
Review: Words without Knowledge

Reviewed Work(s): Vagueness and Contradiction by Roy Sorensen

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Words Without Knowledge

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Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? *Job* 14; 1.

1. Welcome to Epistemicism

In *Blindspots* (1988) Roy Sorensen gave us the epistemic view of vagueness. The view was taken up and articulated in rigorous fashion by Tim Williamson in *Vagueness* (1994). Thirteen years after *Blindspots* Sorensen has come back to articulate the theory in his own way in *Vagueness and Contradiction* (2001).¹ The articulated theory is at once extremely conservative, taking “classical” logic simply as a given, and extremely radical, arguing that vagueness involves us in rationally believing infinitely many *a priori* (but false) contradictions. This bold line is therefore likely to draw flak from radicals and conservatives alike.

The core of the epistemicist position, at least as both Sorensen and Williamson subscribe to it, is as follows:

1. Vague predicates have the same classical, two-valued, semantics as precise predicates.
2. Consequently, in a soritical progression, there is a precise cut off point between truth and falsity.
3. We cannot, however, know where this cut off point is.

Epistemicism is a highly counter-intuitive view. Point 2, in particular, seems incredible. Even Sorensen confesses that he has trouble believing it (p. 20). The main aim of *Vagueness and Contradiction* is to try to defuse the inconceivability that seems to go with the thought of precise cut-off points (p. 15):

¹ In what follows, page references are to this unless otherwise indicated. All italics in quotations are original.

[T]he book's primary concern is *incredulity*... The basic argument for boundaries ... has been in wide circulation for many years. Yet less than 10 per cent of current experts are persuaded by it. Epistemicism strikes ... [the rest] as conceptually absurd. Let me put their objection in raw form: 'Sharp boundaries for vague predicates are inconceivable. What is inconceivable is impossible. Therefore, vague predicates cannot have sharp boundaries.' My goal is to furnish an account of vagueness that replies to this objection and its refinements.

And rather than explaining vagueness in terms of unknowability, as does Williamson, Sorensen wants to reverse the picture (p. 13):

I prefer an account in which vagueness arises from a semantic feature (such as truthmaker gaps) which precipitates ignorance as a necessary byproduct.

Sorensen's book is charming, engagingly written, full of clever arguments and interesting ideas. And though I am not an epistemicist, there is, in fact, much in the book that I agree with. In good philosophical spirit, I shall concentrate here on the bits that I disagree with, though. Of course one cannot do justice to the content of the book in a short article like this. I can but concentrate on aspects of it; I will restrict myself to chipping away at some of the logical protective belt with which Sorensen surrounds epistemicism.²

2. Incredibility

Let us start with a basic statement of Sorensen's explanation of the incredibility of epistemicism. Consider Sorensen's favourite sorites argument. 0 seconds after noon is noonish. For any i , if i seconds after noon is noonish so is $i+1$ seconds. So, e.g., n seconds after noon is noonish—where n is a very large number, say enough to make the time midnight. The argument can be put in the form of *n modus ponens* inference. Let $F(x)$ be the predicate ' x seconds after noon is noonish'. Then we have:

$$\begin{array}{c}
 \frac{F(0) \quad F(0) \supset F(1)}{F(1)} \quad \frac{F(1) \supset F(2)}{F(2)} \\
 \hline
 \vdots \\
 \frac{F(n-1) \quad F(n-1) \supset F(n)}{F(n)}
 \end{array}$$

Despite appearances, if classical logic is correct, there is a last i such that $F(i)$ is true and $F(i+1)$ is false. Let this be k . Every (material) conditional of the form $F(i) \supset F(i+1)$ is therefore true, except one, where $i = k$, which is false. Correspondingly their negations, $F(i) \wedge \neg F(i+1)$, which we may call *thresh-*

² I much appreciated generous comments that I received from Sorensen on a first draft of this essay, which greatly improved it.

old statements, are all false, with the exception of $i = k$, which is true. Now, Sorensen tells us (p. 18 f.):

All threshold statements look worse than unassertible; they look *contradictory*. I now think that the correct explanation of this appearance is that almost all threshold statements are indeed contradictions... [T]hey owe their unbelievability to representational constraints which compel us to round off insignificant possibilities. In a typical sorites, almost all of the hypotheses as to where the boundary might be have the same semantic status as 'Sixteen is a large number but seventeen is not a large number'. Moreover, the single true threshold statement in the sequence is such that competent speakers of English must construe it as a contradiction. Thus, I believe 'There is a minimum number of sands needed to make a heap' is a tautology but each proposal for the minimum ought to be regarded as a contradiction.

In several chapters of the book Sorensen attempts to soften the blow of this position by arguing, amongst other things, that the rational person must believe many contradictory things which have nothing to do with vagueness.

What is one to say about this view? Note that '16 seconds past noon is noonish, but 17 seconds is not' is certainly not contradictory in the sense of being logically false. We must therefore take the sense of contradiction that Sorensen has in mind differently: *false in all possible worlds* will do. The thought, then, is that we find the true threshold statement inconceivable because all the others are contradictory in this sense. But that, on its own, cannot explain the matter. Suppose that I have a bunch of sentences, all of which are contradictory—even logically false—except one, which is logically true, though I don't know which. There is nothing inconceivable about a particular one of them being that one. There must be more to it than this.

There is. In the previous quotation, Sorensen alludes to speaker-competence. The role of this is explained at greater length as follows (p. 58):

Each of [the conditionals in a sorites argument] seems analytically true because they manifest our understanding that 'noonish' is tolerant. Whenever we believe that n seconds after noon is noonish, we are compelled to believe that $n + 1$ seconds is noonish. This is a psychological compulsion. But it is not a mere psychological compulsion. The compulsion is part of the psychology of language and hence has a normative aspect. We can only be inducted into a language in so far as we submit to conditionals such as these. We have a conditional *obligation* to believe each of the tolerance conditionals: if you wish to use 'noonish', then you must cooperate by ignoring insignificant differences.

Thus, there is something about sorites (tolerance) conditionals that forces them upon us. Specifically, if you don't subscribe to such conditionals (*a priori* as Sorensen says at other places), you don't *understand* the vague predicate concerned. Understand what? Presumably the meaning of the predicate. But that cannot be right. If Epistemicism is right, the meaning of the predicate is precisely not such as to make every threshold statement false. To understand it in such a way that it does must therefore be precisely to *misunderstand* it.

Perhaps what one does not understand is not the meaning of the predicate but its use (assuming that not all pragmatic features are semantic): someone who does not take it that [if F (say) can legitimately be applied to i —in whatever pragmatic sense of legitimacy is appropriate—it can legitimately be applied to $i + 1$] does not understand the use of the predicate. But this can't be right either. If this conditional really governed the use of F , it would be legitimate to apply 'noonish' to midnight, which it obviously isn't. Someone who takes things in this way therefore simply misunderstands the use of the predicate.

3. Cut-Off Points

So much for why we find the existence of a cut-off point counter-intuitive. Even if the explanation Sorensen offers of this is correct, there remains the question of how it is possible, when things are correctly understood, for there to be a cut-off at all. In chapter 11, Sorensen addresses this issue and offers us a choice. Truth is to have either a deflationist or a correspondence understanding. Either, for different reasons, can be harnessed to do the required job.

Now of course, one might understand truth in some other way as well. But let us pass this over. Why can each do the job? Let us start with the first alternative. We want to know what it is about, say, 15 minutes after noon that makes it the last noonish instant. Sorensen says (p. 165):

...a deflationist theory of truth forms a congenial setting by quietly smothering the primal plea. If 'true' does little more than remove quotation marks and serve as a sentence variable, then talk of 'facts' is similarly thin and linguistic. What makes a borderline tall man actually tall? Well, the *fact* that he is tall. What is the nature of that fact? Well, it just consists in 'He is tall' being true. Facts and truths are just two sides of the same slim coin.

This, I think, misses the point. Deflationism does not smother the "primal plea" at all. Even if one is a deflationist, it is still a sensible—and pressing—question to ask why 15, and not some other, is the last noonish minute past noon. All that an appeal to deflationism does is deprive us of any independent notion of fact with which to frame an answer to this question. The question remains just as piquant.

In fact, most of Sorensen's discussion in this chapter concerns the other possibility, so let us look more closely at that. Let us suppose a correspondence theory of truth. What is it that makes k the cut off point in a soritical progression? Sorensen answers *nothing*. There is one i between 0 and n for which $F(i) \wedge \neg F(i+1)$ is true, but there is no extra-linguistic fact in virtue of which it is the one it is, k . In a currently fashionable jargon, $F(k) \wedge \neg F(k+1)$ has no truth-maker. (And this is why one cannot know where k is: there is no fact to know.)

Sorensen likens the situation to that concerning what he calls the "no-no" paradox. Consider a business card, on each side of which is written a single

sentence: *the sentence on the other side is false*. A little thought assures that there is only one consistent assignment of truth values to these two sentences: one is true; the other is false. But which is the true one? Since the situation is completely symmetrical, there is nothing in virtue of which it is one rather than the other. Despite this, classical logic assures us that it is one or the other.

I agree with Sorensen that the sorites case and the “no-no” paradox are on a par. So let us focus on the latter. As Sorensen points out, the possibility that the two sentences in question have different semantic properties flies in the face of the truth-maker principle, that all truths have truth makers; but this is not a terribly novel or radical admission: there are fairly standard versions of the correspondence theory of truth that hold this. (For example, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* holds that tautologies have no truth-makers.) What is much worse is that the possibility is a manifest *a priori* repugnance. The situation concerning the card is, in all respects, symmetrical; it cannot, therefore, have an asymmetric upshot. Either both sentences are true, or both are false. But if both sentences are true, they are false as well; and if both sentences are false, they are true as well. Hence, it would seem, both sentences are true and false.³

The possibility of being both true and false means revising orthodox logical theory, but before we turn to that, let us pause to ask whether, even if Sorensen were right about the absence of a truth maker, this would explain why the true threshold statement is unknowable. I doubt it. If $F(k) \wedge \neg F(k+1)$ had no truth value, it would of course follow that we cannot know it. But Sorensen thinks that it is true, just not made so. Becoming acquainted with the truth-maker of a truth may be one route to knowledge of its truth; but it is certainly not the only one. I was never acquainted with Caesar, but I know that he died on the Ides of March. Nor am I, or anybody else, acquainted with the truth-makers of the laws of Special Relativity—if they have ones—but we know these to be true too. Finally, consider necessary truths. If these have truth-makers at all, they are presumably not the kind of thing with which we can be acquainted. Yet it remains the case that we can know many such truths: we know that $1+1=2$; and even Sorensen thinks that you can know that if 1 second after noon is noonish, so is 2 seconds. *a priori* reasoning would seem to be an independent source of knowledge about necessary truths.

³ There is, of course, another symmetrical possibility: that they are both neither true nor false. In particular, then, each is not false. But each says the other *is* false; so each is false after all—and so true. Better to say that the sentences are both true and false than that they are both true and false and neither true nor false.

4. Revising “Logic”

The previous section raised the possibility of subscribing to a logic with “truth value gluts”, not “classical” logic. Since, as I have noted, an endorsement of classical logic is part of Sorensen’s defence of epistemicism, let us turn to this. (Of course, Sorensen does not need all of classical logic to support his view—only a part of it. But that part is the part that concerns the conditional, and this is one of its more sensitive parts.)

Let us grant that we have a belief in classical logic (or at least that Sorensen and *some* of his logician friends at the start of the 21st Century have such a belief); we (p.8):

...should not retreat from standard logic to rescue speculative hypotheses about how language operates. Change in the web of belief should be made at the most peripheral portion available. Beliefs about how language works are far more peripheral than beliefs about logic. After all, anti-boundary beliefs emanate from philosophy of language, not linguistics or some other scientific discipline. Instead of changing logic, we should change our opinions about how language works.

He goes on to point out that native speakers have impressive linguistic knowledge, but *theorising* about how language works is a quite different—and very fallible—matter.

Now let us get a few things straight here. For a start, native reasoners have impressive knowledge of ratiocination too, but theorising about how reasoning works is a quite different—and very fallible—matter. When we do theorise, we construct theories of deductive consequence, amongst other things; that is, we construct theories of validity—what follows from what and why. All being well, we believe the best theory that we have. But as with all theories, better ones may turn up. This is what happens when we revise our beliefs about logic. Notice that this is not revising logic itself, whatever, exactly, that might mean. Similarly, when we revise our theory of language, we do not revise the language we speak.

Notice, also, that in the two and a half thousand year Western history of logic, orthodox beliefs about logic have been revised many times. Aristotle and the medievals subscribed to principles of syllogistic reasoning that we now take to be invalid (such as *Darapti*);⁴ theories of what principles of inference concerning the conditional are correct have come and gone... and come again;⁵ principles of modal inference have varied in fashion; the Law of Bivalence was endorsed by the Stoics and some medievals, but rejected by Aristotle (arguably) and intuitionists; and so on.

Now, what of this theory, “classical logic”, in which Sorensen puts such faith? It is a creature of the late 19th Century, and arose out of the desire for a

⁴ See Priest (2003) for discussion.

⁵ See Sylvan (2000) for some of the history.

logical vehicle that was adequate for reasoning about foundational issues in mathematics. This it did, we may agree, very well. But does this give us any reason to suppose that the logic generalises to other sorts of topic? After all, foundational reasoning does not involve intentional predicates, tenses, fictional objects, counterfactuals... or, of course, vague predicates. Even if it is correct for foundational reasoning, therefore, there is no reason to suppose that it applies to vague discourse—any more than the adequacy of classical physics for reasoning about macroscopic objects gives reason to believe that it applies to sub-atomic particles.⁶

Sorensen claims (p. 9) that the history of deviant logics is without a single successful philosophical application.⁷ It should not be forgotten that what he calls classical logic was once itself the deviant logic. A generation of traditional logicians argued against the new “mathematical logic” in the first part of the 20th century. He also claims (p. 11) that in:

...the realm of science and mathematics, a conflict with standard logic is invariably fatal. Scientists and mathematicians have thought it deeply ad hoc to rescue a theory by altering logic.

But this is exactly what did happen during that period. According to Aristotelian syllogistic, much mathematical reasoning is not deductively valid; but it was the logical theory that was revised and the mathematics that was preserved.

5. Dialetheism

But classical logic is not perfect, even in the area for which it was designed. The foundations of mathematics come with paradoxes, *prima facie* contradictions. And “classical logic” has always had trouble reasoning about inconsistent situations. It would seem that such situations can have a quite determinate and non-trivial structure; but the principle of Explosion (a contradiction entails everything) makes a real mess of them.

Sorensen mentions one apparently inconsistent situation himself (p. 76 ff.): Chihara’s Secretaries Liberation Club.⁸ This is a club to be eligible for membership of which a person has to be a secretary of a club which they are not eligible to join. The secretary of this club both is and is not eligible to join. But a female secretary of a male club is eligible to join and a male sec-

⁶ I am not suggesting pluralism about logic here: that different domains of discourse may require different logics; simply that classical logic may be a special case of a more general logic, one that is obtained when the general logic is restricted to a special case—the precise, the extensional, or whatever.

⁷ This is false, even in the sense that he intends it. To cite just one example, whatever one thinks about impossible worlds, their manifest ability to give an account of counterfactual conditionals with necessarily false antecedents—a matter which causes embarrassment for those who would do without them—cannot be denied.

⁸ For another, fictional, situation, see Priest (1997).

retary of a male club is not (both quite consistently). (We suppose that each person is secretary of at most one club.) Not that Sorensen thinks that this is a genuinely inconsistent situation. He says that the rules of the club simply cannot cover the club's own secretary. And that's that. But this rings hollow. Suppose that I am the person who wrote the rules; whether aware of the lurking contradiction or not, when I formulated them I said 'all secretaries' and I *meant* all secretaries—just ask me.⁹

Though Sorensen does not think that there are any inconsistent situations, he still thinks that the rational person must believe infinitely many contradictions. Lest one might suspect him of harbouring sympathies with dialetheism, and its concomitant paraconsistency, he therefore serves up an attack on dialetheists such as myself (p. 147):¹⁰

Priest uses 'contradiction' in a deviant way—he thinks that a few contradictions are *both* true and false! This deprives contradiction of its constitutive role in *reductio ad absurdum*. Instead of being the point of closure in a premise-less refutation, the 'contradiction' becomes a deniable assumption in a *modus tollens* argument. Consequently, Priest seems as much a skeptic about the existence of contradictions as he seems to be a daringly open-minded believer in contradictions.

Now, I am certainly no skeptic about contradictions in Sorensen's sense. I believe that there is a logical constant, \perp , that entails everything. If you want to gloss it, 'Everything is true' will do nicely. And I think that someone who accepts an argument showing that A entails \perp , and who does not reject A , is irrational, just as much as any classical logician does.¹¹ I just deny that what I call a contradiction, something of the form $A \wedge \neg A$, is logically equivalent to \perp simply in virtue of its form.¹² Of course, classical logic identifies the different things that Sorensen and I call contradictions; paraconsistent logics keep them apart. It is not uncommon in the history of science for notions that had hitherto been thought the same to be distinguished by a more discriminating theory. (Think, for example, of *rest mass* and *inertial mass* in Newtonian and Relativistic dynamics.) And claiming that the role of contradictions (in my sense) in *reductio* reasoning is *constitutive* of their sense is just a bit of foot-stamping.

6. Conclusion

I have examined Sorensen's unargued appeal to classical logic; his account of why we find the existence of cut-off points incredible; and his explanation of the location of a cut-off point. All of these, I have argued, do not stand up to inspection. None of this shows that epistemicism is false. But without *ade-*

⁹ For a fuller discussion, see ch. 13 of Priest (1987), esp. 13.5.

¹⁰ See also p. 77.

¹¹ See Priest (1999).

¹² Though some things of this form are certainly logically equivalent to it, e.g., $\perp \wedge \neg \perp$.

quate accounts of such things, vague words without knowledge of cut-offs is indeed a dark counsel.

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