



Towards a Realist Shifty Semantic Account of Moral Vagueness

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Abstract

A widely shared intuition says moral statements like “Aborting at 150 days is permissible” seem vague. But what is the nature of such vagueness? This article proposes a novel, shifty semantic account of moral vagueness which argues: Moral vagueness is essentially a semantic phenomenon existing in our imperfect (moral) language; the referents of vague moral terms may shift under the right circumstance; our usage of vague moral terms may contribute to such shifts, but so may some factors beyond our control. After the account is fleshed out, some distinctions will be drawn to differentiate it from other accounts of moral vagueness, and more importantly, efforts will be made to reconcile this account and moral realism. In conclusion, my account is by far the first (minimal) moral realism-friendly shifty semantic account of moral vagueness that successfully explains our intuitions about vague moral statements.

Keywords Moral vagueness · Referent shift · Supervaluationism · Moral realism · Semantic externalism

1 Introduction

The alleged problem of moral vagueness usually lurks behind cases like this.¹ Intuitively, for many people, killing 1 person to save 1 billion people is permissible, but killing 1 person to save 5 people is not. However, it seems intuitively vague, at least for some people, whether it is permissible to kill 1 person to

¹ See, e.g., Baima 2014, sec. 2; Schoenfeld 2016, sec. 3; Dougherty 2017, sec. 1 for other paradigm cases of moral vagueness.

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save 1000 people.² If granting such intuition, I think we will be led to some interesting questions concerning both our moral theory and our moral practice. For our moral theory, we may ask: “What is the nature of moral vagueness? Why is there moral vagueness? How does moral vagueness come into being, and will it go away?” As for our moral practice, we may ask: “What should we do if the permissibility of an action is vague? Executing the action? Refraining from executing the action? Any arbitrary thing that we prefer? Or nothing at all?” Once we start thinking about these questions, we will probably feel alerted: None of them is easy to answer. However, it seems shockingly easy for moral vagueness to sneak in our daily activities that are crucial to our life: For example, it can easily sneak in when we participate in traffic (can we run a red light if it’s only 0.1 s late?), when we parent our children (can we responsibly divert our attention from our children for 30 s?), etc. To figure out how we should, even if merely hypothetically, react in these instances of moral vagueness, a better understanding of the subject is required. Thus, studies of moral vagueness are in need.

This article primarily focuses on the nature of moral vagueness. I intend to develop and defend a once misunderstood theory—a (minimal) moral realism-friendly shifty semantic account—according to which moral vagueness is essentially a semantic phenomenon existing in our imperfect (moral) language. Sections of this article will proceed as follows. Section 2 is a brief review of vagueness in general and moral vagueness in particular. By contrasting two bodies of literature, one motivation of my project naturally follows: There is still a lot of work about moral vagueness to be done. In passing, I will also specify what I mean by ‘moral vagueness,’ regardless of many other phenomena that sometimes come together with it. Section 3 is a warm-up for my later discussion in which I first introduce some background concepts including the meaning of terms, semantic vagueness, the shifty semantic account of moral vagueness and (robust) moral realism, and I then refute a powerful, influential argument on why moral realism is incompatible with the kind of theory I try to propose. Section 4 is the formulation of my positive account. To honor a tradition in the literature, I first propose a semantic account of moral vagueness, and then introduce a metasemantic theory to explain why the semantic account is (probably) true. I will also differentiate my account from other accounts of moral vagueness and consider several objections in this process. Section 5 is a revisit of the tension between my account and moral realism. Most ideally, I hope my account can accommodate moral realism, no matter how the latter is conceptualized. More practically, I will demonstrate how my account is compatible with one particular conception of moral realism, at the very least.

² Agonism about moral vagueness may say this intuition is unreliable. For example, presumably, a hard-core consequentialist may believe killing the person in the trolley problem is permissible as long as the number of people being saved is greater than 2. I think agonism about moral vagueness might be true, however, this position will not be further discussed in this article.

2 Vagueness and Moral Vagueness

Section 2 briefly reviews the dialectical landscape of vagueness in general and moral vagueness in particular. To begin, consider the question “How many grains of sand make a dune?” A line of reasoning may go like this. 1 grain obviously does not make a dune. Neither do 2 grains. Nor 3 grains... But 1 billion grains certainly do make a dune. Many philosophers believe the case of dune exemplifies the concept of vagueness, which can be characterized in three ways. First, vagueness can be characterized as the non-existence of sharp cut-off points. That said, if the concept of dune is vague, then there is no specific number (viz. a positive integral greater than 3), n , such that n minus 1 grains of sand do not make a dune but n grains do. Second, vagueness can be characterized as the existence of borderline cases. That said, if the concept of dune is vague, then there is a range of numbers such that for any number (viz. a positive integral), n , falls in that range, it is neither determinately true nor determinately false that n grains of sand make a dune. Third, vagueness can be characterized as the susceptibility of sorites paradox. That said, if the concept of dune is vague, then a paradox as below can be constructed.

1 grain of sand does not make a dune.

If 1 grain of sand does not make a dune, then 2 grains do not make a dune.

If 2 grains of sand do not make a dune, then 3 grains do not make a dune.

...

If n grains of sand do not make a dune, then n plus 1 grains do not make a dune.

1 billion grains of sands do not make a dune.³

There is an on-going debate about which characterization demarcates vagueness the best.⁴ But this debate should not concern us. In this article, let us take vagueness to be what is exemplified in the case of dune.

There are four typical theories of vagueness: The theory of ontic vagueness, epistemicism, supervaluationism and contextualism. First, the theory of ontic vagueness is the thesis that, very roughly, vagueness is a fundamental feature of reality.⁵ Suppose the statement “1000 grains of sand make a dune” is vague. The theory of ontic vagueness would say the statement is vague because it is ontologically unsettled which possible state of affairs is actualized: *1000 grains of sand make a dune* or *1000 grains of sand do not make a dune*. Second, epistemicism is the thesis that, very roughly, vagueness is a kind of ignorance.⁶ For every allegedly vague predicate

³ The version above is constructed in the ascending order. Notably, another way to construct the paradox is to formulate it in the descending order, starting with the premise “1 billion grains of sand make a dune” and the rule “If n grains of sand make a dune, then n minus 1 grains make a dune,” and ending with the paradoxical conclusion “1 grain of sand makes a dune.” These two versions are arguably equivalent.

⁴ See, e.g., Eklund 2007; Bones 2021, chs. 1–2; Sorensen 2023, sec. 1.

⁵ See, e.g., Barnes 2010; Barnes & Williams 2011; Barnes 2014.

⁶ See, e.g., Williamson 1994; Sorensen 2001, ch. 4; Kearns & Magidor 2008. Here I primarily represent Timothy Williamson’s version, which is arguably the most influential.

P, there is an unknowable boundary between instances of *P* and instances of *not P*. Third, supervaluationism is the thesis that, very roughly, vagueness is a matter of linguistic indecision.⁷ According to this theory, there is a truth-value gap for borderline cases. Borderline statements are neither determinately true nor determinately false; and they thus lack truth-values.⁸ Fourth, contextualism is the thesis that, very roughly, vagueness is a special kind of context sensitivity.⁹ Vague statements can have different truth-values as the context changes.

Bearing these four typical theories in head, let us now transfer to the introduction of moral vagueness.¹⁰ To start, I would like to distinguish moral vagueness from other co-existing phenomena. Consider the following paradigm case of moral vagueness:

ABORTIONS. Cheryl is pregnant. She and her partner suddenly realize that, if the pregnancy is carried to term, they'll have to skip a much-anticipated vacation that they had long ago planned with a group of friends. They don't think that skipping the vacation would have a significantly negative impact on their lives. But, all things considered, they'd prefer that the fetus not be born. It is permissible to abort after one day for these reasons. It is not permissible to abort after nine months for these reasons. Is it permissible to abort at 150 days? 151? 151.5? Plausibly, we can create a Sorites series, admitting of borderline cases of permissibility, out of a series of abortions in which the fetus's age differs by a day (or a minute, or a second). (Schoenfield, 2016, 263)

There could be different stories explaining why "Aborting at 150 days is permissible" is morally iff. One story is about moral uncertainty.¹¹ This story says the unclarity of whether aborting at 150 days is permissible comes from various uncertainties. It seems uncertain: Which normative theory should be adopted (consequentialism, deontology or virtue ethics?), what factors are relevant to moral deliberation (e.g., when is the start of personhood?), how much weight different factors have, and whether we are hundred percent sure about the correctness of our judgment given the complexity of the reasoning process, etc. The other story is about moral vagueness. This story says the unclarity of whether aborting at 150 days is permissible comes from a special feature (viz. vagueness) of the moral predicate 'permissible.' It is not

⁷ See, e.g., Fine 1975; Lewis 1982, 1986, ch. 4.3; Field 2003. In this article I do not distinguish 'supervaluationist,' 'semantic' and 'linguistic.' And note that here I only focus on the gappy version of supervaluationism which accepts bivalence (i.e., there are two and only two truth-values—true and false). Besides the gappy version, there is also a fuzzy version which rejects bivalence (see, e.g., Łukasiewicz 1970 [1920]).

⁸ In this article I do not distinguish 'statement,' 'expression' and 'utterance,' and I will stick to 'statement' throughout.

⁹ See, e.g., Kamp 1981; Graff 2000; Shapiro 2006, chs. 3–5.

¹⁰ In the literature, terms like 'moral indeterminacy,' 'ethical vagueness' and 'normative vagueness' are also employed to characterize similar though not necessarily identical phenomena. In this article I stick to 'moral vagueness' throughout.

¹¹ See, e.g., Sepielli 2013; Williams 2014; MacAskill 2019.

difficult to see that moral uncertainty and moral vagueness usually come hand in hand, just like in the case of ABORTIONS.¹² Nevertheless, in this article, what concerns me is moral vagueness only. What's more, similar to my rough definition of vagueness, in this article, by 'moral vagueness' I mean what is exemplified in cases like ABORTIONS, which is also adopted by many other authors—e.g., Schoenfield (2016), Sud (2019) and Hawthorne (2022)—involved in the debate.

One last point for Section 2 is about the relation between vagueness and moral vagueness. The study of moral vagueness mirrors the study of vagueness in many ways.¹³ In one way, similar elements—sorites sequences, sharp cut-off points (or the lack thereof), borderlines (or the lack thereof)—appear in paradigm cases of both vagueness and moral vagueness. Similar strategies, in another way, are adopted to conceptualize both vagueness and moral vagueness, too. Recall these four typical theories of vagueness, correspondingly, there is also a proposal of moral vagueness as ontic vagueness (Schoenfield, 2016), two (quite different) epistemicist accounts of moral vagueness (Sorensen, 1995; Hawthorne, 2022), and a supervaluationist account of moral vagueness (Sud, 2019).¹⁴ And each position has its friends and enemies.¹⁵ Despite the parallel between the study of vagueness and the study of moral vagueness, the imbalance between two bodies of literature is nonetheless significant. Vagueness has been studied for decades, and dozens of theories have been produced in the process. By contrast, the study of moral vagueness is still underdeveloped, though its recognition arguably originates to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹⁶ With respect to the available supervaluationist theory of moral vagueness, Sud's account (2019) is arguably the only one. And there is apparently space for more. Just like for supervaluationist theories of vagueness, there are proposals from Fine (1975), Lewis (1982, 1986), Field (2003), among others. Furthermore, according to Schoenfield (2016, 264), in principle there could be two kinds of supervaluationist theory of moral vagueness: The rigid kind and the shifty kind. What has

¹² Besides these two phenomena exemplified in the case of ABORTIONS, vagueness—or loosely equivalently, indeterminacy—is also connected to the study of value theory and population ethics, in which indeterminacy often intertwines with the idea of incomparability, see, e.g., Chang 2002; Broome 2004, ch. 12.3; Constantinescu 2012 for the relevant discussion. I will not further explore this direction in this article.

¹³ Such a mirroring relation is noticed by many authors, among whom pioneers are, as far as I am concerned, Shafer-Landau 1994, 1995, Sorensen 1995. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this body of literature.

¹⁴ Though Schoenfield's original claim is weaker. She just argues that if moral realism is true, then moral vagueness is ontic vagueness.

¹⁵ A sketchy exegesis can be found in Dougherty 2017, sec. 2, though the arguably only defense of the semantic account (i.e., Sud 2019) has not come out by then. Besides these four main positive accounts mentioned in the main text (i.e., Sorensen 1995, Schoenfield 2016, Sud 2019, and Hawthorne 2022), there are also many negative criticisms. For objections to the semantic account, see Constantinescu 2014, sec. 3.1.1; Dougherty 2014, sec. 3; Schoenfield 2016, sec. 4. For objections to the epistemic account, see Sider 1995; Dougherty 2014, sec. 2; Constantinescu 2014, sec. 3.2.3; Schoenfield 2016, sec. 4. And for objections to the metaphysical account, see, e.g., Constantinescu 2014, sec. 3.1.2. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify the general tendency of the dialect, which solidifies the background of my discussion.

¹⁶ See Baima 2014, 593; Constantinescu 2014, 152; Dougherty 2014, 352 for this point.

been proposed by now—i.e., the one in Sud 2019—is only the rigid kind. And if my attempt of proposing the shifty kind succeeds, it may fill the gap in the literature.

3 Towards My Proposal: Where the Literature Left Us

Section 3 continues setting up the stage of my discussion. To start, I mark four more preliminary remarks. First, my discussion focuses on moral terms (or more precisely, predicates) like ‘permissible’ whose meanings are usually taken to be their referents in the literature of moral vagueness.¹⁷ What’s more, I take the referent of a predicate to be its extension, which usually consists of objects (or actions) it picks out (or applies to). For example, the extension of ‘tall’ is something consisting of Micheal Jordan, James Leblanc, among others.¹⁸ Second, semantic vagueness on my view is the thesis that vagueness only exists in our imperfectly precise language, which implies if vagueness were semantic and were our language perfectly precise, there would be no vagueness at all (Schoenfield, 2016, 257, 261; Sud, 2019, 689). Third, related to the second point, by ‘the shifty semantic account of moral vagueness’ I mean the sensitivity the truth-value of a moral statement Pa has to the way the vague term P is used in a linguistic community (Schoenfield, 2016, 264). That said, Pa may be false when uttered in English by Amy, but true when uttered in Denglish by Bob, who is in all respects just like Amy, except that Denglish speakers apply the predicate P slightly more liberally than English speakers. The shifty semantic account, in other words, is the idea that a slight change in the application of a vague term could change its referent and the truth-value of a statement predicated in it (Abasnezhad, 2023, 3). Fourth, my discussion presupposes a robust form of moral realism which says: The truth of a moral statement is independent of people’s perspective on it; and moral properties are a part of the deep underlying metaphysical structure of the world that obtains entirely independently of how the world is conceptualized.¹⁹ Since such a presupposition is not rare in the literature, here I simply grant it to create a similar environment for discussion.²⁰ But notably, there

¹⁷ See, e.g., Schoenfield 2016; Sud 2019; Hawthorne 2022; Abasnezhad 2023 for this moral term-centric approach. Notably, there are some, though not many, researches of moral vagueness focusing on moral obligations (e.g., Sorensen 1995) or moral values (e.g., Dougherty 2014). Yet, as far as I can see, the mainstream approach to moral vagueness is still moral term-centric.

¹⁸ Another view says the referent of a moral predicate like ‘permissible’ is a property, which is usually an abstract characteristic of an object. For example, redness is a property that an ripen apple has. In this article I will not engage in the debate over what exactly the referent of a predicate is. Instead, I will stick to the extension approach since it is endorsed by most aforementioned authors except Hawthorne (2022). But I mark Hawthorne’s concern: Maybe a predicate means something over and above its extension (2022, 215). Anyway, this point is compatible with the idea that the extension is (at least) a part of a predicate’s meaning, even if the predicate also means an abstract property at the same time.

¹⁹ Here I only report Schoenfield’s rough conception of the position (2016, 259–260). For a more careful demarcation of (robust) moral realism, see Section 5 of this article.

²⁰ Moral realism is also presupposed, or at least entertained, in, e.g., Shafer-Landau 1995, Dougherty 2014, Schoenfield 2016, Sud 2019, Abasnezhad 2023.

might be a tension between my account and (robust) moral realism, to which I will come back at length in Section 5.

I now deal with one argument according to which it is theoretically impossible to propose any shifty semantic account of moral vagueness that is moral realism-friendly. The argument is built upon the following case:

LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGIST. Suppose that Cheryl and her partner are deliberating about whether to abort a fetus at 150 days. They feel very conflicted about the issue and spend a great deal of time deliberating, indeed, agonizing, over whether such an abortion would be permissible. The linguistic anthropologist then knocks on the door. “Guess what!” she says. “I’ve conducted a series of surveys about the way language users in your community use the word ‘permissible.’ Here are the data!” After dropping some thick manila folders on the coffee table, the anthropologist disappears. Fortunately, Cheryl and her partner are expert philosophers of language and can make excellent inferences about the truth-values of statements with vague predicates based on usage facts. Cheryl and her partner spend the night crunching through the data that the linguistic anthropologist provided. With the first rays of light, Cheryl and her partner breathe a sigh of relief. The usage facts in their community are only consistent with precisifications that permit the abortion in question. Thus, the abortion is permissible. (Schoenfield, 2016, 265)

The argument (call it *The Linguistic Anthropologist Argument*) goes like this (Schoenfield, 2016, 266). Suppose the shifty semantic account of moral vagueness is true. It follows that people can reasonably use terms like ‘permissible’ differently, i.e., there are different usage facts about terms like ‘permissible.’ Given these different usage facts, to see whether an action is permissible, one way is to go through some linguistic data like what Cheryl does in the LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGIST case. But this way of resolving moral disagreement is incompatible with robust moral realism, according to which the truth of an action being permissible (or not) is independent of people’s conceptualizations of it (which usually appear in the form of statements predicated in ‘permissible’). Therefore, if robust moral realism is true, then the shifty semantic account of moral vagueness is false. Were this argument to hold, the prospect of any shifty semantic account of moral vagueness would be hopelessly doomed.

Nevertheless, I think *The Linguistic Anthropologist Argument* is arguably flawed, though powerful indeed. This argument rests upon one ungrounded assumption, which could be teased out in two ways. First, the ungrounded assumption can be articulated as *The Knowledge Assumption*. It says: By surveying through the linguistic data, we can not only know which property a predicate picks out, but also automatically know whether a certain object, action (or event) instantiates the property (Hawthorne, 2022, 226). Second, the assumption can also be articulated as *The Meaning Determination Assumption*. It says: For (arguably) any term, by collecting linguistic data, we can determinately fix whether an object or action is in fact a referent of a term (Abasnezhad, 2023, 4). Arguably, either *The Knowledge Assumption* or *The Meaning Determination Assumption* is falsifiable. Here I proceed with *The Meaning Determination Assumption*, as I will later implement a semantic

rather than epistemic approach. Understandably, this assumption could have been made in the first place because of the prominent semantic externalism which says: The meaning of a term is (at least partly) determined by communal factors external to the speaker's mental state. For illustration, consider the celebrated example of 'arthritis' (Burge, 1979, 77). Intuitively, in the actual world, a patient in our linguistic community of English speakers cannot use 'arthritis'—which conventionally means an affliction of joints—to mean pain in his thighs even if he sincerely believes so. The idea behind semantic externalism seems natural, but I think *The Meaning Determination Assumption* overgeneralizes this intuitive idea: It does not follow from semantic externalism that the meaning of a term like 'permissible' is completely determined by factors of how the term is used in the linguistic community. Semantic externalism only says the usage of a term in the linguistic community contributes to the meaning determination process, but it does not say such usage determinately fixes the term's referent. To make an analogy, consider how humans influence global warming: Obviously, human's activity contributes to the process of global warming, but we have little control over how global warming takes place, or to what degree the temperature will rise to. Similarly, with respect to the meaning determination process of terms, people's usage contributes to such a process, but they do not have complete control over it with respect to its result (call it *The Lack of Control Claim*).²¹ I think this analogy is intuitive. Summing up my point, by lines of reasoning above, hopefully I at least show how *The Meaning Determination Assumption* could be false. To this extent, *The Linguistic Anthropologist Argument* does not provide a knock-down objection to shifty semantic accounts of moral vagueness.

4 A Shifty Semantic Account of Moral Vagueness

Section 4 outlines my shifty semantic account of moral vagueness.²² In the first part, I substantiate my positive theory which goes like this:

THE SHIFTY SEMANTIC ACCOUNT OF MORAL VAGUENESS. Suppose P is a vague moral term.

I. (Shifty Condition) The referent of P is shifty in the sense that there exists (at least) one action a such that i) given (at least) one precisification of P , P

²¹ In the current metaphilosophical debate, the meaning shifting process is also known as the process of conceptual engineering. This analogy comes from Cappelen 2018, ch. 7. More interestingly, there is a lot to discuss if we apply this line of explanation to the fixation of moral terms' referents, especially when we accept moral realism at the same time. My thanks to Matthew Liao for pressing this point to me. I will come back to it in depth in Section 5.

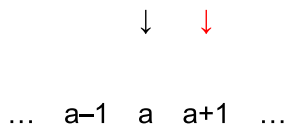
²² I mark a methodological note. A tradition is initiated in Schoenfield 2016 that to propose a certain semantic account of moral vagueness, the metasemantic theory based on which the semantic account is true should also be given. Though Schoenfield never argues that it is necessary for a semantic account of moral vagueness to find out its underlying metasemantic theory, her tradition is honored by authors like Sud (2019) and Abasnezhad (2023). And I will honor this tradition, too.

applies to a , and ii) while given (at least) one another precisification of P , P does not apply to a .

II. (**Semantic Condition**) For any action b falling in the borderline between instances of P and instances of *not* P , Pb lacks truth-values, that said, it is neither super-true (i.e., true under every possible precisification) nor super-false (i.e., false under every possible precisification).

It is a typical supervaluationist account.²³ ‘Precisification’ here roughly means a way to specify instances to which a term applies. To see how the shifty semantic account works, consider the case of ABORTIONS from Section 2 in which “Aborting at 150 days is permissible” is vague. Suppose the linguistic community here is the community of English speakers in the United States. One precisification could be made by a pro-abortion philosopher, according to which ‘permissible’ applies to *aborting at 150 days*. Another precisification could be made by an anti-abortion activist, according to which ‘permissible’ does not apply to *aborting at 150 days*. Since “Aborting at 150 days is permissible” might be true under some precisifications while false under others, it is neither super-true nor super-false. In this sense, “Aborting at 150 days is permissible” is vague.

My shifty semantic account is *prima facie* different from the theory of ontic vagueness: The former entails that (moral) vagueness only exists in language, while the latter entails (moral) vagueness is a unique feature of reality. Provided the seemingly robust distinction between language and reality, the distinction between the shifty semantic account and the theory of ontic vagueness is apparent. In the meantime, I think my account is also different from epistemicism. One may have the impression that something like sharp cut-off points is hiding behind the shift of referents. Consider the sorites sequence below. Suppose the referent of P shifts from a to $a+1$. Seemingly, there is also a sharp boundary moving from a to $a+1$ that divides the sequence into two parts. And my account flirts with epistemicism in this regard.²⁴



My clarification is this. Even if the alleged boundary is implied, it differs from the sharp cut-off point entailed by epistemicism. The proposed sequence only presents us half of the picture. Consider the referent shifts of ‘permissible’ and its negation ‘impermissible.’ The referent of ‘impermissible’ is not necessarily the complementary set of the referent of ‘permissible.’ Suppose the referent of ‘permissible’ shifts from a to $a+1$, and the referent of ‘impermissible’ from b to $b-1$. The sorites sequence would then look like this.

²³ Cf. Fine 1975, 266; Lewis 1982, 440, 1986, 212; Field 2003, 459.

²⁴ My thanks to Mathew Liao for pushing me to make this clarification.



As the diagram illustrates, in its supervenience spirit, my account may still allow for a truth-value gap.²⁵ Let me further distinguish my account from epistemicism, especially Hawthorne's version (2022). Hawthorne's epistemicism is committed to four theses including i) excluded middle holds in borderline cases, ii) bivalence holds in borderline cases, iii) borderline cases beget ignorance among humans, left to their own devices, and iv) not all ignorance is ignorance due to vagueness (p. 215).²⁶ Consider the vague moral term 'permissible,' Hawthorne argues that there exists one and only one case such that a) this case is either permissible or impermissible, and b) it divides all borderline cases into two parts, i.e., the permissible party and the impermissible party (p. 220). But as I have argued shortly before, my account is not committed to either clause a) or b). That said, *contra* clause i) of Hawthorne's theory, I argue excluded middle does not hold in borderline cases. Besides, Hawthorne allows these humanly unknowable sharp cut-off points to be known by an omniscient superbeing (p. 215). That said, when confronted with any arbitrary borderline case, an omniscient superbeing can always clearly answer either "Yes, it is permissible" or "No, it is impermissible." But my account, *contra* clause iii) of Hawthorne's theory, suggests there are no facts of matter about borderline cases. Though people may still take a borderline case to be permissible or impermissible, these judgements are just their points of view, given some particular precisifications they make.

Above demonstrates how my account differs from epistemicism. In the meantime, I think my account is also different from the rigid semantic account. To demonstrate the difference, I highlight two crucial components of the rigid semantic account defended by Sud (2019). The first component is the stability claim. It says: Moral terms like 'wrong' are stable; they would have the same application condition and meaning, even if our dispositions to apply them were slightly different (p. 685). The second component is the metasemantic theory, the conceptual role semantics, that grounds the stability claim. It says: The use of a term in inferences constitutes its meaning; the reference relation assigns to a word the referent that determines contents of statements such that the rationality of inferences involving these statements is maximized (p. 694).²⁷ And here is how Sud's account explains moral vagueness.

²⁵ A follow-up question is "Whether does this gap have sharp boundaries?" which interestingly invites debate over higher-order vagueness, though I cannot answer it here. For an introduction of higher-order vagueness, see, e.g., Bobzien 2010, sec. 3; Zardini 2013, sec. 3; Pagin 2017, sec. 1.

²⁶ Excluded middle is the thesis that, for propositions p and $\text{not } p$, one and only one of them must be true. As for bivalence, cf. fn. 7 of this article.

²⁷ Here I only report Sud's conception of the position. For a more careful discussion of the conceptual role semantics, see, e.g., Harman 1982; Wedgwood 2001; Luzon 2024.

In borderline cases, on Sud's view, there are multiple interpretational functions that make our inference most rational. That said, there are multiple reference relations connecting a vague moral term to multiple possible referents. Since these interpretational functions are equally maximally rational, these reference relations are equally qualified to obtain. To this extent, it is unclear which reference relation in fact obtains and which referent the vague term in fact means (p. 696). The fundamental difference between my account and Sud's account is this. Suppose a vague term has, according to Sud's account, two referents picked out by equally maximally rational interpretational functions. Two questions, then, say: Can there be a third referent picked out by a third equally maximally rational function? And can these two existing referents no longer qualify as the referent of the term? Sud will probably say no to both questions (p. 685). That's why his theory is deemed *stable*. But I would say yes to both questions. That's why my account is labeled *shifty*.

Above demonstrates how my account differs from the rigid semantic account. In the meantime, I think my account is also different from contextualism. Suppose contextualism about moral vagueness is the thesis that a vague moral statement may have different truth-values if we anchor the context differently.²⁸ I argue, to start, my account and contextualism apparently utilize different methodologies. Precisification, on the one hand, focuses on vague statements themselves. For example, recall the case of 'permissible,' when we precisify this vague term, we are considering whether actions like *aborting at 150 days* are a part of the term's referent. On the other hand, context-anchoring focuses on these situations that surround the given vague statement. Again, consider the example of "Aborting at 150 days is permissible." When we anchor the context, we are in effect stipulating some other background statements—e.g., "The conversation takes place in 2020, not 1920"—that constitute the situation in which the vague statement is uttered. Besides the difference in methodology, a more fundamental difference between my account and contextualism is this. Even if my account allows speakers to make their own precisifications, it does not eliminate the vagueness of borderline cases. Vague statements, on my view, still lack truth-values (viz. super-true or super-false) after the precisification is made.²⁹ However, according to contextualism, the vague statement will arguably a) no longer be deemed borderline (at least in the given context), and b) be assigned a truth-value after the context is anchored.³⁰ But my account is committed to neither clause a) nor b).

²⁸ As far as I am concerned, till this day, no author has explicitly defended a contextualist theory of moral vagueness (which I take to be an interesting direction for the literature to evolve). In lights of this, my understanding of contextualism about moral vagueness here primarily mirrors standard contextualist theories of vagueness (cf. fn. 9 of this article).

²⁹ This point is uncontroversial under a semantic externalist schema. One particular precisification may change the meaning in the speaker's private language, but it is at most something like the patient's effort of making 'arthritis' mean pain in his thighs, to echo Burge's case of 'arthritis' (1979, 77).

³⁰ One may further argue: If context-anchoring eliminates borderline cases, then contextualists in effect draw a sharp boundary which is arguably unknown before the context is anchored. And in this sense contextualism may intertwine with epistemicism. I think it is a legitimate concern about contextualism (and I thank Claudia Passos Ferreira for pressing this point to me). However, once the distinction between my account and contextualism is made, this problem should not worry me here.

These three distinctions above hopefully vindicate the novelty of my account. I now mark one objection before I transfer to the part about metasemantics. Let p be the vague statement “Aborting at 150 days is permissible.” A faithful supervaluationist may follow up by asking: “Is there a fact of matter about p ?” The standard supervaluationist answer is no, according to which we can at most have points of view about p . I tentatively suggest the same thing. But here seems to be a problem. Given robust moral realism, there need to be some truths about whether abortion is permissible that are independent of our opinions. I have duly noticed the alleged tension between supervaluationism and moral realism. Here is a brief reply. My account never denies that there are truths independent of our opinions about whether abortion is permissible. For example, my account has no problem implying that “Aborting at 1 day is permissible” is super-true while “Aborting at 299 days is permissible” is super-false. And (super-)truth (or falsity) of this kind seems to be independent of our opinions. So far, so good. But one may follow up by asking: Can a (robust) moral realist accept this line of explanation?³¹ I will come back to examine this question more carefully in Section 5. Let us move on for now.

The second part of Section 4 is to provide a metasemantic theory explaining why my shifty semantic account is true. The metasemantic theory I utilize is Gareth Evans’s theory of reference shifting (1973). This theory explains how referents of terms (or in Evans’s case, proper names) shift under a semantic externalist schema by telling the following story. Suppose the referent of a proper name is an object. On Evans’s view, there needs to be a dominant source of information (understood as a *dossier* of descriptions) to fix the mapping of a proper name onto an object (i.e., its referent). And the dominant source is affected by people’s usage of the term in (at least) two ways: First, each individual may add some new descriptions to the *dossier*; second, after enough number of people add the same description to the *dossier*, that description becomes a part of the new dominant resource. To see how Evans’s theory works, consider the celebrated case of ‘Madagascar’ for illustration (Evans, 1973, 195). During the course of history, the referent of ‘Madagascar’ shifts from *a portion of the African mainland* to *the great African island*, allegedly due to a hearsay report of Malay or Arab sailors misunderstood by Marco Polo.³² Evans’s theory explains the referent shift of ‘Madagascar’ like this. At first, the referent of ‘Madagascar’ is *a portion of the African mainland* associated with the *dossier* including ‘be such-and-such big,’ ‘be the hometown of this tribal chief,’ etc. As time flew, people added to the *dossier* some descriptions (e.g., ‘be the home of some penguins’) that were gradually becoming a part of the dominant resource. After long enough time, the dominant resource of ‘Madagascar’ changes into something including ‘be an island,’ ‘be the home of some penguins,’ etc. By then, the referent *a portion of the African mainland* no longer matches this new dominant resource, but the referent *the great African island* matches: Hence, the referent of ‘Madagascar’ shifts.

³¹ My thanks to Matthew Liao for pressing this point.

³² This case is also in some sense a notorious example of philosophers’ sloppiness. Evans talks about it without trying to figure out what exactly happened, then Kripke quotes Evans, Dummett quotes Kripke, and the nightmare goes on. I recommend Burgess 2014 to anyone who wants to know what exactly happened to ‘Madagascar’ and its referents.

Some may find Evans's theory easily confused with reference magnetism.³³ Here is my clarification. Evans's theory aims at explaining how, given the causal theory of names (roughly the thesis that a proper name is connected to its referent via a causal chain), the meaning of proper names may change. By contrast, reference magnetism is the idea that some special, metaphysically natural/elite meanings exert a kind of "magnetic" pull in the theory of interpretation.³⁴ It aims at explaining, for example, why the predicate applies to a piece of emerald should be 'green' rather than 'grue' (viz. being green before the year 3000 and blue afterwards). If there is any similarity between Evans's theory and reference magnetism, it should come from our imagery of the term-referent chain. But these two theories have different readings of such a chain. For Evans's theory, the term-referent chain is subject to formation, change and disappearance. For reference magnetism, however, the term-referent chain is fixed. It should always connect a (kind of) referent to a particular (kind of) predicate. In lights of this comparison, Evans's theory is substantially different from reference magnetism, despite the superficial similarity that both theories are committed to term-referent chains.

Now let me apply the metasemantic theory I utilize to a vague moral term like 'permissible.' I first mark a difference. 'Madagascar' is a proper name, and its referent is an object. 'Permissible' is a predicate, and its referent is either its extension or a property. Despite such a difference, a story about the referent shift of 'permissible,' similar to that of 'Madagascar,' may go like this. In a certain linguistic community, each speaker may make his own precisification of 'permissible.' By making such a precisification, the speaker adds to the *dossier* some descriptions like 'be applicable to aborting at 150 days,' 'be applicable to killing 1 person to save 1000 people,' etc. After each precisification is made, some descriptions may become or fail to become a part of the dominant resource. If the inclusion or exclusion causes a significant change to the *dossier*, then the referent of 'permissible' shifts. After such a shift, actions like *aborting at 150 days* may become or fail to become a referent of 'permissible.' Call the picture I have just presented *The Shifty Picture*.

I can think of two objections to *The Shifty Picture*. First, it faces a problem of empty referent. That is, it is possible that, at a certain time, the dominant resource of a term is matched by no object/action. Consider the case of 'Goldilocks' for illustration (Evans, 1973, 203). Suppose some villagers use the name 'Goldilocks' to refer to a girl. But unbeknownst to them, sometimes when they make descriptions about 'Goldilocks,' who they actually see is the girl's twin sister. If Evans's theory is true, all descriptions these villagers make—regardless of whichever girl they are in fact about—qualify for contributing to the dominant resource fixing the referent of 'Goldilocks.' However, because these descriptions confuse two distinct persons, it is possible that at a certain time the dominant resource matches neither the girl nor her twin sister. If so, at that time, 'Goldilocks' is referent-less and any statement about it will lack truth-values for being semantically incomplete. I agree a case like this

³³ My thanks to Matthew Liao for pushing me to make this clarification.

³⁴ The name 'reference magnetism' is first introduced in Hodes 1984 (on p. 135) and attributed to Lewis 1983 (the aptness of such attribution is disputable, though). For contemporary discussions of reference magnetism, see Hawthorne 2007 and Sider 2012, ch. 1.

may pose a problem to non-moral terms. For example, some people may insist: Even if contradictory descriptions (e.g., ‘be poisonous’ and ‘be drinkable’) are unfortunately added to the *dossier* that fixes the referent of ‘water,’ intuitively the referent of ‘water’ is still H₂O and statements like “Water has mass” are still true. And many then deem Evans’s theory implausible because of such intuition. I will not offer a full-blown defense of Evans’s theory here. Instead, I think my account can accept the possibility that the referent shift makes some vague moral terms referentless. On my view, this possible consequence not only is not counter-intuitive, but also perfectly captures the supervaluationist spirit. Here is how. In an alleged case of empty referent, the vague statement being semantically incomplete and therefore lacking truth-values is *exactly* what it means to be in a truth-value gap!

The second objection is this. *The Shifty Picture* is dubiously inconsistent with *The Lack of Control Claim* introduced in Section 3, which says speakers have no (complete) control over what a term means in their community. Some may even say *The Shifty Picture* in effect implies the opposite of *The Lack of Control Claim*. Here is how. Given *The Shifty Picture*, speakers seem to have (complete) control over the meaning of terms in the sense that, long story short, referent shifts are caused by precisifications they make. If this objection stands, *The Linguistic Anthropologist Argument* will come back. My reply is this. I argue *The Shifty Picture*, *contra* what some might say, instead implies that speakers do not have control over what a term means at least in the following sense. Again, consider the referent shift of ‘permissible.’ When precisifications of ‘permissible’ are made, besides the description ‘be applicable to aborting at 150 days,’ there are also many other descriptions being added to the *dossier*: For example, ‘be applicable to killing 1 person to save 1000 people,’ ‘be applicable to a 30-s diversion from one’s child,’ etc. And even if ‘be applicable to aborting at 150 days’ becomes a part of the dominant resource because of these precisifications speakers make, it seems to me speakers still lack control over the referent shift in the sense that they cannot rule out the possibility of empty referent. That said, speakers cannot rule out the possibility that there is no action that matches the dominant resource now (recall the objection discussed in last paragraph). And the alleged inconsistency collapses to this extent. Let me further strengthen my position. I argue *The Shifty Picture* in effect entails *The Lack of Control Claim*. Here is how. Sure, this picture says there needs to be a significant change in the dominant resource for a term’s referent to shift. But with respect to what counts as ‘significant’ and when the referent shift takes place, this theory is silent. What’s more, in this picture, speakers may have the power to add descriptions to the *dossier*, but they cannot navigate or predict the result of when and to what the term’s referent shifts. They, to this extent, lack control over what a term means in their community.³⁵ That said, if *The Shifty Picture* is correct, it can also justify why *The Meaning Determination Assumption*—roughly the thesis that people’s usage of a term determinately fixes its referent—is false.

³⁵ One follow-up question is: Can this kind of lacking control really satisfy moral realists? Again, I save this question for Section 5. My thanks to Matthew Liao for pressing this point.

5 Reconciling Supervaluationism and Moral Realism

Section 5 explores the question “Is the supervaluationist shifty semantic account acceptable to moral realists?” that appears multiple times in previous sections. But before any exploration is made, one meta-question needs to be addressed: Why should one care about reconciling supervaluationism and moral realism in the first place? My reason is this. Supervaluationism, on the one hand, is a popular, powerful theory of non-moral vagueness which most philosophers accept: The last section of *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry of “Vagueness” is entitled “Is All Vagueness Linguistic?” which itself reflects the predominance of the linguistic theory among philosophers. A natural thought, then, is that maybe such popularity extends to philosopher’s preference among different theories of moral vagueness, too. After all, moral vagueness mirrors vagueness in many important aspects. On the other hand, moral realism is also popular and powerful. As the PhilPapers poll taken in 2020 suggests, ca. 62% of investigated philosophers are reported to be moral realists (Bourget & Chalmers, 2023, 7). Bearing these two points in head, the dialect in front of me is this. To implement a popular semantic approach to vagueness in the moral sphere, my shifty semantic account is developed. However, concerns have been expressed regarding the possible conflict between this account and another popular theory about the nature of morality in general. Thus, the task for me is to, most ideally, accommodate both supervaluationism and moral realism. At the minimum, I need to do some work to soften the tension. And Section 5 responds to such a need.

Let us move on. I think we need to take a closer look at both parties in order to answer the target question “Is the supervaluationist shifty semantic account acceptable to moral realists?” properly. My shifty semantic account of moral vagueness, for one thing, is committed to the following claims:

The Vagueness Claim. Some moral terms are vague.

The Shifty Claim. The referents of vague moral terms may shift under the right circumstance.

The Contribution Claim. Our usage of vague moral terms may contribute to the shift of vague moral terms’ referents.

The Lack of Control Claim. Some factors beyond our control may also contribute to the shift of vague moral terms’ referents.

(Robust) moral realism is, for another thing, though arguably “not a particular substantive moral view nor does it carry a distinctive metaphysical commitment over and above the commitment that comes with thinking moral claims can be true or false and some are true” (Sayre-McCord, 2023, sec 1), usually believed to entail three theses.³⁶ They are:

The Semantic Thesis. The primary semantic role of moral predicates (such as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’) is to refer to moral properties (such as rightness and wrongness), so that moral statements (such as “honesty is good” and “slavery

³⁶ These three theses are first introduced in Väyrynen 2006 (on pp. 379–380), which is widely endorsed in the literature afterwards.

is unjust”) purport to represent moral facts, and express propositions that are true or false (or approximately true, largely false, and so on).

The Alethic Thesis. Some moral propositions are in fact true.

The Metaphysical Thesis. Moral propositions are true when actions and other objects of moral assessment have the relevant moral properties (so that the relevant moral facts obtain), where these facts and properties are robust in the sense that their metaphysical status, whatever it is, is not relevantly different from that of (certain types of) ordinary non-moral facts and properties.

The Semantic Thesis basically asserts that moral statements are truth-valuable. My account, or any supervaluationist account of moral vagueness, is built upon this idea. No conflict here. *The Alethic Thesis* asserts that there are moral truths in fact. My account implies (super-)truths like that of “Aborting at 1 day is permissible.” No conflict here, either. It seems to me that the tension between supervaluationism and (the robust form of) moral realism, if any, can only come from *The Metaphysical Thesis*. This thesis asserts that the metaphysical status of moral properties should be equal to that of non-moral/natural properties. The most famous defense of *The Metaphysical Thesis* is made by naturalism, according to which the metaphysical status of a moral property like ‘permissible’ should be no different from that of a natural property like ‘water.’³⁷ ‘Water’ picks out a natural kind, so should ‘permissible.’ People’s usage cannot change the kind of entity ‘water’ picks out which, recall the twin earth thought experiment (Putnam, 1975, 139–140), should always be H₂O rather than XYZ. Similarly, people’s usage cannot change the kind of entity ‘permissible’ picks out, either. Therefore, *The Metaphysical Thesis* seems to be incompatible with *The Contribution Claim* which entails that the entity ‘permissible’ picks out may be changed by people’s usage of the term.

I can think of three replies to this objection.³⁸ First, one could reject the incompatibility conclusion. If one ramifies *The Contribution Claim* as “People’s usage only contributes to subtle shifts of referents with respect to vague uses,” then it is largely compatible with *The Metaphysical Thesis*. Here is how. Presumably, not all moral terms are vague. Thus, for moral properties that correspond to these non-vague moral terms, their metaphysical status will not be affected by people’s usage at all. To this extent, *The Metaphysical Thesis* still obtains in many cases. Second, even if one reads *The Contribution Claim* as strong as something like “People’s usage can contribute to radical changes in moral meaning,” the tension between this reading and robust moral realism might not be as much as it seems at first glance. One could argue: Had our moral language changed that radically, then we would probably be very different creatures. While for each species, robust realist theories about their morality and values might still be true. To this extent, robust moral realism is compatible with shifts in morality/values. Interestingly, this reply would put the shifty semantic account roughly in line with Phillipa Foot’s natural realism, which defends a creature-centric view about morality and values (Foot, 2001, esp. ch. 3).³⁹

³⁷ See, e.g., Moore 1997 [1903], ch. 2; Railton 1986; Lutz 2023, secs. 3–4.

³⁸ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for proposing the first two replies (especially the second one about Foot’s natural realism), which substantially strengthens my position.

³⁹ Though there are debates over whether Foot’s view qualifies as moral realism in a robust sense, some people believe it in fact does. At any event, Foot’s view unproblematically qualifies as a form of minimal moral realism, which is consistent with my later proposal.

Third, at the very least, even if assuming that the incompatibility conclusion holds, one can still reconcile supervenience and moral realism by rejecting *The Metaphysical Thesis*, which leads to the minimal model of moral realism that is committed to *The Semantic Thesis* and *The Alethic Thesis* only. A more detailed introduction of minimal moral realism is this.⁴⁰ Minimal moral realism holds a deflationary interpretation of realist theses about moral truths, according to which, *contra* robust realism's tenet that moral truths have genuine metaphysical content and are thus irreducible to mere moral verdicts, realist theses about moral truths are internal to moral discourses. For example, on this view, the seemingly metaphysical claim that "It is a fact that genocide is wrong" is equivalent to the first-order moral claim that "Genocide is wrong." If we adopt minimal moral realism, then the alleged tension seems to go away. But a problem remains: By rejecting *The Metaphysical Thesis*, the gate to moral subjectivism—roughly the thesis that moral facts are not mind-independent in the relevant sense, though moral statements may still be true—swings open. And such a view is historically associated with moral anti-realism, though it seems to be compatible with minimal moral realism.⁴¹ And the question will then transform to: Is the minimal model sufficient for moral realists' demand?

I am afraid I cannot offer an uncontroversial reply. But I can report two points. Robust moral realism faces some objections.⁴² And minimal moral realism has its friends.⁴³ Here I do not intend to engage in the debate concerning which model represents moral realism the best. Instead, I tentatively propose a choice for moral realists which goes like this. To reject *The Metaphysical Thesis*, on the one hand, moral realists may be capable of dealing with a significant phenomenon (i.e., moral vagueness) and be friend with another powerful philosophical perspective (i.e., supervenience), though they must sacrifice one commitment for these gains. To accept *The Metaphysical Thesis*, on the other hand, moral realists may be capable of keeping an arguably crucial theoretical commitment, but the cost is to lose a potentially fruitful explanation of an apparently significant phenomenon. The decision is moral realists'. I guess some of them may feel the pull, while others may feel the resistance.

6 Conclusion

My contribution in this article can be so-summarized. Moral vagueness poses serious problems in- and outside philosophy (Section 1). Unlike the study of vagueness, in many aspects, the study of moral vagueness is still insufficient, and my account developed in this article is arguably the only shifty semantic account of moral vagueness ever proposed (Sections 2 & 3). According to this account, the referents of vague moral terms

⁴⁰ The understanding proposed here is primarily inspired by Golub's interpretation (2021, 512).

⁴¹ This observation is also made in Sayre-McCord 2023, sec. 1.

⁴² For discussions in the recent literature, see, e.g., Dreier 2019 for a supervenience problem; Bedke 2019 for a dilemma between irrationality and immortality; Golub 2021 for an accusation of being held hostage to metaphysics.

⁴³ For defenses of minimal moral realism, see, e.g., Kramer 2009, chs. 2–7; Dworkin 2011, chs. 2–3; Scanlon 2014, lect. 2.

may shift under the right circumstance, our usage of vague moral terms may contribute to such shifts, but so may some factors beyond our control (Section 4). Minimal moral realists won't have much to lose if accepting this account, though such acceptance, if at all, will probably give robust moral realists a hard time (Section 5).

My final point is about how our reflection on the nature of moral vagueness may help introspect our conception of moral realism. Notably, some (though not many) efforts of utilizing moral vagueness to shed light on other discussions in moral philosophy have already been made in the recent literature.⁴⁴ I only cite three precedents. Baima (2014) argues that expressivism does not have the resources to adequately account for (a special ramification of) moral vagueness, while cognitivism does. Therefore, other things being equal, cognitivism may in this regard be preferable than expressivism. Likewise, Constantinescu (2014) holds that moral vagueness may pose a dilemma to non-naturalism, which can serve as a pro-naturalism reason. In the same vein, Suikkanen (forthcoming) points out that, to better defend their positions, friends of anti-realism in metaethics need to seriously think about, even if they are not defeated by, a challenge from unknowable normative facts entailed by (Timothy Williamson's version of) epistemicism in the moral sphere.

The introspection my discussion in this article inspires is presumably this. Moral realism, in a very broad picture, is about what our moral sphere should look like and about how morality can fit in the non-moral/physical reality. Moral vagueness, as we observe, is a significant feature of our moral sphere. And supervaluationism is a powerful theory of moral vagueness compatible with minimal moral realism. In lights of such compatibility, one may suggest: Maybe a better model of moral realism is the minimal one rather than the robust one. I am not saying above is what we should draw for the conclusion. Nevertheless, as it stands, an uncontroversial lesson is this: The discussion of moral vagueness can influence our theory of morality more profoundly than we have anticipated in the beginning.

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⁴⁴ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this body of literature, which substantially strengthens my point.

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