Professor Williamson’s gracious and thoughtful reply to our review\(^1\) of Vagueness\(^2\) has clarified in a very useful way where he and we agree and disagree.

Where we agree most enthusiastically is in the assessment that vagueness is largely – Williamson would say entirely – an epistemic phenomenon. Of course, everyone always knew that there were epistemic aspects to vagueness, but we daresay no one before Williamson realized just how much you could learn if you look at vagueness with epistemic concerns primarily in mind.

Indeed, we would go so far as to say that Williamson has solved the *sorites* paradox. He hasn’t, of course, vindicated the *sorites* principles – sayings like “Anyone who owns just a penny more than a poor person is poor” – for those principles are beyond redemption. What Williamson has accomplished is the philosophical task that remains after we repudiate the principles, namely, to explain why, in spite of their preposterous consequences, the *sorites* principles have such enormous intuitive appeal. The explanation is that we cannot produce a counterexample, or even clearly imagine producing a counterexample. To apply a vague term reliably, we must leave a margin for error, so that people very close to the boundary of “poor” aren’t recognizable as poor, even if they are, in fact, poor. If we can recognize someone as poor, then a person with just a few pennies more is poor as well. So, although we can prove mathematically that there is a richest poor person, we can never hope to identify such a person by name.

What we disagree about is meaning fixation. Allowing ourselves the simplifying fiction that whether a person is poor depends only on how much money the person possesses, Williamson contends that English usage determines a precise if unknown amount of money such that anyone with that amount of money or less satisfies “poor”, and anyone with even a penny more satisfies “not poor”. We don’t for a moment suppose that this doctrine is contradictory, but we nonetheless find it incredible that

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our casual and careless practices establish a partition of such astonishing exactitude.

The alternative is to suppose that English usage determines ranges of application for “poor” and for “not poor”, but it is not so incisive as to partition everyone into one category or the other; there are folk in the middle about whom usage is indecisive. The way we like to put it (the terminology is not obligatory), if Tom is in the first range, “Tom is poor” is determinately true. If in the second, the sentence is determinately false. Otherwise, the truth value of the sentence is undetermined. This threefold partition is itself vague.

Williamson asks, reasonably enough, that we say explicitly what we mean by “determinately”, and we haven’t been able to do so. We anticipate that, if someday people have an adequate account of the procedures by which English words get their meanings, they will see that those procedures leave some difficult cases unsettled. That is our expectation, but no one has a satisfactory account of meaning fixation in English at present. The interim problem of trying to define “determinately” using the theoretical resources currently on hand is one on which we haven’t made much progress.

Williamson’s complaint is entirely justified, but we ask, rather churlishly, if one cannot make a similar complaint against him? He confidently predicts that, if we do someday have an account of how natural-language expressions get their meanings, it will tell us that speakers’ practices establish an exactly delimited border for every meaningful predicate of the language. Doesn’t he owe us at least a sketch of an account of how this is done?

We expressed the hope that someday a scientific understanding of meaning fixation would resolve the controversy between epistemist and semantic accounts of vagueness. Williamson is not nearly so optimistic. He thinks it not unlikely that the multifarious paths by which words get their meanings will never submit themselves to a unified scientific understanding, so that our dispute will never rise above the level of philosophical speculation. Certainly, we claim no powers of prognostication, but we would have thought that Williamson would have been embarrassed by the suggestion that the connections between linguistic usage and semantic values are too diverse and too imprecisely defined to allow significant generalizations. He himself advocates a principle of breathtaking generality, namely, that for every single meaningful predicate of the language, usage establishes a function that determines, for each possible context of utterance, an exact, exclusive, and exhaustive partition into things that satisfy the predicate and things that satisfy its negation.