"Vagueness and Rationality" – Abstract

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Sometimes we organize our practical concerns around vague concepts. For example, I may care about *baldness*. I may, all other things being appropriately equal, prefer that I be (fully, determinately) hirsute rather than (fully, determinately) bald. Indeed, I may prefer that I spend $10,000 on cosmetic surgery and be (fully, determinately) hirsute rather than keep the money and be (fully, determinately) bald. But I may lack a general preference for having more hairs on my head. I may not prefer that I have 56,604, rather than 56,603 hairs on my head – after all, one hair is not going to make the difference between my being hirsute and my being bald.

Here is a sorites-like argument to the conclusion that preference-patterns like this are irrational. Consider, first, states of affairs S_0 to $S_{100,000}$.

S_0 In which I end up with 0 hairs on my head and pay $0
S_1 In which I end up with 1 hair on my head and pay $0.1
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$S_{100,000}$ In which I end up with 100,000 hairs on my head and pay $10,000

For any n, I prefer S_n to S_{n+1}. 'Why pay ten cents to end up with one extra hair?' But I do not prefer S_0 to $S_{100,000}$. I will happily pay $10,000 to be hirsute, rather than bald. So my preferences between states of affairs are intransitive. But rationality demands of me that my preferences between states of affairs be transitive.

The argument shows that if we organize our concerns around vague concepts (i.e. we are willing to pay $10,000 to end up hirsute, rather than bald) then we are rationally committed to caring about small increments (i.e. being willing to pay ten cents to end up with one extra hair).

Well and good. In this paper I will look at some sorts of cases in which there is a tension between organizing our concerns around vague concepts and caring about small increments.

The primary sort of case is one in which the increments are small enough to be *imperceptible*. Suppose that I am willing to pay $10,000 for a bright yellow suit, but unwilling to pay anything for a dull yellow suit. Many yellow suits are available for me to purchase, ranging from dull to dazzling, cheap to expensive. Consider states of affairs S_0 to S_{100}.

S_0 In which I end up with a dull yellow suit, and pay nothing
S_1 In which I end up with an imperceptibly less dull yellow suit and pay $100
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S_{100} In which I end up with a bright yellow suit and pay $10,000

I prefer S_{100} to S_0. So, if I am to avoid having intransitive preferences between states of affairs, there must be some n such that I fail to prefer S_n to S_{n+1}.

But, for any n, why not prefer S_n to S_{n+1}? – after all, the suits in S_n and S_{n+1} are imperceptibly different, and I am $100 better off in S_n. It seems irrational to pay an extra $100 for an imperceptibly brighter suit.

There is an apparent paradox here. Some philosophers have suggested that we should resolve it by conceding that there are cases in which it is rational to have intransitive preferences between states of affairs. I disagree. We should instead concede that it may be in our interest to pay for imperceptible phenomenal upgrades ($100 for an imperceptibly brighter suit). I argue that the thought that it is irrational to do so equivocates between two senses of 'imperceptible.'

This primary sort of case has an important moral. Because there are situations in which it is in our interest to pay for imperceptible phenomenal upgrades, there are situations in which we are unreliable authorities on our own hedonic good.

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