

Vagueness and Indeterminacy in Ethics¹

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1. Examples of ethical vagueness

In an artificial incubator, a zygote gradually develops from a handful of cells to a child that is capable of surviving on its own (Manley ms). With a sufficiently powerful microscope, we would see that its continuous development is constituted by smaller processes in which cells gradually multiply and differentiate. There will come a point in these processes at which we assign the emergent human a moral status higher than that of a cat. But is there a specific millisecond, at which the entity gains this moral status? If we had to choose between terminating the human entity or terminating a cat, are there individual strands of protein that need to bind together for it to become impermissible to terminate the human entity?

This ethical question has familiar descriptive analogues. Is there a precise millisecond at which a cat stops being a kitten? A blind and mewling day-old feline is clearly a kitten. An august 15 year old cat is clearly not. But between these clear cases, there will be a range of borderline cases—say, Cornelius a one year old cat who is rapidly losing his interest in playing with string. Following a common definition, let us say when a term like “kitten” has borderline cases, this term is *vague*.

In our introductory example, the zygote develops in a continuous process, and the vagueness arises because there is no definite degree in this process at which the entity acquires a new moral status. This degree-based vagueness is what gives rise to the Sorites paradox. Consider the following argument:

- P1. It is permissible to terminate the single-cell zygote rather than a cat
- P2. If it is permissible to terminate X rather than a cat, and after a millisecond of development, X becomes Y, then it is permissible to terminate Y rather than a cat
- P3. In a continuous process, a zygote will develop into a three year old child

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C. Therefore, it is permissible to terminate a three year old child rather than a cat

The conclusion is unacceptable, and yet every premise has some initial plausibility. Hence the paradox.

Ethical vagueness need not always arise from an underlying property that comes in degrees. Suppose our paradigm of a morally responsible person is someone who has a cluster of capacities, e.g. rationality, self-governance and a capacity to act on ethical reasons. Now suppose Jones has some but not all of this cluster of capacities. We might then say that Jones is a borderline case of a morally responsible person, without explaining this vagueness of “morally responsible” in terms of degrees.

A third putative example of ethical vagueness is a little controversial. Just as some non-comparative terms are vague, so comparative terms can also be vague. For example, is Alfred who has 1000 hairs distributed across his head more bald than Bert who has 1,500 hairs clustered directly above his ears (Wasserman 2004: 396)? It seems vague which man is balder. But if there is comparative vagueness in non-ethical cases, then there seems nothing to stop it arising in ethical cases too. Just as it could be vague whether Clare is non-comparatively a good artist, it could also be vague as to who is the better artist out of Clare and Dana. If so, we should neither say that each artist is definitely better than the other, nor that both are exactly equally as good—it is not as if a smidgen more creativity in Clare’s finger-tips would tip the balance in her favour. In this way, we could appeal to comparative ethical vagueness to give an attractive account of how it is possible for two people to be “incommensurable” with respect to e.g. artistic merit (Shafer-Landau 1995; Broome 1997; Constantinescu 2012; Williams 2015; Elson ms). This is an account that will prove controversial with some (Chang 2002), but it is hard to see what special reasons there would be to be dismissive of comparative ethical vagueness, once we have already taken non-comparative ethical vagueness seriously (Constantinescu 2012; Williams 2015). If value incommensurability is a form of comparative ethical vagueness, then the debate about how we should reason in the face of incommensurable values is, in effect, a debate about how to reason in the face of ethical vagueness. Since the literature on how to reason in the face of incommensurability is vast, and surveyed elsewhere (Hsieh 2007; Chang 2013), I will set it to one side here.

2. Semantic, epistemic and metaphysical accounts of vagueness

Outside of ethics, there are three standard explanations of vagueness (Williams 2008). To keep our initial exposition simple, let us first consider “pure” accounts that posit only one source of vagueness. According to a purely semantic account, vagueness is an artefact of how we represent the world in our thought and talk. For example, a semantic theorist might say that our use of the term “kitten” does not settle whether it applies to Cornelius, our two year old feline. If so, the statement “Cornelius is a kitten” would be (“alethically”) indeterminate insofar as it lacks a determinate truth value. Since this is a view about the indeterminacy of our linguistic representations, a purely semantic theorist would hold that the world itself is perfectly precise.

A purely epistemic account agrees that the world itself is precise but denies that some statements involving vague predicates lack a determinate truth value. The epistemic theorist will say that facts about our usage of the term and facts about the rest of the world jointly determine whether the term applies or does not apply to all entities in the world. However, the epistemic theorist will say that we are unable to know whether the term applies to certain entities, and hence these entities will be borderline cases for us. So if an epistemic account of the vagueness of “kitten” is correct, then it is either the case that Cornelius is a kitten, or it is not the case that Cornelius is not a kitten. Cornelius would only be a borderline case, insofar as it is difficult, and perhaps even impossible, for us to discover whether he is a kitten or not.

Meanwhile a purely metaphysical account will hold that the world itself is imprecise, insofar as it is metaphysically unsettled whether some entities have particular properties. These entities will be borderline cases for the terms that refer to these properties. On this account, there is genuine metaphysical indeterminacy that is not the result of our epistemic or linguistic limitations: this is vagueness written into the world, which we should continue to acknowledge even if we were omniscient and spoke a perfectly precise language (Barnes 2014). Indeed, if there is metaphysical vagueness, then a perfectly precise language would be *too* precise for accurately capturing all of reality. To capture all of reality, we would need language with imprecision that mirrors the imprecision in the world. If we accept a metaphysical account of the vagueness of “kitten,” then we should conclude that the underlying reality is simply that it is metaphysically indeterminate whether Cornelius is a kitten. (This example is for illustrative purposes only; it could be that there are more plausible examples of metaphysical vagueness than that associated with the term “kitten”.)

We need not hold a pure account of vagueness though. We might think that one type of explanation is most appropriate for the vagueness of some terms, while another explanation is appropriate for other terms. For example, someone might hold a semantic account of the vagueness of a term like “kitten,” while holding a metaphysical account of the vagueness of a natural kind term like “feline.”

So outside of ethics, accounts of vagueness take stances on issues in the philosophy of language, epistemology and metaphysics. Since metaethicists aim to give accounts of ethical language, ethical knowledge and ethical metaphysics, this means that they will need to give accounts of ethical vagueness. So what should metaethicists say about ethical vagueness?

3. Ethical vagueness and ethical disagreement

An early metaethical appeal to vagueness was made by Samuel Clarke, who held that the fittingness of certain actions is “so notoriously plain and self-evident that nothing but the extremest stupidity of mind, corruption of manners, or perverseness of spirit can possibly make any man entertain the least doubt concerning them.” (Clarke 1969 [1704-5]: 194) But if ethical knowledge is so easy, how could people who are not stupid or perverse fall into ethical error? Clarke had this to say:

“But as...two very different colours, by diluting each other very slowly and gradually, may... so run into the other, that it shall not be possible even for a skilful eye to determine exactly where the one ends, and the other begins, and yet the colours really differ as much as can be, not in degree only but entirely in kind, as...white and black: so, though it may perhaps be very difficult in some nice and perplex cases (which yet are very far from occurring frequently), to define exactly the bounds of right and wrong,... yet right and wrong are nevertheless in themselves totally and essentially different, even altogether as much, as white and black.” (p. 229)

Here Clarke appears to hold an epistemic account of vagueness, and uses this to press an analogy between descriptive vagueness and ethical vagueness. Clarke’s thought is that just as there are borderline cases of “white,” there are also borderline cases of “wrong.” And just as one may occasionally fail to discern whether a colour is white, so one may fail to discern whether an action is wrong. In this way, Clarke appeals to ethical vagueness in order to explain ethical ignorance.

In the contemporary metaethics literature, some philosophers have made a similar appeal to vagueness as part of their overall explanation of ethical disagreement. Explaining ethical disagreement has become a pressing task for “ethical realists.” For the purposes of this article, let us use the term “ethical realism” coarsely to refer to views that hold the following two commitments. First, these views hold that ethical judgments are members of a broader kind of doxastic mental state, which aim to fit the world; as such, ethical realists disagree with theorists who hold that ethical judgments are conative states that aim to change the way the world is. Second, these views hold that some ethical judgments are true in virtue of representing ethical facts; as such, ethical realists disagree with error theorists who hold that all of our ethical judgments are false because there are no ethical facts to make them true. This coarse-grained conception of ethical realism covers a host of positions that are discussed in this handbook. However, since all of these positions typically assume that we have some ethical knowledge, they face a common challenge: they need to provide a moral epistemology that explains how it is that we can have this knowledge, while simultaneously explaining how it is that we can disagree.

Typically, ethical realists’ overall explanation of ethical disagreement is multi-faceted. Ethical realists will explain some ethical disagreement as resulting from non-ethical disagreement (e.g. about the deterrence effect of capital punishment). Further, they will explain other ethical disagreement as resulting from partiality or ideology. But in addition some ethical realists have posited pockets of ethical vagueness, and argued that we should not expect people to agree when an ethical issue is vague (Brink 1984; Shafer-Landau 1994; Sosa 2001).

However, this response might seem a little quick: why would idealized ethical judges not simply agree that the issues in question are ethically vague (Shafer-Landau, 1994: 336)? After all, when we encounter one year old Cornelius, we presumably will not persist long in deep disagreement about whether he is really a kitten. Instead, most likely, we will soon agree that he is a borderline case.

Some ethical realists have conceded this point, but suggested that the upshot is that we have to be careful about how we characterize failures of agreement in the first place. They argue that some cases that might initially look like ethical disagreement are in fact cases in which people simply are failing to agree, insofar as they are not converging on shared judgments about which actions are determinately right and wrong (Shafer-Landau, 1994: 343; Vasile 2010). So if we both are of the opinion that it is

vague whether the term “kitten” applies to Cornelius, then we might be said to be failing to agree whether Cornelius is a kitten. But we need not thereby be disagreeing in the sense that one of us judges that he is a kitten, and the other judges that he is not a kitten. A similar story could be told for ethical vagueness.

4. Realists’ accounts of ethical vagueness

But if an ethical realist allows that there is ethical vagueness, then what account can she give of this phenomenon? This issue rapidly becomes complex, and it is here that much of the metaethical interest in ethical vagueness lies. We quickly come to interesting and vexed questions concerning the correct metasemantics for ethical terms, and the extent of our epistemic grasp of the ethical world. In order to introduce some of the key philosophical points at issue, let us abstract from much of this complexity and consider a few simplified explanations.

Suppose an ethical realist tried to replicate the following semantic explanation of the vagueness of the term “bald”. According to this explanation, the extension of the term is fixed simply by how we use the term, and we never settled whether to apply it to some men. These men are the borderline cases of bald men. There are multiple ways that we could have made our term “bald” precise, and each way would generate a different extension for the precisified version of “bald.” However, as things stand, we have never settled on one precisification rather than another, and so it is indeterminate which of these extensions is the referent of the term. By analogy, an ethical realist could say that we simply failed to settle whether to apply “wrong” to certain actions. This would mean that there are multiple candidate extensions of wrong actions, and it is indeterminate which our term “wrong” refers to. Consequently, none of these extensions stands out with a “special ethical glow” (Dougherty 2014; Eklund ms).

Moreover, by giving a robust role to semantic conventions in determining the extension of our ethical terms, this line faces two related challenges. First, how could it be possible for us to have a substantive, non-terminological, ethical disagreement with someone from a community of people whose ethical terms are governed by different semantic conventions (Horgan & Timmon 1991; Manley ms; Eklund ms)? Given how broadly we are conceiving of ethical realism, perhaps some ethical realists will not think this scenario is possible. But many realists will allow that there could be a genuine ethical disagreement here, without this simply being a matter of the communities using terms differently and thereby talking past each other. Second, can practical questions be resolved

by discovering more about how people use words? Suppose someone is faced with a practical dilemma about whether to perform an action that she initially judges to be borderline wrong. Should her quandary be resolved by a linguistic anthropologist informing her that, upon closer examination, her community's semantic conventions governing the word "wrong" dictate that the term determinately applies to the action (Schoenfield 2016)? Both challenges can be raised outside of the context of ethical vagueness, but they are pressing challenges for an ethical realist who offers a semantic account of vagueness in terms of linguistic conventions.

Similar problems arise for an ethical realist who gives an epistemic explanation along the lines that some people have given of the vagueness of terms like "bald" (Williamson 1994). On this epistemicist line, our linguistic usage does determine precisely whether "bald" applies to each person. However, the reference of this term is sensitive to small shifts in our community's linguistic usage (Hawthorne 2006; Schoenfield 2016). Consequently, we are sometimes unable to know whether the term applies to some people —the borderline cases. For similar reasons, we might say that we cannot know whether the term "wrong" applies to some actions. But although this is an epistemic explanation of ethical vagueness, it also gives a robust role to semantic conventions in fixing the reference of normative terms: it is because we are partially ignorant of these conventions that we do not know whether the term "wrong" applies to borderline cases. As a result, this explanation faces both the community disagreement challenge and the linguistic anthropologist challenge.

In addition, this epistemic explanation faces two further challenges. First, when we consider degree-based ethical vagueness, we will see that small descriptive changes can determine whether a normative predicate such as "permissible" applies. Consider our introductory example of an embryo's development. We supposed that there are borderline cases of embryos that it is permissible for one to terminate in order to save a cat. According to the epistemic account, among these borderline cases there will be a pair of embryos, such that one embryo is microscopically more developed than the other, and yet it is permissible to terminate the earlier embryo while impermissible to terminate the later embryo. This may cause us to revise the significance that we place on properties like permissibility (Sider 1995; Dougherty 2014; Constantinescu 2014). Antecedently, we might think that there is a huge moral difference between permissibly terminating the life of a human being and impermissibly terminating the life of a human being. But when we learn that this difference in

permissibility could turn on the minutest developmental increase, we may revise this antecedent judgment. Second, the commitment to holding that there are some unknowable ethical facts will be challenged by those who argue that ethical facts need to be knowable in order to be action-guiding (Sorensen 1995; Sider 1995; Dougherty 2014; Constantinescu 2014; Schoenfield 2016). Indeed, these challenges will face anyone, realist or not, who wishes to give an epistemic account of ethical vagueness.

Alternatively, an ethical realist might deny that an ethical term's extension is simply the entities to which we actually apply the term in practice. Instead, she might say that an ethical term's extension is determined in the way that the extension of a "natural kind" term is determined (Boyd 1988). Consider the following two metasemantic stories for natural kind terms (Manley ms). The first story holds that we use natural kind terms with the intention that these terms refer to natural kinds and ethical kinds; the story continues that this intention ensures that these terms refer to natural kinds and ethical kinds, even when our patterns of using the terms fails to do so. The second story holds that the extension of a term is fixed not only by how candidate extensions *fit* our usage, but also by how "eligible" these extensions are. On this line, some extensions are more eligible than others because they are more "natural" groups (Lewis 1983, 1984). For example the set of green things is a more natural group than the set of things that are "grue"—things that either are observed before some future time, e.g. 2025, and green or are blue (Goodman 1955). Consequently, the set of green things is a more eligible extension for our terms than the set of grue things. In this way, some metaphysically privileged extensions can act as "reference magnets" for our terms, even when we fail to apply these terms to these things (Lewis 1983; Sider 2011). If the ethical realist adopts either of these metasemantic stories, then she could hold that natural kind terms refer to groups that form part of the deep metaphysical structure of the world, even if in practice we do not apply the terms to all the members of these groups. Similarly, she might say that our ethical kind terms' reference is guided by the existence of ethical kinds that have a special metaphysical status. If she holds that there is a single precise set of things that forms an ethical kind associated with a particular term, then she will not be able to offer a semantic account of the vagueness of this term (since the metasemantic story would lead her to the conclusion that the term determinately refers to this precise extension). But she might say that the precise demarcations of this ethical kind is unknown and maybe even unknowable to us, and consequently offer an epistemic account of the term's vagueness. If, by

contrast, she holds that there are multiple precise sets of things that each form multiple precise ethical kinds associated with a term, then she can say that it is indeterminate which of these kinds is the referent of the term. In this way, she could offer a semantic explanation of ethical vagueness (Boyd 1988).

Those are some of the ways that an ethical realist can aim to offer semantic or epistemic explanations of ethical vagueness. In addition, she might simply say that ethical vagueness is metaphysical vagueness (Schoenfield 2016). This is a claim that is compatible with accepting or rejecting the natural kind analogy. The costs of this position would seem only be the costs that one bears for positing metaphysical vagueness in general. The nature of these costs is currently up for debate. Until relatively recently, positing metaphysical vagueness was not taken seriously as an option, and was quickly dismissed as incoherent or misguided. But the view has received sustained defense in recent years, and the debate about the viability of metaphysical vagueness continues (Williams 2008; Barnes 2010).

5. Expressivists' accounts of ethical vagueness

That brief sketch covers some—but by no means all—of the options for ethical realists. What options are there for realists' opponents? Some opponents, such as error theorists, may simply deny that there is any ethical vagueness to be accounted for in the first place. But other opponents of realism want to recover much of the surface of our ethical discourse. In the contemporary debate, the most popular position in this vicinity is expressivism, which holds that ethical judgments are conative or evaluative mental states that are different in kind from the doxastic states by which we represent the world. If ethical vagueness is included in the parts of our ethical discourse that an expressivist wishes to explain, what account should she give of ethical vagueness?

The first task for an expressivist will be to retain a robust enough account of truth that she can identify determinately e.g. wrong actions in the first place (Sorensen 1993). But assuming for the sake of argument, that an expressivist can do this, the question then is whether this account could be naturally extended to cover the borderline e.g. wrong actions that generate ethical vagueness. For example, what is it to judge an action to be indeterminately morally wrong? Is it simply to be unsure whether the action is morally wrong? To make good on this epistemic explanation, she would need to have sufficient theoretical resources for giving an account of ethical uncertainty (Smith 2002; Baima 2014). Does giving an account of

judging an action to be indeterminately wrong require finding an additional conative or evaluative mental state? Alternatively, could it be accounted for by positing ambivalence between conative or evaluative mental states besides the mental states that constitute judging actions to be determinately right or wrong? Or could it be accounted for by positing indeterminacy concerning which mental states someone is in? These are questions that would seem to interlink with the question of which conative attitudes it is appropriate to form in the face of ethical indeterminacy (Williams 2014, 2015).

7. Directions for future research

The topic of ethical vagueness is a relatively neglected topic in metaethics. It certainly has received nothing like the attention spent on ethical judgments about what is e.g. determinately right or wrong, and what it would be for there to be such a determinate ethical fact. As such, it is a topic on which there is still much work to be done. Research so far has focused primarily on what ethical realists and expressivists could say about ethical vagueness. It seems unlikely that the final word has been said about either metaethical position. In particular, there remain interesting questions concerning whether accounting for ethical vagueness is easier or harder for the various positions that fly under the ethical realist banner. (Again, the term “realist” is being used coarsely here to refer to cognitivists who hold that some ethical claims are true.) In addition, could an expressivist give a semantic account of ethical vagueness—something she might feel pressured to do if she gave a semantic account of non-ethical vagueness? Moreover, ethical realism and expressivism do not exhaust the metaethical terrain. What accounts of ethical vagueness could be offered by other metaethical positions? What might an ethical fictionalist say about ethical vagueness, for example?

Carrying out this research could help us in our choice between different metaethical positions. If, as seems plausible, these positions have different explanatory options available to them when it comes to accounting for ethical vagueness, then we can evaluate these positions according to the attractiveness of these options. When doing so, we can bring to bear considerations about the viability of the standard accounts of vagueness, and we can also bring to bear specialist considerations that arise only in the ethical case. In these respects, ethical vagueness is an exciting topic, insofar as it offers us the possibility of finding new leverage with some of the most central and important debates in metaethics.

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