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## VAGUENESS, SEMANTICS AND PSYCHOLOGY

By Jonas Åkerman

*According to extension shifting theories of vagueness, the extensions of vague predicates have sharp boundaries, which shift around as a function of certain psychological factors. It has been claimed that such theories can provide a particularly attractive explanation of the appeal of soritical reasoning. This paper challenges that claim, and argues that the demand for such an explanation need not constrain the semantics of vague predicates at all.*

Imagine 2000 men lined up in a row. Each man is slightly shorter than the man before him, but the difference is so small that they are practically indistinguishable with respect to height. The first man is 6'5" and thus clearly tall, while the last man is only 5'1" and thus clearly not tall. Now, vague predicates like 'is tall' appear to be such that very marginal differences in the relevant property – in this case height – cannot make any significant difference to its correct application, and this means that the following claim seems warranted:

(SOR) For each  $n$ , if the  $n$ th man in the row is tall, then the  $n+1$ th man in the row is also tall.

However, together with the claim that the first man in the row is tall and the claim that the last man in the row is not tall, (SOR) leads straight to a contradiction. While each of these three claims strikes us as plausible when taken in isolation, they are mutually inconsistent, and taken

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together, they form an instance of the notorious *sorites paradox*. The urge to resolve this paradox has been the driving force behind the proliferation of theories of vagueness during the last several decades, and although there is little consensus about which theory is the best one, it is widely agreed that the inconsistency should be resolved by denying the strict truth of claims like (SOR). According to the theories to be discussed in this paper – which will be referred to as *extension shifting theories* of vagueness – claims like (SOR) are false simply because there is always a falsifying instance; vague predicates do in fact draw sharp boundaries, but the location of the boundary varies from occasion to occasion.

If we focus on the particular instance of the sorites paradox considered above, we see that the rejection of (SOR) takes care of the inconsistency, but it does not fully resolve the paradox. We also need to explain what it is about vague predicates that makes principles like (SOR) so appealing. According to some philosophers, extension shifting theories are specifically designed to deal with this question, and the fact that they can provide a good explanation of the seductiveness of soritical reasoning gives us good reasons to prefer them over other comparable theories of vagueness.<sup>1</sup> The main purpose of this paper is to show that, contrary to this line of argument, extension shifters do not enjoy any such advantage. Let us first take a look at the proposed explanation.

The basic idea behind the extension shifter's explanation is that the extension of 'is tall' shifts in such a way as to make each instance of (SOR) true at the moment when we consider it. In other words, the boundary is elusive in the sense that it is never where we are looking, and this leads us to think that each instance of (SOR) is true. But what explains why the boundary moves

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<sup>1</sup> For an endorsement of this claim, see Delia Graff Fara, 'Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness', *Philosophical Topics* 28 (2000), pp. 45-81, at p. 54. (Originally published under the name 'Delia Graff'.)

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around in this peculiar way? Well, according to the most elaborate accounts of the mechanisms underlying the shifts – i.e. those given by Diana Raffman<sup>2</sup> and Delia Graff Fara<sup>3</sup> – the boundary shifts as a function of our focus of attention. Roughly, when we actively consider a pair of adjacent men in the row, the similarity between its members with respect to height is thereby raised to salience, and due to certain features of our psychology, this makes us disposed to judge them in the same way. Of course, such an account of the psychology behind our judgements cannot by itself explain the extension shifts. The extension shifter's crucial claim is that the very same psychological factors that determine our dispositions to judge, also determine the extension of 'is tall', so that all and only the men in the row that we are disposed to judge as being tall fall in the extension of 'is tall'. Taken together with the psychological story just mentioned, this means that whenever we actively consider a certain pair of adjacent men in the row, the boundary cannot be between its members at that moment.

Let us assume that the psychological story provided by the extension shifter is roughly correct, and let us also assume that our attitude towards (SOR) is typically a result of our considering its different instances. Then it seems that we do have a pretty nice account of why we tend to accept (SOR). We are simply disposed to judge each instance of (SOR) to be true, and that explains why we tend to buy into the soritical reasoning. But note that this explanation does not depend on the further claim that the extension of 'is tall' shifts with the relevant psychological factors. This means that we can accept the psychological story as well as the

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<sup>2</sup> 'Vagueness without Paradox', *Philosophical Review*, 103 (1994), pp. 41-74, and 'Vagueness and Context Relativity', *Philosophical Studies*, 81 (1996), pp. 175-192.

<sup>3</sup> 'Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness', and 'Profiling Interest Relativity', *Analysis* 68 (2008), pp. 326–35.

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explanation of the appeal of soritical reasoning that it yields without accepting the claim about the extension shifts.

It thus seems that we can divide the extension shifter's diagnosis of the soritical fallacy into two parts: a *psychological* part, which concerns our tendency to accept (SOR), and a *semantic* part, which concerns the extension shifts. The semantic part by itself cannot explain why we tend to think that (SOR) is true. There are many true things that we do not tend to believe, so even if it were the case that the extension of 'is tall' shifted in a way that made every instance of (SOR) true at the moment of consideration, this by itself would not be enough. The real work is done by the psychological part. In fact, the psychological part could be invoked in order to argue that even if some instance were false at the moment of consideration, we would tend to think that it was true. Even if the boundary happened to be located between the members of the pair we are actively considering, the very act of considering them would raise their similarity to salience, and thus make us inclined to judge them alike. As long as we reject the extension shifter's central claim that the relevant psychological factors also determine the extension (in the way suggested by the extension shifter), such an act of active consideration need not affect the extension at all.

Thus, when it comes to explaining the appeal of soritical reasoning, it seems that the extension shifter could not claim to have any advantage over someone who accepts the psychological part, but rejects the semantic part. More generally, the considerations above indicate that virtually *any* semantics of vague predicates is compatible with this psychological explanation of the appeal of soritical reasoning. Indeed, given that we can deal with this issue in purely psychological terms, there is no reason to demand that we should be able to extract such an explanation from a semantics of vague expressions. Rather, as suggested by the observations above, we could have a separate psychological account, which provides an answer independently

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of the semantics. Moreover, we should not find it problematic that there is a gap between what is true and what we tend to believe when it comes to the sorites paradox. Given that (SOR) is false, something must be hidden from subjects who fail to realise this. As long as we can give a psychological explanation of why we tend to believe that instances of (SOR) are true even when they are in fact false (or indeterminate), there is no reason why we should not allow for the possibility of such mistakes on the part of ordinary speakers.

One might feel tempted to respond to this as follows: All else equal, we should prefer an account on which semantics and psychology are coordinated, since language is an artefact of the human mind-brain. If we accept the extension shifter's claim that the psychological factors that determine the relevant (dispositional) judgments also determine the extension of 'is tall', we get a coordination of the desired kind. Given this coordination, the psychological part and the semantic part become inseparable, and thus the psychological part becomes available only to the extension shifter. If we reject this coordination claim, the psychological part becomes available to anyone, but then the desired link between semantics and psychology is severed. Either way, the extension shifter will enjoy an advantage over her opponents. Or so the argument goes.

The main problem with this argument is that the general and plausible idea that semantics and psychology should be connected in some way is compatible with various ways to specify both the relevant range of factors that goes into the determination of extensions and the function from these factors to the extensions. In particular, even if we were to agree that ordinary speakers' dispositions (or the psychological states grounding them) ultimately determine the extensions of vague predicates, it is far from clear that we should prefer an account that coordinates extensions and dispositions in the way that the extension shifter suggests. In fact, we might well complain that the extension shifter's picture is too individualistic. Just because

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language is an artefact of the human mind-brain, it need not be the case that the linguistic dispositions of each individual speaker alone determine the extensions of vague expressions as used by that speaker. Those extensions may well be determined by the whole body of linguistic dispositions of the members of the relevant speaker community in a manner that allows for individual speakers to be wrong about certain classifications of objects close to the borderline. Thus, even if we agree that we should prefer an account on which extensions and ordinary speakers' linguistic dispositions are *somehow* connected over an account on which they are not, this in itself does not give us any good reason to accept the extension shifter's coordination claim.

Of course, any adequate theory of vagueness should be compatible with empirical facts about speaker psychology, linguistic dispositions, language use, and so on. But the demand for mere compatibility with such facts does not put any severe constraint on our semantics, since many different kinds of semantic theories can turn out to be equally compatible with such facts. Moreover, even if we should demand that a full theory of vagueness explain the appeal of soritical reasoning, we should not presuppose that this explanation must flow from the semantics, and thus we should not take for granted that the demand for such an explanation constrains our choice of semantics for vague expressions in any significant way. In other words, we should acknowledge the possibility of treating this question within a psychological account that is more or less independent of the semantics. Since theorists of vagueness have tended to assume that the seductiveness of the sorites must be explained in terms of their semantics (or philosophical theory) rather than by an independent psychological account, this point, if taken, is likely to have some impact on theorising about vagueness in general. However, insofar as extension shifting theories are specifically designed to explain the appeal of claims like (SOR) in terms of their semantics, and insofar as their superiority in this respect is supposed to be the major reason for

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preferring them over the extant alternatives<sup>4</sup>, this point seems to pose more of a threat to extension shifting theorists than to proponents of other kinds of account.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Fara argues along these lines at p. 54 of her 'Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness'.

<sup>5</sup> Predecessors of this paper have been presented at seminars and conferences in Stockholm, St Andrews, Oxford, and Krakow. I am grateful for the feedback received on these and other occasions. Particular thanks to Delia Graff Fara, Patrick Greenough, Diana Raffman, Levi Spectre, Mikael Pettersson, Peter Pagin, and several anonymous referees, for very helpful discussion, comments and suggestions.