

[for *The Philosophical Review*]

Stewart Shapiro, *Vagueness in Context*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xiv, 226.

Stewart Shapiro's book develops a contextualist approach to vagueness. It's chock-full of ideas and arguments, laid out in wonderfully limpid prose. Anyone working on vagueness (or the other topics it touches on—see below) will want to read it.

According to Shapiro, vague terms have borderline cases: there are objects to which the term neither determinately applies nor determinately does not apply. A term determinately applies in a context iff the term's meaning and the non-linguistic facts determine that they do. The non-linguistic facts include the "external" context: "comparison class, paradigm cases, contrasting cases, etc." (33) But *external*-context-sensitivity is not what's central to Shapiro's contextualism. Even fixing external context, vague terms' (anti-)extensions exhibit sensitivity to *internal* context: the decisions of competent speakers. According to Shapiro's *open texture* thesis, for each borderline case, there is some circumstance in which a speaker, consistently with the term's meaning and the non-linguistic facts, can judge it to fall into the term's extension and some circumstance in which the speaker can judge it to fall into the term's anti-extension: she can "go either way." Moreover, borderline sentences are Euthyphronically *judgment-dependent*: a competent speaker's judging a borderline to fall into a term's (anti-)extension makes it so. For Shapiro, then, a sentence can be true but indeterminate: a case left unsettled by meaning and the non-linguistic facts (and thus indeterminate, or borderline) may be made true by a competent speaker's judgment. Importantly, among the non-linguistic facts that constrain speakers' judgments (at least in the cases Shapiro cares about) is a principle of *tolerance*: for all x and y , if x and y differ marginally in the relevant respect (henceforth, M_{xy}), then if one competently judges Bx , one cannot competently judge y in any other manner in the same (total) context.¹ This does not require that one judge By : one might not consider the matter at all. So long as *some* borderline case remains unresolved, the inductive sorites premise—for all x and y , if M_{xy} , then, if Bx , then By —is neither true nor false. If we consider a borderline case and judge it one way or the other regarding B , then tolerance and consistency require that some *other* borderline be unresolved (even if in a previous context it *was* resolved).

Shapiro lays out this view of vagueness in Chapter 1 without directly arguing for its main claims. The hope is that they comprise an attractive package relative to leading rivals, the pros and cons of which are for the most part assumed familiar to readers. Following a chapter on the role of formal languages in modeling natural languages, Chapters 3 and 4 develop a detailed model theory that embodies Shapiro's view of vagueness and thus provides guidance for understanding the logic of languages containing vague terms. Chapter 5 considers higher-order vagueness and how the model theory might be modified to accommodate it. Chapter 6 extends the view to handle vague

¹ Shapiro doesn't claim that tolerance is part of a vague term's *meaning*. He allows that a speaker may sometimes draw a sharp boundary for current purposes without being semantically incompetent or changing the meaning of the term. But he is concerned with situations in which tolerance is "in force." (It would be consistent with his view to maintain that tolerance is a semantic default: in force unless reasonably overridden by current needs.)

singular terms. Chapter 7 discusses whether vagueness is a linguistic phenomenon and whether vague discourse is objective. Finally, an Appendix takes up Waismann's views on open texture and analyticity.

Shapiro's book is rich, and there is much to argue about. I limit myself to tensions between *tolerance* and both *open texture* and Shapiro's definition of determinacy. For critical discussion of other aspects of Shapiro's views, see Eklund 2006, Keefe 2007, and Sorensen 2008.

Open texture requires that borderline cases *can* go either way, but *tolerance* requires that borderline cases sufficiently similar to determinate cases *cannot* go either way. Suppose *c* is determinately *B*, a competent speaker correctly judges *Bc*, *c'* is borderline *B*, and *Mcc'*. Then, by *tolerance*, the speaker cannot judge not-*Bc'*. Moreover, assuming external context is held fixed, there is *no* context in which a speaker could competently judge not-*Bc'*. (Suppose otherwise. Then, given *tolerance*, the speaker could *not* competently judge *Bc*. But *c* is determinately *B*—that is, made true by the meaning of *B* and the non-linguistic facts—and a speaker is competent with respect to *B* if her judgments regarding *B*-ness are consistent with *B*'s meaning and the non-linguistic facts. So, no matter the internal context, a speaker *can* competently judge *Bc*.) But that there is *no* context in which a speaker could competently judge not-*Bc'* conflicts with its being a borderline case. For, according to *open texture*, if *c'* is borderline *B*, then there is some internal context in which one *can* judge not-*Bc'*.

One might reply that this argument's suppositions are questionable when there is higher-order vagueness. Shapiro is officially unsure whether there *is* any (so-called) higher-order vagueness.² But suppose there is. The thought, then, is that nothing in Shapiro's model theory guarantees that there is a determinate case and a borderline case that differ marginally. But does anything guarantee that there will *not* be, for some vague predicate? Even if a large number of higher-order-vague cases intervene between *c* and *c'* along the comparative-*B*-ness-dimension, the number of intervening cases does not settle whether *Mcc'*. (If the domain, ordered by comparative-*B*-ness, is dense, there will *always* be a non-finite number of intervening cases.) Shapiro should agree that this reply shoulders the burden: he argues that, given the limits of human discrimination (and the role of judgment-dependence), "for all practical purposes, most ... higher-order borders are sharp." (127)

In any event, we can run a version of the argument where *c'* is *higher-order* borderline. Suppose *c'* is borderline-borderline. Shapiro argues (135) that, if there *is* higher-order vagueness, it has its source in the vagueness of 'competent speaker.' He thus accommodates higher-order vagueness by defining determinacy in terms of competence—it's determinate that *P* just in case *P* and it's not competent to judge not-*P*—and by allowing that claims concerning competence and thus determinacy can be neither true nor false. Shapiro argues further (155) that there are penumbral connections among claims concerning what's competent with respect to *B*-judgments and claims concerning *B*-ness. In particular, for any *x*, if it is true, or made true by a competent speaker's judgment concerning competence, that it's not competent to judge *Bx*, then not-

² Shapiro denies that there is higher-order vagueness *if* one means a further species of vagueness for a predicate beyond its having borderline cases. What he is officially unsure of is whether such complex predicates as 'satisfies the application conditions of *B* as determined by the thoughts and practices of competent speakers' are vague. Henceforth, I suppress the 'so-called.'

Bx. Now, it's because 'competent speaker' is vague that it's neither true nor false that it's not competent to judge Bc'. So, by *open texture*, there is an internal context in which the vagueness of 'competence' is resolved so that it's not competent to judge Bc'. But then, by the penumbral connection, not-Bc', and so it's competent to judge not-Bc'. But this is again incompatible with *tolerance's* demand that it *not* be competent to judge not-Bc' in any internal context. And if we suppose rather that c' is nth-order borderline (n>2), we can reach the same conclusion by repeated use of the penumbral connection.

Moreover, having introduced Shapiro's definition of determinacy, we can now note the tension between *it* and *tolerance*. Return to our supposition that c' is borderline B. Since Mcc', it's not competent to judge not-Bc'. But now suppose that in some internal context a competent speaker resolves c' by judging Bc'. It follows from the definition that it is determinate that Bc' and thus that c' is *not* borderline. If we lack reason to think there *cannot* be a borderline case that differs marginally from a determinate case, we must reject the definition.

An alternative reply runs as follows. We assumed that *open texture* requires that there are circumstances in which a competent speaker can judge a borderline case either way even when *tolerance* is in force. But it might suffice for openness that there are circumstances in which *tolerance* is *not* in force and a competent speaker can judge either way. Then, even if Mcc', one can competently judge not-Bc', because B's meaning and the relevant non-linguistic facts need not preclude one's drawing a sharp boundary for current purposes.³

A problem, however, is that, at least in some cases, considering what would be the case were *tolerance* not in force may involve considering what would be the case were the relevant non-linguistic facts *different*. Recall that the relevant non-linguistic facts include whatever constitutes external context. Suppose we draw a sharp boundary for current purposes: circumstances are such that we must sort the balls exhaustively into two bins, so we select #134 as our last red ball, even though it differs marginally from #135. Arguably, the relevant comparison class thereby becomes something like *what matches or is redder than #134*. To argue that dropping *tolerance* never affects external context, one would have to tell us much more than Shapiro does about what external context is, how it is determined, and what determines whether *tolerance* is in force.⁴

Finally, one might abandon *open texture's* claim that "[u]nsettled entails open" (10), restricting it to cases not marginally different from a determinate case. This significantly modifies the account's "main thesis" (44), but in a way that retains its character. Perhaps *resolvability* then becomes the *fundamental* feature of borderline cases, with openness a further feature only some happen to have. But Shapiro could maintain that there is sufficient openness for it to be central to a complete account of vagueness.⁵ Be that as it may, even if this is the best reply to the tension between

³ Thanks to Stewart Shapiro for suggesting this reply, which may not express his own considered view.

⁴ One can distinguish *tolerance's* not being in force from someone's having actually exercised the option of drawing a sharp boundary. But, still, that *tolerance* is no longer in force may suffice to alter external context. Pending clarification and argument to the contrary, it's plausible to think that whether *tolerance* is in force and what the external context is are both determined by current interests and purposes.

⁵ There's no standard sense in which *most* borderline cases are open, since, even for one sorites series, there can be uncountably many that aren't. Claiming that borderline cases are *generically* open would require some independent grasp of "(ab)normal" borderline case. And it's unclear that all predicates or sorites series must have *some* open borderline cases: in principle, some might have borderline cases *each* of

tolerance and *open texture*, the concession leaves untouched the tension between *tolerance* and the definition of determinacy. The definition is not obviously amenable to concessive restriction and cannot be abandoned unless some other account of higher-order vagueness is put in its place—or unless Shapiro is willing to deny categorically the existence of higher-order vagueness after all.

Shapiro's book has many attractions, and one learns an enormous amount from working through it. It's less obvious how attractive the position it puts forward is in the end. But that's so with all extant views of vagueness.⁶

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References

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which differs marginally from a determinate case. More controversially, there could be a predicate or series each of whose borderline cases differs marginally *both* from something determinately B and from something determinately not-B. If that were so, then none of its borderline cases would be even *resolvable* if tolerance were in force. (It might be objected that differing marginally from a determinate B suffices for not differing marginally from something determinately not-B—and vice versa. To assess this, we would need to know more about what counts as differing marginally. Shapiro at one point characterizes a sorites series as one where “it is at least prima facie plausible that for each $i < n$, if Pa_i , then Pa_{i+1} .” (3))

⁶ Many thanks to Stewart Shapiro for very helpful correspondence.