

“Epistemicism about vagueness and meta-linguistic safety”

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In his seminal book *Vagueness*, Timothy Williamson defends a combination of the following positions: First, sentences containing vague expressions satisfy (other things being equal) the relevant instances of the law of excluded middle and the law of bivalence. For example, even if Jack is a borderline case of baldness, then either Jack is bald or he is not bald, and ‘Jack is bald’ is either true or false. To speak more metaphorically: vague expressions have “sharp cut-off points”. Second, we do not and cannot know the sharp cut-off points of vague expressions. Third, the explanation of why we do not and cannot know the sharp cut-off points of vague expressions is a safety-based explanation. Roughly, the explanation is this: in close-by possible worlds, ones in which the use facts for a certain vague expression differ only ever so slightly than the actual use facts, the meaning and consequently the cut-off point of the expression is slightly different (to use the terminology of Hawthorne (2006), vague expressions are ‘semantically plastic’). This entails that our beliefs about the cut-off points of vague expressions are not safe and thus do not constitute knowledge.

Our aim in this paper is to challenge Williamson’s safety based explanation for why we cannot know the cut-off point of vague expressions. We assume throughout (most of) the paper that Williamson is correct in saying that vague expressions have sharp cut-off points, but we argue that Williamson’s explanation for why we do not and cannot know these cut-off points is unsatisfactory.

In §1, we present Williamson’s position in more detail. We note in particular that Williamson’s explanation of our ignorance implicitly relies on the following safety-principle being a necessary condition on knowledge:

The principle of meta-linguistic safety for belief (MBS): An agent X’s belief that p is safe if there is no close possible world w such that (i) in w , X has a belief that can be adequately described in w using ‘ p ’ (ii) that belief is false in w .

In §2, we argue that even if MBS were a necessary condition on knowledge that would not entail that we cannot know the cut-off points of vague predicates. In §3, we present our core objection to Williamson’s view. We argue that MBS is not a necessary condition on knowledge by presenting a series of cases where an agent has a belief which violates MBS but which nonetheless constitutes knowledge. In §4 we discuss an objection to our view, one according to which if it were allowed that we know non-meta-linguistic cut-off point claims (‘ m is the cut-off point for tallness’) that violate MBS, then it should be allowed that we know meta-linguistic cut-off point claims (‘ m is the cut-off point for ‘tall’’) which violates a more straightforward safety condition on knowledge. We argue that this objection is not compelling. Finally, in §5 we briefly discuss what are the possible directions that a theory of vagueness can take if our objections to Williamson’s theory are taken on board.

References

Hawthorne, J., ‘Epistemicism and semantic plasticity’, in his *Metaphysical Essays*, OUP, 2006.
Williamson, T. *Vagueness*, Routledge, 1994.