

Borderline cases and permissibility

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The paper explores the idea that when a proposition p is borderline, p is permissible: we can assert p , deny p or suspend judgement about p - for all we know, nothing mandates one of these attitudes. The vagueness of p leaves open what we have to *think* of p . Recognition that p is borderline amounts to be *tolerant* toward any of three following attitudes on p : 1) hesitant acceptance of p (positive view); 2) hesitant denial of p (negative view); 3) agnosticism about p (agnostic view). Let's say that p is *permissible* when it is *recognised* that it is borderline. Permissibility is thus an attitudinal notion, though it is linked to the status of being borderline, it is not just the notion of borderliness but, rather, our characteristic attitudes to towards three possible dispositions towards borderline propositions - i.e. denial, acceptance and suspension of judgment. When p is borderline, we consider permissible having any of the three latter attitudes towards p .

In the paper I scrutinize two main readings of permissibility. According to the first one - the *excusatory conception* - the tolerant attitude characteristic of permissibility is connected to the absence of epistemic blameworthiness. Whoever takes a view in borderline cases is not blameworthy of having overlooked some evidence since the fact is evidence-transcendent. Whoever decides to be agnostic is excused in the sense that, being inescapably ignorant of the fact of the matter, she is exculpated in forming any relevant belief because of the impossibility for her to get any further information - there is no further evidence she could acquire to take a view for, if she has not formed any belief, there is nothing more she can do to unlock her suspension of judgement. This reading assumes that there is no possibility of having knowledge in the borderline area and that, *a fortiori*, our judgements in borderline area are not knowledgeable. Whether or not there is there is actually a fact of the matter about p , knowledge whether p , when p is borderline, is foreclosed to us. But if this is so, then why should I assert or deny that

p when I know that I cannot but lack knowledge of p ? And why should I even entertain any belief about p ? Analogously, why should I ever be disposed allow someone to take a view if I know that she does not know and that she cannot know? The excusatory conception falls victim to the problem that agnosticism becomes rationally mandated - let's call this problem the *Agnostic Collapse* (originally formulated in Sorensen (1994)).

A second reading of permissibility - the *lacking-any-reason-against conception* - interprets "tolerant" as "lacking any reason against": recognition that a case is borderline amounts to lacking any evidence against a positive view, a negative view and a agnostic view. However, this reading is hostage again to the Agnostic Collapse problem. Suppose I recognise that a proposition p is borderline, this recognition is tantamount to the fact that I lack any reason against taking a positive view; but I also lack any reason against a negative view. Hence I lack reason against any view. But if I lack any reason against p and not- p , I have no reason for not- p and for not-not- p . Hence I should be agnostic on p .

The the Agnostic Collapse problem shows that permissibility cannot easily be stabilised to make justice to intended liberality of underlying intuition.

In the paper I explore whether either contextualism (Kamp (1981), Fara Graff (2002), Raffman (2005), Shapiro (2006) or supervaluationism (Fine (1975), McGee and McLaughlin (1994), Keefe (2000)) can spell out the excusatory conceptions thus escaping the Agnostic Collapse problem and I argue that they cannot. I consider then a refinement of the lacking-any-reason-against conception that could escape the Agnostic Collapse problem. According to this refinement the source of vagueness is a form of second-order ignorance: in borderline cases we gently disagree because we are not in a position to assess the knowledgeability of the verdicts. Borderline cases are cases where we cannot identify a warrant for a positive or negative verdict and where, at the present state of information, it is undecidable whether this unidentifiability is due to the impossibility to advance a knowledgeable verdict in the borderline area (Wright (2001)). Agnostic Collapse is avoided because, since we are not in a position to know whether borderline propositions are unknowable, we should abstain from blaming who takes any of the three views.

Crispin Wright's proposal in "Being on a Quandary" is here considered and criticized. The main problem with that proposal is that permissibility was explicated as the lack of warrant for the inference that goes from the denial of failure of Cognitive Command to Cognitive Command itself - where Cognitive Command - CC - says that, put it roughly, that a disagreement involves cognitive blameworthiness on the part of

one of the disputants. However, the attitude of accepting that there cannot be cognitive blameless disagreements while refraining to assert CC does not avoid the problem of Agnostic Collapse. In fact, according to quandaryism, given we lack knowledge of the existence of some evidence for taking a view in a borderline case, if a thinker has not formed any belief, there is nothing more she can reflectively do to unlock her suspension of judgement. The agnostic attitude seems to be a cautious attitude that is rationally appropriate in such cases. Moreover, according to quandaryism it is also true that any reflective subject who takes a positive or negative view cannot but believe that her view and the opposite one cannot be both right, and hence, provided acceptance of a view involves the attitude that the view should be taken, she cannot but regard the opposite view as something that should not be taken and hence incorrect. Quandaryism seems to justify only the agnostic view while at the same time leaving no conceptual space for any notion of permissibility.

It seems then that an agnostic theory must avoid agnostic collapse by refraining to infer from the impossibility of the falsity of CC to the impossibility of recognizing on the part of someone who takes a view in borderline cases any legitimacy to take the opposite view. By analysing borderline permissibility as a peculiar situation where the informative state of a thinker introduces a peculiar opacity to her reasons for or against the relevant borderline proposition, I try to show that this opacity is reflected in the reasons that we, as reflective thinkers who take a view in borderline cases, can attribute to whoever take an opposite view, thus avoiding to be committed to delegitimize the opposite view.

The paper ends exploring some objections and connecting this view to agnostic theories of vagueness.

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