

Review of *Vagueness: A Global Approach**

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In this book, Kit Fine argues that vagueness is a matter of *global* rather than *local* indeterminacy. Fine’s guiding analogy involves uneven stepping stones: the stones are collectively uneven, even though no particular stone is correctly deemed to be uneven. Similarly, Fine thinks, vagueness is a global phenomenon afflicting a whole sorites series, even while no individual element of the series can be said (in an independent sense) to be indeterminate. Fine develops his account in some detail, showing how the account is meant to improve on familiar approaches. The book is just 100 pages, containing three chapters and two technical appendices.

The first chapter presents what Fine takes to be the main problems about vagueness, and explains why he is unsatisfied with three popular approaches: the degree-theoretic approach, Fine’s previous supervaluationist approach, and the epistemic approach. The second chapter presents the details of Fine’s positive “global” approach to vagueness, and highlights various points in favor of this approach over the others. The third chapter shows how Fine’s new account applies to the sorites paradox, to Williamson’s “anti-luminosity” argument, and to Parfit’s approach to personal identity.

I will briefly comment on his approach to one version of the sorites (not the only one he considers). In a standard presentation of the sorites paradox, we have a series of items, where the

* Kit Fine. *Vagueness: A Global Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xx+ 100 pp.

first item is clearly F, the last item is clearly not F, and any two adjacent members of the series are nearly indistinguishable in a way that seems to support this “tolerance” principle:

If a given item in the series is F, then so is the next item in the series.

Given this principle, we are classically led to contradiction.

Fine’s solution is to deny the “tolerance” principle. He agrees that the principle *seems* true. But he thinks it seems true only because we infer it from the “Cut-Off” claim—which Fine endorses—that there is no sharp cutoff between adjacent cases in the series: no item in the series such that that item is F and its neighbor is not F. Fine provides a (non-classical) semantics on which there is no sharp cutoff of this sort even though the tolerance principle is false, so that our attempt to infer the “tolerance” principle is invalid.

Why are we prone to draw this invalid inference? Fine suggests we are subject to an illusion that there’s an intermediate state between being F and being non-F:

The broader concept of not-being-true, as opposed to not being the case, is an illusion—we can form no conception of an object having some alternative status to being F beyond its not being F; and it is because we fall prey to this illusion of there being such an alternative that we are inclined to think of Tolerance as simply following from an appropriately generalized form of Cut-Off. (51)

Why does it seem to us that there is such an “alternative status”? You might think it’s because there are examples of such things, such as a shade in-between red and orange about which it’s neither true nor false that it is red, or a spot in the penumbra of the Outback about which it is neither true nor false that it is a part of the Outback. But Fine has a different idea: he says that the illusion is “transcendental ... in something like the Kantian sense”:

It arises from thinking that we can attain an external or “transcendent” perspective on some phenomenon or practice from which no such perspective is to be had. Thus our ordinary practice in the use of vague predicates involves our forming judgments as to whether or not someone is bald or as to whether, in the ordinary sense of “true” and “false,” it is true

or false that the person is bald. But it is supposed, when we have difficulties in forming ordinary judgments of this sort, that we can somehow transcend our ordinary practice and arrive at a different kind of judgment, one in which the difficulties we are having can be attributed to some intermediate way in which the object might be susceptible to being bald.
(51)

This suggestive claim is, it seems to me, the core of Fine's treatment of the paradox.

I find the claim implausible. Fine may be right that it is not part of ordinary practice to say of something that it is neither true nor false that it is red (or bald or what have you). But we do make ordinary judgments like 'reddish-orange' or 'balding' that seem to reveal an ordinary tendency to recognize "intermediate" cases. Moreover, even if I am mistaken about this, and there is no such ordinary tendency, it is nevertheless plausible, on reflection, that there are such intermediate cases, and that they are correctly described as cases in which it is neither true nor false that the relevant object is F. I don't see in Fine's work a satisfying explanation of how the plausibility of this view could turn out to be an illusion. It seems that what is needed is some further argument that, as Fine suggests in the above quote, "no such perspective is to be had."

Still, the overall view that Fine defends is carefully and subtly developed, and has more applications and features than I can review here. It's definitely worth a look.