On the Epistemic Status of Borderline Cases

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Abstract.   In this paper I argue that the epistemicist account of vagueness cannot be entirely correct. After analysing the main features of Williamson's view, I propose a novel approach to the epistemological problem of borderline cases.

Keywords: Timothy Williamson; vagueness; epistemicism; borderline cases; knowledge.

1. Williamson's View of Vagueness

Vagueness, as Timothy Williamson (1994, 2007) conceives it, is an epistemic phenomenon that can be characterized in terms of absence of knowledge. The phrase 'absence of knowledge' means something stronger than mere lack of epistemically relevant information: it means the in-principle unknowability of the semantic boundaries of vague predicates. According to Williamson's theory, there is a sharp boundary between the extension and anti-extension of vague predicates, but because of our conceptual limitations we are unable to figure out the exact location of this boundary. If F is vague, then some objects may be classified as clear cases of F, some objects may be classified as clear cases of not-F, and there are also intermediate cases where our classificatory capacities turn out to be insufficient. This is tantamount to say that vague predicates give rise to epistemic borderline cases.

One of the primary challenges of epistemicism is to provide an explanation of why we are doomed to ignorance in the borderline area. Williamson's proposed explanation consists of two parts. The first part elaborates and defends a reliabilist thesis according to which a belief constitutes knowledge only if it is reliable in an appropriate way (see e.g. Williamson 1994: 226–30; 1997: 926–7). The idea, succinctly stated, is that beliefs may be considered reliable when statements based on them express knowledge in all sufficiently similar cases. What counts as sufficiently similar is supposed to vary across contexts and believing agents. The second part formulates a supervenience principle about the meaning of vague predicates. The principle states that (i) the extension of vague predicates supervenes on the overall use of those predicates in such a way that a small change in our use of a particular vague F would induce a small change in the extension of that F, and that (ii) we do not have appropriate conceptual resources to detect such small changes (cf. Williamson 1994: 231; 1997: 948). The reliability thesis and the supervenience principle can be taken as being intended, jointly, to entail the unknowability of the boundary between the

extension and anti-extension of vague *F*s. Borderline cases should then be thought of as incompatible with knowledge. But as Williamson points out, our irremediable ignorance does not prevent us from making true judgements about objects that are neither clearly *F*s nor clearly not-*F*s (see e.g. Williamson 2003: 709). So conceived, borderline cases appear to be compatible with true judgements. I argue below that Williamson's view on the epistemic status of borderline cases is incorrect.

2. An Argument against the Existence of True Judgements about Borderline Cases

The crucial point in Williamson's explanatory model can be best brought out by an example. Suppose that, in accordance with the sharp boundary hypothesis, a borderline bald man with 3,831 hairs on his head belongs to the extension of 'bald' and a borderline bald man with 3,832 hairs on his head belongs to the anti-extension of 'bald'.[1] So someone whose beliefs are consistent with this supposition may judge truly that a man with 3,831 hairs on his head is bald. But the statement 'A man with 3,831 hairs on his head is bald', though unquestionably true, does not express knowledge since the belief on which it rests is not reliable enough. Had things been very slightly different in our overall use of 'bald', then though we had the same belief it might not have produced the same statement. For instance, if our overall use had been slightly shifted in such a way that a man with 3,831 hairs on his head would already belong to the anti-extension of 'bald', then the statement 'A man with 3,831 hairs on his head is bald' would have been false. Such shifts in use are so small that they *must* remain undetectable to us. We are not able to track all the relevant factors that might influence the use of a certain predicate. But then we cannot detect shifts in truth value either: no one can ascertain whether the borderline statement 'A man with 3,831 hairs on his head is bald' expresses a true or a false proposition. The final consequence, obtained by semantic descent, is that it cannot be known whether a man with 3,831 hairs on his head is bald or not bald.

As has already been recognised, the epistemicists' explanatory model incorporates a number of hidden assumptions concerning the existence of sharply bounded extensions. It has been pointed out, for instance, that the linkage between our non-linguistic beliefs and the extensions of vague predicates is not quite as simple as the epistemicists' model assumes (see Ray 2004). It is also often remarked that the epistemicist accepts without further proof that the externalist semantics of predication is the correct one (see e.g. Schiffer 1999; Wright 2003). Instead of reconsidering the sustainability of these assumptions one by one, I will try to pinpoint a hitherto overlooked difficulty in Williamson's argument.

The difficulty begins with the non-triviality of the first supposition outlined above. Let n and $n+1$ be the numbers of hairs between which the sharp boundary for 'bald'

is supposed to lie. Then, according to Williamson, one may judge truly that a man with n hairs on his head is bald. And similarly, one may judge truly that a man with $n + 1$ hairs on his head is not bald. But given that having n or $n + 1$ hairs are both borderline cases of baldness, one can make judgements like these only by mere luck or happy accident. Neither the agent who makes the judgement, nor the epistemicist who investigates the agent's act, nor anyone else with normal human abilities seems to be in a position to come to know that the judgement is in fact true. This kind of ignorance is irremediable and unalterable.

If this is so, we may presume that the possibility of making true judgements about borderline cases remains doubtful even under lucky circumstances. For consider an agent who judges truly by sheer luck that a man with n hairs on his head is bald.[2] At first sight, the conditions for obtaining such a judgement seem to be coherently conceivable. Under closer inspection, however, the coherence of the conceived situation becomes dubious. The problem arises from the fact that in order to establish that the judgement based on the lucky guess is true, we should already know that somenone who has n hairs on his head belongs to the extension of bald. But this is something we obviously cannot know. An important consequence is the following. Where there are no competent agents who are, at least in principle, able to determine the epistemic status of certain judgements, there is little point in using the truth predicate. Thus, to say that a particular judgement is true in the borderline area seems to be a mere verbal manoeuvre without any theoretical weight. It should be noted in passing that we have arrived at this conclusion without mentioning any particular position in the realism-antirealism debate. This is not an accident. The present difficulty concerns the accessibility or shareability of certain judgements, not their dependence on the way things are in the world.

The difficulty increases when we recall that Williamson explained the unknowability of the sharp boundary for 'bald' with recourse to the basic epistemic difference between true judgements and knowledge. True judgements about borderline cases were declared not to be reliable enough to constitute knowledge. Of course, we may judge truly that a man with n (or $n + 1$) hairs on his head is neither clearly bald nor clearly not bald. To do so would require no more than recognizing the presence of intermediate statuses between clear cases of baldness and clear cases of not-baldness. Moreover, without the truthfulness of such judgements we would not be able at all to think of someone as borderline bald. This does not entail, however, that a man who has n hairs on his head may be judged truly to be bald, or that a man who has $n + 1$ hairs on his head may be judged truly to be not bald.[3] It is hard to imagine how we could have any chance of validating or disproving judgements of this latter sort. Even if all the relevant non-semantic facts about baldness were available, and all the semantic facts about 'bald' known, our epistemic situation would hardly be improved.

But if there are good reasons to deny that we can make true judgements about borderline cases, then it could no longer be plausibly maintained that the unknowability of sharp boundaries results from lack of reliability. In this respect, it does not much matter that our overall use of 'bald' might have been slightly different from what it actually is. What is of primary importance is the defectiveness of our judging situation concerning borderline cases: contrary to Williamson's model, borderline cases must be thought of as incompatible with true judgements. Thus, once we see that the proposed distinction between true judgements and knowledge proves to be pointless in the borderline area, it becomes reasonable to think that Williamson's reliability thesis is also incorrect.

3. Borderlineness and Knowledge

Does all of this mean that the epistemic status of borderline cases is incompatible both with true judgements and knowledge? Yes, and no. If we agree with the traditional epistemological approach and construe knowledge as a factive concept, then the incompatibility becomes evident (cf. Williamson 2000: 95). Suppose, in accordance with the alleged factivity of knowledge, that if we are in a position to know a statement about a man who has a particular number of hairs on his head, then the statement in question is true. Suppose also that excluded middle and bivalence holds even in the borderline area. Then it is either true that a man with n hairs on his head is bald or true that he is not bald. But it is a robust phenomenon of human knowledge that such things are not knowable. In this sense, we are ignorant of a truth. Borderline cases must be seen, thus, as incompatible with knowledge.

As an alternative, we may advocate a somewhat more liberal approach to knowledge. According to the alternative view, it is epistemically possible for us to know that a man with n hairs on his head is bald, and it is also epistemically possible for us to know that he is not bald. We are not thereby involved in a truth value contradiction, for the epistemic possibility that a man with n hairs on his head might be known to be bald (or not bald) does not imply that it is in fact *true* that he is bald (not bald). The existence of these possibilities reflects only how things might turn out to be in the borderline area (cf. Chalmers 2010).[4]

This can provide an interesting new perspective for the analysis of the knowability of borderline statements. In the possibilist approach at hand, we are not conceptually or a priori prevented from making knowable statements about borderline cases.[5] Quite the contrary, there seems to be nothing wrong in forming beliefs which aim to express our cognitive relation to borderlineness. Given that some of our vagueness-related beliefs might turn out to be true, it is not irrational or epistemically irresponsible to think that we have the right to claim knowledge even in

borderline cases. We might call this phenomenon *weak epistemic entitlement*, since the statements that result from these belief-forming processes do not require full-blooded factual justification. In such circumstances, it is sufficient for us to be convinced that the resulting statements are not in direct conflict with what we already know about clear cases. Two considerations follow. First, our knowledge in clear cases remains unexceptionally factual. But when we make statements about borderline cases, the constraints on factuality are weakened: borderline statements do not serve to describe the world, they express cognitive relations rather than facts.[6] Second, conflicting statements—for example, '*a* is *F* and *a* is not-*F*'—lead unavoidably to epistemic contradictions in clear cases. In the borderline area, however, such conflicts become rationally acceptable.

Now back to our example. If it is not excluded by any existing piece of knowledge that a man with *n* hairs on his head is bald, then we are *weakly entitled* to say that he is known to be bald; and similarly for not bald. Thus, we may conclude that in this more liberal sense, and in this sense alone, the epistemic status of borderline cases is *compatible* with knowledge.[7]

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Resumo. Neste artigo, sustento que a explicação epistemicista da vagueza não pode estar inteiramente correta. Depois de analisar os aspectos principais da concepção de Williamson, proponho uma nova abordagem ao problema epistemológico dos casos fronteiriços.

Palavras-chave: Timothy Williamson; vagueza; epistemicismo; casos fronteiriços; conhecimento.

Notes

[1] In order for the example to work we should also suppose that 'hairs' and 'head' can be used precisely and thus do not give rise to further complications.

[2] It is important to note that in the present context 'luck' should not be interpreted as 'epistemic luck'. From an epistemic point of view, these are different expressions. While the latter functions usually as a potential indicator of knowledge, the former is neutral in that respect.

[3] Or, to put it more generally, if x is recognized as having an intermediate status between being F and not-F, then x may be judged truly to be a borderline case of F. But it does not follow from this that we can judge truly that x is F or that x is not-F.

[4] I do not want to suggest that to refer to the idea of epistemic possibility is entirely unproblematical in the theory of vagueness. But I think one key feature of the idea can be invoked here without any need of deeper justification. It may simply be contended that in using the notion of 'epistemic possibility' we do not aim to extend our analysis to include counterfactual circumstances or possible worlds. Because epistemic possibilities concern only the way things might actually be, we should not directly deal with the additional issues of metaphysical modality.

[5] Note that though some parts of the the epistemicists' explanatory model is invalidated by the possibilist approach, neither excluded middle nor the principle of bivalence need be given up.

[6] In this regard, the present view has a certain affinity with Seth Yalcins's non-factive theory of epistemic modals (see Yalcin 2007).

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