Vagueness and Indeterminacy

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This course explores central philosophical questions about vagueness and indeterminacy. Many of our ordinary expressions seem to have borderline cases: is someone who is 180 cm tall tall? Is a collection of grains of sand a heap? Such cases give rise to the Sorites paradox, which seems to show that our ordinary ways of thinking and speaking are incoherent. How should we respond to this problem? Is vagueness a feature of language, of thought, or even of reality itself? Can a sentence be neither determinately true nor determinately false? And how should we reason when faced with such indeterminacy?

We will begin by examining the main philosophical theories of vagueness and the challenges they face. We will then explore whether similar forms of indeterminacy arise in other domains, including metaphysics, ethics, and mathematics. Throughout, we will ask whether these are manifestations of a single underlying phenomenon, and what their implications are for our understanding of truth, meaning, and rationality.

(For some background, see the Stanford Encyclopedia entry on Vagueness.)

Weekly readings are tentative and subject to revision, especially for later weeks. An asterisk marks optional readings.

Week 1: **Introduction: The Sorites and the Threat of Incoherence**
- Dummett: Wang's Paradox
- *Sorensen: Vagueness (SEP entry)
- *Fara: Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness
- *Heck: Semantic Accounts of Vagueness
- *Stanley: Context, Interest Relativity, and the Sorites

Week 2: **Degrees of Truth**
- Williamson: *Vagueness*, Ch. 4, Many-Valued Logic and Degrees of Truth
- Smith: *Vagueness and Degrees of Truth* (extracts)

Week 3: **Supervaluationism**
- Fine: Vagueness, Truth and Logic
- *Williamson: *Vagueness*, Ch. 5, Supervaluations

Week 4: **Epistemicism**
- Williamson: *Vagueness*, Ch. 7, Vagueness and Ignorance, and Ch. 8, Inexact Knowledge

Week 5: **Vagueness in Thought**
- Bacon: *Vagueness and Thought* (selected chapters)

Week 6: **Revising the Logic**
- Wright: Intuitionism and the Sorites Paradox
- Cobreros, Égré, Ripley and van Rooij: Tolerant, Classical, Strict

Week 7: **Higher-Order Vagueness and Definiteness**

Williamson: On the Structure of Higher-Order Vagueness
McGee and McLaughlin: Distinctions Without a Difference
*Williamson: Definiteness and Knowability
*Fine: The Impossibility of Vagueness

Week 8: **Metaphysics I: Vague Objects**

Evans: Can There Be Vague Objects?
Lewis: Vague Identity: Evans Misunderstood
*Barnes and Williams: A Theory of Metaphysical Indeterminacy

Week 9: **Metaphysics II: Vague Existence**

Sider: *Four-Dimensionalism* (extracts on the argument from vagueness)
Roberts: Imprecise Quantification

Week 10: **Ethics**

Schoenfield: Moral Vagueness Is Ontic Vagueness
Sud: Moral Vagueness as Semantic Vagueness
*Chang: The Possibility of Parity

Week 11: **Mathematics**

Field: Which Undecidable Mathematical Sentences Have Determinate Truth Values?
Warren and Waxman: A Metasemantic Challenge for Mathematical Determinacy

Week 12: **The Attitude: What Is It to Take Something to Be Indeterminate?**

Williams: Decision Making under Indeterminacy
Field: Indeterminacy, Degree of Belief, and Excluded Middle

Week 13: **Student Presentations**