

Luminosity and Vagueness

§1. The paper discusses some ways in which vagueness and its phenomena may be thought to impose certain *limits* on knowledge and, more specifically, may be thought to bear on the traditional philosophical idea that certain domains of facts are *luminous*, i.e. fully open to our view in such a way that, under certain circumstances, one is always in a position to know that the facts—whatever they are—belonging to those domains obtain. The discussion focusses on a very influential argument (due to Williamson [1996]) to the effect that, roughly, no such domains exist. Many commentators have felt that the *vagueness* unavoidably inherent in the description of the facts that are best candidates for being luminous (such as e.g. the fact that one feels cold) plays an illicit role in such argument. The paper pursues two different avenues along which this suspicion may be vindicated.

§2. The first avenue of inquiry centres around the idea that vagueness brings with itself *borderline cases*, and that these in turn generate absence of a fact of the matter (i.e. indeterminacy) and hence epistemically benign lack of knowledge. It is argued that, given the possibility of absence of a fact of the matter, the idea of luminosity should be *reformulated* using the notion of *determinacy*, and that the resulting reformulation is not immediately subject to the original anti-luminosity argument. However, it is shown that the specific understanding of determinacy required by this strategy validates a new argument against the reformulated version of luminosity. Moreover, reflection on the connection between being mistaken and absence of a fact of the matter offers another argument against such version, with the surprising upshot that, granting the soundness of the original anti-luminosity argument, not even the determinacy of a certain fact would guarantee its luminosity.

§3. The second avenue of inquiry centres around the idea that vagueness brings with itself the *prima facie* plausibility of *soritical principles* (principles which, in most logical frameworks, breed inconsistency). It is first pointed out that, despite certain considerations to the contrary, a certain “*margin-for-error*” lemma required by the anti-luminosity argument may well derive all of its plausibility from an underlying soritical principle. The notion of *confidence* that is relevant to the argument is then isolated and sharply distinguished from the notion of *subjective probability*. Against this background, it is finally argued that the reasoning about confidence involved in the argument in favour of the problematic “margin-for-error” lemma is fallacious in the same way in which sorites reasoning is, with the final upshot that careful heeding of vagueness and its phenomena, while forcing a reformulation of the idea of luminosity (see §2), also removes one of the main arguments against it.

References

Williamson, T. [1996], ‘Cognitive Homelessness’, *The Journal of Philosophy* **93**, pp. 554–573.