Epistemicism and Moral Vagueness

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Abstract

This essay defends an epistemicist response to the phenomenon of vagueness concerning moral terms. I outline a traditional model of – and then two novel approaches to – epistemicism about moral predicates, and I demonstrate how the foregoing are able to provide robust explanations of the source of moral, as epistemic, indeterminacy. The first model of epistemic indeterminacy concerns the extensions of moral predicates, as witnessed by the non-transitivity of a value-theoretic sorites paradox. The second model of moral epistemicism is induced by the status of moral dilemmas in the epistemic interpretation of two-dimensional semantics. The third model is argued to consist in the formal invalidation of modal axiom K – and thus of epistemic closure – in the derivation of Curry’s paradox. I examine the philosophical significance of the foregoing, and compare the proposal to those of ethical expressivism, constructivism, and scalar act-consequentialism. Finally, I examine the status of moral relativism in light of the epistemicist models of moral vagueness developed in the paper, and I argue that the rigidity of ethical value-theoretic concepts adduces in favor of an epistemic interpretation of the indeterminacy thereof.

1 Introduction

This essay defends an epistemicist response to the phenomenon of vagueness concerning moral terms. Schoenfield (2016) endeavors to provide an argument in favor of ontic vagueness for moral predicates, by countenancing arguments which adduce against the tenability of semantic and epistemicist approaches.\footnote{For a survey of semantic and epistemic approaches to moral vagueness, see Dougherty (2014).} The primary objection to the epistemicist response is that a sufficient explanation is lacking for the reason for which the relevant epistemic indeterminacy might be induced.

The philosophical significance of the discussion concerns whether the prevalence of occasionally intransigent indeterminacy with regard to moral concepts, such as what is permissible and what is obligatory, is owing to indeterminacy in the nature of the properties at issue, or instead owing to the epistemic limits of non-ideal agents. In this essay, I will advance and defend four epistemicist explanations of moral vagueness; and thus argue that – metaphysically – moral
predicates concerning what is permissible and obligatory have precise extensions. Disputes and the indeterminacy concerning what moral properties are, and what the concepts denoting them might be, are thus owing to the formal limits of human knowledge, rather than to the intrinsically vague nature of values.

In Section 2, I outline objections that have been proffered against the epistemicist approach to moral vagueness. I outline, then, a traditional explanation in virtue of which moral predicates may be taken to be epistemically indeterminate, and develop two, new models of the moral epistemicist proposal. The first of the new models targets the modal status of moral dilemmas in the epistemic interpretation of two-dimensional semantics. The second of the two models targets the invalidity of epistemic closure in the derivation of Curry’s paradox, in which the formulas figuring therein are interpreted so as to concern ethical claims. In Section 3, I examine the philosophical significance of the foregoing, and compare the proposal to those of ethical expressivism, act-consequentialism, and constructivism. In Section 4, I examine the status of moral relativism, in light of the models of moral epistemicism developed in the following, and argue that the formal semantic profile of ethical value-theoretic concepts adjoins in favor of an epistemic interpretation of the indeterminacy thereof. Section 5 provides concluding remarks.

2 Epistemicist Models of Moral Vagueness

2.1 Objections to Moral Epistemicism

Against a purely semantic response to the phenomenon of vagueness concerning moral predicates, Schoenfield (op. cit.) argues that variations on the proposal, which either (i) take the extensions of moral terms to vary with context, or (ii) take moral terms rigidly to refer to their extensions, are problematic.

Generally, the issue with the context-shifting view is claimed to be that it precludes the capacity for moral deliberation (265-266, 268).

The issue with a first variation on the proposal which takes moral terms, such as ‘permissible’, to be rigid is that – on a reference magnetist semantics thereof – semantic indeterminacy entails ontic determinacy (270-271). If, on the other hand, there are a range of perfectly natural value-theoretic properties falling within the extension of the vague moral term, then this would be inconsistent with the semantic indeterminacy that is being presupposed (271).

The issue with a second explanation of the rigidity of moral terms which avails, by contrast, of conceptual role semantics, is that the validity of terms such as ‘permissible’ will depend upon there being a property in virtue of which the claims about permissibility are valid (274). Thus, any indeterminacy in the semantics for ‘permissible’ will similarly entail a version of ontic vagueness (274-275).

Against the epistemicist response to the phenomenon of moral vagueness, Schoenfield argues that the two most prominent explanations of the epistemic
indeterminacy of the extensions of vague terms are also problematic. The primary issue for an explanation of epistemic indeterminacy which consists in a ‘safety’-based conception of knowledge – according to which it is safe to believe that terms have a particular extension, if they are accessible from a world at which that extension is known and the accessibility relation is reflexive, symmetric, and non-transitive (cf. Williamson, 2001: ch.5) – is that it collapses into the context-shifting view outlined in the foregoing and which is purported to be inconsistent with the capacity for moral deliberation (276-277).

The primary issue for a variant explanation of the epistemic indeterminacy concerning the extension of a moral predicate – according to which epistemic indeterminacy is grounded in the absence of a truthmaker – is that the truth of the ethical propositions in which the moral predicates at issue figure will then be contingent (278-279; cf. Sorensen, 1988).

In the remainder of this section, I will argue that the foregoing analysis of the tenability of epistemicist approaches to moral vagueness is not exhaustive. I endeavor, in turn, to advance four epistemicist models of moral vagueness which can explain in virtue of what there is epistemic indeterminacy with regard to the extensions of moral predicates.

2.2 The Sorites

The first epistemic explanation of moral vagueness concerns the status of non-transitivity in a value-theoretic sorites series (cf. Williamson, 1990/2013; 1994: 8.6; 2001: ch.4; 2014). Suppose, for example, that a subject is presented with a continuum of value-theoretic properties. Let the incipient property in the series be saliently maximally valuable for a subject, and let the terminal property in the series be saliently maximally disvaluable for the subject. By transitivity: If the first property is not saliently different in value from the second property, and the second property is not saliently different in value from the third property, then the first property is not saliently different in value from the third property. The sorites paradox arises, subsequently, because iterations of the transitivity relation would entail that the initial property and the terminal property are not saliently different in value, contrary to the hypothesis that – for the subject – the incipient property is actually maximally valuable whereas the terminal property is maximally disvaluable.

In the relational semantics for modal logic, a labeled transition system is a frame comprised of a set of worlds and an accessibility relation: \( F = \langle W, R \rangle \). A model augments the frame with a valuation function mapping elements from a domain of formulas to subsets of \( W \); thus, \( M = \langle F, D, R, V \rangle \). If the accessibility relation is reflexive, then a world is accessible from itself, intuitively validating modal axiom, T, for the modal operator, which states that \( \Box \phi \) is factive. If the accessibility relation is symmetric, then the operator satisfies modal axiom B, according to which the value of the formula is necessarily possibly true (\( \phi \iff \Box \diamond \phi \)). Finally, if the accessibility relation is transitive, then the operator satisfies modal axiom 4, according to which, if the value of the formula is necessarily true, then the value of the formula is necessarily necessarily true (\( \Box \phi \iff \Box \Box \phi \)).
The box operator may receive different interpretations, which characterize then the nature of the worlds over which the accessibility relation is defined. Thus, e.g., one might distinguish between metaphysical modality, i.e. what is possible or necessary relative to maximally general worlds, by contrast to deontic modality, i.e. what is permissible or obligatory. When the operator is interpreted so as to target epistemic necessity, then the space of worlds at issue can concern states of knowledge. The first epistemicist explanation of moral vagueness is then that – in epistemic logic – if transitivity is the culprit in a value-theoretic sorites, then an invalidation of transitivity is equivalent to an invalidation of modal axiom 4. On its epistemic interpretation, 4 states that one knows that \(\phi\) entails that one knows that one knows that \(\phi\). Invalidating modal axiom 4 thus entails a type of epistemic indeterminacy and the paradigm example of the epistemicist solution to the logical paradoxes: One can know that a formula is true relative to a point, while yet not know that one knows that the formula is true.

### 2.3 Indeterminacy and Actuality

The second epistemic explanation of moral vagueness reinterprets the import of an account that has been proffered in order to explain metaphysical indeterminacy. According to Barnes and Williams (2011), metaphysical indeterminacy occurs if and only if there is a set of worlds concerning a state of affairs, and – subsequent to filterings of the worlds by precisifications – it remains indeterminate which among the set of worlds is actual. In the epistemic setting, the foregoing can receive a moral interpretation if and only if the set of worlds concern the value of an ethical injunction. Crucially, epistemic indeterminacy about the value of the injunction may then consist in the indeterminacy with regard to which among the possible values of the ethical imperative is actual.

### 2.4 Moral Dilemmas and Two-dimensional Semantics

The third epistemic explanation of moral vagueness may be defined in the setting of the epistemic interpretation of two-dimensional semantics. In two-dimensional semantics, the value of a formula may be defined relative to two parameters. Let the first parameter range over epistemically possible worlds, and let the second parameter range over metaphysically possible worlds. A formula is negatively conceivable (\(\Diamond\)) if and only if nothing rules it out apriori (\(\neg \Box \neg \)). A formula is apriori (\(\Box\)) if and only if it is inconceivable for it to be false (\(\neg \neg \)). Suppose, furthermore, that the intensions and extensions for the ethical terms comprising a target formula are super-rigid; i.e., they are invariant across the points both in epistemic modal space and in metaphysical modal space. The super-rigidity of ethical terms ensures that the possible indeterminacy of reference for the terms which span the two modal spaces can be precluded. Thus, the epistemic possibility or conceivability that, say, a certain ethical claim is true, will be a guide to its metaphysical possibility.
A counterexample to the constitutive link between conceivability and metaphysical possibility is referred to as a 'strong' necessity. Chalmers (2010: 166-167) writes, e.g., that: '[[t]t is useful to clarify [the general conceivability-possibility thesis] CP by making clear what a counterexample to it would involve... Let us say that a negative strong necessity is a statement S such that S is [epistemically]-necessary and [metaphysically]-necessary but ¬S is negatively conceivable'. The third epistemicist response might then be based on the existence of strong necessities. I propose that the strong necessity at issue will be an ethical claim, the value of which presents as inconsistent in a subject's belief set, i.e. their set of epistemic possibilities. Suppose, for example, that it is metaphysically necessary that the ethical imperative is true. Semantically, the objective validity of the ethical claim may be countenanced as a deontic modal operator taking scope over the ethical claim and whose value is defined relative to a context – ranging over the agent and their location – and an index – ranging over the set of relevant facts. Suppose, however, that, subjectively, the agent does not know whether the ethical claim is true. Thus, semantically, the subjective profile of the ethical claim may be countenanced as a deontic modal operator taking scope over the ethical formula at issue, where the value of the claim is defined relative to a context – ranging over the agent and their location – and an index – ranging over the agent's states of information, i.e. the possibilities that are conceivable to them. Then, the value of the ethical imperative will therefore present to the subject as a moral dilemma. The content of the imperative might, e.g., state that it ought to be the case that the subject pursues a course of action (□ϕ). Because of the subject's epistemic uncertainty about the value of the ethical claim, there will also be a world in their epistemic modal space according to which it is not obligatory for the agent to pursue the action (¬□ϕ). By the duality of obligation and permissibility, it will then appear as permissible for them not to pursue the course of action (¬□ϕ ←⇒ ¬¬⋄¬ϕ). The moral dilemma thus follows that – despite that, objectively, i.e., relative to the space of metaphysical modalities, they ought to pursue the action – the obligation operator can yet receive a distinct value, i.e. falsity, as relative to a parameter ranging over their states of information.

2.5 Moral Epistemicism and Curry’s Paradox

The fourth, and final, epistemicist explanation of the indeterminacy of moral terms consists in counterinstances to modal axiom K. The epistemic interpretation of modal axiom K is the formal analogue of epistemic closure. K states that [□(ϕ → ψ) → (□ϕ → □ψ)]. Intuitively: If one knows that ϕ entails ψ, then if one knows that ϕ then one knows that ψ.

Suppose that a subject is presented with a variation of Curry’s paradox, in which the formula, ϕ, at issue states an ethical falsehood; e.g., that the property of being good just is the property of an agent’s happiness. Author (ms) argues that Curry’s paradox is not closed under known entailment, and the interpretation of the formula figuring therein as an ethical claim may serve to dramatize the approach. Suppose, then, that ϕ holds such that the truth of
\( \phi \) would entail contradiction. Curry’s paradox is as follows. With \( T(x) \) a truth predicate:

1. \( \phi \iff [T(\phi) \rightarrow \bot] \) (1, T-introduction)
2. \( T(\phi) \iff [T(\phi) \rightarrow \bot] \) (2, L-R)
3. \( [T(\phi) \land T(\phi)] \rightarrow \bot \) (3, importation)
4. \( T(\phi) \rightarrow \bot \) (4, contraction)
5. \( [T(\phi) \rightarrow \bot] \rightarrow T(\phi) \) (2, R-L)
6. \( T(\phi) \) (5, 6)
7. \( \bot \) (5, 7)

Line 5, in Curry’s paradox, belies modal axiom K. The relevant instance states that, if one knows that the truth of \( \phi \) entails a contradiction, then if one knows the truth of \( \phi \), then one knows a contradiction:

\[ (*) \quad [\square [T(\phi) \rightarrow \bot]] \rightarrow [\square [T(\phi)] \rightarrow \square (\bot)] \]

However, knowledge is factive, as recorded by the validity of modal axiom \( T (\square \phi \iff \phi) \); i.e. \( \phi \) is known or knowable only if \( \phi \) obtains. Thus, the consequent in the last conditional in (*) is false. Thus, the last conditional in (*) is itself false. Because the last conditional in (*) figures itself as the consequent of (*) and it is false, the entire statement, (*), is false. Thus, one can know that \( T(\phi) \) entails a contradiction, and yet not know that, in knowing \( T(\phi) \) (as in line 7 of Curry’s paradox), one knows a contradiction (as in line 8 of the paradox). Thus, Curry’s paradox is not closed under known entailment; and the paradox exhibits the property of epistemic indeterminacy.

The interest of the instance of Curry’s paradox in which the formulas figuring therein concern false ethical claims is that it evinces another means by which attributions of value-theoretic properties are formally related to the epistemicist explanation of vagueness and indeterminacy.

### 3 Consequences of Moral Epistemicism

In this section, I examine four consequences of the argument for the epistemic interpretation of moral vagueness in the preceding section.

The first consequence of moral epistemicism is that the view is consistent with both moral expressivist and moral realist approaches to the ontology of value-theoretic properties. Moral epistemicism is naturally consistent with moral realism, because the logic governing the epistemic-modal operator is fully classical, validating the law of excluded middle in the sorites paradox. The classical logic subserving epistemicism is further consistent with Curry’s paradox, which has traditionally been taken to provide a dilemma according to which – given the derivation of contradiction from classically valid reasoning – either the normal truth rules are to be eschewed, or bivalence must be invalidated. Thus, the classical logic subserving moral epistemicism may be maintained, and may vindicate a realist approach to the determinacy of ethical reference.
A second one of the arguments that was availed of, in order to vindicate the epistemicist approach to moral vagueness, was the argument from moral dilemmas. The argument from moral dilemmas was defined in the epistemic interpretation of two-dimensional semantics. The central claim of the argument was that moral indeterminacy is a species of epistemic indeterminacy. Epistemic indeterminacy tracks the uncertainty with regard to whether a deontic modal claim is true. The argument presupposed that, objectively – i.e. in the space of metaphysically possible worlds – the deontic modal claim is true, whereas subjectively, – i.e., in epistemic modal space – it both appears as though one ought to pursue a course of action, and it appears to be permissible that one need not pursue that course of action.

The interest of the foregoing is that two-dimensional semantics has been argued to evince an instability in traditional expressivist approaches to the truth value of ethical claims. The expressivist approaches at issue argue that the value of ethical claims must be evidentially constrained, while further being in some sense objective. Peacocke (2003: ch.7) notes, however, that two-dimensional indexing might undermine the foregoing. Recall, e.g., that – in two-dimensional semantics – the value of a formula relative to a first parameter determines the value of a formula relative to a second parameter. Suppose, then, that the first parameter ranges over subjects’ mental states, whereas the second parameter ranges over a space of facts. Then the value of an ethical claim such as that ‘It is virtuous to turn the other cheek’ relative to a subject’s mental states will determine the value of the ethical claim relative to the facts. Given, however, that the first parameter can range over distinct subjects, the value of the ethical claim relative to the second parameter – i.e. the facts – will alter in accordance with whichever subject over which the first parameter happens to range. Thus, the objectivity of the ethical claim – i.e., the value of the formula relative to a second parameter which ranges over the facts – will be compromised by being determined by the value of the formula relative to a first parameter – i.e., the attitudes of whichever subject might fall within the range of that parameter.

One reply to the above is to suggest that the mental states over which the context ranges are beliefs, and need not thereby be factive (cf. Schroeder, 2014: 285-288). The discussion in the previous section evinces, however, that the argument against expressivism can itself be circumvented, in cases in which subjects face moral dilemmas. The latter will suffice for invalidating the relation between the value of an ethical claim at an epistemically possible world, and the value of the claim at a metaphysically possible world, because – although the ethical claim might be metaphysically necessary and appear to be epistemically necessary – it will yet be epistemically possible for the ethical claim to be false.

A second consequence of moral epistemicism concerns the viability of an act-consequentialist approach to the foundations of ethics. According to scalar approaches to act-consequentialism, the outcomes of pursuing certain courses of action, relative to a context, will entrain the greatest degree of utility. Relative to the pertinent contexts, those actions are said then to be the most fitting to pursue. On the act-consequentialist approach, the notion of fittingness – rather than those of value or rightness – may thus figure as the ultimate ground of
valid practical reasoning (cf. Chappell, 2012). However, given the formal limits in epistemic logic, which demonstrate that there can only be inexact knowledge about, e.g., which courses of action are determinately maximally valuable, it is unclear whether – in principle – act-consequentialism can redress the contention that there might be insuperable barriers to knowing which course of action would, in a given context, be optimally fitting.

A third consequence of moral epistemicism concerns the evolutionary debunking arguments against moral realism. The epistemic indeterminacy entrained by moral dilemmas in the setting of the epistemic interpretation of two-dimensional semantics; the failure of epistemic closure in Curry’s paradox; and the non-transitivity of the sorites series, is consistent with both constructivist and realist approaches to the ontology of value-theoretic properties. One objection to a moral realist approach to the ontology of value which countenances value-theoretic properties as either being \textit{sui generis} or being identical but non-reductive – because e.g. non-symmetric – to natural properties, takes the form of a reliability challenge. The objection is that, given the evolutionary pressures of natural selection, it is incumbent on moral realists to provide some account of how subjects’ ethical judgments can reliably track the truth of ethical claims (Street, 2006). However, it is unclear whether moral realists can provide a principled account of the foregoing mechanism.

In response to the constructivist’s evolutionary debunking argument, moral epistemicism evinces that epistemic indeterminacy is an issue that is not specific to the realist proposal. Rather moral, because epistemic, indeterminacy is a phenomenon whose prevalence generalizes to the array of approaches which may be taken to the epistemology of morality. The semantic and logical barriers to epistemic transparency which are entrained by moral epistemicism – as evinced, most notably, by the rejection of modal axiom 4 in the sorites series – is thus as much of an issue for moral realists as it is for constructivist proponents who aver, e.g., that value consists in its conferral upon actions by self-knowing agents (cf. Korsgaard, 1996), as well as that the aim of intentional action is the diachronic satisfaction of self-knowledge (cf. Velleman, 1989). The motivation for moral epistemicism from the occurrence of ethical formulas, and the failure of epistemic closure in Curry’s paradox, provides furthermore a general challenge to theories of the source of normativity which locate value in the deductive practical reasoning of autonomous and self-reflective agents.

4 Limits of Value Relativism

In the previous section, four models of moral epistemicism were advanced. The first is a paradigm of the approach, which targets the invalidity of modal axiom 4 given non-transitive models of the sorites paradox. The sorites paradox is arguably engendered by the property of transitivity, such that – if one is presented with a bounded color continuum whose incipient point is red and whose terminal point has the color hue of being orange – the first and second points’ matching and the second and third points’ matching entails that the first and third points
would match, the second and third points’ matching and the third and fourth points’ matching entails that the second and fourth points match, and so on. Then the color hues of the initial and terminal points would match, contrary to the hypothesis. In the relational semantics for modal logic, transitivity is codified by the 4 principle, which captures the iterative nature of transitivity and states that $\Box \phi \rightarrow \Box \Box \phi$. On the epistemic interpretation of the logic, modal axiom 4 states, then, that $K \phi \rightarrow KK \phi$. The invalidity of transitivity entails then that one can know that a formula is true yet cannot know that they know that the formula is true.

The second model of epistemicism was expressed in the setting of the epistemic interpretation of two-dimensional semantics, rather than in the setting of epistemic logic. In two-dimensional semantics, a formula can be defined relative to a first parameter, which will determine the value of the formula relative to a second parameter. According, again, to the epistemic interpretation of the semantics, the first parameter will range over the epistemically possible worlds, i.e., scenarios that are conceivable to an agent, and the second parameter will range over metaphysi- cally possible worlds. Thus the epistemic possibility that a formula is true can be a guide to determining the metaphysical possibility that the formula is true. In the foregoing setting, I suggested that moral vague- ness can be presented on the model of moral dilemmas with regard to moral obligation. Moral dilemmas are an example of a strong necessity, according to which the epistemic possibilities at issue will outrun, as it were, the metaphysi- cally possible worlds, rather than directly coincide with them. If it’s meta- physically or objectively necessary that one ought to $\phi$, then — in the best case — it will be epistemically or subjectively necessary that one ought to $\phi$. However, in the case of moral dilemmas, it will be subjectively possible or permissible for one not to $\phi$, as well. It will then be epistemically indeterminate for an agent whether to $\phi$.

In this section, I examine the status of moral relativism, in light of the models of moral epistemicism developed in the foregoing. Moral epistemicism is defined over a classical logic; thus the extensions of moral predicates are determinate, and vagueness with regard to the extensions of moral terms is owing to the limits of knowledge, i.e. the structural conditions on epistemic indeterminacy that have been here examined. However, a generalization of value-theoretic predicates to include those which refer to properties of taste would appear to be an issue for the approach. If, for example, $\text{angel}_1$ believes that ambrosia is possessed of gustatory value, whereas $\text{angel}_2$ believes that ambrosia is possessed of no gustatory value, then it would appear that the disagreement between the angels is faultless. The advent of disagreement in ethical value judgments comprises another case of moral vagueness. However, on the moral epistemicist approach here advanced, there will be a determinate fact of the matter concerning the values of the claims being judged in the dispute.

One crucial project concerns whether the notion of a faultless disagreement can be provided a more informative theoretical elucidation. Another crucial project concerns whether a principled distinction may be drawn between the status of disagreement concerning value-theoretic properties, such as those which
concern taste, by contrast to what impresses as the objectivity of value-theoretic properties which concern ethics. I will argue for a hybrid approach, according to which the distinction between gustatory and ethical value-theoretic properties consists both in the semantics for the relevant terms, and also in the differences in the etiology and type of phenomenal properties which attend the judgments that express the semantics.

Faultless disagreement with regard to judgments of taste may receive a familiar, sensory-based analysis. The familiar sensory-based analysis is that it is innocuous for judgments of taste to vary with differences in one’s biological constitution relative to various contextual parameters. It would thus be innocuous for subjects to have different preferences and assign different values to their ascriptions of utility. The sensory-based explanation of faultless disagreement concerning taste is sufficiently compelling.

A more nuanced analysis of faultless disagreement is logical. The analysis endeavors to provide a formal-logical explanation of the reason for which disagreements in taste are thought to be faultless. In order to codify and explain the faultlessness of value-theoretic disagreement, Wright (2006) provides the following deduction (41):

Let A and B denote two agents, and let \( \phi \) state that for distinct foods, x and y, 'x is preferable to y':

1. A accepts \( \phi \) (assumption)
2. B accepts \( \neg \phi \) (assumption)
3. A and B’s disagreement involves no mistake (assumption)
4. \( \phi \) (assumption)
5. B is mistaken (2, 4)
6. \( \neg \phi \) (2, 3, 5)
7. A is mistaken (1, 6)
8. (3) is false.

The interest of the deduction is that it demonstrates both the instability and philosophical interest of the attempt to characterize the very phenomenon of faultless disagreement. Wright’s (op. cit.: 41-42) preferred response to the foregoing is take it to provide a further reason to revise one’s background logic, from classical to intuitionistic. Classically, it is permitted to reason from \( \neg\neg\phi \) to \( \phi \). However, in intuitionistic logic, (i) the law of excluded middle – i.e., \( \forall \phi (\phi \lor \neg\phi) \) – is invalid, because it states nothing of the verification-conditions on the satisfaction of either \( \phi \) or not-\( \phi \); and so is (ii) the rule of double negation elimination, because from it not being the case that \( \phi \) has been disproven, it does not follow that verification-condition has yet been provided for the satisfaction of \( \phi \).

Wright’s response to the deduction is then to argue that it is intuitionistically invalid. Line 3 in the deduction can be codified as stating that:

\[ \neg(\neg(5) \land \neg(6)), \]

i.e. it is not the case that A is mistaken and it is not the case that B is mistaken. The conclusion of the deduction, line 8, states that 3 is false. Thus:

\[ \neg(\neg(5) \land \neg(6)). \]

By the de Morgan rules for negation:
\[-\neg[(5) \text{ or } (6)],\]
i.e. it is not, not the case that B is mistaken or A is mistaken (42).

Thus, classically, the deduction – i.e., the logical codification of the phenomenon of faultless disagreement – yields the wrong result that one of the agents is after all mistaken. Intuitionistically, however, the deduction results in a situation of quandary; it is not not the case that either of the agents is mistaken, and so it remains at the very least indeterminate whether either of the agents is at fault with regard to their judgment of taste.

The foregoing might adduce against the merits of pursuing a logical analysis of faultless disagreement. A theoretical characterization of the phenomenon may also be pursued both at the level of formal semantics, as well as at the level of the phenomenal properties of the judgments. The primary virtue accruing to the semantic analysis of faultless disagreement is that it provides the resources to distinguish between the faultlessness of contradictory judgments concerning the value-theoretic properties of taste, by contrast to the objectivity attending the assessments of value-theoretic properties in the domain of morality. A subsidiary virtue of the semantic analysis is that it does not require the revision of classically valid reasoning.

Suppose that A judges that, for the gustatory values, x and y, x is preferable to y, while B judges the negation thereof. Disagreements concerning gustatory value-theoretic properties are presumably faultless. Suppose, however, that the value-theoretic properties at issue concern those in the domain of ethics. Thus, A might judge that 'Helping those in need is good', whereas B might villainously judge the negation of the claim. The question on which I will focus in the remainder of this essay concerns the difference in the status of objectivity between assessments concerning gustatory value-theoretic properties and ethical value-theoretic properties. The relevance of the examination to the issue of moral vagueness is again that – whereas it might be innocuous for disagreements concerning gustatory value-theoretic properties to be faultless – there will be a determinate fact of the matter concerning the values of contradictory judgments about ethical properties. Thus, indeterminacy in the extensions of moral predicates and in the judgments in which they figure will be owing to the epistemic limits of ethical agents, rather than being semantic or ontological in nature.

Prinz (2007) argues that ethical value-theoretic predicates and the judgments in which they figure are no different, either in source or in kind, from broadly sensory, value-theoretic predicates. The view may be contrasted to that of Kant, who distinguishes between maxims (i.e., ethical claims made on the basis of one’s inclinations) by contrast to duties (i.e., ethical claims made on the basis of the categorical imperative) (1788/1996: 5:19), and further distinguishes between judgments of taste (i.e., evaluative claims whose values are determined relative to subjects) and judgments of beauty (i.e., the phenomenal property of judging beautiful objects, as induced by the interaction between beautiful objects and a subject’s faculties of pre-conceptual, schematic imagining and conceptual understanding) (1790/2000).

I will assume that Kant is correct in distinguishing between broadly sensory, value-theoretic properties and the value-theoretic properties unique to the
domain of ethics. The difference between the two classes of value-theoretic property cannot, however, be explained by recourse only to the role of the sensations in individuating the type of the property at issue. Pain, for example, is a sensory value-theoretic property – physical pain is instantiated, e.g., only if an affectively valenced sensory state is induced – yet pain is an ethical value-theoretic property, as well: It is intrinsically disvaluable to induce the instantiation of pain.

The distinction between sensory and ethical value-theoretic properties cannot be wholly explained by differences in phenomenology either. Kant (5:217) may have been the first to argue that there are phenomenal properties unique to judgments, rather than only to perceptual states. The property of being beautiful is defined as the phenomenal property which is unique to judging beautiful objects, by contrast to the experience of agreeable sensory states (5:212). However, even for Kant, the phenomenology of the judgments is not what explains the difference between sensory experiences and the encounter with the beautiful. Rather, the feeling of the beautiful is the phenomenal property of judging beautiful objects, and occurs only if the subject’s inner mechanisms – i.e., their faculties of imaginative schematizing and conceptual understanding – have been activated (5:219, 228). The feeling of the beautiful is distinct from sensory phenomenal properties because of the implicit mechanisms which serve to induce it. The demands of the beautiful – i.e., that it be recognized as such by all subjects – consists in that other subjects are presupposed – as a type of regulative judgment (5:222, 361) – to share the same implicit mechanisms (5:217). Analogous to the presupposition that agents act in virtue of duty, because they bear apriori representations of the moral law – aesthetic purveyors are presupposed to have the same mental constitution – i.e. the imagination and understanding – such that they ought to respond to beautiful objects in the same way (5:218, 293-296). Thus, the explanation of the difference between sensory and properly aesthetic phenomenology consists in the implicit mechanisms which subserve their instantiation, and not in the experience of the phenomenal properties themselves.

The distinction between sensory and ethical values cannot then be sufficiently explained by their sensory, logical, or phenomenal components. In the remainder of this section, I will thus pursue a formal semantic analysis of the distinction. The formal semantic analysis will be shown to provide one account of the difference between the classes of value-theoretic predicates at issue; and will thus partly explain the metaphysical determinacy of ethical properties, such that the apparent vagueness thereof is owing to the epistemic limits of moral agents.

Recall again that in two-dimensional semantics, the value of a term may be defined relative to an array of intensional parameters. As with the values of the different types of deontic modal claims, the distinctions between sensory and ethical value-theoretic predicates may thus be countenanced by differences in the arrays of parameters relative to which their extensions are defined. Subjectively, for example, an agent ought to pursue a course of action, and the subjective deontic modal can be codified by its being defined relative to a context – which
includes information about the agent, time, and location at issue – and the value of the obligation relative to the context will determine the value of the obligation relative to an index – which will include the subject’s states of information. Objectively, by contrast, an agent ought to pursue a course of action, and the objective obligation can be defined relative to the same context, where the value of the obligation relative to the context will determine the value of the claim relative to an index, which ranges over the facts.

Formally, the concept of intrinsic goodness, $A$, has an intension, i.e. a function from worlds to extensions. Then, the concept of intrinsic goodness is arguably super-rigid, i.e. possesses the property of being epistemically and metaphysically invariant:

$$\llbracket A \rrbracket^v,w = \lambda x.\text{Good}(x), \text{only if } \forall v',w'[\llbracket A \rrbracket^{v',w'} = \lambda x.\text{Good}(x)].$$

Sensory value-theoretic concepts, $F$, which are not distinctively ethical, such as the concept of a gustatory value, are not super-rigid; i.e., their extensions may vary relative to different subjective contexts of evaluation, which will then determine the metaphysical profile of the concept’s extension:

$$\llbracket F \rrbracket^v,w = \lambda x.\text{Delicious}(x), \text{only if } \exists v',w'[\llbracket F \rrbracket^{v',w'} = \lambda x.\text{Delicious}(x)].$$

The distinction between sensory and ethical value-theoretic terms consists then in differences in the intensional parameters relative to which their extensions are defined. In particular, ethical value-theoretic concepts may be taken to be super-rigid, because their extensions are rigid in both epistemic and metaphysical modal space. Sensory value-theoretic concepts, by contrast, may be taken to be non-rigid, given the variations in the concept’s extension relative to the profiles of varying agents.

The philosophical significance of the formal semantic profile of ethical value-theoretic concepts, in particular, is that – if there is any indeterminacy in the concept’s extension – the indeterminacy consists neither in the semantics nor in the ontological status of the properties that the concepts denote. Rather, the super-rigidity of the concepts at issue is one means of recording how the extensions of the concept are invariant. Given that the source of moral vagueness for ethical concepts does not consist in their semantics, in their metaphysical profile, nor in the fact that the ethical concepts have empty or non-classical extensions, any indeterminacy with regard to the extensions of the ethical concepts at issue must consist in the epistemic limits of the agents who endeavor to grasp them.

5 Concluding Remarks

In this essay, I have argued in favor of an approach to the vagueness of moral terms which countenances the latter as instances of epistemic indeterminacy. I outlined a traditional model of – and then two novel approaches to – epistemicism about moral predicates, and demonstrated how the foregoing are able to provide robust explanations of the source of moral, as epistemic, indeterminacy. The first model of epistemic indeterminacy concerning the extensions of moral predicates was witnessed by the non-transitivity of the value-theoretic
sorites paradox. A second, new model of moral epistemicism was shown to be induced by the status of moral dilemmas in the epistemic interpretation of two-dimensional semantics. Finally, a third, new model of moral epistemicism was demonstrated as consisting in the failure of epistemic closure – and thus the epistemic indeterminacy in the proof of contradiction – in the derivation of Curry’s paradox. I examined the philosophical significance of moral epistemicism for the viability of expressivist, act-consequentialist, and constructivist approaches to the epistemology of ethical truth. I argued, then, that – by contrast to sensory value-theoretic properties – moral relativism about the values of distinctively ethical concepts can be circumvented by a formal-semantic, rather than logical, sensory, or phenomenological, analysis of the properties to which they refer.
References


