

18

How to Respond to Borderline Cases

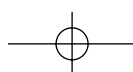
Dan López de Sa

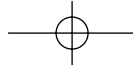
It seems that Hannah and her wife Sarah may disagree as to whether Homer Simpson is funny, without either of them being at fault. This is an (almost) uncontroversial case of apparent faultless disagreement.

More cases are arguably provided in other philosophically interesting domains: predicates of personal taste, evaluative predicates in general, epistemic modals, and knowledge attributions. With respect to any of these, it is held, it seems that there could be contrasting judgements without fault on the part of any of the participants. Some philosophers seem to think that vagueness should be included in the list above: borderline cases provide further cases of apparent faultless disagreement. My aim here is to argue against such a suggestion.

After elaborating briefly on the notion of apparent faultless disagreement, I present the case for my main claim: with respect to borderline cases, people typically do not respond by taking a view—in contrast to what is the case in genuine cases of apparent faultless disagreement (section 18.1). The status of this kind of claim, both descriptive (of paradigm cases, at least) and normative—though familiar in many other domains, such as the theory of meaning, decision theory, or moral psychology—is likely to raise suspicion. The main part of this chapter is devoted to alleviating such suspicion. I argue that my claim is indeed respected and actually accounted for by paradigm cases of semantic and epistemic views on the nature of vagueness (section 18.2). And I also argue that my claim turns out to be, initial appearances notwithstanding, compatible with other claims in the literature—to the effect that, in appropriate circumstances, there are indeed, or there might well be, ‘macho,’ admissible, forced, and hesitant responses to borderline cases (section 18.3).

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18.1 THE PHENOMENON OF APPARENT FAULTLESS DISAGREEMENT

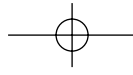
We are quite familiar with situations such as that of Hannah and Sarah regarding whether Homer Simpson is funny: disputes as to whether spinach is tasty or disgusting, or as to whether getting to the party late is cool or lame, or as to whether Brad Pitt or Uma Thurman are really sexy or rather overrated. In cases like these, people often take views on the matter, even strong ones, which sometimes issue in (long) discussions and arguments. Still, it seems that none of the parties need be mistaken with regard to their views, after all.

Whether such an appearance of faultless disagreement is to be endorsed—or even whether it *could* be endorsed—is, of course, a matter of controversy. Following the lead of Crispin Wright 1992, one can conceive of *relativism* in general as precisely the attempt to so endorse the appearances of faultless disagreement, in the different domains—for such needs to involve, in one way or other, some relativity to contrasting features of the subjects in question. The different sources the relativity might be held to have are what give rise to the different relativisms. *Moderate* relativism has it that such an endorsement can be done within the general Kaplan–Lewis–Stalnaker two-dimensional framework, in which the basic semantic notion is that of a sentence s being true at a context c at the index i .¹ It may in effect be the case that s is true at c (at its index i_c) but false at c^* (at i_{c^*})—due to the *content* of sentence s at c being different from that of s at c^* (*indexical contextualism*); or, even if the content is the same, due to relevant differences in the indices i_c and i_{c^*} determined by c and c^* (*non-indexical contextualism*). *Radical* relativism, by contrast, claims that appropriately endorsing appearances of faultless disagreement requires departing from the two-dimensional framework, in that s at the very context c can be true from a certain perspective but false from another—where perspectives are to be thought of as the same sort of thing as contexts, but representing a location from where a sentence, as said in a (possibly different) location, could be viewed or assessed.²

¹ The jargon I adopt is from Lewis (1980). A *context* is a location—time, place, and possible world, or *centered world* for short—where a sentence could be said. It has countless features, determined by the character of the location. An *index* is an n -tuple of features of context, but not necessarily features that go together in any possible context. Thus an index might consist of a speaker, a time before his birth, a world where he never lived at all, and so on. The coordinates of an index are features that can be shifted independently, unlike those of a context, and thus serve to represent the contribution of sentences embedded under sentence operators, such as ‘possibly’ or, more controversially, ‘somewhere,’ ‘strictly speaking,’ and so on. Given a context c , however, there is *the index of* the context, i_c : that index having coordinates that match the appropriate features of c . Given this uniqueness, the basic two-dimensional relation can be abbreviated in this special case: sentence s is true at context c iff s is true at context c at index i_c .

² I propose to use ‘perspectives’ instead of MacFarlane’s ‘contexts of assessment,’ see his 2003, 2005. I think this terminology helps to avoid confusions with ‘context of use/utterance’ (‘context’ here) and, more importantly, with ‘circumstance/point of evaluation’ (‘index’ here). My taxonomy is greatly indebted to—and some of the labels due to—John MacFarlane. I elaborate on the details in López de Sa (2009b).





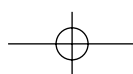
Whether the appearances of faultless disagreement are (can be) endorsed is, as I said, controversial. But that such *appearances* exist is, I take it, a *datum* for non-relativists and relativist alike—appearances that are to be explained away, if they are not endorsed. Hannah may have a judgement she might naturally express in an ordinary context by uttering ‘Homer Simpson is funny’ with its literal meaning; whereas Sarah may have a judgement she might naturally express in an ordinary context by uttering ‘Homer Simpson is not funny.’ And these contrasting judgements need not involve, apparently, any error on the part of Hannah nor Sarah. Similarly in some other philosophically interesting cases—including future contingents, predicates of personal taste, evaluative predicates in general, epistemic modals, and knowledge attributions—there can be contrasting judgements about an issue in the domain that do not seem to involve fault on the part of any of the participants: they all involve cases of (at least) apparent faultless disagreement.³

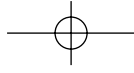
Some philosophers seem to think that vagueness should be included in the list above: borderline cases provide further cases of apparent faultless disagreement. However, this does not seem to be so. Take Jason and his husband Justin, and consider a borderline green towel.⁴ Typically, I submit, they would not respond to it by taking a view as to whether the towel is green or not. They would simply lack the judgements that they would naturally express in an ordinary context by asserting ‘The towel is green’ or ‘The towel is not green’ with its literal meaning; rather, if questioned about it, they would easily converge in something like that ‘it sort of is and sort of isn’t,’ ‘it’s greenish,’ etc.—and they would be rational in so doing. But then they would lack the building blocks for the appearance of faultless disagreement clearly present in the other cases considered above: the (contrasting) judgements. Hannah and Sarah *do* typically form polar opinions with respect to issues such as whether Homer Simpson is funny; Jason and Justin typically do *not* form such verdicts with respect to issues such as whether the towel is green.

So this is in essence why I think that vagueness does not provide further cases of apparent faultless disagreement: with respect to borderline cases, people typically do not respond by taking a view—in contrast to what is the case in genuine cases of apparent faultless disagreement. The status of this kind of claim, however, is likely to raise suspicion. I am submitting Jason and Justin as paradigmatic with respect to people’s actual ways of responding to borderline cases. And I am also suggesting the normative view that it is indeed rational for them so to respond. I take it we are familiar with this kind of situation—claims that are submitted as both descriptive (of

³ Some use ‘faultless disagreement’ in a more restricted sense, requiring that there be a single content or proposition which is contrastingly judged, see for instance Kölbel (2003). According to this more restricted sense, it cannot just be taken as a *datum* for relativists and non-relativists alike that there are apparent faultless disagreements, nor do all versions of relativism endorse that there are in effect faultless disagreements in the relevant domains. These I take to favor my more liberal usage.

⁴ To provide an adequate characterization of what it is for something to be a *borderline case* is of course part of what is at stake. For present purposes, however, it suffices to point to cases with respect to which the different views as to how to respond to them differ.





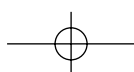
paradigm cases, at least) and normative—in many other domains, such as the theory of meaning, decision theory, or moral psychology. But this familiarity by itself need not remove suspicion. As I said at the beginning, what follows is my best attempt to alleviate such suspicion in the case at hand. I will argue that my claim is indeed respected and actually accounted for by paradigm cases of semantic and epistemic views on the nature of vagueness. And besides, I will also argue that my claim turns out to be, initial appearances notwithstanding, compatible with other claims in the literature—to the effect that, in appropriate circumstances, there are indeed, or there might well be, ‘macho,’ admissible, forced, and hesitant responses to borderline cases.

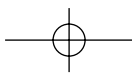
18.2 NORMS OF ASSERTION AND THE NATURE OF VAGUENESS

One of the main views on the nature of vagueness has it that vagueness is a phenomenon of *semantic indecision*: (roughly) whatever it is that in the thoughts, experiences and practices of language users determines the meaning of expressions, it fails to determine, for vague expressions, any single one from a given range of similarly natural candidate references. Each way of (‘arbitrarily’) fixing what is left semantically indeterminate gives rise to a *precisification* or *sharpening* of the original vague expression. Although all such sharpenings are, by essence, arbitrary to a certain extent, not all of them are *admissible*. In the case of predicates, admissible ones should preserve *clear cases*, both of application and of non-application—Yul Brynner should count for ‘is bald,’ while Andy García cannot—, and they should also preserve *penumbral connections*—‘Whoever is bald is bald,’ ‘If someone is bald, then so is anyone who is balder,’ and so on—.⁵ What one says by means of a vague expression is true, according to this view, if it would be true however one (admissibly) precisifies it—or, as I will put it, if it counts as true according to all admissible sharpenings. And it is false if it counts as false according to all admissible sharpenings. Otherwise, if there are admissible ways of precisifying it which give rise to truths, but also admissible ways of precisifying it which give rise to falsehoods, the vague sentence is indeterminate: neither true nor false.

That is indeed the situation with respect to borderline cases, as the view has it. Take Harry, a borderline case with respect to ‘is bald,’ having exactly 3,833 hairs on his scalp. Whatever it is that in the thoughts, experiences and practices of language users determines the meaning of expressions, it fails to determine whether someone with this very number of hairs does or does not fall under ‘is bald.’ Thus ‘is bald’ can be admissibly precisified by (let us assume) ‘has at most 3,832 hairs on his scalp,’ but

⁵ Thus sharpenings are, strictly speaking, of the language as a whole, and not of isolated expressions, see Fine (1975). How to characterize in an explicit satisfactory way the notion of *admissible* constituted by these connections (possibly among others) would of course be crucial for a full defense of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision. Notice that ‘is admissible’ is, of course, itself vague: this is arguably part of what accounts, in this framework, for the phenomenon of ‘higher-order’ vagueness. Complications arising from this will be set aside here.





also by ‘has at most 3,834 hairs on his scalp.’ Hence, ‘Harry is bald’ fails to be true, given that ‘Harry has at most 3,832 hairs on his scalp’ is false, but it also fails to be false, given that ‘Harry has at most 3,834 hairs on his scalp’ is true.⁶

As most of its critics also acknowledge, the view of vagueness as semantic indecision is certainly—at least initially—intuitively very plausible. But it is at odds with the claim that borderline cases exhibit apparent faultless disagreement: it predicts that people would typically not (and should not) take a view with respect to borderline cases, as the relevant statements would lack a truth value and thus would not be true. In this way, I hold, the view provides further support to my main claim.

Let me elaborate. As we have just seen, the phenomenon of faultless disagreement requires that people do typically form judgements on the matter (which may be contrasting while apparently fault-free). Judgements like these are typically manifested by people’s *asserting* the relevant statements in question, at their respective contexts. Thus, as we saw, Hannah could perfectly well express her judgement by asserting ‘Homer is funny’ at her context, and Sarah by asserting its negation at hers. Assertions are (arguably) acts governed by norms. The weakest sensible norm for assertion, most would agree,⁷ is the *truth rule*:

One must: assert *s* at *c* only if *s* at *c* (at *i_c*) is true.

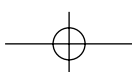
The truth rule forbids *untrue* assertions.⁸ Borderline cases exhibiting the phenomenon of apparent faultless disagreement would require things like (say) Jason forming a view to the effect that the towel is green, and Justin forming a contrasting view to the effect that the towel is not green. But according to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, ‘The towel is green’ is not true at Jason’s context, nor is it true ‘The towel is not green’ at Justin’s. Thus Jason should not assert ‘The towel is green,’ nor Justin assert its negation. And this is, as we saw, in clear contrast with the case of Hannah and Sarah. To the extent to which it is sensible to assume that people’s actions typically conform to their characteristic norms (at least in paradigmatic instances of the relevant action types), the view of vagueness as semantic indecision also accounts for why people typically do not take a view with respect to borderline cases.

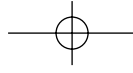
I have argued that the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, which is certainly (at least initially) plausible from an intuitive point of view, respects and accounts for my main claim and thus provides support to the contention that borderline cases do not exhibit the phenomenon of apparent faultless disagreement. The same is true,

⁶ Thus the characteristic denial of the principle of bivalence: not everything that says something is either true or false, as borderline cases are indeterminate. Williamson (1994) contains an argument for the incompatibility of this feature with Tarskian views about truth and falsity, which apparently convinced most people in the field. In my view, however, Andjelković and Williamson (2000) contains the key elements for resisting it: see for elaboration and further discussion López de Sa (2009*a*).

⁷ As also noticed by defenders of radical relativism, their view is committed to depart from standard ones on this (related) count as well.

⁸ See (Williamson, 2000, ch. 11) for further (critical) discussion. He says: ‘The truth rule forbids *false* assertions’ 2000, 242, my emphasis, which is just a *proper* consequence—in the absence of the (independent) principle of bivalence.





I now claim, about one of the other main rival views on the nature of vagueness: epistemicism as defended by Williamson (1994)—provided that some epistemic norm for assertion holds.

Were Jason to form a view to the effect that the towel is green, this would not constitute knowledge. And neither could Justin knowledgeably form a contrasting view to the effect that the towel is not green, for the same reasons. Most people would agree: if it is borderline, then there is no knowing that the towel is green, and no knowing that it is not green. According to defenders of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, the explanation of this is straightforward (and shows why it would be misleading to label the situation as one of *ignorance*): there is no knowing because, as noted above, there is no truth there to be known. By contrast, according to epistemicism as defended by Williamson (1994), we may suppose, either ‘The towel is green’ is true at Jason’s context, or it is true ‘The towel is not green’ at Justin’s.⁹ Still, the epistemicist holds, neither of the judgements that Jason or Justin could naturally express in their respective contexts would constitute knowledge.¹⁰

Now, although admittedly more controversial, a case has been made for assertions being acts governed by the (stronger) *knowledge rule*, see (Williamson, 2000, ch. 8):

One must: assert *s* at *c* only if one knows *p*,

where *p* is the content of *s* at *c*.

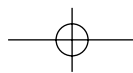
But if this holds, we have a corresponding support for my main claim, even according to epistemicism. For again borderline cases exhibiting the phenomenon of apparent faultless disagreement would require things like (say) Jason forming a view to the effect that the towel is green, and Justin forming a contrasting view to the effect that the towel is not green. But according to epistemicism, neither could *knowledgeably* form such judgements. Thus again Jason should not assert ‘The towel is green,’ nor should Justin assert its negation, in clear contrast with the case of Hannah and Sarah. To the extent to which it is sensible to assume that people’s actions typically conform to their characteristic norms (at least in paradigmatic instances of the relevant action types), the epistemicist view of vagueness also accounts for why people typically do not take a view with respect to borderline cases.

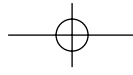
18.3 FURTHER RESPONSES TO BORDERLINE CASES

I have submitted that the case of Jason and Justin regarding whether borderline green towel is green is intuitively very different from that of Hannah and Sarah regarding whether Homer Simpson is funny. The former typically won’t (and shouldn’t) take a view on the matter, thus lacking the judgements that are the building blocks for the phenomenon of apparent faultless disagreement, present in the latter. I have also

⁹ The main positive argument offered by Williamson (1994) in favor of epistemicism is precisely the one in favor of the principle of bivalence mentioned in footnote 6.

¹⁰ The explanation of this given the presence of a truth on the issue, is much more complex: see (Williamson, 1994, ch. 8) and (Williamson, 2000, ch. 5)





argued that this claim is indeed respected and actually accounted for by paradigm cases of semantic and epistemic views on the nature of vagueness, provided that certain plausible norms of assertion hold. In the remainder of this chapter I will try to show that my claim turns out to be, initial appearances notwithstanding, compatible with other claims in the literature concerning various responses to borderline cases.

18.3.1 'Macho' responses

In his discussion of Williamson (1994), Paul Horwich contends that

the essence of [the phenomenon of vagueness] is *not* that borderline predications cannot be known to be correct. The essence of it . . . is that in certain cases we are normally unwilling to apply the predicate, unwilling to deny that it applies, and confident that no further investigation could yield a decision. The problem of knowledge in such circumstances is a *result* of this paralysis of judgement.

(Horwich, 1997, 931)

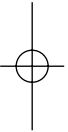
I would not say that the issue of how to respond to borderline cases constitutes the *essence* of vagueness, as opposed to being part of its characteristic manifestation. As implied above, I take the different views of the nature of vagueness to be views such as the view of vagueness as semantic indecision and epistemicism, which account for the manifestation of vagueness in how to respond to borderline cases. As a result, *pace* Horwich, I do not take the contention that a certain kind of 'paralysis of judgement' with respect to borderline cases is a characteristic manifestation of vagueness to be in tension with an epistemic view on the nature of vagueness. On the contrary, as I have just argued, epistemicism seems to account nicely for this, provided that certain epistemic norms for assertion hold.

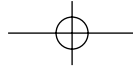
My main claim, however, that with respect to borderline cases people typically don't and shouldn't form categorical judgements—in contrast with what is clearly the case in domains that exhibit apparent faultless disagreement—seems clearly in tune with Horwich's contention that a certain kind of 'paralysis in judgement' with respect to borderline cases is indeed a characteristic manifestation of vagueness: Jason and Justin would typically not respond to a borderline green towel by taking a view as to whether it is green or not.

It is important to observe that this claim is compatible with the possibility of Jason and Justin being, on occasions, more opinionated and 'macho' than one typically is (and should be), and thus with them *forming* the judgements as to whether the towel is green or not. After all, we have all discovered ourselves, on occasions, in discussions as to whether something is or is not a certain way, just to realize that the case in question was simply borderline. My claim has it, however, that giving such 'macho' responses is not the way we *typically* respond to borderline cases, nor of course the way we *should* respond to them, and that this is clearly in contrast with situations such as that of Hannah and Sarah regarding whether Homer Simpson is funny.

In his intriguing reply to Horwich, however, Williamson says:

Horwich notwithstanding, paralysis in judgement is quite unnecessary for vagueness. Consider an opinionated macho community, in which everyone applies the term 'bald' or its negation





confidently and unhesitatingly on the basis of impressions gained from causal observations whenever the issue arises. There is no appeal to precise necessary and sufficient conditions. Speakers accept that the application of ‘bald’ depends only on the exact distribution of hairs on someone’s scalp, but vagaries of mood and perception cause them often to apply the term ‘bald’ when the distribution is exactly the same as in a previous case which they classified as ‘not bald.’ When they disagree, each dogmatically insist that the other is clearly wrong. When inconsistencies are pointed out in a single speaker’s application of the term, they are denied *ad hoc* (‘I never said that!’; ‘His hair has grown since then!’). On Horwich account, ‘bald’ is not vague in the language of this community, because there are no cases in which speakers ‘are normally unwilling to apply the predicate, unwilling to deny that it applies, and confident that no further investigation could yield a decision.’ But ‘bald’ is vague in the language of this community.

(Williamson, 1997, 945–6)

I think there are two ways of conceiving of such a community. If Jason and Justin can *on occasions* give such ‘macho’ responses, we can conceive of them as *always* giving them—and we can also conceive of the rest of the population being similarly ‘macho.’ On this way of conceiving the community, it is certainly the case that the relevant expressions are still vague in the language of the community, as Williamson contends. But this being so does not contradict Horwich’s contention about ‘paralysis of judgement,’ at least understood along the lines of my main claim. For it would still be the case that, in the relevant sense, this would be the conceiving of a community in which people *typically wouldn’t* and *shouldn’t* give such ‘macho’ responses: on this way of conceiving the community, people are disposed as we are, it is just that we imagine the conditions to be such that they do not manifest their dispositions. Many other domains, such as the theory of meaning, decision theory, or moral psychology—or indeed basic dispositions to judge that the lines in the Müller–Lyer illusion are the same length—provide situations that are structurally analogous.

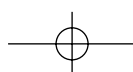
If, by contrast, we conceive of a situation in which people simply *lack* the relevant dispositions to manifest ‘paralysis of judgement’ with respect to borderline cases at all, then I submit we no longer have the intuition that the relevant expressions are, indeed, *vague*—as ours indisputably are.

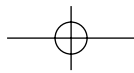
18.3.2 Admissible responses

On the face of it, my main claim that, with respect to borderline cases, people typically don’t (and shouldn’t) take a view seems in tension with the idea that, with respect to borderline cases, people can ‘go either way.’ Here is Stewart Shapiro’s recent statement of this idea:

Suppose . . . that *a* is a borderline case of *P*. I take it as another premise that, in some situations, a speaker is free to assert *Pa* and free to assert $\neg Pa$, without offending against the meanings of the terms, or against any other rule of language use. Unsettled entails open. The rules of language use, as they are fixed by what we say and do, allow someone to go either way in the borderline region. Let us call this the *open-texture* thesis.

(Shapiro, 2003, 43)





However, I do not think that the tension is genuine. For the idea seems to amount to the thought that, in certain conversations and given the presence of certain particular knowledge, purposes, etc., participants are capable of altering the standards of precision prevalent in that conversation, with the effect of producing local (explicit, or more plausibly, implicit) stipulations that give rise precisely to a precisification of the relevant vague expression—at least, for the purpose of the conversation at hand. The presence of the mechanism can be motivated independently, in a straightforward enough way within the framework of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision. I assume that similar moves might be available to the friend of epistemicism, although I will not attempt to adapt the consideration here.

In his ‘Scorekeeping in a Language Game,’ David Lewis 1979 famously introduced the figure of a *conversational score*, whose kinematics—including prominently the rules of accommodation—he precisely illustrated with, among others, the case of vagueness.

If Fred is a borderline case of baldness, the sentence ‘Fred is bald’ may have no determinate truth value. Whether it is true depends on where you draw the line. Relative to some perfectly reasonable ways of drawing a precise boundary between bald and non-bald, the sentence is true. Relative to other delineations, no less reasonable, it is false. Nothing in our use of language makes one of these delineations right and all the others wrong. We cannot pick a delineation once and for all (not if we are interested in ordinary language), but must consider the entire range of reasonable delineations.

If a sentence is true over the entire range, true no matter how we draw the line, surely we are entitled to treat it simply as true. But we also treat a sentence more or less as if it is simply true, if it is true over a large enough part of the range of delineations of its vagueness. (In short: if it is *true enough*). . . .

When is a sentence true enough? Which are the ‘large enough’ parts of the range of delineations of its vagueness? This is itself a vague matter. More important for our present purposes, it is something that depends on context. What is true enough on one occasion is not true enough on another. The standards of precision in force are different from one conversation to another, and may change in the course of a single conversation. Austin’s ‘France is hexagonal’ is a good example of a sentence that is true enough for many contexts, but not true enough for many others. Under low standards of precision it is acceptable. Rise the standards and it loses its acceptability.

(Lewis, 1979, 244–5)

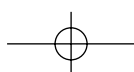
As I suggested, the idea that, with respect to borderline cases, people can ‘go either way,’ as I understand it, can indeed be seen as providing further ways in which accommodation can alter the standards of precisions in force in a given conversation. For consider the following conversation between Jason and Justin:

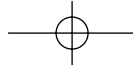
[Jason has just finished having his shower. In their bathroom, there is both the borderline green towel and another, white one.]

—Justin, please, pass me the towel, would you?

—Which one you want?

—I don’t know . . . whichever . . . Just give me the green one, but please hurry up, I’m freezing!





I submit that, in a conversation such as this, participants would accommodate by relaxing standards of precision dramatically, so as to count sentences as ‘The towel is green’ at the context as *true*, regardless the fact that the part of the range of reasonable delineations which do so may be not large at all.

But all this is, I take it, compatible with my main claim that, with respect to borderline cases, people typically don’t (and shouldn’t) take a view: in the absence of the particular knowledge, purposes, etc., that we naturally imagined partly informing the conversational score, one would regard an unqualified utterance of ‘The towel is green’ by Jason at his context to be simply a ‘macho’ response.

18.3.3 Forced responses

Following Diana Raffman 1994, Shapiro considers the responses in a ‘forced march’ scenario—where subject are asked to say (say) ‘yes’ or otherwise to the question ‘Is this towel green?’ concerning items that conform a sorites series—with respect to (among others) borderline cases.

In her response, Rosanna Keefe wonders:

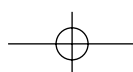
Is it reasonable to draw any significant conclusions from the response subjects are driven to make when they are marched through a Sorites series and forced to judge each case either one way or the other? . . . [S]uppose you make subjects respond with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to questions involving unfulfilled presuppositions; e.g. you ask them ‘Have you stopped ϕ -ing?’ when they’ve never ϕ -ed. They may be reluctant to answer yes or no—both answers are misleading—but they may nonetheless choose one of those answers when forced. Surely their choice in that situation should not be taken as deeply significant, nor as helping to illuminate the semantics of sentences involving unfulfilled presuppositions. . . . Second analogy: reading too much into the response to forced march paradoxes seems rather like forcing someone to guess the weight of something and then taking that guess to reveal that the subject believes that the weight is exactly that.

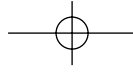
(Keefe, 2003, 79)

I do not want to assess here whether Keefe is right in these comments, nor how this would affect the tenability of the contextualist proposals of Raffman and Shapiro. For my present purposes, a much weaker and rather uncontroversial remark is pertinent. Whichever way one conceives of the relevance of these forced responses, the fact that in situations like those envisaged people are asked to issue them is compatible with my main claim. For, indeed, it would seem that awareness of the past items in the series, of the likely future one, and their respective similarity in the relevant respects, among other things, gives rise to a peculiar conversational score in which the forced responses in question can be regarded as admissible. But this is so even if, typically, one would not (and should not) issue them.

18.3.4 Hesitant responses

Third Possibility can be seen as the generic view that, if sentence s at context c is borderline, then it has some kind of third status incompatible with each of the poles,





truth and falsity—be it lacking a truth value, possessing a third value, or what have you. The view of vagueness as semantic indecision is a paradigm case of Third Possibility. Call *verdict* a judgement to the effect that something is *F*, or that it is not *F*—where the question of whether something is or is not *F* might be borderline. *Verdict Exclusion* says that with respect to borderline cases no such verdict constitutes knowledge. Both the view of vagueness as semantic indecision and epistemicism are paradigm cases of Verdict Exclusion.

One consequence of my main claim in this chapter might be a plea for Verdict Exclusion. As Crispin Wright—to whom these labels are due—says:

According to Verdict Exclusion, one ought, all things considered, to offer no verdict about a borderline case and to have no opinion which could be expressed in such a verdict.

(Wright, 2003, 92)

In effect, I have claimed, intuitively, and in sharp contrast with the case of Hannah and Sarah regarding whether Homer is funny, Jason and Justin would typically not, and should not, offer a verdict as to whether the towel is green, nor have any opinion which could be expressed in such a verdict. This is accounted for by two of the main views about the nature of vagueness, and is compatible with their issuing ‘macho,’ admissible, forced, and, as we are now about to see, with their issuing *hesitant* responses.

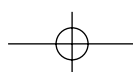
As Wright points out,

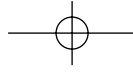
The manifestation of vagueness, in the kinds of case we are concerned with, is not a consensus on certain cases as borderline—not if that is to be a status which undercuts both polar verdicts. Rather, the impression of a case as borderline goes along with a readiness to tolerate other’s taking a positive or negative view—*provided, at least, that their view is suitably hesitant and qualified and marked by a respect for one’s unwillingness to advance a verdict.*

(Wright, 2003, 92–3, my emphasis)

I think, however, that the defender of Third View and Verdict Exclusion can—with a qualification to come—fully appreciate this insight. For what her view excludes, as we have seen, is that people typically offer—non-hesitant, unqualified—*verdicts* concerning borderline cases. Jason and Justin *can* indeed give such responses, as in Williamson’s ‘macho’ opinionated community. But they would typically not do so, nor should do so. This does not mean that they should issue *no response at all*, refusing to form any opinion on the matter whatsoever. They may eventually refuse to do so, but in most contexts it would be more natural (and rational) for them precisely to issue the suitably hesitant and qualified responses: ‘yeah . . . it’s kind of green,’ ‘sort of is’n sort of isn’t,’ ‘. . . greenish . . .,’ ‘it’s more green than blue, I guess’—or even ‘it’s green,’ which the appropriate gestural and/or intonational vagueifying markers.

So, the defender of Third View and Verdict Exclusion can, it seems, fully appreciate the insight contained in the second part of Wright’s quote. She would probably resist, and this is the qualification announced above, the remark in the first part. For, she might hold, the predicted consensus on certain cases as borderline can indeed take the form of people precisely issuing the suitably hesitant and qualified opinions—not necessarily confining themselves to an aseptic agnostic silence. What I





am in effect suggesting is that Third View and Verdict Exclusion can indeed turn out to be compatible with the contention that there is a characteristic psychological attitude of the sort advocated by Wright 2003 himself—see also, for a related proposal, Schiffer (2003).¹¹ (Of course, one may hold that vagueness is characteristically manifested by a certain way of responding to borderline cases and still hold that the *nature* of borderline cases has to do with semantic indecision, irremovable ignorance, and so on.)

Substantiating this suggestion of mine is something I am not in a position to do here.¹² Fortunately, defending my main claim does not require it. For my main claim has been simply that people typically do not and should not respond to borderline cases by forming—non-hesitant, unqualified—verdicts concerning them. This is compatible with their forming an opinion—*provided* they are suitably hesitant and qualified.

18.4 CONCLUSION

It seems that Hannah and Sarah may disagree as to whether Homer Simpson is funny, without either of them being at fault. They may typically form (non-hesitant, unqualified) judgements on the matter, and it is not clear at all that they should not: hence the appearance of faultiness in their disagreement, which most people are, in the case at hand, inclined to endorse.

By contrast, Jason and Justin do not typically form (non-hesitant, unqualified) judgements on whether the (borderline green) towel is green or not. That this is so is not only the intuitive view but also indeed respected and actually accounted for by paradigm cases of semantic and epistemic views on the nature of vagueness. And it turns out to be compatible with their issuing ‘macho,’ admissible, forced, and hesitant responses with respect to borderline cases. Thus Jason and Justin just lack the (eventually contrasting) judgements, which are the building blocks of apparent faultless disagreements. Borderline cases do not provide further cases thereof.

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¹¹ Wright explicitly notes that the quoted reflections on the characteristic manifestation of vagueness ‘are, to stress, strictly inconsistent neither with Third Possibility nor, therefore, with Verdict Exclusion.’ 2003, 93 He nonetheless adds: ‘What they are inconsistent with is our knowing that either of those proposals correctly characterizes borderline cases—or better, if someone insist that either is a correct characterization, with there being any definite (known) borderline case in the sense of the characterization.’ 2003, 93. I am suggesting that they can be consistent in the latter case as well.

¹² I hope to attempt this elsewhere.



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