Penumbral Knowledge

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My target is the schema:

PRECLUSION

If it is vague whether p, then S does not know that p.

or, equivalently,

If S knows that p, then definitely p.

where

definitely $p =_{df} p$ and it is not vague whether p.

What turns on PRECLUSION?

- (A) (i) It is widely thought to be a conceptual truth; (ii) it is a prediction of epistemicism; (iii) the theoretical role of vagueness.
- (B) (i) It threatens Cartesianism about self-knowledge; (ii) it also threatens Chalmers (2012)-style *a priori* scrutability; (iii) vagueness and consciousness.

The Argument from Truth

TRUTHINESS: If S knows that p, then it is true that p.

SUPERTRUTH: If it is true that p, then definitely p.

Problem: TRUTHINESS seems to be motivated by the two schemata

FACTIVITY: If S knows that p, then p.

CAPTURE: If p, then it is true that p.

and CAPTURE and SUPERTRUTH together entail the problematic

COLLAPSE: p if and only if definitely p.

The Argument from Reticence

Perceptually and cognitively able cooperative people will not assert that p when confronted with a paradigm case of it being vague whether p (e.g., a borderline case in a sorites series). The best explanation of this reticence is that they do not know that p, supporting PRECLUSION.

Penumbral Knowledge¹

S has penumbral knowledge regarding $p =_{df}$ throughout the sorites series with respect to p: if p, then S knows that p

EXCLUDED MIDDLE: p or not-p.

- As he dozes off, Descartes has penumbral knowledge regarding the proposition that he is thinking.
- As her head is chopped off, Marie Antoinette has penumbral knowledge regarding the proposition that she knows that she has been condemned to die.
- As the referent of "arthritis" in English shifts from arthritis to arthritis*, Oscar has penumbral knowledge regarding the proposition that he believes that arthritis is painful.

The argument against PRECLUSION also works in logics like those of Field (2008) in which by giving up EXCLUDED MIDDLE we get to say that "p, and it is vague whether p" is genuinely inconsistent.²

 $^1\mathrm{Dorr}$ (2003), Barnett (2011), and Weatherson (unpublished) give very different arguments against PRECLUSION.

²Here is the argument:

1. $Vp \rightarrow \neg Kp$	Preclusion
2. $p \to Kp$	penumbral knowledge
3. $\neg Kp \rightarrow \neg p$	2, contraposition
4. Vp	premise
5. $\neg p$	1, 3, 4, modus ponens
6. $V \neg p$	4
7. ⊥	5, 6

A better principle

DEFINITENESS: If S knows that p, then definitely (if S believes that p, then p).

Compare:

BAD PRINCIPLE: If S knows that p, then nearby necessarily p.

SIMPLE SAFETY: If S knows that p, then nearby necessarily (if S believes that p, then p).

where

nearby necessarily $p =_{df}$ it could not easily have failed to be the case that p

The Argument from Semantic Plasticity (Williamson, 1994)

If it is vague whether p and S believes that p by accepting a sentence φ that means that p in her public language, then S could have easily had a false belief in accepting φ , since, as the result of small changes in communitywide usage to which S's acceptance of φ is insensitive, φ could have easily meant something different from what it actually means and, moreover, have meant something false. S's belief is therefore be unsafe, and so does not amount to knowledge.

The challenge: "Savoir" could easily have expressed in French an attitude knowledge⁺ slightly more demanding than knowledge, in which case Marie Antoinette would in her last moments have falsely believed that she knew⁺ that she had been condemned to die.

Three possible rejoinders:

- 1. Safety-theoretic claims should be driven by judgments about cases, not vice versa.
- 2. Semantic plasticity leads to a host of puzzles, some of the most attractive solutions to which also defuse the above argument for PRECLUSION. (Dorr and Hawthorne, 2014)
- 3. Knowledge and belief may be 'joints'. (Williamson, 2000)

Further questions: How easy to come by is penumbral knowledge? Might it offer a way to resist Williamson's anti-luminosity argument?

References

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