

Williamson on Epistemicism

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October 5, 2005

1 Bivalence and epistemicism

Bivalence: if u says that P , then either u is true or u is false.

Williamson's argument that "we are ignorant of something" in borderline cases (p. 185):

Suppose that (i) an utterance of 'TW is thin' is either true or false. Then since (ii) we do not know that TW is thin and do not know that TW is not thin, (iii) we are ignorant of something. Either 'TW is thin' expresses an unknown truth, or 'TW is not thin' does.

Williamson thinks that most people working on vagueness will want to resist (iii). He does not consider the option of rejecting (ii). Thus, he assumes that rejecting (i) is the only way to avoid (iii).

- I don't, myself, see how the question about bivalence—a question about *utterances*—has any bearing on the question whether borderline cases are cases in which we are ignorant. Even if we rejected the first premise of Williamson's argument, we would still have to contend with the following argument not involving the notion of truth at all:

Either TW is thin, or TW is not thin. We do not know that TW is thin, and we do not know that TW is not thin. Therefore, either TW is thin and we do not know that TW is thin, or TW is not thin and we do not know that TW is not thin. In either case, we are ignorant of something.

- What are the objects of knowledge and ignorance? Propositions, or maybe facts. Not utterances, in any case! I can see how a denial of bivalence for propositions might play a role in enabling one to resist the foregoing argument. But I can't see any role for utterances.

2 The argument for bivalence

(T) If u says that P , u is true iff P

(F) If u says that P , u is false iff not P

3 The omniscient speakers argument

A simplified case: you are faced with a bunch of co-operative omniscient speakers, and a borderline heap. You issue them the following instruction: 'Say "Yes" if and only if this object is a heap.'

Suppose that each of them says 'Yes' if and only if the object is a heap. It follows that each of them says 'Yes' only if each other one of them says 'Yes'. Thus either all say 'Yes', or none do.

Critique of the argument: If the object is a borderline heap, then any of the speakers who definitely says 'Yes' or definitely fails to say 'Yes' is a borderline case of the predicate 'says "Yes" if and only if this object is a heap'. And it's hard to see how this could be any different for a speaker who

mumbles so that she is a borderline case of the predicate ‘says “Yes”’: there aren’t the required penumbral connections between ‘says “Yes”’ and ‘heap’.

What should a co-operative person do when given a command such that it can at best be indeterminate whether the command has been carried out? Act so as to make it indeterminate, and make one’s apologies...? In any case, there is no reason to expect that all co-operative omniscient speakers would react in the same way.

- Remember, on a classical-logic view like supervaluationism the claim that none of the speakers determinately carried out or failed to carry out your instruction is consistent with the claim that one of them did carry it out, and the others did not (it’s just that it’s indeterminate which).
- Suppose we just stipulate that it’s part of what we mean by ‘co-operative’ that a co-operative speaker, when given the command ‘Say “Yes” if and only if this object is a heap’, will behave as if solely motivated by the desire to say “yes” if and only if the object in question is a heap. Then we restore the proof that all co-operative omniscient speakers would say the same thing: for surely an omniscient speaker who was moved by that desire would be able to fulfill it. But we do this at the cost of making it indeterminate which of our original lineup of speakers was “co-operative” in our stipulated sense.

Williamson’s case is slightly different: his question, in effect, is not ‘Say “Yes” if and only if this object is a heap’ but ‘Say “Yes” if and only if it is mandatory for you to apply the term “heap” to this argument’. This doesn’t make any important difference.

4 Objections

- (i) Objections based on the assumption that necessary truths must be knowable
- (ii) ‘How could our use of “can make a heap” determine one particular number n as the least one to which that predicate applies?’
- (iii) What if the facts about use are symmetric? Williamson: falsehood is the default.
 - Can we imagine cases where the symmetry can’t be broken in this way? E.g. couldn’t we be related symmetrically to two of the candidates for being the referent of a name like ‘Kilimanjaro’, even though the name refers to just one of them?
 - i and $-i$ (Brandom)
- (iv) Does epistemicism entail that we don’t know what our words mean?

5 Margins for error

Form of an ordinary margin-for-error principle: if one knows that P , then in all situations that are sufficiently like one’s actual situation in relevant respects, P .

Nothing of this form can explain our failure to know a necessary truth, e.g. that 100 grains can [can’t] make a heap.

Williamson suggests that we should instead appeal to something along the following lines: if one knows that P *in virtue of a certain particular judgement*, then in all situations that are sufficiently

like one's actual situation in relevant respects in which one makes that particular judgement, one thereby judges something true.

- Put this way, the view seems to presuppose a conception of believing on which it involves the occurrence of something like an interior assertion—a particular capable of having a different content from its actual content.

How does this apply to vagueness? The claim is that any particular judgment by which I might believe that, say, chartreuse is yellow will be a judgment of something false at some relevantly similar worlds. Which ones? Those in which 'chartreuse' is used slightly differently—or at least, in which whatever facts determine the content of that judgment are slightly different in such a way as to assign it a false content.

- Can we divorce the proposal from the conception of believing as involving something like inner assertion? Perhaps by invoking the idea of 'mechanisms' (Sainsbury). Idea: one knows that P only if one is caused to believe that P by a mechanism that couldn't *easily* have caused one to believe something false.
- Is it plausible that we don't have access to any mechanisms that could produce belief that chartreuse is yellow without producing false belief at the nearby worlds Williamson is talking about?

6 What is the epistemic theory of indefiniteness?

The idea is that it is indefinite that P iff we cannot know whether P for a certain distinctive kind of reason. But what, exactly?

Williamson: 'The vagueness of an expression consists in the semantic differences between it and other possible expressions that would be indiscriminable by those who understood them. Similarly, the vagueness of a concept consists in the differences between it and other possible concepts that would be indiscriminable by those who grasped them.'

Suggests something like this: a sentence S is definitely true iff for every proposition P such that we cannot know that S does not express P , P is true.

What about propositions? Perhaps this: a proposition P is definitely true iff for every proposition P' such that we cannot know that $P \neq P'$, P' is true.