

Philosophy Preliminary Exam Topic - Vagueness

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Many accounts of vagueness have been put forward recently. Some of the most prominent are epistemicism, degree theory, supervaluationism and contextualism. All of these accounts attempt to give a description of the phenomenon of vagueness, and in doing so, try to resolve the sorites paradox. The epistemicist thinks that the phenomenon of vagueness is an *epistemic* one: vague predications, like precise ones, are in fact either true or false, but we just do not *know* in some cases whether our predicates apply or not. Is this a defensible position? How does Williamson defend this account? The contextualist argues that as speakers consider a sorites series, the context of their evaluation shifts - either because their interests change (Graff), or their internal mental states change (Raffman) - in such a way that they are never actively considering in a given, fixed context, a boundary object. How do Graff and Raffman argue for their accounts? Supervaluationists and degree theorists think that vagueness is a *semantic* problem: we need to discover the correct logical account of the truth conditions for vague predications. The degree theorist thinks that truth comes in degrees and that borderline cases of a predicate get assigned various degrees based on the extent to which that predicate applies. A supervaluationist thinks that vague predicates have truth-value gaps, and that the best way to assign a truth value is to consider all the possible ways of making a vague predicate more precise (i.e. ways of filling in the truth-value gaps). On this account, a predicate applies when it applies in all or most such precisifications. What are the rest of the details of the classical supervaluationist and degree theoretic accounts? How do more recent versions (Edgington, Cook, Weatherson, Keefe) differ from standard accounts, and what motivated them to adopt a non-standard version? Can

they deal with the problem of higher-order vagueness? Is the standard rejection of epistemicism a good starting point, or motivation for a semantic approach? Are there other possible motivations? How does MacFarlane's hybrid account answer these questions?

Generally, how does each of these theories attempt to resolve the sorites paradox? What are problems that they face and are any of them successful in responding to these problems?

Reading List

1. Williamson, Timothy (1994) Vagueness, (Routledge) *Chapters 4,5,7 and 8*
2. Keefe, Rosanna (2000) Theories of Vagueness, (Cambridge University Press) *Chapters 3-8*
3. Sainsbury, Mark (1995) Paradoxes (Cambridge University Press) *Chapter 2: Vagueness*
4. Fine, Kit (1975) "Vagueness, Truth and Logic." *Synthese* 30:265-300
5. Edgington, Dorothy (1997) "Vagueness By Degrees" in Keefe and Smith, eds., *Vagueness: A Reader* p. 294-316 (MIT Press)
6. Weatherson, Brian (2005) "True, Truer, Truest" *Philosophical Studies* 123: 47-70
7. MacFarlane, John (2007) "Fuzzy Epistemicism" preprint
8. Fara, Delia Graff (2000) "Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness" *Philosophical Topics* 28(1): 45-81. Originally published under the name 'Delia Graff'.
9. Raffman, Diana (1994) "Vagueness without Paradox" *The Philosophical Review* 103 (1): 41-74
10. Cook, Roy (2002) "Vagueness and Mathematical Precision" *Mind* 111:225-247