

# Vagueness, lecture 7: Contextualism.

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## 1. Fara's questions

Fara [2000, p. 50] says that as soon as one prepares to give up the truth of sorites sentences, new problems arise, viz.:

1. *The Semantic Question.* If the universal generalization ' $(\forall x)(\forall y)(Fx \& Rxy \rightarrow Fy)$ ' is not true, then must this classical equivalent of its negation be true?

The "sharp boundaries" claim:  $(\exists x)(\exists y)(Fx \& Rxy \& \neg Fy)$

- (a) If the sharp boundaries claim is true, how is its truth compatible with the fact that vague predicates have borderline cases? For the sharp boundaries claim seems to deny just that.
  - (b) If the sharp boundaries claim is not true, then given that a classical equivalent of its negation is not true either, what revision of classical logic and semantics must be made to accommodate that fact?
2. *The Epistemological Question.* If ' $(\forall x)(\forall y)(Fx \& Rxy \rightarrow Fy)$ ' is not true, why are we unable to say which one (or more) of its instances is not true—even when, say if the  $F$  in question is 'is a tall man', all the heights of the possible values of  $x$  and  $y$  are known?
3. *The Psychological Question.* If the universally generalized sorites sentence is not true, why were we so inclined to accept it in the first place? In other words, what is it about vague predicates that makes them seem tolerant, and hence boundaryless to us?

Note that *tolerance* here means insensitivity to small changes; the term is due to Wright [1975].

## 2. Fara's constraints

[W]e have some leeway in our standards of use for vague predicates; the variation in standards of use is not always attributable to a variation in comparison class; but still, we cannot use these predicates any old way we like.

[Fara 2000, p. 57]

- (i) Clear-Case Constraints: some cases are such that it is mandatory to apply the predicate to the case (e.g. the colour of a clear afternoon sky) and some are such that it is mandatory not to apply the predicate.

- (ii) Relational Constraints: the use of some predicates will be partly governed by their relation to others (e.g. tallness and height).
- (iii) Coordination Constraints: the use of some predicates must be coordinated (e.g. opposites like rich and poor).
- (iv) Similarity Constraints: “whatever standard is in use for a vague expression, anything that is *saliently* similar, in the relevant respect, to something that meets the standard itself meets the standard”.

### 3. Similarity and the epistemological and psychological questions

[T]he very act of our evaluation raises the similarity of the pair to salience, which has the effect of rendering true the very instance we are considering. We cannot find the boundary of the extension of a vague predicate in a sorites series for that predicate, because the boundary can never be where we are looking. It shifts around. In answer to the Psychological Question, we may say that it is no wonder that we were so inclined in the first place to regard the universal generalization as true, given that any instance of it we consider is in fact true at the time we consider it.

[Fara 2000, p. 59]

- Why is the instance of the sorites sentence in question *true*?
- What is the relation of this claim to bivalence?

### 4. Predications and norms

- Fara wants to analyse expressions like “a lot” in terms of something’s being “*significantly* more than some norm”.
- There are many different such norms.
- The truth-value of statements with the same surface grammar may vary because they are uttered relative to different norms.
- Is this plausible in cases of vagueness?

### 5. Sameness for present purposes

- Fara claims that “in claiming that someone is tall for a ten-year-old, for example, we are claiming that he has *significantly* more height than some norm for ten-year-olds”.
- Fara wants to argue that if this view is (in general) correct, then the Similarity Constraint is a consequence.

The argument rests on the idea that two things that are qualitatively different in some respect, even when they are known to be different, can nonetheless be the same for present purposes. What I claim is that if two things are the same for present purposes, in respect of height say, then one can have significantly more height than is typical if and only if the

other does. Given my proposed analysis of ‘tall’, it follows that when two things are in respect of height the same for present purposes, one is in the extension of ‘tall’ if and only if the other is. What’s required, if the Similarity Constraint is to follow, is that two things come to be the same for present purposes when they are not only very similar, but when also their similarity is in some sense salient—in particular, when it is being actively considered.

[Fara 2000, p. 67]

- Fara says that two things being the same for present purposes does *not* entail that for present purposes it is true that the two things are the same.

To say that the two amounts of coffee are the same for present purposes is to say that as far as my coffee-making purpose is concerned, the two amounts might as well be the same; my coffee-making purpose permits me to behave as if the two amounts were the same, since the purpose is in no way thwarted by my behaving as if they were the same.

[Fara 2000, p. 67]

- The claim is stronger than merely being permitted to treat two things as the same: in the relevant context, our interests as a whole require us to treat them as the same (e.g. for efficiency reasons).
- Thus two things are the same (in a certain respect) for present purposes *because* the cost of discriminating between them outweighs the benefits.
  - Fara makes it clear that this is not a semantic claim, so how should we understand it? As just a material implication? A causal (counterfactual) claim? An explanation of some kind?
- Fara argues (bottom of p. 68) that her analysis of *being the same for present purposes* really does imply the Similarity Constraint.
  - Can you reconstruct Fara’s argument?
  - Is it sound?

## 6. The sorites paradox

- Fara entertains the idea that the sorites paradox may still pose a serious problem for her account.
- She suggests two possible ways to avoid the paradox.
  1. There cannot be enough salient similarities to engender the paradox.
  2. Alternatively, there can be no standard (in a situation with too many salient similarities) that will satisfy all four constraints.
- Fara prefers the first alternative.

Whichever of the wide variety of purposes we may have in conversations where we have occasion to use vague expressions like ‘tall’, ‘old’, ‘expensive’, and the like, it will simply be a brute fact that there will be a

least height, age, or cost of which it is true to say that it is significantly greater than is typical—at least, that is, if it is true to say of any height, age, or cost at all that it is significantly greater than is typical. Any lesser amount simply cannot be the same for whatever purposes are in place. Even if there is some cost associated with any discrimination we might make between similar heights, ages, etc., the cost of making the discrimination nowhere does not outweigh the benefits of making it somewhere. The boundary between those differences that are significant and those that are not will try to locate itself, so to speak, at a place where there is least resistance.

[Fara 2000, p. 70]

- Is this a plausible account?
- Fara seems to end up endorsing some kind of epistemicism. How does it differ from Williamson’s account?

## 7. The semantic question

- Fara thinks that sorites sentences are false and “sharp boundaries” claims are true.
- But she doesn’t want to call the proposed boundary between the last object possessing a property and the first object lacking that property a *sharp* boundary, “since . . . this is but a metaphor”.
- In addressing the Semantic Question, of how sharp boundaries could be compatible with a vague predicate’s having borderline cases, Fara wants to suggest that there are many *different* possible causes for us giving ‘hedging’ responses to borderline cases.
  - Fara argues that many of these plausibly involve *ignorance*: of pertinent facts, of our own interests, of what is significant, or of the relevant context.
  - Is this at all plausible? Is there really “more room than is commonly thought within the space of classical logic and semantics to account for the many phenomena of vagueness”? [Fara 2000, p. 77]

## References

- D. G. Fara. Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness. *Philosophical Topics*, 28(1):45–81, 2000. doi:10.5840/philtopics20002816. Originally published under the name Delia Graff.
- C. Wright. On the coherence of vague predicates. *Synthese*, 30(3):325–365, 1975. doi:10.1007/BF00485049.