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Paper 1

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**Why we all deserve A’s**

When the term ends, you will face a collection of notes, papers, reports, and participation points that feed into a formula for determining a letter grade. It would be simple, and seemingly fair, to assume that any person who gets less than 60% of the total possible points should fail the course. I will demonstrate that if you look at each student one-by-one and compare his or her grade to those of the other students it will be obvious that to fail any one person in the course implies that you should fail all persons. Furthermore, I will show that if you give any student in the class a passing grade, you should give every student a passing grade. Lastly, I will show through observation that a plurality of students is closer to an ideal pass than a fail, and so you should not fail anyone in the course. I then present three clear criticisms of my argument, along with reasons why none of them apply to this particular case.

Let me begin by examining the potential best and worst grades available for you to give. Say you have a student, call him Johnny Smarts, who writes original, consistent responses to each week’s reading, performs flawless feats of logic and creativity on each paper, reviews his peers better than his instructor, and participates in every class with a few, though not too many, intriguing points. By every measure of grading available to you, it is clear that Johnny should receive a 100% A at the course’s end. Now, take another student, Johnny’s degenerate friend Stu Pidman. The only effort that Stu put in all term was to register for the course. He turned in no notes, no papers, no reports, and did not show up to a single class, nor did he notice or respond to the many unread messages from Jason Decker or Roger Lasley in his inbox. Clearly, Stu did not earn a single point, and should be given a 0% F.

I believe that the cases of Johnny and Stu are indisputable in terms of their final grades. However, neither of these students is likely to exist in real life. So, let us see what happens if I adjust these students to more closely match real students in your class. Say, for instance, that Johnny made a typo on one reading response, and that this resulted in his final grade being a 99.9%. This is still certainly an A. Say he did worse. Say he got a B on one paper, missed a few classes, and had one mediocre reading note so that his final percentage was 93%, which is a natural cut-off between an A and an A-. By any reasonable grading scale, this is still an A. Now, given this scenario, say we add in the same typo as in the earlier case, so his grade drops to 92.9%. You, as a fair professor, would likely also reward this with an A, given the inconsistencies of human judgment in paper grading that could lead to a few points’ difference either way. Now, introduce to this situation Johnny’s study partner, Sally Sharp. Assume that she ended up with 92.8% at the end of the term. Given that you are willing to reward a grade that is -.1% from your cutoff with an A, it would be inconsistent and therefore unfair to reward Sally’s efforts with anything else, given that you have essentially moved the cutoff down .1% already and now have the same issue as before. With this reasoning, it is safe to say that given a students’ grade X for a percentage x in your course, if a student has a grade that is .1% less than x, he or she should also receive the grade X. But, this implies Stu should receive an A, so we have a contradiction.[[1]](#footnote--1)

Now, if I apply the same reasoning in reverse to the Stu case, you see that we can reach the opposite conclusion going the other way. In other words, if Stu receives an F for a percentage y and some student receives percentage y + .1%, that student should also receive an F. So Johnny deserves an F.[[2]](#footnote-0) I must note first that it is unlikely that everyone’s percentages in the class differ by such small increments. Given 1000 students in the class, you could assume based on the reasoning laid out thus far that, given a student like Johnny in the class, all 1000 students should receive A’s, and likewise given a student like Stu in the class, all 1000 students should receive F’s. But in reality, there are only about 20 students in the class, and none are Johnny or Stu. It is almost impossible that all 20 of these students will be within .1% of another student. But, if there were a student that was within this increment of another student for every student in the class, my argument would hold and all students would have the same grade. The mere possibility of such a close grade percentage in the case of each student makes it so that my argument applies to every student, regardless of real difference in the class. Say there are five students that are all within the range 92.4-93% and another student whose percentage is 92.2%. To say that the student with 92.2% should not get the same grade as the one with 92.4% because there is no student that has a 92.3% makes no sense, since the student with 92.4% is being rewarded the grade for 93% already. So the fairness of grading need only rely on the possibility of a certain grade in a class, and all students must receive A’s or all students must receive F’s.

How, then, should you determine if everyone passes or fails? Note that given a grade cutoff, it is safe to say that someone with a higher grade percentage ought to be closer to passing than someone with a lower grade percentage, and vice versa for failure. Here I am talking about an absolute grade for one student given no others in the class, not a grade determined through relation to another student. If you look at each student individually like this, I conjecture that most, if not all students are closer to 100% than 0%. And, if you wish to go by the traditional 60% fail cutoff, I also feel safe assuming that most students are closer to 100% than 60%. My Sorites argument going one way decided that all students must receive A’s, and in the other way F’s. Neither of these arguments gives information that would determine whether it was preferable to its opposite, so I must rely on the weights of observed cases to theorize which makes the most sense, since you can hardly both pass AND fail a student. Observing that most are closer to A’s, it clearly makes more sense to give everyone A’s than F’s.

This argument deals with the Sorites paradox by assuming that all must go one way or another (i.e. all heaps or all grains), using both top-down and bottom-up arguments and then relies on observation to conjecture which makes the most sense.[[3]](#footnote-1) This argument extends poorly to the heap problem and the “human” problem because there are plenty of grains of sand and quarks in the world but few failing students in one specific class. A better comparison is with the color problem. Say you have a set of colors in front of you made from pure blue and red dyes where, in each element of the set, more blue than red was used to make it. You have deduced that you must call all of these colors blue or red, by the same Sorites argument I have made. I think it makes more sense to call them blue than red because they physically have more blue than red in them. Russell’s claim that vagueness affects all words, and implication that it would not be valid to say “something must be red or not red,” applies here in the sense that these grades are in some sense part A and part F, but I say that because they are more A than F in practice, we should call them A’s.[[4]](#footnote-2) Some would call this argument weak, as it has no direct logical basis from which to assume A’s over F’s except for a faith in the trends of a specific observation, and in the weights of the scale from one grade to another. Stoics may take issue, as I have not given much reason why A’s are more valid other than that it makes more sense.[[5]](#footnote-3) I admit this criticism to be valid. But, faced with a choice between two options and nothing other than the evidence in front of me to pick which one, I must choose based on the evidence. To put this generally, it makes more sense to conjecture based on assumed facts and some observation than it does to assume something is false because it cannot be fully proven. If there is a problem in my argument, then, it must be in what facts I assume.

This brings me to the most troublesome criticism of my argument. While it is clear that someone with a 100% should have an A and someone with a 0% should have an F, it is less clear that differences of + or - .1% should not change the grade. Some would call these direct cutoffs between grades completely valid. Ok, so let us make the difference smaller, say + or - .000001%. Ignoring for a moment that this would indicate a very strange, intense point grading system, notice that this smaller increment does not combat the criticism. 93% is still 93%, and if you subtract this difference it is less than 93%, and therefore not an A. I believe that the validity of this criticism indicates that the question of fairness and unfairness in grades is actually not so vague. You, the professor, define grade cutoffs. A pass is a pass, and a fail a fail. Unless your syllabus and grade scale are vague or undefined, the scale from pass to fail has clear boundaries, and is therefore immune to Sorites arguments. In the case of this particular class, though, you have no defined cutoffs (at least on your syllabus). Because of this, my argument holds and the criticism I just mentioned does not derail it.

The final potential criticism of my argument deals with the grades D through B. For instance, is it not also true, according to my logic, that if one student is given a B that all students should be given a B? It may seem that I am being imprecise, in which case it would be difficult to exploit the vagueness of grade cutoffs necessary for a Sorites argument.[[6]](#footnote-4) This criticism misses the point of my argument. My argument says that either all grades must follow from the lowest or highest potential grade. Say, for instance, you wanted to use my argument to say that every student should get the average grade in the class. The problem with this is that you must add and subtract increments, creating a double-direction increment not present in my argument. My argument sweeps from top-to-bottom or bottom-to-top, and the only basis grades from which to make this argument are A and F, since they are the highest and lowest. So, even if the best student in the class by his or her self is in the 85% range, because there could be students with percentages 85.1%, 85.2% … all the way to 100%, it would be unfair to call 85% a B. In fact, it would be more fair to call 85% an F than a B, and it could be an F and not an A were it not for my observation that percentages clump towards the top end.

Through application of a Sorites argument, I showed that all grades given for this class must be either all A’s or all F’s. I then showed why it makes much more sense to award A’s, and concluded that it would be unfair to fail anyone in the class. The issues of invalidity in drawing conclusion from observation, using strict grade cutoffs, and awarding intermediate grades have all been dismissed as invalid for this particular argument. From here, I think the next debate is whether this reasoning’s potential shortcomings in other applications ought to affect its use here.

**Works Cited**

Williamson, Timothy. *Vagueness*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

1. Williamson, Timothy. *Vagueness*. New York: Routledge, 2005. p22-26 [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Williamson p. 22-26 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Williamson p. 22-26 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Williamson p. 54-55 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Williamson p. 33-35 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Williamson p. 70-73 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)