

How to understand contextualism about vagueness: reply to Stanley

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Jason Stanley (2003) claims to have found a version of the sorites paradox that defeats so-called contextualist theories of vagueness. In this brief note I will suggest that even if Stanley's argument works against the form of contextualism he constructs, it is not effective against contextualist accounts in general, contrary to what he seems to think.

Stanley's discussion concerns the *dynamic* or 'forced march' version of the sorites, viz. the version framed in terms of the judgments that would be made by a competent speaker who proceeds step by step along a sorites series for a vague predicate ' Φ '. According to Stanley, the contextualist treatment of the paradox is based on the idea that the speaker shifts the content of the predicate whenever necessary to make it the case that each successive pair of adjacent items are category-identical – in other words, either both items satisfy ' Φ ' or neither does. These adjustments allow the speaker to progress from a clear case for ' Φ ' to a clear case for 'not- Φ ' without breaking the seeming continuity of the series.

Trouble brews, Stanley contends, when the contextualist puts the latter view together with the claim that vague predicates are indexicals.¹ He explains that the content of an indexical expression is invariant across verb deletion or verb phrase ellipsis. For example, in the sentence 'John likes you, and Bill does too', the occurrence of 'you' in the ellipsed VP must be interpreted as referring to the same person picked out by the overt 'you' in the first clause. Therefore, given the contextualist's claims (1) that

¹ He cites Scott Soames (2002: 445) as claiming that vague predicates are indexicals. I am sceptical of this reading of Soames, but I won't press the point here.

the content of a vague predicate changes as we proceed along a sorites series, and (2) that vague predicates are indexicals, one might expect an ‘elliptical’ version of the paradox to cause problems. To see how, consider a series of 100 piles of sand grains, each containing one grain less than the last, progressing from a clear heap to a clear non-heap. Stanley writes:

Suppose, ostending each pile of grains in turn (where ‘that_{*j*}’ is a demonstrative used to refer to the *j*th heap in the series), we say either:

(10) That₁ is a heap, and that₂ is too, and that₃ is too, and that₄ is too, ... and that_[100] is too.

[or]

(11) If that₁ is a heap, then that₂ is too, and if that₂ is, then that₃ is, and if that₃ is, then that₄ is, ... and then that_[100] is.

The contextualist presumably wishes to claim that the reason each conjunct in (10) is so compelling, and each conditional in (11), is that the similarity between the *i*-th member of the series and the *i* + 1th member of the series causes us to adjust the content of ‘heap’ so that its extension includes both. But since VP ellipsis is used in this version of the sorites, this strategy cannot succeed. If the word ‘heap’ is an indexical, then it does not shift its denotation in any of the different conjuncts in (10) or any of the different conditionals in (11). (272)

As examples of contextualists, Stanley cites Soames (2002), Kamp (e.g. 1981), and Raffman (1994, 1996), and notes that Tappenden (1993) is also a possibility.² I cannot speak for these other authors, but much of Stanley’s discussion does not apply to the form of contextualism that I proposed. Among other things, I did not make the false claim that vague predicates are indexicals. Vague predicates share certain features with indexicals, but the differences between the two kinds of term are as significant as the similarities. (See my 2005b [in progress], Chapter 4, for detailed discussion.) My contextualist will claim that the behaviour of a vague predicate across VP ellipsis is properly understood on the model of ‘That elephant is big, and that flea is too’. In the latter sentence the operative comparison class shifts from the first, overt occurrence of the predicate to the second, tacit occurrence. Hence its content is something like *that elephant is big for an elephant and that flea is big for a flea*.³

In so far as the contextualism I proposed did not include the claim that vague predicates are indexicals, Stanley’s argument fails to touch it. That said, how *does* my contextualist handle the arguments (10) and (11)?

² He also discusses Graff 2000 but denies that she is a contextualist.

³ See Ludlow 1989: 519–20, for illuminating discussion of these kinds of case.

We can set aside argument (10) straight off, since it isn't an instance of the sorites paradox. Contra Stanley, we don't find compelling those conjuncts that apply to piles we think are borderline cases (however one defines 'borderline') or a fortiori to piles we think are clear non-heaps. Argument (11), which contains conditional premisses, is an instance of the paradox. I will outline one of several contextualist strategies for resolving it.

Consider first a non-elliptical analogue of (11):

- (11-NE) (1) That₁ is a heap.
 (2) If that₁ is a heap, then that₂ is a heap.
 (3) If that₂ is a heap, then that₃ is a heap.
 Etc.
 (46) If that₄₅ is a heap, then that₄₆ is a heap.
 (47) If that₄₆ is a heap, then that₄₇ is a heap.
 Etc.
 (101) Therefore that₁₀₀ is a heap.

Plainly, if argument (11-NE) is to go through, each sentence 'that_t is a heap' must take the same truth-value in both of its occurrences. For example, the sentence 'that₂ is a heap' must take the same truth-value when it occurs as the consequent of premiss (2) and when it occurs as the antecedent of premiss (3). However, although truth-values are usually preserved across consecutive premisses, in the neighbourhoods near the blurred borders between categories (heap/borderline, borderline/non-heap), the truth-value of a sentence can change from its first occurrence to its second. In particular, such a change occurs when the speaker switches predicates – say, from 'heap' to 'borderline heap'. For example, the sentence 'that₄₆ is a heap' may be true in premiss (46) but untrue in premiss (47). That is because pile #46 may count as a heap in the evaluation of premiss (46), i.e. in comparison with pile #45, but as a borderline case in the evaluation of premiss (47), i.e. in comparison with pile #47. (For the sake of argument only, let's suppose we are working with a three-valued semantics using 'true', 'false', and 'indefinite'; so an untrue sentence is either false or indefinite.) This allows both premisses (46) and (47) to be true or, at worst, indefinite (depending on our definition of the material conditional).

How can the truth-value of the sentence 'that₄₆ is a heap' change from one conditional to the next? I can provide only a sketch of an answer here, but two points are critical. First, remember that in our series of piles #1–#100, the categories *heap* and *borderline heap* contain a range of more and less central cases.⁴ In particular, as the heaps progress away from the

⁴ The distinction between central and non-central cases is not the distinction between clear and borderline cases. The former distinction is drawn within the heaps, within the borderline cases, and within the non-heaps.

initial, most central heap (pile #1), they become more and more similar to borderline cases. The same goes on in reverse in the category *borderline heap*: as the borderline piles progress away from the most central borderline cases toward the heaps, they become increasingly heap-like. The result is that in the vicinity of the blurred border between the two categories, where the speaker switches from 'heap' to 'borderline heap', heaps and borderline heaps are very much alike; non-central heaps and non-central borderline cases are very much alike – even identical. Consequently the piles in this region, like #46, can competently be called 'heaps' and competently be called 'borderline heaps'. I suspect that when we think about the difference between being a heap and being a borderline heap, we think, too narrowly, of the difference between being a *central* case of a heap and being a *central* borderline case. So naturally it seems incredible that one and the same pile could shift from the one category to the other.

Second, in switching from 'heap' to 'borderline heap', the speaker undergoes a change in her verbal dispositions. In particular, she will now be disposed to judge as borderline some of the piles that she previously judged as heaps. For example, after judging pile #46 to be a borderline case, the speaker will now be disposed to judge piles #45 and #44 borderline also.⁵ Hence once she evaluates the sentence 'that₄₆ is a heap' as indefinite in premiss (47), she will now be disposed to evaluate the sentences 'that₄₅ is a heap' and 'that₄₄ is a heap' as indefinite too. Similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, for her switch from 'borderline heap' to 'non-heap', where a subsequent sentence, for example 'that₅₅ is a heap', will be indefinite in its first occurrence and false in its second. In my 1994 and 1996 papers I characterized these changes of verbal dispositions as changes of *context*, using the term 'context' in a broad way that included speakers' mental states. My thought was that it's *by* shifting to a new dispositional state, *by* shifting to a new context, that the speaker is able to switch predicates in the sorites series.

Consider now Stanley's (11). Since 'heap' is not an indexical, (11) is resolved in the same way as (11-NE). As before, the paradoxical argument is fallacious because (e.g.) the constituent sentence 'that₄₆ is' fails to take the same truth-value in both of its occurrences. The speaker proceeding along the series of piles undergoes a contextual shift so that the sentence 'that₄₆ is' is true (pre-shift) in premiss (46) but indefinite (post-shift) in premiss (47).

Why then do we find each of the conditionals in arguments (11) and (11-NE) compelling? Various explanations are possible. If you believe in a third value, the conditionals are either true or, at worst, indefinite. If you believe

⁵ Recent experimental results confirm the existence of such a *hysteresis* effect; see Lindsey, Brown, and Raffman 2005 (in progress).

in bivalence (as I do), so that whatever is untrue is false, then all of the conditionals are true. Alternatively, perhaps when ordinary speakers affirm the conditionals in (11) and (11-NE), what they really have in mind is that *if it's true that* that_i is (a heap) then *it's true that* that_{i+1} is (a heap). The latter conditional is always true. Or maybe ordinary speakers mean just that 'that_i is' and 'that_{i+1} is' take the same value: if it's true that that_i is then it's true that that_{i+1} is, if it's false that that_i is then it's false that that_{i+1} is, and if it's indefinite whether that_i is then it's indefinite whether that_{i+1} is. Again, these conditionals are always true.

I should perhaps make clear that I am no longer a contextualist about vagueness.⁶ Nevertheless, I think it is important to see that even if the brand of contextualism I proposed proves untenable, that will not be because of an elliptical version of the sorites paradox.⁷

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⁶ I develop a non-contextual theory of vagueness in Raffman 2005a (forthcoming) and 2005b (in progress).

⁷ I am grateful to Stewart Shapiro for helpful discussion. (See Shapiro forthcoming for development of a dynamic contextualist treatment of vagueness in conversation.) Also, the Editor and an anonymous referee for this journal made recommendations that much improved the paper.