymous reviewer departs from my other informants in reporting that (25a) sounds wrong to them. I'm not sure what to make of that. But since the relevant comparison point is (24), the acceptability of (25b) is more crucial for my purposes.

⁴⁰ It may be possible to force a contextual maximal standard, for example, through contextual salience of the absence of any moral or rational deficiency.

⁴¹ This general idea can be implemented in multiple more specific ways. General theories of gradable adjectives that could be adapted in this way include Lassiter and Goodman (2013) and Rett (2015).

⁴² A central question of substantive normative ethics, of course, is just how demanding morality is.

associated with demanding standards.⁴³ The “at least typically” matters. Evaluative utterances may have other purposes or be sensitive to other pressures as well. We may say in the spirit of encouragement that someone did “a good thing” when they merely suppressed their worse instincts. We may call “good” things that are merely satisfactory or acceptable for the present purposes. (But “good” doesn’t easily lend itself to the latter use in moral discourse, and parallel uses of “rational” seem rare.)

The “high standards” account implies that “rational” and moral “good” are a special kind of gradable adjectives. The normative function of “rational” or moral “good” doesn’t require a suitably demanding degree to be at the extreme end of the scale. We routinely commend, approve, prescribe, and praise actions that are neither perfectly morally good nor completely rational, but nothing about the function suggests that this is almost always loose talk. However, the normative function doesn’t allow the standard to travel as freely on the scale as can happen with more simple relative adjectives such as “tall” or “cheap.” This implication of my proposal isn’t objectionable in principle. It fits with the results of the selection test in Section 5 and I’ve given it independent motivation. We’ve seen that “rational” and moral “good” don’t fit neatly into the standard classification of gradable adjectives into relative, minimum-standard, and maximum-standard adjectives—but, of course, I’ve raised problems for this classification.

As the “high standards” account stands here, it can take a variety of more specific forms. One choice-point is whether “rational” and moral “good” have their normative function in virtue of their conventional meanings. My general proposal allows this but also tolerates the possibility that these adjectives are characteristically used to commend (although they may be used in other ways as well), and this discourse-specific assumption is part of general speaker competence. It seems in general possible for discourse-specific assumptions to interact with conventional meaning in truth-conditionally relevant ways (cf., Silk 2021). So association with demanding standards can be systematic and predictable whether it’s conventional or reflects general empirical facts about discourses.

Another choice-point I’ll leave for future work is whether “rational” and moral “good” have relative or absolute standards.⁴⁴ A relativist version of the “high standards” account says that “rational” and moral “good” are associated with relatively demanding standards that may exhibit some contextual variation within that demanding range. An absolutist version says that they’re associated with context-invariant demanding standards.⁴⁵ Any relativist version requires a metasemantics that specifies how contextual factors determine semantic value within the

default constraints set by the characteristic normative function of “rational” and moral “good.” Any absolutist version requires a principled basis for an absolute but non-maximal standard. Either task is far from trivial. For example, the same standards of moral goodness may not be supplied across contexts unless we assume a universal body of moral norms. This substantive matter isn’t built into conventional meaning, any more than how our subjective attitudes relate to what counts as “rational” or morally “good.”⁴⁶ This approach to “rational” and moral “good” may have some precedent. In particular, color adjectives have been suggested to have maximum degrees but not maximal standards (McNally 2011). Experimental evidence on speaker judgments shows a lot of interpersonal variation, but the evidence supports both the possibility that color terms have absolute “midpoint standard” interpretations and the possibility that people vary in where standards for color terms are located on the relevant scale (Hansen and Chemla 2017). The “high standards” account presents the characteristic normative function of “rational” and moral “good” as an additional constraint on standard-setting, at least in contexts of commendatory use.

The commendatory function of evaluative discourse directs us to *normatively demanding* degrees of evaluative properties. Whether such a degree corresponds to a high *semantic degree* depends on how the relevant scale is structured (cf., Wolfsdorf 2019, 83). One example is that the notion of a high degree isn’t apt when the scale has no upper bound. Another example is that semantics shouldn’t rule out the substantive view that *x* is (morally) good if and only if *x* is better than something neutral. “Better than neutral” looks like a minimum-degree semantic standard if the linguistic scale associated with moral “good” bottoms out at a zero degree that borders a neutral zone. But it won’t be a minimum-degree standard if moral “good” and “bad” measure the same scale in inverse directions, with a neutral zone in between. I take this question about the linguistic scale to be quite independent from the question of how difficult it is for a person or act to be better than the morally neutral. For independent reasons, the standard value for moral “good” seems unlikely in general to be a distributional statistical property.⁴⁷ Sometimes nothing may be good in a given domain. More often, counting as “good” may be satisficing in relation to high standards.

10 | Conclusion

I’ve argued that the hypothesis that “rational” and moral “good” are typically associated with demanding standards is more plausible than the hypothesis that they’re maximum-standard absolute adjectives, and at minimum merits serious further consideration. But one might wonder about any proposal in

⁴³ One worry here is that ordinary ascriptions of rationality are often sensitive to limits of human cognition and bounds on time, foresight, and knowledge. (Thanks to Thomas Sturm for raising this.) But when the scale associated with “rational” reflects real-world limitations, the standard for “rational” may well be a demanding degree of bounded rationality.

⁴⁴ One task is to consider “discourse-oriented uses” of “rational” and moral “good” in which the speakers manage their assumptions about what standards, values, or the like to accept in the discourse (Silk 2021). Relative adjectives might admit such uses more naturally than absolute adjectives.

⁴⁵ One possibility: if *x* is good iff *x* is better than _____, and the blank is filled by an absolute measure, then “good” might have a non-maximal absolute standard. The relation between goodness and betterness is controversial.

⁴⁶ Silk (2021) and Stojanovic and McNally (2023) suggest (on different grounds) that although moral predicates exhibit certain hallmarks of subjectivity at linguistic level, they differ significantly from and have greater objective purport than prototypical subjective predicates such as predicates of personal taste. Silk allows that this may be a matter of empirical facts about discourses, not their grammar or lexical semantics.

⁴⁷ Contrary to what seems to be suggested, for example, by Kennedy (2007) and Wolfsdorf (2019, 83–85).

this area: so what? The real nature of rationality or moral goodness or their substantive standards might be different from whatever assumptions about what counts as “rational” or morally “good” are encoded in the English language and reflected in how ordinary speakers talk about rationality and moral goodness.⁴⁸ Nothing about the English language as such even guarantees that “rational” and moral “good” express philosophically interesting concepts.

Interaction between the semantics for evaluative language and substantive study of value, rationality, and morality is rarely discussed in depth. But I’m inclined to think that the dismissive reaction is unwarranted. It would be puzzling—and require explanation—if these words *couldn’t* be used, consistently with their ordinary meanings and connections to everyday practices, to express philosophically interesting thoughts about their subject matter. For example, I’ve argued that “rational” and moral “good” may be associated with different types of scale structure in different contexts. This significantly expands their expressive range. Someone who still thought their ideas about rationality or moral goodness couldn’t be expressed using their natural language as it is could invent new words for that purpose. A semantics for such a language would be subject to the same methodological constraints and explanatory burdens as any other semantics. Particularly relevant here is that semanticists formulate and test hypotheses about how expressions relate compositionally to representations and operations in non-linguistic cognition.⁴⁹ Their primary data are judgments concerning the (un)acceptability of certain phrasal combinations. Among these, truth-conditional evaluations depend also on what the world is or could be like.⁵⁰ Semantic theory should respect (to the extent possible) both our semantic intuitions and our metaphysical intuitions about how the world is or could be and try to resolve mismatches where they are found (Wellwood 2020). Often judgments of acceptability of various phrasal combinations may be robust enough that a mismatch with metaphysical intuitions should resolve in favor of whichever semantic theory best explains those judgments. But the converse may be true if metaphysical possibility judgments are robust but linguistic acceptability judgments aren’t. Although more remains to be said about how semantic theorizing about “rational” and moral “good” interacts with normative and metanormative theorizing about value, rationality, and morality, there are general reasons to think that each is at least indirectly relevant to the other.

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⁴⁸ Mankowitz flags the dismissive reaction as an option for metaethical views that take the nature of moral goodness to diverge from its representation in maximalist semantics (2024, 665). It’s also an option for views in normative ethics that take the substantive standards for moral goodness to diverge from their representation in maximalist semantics. For a trenchant expression of the view that philosophical semantics “has no bearing on ... anything else of broader philosophical interest,” focused in part on maximalist semantics for “rational,” see Chappell (2023).

⁴⁹ The lesson of example (12) in Section 6 is directly relevant to this point.

⁵⁰ This allows for the coherence of error-theoretic views according to which there’s nothing in the world for “rational” or moral “good” to pick out, given the conditions that their meanings impose on the world.

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