Reflections on ‘Wang’s Paradox’

John Burgess

RESUMEN
En este artículo trato de explicar con detalle lo que considero que es las más importantes enseñanzas generales que pueden extraerse de la ‘paradoja de Wang’ de Michael Dummett, no como el propio Dummett las consideró, sino tal como yo las veo algunas décadas más tarde. Extraigo dos conclusiones principales: (C1): el significado no ha de representarse como conocimiento proposicional capaz de ser adquirido mediante el solo aprendizaje libresco. Algunos aspectos del significado consisten en elementos que pertenecen al conocimiento práctico que se resisten a ser representados como conocimiento teórico. (C2): la vaguedad no puede modelarse en un armazón semántico individualista.

PALABRAS CLAVE: vaguedad, paradoja de Wang, sorites, intersubjetividad, predicados observacionales, cualidades fenoménicas.

ABSTRACT
In this paper, I shall try to spell out what I take the principal general morals of Michael Dummett’s ‘Wang’s Paradox’ to be, not as Dummett himself saw them, but as I see them several decades later. I draw two main conclusions. (C1): Meaning should not be represented as propositional knowledge capable of being acquired through book learning alone. Some aspects of meaning consist of items of practical knowledge that resist representation as theoretical knowledge. (C2): Vagueness cannot be modelled in a semantic individualist framework.

KEYWORDS: Vagueness, Wang’s Paradox, Sorites Paradox, Intersubjectivity, Observational Predicates, Phenomenal Qualities.

It has come broadly to be accepted that Sir Michael Dummett’s ‘Wang’s Paradox’ is the most challenging, influential and distinguished paper on vagueness. I think that this assessment is correct. In the space of a short paper, Dummett managed to discuss productively the viability of strict
finitism as a philosophy of mathematics, the minimum materials required to
generate sorites paradoxes, the viability of supervaluations as a semantics for
vague languages, the required formal properties of operators expressing
‘definitely’ and their relation to higher-order vagueness, and the question
whether a coherent notion of phenomenal quality is available. Much of the
best work on these topics that has been produced in the last 40 years or so has
been the direct result of others struggling with the ideas in that paper, or with
those in its most productive descendents. Perhaps most staggering of all, the
whole thriving field of vague ontology seems to have been stimulated by one
short remark about the unintelligibility of the idea that reality might be
vague.

In this paper, I shall try to spell out what I take the principal general
morals of that paper to be, not as Dummett himself saw them, but as I see
them several decades later. I draw two main conclusions.

(C1) Meaning should not be represented as propositional knowledge
capable of being acquired through book learning alone. Some as-
pects of meaning consist of items of practical knowledge that re-
sist representation as theoretical knowledge.

(C2) Vagueness cannot be modelled in a semantic individualist frame-
work.

Neither moral has been taken to heart as often as it deserves to be.1 In § I, I
shall set the stage by sketching the conclusions Dummett himself draws in
‘Wang’s Paradox.’ I shall also trace the connections between Dummett’s
conclusions and the morals I draw. Unsurprisingly, ‘Wang’s Paradox’ con-
tains much of interest that I do not have space to discuss.

I. DUMMETT’S CONCLUSIONS IN ‘WANG’S PARADOX’.

Wang’s Paradox is, in all essentials, simply the paradox best known as
the Sorites. In its most compelling form, it can be presented as a puzzle about
observational predicates. Let us start with an object that is uncontentiously
red: say an old fashioned English post box. Premise (i) affirms its redness.
Since redness is an observational property, one we can ascribe to an object
just by looking, it would seem that if a second object matches one already
correctly described as red, we must be able to classify it correctly as red also.
The generalisation of this principle is premise (ii):

(ii) For all x, y, if x is red, and y matches x, then y is red.
But if we construct or find a sufficiently long series of non-transitively matching objects starting with our first red sample, we can be led by a series of steps driven by premise (ii) to ascribe redness to a patently non-red object, say, a ripe orange or, after many more steps, a cucumber.

Towards the end of the paper Dummett drew the following conclusions:

1. Where non-discriminable difference is non-transitive, observational predicates are essentially vague.

2. Moreover, in this case, the use of such predicates is intrinsically inconsistent.

3. Wang’s paradox merely reflects this inconsistency. What is in error is not the principles of reasoning involved, nor … the induction step. The induction step is correct according to the rules of use governing vague predicates such as ‘small’: but these rules are themselves inconsistent, and hence the paradox … [Dummett (1975), pp. 264–265].

I shall not here be concerned to dispute (1); in § IV I defend it. My quarrel is solely with conclusions (2) and (3). What I shall be concerned to contest directly is conclusion (3). The induction step in the paradox is to be rejected. Accordingly, there is no warrant for regarding vague predicates as intrinsically inconsistent, so (2) is false (§ III). Turning the reasoning on its head (§§ V and VI), what must be at fault is the conception of meaning which forces the induction step on us as a principle partly constitutive of the meaning of the vague predicate that features in that step. This is lesson (C1) of the introduction. But, if this conception of vagueness is inadequate, some rather different account of vagueness must be available (§ IV). This is lesson (C2).

Crispin Wright has provided two useful pieces of terminology for the discussion of Dummett’s position. First, he has dubbed any principle apt to serve as the induction step in a sorites paradox a principle of tolerance [Wright (1976), p. 229]. For our example above, premise

(ii) For all x, y, if x is red, and y matches x, then y is red

is a principle of tolerance, as is the induction step in any sorites paradox. Second, we have the governing view. This is a combination of two claims. The first is that a master of a language is someone who has, at some deep level, internalized a definite set of semantic and syntactic rules, definitive of the language. The second is something of a pot pourri of specific ideas about how such rules might be brought to light:
… we may legitimately approach our use of language from within, i.e., reflectively as self conscious masters of it rather than externally equipped only with behavioural notions. Thus it is legitimate to appeal to our conception of what justifies the application of a particular expression; to the limitations imposed by our senses and memories on the kind of instructions we can actually carry out in practice; and to the kind of consequence which we associate with the application of a particular predicate, to what we think of as the point or interest of the distinction which the predicate implements [Wright (1976), p. 225].

The governing view, or something very much like it, clearly seems to be implicitly presupposed in Dummett’s case for his conclusions, and in Dummett (2007) he still endorsed a rule-based approach.

Wright (1975) saw the consequence of inverting Dummett’s argument as requiring the abandonment of the governing view and its replacement by a more behaviouristic model of language mastery, a position he reaffirmed and elaborated, for observational predicates, in Wright (2007). Clearly this conclusion is closely related to those I draw above; (C1) and (C2). At this stage, I have two points to make about it.

First, on the face of it, this is a stronger conclusion than Wright needed to draw. The inability of the governing view to furnish us with a sensible account of vagueness does not force us to abandon it wholesale. It only requires that we supplement it with something else. And some of the material needed to supplement our account lies readily at hand; everybody, including Dummett (1976), p.36, agrees that, first and foremost, the ability to speak a language is a practical skill. Why not simply represent that ability directly as such, giving any propositional knowledge that is required of speakers its appropriate place in the representation of that skill? On this view, rules still might have some role to play. As with rules, so too with the first-person, introspective approach to discovering them. Why not supplement this approach with third-person methods of finding out about our practices? I see no need to abandon either rules or introspective methods outright.

Second, what Wright (1975) rejects officially is the governing view, which is a conjunction of two views. At least apparently, he could have tried to rescue the picture of meaning as a system of rules, so long as he rejected the introspective model of evidence for the rules, or as I have suggested, insisted that it requires supplementation. As far as I know, Wright has not explored this possibility although, in fairness, one must admit that it does not look promising.

II. MEANING AS PROPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Michael Dummett (1976), p. 36, characterised the job of a theory of meaning for a language as that of presenting propositional knowledge which,
if possessed, would imbue in the possessor the practical skill of being able to understand, and communicate in, that language. Meaning, on this model, is propositional knowledge that would suffice for mastery of the language. Applying this idea to predicates, it was natural to suppose that mastery of a predicate consisted in a principled ability to tell which objects are in the extension of that predicate and which objects are not. The sorting ability thus characterised is principled if it enables us to classify objects correctly for the right reason. Dummett makes no claim that ordinary speakers do possess propositional knowledge this extensive. Rather the propositional knowledge appealed to is presumably such that either it would imbue us with the right capacities or it would require, for its acquisition, that we first acquire those capacities. Let us ask, then, why it seemed sensible to model a practical capacity indirectly as propositional knowledge rather than directly as practical knowledge.

We have come to view theories of meaning as containing as a core element, perhaps their sole element, a theory of interpretation. Such a theory will deliver, for every sentence of the language treated, a statement of what it means, either directly, or indirectly via a theory of truth for that language. Obviously, anybody who knows the language in which the meanings are given, and this is of course a precondition of understanding the theory, will have propositional knowledge of the meaning of every sentence of the interpreted language. Of course, the acquisition of this propositional knowledge might have, as a necessary condition, the acquisition of a practical capacity. But any irreducibly practical capacities required will be invisible at the level of output of the theory.

So long as we are content to limit our ambitions for the output of a theory of meaning to the delivery of truth conditions for each sentence of the interpreted language, we need not be concerned about vagueness threatening this model of meaning. Problems appear only if we aspire to what Dummett called a full-blooded and (at least) molecular theory of meaning [Dummett (1975a), passim.] For if we must represent the meaning of a predicate by rules or principles completely constitutive of mastery, the paradox sketched earlier with the predicate ‘red’ seems to confirm Dummett’s conclusion that vague predicates are governed by inconsistent rules.

III. RULES AND OBSERVATIONALITY

It is time to ask just how plausible it really is that vague predicates are governed by rules that are intrinsically contradictory.

In truth, it really seems not very plausible at all. Take colour terms. To be sure, we sometimes give incompatible verdicts to the same object on different occasions, and, on a single occasion, two observers might contradict
each other. But this can happen for reasons that have nothing to do with vagueness without our being tempted to attribute to speakers rules of use that are contradictory. Principles of tolerance for colour terms seem to be forced on us because it appears to make no sense to say both that we can apply colour terms correctly just by looking and that both of two incompatible predicates can be correctly applied to different objects which look exactly alike. But it is far from self-evident that we need the principles. If we can apply colour terms to objects taken singly just by looking at those objects, why would we need rules involving colour comparisons at all? Just look and judge: what other rule would you need? Furthermore, we would expect that if principles of tolerance really governed colour terms, their failure to lead to utterly capricious patterns of application has to be due to the fact that we simply don’t run into sorites series sufficiently long to lead us into trouble or because ‘the principle is never sufficiently pressed’ [Dummett (1975), p. 264]. But this is clearly not the reason. When we explain the consequences of the non-transitivity of matching to someone who was unaware of them, as we do with our philosophy students, their reaction is not to welcome the bracing promise of liberation from the need for consistency. If they really felt the pull of principles of tolerance, they would know that they are licensed to apply absolutely any colour term to any object whatsoever without fear of ever going wrong. But nobody reacts as though they had such a license, and we would think crazy anybody who did. Perhaps, then, we have a meta-rule, which tells us that judgments based on direct observation trump incompatible verdicts based on chains of sorites reasoning. But the idea of lexically ordered rules was not part of the governing view. And, even if it were, what function, exactly, would principles of tolerance play in imbuing mastery of colour terms? Clearly, the overwhelming majority of particular conditional instances of principles of tolerance will be true; perhaps this partly explains our untutored tendency to think true the universally quantified principles.

There is another reason why we should be leery of the attempt to present an account of observational predicates in the form of rules. Take the example of colour-blind Mary who, we are to suppose, has completely mastered everything science has to teach about colour [Jackson (1986)]. Then she has an operation that gives her normal colour vision. Surely, or so it seems, she learns something about colour after the operation: what it is like for something to be, say, red. Examples like this have been used to attack physicalism [Nagel (1974)] and to motivate the postulation of epiphenomenal qualia [Jackson (1986)]. More dramatically, if we believe that colour predicates are essentially observational, we should hold that Mary has her first colour thoughts only after her operation, for only then can she apply colour terms to objects just by looking at them. Note that nothing seems to hinge on Mary’s book learning being restricted to science; her post-operative colour lessons would remain essentially the same if she had also previously mastered every-
Reflections on 'Wang's Paradox'

thing the phenomenology of colour has to teach. The moral, then, is that the
mastery of colour terms cannot be attained through book learning alone. It
seems, then, that there is an obstacle in principle to our representing the
meanings of colour terms wholly as items of propositional knowledge.

What all of this suggests very clearly is that the governing view, far
from being compelling, is really incapable of furnishing an explanation of
some very obvious facts about our everyday experience of our use of vague
predicates.

IV. OBSERVATIONALITY AND VAGUENESS

We have seen that Dummett’s reasoning concerning the nature of
vagueness and meaning needs to be turned on its head. But what of his con-
clusion that observational predicates are essentially vague? Without our ask-
ing precisely which notion of necessity is in play in Dummett’s conclusion
(1), we can certainly see why observational predicates can be expected to be
vague. Dummett (1975) spelt out the reasons very clearly. However we in
fact respect the boundaries of vague concepts, we cannot draw a memorable,
or even noticeable, boundary between two matching items. In view of the
non-transitivity of indiscriminable difference, this is precisely what we would
have to do to respect the boundaries of observational predicates, were they
perfectly sharp. But we have no belief that we can do this, either individu-
ally or collectively as a speech community. Not only do we, as we should now
expect, lack propositional knowledge of the location of sharp boundaries to
vague concepts, we should not expect our observational capacities to be
wholly consistent when exercised on objects at the margins. It is because our
capacities are rough that we should expect our concepts and the predicates
that express them also to be rough.

So how do our capacities, conceived as practical capacities, determine
vague boundaries to observational concepts? On the view I favour [Burgess
(1990), subsequently elaborated in Burgess (1998), (2001), and (2008)], ob-
servational concepts are bounded simply by the patterns of our dispositions to
affirm, deny, withhold, hedge or qualify our attributions of those concepts
around the border area – i.e. the area of permissible disagreement and dispute.
We expect that there will be almost universal agreement about central cases
and full agreement amongst those who do agree in rejecting as mistakes attri-
butions that are not in agreement. This obvious starting point furnishes us
with a core set of positive cases, negative cases, and competent speakers and
sets absolute bounds to the extent of the borderline cases at any given time.
From there we can imagine the borderline structure of each concept deter-
mined by the projection onto the whole population of speakers of the ac-
cepted methods of informal acceptance and rejection we in fact employ in
our daily dealings with each other. The border area will not be as extensive as our starting point, and there will be more competent speakers than that point reveals: we accept that competent speakers may make mistakes. Accordingly, the definite cases of, say, ‘red’ at any time, \( t \), will be those cases most competent speakers are disposed to judge red, in suitable conditions, at \( t \).

What emerges from this picture is a model of the notion of intersubjectivity. To appreciate how it departs from tradition, let us back track a little. Since Putnam (1975) we have become accustomed to the idea that not all concepts require, for their mastery, that every individual speaker of the language possess the practical sorting ability that goes with, if you like, full mastery. Most of us are not experts with a great many predicates which we still seem to use intelligibly. We employ these predicates with deference to those who are experts, a point that Dummett conceded rather early [Dummett (1974), pp. 424-25]. This concession involves a slight watering down of the picture of predicate mastery as the possession of a correctly principled capacity for sorting objects into satisfiers and non-satisfiers.

But where do intersubjective terms fit into the overall picture? For natural kind terms, on a perhaps idealised picture, what determines the extension of those terms are facts about the kinds the terms designate. It is the possession by some of knowledge of these facts that makes them experts; it is not their exercises of expertise that makes those facts determining facts. On this picture, objectivity in a concept consists in it picking out a kind, furnished as such, by the world alone.

We are, however, fully aware that there are also concepts for kinds that are made kinds not just by intrinsic features of the objects that make them up but also by their affect on us. These concepts we have lately come to call response dependent and the kinds they pick out might accordingly be considered artificial to the extent that our responses do constitute them as kinds. Some response-dependent concepts furnish us with terms we might plausibly regard as subjective; the concept of being pleasing to the eye is one such. Much more interesting, however, are the response-dependent concepts that deliver kinds not because of the responses of a single person but because, as masters of a common language, we respond alike, or nearly enough alike for the minimal needs of communication to be met. It is natural to dub these kinds intersubjective.

I think that there are reasons, although not very good reasons, why philosophers have been reluctant to accept the notion of an intersubjective concept at play in my account. There might seem to be nothing that firmly anchors these concepts to aspects of reality. What is to prevent our concepts from drifting to a point where the objects in their extensions are very different from what they once were? As far as the theory alone is concerned, nothing absolutely rules out conceptual drift of this dramatic kind. We tend to regard observational predicates as coherent because we regard it as a brute
fact that there is a core class of clear cases that really are clear.\(^4\) That this is so is something for which we have no \textit{a priori} guarantee. But dramatic drift is really not very likely. We have a vested interest in the extensions of our observational concepts remaining relatively fixed over time – the more fixed they are, the more reliable the past observational record is – and we police each other’s performance in order to achieve this. I think that some resistance to the account of intersubjectivity sketched here will disappear if we observe that we stabilise each other’s observational capacities on the fly in much the same way that a band with no conductor or designated time keeper maintains and changes tempo. There are signs that we can observe that we are dragging or rushing inappropriately; there are signs that someone else is dragging or rushing inappropriately. There are subtle ways in which we communicate with each other to bring any perceived deviant back into line. Between performances we can alert each other explicitly to our deficiencies. This kind of co-ordination is difficult to do well, but it permeates our lives. Despite the apparent lack of adequate foundations, there is nothing magical about it and there is no reason why it should not be needed for language mastery as much as by ensembles of musicians.

V. INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM; INDIVIDUALISM AND SOCIALISM

What precisely, then, is the challenge issued by the existence of intersubjective concepts to the model of meaning enshrined in the governing view? Let me introduce a little terminology.

Call \textit{semantic internalism} the view that semantic content supervenes on properties wholly internal to individual thinkers. There are two reasons commonly cited for rejecting semantic internalism thus characterised. First, ‘twin earth’ thought experiments seem to show that our environment makes a contribution to determining the content of thoughts as well as to determining their truth value. Two thinkers could be exactly alike in all their non-relationainternal properties, physical and mental, and yet differ as to what kinds their concepts refer to. Second, as we saw in the last section, some predicate contents seem not to depend for their availability on our possession of a full sorting capacity, i.e., we might know enough about beech trees to think and talk about them without possessing the ability to sort all trees into beeches and non-beeches.\(^5\)

\textit{Semantic individualism} with respect to a predicate, \(F\), as I understand it,\(^6\) is the view that every maximally expert user of \(F\) has a sorting capacity that suffices, without supplementation by facts about the capacities of others, to determine the extension of \(F\). If semantic individualism is false for a predicate, \(F\), \textit{semantic socialism} must be true for it. Although clearly related, semantic internalism and individualism are not the same. If the best individ-
ual experts with the term ‘beech’ can always tell beeches from other trees, we could be both individualists and externalists about beeches.

The retreat from the full Dummettian picture of meaning has been, so far, a retreat from semantic internalism, the view that meanings are wholly ‘in the head.’ Deference and environment dependence each suffice to defeat internalism. In my opinion, the existence of intersubjective terms and kinds poses a threat to semantic individualism rather than internalism. If the extension of a kind term is in part determined by the responses of language users working collectively rather than as isolated individuals, then, presumably, no individual has, except perhaps by happy accident, responses that exactly match the semantic profile of the borderarea of that concept. Response dependence is collective in a way that is non-distributive. We as individuals have neither practical nor theoretical knowledge that would suffice to do the job but only dispositions which play a partly determinative role that becomes fully determinative only in conjunction with the dispositions of others.

For intersubjective concepts, the knowledge of all competent individual speakers plays a much more important role than it does for pure natural kind terms, if there are any. For one thing, there need be no expertise, although nothing in what I have said rules out the possibility of response-dependent concepts determining kinds through the collective dispositions of groups of experts. More importantly, and more radically, no individual speaker possesses knowledge which would suffice to track exactly the extension of that term, let alone to determine it. Of course, it is not the knowledge possessed by experts that determines the extension of natural kind terms; rather, it is the determinative facts that their knowledge tracks. With intersubjective concepts, the linguistic knowledge constitutive of mastery neither exactly tracks nor exactly constitutes those determinative facts. This seems to me to be a departure from semantic individualism that is so complete and so irresistible as to make that doctrine of little continuing interest.

Intersubjective concepts will be so for two reasons. First, they aspire to coming as close to objectivity as is feasible for concepts with their function. To take colour concepts, we need to apply them on the basis of rough observation, but no sharp boundary between, say, red and orange, would be noticeable, let alone memorable. That said, nothing in nature forces us to have a borderarea any wider or more unstable than is forced on us by our incapacity to make colour discriminations more finely. The second reason that makes intersubjective concepts so is their vagueness. Concepts that admit of sorites vagueness require stabilisation [Burgess (1990), (2008)]. This is not to say that observational concepts are not, or should not be, flexible enough to shift in extension over time, say, as the distribution of qualities in the environment changes. Whether or not this does or can occur is an empirical question to be answered concept by concept, but there can be no doubt that the demands of communication require that this happen only rarely and slowly and in re-
sponse only to very pressing community needs. The need for stability of extension over time, something on which meaningful generalisations depend, places a conservative pressure on us to maintain quality boundaries. This is of course overridden when there is a greater need for flexibility than for continuity of extension, but the conservative pressure no doubt helps to maintain coherence during periods of change.

How does our linguistic behaviour collectively help to determine semantic properties? We do best to regard our informal practices of assent and dissent, confirmation and correction, as the only ways in which the intersubjective nature of observational concepts gets manifested in behaviour. The semantic properties are best thought of as projections, for every speaker and the whole language, of our non-collusive dispositions to judge, confirm and correct, collectively in groups, in actual linguistic contexts. Intersubjectivity arises in the following way. We are obliged, on pain of losing our reputations for mastery, to defer to others when they have overwhelming peer support. We are, of course, not necessarily obliged to defer to a majority in any particular context. We might rightly suspect that our critics represent an atypical sample and, if they do, their complaints will just be wrong, even if they were in a majority on the occasion in question. We might rightly suspect collusion. The introduction of contexts complicates our picture but does not eliminate intersubjectivity. Some vagueness is indeed contextually resolvable but this is not always appropriate – generalisations involving vague expressions often cannot be contextually relativised – and, where relativisation is permissible, it is only permissible within certain vaguely defined bounds. France might be hexagonal, in certain linguistic contexts, but it is, I suggest, never correctly represented as triangular.

The intersubjectivist position is easy to mock if presented in an unsympathetic or unsophisticated way. Let us be clear about one thing: it is not the risible democratic theory of truth – the view that truth can be anything the majority want it to be. I think that those who fear intersubjectivity probably do not realise how little work is actually done by peer pressure. Its role is not to supplant nature with democratic opinion but rather to tidy up, and only to tidy up, loose ends in concepts that nature is incapable of tidying up by itself. Although some concepts are response dependent, it would be a mistake to think we are, or that we regard ourselves as, free to draw boundaries anywhere we want, as we would have to for the democratic theory of truth to be correct. When we notice and respond to the colours of external objects, we are largely responding to features of the world whose differences are genuine; there is a real difference between clear cases of red and clear cases of orange which is as well-founded as any difference could be. It is only because the clear cases trail off gradually and imperceptibly into unclear cases and then into borderline cases that intersubjective elements are required in the extension determination of colour concepts. Without those elements, the super-
venience base for colours in nature, if left to itself, would fail to provide boundaries to colours at all.

VI. SEMANTIC SOCIALISM AND THE MODELLING OF VAGUENESS

I have spoken as though the remarks I have made ought to be fairly uncontroversial. I do indeed believe that any theorist about vagueness who thinks that vague languages have models of the kinds studied by logicians seems committed to the socialist picture I have outlined [Burgess (1990), (2001)]. It is a puzzling feature of most semantic accounts of vagueness that they fail to give even a hint as to how semantic values get determined by facts about usage as well as facts about the mind-independent world. One gets the impression that the need openly to acknowledge the intersubjectivity of most vague language is something of an embarrassment; something better swept under the carpet than openly acknowledged. It should come as no surprise that this failure will come back to haunt the theorist. Where the ghost of the governing view returns varies from account to account.

I shall illustrate how the ghost of the governing view still has the power to haunt theorists with just one example, although I could have chosen many others. According to Crispin Wright (1992), a weakened principle of tolerance is (partly) constitutive of what it is for a predicate to be vague:

\[
\text{Weakened tolerance: If } x \text{ is definitely red, and } y \text{ matches } x, \text{ then } y \text{ is not definitely not red.}
\]

Assuming weakened tolerance, we can show that higher-order vagueness is incoherent.

I shall not here sketch nor criticise the formal details of Wright’s argument which has been effectively criticised by Dorothy Edgington (1993). Rather I shall comment on the advisability of attempting to rescue principles of tolerance in any form at all. In view of the fact that we know where those principles lead, why would we suppose that some weakened such principle must be true? What, other than individualism, could recommend principles like this as analyses of what vagueness consists in? But the weakened principle of tolerance would, if it governed anything, be constraining a kind of linguistic behaviour nobody indulges in. Second-order vagueness is vagueness in the boundaries between borderline cases and definite cases and between borderline cases and definite non-cases. It exists if the statistical projections of our dispositions tempered by our informal correction methods fail to determine sharp first-order boundaries; something which, for any concept of realistic complexity, seems virtually certain to be the case. We as speakers are not going to know, except very roughly, where first-order boundaries lie, let
alone second-order boundaries or higher. In precisely which situations are we supposed to be applying the weakened tolerance principle? I have absolutely no idea. Wright’s position, insofar as the position he sketches is, or ever was, actually his, seems to be a very strong form of semantic individualism and one which he has elsewhere firmly rejected. As far as I am aware, Wright has offered no substantive account of the intersubjective aspect of vague predicates. In this he is scarcely alone.

Finally, let us return to the governing view. The picture of vagueness I have been sketching still leaves room for rules where they are explicitly appealed to by established masters of the language. There will, no doubt, be principles of predicate incompatibility. If something is green (all over) it cannot also be red (all over.) There will also be rules governing acceptance and correction. If someone whose colour judgments are usually reliable disagrees with you about the colour of an object, check that conditions are suitable, check whether either you or she are likely to have had a temporary lapse of judgment, check with a third party if one can be found … and so on. What we can’t accept is that acquiring and maintaining a practical capacity to make colour judgments is something that can usefully be modelled wholly by appeal to the following of rules.

Turning to the second part of the governing view, I note an interesting upshot of our investigation. There seems to be no reason why we should abandon the ordinary philosophically self-conscious means by which we arrive at and check putative views about meaning. But the methods need to be applied flexibly without strict preconceptions about what kind of model will finally prove adequate. We may draw considerations from our roles as self-conscious agents and as intelligent observers of our own behaviour and that of others. If we insist on working with an exclusively individualist model of meaning, those methods will deliver a mistaken individualist theory. What is at fault, of course, is the inappropriate model, not the methods.

NOTES

1 One exception is Crispin Wright who has embraced a position at least very much like (C1) in (2007), p.433ff]. Whether there is any distance at all between our broad positions is hard to tell. His focus on rule following rather than on propositional
knowledge as such seems to leave room for a substantive difference. But, since he couches his conclusion, as I do mine, in terms of the failure of information alone to underlie mastery, the difference might only be verbal.

2 Dummett drew a fourth conclusion. The weakly infinite totalities required for strict finitist mathematics must be rejected. We shall not be concerned with strict finitism in this paper.

3 It is here that my account and that of Wright (2007) begin to differ substantially.

4 This was the insight behind Grice and Strawson’s defence of the notion of analyticity in [Grice and Strawson (1956)]; widespread non-collusive agreement on clear cases is all that is needed for the existence of a vague distinction. Grice came later to doubt the success of his earlier defence of analyticity but not for reasons that would debar my using it for observational predicates.

5 Both appear in Putnam (1975). See also Kripke (1972).

6 Tyler Burge (1979) uses the term ‘individualism’ for the doctrine I have been calling internalism. I would avoid using the term ‘individualism’ for my concept if only I could think of another which did the job just as well.

7 Wright does say [Wright (2007), p. 438], I believe correctly, that what we would require is a ‘developed account of some sort of response dependence,’ but wonders whether an account of this kind could be constructed fully successfully. I think that we can only make significant further progress by trying. Even if such an attempt were bound to fail, and I have never seen a good reason to suppose that it must, we would learn much by discovering why it was bound to fail.

8 I’d like to thank Karen Green for helpful comments on the penultimate draft.

REFERENCES


Reflections on ‘Wang’s Paradox’


Scepticism & Reliable Belief