CONTEXTUALISM AND THE PRINCIPLE OF TOLERANCE

Paula SWEENEY
University of Aberdeen

Summary
When we bring together certain plausible and compatible principles guiding the use of vague predicates, the inclination to accept that vague predicates are tolerant is significantly weakened. As the principle of tolerance is a troublesome, paradox inducing principle, a theory giving a satisfactory account of the nature of vague predicates and accounting for the appeal of the sorites paradox without recourse to the principle of tolerance is a worthy addition to the vagueness debate. The theory offered, Contextual Intolerance, draws considerably on Sainsbury’s (1996) thesis of the boundarylessness of vague concepts and on the contextualist theories of vagueness offered by Stewart Shapiro (2003, 2006) and Diana Raffman (1994).

1. Introduction

The motivating intuition behind the principle of tolerance is that vague predicates are such that, if the predicate applies to an object \( n \), then the predicate must also apply to an object that is suitably similar to \( n \) in the relevant respect. A definition of what it takes for a predicate ‘is \( F \)’ to be tolerant was first given by Crispin Wright:

\[
\text{Standard Tolerance: “Whereas large enough differences in } F \text{'s parameter of application sometimes matter to the justice with which it is applied, some small enough difference never thus matters.” (Wright 1976, 334)}
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If we stipulate that a vague predicate, e.g. ‘is bald’, is such that standard tolerance governs competence with use or is at the very least a semantic default, then under certain sorites-prone conditions standard tolerance shows itself to be a troublesome, paradox inducing, principle. An example of sorites-prone conditions for ‘is bald’ is a series of 100,000 men, where #1 has no hairs on his head, #100,000 has 99,999...
hairs, and each man in the series has exactly one more hair than his predecessor.

The standard version of the sorites paradox sees a false conclusion reached from apparently true premises via apparently valid reasoning. Consider this example ranging over the series of 100,000 men, where $F$ schematises the vague predicate ‘is bald’:

Base step: $F1$

Universal Generalisation: $(\forall x)(Fx \rightarrow Fx')$

Conclusion: $F100,000$

The base step represents the fact that the first man in the series is bald. The universal generalisation represents our tolerance intuition that, for any object that satisfies the predicate ‘is bald’, an object which is relevantly similar will also satisfy the predicate. Elementary reasoning via universal instantiation and modus ponens leads to the conclusion $F100,000$, yet a man with 99,999 hairs clearly does not satisfy the predicate ‘is bald’, hence the paradox.

Contextualist solutions to the sorites rely on some form of what Åkerman and Greenough call weak tolerance;

Weak Tolerance: “It is not the case that: there is a context of utterance C and there is an $x$ such that $x$ and $x'$ are considered together as a pair by a single subject in C and ‘is $F$’ (as used in C) is true of $x$ and ‘is $F$’ (as used in C) is false of $x'$, (where $x'$ is adjacent to $x$ in the sorites series running from $F$ to not-$F$).” (Åkerman and Greenough 2010, 276)

Weak tolerance, henceforth simply tolerance, has been brought to bear by contextualists in different forms. Diana Raffman represents tolerance with IP*,

IP*: “for any $n$, if patch #n is red then patch #(n+1) is red, relative to a pair-wise presentational context”. (1994, 68)

Delia Graff Fara represents tolerance with Salient Similarity (SS),

SS: “if two things are saliently similar, then it cannot be that one is in the extension of the predicate, or in its anti-extension, while the other is not.” (2000, 57)

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1. Where $x'$ is a complex expression involving the bound variable $x$, equivalent to a description such as ‘the successor of $x$’. 