Philosophy and
Phenomenological Research

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Vague Value[1]

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You are morally permitted to save your friend at the expense of a few strangers, but not at the expense of very many. However, there seems no number of strangers that marks a precise upper bound here. Consequently, there are borderline cases of groups at the expense of which you are permitted to save your friend. This essay discusses the question of what explains ethical vagueness like this, arguing that there are interesting metaethical consequences of various explanations.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle advises us not to seek more precision in our account than the subject matter allows.[2] Wise advice, we might think, since certain ethical terms are vague.[3] By this, I

[1] For helpful comments and discussions, I would like to thank Elizabeth Barnes, David Braddon-Mitchell, Ross Cameron, Tyler Doggett, Caspar Hare, Nadeem Hussein, Tristram McPherson, Ricardo Mena, Daniel Nolan, Alejandro Perez-Carballo, David Plunkett, Agustin Rayo, Miriam Schoenfield, Ted Sider, Nicholas J. J. Smith, Eric Swanson, Ryan Wasserman, Steve Yablo, members of the 2012 American Association of Mexican Philosophers Conference and an anonymous reviewer for Philosophy and Phenomenological Research.

[2] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, translated and edited by Terence Irwin, 2nd edition, (Indianapolis IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999).

[3] An anonymous reviewer has suggested that there may also be forms of ethical indeterminacy that are not forms of ethical vagueness. For example, it may be that the global structure of one's duties is determinate, but the local structure is not. A putative example would be so-called imperfect duties, such as a duty of beneficence. Such a duty would require one to do something to help others, but would not determine specific required actions. If there are these other forms of ethical indeterminacy, then a fully comprehensive account of ethical imprecision will need to explain these as well. In this essay, I only consider theories that could be adopted in pursuing the less ambitious goal of explaining ethical vagueness.

mean that these terms have borderline cases.[4] For illustration, let us consider two paradigms of ethical vagueness.[5] The first paradigm of ethical vagueness is tied to gradable properties. It arises when the following conditions obtain: (i) there is an ethically relevant factor that admits of degrees; (ii) this factor has a "threshold" that determines whether an ethical property obtains; and (iii) there does not seem to be a precise degree that marks this threshold. For example, it seems that you may save your friend at the expense of saving a few strangers, but not at the expense of saving very many strangers. How many is very many? No precise number appears to fix a threshold. The boundary seems fuzzy, and correspondingly some actions, e.g. saving your friend rather than thirteen strangers, are borderline cases of a morally permissible action. Thus the term "morally permissible" is vague. Similarly, there seems no precise number of milliseconds of pleasure that would compensate someone for a broken pinky toe; nor does there seem to be an exact maximal number of cents that you must spend on a taxi in order to keep your promise to meet someone at a restaurant at 7 pm. The second paradigm of ethical vagueness concerns any ethical properties that are so-called cluster properties with borderline cases.[6] To illustrate, suppose moral responsibility consists in a cluster of rationality, self-governance and a capacity to act on the basis of moral considerations. One might hold that paradigmatically morally responsible agents have all features, but borderline morally responsible agents only have two of these features. If so, the term "morally responsible agent" would be vague. I mention these two paradigms of ethical vagueness simply to introduce the phenomenon, and there may well

[4] In surveying the recent literature on how to characterize vagueness, Matti Eklund notes that "appeal to lack of sharp boundaries," "appeal to borderline cases" and predicates being "sorites-susceptible" are the "three informal characterizations [that are] are relatively common in the literature." Both of the other two characterizations would work for characterizing the paradigm of ethical vagueness involving gradable properties that I proceed to discuss. Matti Eklund "Characterizing Vagueness," Philosophy Compass 2 (2007): 896–909.

[5] For concision, I follow the standard framing of the issue as one of vagueness, noting Eklund's point that this seems prejudicial to "epistemic" views that hold that appearances are misleading and the ethical world is perfectly chiseled, even though we cannot know where the faultlines are located. Eklund, "Being Metaphysically Unsettled: Barnes and Williams on Metaphysical Indeterminacy and Vagueness," in Karen Bennett (ed.), Oxford Studies in Metaphysics, Vol. 6, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[6] Thanks to Elizabeth Barnes for making this point. For discussion of indeterminate cluster properties, see Richard Boyd, "How to be a Moral Realist," in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), Essays on Moral Realism, (Ithaca, Cornell Press, 1988), pp. 181–228.

be other examples of ethical vagueness besides these.[7] Since the purpose of these particular examples is illustrative, I do not insist on them; depending on your first-order ethical views, you may disagree with my claims about these cases. Nonetheless I am highly confident that you will agree that there are some ethical terms that have borderline cases. I will proceed on the assumption that there are.

An account of ethical vagueness calls for more than an account of the so-called incommensurability of values.[8] To illustrate incommensurability, consider Michelangelo and Mozart. Some say that they are not equally creative, nor is one more creative than the other; instead, their creativity is incommensurable. Or, as Ruth Chang puts it, they are "on a par," with respect to creativity.[9] Assuming this fourth relation of parity exists, we can see that these phenomena are distinct by noting two points.[10] First, there is ethical vagueness without incommensurability. Arguably, there is no precise point along an embryo's development, such that it becomes wrong to destroy the embryo. It is implausible to construe this as a case where two values are incommensurable. (Which values?) Second, incommensurability will often bring with it an independent form of ethical vagueness. We could imagine a series of counterparts of Michelangelo who are decreasingly creative. Eventually we would come across a counterpart who is clearly less creative than Mozart. Consequently, the creativity of this counterpart would be commensurable with Mozart's. However, there does not seem to be a sharp threshold in this series that divides the counterparts whose creativity is commensurable with Mozart's and those whose creativity is not. Consequently, there will be some counterparts who are borderline cases of people whose creativity is commensurable with Mozart's.

What explains ethical vagueness? This is the question that I will discuss. My reason for doing so is that popular explanations of vagueness lead to interesting metaethical results. I will argue that certain explanations of ethical vagueness have implications for whether ethical properties "carve the world at its joints,"

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7 For example, an anonymous reviewer has pointed out to me the possibility that there is a moral difference between killing and letting die, but there is no sharp boundary here. Consider a series of cases, each only marginally different from the other, that runs from paradigmatic killing to paradigmatic letting die. We might hold that this series includes borderline cases of killing, even though killing does not come in degrees.

8 For a helpful introduction to the literature on incommensurability see Ruth Chang (ed.), Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

9 Ruth Chang, "The Possibility of Parity," Ethics, 112 4, (2002): 659–688;

10 John Broome denies that there is a fourth relation of parity, claiming that these examples simply illustrate normative vagueness. John Broome, "Is Incommensurability Vagueness?" in Chang (ed.), Incommensurability. Similarly, Ryan Wasserman argues that Chang fails to make a case for parity, as distinct from indeterminacy, in his "Indeterminacy, Ignorance and the Possibility of Parity," Philosophical Perspectives, 18, Ethics, (2004): 391–403

for whether ethical properties must be capable of guiding action, and even for the importance we place on the property of moral permissibility itself.[11]

In light of my aim of uncovering interesting connections between theories of vagueness and metaethical theories, I will not discuss one family of theories of vagueness: metaphysical theories. According to these theories, the "world itself, independently of what we know about it or how we represent it, is metaphysically" vague.[12] I set these theories to one side, not because I consider them unpromising—to the contrary, although these theories have been historically unpopular, recently there has been a flurry of impressive work in their defense.[13]

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11 Russ Shafer-Landau makes inroads into this topic when discussing persisting ethical disagreement in his "Ethical Disagreement, Ethical Objectivism and Moral Indeterminacy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52 (1994): 331–344. Cristian Constantinescu independently makes similar arguments to mine in his unpublished manuscript, "Moral Vagueness: A Dilemma for Moral Realism." As I only became aware of Constantinescu's essay after submitting the final version of this essay for publication, I have not been able to engage with it in this essay in the way that I would have liked to. Constantinescu presented his paper at the 9th Madison Metaethics Conference. Most of the papers of this conference will be published in Volume 8 of Oxford Studies in Metaethics, and are currently under peer review.

12 Robert Williams gives this gloss of a theory of metaphysical indeterminacy, but it works just as nicely for a theory of metaphysical vagueness. Williams, "Ontic Vagueness and Metaphysical Indeterminacy," Philosophy Compass 3/4 (2008): 763–788.

13 Russ Shafer-Landau suggests a position along these lines for the moral realist, defending moral realism about properties that have indeterminate extensions. Russ Shafer-Landau, "Vagueness, Borderline Cases and Moral Realism," American Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 83–96; Arguably the most developed work on metaphysical theories has been done by Elizabeth Barnes, Nicholas J. J. Smith and Robert Williams. In a co-authored paper, Barnes and Williams claim that

> where p is metaphysically indeterminate, there are two possible (exhaustive, exclusive) states of affairs—the state of affairs that p and the state of affairs that not-p—and it is simply unsettled which in fact obtains.

This view is also defended by Barnes in her "Ontic Vagueness: A Guide for the Perplexed," Noûs, 44:4 (2010): 601–627. Elsewhere, Williams defends the related view that there are multiple possible worlds which are actualized. A key difference between these views is that the former view maintains the principle of bivalence, while the latter does not. J. Robert G. Williams, "Multiple Actualities and Ontically Vague Identity" Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 58, Issue 230, (January 2008): 134–154. With Gideon Rosen, Smith has argued that if the "standard fuzzy view" of semantics is correct, then our language refers to relations that are "inherently vague." Gideon Rosen and Nicholas J. J. Smith, "Worldly Indeterminacy: A Rough Guide," Australian Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 82, No. 1, pp. 185–198; March 2004; Smith develops a degree-theoretic account of vagueness in his Vagueness and Degrees of Truth, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008). For criticism of Barnes's and Williams's view, see Eklund, "Being Metaphysically Unsettled." For the objection that metaphysical vagueness is impossible or incoherent, see David Lewis, On the Plurality of Worlds, (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1986), p. 212. Hud Hudson, The Metaphysics of Hyperspace, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For a defense of the intelligibility of ontic vagueness see Barnes and Williams, "A Theory of Metaphysical Indeterminacy"; Barnes, "Ontic Vagueness: A Guide for the Perplexed." For a helpful summary of, and replies to, these and other extant objections, see Elizabeth Barnes, "Arguments against metaphysical indeterminacy and vagueness," Philosophy Compass 5/11 (2010): 953–964.

Rather, I pass over these theories simply because I have not found any interesting metaethical consequences of them. Instead, I will focus on epistemic and semantic theories of vagueness. Although I will discuss each type of explanation separately, it is important to note that one might have a "mixed view" that endorses more than one type of explanation. For example, one might hold that some forms of vagueness require a semantic explanation, while other forms require an epistemic explanation. However, I will discuss each view in isolation in order to separate cleanly what is distinctive about each. Towards this end, I will make the assumption throughout that there is no metaphysical vagueness.

2. Epistemic Explanations of Vagueness

The first explanatory option we will look at explains ethical vagueness as an epistemic phenomenon. Often motivated by the goal of retaining a classical logic and semantics, an epistemic explanation of vagueness maintains that, for example, it is fully precise what minimum number of hairs a non-bald person must have.[14] They say that it appears vague to us simply because we do not know what this number is. As Robert Williams puts it,

> [m]any philosophers will agree that whatever else is true of indefiniteness, if it is indefinite whether p, one does not know that p nor know that not-p. The epistemicist will identify indefiniteness with this lack of knowledge—and typically will believe there to be sharp, but unknowable boundaries to the application of vague and indefinite terms.[15]

So, for example, someone is a borderline case of baldness because we do not know whether he is bald or not. Indeed, some epistemic explanations claim that we cannot in principle know where the cut-off point for baldness is.[16]

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[14] A further motivation is the worry that semantic theories of vagueness cannot avoid introducing precision in our semantic conventions, in light of the so-called problem of higher-order vagueness. There is higher-order vagueness if the boundary separating, e.g., the people who are determinately bald from those who are indeterminately bald is itself vague. These motivations are discussed at length in the contemporary locus classicus, Timothy Williamson, Vagueness, (London: Routledge Press, 1994).

[15] Williams, "Ontic Vagueness," p. 766.

[16] I reserve the term "epistemicism" to refer to an epistemic explanation that makes this further claim. A paradigm epistemicist view is Timothy Williamson's. Stephen Kearns and Ofra Magidor neatly summarise why Williamson maintains we "cannot know the sharp cut-off points corresponding to vague expressions":

> …in close-by possible worlds, ones in which the use facts for a certain vague expression differ only slighly from their actual use facts, the meaning and consequently the cut-off point of the expression is slightly different…This entails that our beliefs about the cut-off points corresponding to vague expressions are not safe and thus do not constitute knowledge.

Williamson, Vagueness; Stephen Kearns and Ofra Magidor, "Epistemicism About Vagueness and Meta-Linguistic Safety," Philosophical Perspectives, Vol 22 Issue 1 (2008), pp. 277–304, at p. 277.

Still, they claim that our linguistic conventions for terms like "bald" do fix precise application conditions. For any "borderline case" of baldness, this person is either bald or is not bald. Thus, there is a sharp line dividing the people who are bald from those that are not.

Many people have found epistemic explanations of the vagueness of terms like "bald" unappealing because they find incredible the thought that our messy linguistic practices could fix such precise conditions. In its sharpest form, this worry about the plausibility of an epistemic explanation of these terms is a worry about a view of our linguistic practices.[17] This objection does not apply to epistemic explanations of terms that refer to so-called natural kinds.[18] Natural kinds are not meant to be demarcated by our linguistic practices. Instead, the thought is that the world itself is divided up into these groupings independently of our view of it. For the sake of illustrating how an epistemic explanation of the vagueness of a natural kind term would work, let us assume that the kind, orangutan, is a natural kind. Also, let us assume a promising, albeit controversial, metasemantic theory—so-called reference magnetism.[19] On this metasemantic theory, there are multiple candidate extensions for our term "orangutan." These candidate extensions will vary according to how well they fit our use of this word. The candidate extensions will also vary according to how close they are to the underlying metaphysical structure of the world.[20] The actual extension of our term is fixed by both factors.[21] Since we are assuming that there is a natural biological kind, and our usage of the term "orangutan" comes close to picking it out, this natural kind becomes the referent of the word. In this way, a natural kind can act as a "reference magnet" for a term.

Let us suppose for now that there is a unique set of things that constitutes the natural kind, orangutan. (Later we will discuss the view that there are overlapping but distinct sets that are equally natural as kinds.) Now, assuming we reject

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17 A less serious worry is a worry about the claim that the world itself is precise. After all, adherents of a semantic view of vagueness often object that it is implausible that the world itself is vague, contra the metaphysical view of vagueness. It would hardly seem fair to claim, in addition, that it is implausible that the world itself is precise, contra the epistemic explanation.

18 Indeed, an epistemic explanation of the vagueness of natural kind terms could sit comfortably alongside a semantic explanation of the vagueness of terms like "bald."

19 More generally, one would expect a similar approach could be taken on many externalist theories of content.

20 Following David Lewis, this point is commonly put in terms of the "naturalness" of the properties. However, I prefer to avoid this terminology, given the different usage of "naturalist" and "non-naturalist" in the metaethics literature to refer to realist theories that respectively affirm and deny that ethical properties are identical to those studied by the natural sciences. David Lewis, On the Plurality of Worlds.

21 For further elucidation of this view see Wasserman, "Indeterminacy,"; David Lewis, On the Plurality of Worlds, pp. 59–69; Theodore Sider, Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

a metaphysical view of vagueness, this natural kind has a precise boundary: everything is in this set or it is not. Therefore, our use of the word "orangutan" would pick out a precise set of things. However, there is no guarantee that we will be in a position to know the demarcation of the natural kind, orangutan. Indeed, given the inherent limitations to our investigative abilities, it seems doubtful that we could ever discover such a fine-grained, precise biological fact. If we do not know this, then the reference of our term "orangutan" is not transparent to us. We will not know whether to apply this term to certain creatures. Instead, some will seem to us borderline orangutans. So when we are tempted to say that it is indeterminate whether they are orangutans, the truth of the matter is that we do not know whether they are orangutans. Indeed, given the limitations of our investigative methods, it seems that we could never know this.

Since an epistemic explanation of the vagueness of natural kind terms does not entail that linguistic conventions fix precise application conditions for these terms, the explanation is not prey to the objection that our linguistic conventions are too messy to fix precise application conditions for our terms. This objection does, however, apply to epistemic explanations of the vagueness of terms like "bald."[22] For terms like "bald," all the reference-fixing work is done by our linguistic conventions; but with natural kind terms like "orangutan" the underlying metaphysical structure of the world can lend a helping hand by supplying a reference magnet.

Which type of epistemic explanation can we give of ethical vagueness? The answer depends on our metaethical commitments. On one view, which I will call "robust realism," ethical properties are part of the deep underlying metaphysical structure of the world, and they obtain entirely independently of how we conceptualize the world.[23] Sometimes, this thought is put

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[22] Elizabeth Barnes has pointed out to me a possible way in which epistemic explanations of ethical vagueness may be more controversial. If it is part of the ethical beliefs of lay-people that some ethical claims are indeterminate, rather than determinate but unknown, and we ought to give a privileged role to the ethical beliefs of lay-people in our metaethical theorizing, then we have reason to reject an epistemic explanation of ethical vagueness. By contrast, there would appear less motivation for giving the semantic beliefs of lay-people a privileged role in our theorizing about natural language semantics.

[23] There is no consensus about how to characterize ethical realism in the metaethics literature, but I suggest that the view I describe has a good title to the name, on the grounds that it is simply a broader characterization of realism, extant in the general metaphysics literature, applied to the ethical domain. Compare Russ Shafer-Landau's characterization of moral realism:

> by reference to its endorsement of the stance-independence of moral reality. [Realists] believe that there are moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective, in the sense that the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective.

Russ Shafer-Landau, Moral Realism: A Defense, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), at p. 15, italics removed from the original. For a helpful survey of recent attempts to characterize ethical realism, see William Fitzpatrick, "Recent Work on Ethical Realism," Analysis, 69, (2009): 746–760.

in terms of the metaphor of joint-carving—on some realist metaphysical views, our representations of the world can be assessed as better or worse according to how they capture the so-called joints of nature. As Theodore Sider puts it,

> [t]here are hard questions about what objectivity amounts to… but the intuitive idea is clear: whether a property, word, or concept carves at the joints has nothing to do with the place of the concept in human languages, conceptual schemes, biology, or anything like that.[24]

Here Sider takes the notion of fundamental metaphysical structure to be primitive in the sense that it cannot be defined in more basic terms. Instead, it can only be understood in terms of the role it plays within a broader metaphysical theory.[25] On the robust realist's view, ethical properties are sitting in the world waiting to be "discovered" by us. This view is typically contrasted with another metaethical picture according to which these values are "created" by us, insofar as they obtain in virtue of our attitudes or our conventions.[26] Let us call this other view, "stance-dependent realism." The attitudes and conventions may be our actual ones, or they may be ones that we would have under certain counterfactual conditions. Stance-dependent realism comprises a family of theories, including so-called constructivist metaethics, which explain ethical facts as those arrived at by following a particular procedure,[27] relativist metaethics[28] and

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24 Theodore Sider, Writing the Book of the World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

25 Sider, for example, claims that fundamentality is connected to objective similarity, the intrinsicality of property the substantivity of metaphysical disputes, reference, laws of nature, induction and confirmation, epistemic value, metametaphysics and disputes about ontology, time, modality and logic. Sider, Writing the Book.

26 Gideon Rosen makes an important objection to this standard distinction by arguing that some stance-dependent properties are just as realist as stance-independent properties: Gideon Rosen, "Objectivity and Modern Idealism: What is the Question?" in M. Michael and J. O'Leary-Hawthorne (eds.), Philosophy in Mind: The Place of Philosophy in the Study of Mind, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), pp. 277–319.

27 The relevant procedure could be one that is followed by an individual, such as a procedure of deliberation that establishes what is valuable for her. Or it could be a procedure followed by a group, such as when a group of conveners form a social contract. For an example of the former type of view, see Christine Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For examples of the latter, see John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivisim in Moral Theory," The Journal of Philosophy 77, (1980): 515–72; Thomas M. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

28 See, for example, Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism," in Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson (eds.) Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 3–64; J. David Velleman, Foundations of Moral Relativism, (Open Book Publishing, forthcoming).

response-dependent metaethics, which ground ethical facts in the reactions we have under actual or idealized conditions.[29]

Robust realism can be understood as the view that ethical kinds have the same metaphysical status as natural kinds: they form part of the metaphysical structure of the world, which obtains entirely independently of humans' thoughts and practices.[30] If we assume for now that there is a unique set of things that form the relevant ethical kind, then robust realists can offer the less controversial type of epistemic explanation. They can say that our linguistic conventions for ethical terms do not, by themselves, define precise application criteria. But in light of the metaphysical structure of the world, these terms do end up having determinate references because the world contains ethical kinds that act as reference magnets for these terms. However, the demarcations of these precise kinds appear vague to us because we are ignorant about these demarcations. Thus, the appearance of ethical vagueness is simply a result of our ignorance about the exact ethical contours of the world. And in light of the possibility of offering mixed views of vagueness, robust realists can offer an alternative explanation of the vagueness of a term like "bald." For example, they could give an epistemic explanation of the (apparent) vagueness of "permissible" while giving a semantic explanation of the vagueness of "bald."

On the other hand, stance-dependent realists hold that ethical facts and properties obtain in virtue of our thoughts and practices. As a result, it seems that the epistemic explanation they would offer would be more analogous to an epistemic explanation for descriptive terms like "bald." This is because it seems roughly equally plausible, or not, to think that our linguistic conventions determine precise applications for "bald" as it is to think that our ethically relevant thoughts and practices determine precise applications for terms like "good" or "ought." To be fair, there is some wiggle room here, as one might make a case for ethical thoughts and practices

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[29] For example, something's being a value could be grounded in the desires that we would have under ideal conditions of full information and deliberation. See, for example, Michael Smith, The Moral Problem, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994); David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supp. 63, (1989): 113–37.

[30] We might even say that ethical kinds are natural kinds, but we would risk causing confusion because the term "natural" has different senses in the metaethics and metaphysics literatures. In metaethics, "natural" picks out an epistemological property: according to ethical naturalists, ethical properties are identical to properties that can be studied using science. By contrast, in metaphysics, "natural" picks out the type of metaphysical property discussed in the main text: natural properties mark out joints in the underlying metaphysical structure of the world. These terms do not overlap. For example, if someone held that ethical properties could not be studied by the sciences, but nevertheless these properties form part of the underlying metaphysical structure of the world, then she would say that these properties are natural in the metaphysician's sense, but she would not say that these properties are natural in the metaethicist's sense.

being especially likely to lead to precision. But it is far from straightforward how this wiggling would be done.

Either epistemic explanation has two interesting consequences. First, it leads to unknowable ethical facts. Consider our earlier example: how many cents are you required to spend on a taxi in order not to be late for an appointment for which you have promised to be punctual? A friend of an epistemic position may say that there is a precise minimum here. But it stretches the imagination to think that we could ever know what this minimum is. How would we discover the location of this threshold? It seems that no amount of ethical reflection and debate could help us here.[31] But it would be a striking and substantive result to learn that there are unknowable ethical facts. Some philosophers have explicitly denied that there are unknowable ethical facts, on the grounds that it is a conceptual truth about ethical facts that they must be potentially action-guiding.[32] For example, one might hold that if it is a fact that you must take a taxi that costs less than $35.41 in order to keep a promise to meet someone at a particular time, then you must be able to decide to take a $35.41 taxi on the basis of this fact. This is, arguably, the weakest link one could find between ethical facts and motivation. But friends of epistemic explanations of ethical vagueness should deny that even this link obtains. This is because ethical facts that are unknowable could not guide action.

There is a second interesting consequence. According to an epistemic explanation, there are sharp cut-offs and so tiny differences in subvening descriptive properties can determine whether an ethical property is instantiated. Let "n" refer to the least number of milliseconds of pleasure that adequately compensates someone for a broken pinky toe. Consequently, there are circumstances in which you are permitted to perform an action that breaks someone's toe and brings her n milliseconds, but it would be wrong for you to perform an action that breaks her toe but only brings her (n-1) milliseconds. Thus, the permissibility of your action depends on this tiny difference in the subvening descriptive facts concerning lengths of pleasure. There is some plausibility to thinking that if there is only a tiny descriptive difference between the actions, then any ethical difference between these actions could not be very important. Consequently, we should conclude that

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31 In addition, if one adopts Williamson's epistemicist theory for ethical vagueness, then one will hold that there are limitations in principle to our knowledge of ethical facts. Williamson, Vagueness.

32 See, for example, Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in his Moral Luck, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Jonathan Bennett, The Act Itself (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Judith Jarvis Thomson, Normativity, (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 2008). For a taxonomy of variants of this view under the title "existence internalism," see Stephen Darwall, The British Moralists and the Internal Ought, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 10–12. Roy Sorensen offers a vagueness-based argument for the position that there are unknowable obligations in his "Unknowable Obligations," Utilitas, 7 2 (November 1995): 247–271.

the difference between permissible and impermissible actions is not as important as we usually take it to be. As Sider puts it, one "cannot both uphold epistemicism and continue to believe that differences in vague predicates always retain the significance we previously took them to have."[33] In the case of ethical vague predicates, this may involve scaling back the significance we place on applying these predicates.

3. Semantic Theories of Vagueness

Let us turn now to semantic theories of vagueness. There is a family of semantic theories, which share the common commitment to locating vagueness "in our thought and language."[34] But there are important variations among members. For reasons of space, I will be selective and discuss two key types: vague attitude theories and semantic indecision theories.

3.1. Vague Attitude Theories

The first option begins with the assumption that some form of stance-dependent realism is true, by maintaining that our attitudes ground ethical facts. It then continues that some of these attitudes are vague attitudes. To illustrate, consider David Lewis's theory of value.[35] According to Lewis, something is of value to you if and only if you would desire to desire this thing under conditions of full information and imaginative acquaintance. If we can make coherent in a suitable way the notion that we can have vague desires, then we might be able to explain the vagueness of value claims in terms of the vagueness of these desires.

This strikes me as an explanatory avenue with some promise. However, the devil will be in the details, which it would not be appropriate to work through here (even if I could). But I will briefly note some initial obstacles to proceeding along these lines. The most fully developed theory of vague attitudes is arguably Stephen Schiffer's.[36] Schiffer's account centers on the claim that we can be in a distinctive mental attitude about borderline cases. To illustrate, take someone who is borderline bald. Schiffer says that we neither believe that he is bald nor that he is not bald. Instead, we have a

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[33] Sider makes this remark in the context of arguing against a certain picture of the afterlife. He argues that it would be unjust for tiny differences in e.g. the number of charitable donations someone has made (or in any other relevant factor) to determine whether she goes to heaven or hell. Theodore Sider, "Hell and Vagueness," Faith and Philosophy 19 (2002): 58–68, at p. 7.

[34] Lewis, On The Plurality of Worlds, p. 212.

[35] Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value."

[36] Stephen Schiffer, "Vagueness and Partial Belief," Philosophical Issues, Vol. 10 Issue 1, (Oct. 2000): 220–257; Schiffer, The Things We Mean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

"vagueness-related partial belief" in his baldness. And it is this vague attitude that Schiffer appeals to in order to solve philosophical problems concerning vagueness. Now I know of no metaethical view that has appealed to the mental attitude of vagueness-related partial beliefs. Indeed, extant stance-dependent views tend to give an explanatory role to conative or affective attitudes, such as desire or disapproval, rather than cognitive attitudes, such as that of being in a partial belief. So either a new metaethical view along these lines would have to be fashioned which gives an explanatory role to vagueness-related partial beliefs or Schiffer's view would at least need modification, if not replacement with an alternative account of vague attitudes that are more suitable for work in a metaethical theory. Further, suppose we do try to fashion an alternative account of vague attitudes to Schiffer's. To make this distinctively an account of vague attitudes, it would have to locate the vagueness in the attitudes themselves, rather than it simply being semantically indeterminate whether a term designating attitudes, like "desire," applies to someone with a particular psychology. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with a semantic explanation of vagueness that takes the latter strategy, by appealing to the vagueness of a term for an attitude. It is simply to say that such an account is best understood as appealing to linguistic, rather than attitudinal, vagueness, and hence as occupying the next slot in our taxonomy of semantic explanations.

3.2. Semantic Indecision Theories

Instead of appealing to the vagueness of attitudes, we might instead appeal to the vagueness of linguistic terms. I will focus on the most popular theories along the latter lines: semantic indecision theories. At the heart of these theories is the claim that certain predicates lack precise application conditions. For example, Lewis regards "vagueness as semantic indecision: where we speak vaguely, we have not troubled to settle which of some range of precise meanings our words are meant to express."[37] Again, Williams's gloss is helpful:

> paradigmatically, this view takes the source of indefiniteness to be in shortcomings in the meanings that are assigned to certain words. Consider my chair—it seems that in one sense all the fundamental facts about the colour of the chair are perfectly determinate—it is, we may suppose, of a specific shade, hue and saturation. But the meaning of 'blue', even together with these facts, does not suffice to make the sentence 'that chair is blue' true or false. The semantic rules for 'blue' simply do not 'cater' for certain kinds of precisely describable situations.[38]

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[37] Lewis, On The Plurality of Worlds, p. 233, n.32

[38] J. Robert G. Williams, "Ontic Vagueness and Metaphysical Indeterminacy," Philosophy Compass 3, (2008) 763–788, at p. 766.

The thought is that when the semantic rules for a predicate like "blue" do not specify whether it applies in certain situations, the term is vague. That is the core thesis of a semantic indecision account of vagueness. This provides an account of what vagueness consists in, and the starting point for an account of how a vague language functions. But in our inquiry into ethical vagueness, we are after a little more in the way of explanation: we want to know why ethical vagueness arises. As such, we would like an account along these lines also to explain why, in Williams's words, "the semantic rules for 'blue' do not 'cater' for certain kinds of precisely describable situations." The most popular and plausible answer is that our semantic rules come from our linguistic conventions and these conventions do not determine precise application conditions for terms like "blue." That is, they do not determine a precise point on the color spectrum that distinguishes the combinations of saturation and hue to which the term "blue" picks out from those to which the term does not apply. Instead, there are borderline cases around where this boundary roughly is. Note that in making these claims, the semantic indecision theorist is not committed to the claim that the only reason we speak a vague language is that we have not made up our minds about what our words mean. It could be, for example, that our perceptual and cognitive capabilities necessitate that we use a vague colour language.[39]

How can we appeal to a semantic indecision theory in order to explain how ethical vagueness arises? There are three types of explanation, which I discuss in turn.

3.2.1. Robust Realism and Multiple Ethical Kinds

The first option is a riff on the reference magnetism story encountered earlier. Previously, we considered robust realism about ethical properties: these properties carve the world at its metaphysical joints. In our earlier discussion, we assumed that associated with an apparently vague ethical term, there is simply one precise extension that forms an ethical kind. This kind acts as a reference magnet with the consequence that the ethical term refers to this kind, even though we are ignorant about the kind's boundaries. Analogously, a single precise natural kind can act as a reference magnet for a natural kind term, even if we do not know the boundaries of the natural kind.

Now it is time to complicate the natural kind story slightly, by relaxing the assumption that there is a single extension that forms a natural kind. Instead, there may be multiple extensions that are on a par with respect to naturalness. Perhaps some biological kinds are like this. One might think

[39] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point.

that the term "orangutan" importantly picks out something special about the metaphysical structure of the world, independently of how we represent it. But one might deny that there is a single precise set of creatures that forms a natural kind. Instead, there may be multiple equally natural sets of creatures that slightly vary in their membership. For example, consider Jasmine, a great ape. Jasmine is an evolutionary ancestor of all the orangutans alive today, but has a slight genetic difference from these orangutans. One might hold that two sets of red-haired great apes whose membership differs only with respect to whether they include Jasmine are equally natural. And one might maintain that both sets are natural groupings, owing to their metaphysical difference from the wholly artificial kind, harpsichord. Now suppose, as seems plausible, that our linguistic conventions for the term "orangutan" do not pick out one of these sets at the expense of the others.[40] Thus, if these sets are tied for naturalness, then they are equally strong reference magnets. And so, even on a reference magnet story, there may be semantic indeterminacy concerning natural kind terms. Linguistic conventions for these terms, in conjunction with facts about the metaphysical structure of the world, do not make it the case that each term has a unique extension; instead, it is semantically indeterminate whether the terms refer to multiple extensions.

Again, a parallel story can be told for ethical properties by a robust realist.[41] Suppose a robust realist can make plausible the idea that there are multiple extensions that form important metaphysical categories, although each extension is equally important from a metaphysical point of view. For example, consider Richard Boyd's view that "morally good" refers to a homeostatic property cluster of things that serve human needs.[42] Boyd argues that this property cluster meets his earlier description of natural kinds with associated indeterminacy, and the indeterminacy of the relevant terms

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[40] Indeed, it may be best for our purposes that these terms do not pick out a particular extension:

> The necessary indeterminacy in extension of species terms is a consequence of evolutionary theory, as Darwin observed: speciation depends on the existence of populations which are intermediate between the parent species and the emerging one. Any "refinement" of classification which artificially eliminated the resulting indeterminacy in classification would obscure the central fact about heritable variations in phenotype upon which biological evolution depends. More determinate species categories would be scientifically inappropriate and misleading.

Richard Boyd, "How to be a moral realist," in Paul K. Moser and J. D. Trout (eds.), Contemporary Materialism: A Reader, (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), pp. 307–371, at p. 324.

[41] Thanks to Daniel Nolan for drawing my attention to this possibility.

[42] Boyd, "How to be a moral realist," pp. 329–330.

cannot be eliminated without making them unsuitable for their role within a scientific theory:

> There are natural kinds, properties, etc. whose natural definitions involve a kind of property cluster together with an associated indeterminacy in extension. Both the property-cluster form of such definitions and the associated indeterminacy are dictated by the scientific task of employing categories which correspond to inductively and explanatorily relevant causal structures. In particular, the indeterminacy in extension of such natural definitions could not be remedied without rendering the definitions unnatural in the sense of being scientifically misleading (p. 322).

If an ethical kind, such as goodness, simply is a natural kind, then the definition of this ethical kind would also have a necessary semantic indeterminacy. And Boyd maintains that this is not only consistent with a fully naturalized robust realist metaethic, but is in fact entailed by it since this "indeterminacy is a necessary consequence of 'cutting the world at its (largely theory-independent) joints'" (p. 325).

3.2.2. Descriptive Terms are Semantically Vague

For the second option, suppose instead that we deny that there are ethical kinds acting as reference magnets for our ethical terms (either because there is no reference magnetism, or, contra robust realism, there are no such ethical kinds.) Without the world cooperating by providing these magnets, we are left only with our linguistic conventions to fix the reference of our ethical terms. This leads to the following possibility: explain the vagueness of ethical terms in terms of the vagueness of descriptive terms.

I suspect that this explanation naturally appeals to many people who are already drawn to semantic accounts of vagueness. It is tempting to reason along the following lines. The reason why a nineteen-week embryo is a borderline case of an entity that it is morally permissible to destroy is that the embryo is a borderline case of a person. And the reason why it is a borderline case of a person is that the term "person" is semantically vague. Moreover, "person" is a descriptive term that is vague in just the way that a descriptive term like "red" is semantically vague. And so we have a ready-made explanation of ethical vagueness that draws on the semantic vagueness of descriptive terms—vagueness that we have independent motivation to posit.

However, though this explanation is viable, it is significantly more controversial than it may first seem. By appealing to the vagueness of descriptive terms, the success of this explanation depends entirely on the assumption that the reference of certain ethical terms is explained by the reference of certain descriptive terms. This assumption might seem a

platitude, given that it is widely accepted that the ethical supervenes on the descriptive. But in fact the assumption is more controversial than it may first appear. It is not simply a claim about the relationship between the properties picked out by ethical and descriptive terms; it is a substantive assumption about the relationship between the terms that refer to these properties. Specifically, the assumption is that a semantic fact about an ethical term—the fact that this ethical term is semantically vague—is explained by a semantic fact about a descriptive term—the fact that this descriptive term is semantically vague. Now, in turn there must be some explanation of the semantic vagueness of the descriptive term. Plausibly this explanation will invoke the fact that the linguistic conventions for this term do not imbue it with precise application criteria. Thus, ultimately, it is this fact about the linguistic conventions for the descriptive term that ultimately explains why the ethical term is vague. Clearly this assumption is much more controversial than the platitude that the ethical supervenes on the descriptive! We would need to hear a broader story about why the linguistic conventions for the descriptive term have anything to do with the semantic facts concerning the ethical term.

Here is another way of bringing out the point. Put yourself in the shoes of an agent who is confronted with a borderline case of permissibility. For example, you have to decide whether to destroy a nineteen-week embryo. You consider whether it would be appropriate to apply the term "permissible" to such an act. You are at a loss as to whether to apply the term. Plausibly, the reason why is twofold. First, the embryo seems, in some respects, similar to a zygote, to whose destruction we may assume the term "permissible" applies. And these respects appear ethically important. Second, in other respects, it seems similar to a new-born child, to whose destruction we may assume the term "permissible" clearly does not apply. And again these respects appear ethically important. As such, you conclude that it is semantically indeterminate whether "permissible" applies to the act of destruction. There remains a further question as to whether this has anything to do with the semantics of the term "person." We would need to hear a story about why facts about the indecisive linguistic conventions concerning "person," (which make that term semantically indeterminate), make it the case that the term "permissible" is semantically indeterminate. This story is not provided by simply stating that the ethically relevant metaphysical similarities of the embryo to the zygote and the new-born also make it the case that it is semantically indeterminate whether the descriptive term "person" applies to the fetus.

What we need is a substantive story about why we should accept the view that the semantic indeterminacy of a descriptive term explains the semantic indeterminacy of an ethical term. This will be, at least in part, a metaethical story, insofar as it makes assumptions about ethical language and

metaphysics. I suggest that there are two key ways in which semantic facts concerning descriptive terms could explain whether ethical terms apply.

3.2.2.1. Metaethical Work For Actual or Hypothetical Speech

One way of bridging this explanatory gap is to hold that there are some ethically important forms of speech—understood broadly to include both vocal utterances and written documents—and these forms of speech are couched in vague descriptive terms. This ethically important speech might be actual speech or hypothetical speech.

Actual speech might be ethically important if, for example, the permissibility of an act depends on whether the act is allowed by a codified law. For example, one might hold that the act's permissibility turns on whether a religious text or a piece of human legislation allows the act. Suppose the religious or human law contains the sentence, "Don't destroy any fetus that is a person!" If the term "person" is semantically vague, then it will be semantically indeterminate which acts are proscribed according to this text. Since the reference of "permissible" is tied to what the text proscribes, the reference of "permissible" in turn would be vague.

Hypothetical speech might be ethically important if, for example, the permissibility of an act depends on whether it would be allowed by certain hypothetical agreement or advice. For example, a contractualist might hold that an act's permissibility depends on whether the act is allowed by a hypothetical social contract.[43] Meanwhile, someone who subscribes to an "ideal advisor" metaethic might hold that an act's permissibility depends on whether the act is allowed by hypothetical advice.[44] For the same reasons as before, if the hypothetical contract or advice contained the sentence "Don't destroy any fetus that is a person!", then the vagueness of "person" would infect the semantics of "permissible."

3.2.2.2. Analytic Naturalism

A simple way in which the semantics of ethical terms could track the semantics of descriptive terms would be if so-called analytic naturalism is true. On this view, ethical truths are analytic insofar as some ethical terms are equivalent in meaning to certain descriptive terms. For example, G. E. Moore interprets some utilitarians as holding that the term "right" is synonymous the term "productive of the most pleasure possible."[45] Now this metaethical view has been unpopular in recent times, in light of Moore's own "open question argument": Moore objects that if it is analytic

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43 See Rawls, A Theory of Justice; Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other.

44 For ideal advisor metaethics, see Peter Railton, "Facts and Values," Philosophical Topics, 14 (1986), pp. 5–31; Smith, The Moral Problem.

45 G. E. Moore, Principia Ethica, revised edition, ed. T. Baldwin, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1993.)

that "right" means productive of the most pleasure, then it would not seem that there is an open question as to whether it is right to perform acts that produce the most pleasure. Setting this substantive point to one side, we can note that this metaethical view straightforwardly allows the semantic vagueness of descriptive terms to make ethical terms vague, since these terms are equivalent in meaning. For example, on the analytic utilitarian's view, if the linguistic conventions concerning "pleasure" do not determine whether an act produces the most pleasure, then correspondingly it would not be determined whether an act is right.

3.2.3. Indecisive Conventions for Ethical Terms

On the analytic naturalist explanation we just saw, the linguistic conventions for "permissible" determine that it is synonymous with a descriptive term, whose linguistic conventions leave open whether the term applies to some borderline cases. This suggests a simpler, third option.[46] We might simply say that the linguistic conventions pertaining to an ethical term like "permissible" do not determine whether this term applies to borderline cases. For example, these conventions do not determine whether the term applies to the destruction of a nineteen-week embryo. These conventions might fail to do so in the same way that our conventions concerning "blue" do not determine whether the term applies to a surface with a certain hue and saturation. As such, this semantic explanation would indeed explain why, for example, the term, "permissible" is vague. There are two points I wish to note about it.

First, this explanation is not open to the robust realist, at least as I have characterized her. My robust realist thinks that there are ethical properties that obtain independently of how we conceptualize the world. On her view, these ethical properties are no mere "shadows" of our ethical predicates. As a result, she cannot appeal to the semantic vagueness of these predicates to explain ethical vagueness concerning these properties, apart from in the manner noted above at 3.2.1—i.e. apart from by claiming that there are multiple extensions which are equally referentially magnetic. To illustrate this point, suppose the robust realist thinks that there is a unique property of permissibility that some actions have, and that this property obtains independently of our linguistic schemes. Consequently, if the robust realist thinks that "permissible" is a vague term, then she will have to deny that it is vague because our linguistic conventions for this term are indecisive.

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[46] Indeed, we may see the analytic naturalism explanation as simply a variant on the present explanation. The differences, if any, between these types of explanation will turn on how we individuate linguistic conventions. It is hard to feel that these differences are particularly theoretically important for our topic.

Second, I wonder how satisfying this option will seem as an account of the full phenomenon of ethical vagueness. This is because ethical vagueness gives rise to practical dilemmas, in a way that descriptive vagueness arguably does not. Suppose you are staring at a reddish-orangey patch, which is a borderline case for the term "red." At first, you may feel torn about whether to apply this term. But now you reflect on the putative claim that the linguistic conventions for "red" do not determine whether it applies in this case. If you accept this claim, then your anxiety should dissipate. You should think that you know what the patch looks like and you know how it may or may not be described. What more could you want to know? Your theoretical interest in the patch and its colour should be exhausted.[47] But now suppose that you are confronted with a nineteen-week fetus. You know various biological facts about, say, its physical and mental development. You feel torn about whether you may destroy it. But now you reflect on the putative claim that the linguistic conventions for "permissible" do not determine whether it applies in this case. If you accept this claim, should your anxiety dissipate? It seems to me that it should not. Again, you should think that you know what the fetus is like, on a biological level, and that you know how it may or may not be described in your language. But there remains for you a further practical issue to resolve concerning what to do. Your interest in this issue is not exhausted simply by knowing the biological facts about the fetus and the semantic facts concerning "permissible." Knowing these facts does not resolve your dilemma. This leads me to have doubts about whether appealing to the indecisive linguistic conventions for "permissible" is a satisfying explanation that captures the full phenomenon of ethical vagueness.

3.2.4. An Interesting Consequence of Semantic Indecision Theories

There are important differences between these semantic indecision theories' explanations of ethical vagueness. But they all share an implication for the world of value. To see this, consider the term "blue." On the semantic indecision story, this term is associated with multiple precise extensions. It may be determinate that it refers to one of these extensions. But for no extension is it the case that the term determinately refers to this extension. No precise extension stands out with a special claim to the title. Analogously, a semantics decision theorist about "permissible" would say similar things. She

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47 There may be an attenuated sense in which you can be left with a practical dilemma. For example, if you are facing two borderline cases of a red object, and someone orders you "bring the red object!" then you will find yourself unable to comply with the command. But although this may be a frustrating position to be in, there is nothing particularly deliberatively perplexing: one should realize that one has simply been given bad commands. (Compare someone giving you insufficiently detailed driving instructions.)

would say that this term is associated with multiple precise extensions. Some of these include the destruction of the nineteen week fetus; other extensions do not. But for none of these extensions is it the case that the term determinately refers to this extension. No extension stands out with a special ethical glow (although their intersection arguably does have a special ethical significance). Rather there is a multiplicity of ethically relevant extensions here. I suspect that many metaethicists will find this consequence an interesting ethical result in itself. At the least, it is a claim that hasn't received much attention in the ethics literature.

4. Conclusion

This completes our survey of explanations of ethical vagueness. I have not discussed metaphysical explanations of vagueness, as I am not aware of any interesting upshots of them for the ethical case. But there are some interesting implications of the epistemic and semantic explanations discussed. I will end by bringing together two points that have emerged from the discussion.

First, these explanations typically involve embracing significant and perhaps surprising theses. Endorsing epistemic explanations of vagueness leads to two consequences. The first consequence is that some ethical facts are unknowable—a claim denied by those who maintain that ethical facts must be knowable in order to be capable of guiding and motivating action. The second consequence is that we may need to revise the importance we place on the distinction between permissible and wrong actions, if this distinction can turn on ever-so-slight descriptive differences. Meanwhile, semantic indecision theories of ethical vagueness entail that there is no unique set of actions that is the extension associated with the term "permissible." Rather there are multiple sets associated with this term, none of which stands out from the others with a special ethical glow.

Second, the availability of certain explanations of ethical vagueness depend on one's metaethical commitments. In particular, different options are available to robust realists, who hold that ethical properties demarcate ethical kinds that are part of a metaphysical structure of the world in the way that natural kinds are, and stance-dependent realists, who hold that ethical properties are grounded in our thoughts and practices. By claiming that ethical kinds function as reference magnets in the way that natural kinds function, robust realists can offer an epistemic explanation of vagueness that is uncommitted to the thought that our thoughts and practices generate precise application conditions for our terms. By contrast, a stance-dependent realist's epistemic explanation of vagueness is on a par with epistemic explanations of the vagueness of terms like "bald." Moreover, only a stance-dependent realist can appeal to vague attitudes in order to give a semantic explanation of ethical vagueness. And one can only appeal to

the vagueness of descriptive terms by taking on metaethical commitments such as analytic naturalism or stance-dependent realism. Now one could take this interdependence between explanations of vagueness and metaethical theories to cut both ways. We can use arguments for and against certain metaethics to give us leverage on the debate about vagueness. Alternatively, we can use arguments for and against certain theories of vagueness to guide our choice of metaethics. But my favoured strategy would be to work in both directions at once. We could take a holistic view of all the various arguments, aiming to make sure our explanations of vagueness cohere with our metaethical theories in reflective equilibrium. In light of this opportunity for making progress in both sub-fields, the phenomenon of ethical vagueness should be of great interest both to philosophers of language interested in vagueness and to metaethicists.