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THE EPISTEMIC CONCEPTION OF VAGUENESS:  
COMMENTS ON WRIGHT

Professor Wright examines four recent epistemicist arguments with his characteristic charity and penetration. He appreciates the conservative charm of a position that insists philosophy of language adapt to classical logic and common sense rather than the other way around. Nevertheless, Wright cautions against heeding this voice from the shadows and urges us to struggle on with the old program of obtaining a coherent indeterminist conception of vagueness.

To that end, he floats a dialectical interpretation of the definite operator. It is intended to capture the intuition that borderline cases are open without relying on truth-value gaps. Since Wright's newest proposal influences most of his objections to epistemicism, I shall respond to it first.

I. PARTISAN BORDERLINE CASES COLLAPSE INTO  
NEUTRALITY

Wright's new venture entails daring maneuvers near the edge of epistemicism. He leaves the safety cords of deviant logic dangling and assigns 'definite' a quasi-epistemic reading, so that "for P to be definitely true is for any appropriately generated opinion that not P to be cognitively misbegotten".

Thus 'P is indefinite' when there can be "faultlessly generated conflict" about P.

But can faultless conflict faultlessly continue once it is recognized? Suppose a third party persuades us that our dispute over whether pudding is a solid is due to the vagueness of 'solid'. This intervention exposes our shared analytic error about the nature of the disputed proposition. The outsider dissolves our dispute by showing that pudding is a borderline case of 'solid'.<sup>i</sup> You don't continue to contend that pudding is a solid and I don't continue to contradict you.

Nor do we leave our respective opinions intact by agreeing to disagree.<sup>ii</sup> We both retract our beliefs and become neutral on the question. Try to think of some belief you have in a borderline statement. This task is as mis-delegated as a do-it-yourself search for one of your false beliefs. "Pudding is a borderline case of 'solid' but I believe it is a solid" has the same absurdity as the Moorean "Pudding is not a solid but I believe it is a solid". You cannot represent your own belief as arbitrary. It is irrational to continue to believe that pudding is a solid after you sincerely concede that the belief has nothing more in favor of its truth than its negation. As a believer, you cannot be willing to assign it the same probability as a proposition about which you are neutral. But to assign it a higher probability is to evince confidence that you are tracking its truth. As a believer, you are picturing yourself as a non-accidental indicator of the truth and hence you are committed

to the epistemic accessibility of the supposedly borderline statement.

This Moorean thesis does not rest on acceptance of epistemicism. The absurdity is also predicted by, for instance, supervaluationism. If borderline statements lack truth-value, then they cannot be wittingly believed because belief aims at truth.

The only stable attitude toward a recognized borderline case is indecision. Hence partisan borderline cases collapse into the shoulder shrugging variety. This dissolutive effect is responsible for the performative dimension of vagueness verdicts. Diplomats are fond of showing that an issue is void for vagueness because this quashes debates and airlifts the audience out of the fruitless context of discovery into the opportunity laden context of invention. If the word must be revised to avoid the borderline case, the dissolver will have shown us that appropriate criteria are those of expedience and that the proper speech acts are those of negotiation.

In sum, the dialectical conception of definiteness is too narrow because it requires a borderline case to be debatable. Most borderline cases are indisputable because neutrality is obviously the correct reaction. Can we sincerely argue over whether boys are bachelors? Can it be more than a lawyerly exercise to defend or attack the proposition that glass houses have windows?

## II. SOLIPSISTIC VAGUENESS IS FOR EVERYONE

Any interpersonal requirement for borderline cases falsely implies that private languages are completely precise. However, the evidence for the language of thought is also evidence that it is a vague language.<sup>iii</sup> Similarly, the phenomenalist's language of sense data is beset with the kind of borderline cases associated with the language of appearance (such as 'looks red to me now'). A comprehensive account of borderline cases must address mental indeterminacy, not just linguistic. For a sorites can be constructed from phenomena such as Chisholm's speckled hen.<sup>iv</sup> The hallucinator knows that the hen image has between 10 and 1000 spots but cannot tell exactly how many. Whatever prompts the hallucinator to believe in linguistic indeterminacy prompts him to doubt whether there is a determinate number of speckles.

If Wright replies that solipsistic vagueness is faultlessly generated internal conflict, then he runs the peril of permitting contradictory beliefs. If half of my divided loyalties secures the option to believe  $p$  while the other half secures the option to believe  $\sim p$ , then what prevents me from exercising both options? If consistency precludes self-disagreement, then how am I conflicted? If joint exercise of my options is pre-empted by the principle that judgments be based on the total evidence, then my opposed tendencies cancel each other out. If the conflict is cast as disagreement between my temporal parts, then my baseless changes of belief are irrational flip flops.

Wright would merely be exchanging static irrationality for dynamic irrationality.

Since psychology is prior to language, linguistic indeterminacy probably arises from mental indeterminacy. This makes it reckless to bet that vagueness is essentially a collective phenomenon. Consider the creeping socialism of David Lewis.<sup>v</sup> He thinks each speaker has a perfectly precise idiolect and that vagueness arises from the need to create a composite language tolerant of idiolectal variation. But this superimposition has poor fidelity to introspection. When embarrassed by the sorites, I am embarrassed by my arbitrariness; I am not embarrassed on behalf of English.

And when I unwittingly disagree with you over a borderline case, we do have genuinely conflicting stances toward the same object of belief. An ambiguity has not led us to espouse slightly different propositions. By contradicting me over a borderline statement, you ensure that one of us is right and the other is wrong. Even a supervaluationist, like Lewis, must agree with this second point because 'One of us is right and the other is wrong' comes out true under every precisification!

### III. DEFINITELY MEANINGLESS

As Wright observes, epistemicists have no doctrinal objection to interpreting 'Definitely p' as 'Knowably p'. He even appears to be trying to define 'definitely' in a way that an epistemicist might endorse. After all, Wright is trying to clear a space for

the proposition that borderline statements have truth-values that we cannot settle. But if he swallows that as a real possibility, why does he choke on epistemicism's consequences for philosophy of language?

In any case, the epistemicist should see no gain in constructing a technical, substantial meaning for 'definite'. As far as ordinary usage goes, 'definite' is merely a device of emphasis with no impact on truth conditions. 'Definite' is as devoid of semantic meaning as underscoring or as expletives such as 'darn'. Any darn heap is a heap. But is any heap a darn heap? Technically, yes. The qualification is needed because characterizing an unremarkable heap as a darn heap is as misleading as gratuitously emphasizing words. We balk by denying the sentence -- even if the denial goes paradoxical as with 'A small heap is not a heap'. Fear of pragmatic violation gives rise to apparently stupid questions such as 'Is this heap a heap?'. Or if you prefer words over underscoring: 'Is this heap a definite heap?'.

This redundancy analysis of 'definite' states that x is a definite F if, and only if x is an F. I have defended, at length, a parallel equivalence thesis for 'real': x is a real F if, and only if x is an F.<sup>vi</sup> The general strategy is to concede that this and other assurer words ('authentic', 'genuine', etc.) have a significant syntactic role (as stressed by the deflators of 'true') and important pragmatic aspects. 'Definite' is definitely a member of our vocabulary! Nevertheless, 'definite' lacks an intension and therefore cannot have any of its own borderline cases.

Therefore, this chameleon word cannot be a source of higher order vagueness. `Definite' can only passively transmit the vagueness of what it modifies. The only difference between a definite heap and a definite definite heap is pragmatic. It is the difference between underscoring and double-underscoring. This explains the mind-numbing effect of iterating `definite'. At each stage we feel that we are adding something new. Yet we cannot say what!

The redundancy analysis shows that the premises of sorites arguments are not elliptical for propositions containing definite operators. Of course, logicians are free to devise new meanings for `definite', inject definite operators into sorites premises, and then prove the unsoundness of the altered specimens. But these experiments leave the original sorites unscathed.

#### IV. THE RESIDUAL OBJECTIONS

Wright views the dialectical conception of definitude as injurious to three epistemicist arguments. After all, Timothy Williamson's disquotational argument is focussed on a gappy conception of borderline cases. And I did not anticipate that Wright would billet definite operators in my clone argument and the meta-sorites. If Wright shows that reasoning with vague terms must include substantive definite operators, then he will shown that my original arguments were under-formed. However, the redundancy analysis of `definite' shows that my

arguments are not elliptical. Attention should therefore shift to objections that are independent of the definite operator.

### **A. How the meta-sorites hurts incoherentism**

Wright correctly calculates that the incoherentist should welcome the second order conclusion that I draw from the meta-sorites: all coherent predicates have unlimited sensitivity. However, incoherentists should be alarmed by how I draw it. For I use a lemma lethal to incoherentism. The lemma is the first order conclusion of the meta-sorites: that the induction steps of sorites arguments are false. Recall that the incoherentist plans to reach nihilism by maintaining that the induction steps of sorites arguments are true and that sorites arguments are valid. For then the only way to avoid the conclusion of a sorites is to reject the base step. The conclusions of some sorites negate the base steps of other sorites arguments, so everyone must reject some sorites arguments. The incoherentist obliges by accepting all sorites arguments with base steps that deny that induction predicate applies (such as 'It is not case that 600 minutes after noon is noonish') and rejecting the base steps of all sorites arguments that apply the inductive predicate to the base case ('1 minute after noon is noonish'). He views the induction steps of these positive sorites arguments as vacuously true (such as 'If  $n$  minutes after noon is noonish, then so is  $n + 1$  minutes after noon').

Notice that I have interpreted the incoherentist as alleging that vague predicates such as 'heap' are logically empty like 'round square'. This is perfectly clear and vividly contrasts with epistemicism. For the epistemicist agrees with the incoherentist's loyalty to classical logic but affirms the logical consistency of vague predicates. However, some incoherentists think that predicates are inherently inconsistent, not just logically empty. Others think vague terms are metaphysically empty, that 'heap' is empty in the way Saul Kripke alleges 'unicorn' is empty. Some incoherentists might say that the induction steps of sorites arguments are meaningless. Still others might refuse to say anything at all. But no incoherentist can agree with the meta-sorites conclusion that the induction steps of sorites arguments are false.

### **B. Bad Breadth?**

Wright objects that Williamson's margin of error principle under-explains our ignorance; it might explain why we don't know the threshold but it does not explain why we are also ignorant of the near-threshold. I grant Williamson's principle only establishes one blindspot per sorites sequence. But Wright can assemble the missing explanation by applying the principle to progressively coarser sorites sequences. As the induction step uses larger units, the neighboring area of ignorance shrinks. Suppose the threshold for 'tall man' is two meters and the margin of error is a decimeter. Applying the margin of error principle to a sorites using a millimeter unit

yields the disappointingly narrow  $\sim_K(T2000 \ \& \ \sim T2001)$ . But applying it to a sorites using centimeter units yields a band of ignorance that is ten times wider. Once we reach the decimeter sorites, the whole band is secure.

It is a virtue of Williamson's principle that it not entail ignorance beyond the threshold because there could be a sorites argument that lacked this wider neighborhood of ignorance. Thus the margin of error principle gets the breadth of the margin of error exactly right -- for the breadth equals the limit at which sorites arguments are no longer sound.

As Wright acknowledges, Williamson has sketched (but only sketched) replies to some of Wright's other objections to the margin of error principle. I presently have nothing better to offer. However, I shall offer greater resistance to Professor Wright's explanatory demands. Just why should we assume that a fact will be knowable unless there is a special barrier? If anything, there should be a presumption of ignorance. After all, ignorance is the energetically less costly state. Organisms are designed to perceive and remember and infer only when this helps them pass on copies of their genes. When knowledge stops helping reproduction, the supporting tissue degenerates. That's why species that become cave dwellers also become blind. That's why our hearing and sense of smell are not what they used to be. Adaptive knowledge acquisition is domain specific. Consequently, our ability to acquire the sort of knowledge that is useless to a Pleistocene hunter-gatherer must be an irregular byproduct of capacities that do

(or did) earn their keep. Probably, most of logical space is as impenetrable to us as our libraries are to chimps.

Specific grounds for the presumption of ignorance are provided by Noam Chomsky's classification of our linguistic ability as a species specific mental organ. Just as there is no need to know how the stomach works in order to digest food, there is no need to know how language works in order to speak. Children do not learn language by open minded hypothesis testing. Much of the language a child hears serves more as a trigger than as evidence. Children cannot even make mistakes that correspond to most of the logically possible hypotheses. This blindness to most grammars is adaptive. Children do not need to decide against a false path if the path is invisible. Shared blindspots help speakers to converge on the same grammar and prevent distractions. As the difference between Fs and non-Fs diminishes, there is less return in distinguishing between them. Thus ignorance should increase as differences decrease -- a result dovetailing with the margin of error principle.

### **C. No hedging by semantic indeterminacy**

Crispin Wright says that a neologism can have just the sort of indeterminacy that the epistemicist rejects as impossible. Let's adapt the example that Williamson deployed in his pre-epistemicist days. Mr. Lazy introduces 'dommal' by stipulating that all dogs are dommals and that all dommals are mammals. But Mr. Lazy stops there, apparently marooning my cat as a

borderline case of `dommal'. If Mr. Lazy were more assertive, he might further stipulate that `dommal' is to have no more meaning than specified in the above two clauses.

Wright's analysis of `roughly' puts the problem of willful indeterminacy in a more natural setting. He interprets our common practice of hedging as a deliberate relaxation of precision. For example, Mr. Softener applies `roughly' to `noon' to secure a fuzzy lunch date. The Softener case differs from the Lazy case in that the Softener case portrays the indeterminacy as intentional rather than a side-effect of minimizing linguistic effort and because the Softener case involves combinations of words.

My counter-analysis says that hedging is indeed a deliberate relaxation of precision -- but not in the sense relevant to borderline cases. My paradigm of hedging is `They arrived at noon, give or take thirty minutes'. Although the locution does not introduce a borderline case, it accomplishes the central purpose of hedging; increasing assertibility. Adding a ten minute borderline zone on both ends of `noon' would not have further increased assertibility. For, as stressed in the opening section, I cannot wittingly apply a predicate to a borderline case.

The myth that hedging exploits borderline cases is due to the same equivocation on `vague' that haunts Pierre Duhem's principle that assertibility is inversely related to precision.<sup>vii</sup> I can report my height as 1.8 meters (that is, at least 1.8 but less than 1.9) but cannot report it as 1.827681176

meters because only the first measurement is probable enough to assert. As specificity increases, so do the conditions under which the statement is false. Hence, scientific discourse must fade as we approach the limits of accurate measurement. To keep the conversation going, scientists must water down their claims by either expressing a propositional attitude weaker than belief or substituting a weaker proposition. This solution exploits "vagueness" in the sense of substandard specificity, not vagueness in the sense of borderline cases. Since most of our vocabulary is vague (in the borderline sense) everyday hedging usually does introduce fresh borderline cases (while also turning some pre-existing borderline cases into clear cases, as in `roughly middle-aged'). But the hedged expression's new borderline cases are just a side-effect. `Noonish' has wider applicability than `noon' because times such as 12:01, 12:02 are additional clear cases of `noonish', not because times such as 12:17 are additional borderline cases.

Epistemicists view vagueness as ignorance, as an absence of knowability, and therefore doubt that vagueness has a function. Of course, an absence can be useful in the negative way that, say, the winglessness of island insects keeps them from being blown out to sea. But all attempts to find a constructive role for vagueness have equivocated between vagueness as substandard specificity and vagueness as the possession of borderline cases. Thus a rejection of semantic indeterminacy will not leave the epistemicist short-handed when trying to account for the functional features of language.

Borderline cases are the shadows of representation. Once we understand how concepts illuminate, we will also have an explanation of their spillover phenomena. Thus there is no need to postulate semantic indeterminacy as a special explanation of vagueness.

People feel that indeterminacy can be stipulated into existence because they believe their ability to construct predicates is as limitless as their intentions. However, our predicate making power must be less than the scope of our intentions because sometimes we intend the impossible (at least unwittingly). After all, the received solution to Grelling's paradox incorporates this semantic limit. For the banisher of 'heterological' denies the possibility of a predicate that applies to all and only those predicates that do not apply to themselves. Since the epistemicist thinks that non-epistemic indeterminacy is logically impossible, he will class the attempt to invent such predicates along with tasks such as squaring the circle.

People feel they can relax their way to semantic indeterminacy because they think that the meanings of words are ultimately dependent on an act of will. The semantic voluntarist concedes that his utterances acquire some autonomy by the mechanisms recently studied by externalists: linguistic division of labor, the indexicality of natural kind terms, demonstratives. But the voluntarist emphasizes that the speaker is still in charge. Epistemicism threatens this center of control:

Ordinary forms of content externalism always proceed on the basis of an intentional abrogation of semantic responsibility -- we knowingly delegate, so to speak, the determination of the content and boundaries of certain concepts to external factors. But the kind of determination postulated by the epistemicist is nothing we bargain for in this kind of way, and would have to proceed by mechanisms of which we have no conception. (Crispin Wright, final paragraph)

But instead of treating epistemicism "as an invitation to a kind of semantic mysticism", we should regard epistemicism as evidence against semantic voluntarism.

Compare basic acts of meaning with the action theorist's basic actions. A homeowner decides to flip a switch to turn on a light and thereby unwittingly alerts a burglar. Action descriptions can stretch over both intentional and unintentional consequences. We are led back up the causal chain to a mental event when trying to learn what an agent ultimately does. All basic actions appear to be under the skin, indeed, within the skull. It is no coincidence that the Kantian makes the same retreat. Kant interiorizes morality by concluding that the only good thing is a good will. However, the inner citadel is vulnerable to objections based on psychological determinism and moral luck. The action theorist's basic acts are reminiscent of Tractarian simples and the phenomenalist's basic unit of meaning: the sense datum.

Names and neologisms fit the voluntarist's model fairly well. We plainly make decisions that influence their meanings. (The fit with names is particularly influential because people have a notorious tendency to model all words on names.) But even in the case of names and neologisms, conformance with the intentions of the word originators is not inevitable. My sister's family tried in vain to name the successor of Frisky something other than "Frisky". But the new cat looked so much like the old that force of habit prevailed.

The impotence of the individual speaker can be underscored by considering the failures of linguistic rebels. Suppose a reader of Feyerabend decides that he will no longer defer the meaning of 'gold' to chemists. Or suppose a Parmenidean resolves not to let the reference of 'that' depend on his shifty surroundings. Bertrand Russell believed that 'this' and 'I' were the only logically proper names and that all ordinary "names" were definite descriptions. If semantic voluntarism were correct, one would expect such misconceptions to affect the speaker's semantic decision making and so substantially affect meaning. However, even the most muddled philosophers of language continue to mean just what the rest of us mean. To wax Humean, Nature would view Language as too important a matter to Entrust to a Faculty as weak as Reason. Consequently, meaning is as involuntary as belief. Just as you can decide what to eat, you can decide what to say. But these intentions have almost no affect on the mechanism used to perform these processes. We

are masters of the message, not the medium. Language is not a social contract.

From a voluntarist perspective, externalist discoveries need to be carefully coupled to speaker intentions. Once the necessary plumbing is certified, voluntarism receives surprising indirect confirmation from the very phenomena that loomed as counterexamples. Epistemicism's lack of interest in furnishing psychological links between predicate and property shows that it "should acquire not one iota of plausibility from association with the moderate, local, carefully argued externalist claims familiar in modern philosophy of language and mind." (Wright, last paragraph) But from an involuntarist perspective, linkage is a false requirement. Therefore, epistemicists can treat the discoveries of the externalists as something other than exceptions that prove the rule.

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<sup>i</sup>I discuss the general technique of dissolution by exposure of indeterminacy on 191-195 of Pseudo-Problems (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>ii</sup>The instability of partisan borderline cases also refutes Michael Dummett's thesis that assent to a borderline statement is permitted but not mandatory. (The Logical Basis of Metaphysics (London: Duckworth, 1991) 79).

<sup>iii</sup>Or so I argue in "Vagueness within the Language of Thought" Philosophical Quarterly 41/165 (October 1991) 389-413.

<sup>iv</sup>A formulation of the speckled hen sorites appears on page 425 of Blindspots (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

<sup>v</sup>For an early statement of Lewis' collectivism about vagueness, see the fifth chapter of Convention (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969). His supervaluationism is evident in "Scorekeeping in a language game" which appears in his Philosophical Papers, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>vi</sup>Details for 'definite' would follow the redundancy analysis of 'real' presented in the second chapter of Pseudo-Problems.

<sup>vii</sup>I examine the equivocation in "The Ambiguity of Vagueness and Precision" Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 70/2 (June 1989) 174-183.