Vagueness, lecture 5: Epistemicism.

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1. The epistemicist theory

- *Epistemicism* holds that vagueness is not primarily a semantic phenomenon, but an epistemic one.

- Consider the sentence "Benedict is tall". We might hesitate to assert this, or to assert its negation, because Benedict is a borderline case of tallness.

- According to Williamson, our hesitancy is not due to an absence of *fact*, but an absence of *knowledge*.

2. Williamson's anti-gap argument

- Williamson argues against the "majority view" (e.g. that of Tye [1994] and Fine [1975]) that statements like "Benedict is tall" are *neither true nor false*.

  - Statements which are neither true nor false are often said to be truth-value *gaps*.

- Williamson's argument uses a simple propositional language $\mathcal{L}$ with the usual logical connectives, and a meta-language $\mathcal{L}_T$ which extends $\mathcal{L}$ with a truth predicate and a device of quotation $\ulcorner \cdot \urcorner$ which, when applied to a sentence, yields a constant term.

- Williamson takes the point at issue to be the denial of *bivalence*, the principle that for every sentence P, either P is true or P is not true.

- Suppose P is a non-bivalent sentence, i.e. $\neg(T(\ulcorner P \urcorner) \vee T(\ulcorner \neg P \urcorner))$.

- By Tarski's T-schema, $T(\ulcorner P \urcorner) \leftrightarrow P$ and $T(\ulcorner \neg P \urcorner) \leftrightarrow \neg P$.

- By substitution of equivalents, $\neg(P \vee \neg P)$, and so by De Morgan's law, $\neg P \wedge \neg\neg P$: a contradiction.

3. Objection from the supervenience of vague facts on precise ones

- Williamson considers, and rebuts, an objection based on the claim that vague facts supervene on precise ones.

- E.g. vague facts about colour supervene on precise ones about wavelengths of light.

- Williamson claims one version of this objection (viz. that one can know all the relevant facts about a borderline case but still not be able to decide it) just begs the question against epistemicism.

- Against a second version of the objection, Williamson argues that while supervenience generalisations may be metaphysically necessary, this does not imply that they are a priori knowable.

4. Objection from the supervenience of meaning on use

- Idea of the objection: no sharp natural division for the truth conditions of "They are tall" in the way there is in the H20/XYZ case (Putnam's twin earth example).

- Same use entails same meaning, so no difference in meaning without a difference in use [Williamson and Simons 1992, p. 154].

  > If an expression e is used in a possible situation s in the same way as an expression f is used in a possible situation t, e has the same meaning in s as f has in t.

- Williamson's rebuttal: epistemicism is compatible with this idea.

- Use determines many lines, so "there is no prospect of reducing the truth conditions of vague sentences to the statistics of assent and dissent" [Williamson and Simons 1992, p. 155].

5. Meaning and knowledge

- Actual knowledge of truth conditions does not require possible knowledge of truth value (except for a verificationist).

- Epistemic view seems to attribute incomplete knowledge of a complete meaning (sense as well as reference), even to a complete linguistic/epistemic community.

- Williamson's response: maybe better to say it attributes complete knowledge of an *incomplete* meaning.

  - Conceptual space metaphor (illicitly) collapses meanings of distinct concepts which are necessarily equivalent but not equivalent a priori.

6. Margin for error

An utterance of 'TW is thin' is not the outcome of a disposition to be reliably right; it is right by luck. It can therefore hardly be an expression of knowledge. Contrapositively, an utterance of 'TW is thin' is an expression of knowledge only if I am some way from the boundary of 'thin', that is, only if anyone with physical measurements very close to mine is also thin. More generally, for a given way of measuring difference in physical measurements there will be a small but non-zero constant c such that:

> (!) If x and y differ in physical measurements by less than c and x is known to be thin, y is thin.

Similar principles can be formulated for other vague terms. Vague knowledge requires a margin for error. [Williamson and Simons 1992, p. 161]

- Williamson's other argument: no revisions to classical logic or semantics required, so better in this respect than other approaches.

References

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