Vagueness-Related Attitudes

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Stephen Schiffer claims (in the present collection) that vagueness is essentially a psychological phenomenon. According to him, vagueness should not be explicated in terms of absent truth values or incurable ignorance— that is, as a semantic or an epistemic phenomenon— but rather in terms of a peculiar new type of propositional attitude. Schiffer introduces the notion of a vagueness-related partial belief and bases upon it both a novel analysis of the notion of a borderline case and a novel solution to the sorites paradox.

He defines standard partial beliefs (SPBs) as partial beliefs which can under suitable idealization be identified with subjective probability (p. 221). He defines vagueness-related partial beliefs (VPBs) as partial beliefs which cannot be so identified (p. 223). He adds that VPBs, by contrast to SPBs, do not measure uncertainty or generate corresponding likelihood beliefs (p. 223). He defines a paradigm VPB (VPB*) as a VPB held by an ideally rational thinker who knows, with certainty, that she is in ideal epistemic conditions with respect to the content of her VPB (p. 227). Schiffer then analyzes the notion of a borderline case as follows: $\chi$ is to some extent a borderline case of being $F$ just in case someone could have a VPB* that $\chi$ is $F$.

Near the end of his paper, Schiffer suggests the possibility of reformulating his analysis in
more neutral terms. He says,

There can be little doubt that in making one of her qualified assertions that Tom is bald midway through the plucking of Tom, Sally [Schiffer’s paradigm thinker] is expressing some relation to the proposition that Tom is bald. Let’s dub this relation, whatever its nature, ‘V’. … So, V-ing is a propositional attitude, and it’s a propositional attitude that comes in degrees. But are V-states partial beliefs? … ‘VPB’, of course, is just another name for V-states, whether or not they are partial beliefs … (p. 253).

Schiffer must be speaking loosely when he says that ‘VPB’ is just another name for V-states, whether or not they are partial beliefs. For VPB is by stipulation a type of partial belief. What Schiffer intends to convey is that he could, as a fallback, say of V what he says about VPB, admit that V is not a partial belief, and reformulate his analysis by replacing ‘VPB’ with ‘V’.

An adequate evaluation of Schiffer’s view thereby requires that we reformulate his analysis in the suggested manner. Which in turn requires that we say a bit more about how ‘V’ purports to have its reference fixed. Let us, following Schiffer, stipulate that Sally is an ideally rational thinker who knows with certainty that she is in ideal epistemic conditions with respect to the considered proposition

[1] that Tom is bald.¹

And let us stipulate that [1] is expressed by an utterance of ‘Tom is bald’ when Tom is a solid borderline case of baldness. We can then let ‘V’ stand for whatever propositional attitude Sally determinately bears to [1]. (It is important to keep in mind here, and throughout our discussion,
that Sally’s mental states are determined only by her epistemic situation together with the dictates of rationality.) Here, then, will be our working version of Schiffer’s analysis: x is to some extent a borderline case of being F just in case someone could have a V* that x is F (where V* is a paradigm V). We can think of Schiffer’s original formulation as a strengthening of this one by his claim that V = VPB.

I will evaluate Schiffer’s position by addressing three questions:

(i) What is V (assuming there is such an attitude)?

(ii) Is Schiffer’s analysis in terms of V a good one?

(iii) Does V even exist?

I will argue that there are several reasons to reject Schiffer’s analysis: two of them being that our grasp of V is too scant to base a convincing analysis on it and that it is doubtful that V even exists.

In addressing (i), we may begin by considering Schiffer’s claim that V is a partial belief. I will eventually argue that V cannot be any sort of partial attitude (i.e., any sort of attitude ranging in degree between 0 and 1) if Schiffer’s analysis is sound. However, first I want to argue—regardless of Schiffer’s analysis—that V cannot be a partial belief.

Since ‘V’ refers to whatever attitude Sally determinately bears to [1], it refers to a partial belief only if Sally determinately partially believes [1]. Since partially believing p is rationally incompatible with fully believing p, Sally partially believes [1] only if Sally does not fully believe [1]. From which it follows that ‘V’ refers to a partial belief only if it is determinately the case that Sally does not fully believe [1]. But I shall now argue that it is determinately indeterminate whether Sally fully believes [1].
Focus, to begin with, on the familiar mental episode of seeming, or intuition. Some seemings are stronger than others. It seems to me, for example, more that causing gratuitous suffering is in itself wrong than that causing gratuitous death is in itself wrong. In other words, I have a stronger intuition toward the former than toward the latter proposition. This is not to say that I believe the former more firmly than I believe the latter, or even that I believe either proposition. I might, say, for theoretical reasons, reject them both. We sometimes have reasons to believe that things are not how they seem.

Here is such a case. Suppose you are witness to the gradual plucking of Tom Cruise’s full head of hair and have learned, from a reliable source, that those in charge of the plucking are masters of illusion. In particular, they are masters of making someone who lacks a full head of hair, but who falls within some vague range of hair situations, seem, to an ordinary observer, to have a full head of hair.²

Now, as Schiffer would say, let the plucking begin. Assuming you fully possess the relevant concepts and have good perceptual capacities, it will at the start of the plucking seem to you that Tom has a full head of hair. When the plucking is finished, it will no longer seem to you that he has a full head of hair. Your seeming will start out strong and fade away gradually. At some point in the plucking, it will be indeterminate whether it seems to you that Tom has a full head of hair. The feeling that accompanies this state is familiar to us all. Unless we have reason to doubt that things are as they seem, this feeling should (and usually does) result in our judging that the issue under consideration is indeterminate. Under the present circumstances, however, it is likely to result in your judging that Tom determinately lacks a full head of hair. For you know yourself to be in a situation in which things are not how they seem. You know there to be some
vague range of pluckings such that it will, at least \textit{prima facie}, seem to you that Tom has a full head of hair even though he does not.

But now consider Sally, who knows with certainty that her epistemic situation is ideal. She knows that she fully possesses all relevant concepts; that her cognitive conditions are ideal; and that her immediate evidence—which includes how things seem to her—reveals, in Schiffer’s words, “the full story about Tom’s baldness” (p. 226). For Sally, things regarding Tom’s hair situation are as they seem, and seem as they are. Here, then, is my first premise:

\begin{quote}
(P1) Tom is bald iff it seems to Sally that Tom is bald.
\end{quote}

For suppose otherwise. If Tom is bald even though it does not seem to Sally that he is, then either Sally’s cognitive capacities are deficient or her immediate evidence does not reveal “the full story,” contrary to the stipulations of the case. And if Tom is not bald even though it seems to Sally that he is, then again contrary to stipulation, either Sally’s cognitive capacities are deficient or her immediate evidence does not reveal “the full story.”

What if it is \textit{indeterminate} whether Tom is bald? Then, according to (P1), it is indeterminate whether it seems to Sally that Tom is bald. This, I think, is the correct result—both logically and phenomenologically. For suppose otherwise. Then, when it is indeterminate whether Tom is bald, either it \textit{determinately} seems to Sally that Tom is bald, or else it \textit{determinately} does not seem to her that he is bald. However, the first disjunct is compatible with Tom’s being determinately bald, and the second is compatible with his being determinately not bald. So Sally’s seemings would not be sensitive to the difference between it being indeterminate and it being determinate whether Tom is bald; they would therefore be \textit{flawed}.
It may be replied that Sally’s seemings would be collectively sensitive to this difference, as follows: it is indeterminate whether Tom is bald iff it determinately does not seem to Sally that he is bald and determinately does not seem to her that he is not bald. This, however, would rule out the possibility of Sally simultaneously having a vague seeming both toward the proposition that Tom is bald and toward its negation. (To see this, simply chart her seemings toward the two propositions throughout the plucking, on the supposition that in the middle of the plucking it determinately neither seems to her that Tom is bald nor that he is not bald.) But a vague seeming toward both \( p \) and its negation is just what we would expect, logically, of a paradigm thinker who considers a vague proposition, \( p \). Moreover, it is just how it feels to us when we are presented with a borderline bald person: it sort of seems that he is bald, and it sort of seems that he is not bald. It would be odd in the extreme for you to judge of Harry that he is sort of bald and sort of not bald when it determinately does not seem to you that he is bald and determinately does not seem to you that he is not bald.

I should note, before continuing with my argument, that (P1) is compatible both with semanticism and with epistemicism.\(^3\) For suppose it is indeterminate whether Tom is bald. Then, according to the semanticist, it is neither true nor false that Tom is bald. This, for the semanticist, is perfectly consistent with it being indeterminate whether it seems to Sally that Tom is bald (which is what the biconditional entails). Because this, for the semanticist, is just to say that it is neither true nor false that it seems to Sally that Tom is bald.

Now consider the epistemicist, who claims that if it is indeterminate whether Tom is bald, the proposition that Tom is bald has a truth value even though Sally cannot know it. This is consistent with (P1). For a plausible constraint on Sally, given her circumstance, is that she can
know that Tom is bald only if it determinately seems to her that he is bald. Or, in the words of the epistemicist: only if Sally can know that it seems to her that Tom is bald. If she cannot know this, then surely (given her circumstances) she cannot know that Tom is bald. For how things seem to her is one of her principal bases for judging whether Tom is bald. This is consistent with (P1), which entails that if it is indeterminate whether Tom is bald, then it is indeterminate whether it seems to Sally that Tom bald.

Let us now stipulate that Sally considers (P1). Since Sally knows with certainty that her relevant epistemic conditions are ideal, she knows (P1) with certainty. Let me add, by stipulation, that Sally possesses whatever concepts are required to have likelihood beliefs. Here, then, is my second premise:

(P2) It seems to Sally that Tom is bald iff Sally believes that it is 100% likely that Tom is bald.

For if Sally does not believe that it is 100% likely that Tom is bald even though it seems to her that Tom is bald, then either she doubts (P1) to some degree, contrary to the fact that she knows (P1) with certainty, or her beliefs about how things seem to her are fallible, contrary to the fact that her cognitive conditions are ideal. And if Sally believes that it is 100% likely that Tom is bald even though it does not seem to her that Tom is bald, then either she rejects (P1), contrary to stipulation, or her beliefs about how things seem to her are fallible, again contrary to stipulation.

Finally, given our stipulations about Sally, my final premise follows straightforwardly:

(P3) Sally believes that it is 100% likely that Tom is bald iff Sally fully believes that Tom is bald.
Now, if it is determinately indeterminate whether Tom is bald, then, from (P1)-(P3), it follows that it is determinately indeterminate whether Sally fully believes that Tom is bald.\(^4\)\(^5\)

Since [1] is expressed by an utterance of ‘Tom is bald’ when it is determinately indeterminate whether Tom is bald, it is determinately indeterminate whether Sally fully believes [1]. Finally, since \(\overline{V}\) is a partial belief only if it is determinately the case that Sally does not fully believe [1], we may conclude that \(\overline{V}\) is not a partial belief and therefore that \(\overline{V} \neq \text{VPB}\).\(^6\)

This conclusion is not so surprising. We believe things for reasons. Ideal thinkers believe things only for good reasons. Is there good reason to believe that borderline Tom is bald? Well, this is precisely what is indeterminate: it is indeterminate whether Tom’s hair situation warrants the claim that he is bald. Now, by stipulation, Sally believes [1] just in case she has good reason to believe it. Since it is indeterminate whether she has good reason to believe [1], it is indeterminate whether she believes [1]. Schiffer, I think, has simply confused a borderline case of belief (here I mean belief in the sense in which a partial belief of any degree counts as a belief) with a determinate case of a new kind of attitude, VPB. This diagnosis would explain why he finds it intuitive that Sally would have a .5-degree VPB that Tom is bald and thin when she has a .5-degree VPB that he is bald and a .5-degree VPB that he is thin (p. 225). For it is intuitive that if it is indeterminate both whether Sally believes that Tom is bald and whether she believes that he is thin, then it is indeterminate whether she believes that he is bald and thin. My diagnosis gains credibility in the context of Schiffer’s project. For he is attempting to explicate the notion of a borderline case in terms of a rational mental state. He cannot afford, therefore, to give up on the idea that there is some determinately rational attitude to take toward [1] in ideal conditions. His account would be circular if he claimed, for instance, that \(x\) is a borderline case of being \(F\) just
in case someone in ideal conditions could have a borderline belief that \( x \) is \( F \).

Moreover, independently of my argument above, Schiffer seems committed to the rejection of his claim that \( V \) is a partial belief. For even though he stipulates that VPB is a type of partial belief, he subsequently characterizes it as an attitude that fails to obey the laws that govern belief for a rational thinker. And surely something is a partial belief only if it is similar to belief in the laws that govern it for a rational thinker. Indeed, it is by satisfying these laws that SPBs—partial beliefs which under idealization can be identified with subjective probability—qualify as partial beliefs. Whether there are partial beliefs that are not SPBs is open to investigation. What is not open to investigation is whether there are partial beliefs that fail to obey the laws that govern belief for a rational thinker. One such (complex) law is that \( x \) believes \( p \) more firmly than \( q \) only if (i) \( x \) is less uncertain in \( p \) than in \( q \); (ii) ceteris paribus, \( x \) is disposed to bet more of value on \( p \) than on \( q \); and (iii) if \( x \) desires \( r \) and has no competing desires, \( x \) will prefer \( r \) only if \( p \) to \( r \) only if \( q \). According to Schiffer, however, degrees of VPB are not a measure of uncertainty (p. 223); the subject of a (paradigm) VPB recognizes that it is conceptually impossible for any bet on the matter to be won or lost; and it is not clear what dispositions arise from the interaction of VPBs with desires (p. 253). Indeed, throughout his paper Schiffer stresses substantial differences between VPB and belief, but coherency here demands substantial similarity. Given Schiffer’s strong commitment to applying his characterization of VPB mutatis mutandis to \( V \), he must, independently of my argument above, reject his claim that \( V \) is a partial belief.

But if \( V \) is not a partial belief, then what is it? Clearly it is not a desire, fear, hope, introspection, or any other standard propositional attitude. If \( V \) exists, it must be a wholly new
attitude. This makes investigating its nature difficult for someone like myself, who has no intuitive grasp of it. Schiffer (pp. 248-52) says quite a bit about the way Vs allegedly interact with one another and with SPBs. (I will hereafter reformulate Schiffer’s claims about VPB as claims about V.) He claims, for instance, that Sally would have a .5-degree V that Tom is bald and thin when she has a .5-degree V that he is bald and a .5-degree V that he is thin. But how could I possibly evaluate such a claim with no intuitive grasp of V?

One way to get a grasp of V is to learn what degrees of V measure. We know, already, that they do not measure degrees of belief. And, as Schiffer stresses, they clearly do not measure uncertainty or likelihood. I can think of only two remaining possibilities: orders of vagueness and “degrees to which x is F.”

With the aim of better grasping V, let us discuss what degrees of V might measure, beginning with the possibility that they measure orders of vagueness. If Schiffer’s analysis is sound, then degrees of V measure orders of vagueness only if they provide a basis for an analysis of (at least some) higher orders of vagueness. It is, however, implausible that any higher orders of vagueness might be analyzed, in even a very rough manner, in terms of degrees of V. Perhaps a .5-degree V reflects first-order vagueness. But then what? Does a .8-degree V reflect, even roughly, 3rd- or 12th- or 9,879th-order vagueness? It seems preposterous to suppose that any analysis based on such a correspondence could be justified.

Of course, this is no surprise. Higher-order vagueness is an essentially structured notion; it therefore cannot be analyzed in terms of degrees of V, which have no relevant structure. A proposition p is n-th-order vague just in case it is vague whether p is (n - 1)th-order vague; p is (n - 1)th-order vague just in case it is vague whether p is (n - 2)th-order vague; etc. For n>1, a
successful analysis of being $n^{th}$-order vague must reflect the essential structure of this property. It will not do, for instance, to analyze the property of being third-order vague in terms of degrees of $V$, which lack the requisite structure of third-order vagueness. (This would be like trying to analyze away the structure of being a great grandparent.) The essence of third-order vagueness would be lost. If Schiffer’s analysis is sound, degrees of $V$ do not measure orders of vagueness.

Since higher orders of vagueness are simply special cases of vagueness, an account of them should follow naturally from repeated applications of Schiffer’s analysis. If we let $\Phi = \text{‘someone could have a } V^* \text{ that’}$, we can say that for $n>0$ it is $n^{th}$-order vague whether $x$ is $F$ iff $\Phi (n-1) \Phi (n-2) \Phi \ldots (n-(n-1)) x$ is $F$). The structure of higher orders of vagueness would thereby be reflected in the structured contents of possible $V$s, as opposed to the relevantly unstructured degrees of possible $V$s.

Let us turn to the second possibility regarding the issue of what degrees of $V$ might measure. Schiffer suggests that degrees of $V$ might measure something like “the degree to which $x$ is $F$” (when $V$’s content is that $x$ is $F$). But suppose Tom is such that it is determinately possible for someone have a .9-degree $V^*$ that Tom is bald. Given Schiffer’s analysis, together with the only plausible account of higher-order vagueness that follows from it, it is determinately indeterminate whether Tom is bald. But this is obviously incorrect if Tom is “90% of the way to being bald.” So if Schiffer’s analysis is sound, degrees of $V$ do not measure “degrees to which $x$ is $F$."

It seems, then, that if Schiffer’s analysis is sound, we are left with only one very unsatisfying fact about degrees of $V$: they measure the “strength” of $V$. I now want to return to the general question of what $V$ is and argue that regardless of what degrees of $V$ measure, if
Schiffer’s analysis is sound, then \( V \) cannot be any sort of partial attitude.

Suppose, for reductio, that \( V \) is such a partial attitude and that Schiffer’s analysis is sound. This implies the existence of an attitude, \( W \), whose range includes 0 and 1, such that \( V \)-s are simply partial \( W \)-s—that is, \( n \)-degree \( W \)-s, for \( 0 < n < 1 \). Now consider the following proposition:

\[ \text{[2]} \quad \text{that the laws of } W \text{ for all rational thinkers } x, \text{ epistemic situations } y, \text{ and stages } z \text{ of the plucking of Tom’s hair are such that if (i) situation } y \text{ is ideal regarding whether Tom is bald at stage } z \text{ and (ii) thinker } x \text{ is in situation } y \text{ considering whether Tom is bald, then (iii) there is a unique degree } n \text{ such that thinker } x \text{ has an } n \text{-degree } W \text{ that Tom is bald.} \]

A destructive dilemma follows.

If [2] is true, then there is an unacceptable one-hair cutoff between what suffices to make Tom a borderline case of baldness and what fails to suffice to make him a borderline case of baldness. This is because each hair plucked results in a unique epistemic situation \( y \) such that there is a unique degree \( n \) such that a paradigm thinker in \( y \) must have an \( n \)-degree \( W \) that Tom is bald. The cutoff is simply between the number of hairs Tom has when \( n = 1 \) and the number he has when \( n \) is first less than 1. Presumably, it is to avoid this unacceptable cutoff that Schiffer rejects [2] (p. 250).

The rejection of [2], however, leads to contradiction. For suppose that Tom is such that it is determinately possible for someone to have a .99-degree \( V^* \) (=.99-degree \( W^* \)) that he is bald. It follows, given Schiffer’s analysis,

\[ \text{[3]} \quad \text{that it is determinately indeterminate whether Tom is bald.} \]
From the rejection of [2], it is plausible to infer that Tom is such that it is possible for someone to have a $W^*$ of degree 1 that Tom is bald. This thinker represents Tom as a case of baldness. But if the laws of $W$ together with Tom’s hair situation allow for Tom to be represented either as bald or as a borderline case of baldness, then surely they allow for him to be represented as a borderline borderline case of baldness. In other words, they allow for the possibility of a $V^*$ toward the proposition that it is possible for someone to have a $V^*$ that Tom is bald. This possibility, together with Schiffer’s analysis, entails that it is indeterminate whether it is indeterminate whether Tom is bald. This contradicts [3]. And our reductio is complete.

In struggling with the question, What is $V$?, we have found (i) that $V$ is not a partial belief; (ii) that degrees of $V$ are not a measure of uncertainty or likelihood; and, if Schiffer’s analysis is sound, (iii) that degrees of $V$ do not measure orders of vagueness; (iv) that degrees of $V$ do not measure “the degree to which $x$ is $F$,” and (v) that $V$ is not a partial attitude. The only positive fact we know about $V$ is that, if it exists, Sally determinately bears it toward the proposition that borderline Tom is bald. Schiffer’s analysis therefore threatens to obscure, rather than clarify, the notion of a borderline case. Which means that we are well on our way to giving a negative answer to our second question, Is Schiffer’s analysis a good one?

Furthermore, without a substantial account of the nature $V$, Schiffer’s analysis seems prone to counterexamples. For how are we to rule out the possibility that the following non-vague propositions are contents of possible $V^*$s:

[4] that Mary is a minor* (given that $A$ is minor$^*$ if $\text{def } A$’s age < 17 and $A$ is not a minor$^*$ if $\text{def } A$’s age > 21);\[16\]

[5] that particle $a$ has spin up (given that $a$ is in a superposition of spin states up
and down, and that quantum mechanics does not admit of higher-order indeterminacy, an essential mark of vagueness);  

[6] that I dreamt of a glass of flat 7-Up (given that I dreamt that I saw, but did not inspect, a glass of clear liquid); and  

[7] that the present king of France is not a dolphin (given the coherency of the view that presupposition failure strips a proposition of any truth value and that [7] is an instance of presupposition failure)?  

[5] is particularly worrisome. For with it comes the following dilemma for Schiffer: either his analysis purports to explicate only vagueness-related indeterminacy or it purports to explicate indeterminacy in general. If the former, then his analysis is prone counterexamples, such as those above. If the latter, then his claim that the essence of indeterminacy is psychological is dubious just in case a non-epistemic interpretation of quantum indeterminacy is coherent. For it is doubtful that the indeterminacy of quantum mechanics is reducible to a psychological notion.  

I will say nothing more about [4]-[7], since my poor grasp of the nature of V prevents me from having intuitions about whether V*'s might be had toward them. The worry, simply, is that nothing we know about V excludes [4]-[7] from satisfying the right-hand side of Schiffer’s analysis.  

The remainder of my discussion will address the question, Does V even exist? Given that V is not one of the standard propositional attitudes, there are three prima facie plausible sources of motivation for positing V: Schiffer’s analysis of borderline case, Schiffer’s treatment of the sorites paradox, and empirical psychology.
Might Schiffer’s analysis motivate adding $V$ to our ontology? No. For our evaluation of it depends on our independent grasp of $V$, and we so far have no such grasp.

Might Schiffer’s treatment of the sorites paradox motivate positing $V$? Resting a plausible treatment of the sorites on a $V$-based analysis of borderline case would help to motivate positing $V$. However, I will now argue not only that Schiffer’s treatment of the sorites fails to rest on his analysis of borderline case, but that it is incompatible with it (given Schiffer’s commitment to rejecting “third-possibility” views—to be discussed presently).

Schiffer’s treatment of the sorites (pp. 233-36) has the appearance of being based, at least in part, on his analysis of borderline case. Here, in brief, is his treatment: He rejects the inductive premise of the sorites. He then considers a sub-paradox consisting of an apparently valid three-premise argument whose conclusion is the inductive premise. He claims that the first premise of the sub-paradox is determinately false only if bivalence holds for borderline propositions; that the second premise is determinately false only if bivalence fails for borderline propositions; and that the third premise cannot reasonably be rejected. He concludes that it is indeterminate which of the first two premises is false, because it is the case

[8] that it is indeterminate whether bivalence holds for borderline propositions. His basis for [8] is his claim

[9] that one might have a $V*$ toward propositions such as that it’s true or false that borderline Tom is bald.

(I should note that Schiffer provides an independent argument for [8]. However, it is clearly invalid. It is that “There is a disagreement among extremely intelligent and superbly rational experts as to whether borderline vague propositions have truth-values. … It seems preposterous
to suppose that one side is simply failing to see what the other knows” (pp. 235). Shall we conclude, in the same spirit, that each of the following positions is indeterminate: dualism, realism, rationalism, and consequentialism? And is it, on similar grounds, indeterminate whether there will ever be a peaceful settlement in Ireland?)

I do not think Schiffer’s treatment of the sorites rests on his analysis. For it seems to me that we would only accept [9] on grounds that would justify [8] independently of Schiffer’s analysis. We might, for example, simply find it intuitive that it is indeterminate whether the proposition that borderline Tom is bald has a truth-value.17

This point, however, is superfluous if Schiffer is correct in endorsing Crispin Wright’s rejection of so-called “third-possibility” views of indeterminacy (pp. 231). If Wright is correct, [8] is not merely independent of Schiffer’s analysis, it is incompatible with it.18 According to Wright, “To reject the third possibility view is thus to reject the idea that in viewing the question, whether P, as indeterminate, one takes a view with any direct bearing on the question of the truth-value of P.”19 Now, Schiffer’s treatment of the notion of borderline case rests in part on the rejection of two views: semanticism and epistemicism. Where, in Schiffer’s own words, “The epistemic theorist = the theorist who accepts bivalence for borderline propositions” and “The semantic theorist = the theorist who rejects bivalence for borderline propositions” (p. 228). Given these identities, the only way to reject semanticism and epistemicism is to reject both that bivalence holds for borderline propositions and that it fails for borderline propositions. But Schiffer’s solution to the sorites rests on the proposition that it is indeterminate whether bivalence holds for borderline propositions. So if he rejects third-possibility views, he cannot reject semanticism and epistemicism. To reject semanticism and epistemicism is to pronounce a
third possibility regarding the issue of whether bivalence holds for borderline propositions: namely, that it neither holds nor fails to hold. Schiffer’s rejection of third-possibility views therefore renders his treatment of the sorites incompatible with his treatment of the notion of a borderline case.20

It is, then, unlikely on two counts that Schiffer’s treatment of the sorites could motivate positing V.

Might sufficient motivation for positing V lie, independently of Schiffer’s treatment of vagueness-related issues, in the theory of empirical psychology? Without such an independent motivation for positing V, Schiffer’s analysis simply seems ad hoc. For given that Sally does not determinately partially believe [1]—that borderline Tom is bald, or its negation, why should we think she determinately bears any attitude toward it? Suppose she does not. This would not prevent her from determinately having an opinion on the matter: she would firmly believe that Tom is kind of bald. She would also firmly believe that it is indeterminate whether Tom is bald. Furthermore, her relevant dispositions could be explained under this supposition by reference to her qualified beliefs and relevant desires (and, if needed, to the fact that it is indeterminate whether she fully believes [1]). Prima facie, attributing a V to Sally seems unnecessary.

Schiffer disagrees. He states, “There can be little doubt that in making one of her qualified assertions that Tom is bald midway through the plucking of Tom, Sally is expressing some relation to the proposition that Tom is bald” (p. 253). But I think Schiffer is here conflating two types of qualified assertion: one involving a qualified stance toward a possibly unqualified content, the other involving an unqualified stance toward a qualified content.21 Surely Sally does not assert that she kind of believes that Tom is bald, or that she believes with much less than full
confidence that he is bald. Both of these stance-qualified assertions inappropriately imply that Sally determinately has some degree of confidence in [1].\textsuperscript{22} By contrast, it would be entirely appropriate for Sally to assert that Tom is kind of bald. Of course, this qualified assertion would not express a relation to [1]; it would only express a belief toward the proposition that Tom is kind of bald. It seems, then, that Sally’s verbal responses do not provide an independent motivation for positing \( V \).

Furthermore, if the laws of rationality were to dictate that Sally must determinately bear some attitude toward [1], then wouldn’t they likewise dictate that she must determinately determinately bear some attitude toward the proposition that borderline Tom is bald? Since Sally does not determinately determinately believe or \( V \) this proposition, she would be forced to bear some other new attitude, \( V^2 \), toward it. Of course, being a supreme thinker, Sally might represent even higher orders of vagueness, thereby opening the door for a slew of new attitudes. But why, in the first place, should we think the laws of rationality issue such bizarre dictates?

Perhaps Sally has some other psychological or behavioral dispositions that would motivate attributing a \( V \) to her. Suppose she refuses to date borderline Tom and is attracted only to men who are either completely bald or else have luxurious heads of hair. And suppose we can explain her behavior by reference to her belief that Tom is kind of bald. Schiffer suggests that we can equally well explain her behavior by attributing to her a \( V \) that Tom is bald (p. 254). Of course, if we accepted Schiffer’s analysis of borderline case in terms of \( V \), this suggestion would have some plausibility.\textsuperscript{23} But we are here seeking independent motivation for positing \( V \). Given that our present ontology affords a perfectly good explanation of Sally’s behavior, why posit \( V \).
a wholly new sort of attitude?

By analogy, I might claim that $p$ is a priori iff someone could have a $V#$ that $p$ (where $V#$ is a new kind of attitude). Now suppose we ask Sally to sing only if there is a freckle on the bottom of your foot, and that without inspecting your foot she sings. We might explain her behavior by citing her belief that it is a priori that your foot is freckled. Or, if we accepted my proposed analysis, we might cite her $V#$ that your foot is freckled. But why accept my ad hoc analysis?

It seems, furthermore, that invoking $V$ to explain behavioral or psychological dispositions would lead to disunity in our theory of psychology. For unity is a virtue of positing $V$ only if it is theoretically possible to replace all explanatory attributions of the form, $x$ believes (or desires) that $y$ is kind of $F$, with ones of the form, $x$ has a $V$ that $y$ is $F$. But consider the extreme disappointment of Karen upon being presented with her blind dates, Yul Brenner and Elvis Presley. We might explain Karen’s disappointment by citing two facts: that she believes that neither Yul nor Elvis is kind of bald, and that she strongly desires that her dates be kind of bald.

Could we achieve the same effect in terms $V$? We might start by citing that Karen believes Yul to be completely bald and Elvis to be endowed with a luxurious head of hair. But what about her desire? I can think of two options. First, we could claim that Karen desires that her dates each be such that someone could have a $V*$ toward the proposition that he (the date) is bald. But only if Karen possessed the relevant concepts, and were convinced of Schiffer’s revised analysis, would she care about this bizarre proposition. (The same problem arises when citing the specific belief-content that would frustrate this bizarre desire.) Second, we could further pollute our ontology by claiming that Karen $V$-desires that her dates are bald, where someone $V$-desires that
x is F just in case she desires that x is kind of F. But what would degrees of V-desire measure? Perhaps attributing to Karen a V-desire of degree .5 would convey her desire to date borderline bald men, but it would not convey the strength of her desire. Moreover, any hope of a unified treatment would be lost by introducing a second new attitude, V-desire. If we go this route, we are likely to end up with an entire family of peculiar attitudes, including V-fears, V-hopes, V-remembrances, and V-introspections.

I conclude that there is insufficient motivation for positing V, since none of the three possible sources is a good one. These sources exhausted, Ockham’s razor can justifiably be applied: there is no such attitude as V.

Let me conclude by summarizing the main points of my paper. On Schiffer’s suggestion, I reformulated his analysis in more neutral terms: x is to some extent a borderline case of being F just in case someone could have a V* that x is F (where V* is a paradigm V). I then evaluated Schiffer’s view by addressing three questions:

(i) What is V (assuming there is such an attitude)?

(ii) Is Schiffer’s analysis in terms of V a good one?

(iii) Does V even exist?

Concerning (i), I argued (a) V cannot be a partial belief; and, if Schiffer’s analysis is sound, (b) degrees of V cannot measure orders of vagueness or “degrees to which x is F” and (c) V cannot even be a partial attitude. The only answer I found to (i) is the trivial one: V, if it exists, is whatever attitude Sally determinately bears toward the proposition that borderline Tom is bald.

Concerning (ii), I argued, given my answer to (i), that Schiffer’s analysis threatens to obscure rather than clarify the notion of a borderline case; and that it is prone to
counterexamples. Of course, given my answer to (iii)—that there is no such attitude as
\( V \)—Schiffer’s analysis is a good one only if there is no such phenomenon as vagueness. But vagueness is ubiquitous.

* For helpful comments, I am indebted to Peter Kung, Adam Pautz, Stephen Schiffer and, in a special measure, Hartry Field.

1 I doubt there could ever be a thinker justified in believing with certainty that she is in ideal epistemic conditions, but I will grant this sort of possibility for the sake of argument. See Schiffer (pp. 249-50) for details about it.

2 For present purposes, it is not necessary to distinguish between perceptual and intellectual seemings. It may seem, or appear, that Tom has a full head of hair. Or, Tom’s hair situation may appear a certain way—a way that may be agreed upon by those with or without the concept of baldness—and, given that it appears this way, it may seem, to those who possess the concept of baldness, that Tom is bald.

3 Semanticism is the view that vagueness is a type of absent truth-value. Epistemicism is the view that vagueness is a type of incurable ignorance. See Schiffer (p. 228) for his characterization of both views.

4 I take it as uncontroversial that if one side of a true biconditional is indeterminate, so is the other.

5 If this result strikes you as odd, perhaps you are not keeping in mind that Sally’s mental
states are determined only by her epistemic situation together with the dictates of rationality. It is not as if she surveys her evidence and then exercises her free will by choosing to be such that it is indeterminate whether she fully believes that Tom is bald. This would be odd. Nor is there necessarily anything “it is like” to be in Sally’s belief-state, even though there does seem to be something “it is like” to be in Sally’s seeming-state, namely, it’s like it is when it sort of seems to us that S and sort of seems to us that not S.

Could my argument have been simplified by eliminating (P3) and replacing (P2) with (P2*)—that it seems to Sally that Tom is bald iff Sally fully believes that he is bald? Not if Schiffer’s characterization of VPB is correct. For what seems to be the obvious proof of (P2*) rests on an assumption denied by this characterization: namely, that partially believing p entails doubting p to some degree. The proof would begin by supposing that it seems to Sally that Tom is bald even though she does not fully believe that he is bald. It would then be inferred (here is where the question is begged against Schiffer) that Sally doubts to some degree that he is bald and therefore doubts (P1) to some degree, contrary to stipulation.

Rejecting this claim would be a misleading way for Schiffer to pursue the option of analyzing vagueness in terms of a wholly new kind of attitude—one that is not a partial belief. I will presently consider this option, under a less misleading guise.


Schiffer (p. 254) claims that VPBs are similar to beliefs in that they “behave as if they
were beliefs about the degree to which their contents were true.” (He then gives reasons why VPBs cannot bear any precise correlation with such beliefs.) I will argue in the text to follow that this cannot be. But even if it were the case, it would hardly be enough to show that Schiffer’s characterization of VPB is consistent with his stipulation that VPB is a type of partial belief.

10 I should note that some of my following objections are independent of whether V is a partial belief.

11 Actually, this depends on the interpretation of the expression ‘to some extent’ as it appears in Schiffer’s analysis (x is to some extent a borderline case of being F just in case someone could have a V* that x is F). Used in its ordinary sense, Tom is to some extent bald iff he shows any signs of baldness. From which it plausibly follows that Tom is to some extent bald iff he is: bald or borderline bald or borderline borderline bald or … (up to some vague order of borderline baldness). This might lead a reader of Schiffer to conclude that his analysis is not an analysis of being a borderline case, but rather of being a: borderline case or borderline borderline case or … (up to some vague order of borderline borderlineness). A reader of Schiffer’s discussion of higher-order vagueness might then be led to believe that Schiffer intends for degrees of V to provide a rough measure of (at least some) higher orders of vagueness. Schiffer says (pp. 252-53), “… the intuitive idea meant to be captured is that one thing can be more of a borderline case of a property than another thing, and this should be explained, somehow, in terms of the degrees to which rational agents would v*-believe those things to have the property. If an exact correlation of some sort were to hold, this would alleviate problems of higher-order vagueness,
but it certainly would not eliminate the phenomenon.” In other words, if instead of ‘is a borderline case’ our language only had ‘is to some extent a borderline case’, this would reduce, but not eliminate, the number of potentially vague sentences involving embedded instances of ‘borderline’. Likewise, if we could somehow eliminate the predicate ‘is bald’ in favor of the predicate ‘is to some extent bald’, we could “alleviate” problems of vagueness involving ‘bald’ by reducing the number of potentially vague sentences containing it.

In conversation, however, Schiffer denies that his analysis is of being a: borderline case or borderline borderline case or … . He also denies that degrees of V are intended to be a rough measure of higher orders of vagueness. I shall therefore simply ignore the expression ‘to some extent’ as it appears in Schiffer’s analysis.

12 See my note 9.

13 Given Schiffer’s description of Sally’s mental states during the plucking of Tom (p.224), he seems committed to the claim that during some stage of the plucking it is determinately possible for someone (namely, Sally) to have a .9-degree V that Tom is bald.

14 This claim is not essential to my argument.

15 If Tom is never such that this is determinately possible, then substitute for .99 whatever is the largest determinately possible degree of V* that can be had toward a proposition expressed by ‘Tom is bald’.

16 This is Schiffer’s own example from “Two Issues of Vagueness,” op. cit., p. 199.
Schiffer (same page) says, “there’s nothing vague about ‘minor*’ … Rather than being vague, it’s a precise but incompletely defined term.”

17 Also, the thesis that it is indeterminate whether it is indeterminate whether bivalence holds for borderline propositions seems to me to be as plausible as [8]. Indeed, Schiffer’s arguments for [8] count as well for this thesis. But this thesis is not compatible with Schiffer’s pronouncement that it is not the case that one of the premises is determinately false (and therefore that there is no “happy-face solution”). For this thesis entails that it is indeterminate whether one of the premises is determinately false (and therefore indeterminate whether there is no “happy-face solution”).

18 And if Wright is determinately correct, then [8] is false. For [8] entails that it is indeterminate whether there is a third-possibility regarding the truth-value of borderline propositions.


20 I should note that Schiffer cannot easily dispense with his rejection of third-possibility views. His claim that the essence of vagueness is psychological rests, at least in part, on this rejection (see Schiffer pp. 231-32).

21 Schiffer (p. 251) seems to make a related mistake when trying to vindicate his counterintuitive claim that “Sally will also v-believe to degree .5 that Tom is bald and not bald
when she v-believes each conjunct to degree .5.” Schiffer claims that this consequence is not so unnatural because “… a not unnatural reaction to the question ‘Is Tom bald?’, when Tom is a borderline case of baldness, is to say, albeit with appropriate ambivalence, ‘Well, he sort of is and he sort of isn’t.’” But it is not at all obvious that from the fact that x is sort of F and sort of not F it follows that x is sort of F and not F. I believe that Fred is sort of bald. And I believe that he is sort of not bald. But wouldn’t I be foolish to believe that he is sort of bald and not bald? (Also consider: Clinton is in some ways a great president and in some ways an awful one, but he is no way a great and awful president.)

22 Keep in mind that it is indeterminate whether Sally fully believes [1], and that fully believing does not admit of degree: it’s all or nothing sort of thing. It seems to me incorrect, for this reason, to say that Sally kind of fully believes [1]. But even if it were correct, it would not entail that Sally bears some attitude other than belief to [1].

23 Schiffer might claim that explanations in terms of V-ing that x is F are generally superior to those in terms of believing that x is kind of F because the relevant agent might not have the concept of being kind of F. To this, I would reply that if a vague concept being F admits of comparative use, then part of fully possessing it is being disposed to recognize the possibility of something’s being kind of F (or somewhat F, or sort of F).

24 This, of course, does not imply that it is vague whether x is F only if x is kind of F.