Varieties of Vagueness*

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According to one account, vagueness is "metaphysical." The friend of metaphysical vagueness believes that, for some object and some property, there can be no determinate fact of the matter whether that object exemplifies that property. A second account maintains that vagueness is due only to ignorance. According to the epistemic account, vagueness is explained completely by and is nothing over and above our not knowing some relevant fact or facts. These are the minority views. The dominant position maintains that there is a third possible variety of vagueness, linguistic vagueness. And, it goes on to insist, all vagueness is of this third variety. I shall argue, however, that linguistic vagueness is *not* a third variety of vagueness. Either it is a species of metaphysical vagueness or a kind of ignorance. And this, I argue, makes trouble for the claim that all vagueness is linguistic.

I

Everyone agrees that it can be questionable whether a man is bald, and that this can be questionable even if we know exactly how many hairs the man has on his head. So everyone should agree that there can be, in *some* sense, vagueness with respect to baldness. What everyone does not agree on is in *what* sense there can be vagueness, with respect to baldness or in general. That is, there is disagreement about what *varieties* of vagueness there can be.

One alleged variety of vagueness is "metaphysical." There is vagueness of this variety if, for some object and some property, there is no determinate fact of the matter whether that object exemplifies that property. So the friend of metaphysical vagueness might insist that there is no determinate fact of the matter whether a questionably bald man exemplifies the property of *being bald*. And she will add that the corresponding proposition—the proposition

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claiming that that man exemplifies that property—is neither true nor false, thus rejecting bivalence for propositions.[1]

A second alleged variety of vagueness is "epistemic." Epistemic vagueness is explained completely by and is nothing over and above our not knowing some relevant fact or facts. So, for instance, epistemic vagueness in a case of baldness might be explained by our not knowing enough about the nature of baldness. Or perhaps we do not know enough about the proposition that we express in a given context when we say 'He is bald'. At any rate, no matter where we locate the relevant ignorance, vagueness is epistemic if, were we to have enough information, that vagueness would dissipate.[2]

The dominant position is that vagueness—*all* vagueness—is neither metaphysical nor epistemic, but rather is somehow a product of language and thought. For ease of exposition, this paper will focus exclusively on *linguistic* vagueness. This simplification is harmless, since everything I say about 'bald' below can easily be adapted to the concept of *being bald*. Given our simplification, the dominant position says that a vague case of baldness is somehow the result of some feature of our language, such as, maybe, the fact that we never decided *exactly* what we mean by the word 'bald'. Or perhaps the vagueness is best explained by the "incompleteness of sense" of 'bald'. Or perhaps there is some other story detailing what it is for 'bald' to be vague.

The details here are, for our purposes, beside the point. For regardless of how the details are worked out, linguistic vagueness is typically alleged to be a *third variety* of vagueness, distinct from both the metaphysical and the epistemic. As evidence for this, note that its defenders usually take the claim that all vagueness is linguistic vagueness to be far *superior* to—thus distinct from—both the claim that vagueness is metaphysical and the claim that vagueness is epistemic. I shall argue, however, that linguistic vagueness is *not* a third variety of vagueness. Either it is a species of metaphysical vagueness or the result of ignorance.

Anyone who begins with the claim that all vagueness is epistemic will happily toss in a disjunct and claim that all vagueness—including vagueness in language—is either epistemic or metaphysical. Similarly for one who begins with the claim that all vagueness is metaphysical. But my defense of the claim that linguistic vagueness is either metaphysical or epistemic is

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[1] Metaphysically vague *identity* raises special problems (Evans, 1978). Some defenders of metaphysical vagueness (e.g., van Inwagen, 1990, 228ff) defend vague identity. Others (e.g., Tye, 1990, 538) do not.

[2] Epistemicism says that all vagueness is epistemic. Epistemicism's defenders include the ancient Stoics (see Williamson, 1994, 12ff), Williamson (1994), and Sorensen (1988). Epistemicists often hold that vagueness-constituting ignorance cannot be eliminated. But if we did eliminate it—even if this is practically impossible—epistemicism implies we would thereby eliminate vagueness. Note that given epistemicism, vagueness can be person-relative; that is, a particular case could be vague relative to the ignorant but not vague relative to the cognoscenti.

independent of a prior commitment to either epistemicism or metaphysical vagueness. I know of no other such defense in the literature. This absence is surprising. For the argument of the next section of the paper is so straightforward that it should suggest itself every time the linguistic theorist says there is no settled fact of the matter about whether a vague word describes a certain object. But so far as I can tell, this argument has not been explicitly considered, not even if just for the purpose of being shot down.

II

Consider your favorite example of a man who is vaguely bald. For the purposes of our argument, let's name him 'Harry'. Consider now the following sentence:

(1) 'Bald' describes Harry.

Grant, for the sake of argument and only temporarily, that (1) expresses a single proposition. (I discuss supervaluations below.) One might interpret 'bald''s being linguistically vague as amounting to that proposition's not having a determinate truth value. One might also add that this means there is no determinate fact of the matter about whether 'bald' is related by *describing* to Harry, no determinate fact of the matter about whether 'bald' has the property of *describing Harry*, and no determinate fact of the matter about whether Harry exemplifies the property of *being described by 'bald'*. Obviously enough, if this interpretation of the vagueness of 'bald' is correct, then linguistic vagueness is a species of metaphysical vagueness and the main claim of this paper—that linguistic vagueness is itself either metaphysical or epistemic—is true.

Anyone who wants to reject this interpretation of the vagueness of 'bald' must maintain that the proposition expressed by (1) (again, assuming that there is such a proposition) is either determinately true or determinately false. Note that if we all *knew* that proposition's determinate truth value, we would all *know* whether 'bald' described Harry; and so we would all know whether Harry were bald; and so Harry—our paradigmatic vaguely bald man—would then no longer be a vague case of baldness. So if it is wholly determinate whether 'bald' describes Harry, all vagueness surrounding Harry's baldness would disappear were we apprised of all the relevant facts. The reason Harry *in fact* is a vague case of baldness can only be that we are *not* so apprised. If it is wholly determinate whether 'bald' describes Harry, then the vagueness of 'bald' is rooted entirely in our ignorance of the determinate facts of the matter and so is simply a species of epistemic vagueness.

In sum, the proposition expressed by (1) either has a determinate truth value or it does not. If it has a determinate truth value, then the vagueness of 'bald' is epistemic; if it does not, then that vagueness is metaphysical. So the

linguistic vagueness of 'bald' must be either epistemic or metaphysical. And there is nothing special about 'bald' here (nor, for that matter, about Harry). Parallel arguments can be made about any "linguistically vague" expression.

III

My argument above turns on claims about *the* proposition expressed by (1). But the supervaluationist could insist that (1) does not express a single proposition because, instead, (1) expresses *many* propositions, some true, some false. This, she could continue, implies that (1) itself—that sentence— is neither true nor false. And that, she concludes, gives us linguistic vagueness without metaphysical vagueness.

Alternatively, the supervaluationist might claim that (1) expresses *no* propositions. In order to avoid the obviously false claim that (1) is utterly meaningless, she must then insist that (1) *would* express a proposition under special conditions—its being precisified. In most of what follows, I'll focus on the claim that (1) expresses many propositions. But I shall return to the alternative position at various points in order to show that my argument applies to it as well.

Suppose that, as our supervaluationist would have it, (1) expresses many propositions. This must be because of vagueness in at least some of the expressions in that sentence. So one who maintains that (1) expresses many different propositions must hold that there is vagueness in some of the expressions in "'Bald' describes Harry'.

'Harry' is not vague. Or, if 'Harry' is vague, this is not the source of Harry's *baldness* being vague. The supervaluationist might claim that (1) expresses many propositions because the word 'bald' is vague. In response, by the supervaluationist's own lights, the vagueness of 'bald' is irrelevant to how many propositions (1) expresses. This is because the sentence in question does not *use* the word 'bald'. It *mentions* 'bald'. It is clear which word is mentioned, even if it not particularly clear who, exactly, it describes—and so no precisification is needed. Again, (1) expresses a proposition that makes a claim about a word, and we all know precisely which word it is: 'bald'.[3]

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[3] The supervaluationist might deny that "'Bald' describes Harry' *mentions* a single word, as might anyone who worries that the line between use and mention is sometimes blurry (Cf. Deas, 1989).

Two responses, the first *ad hominem*. Defenders of linguistic vagueness must allow that vague words can be successfully and unproblematically mentioned. For their view just is that 'bald' and other such terms are vague; it is hard to state this view, and impossible to motivate it, without mentioning the vague terms themselves. If defenders of linguistic vagueness can mention such terms in motivating their view, I can mention 'bald' in (1).

Secondly, and more importantly, suppose sentence (1) does not mention a single word. Then it must be that there are many distinct words that are spelled like, pronounced like, and otherwise indistinguishable from 'bald', and that they are all mentioned. So (1) thereby expresses many propositions, each of which mentions a different homonym. And

The only other possible source of vagueness in (1) is the word 'describes'. One could hold that 'describes' expresses many different relations, some of which relate 'bald' to Harry, some of which do not.[4] (Or one could hold that 'describes' expresses no relations, but would express one relation if precisified in one way, another if precisified in another, and so on. This sort of variation is irrelevant to substance of my argument.) That 'describes' thus expresses many relations implies that the sentence ''Bald' describes Harry' expresses some true propositions and some false propositions, and is therefore itself neither true nor false.

So the supervaluationist, at least as I have characterized her position, would have us suppose that 'describes' expresses many different relations, R_1, R_2, R_3...R_n.[5] And furthermore, we are to suppose that it is (determinately) true that 'bald' stands in, say, R_1 to Harry, but (determinately) false that 'bald' stands in, say, R_2 to Harry, and so on. (Obviously, claiming that some of the semantic *relations* R_1...R_n neither determinately relate nor determinately fail to relate 'bald' and Harry would make linguistic vagueness a kind of metaphysical vagueness.) I grant that if all this were true, (1) would be neither true nor false, and, moreover, that we would not thereby be saddled with metaphysical vagueness.

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since each homonym either does or does not describe Harry, no proposition fails to be either true or false. Suppose all this is true. If this secures linguistic vagueness at all, it is—I would argue—a species of epistemic vagueness. For if we all knew exactly which homonyms were involved, and exactly whom they described, there would be no vagueness.

[4] Suppose that 'expresses' ''expresses'' many different relations, E_1...E_n. Suppose further that 'describes' stands in E_1 to only one relation, E_2 to only one (other) relation, and so on. Then, by the supervaluationist's lights, the sentence ''describes' expresses exactly one relation' will be true—true on each precisification of 'expresses'—and the sentence ''describes' expresses many different relations' will be false. These comments do not affect my main line of argument. For my argument will not turn on the claim that ''describes' expresses one relation' is false. My argument relies on only the fact that whatever relations are expressed by 'describes' *either* determinately hold or fail to hold between 'bald' and Harry *or* they do not. If they do not, then we have metaphysical vagueness. If they do, then, I would argue, all the vagueness here is ultimately epistemic.

[5] Of course, which particular relations 'describes' expresses may vary from context to context. And I am a bit mystified as to what these various relations $(R_1...R_n)$ are supposed to be. I am tempted to say that they are relations of *describing* to various degrees (such as *describing to at least degree 0.1, describing to at least degree 0.2*, and so on.) But I don't know how to understand 'describing to various degrees' without presupposing that 'describes'—the thing that is being done to various degrees—is univocal. Moreover, I fear that the ''varying degrees'' might require metaphysical vagueness.

    The supervaluationist might cash these relations out in terms of counterfactuals which invoke, in their consequents, further semantic relations. So for example, the supervaluationist might say that 'bald' stands in R_1 to Harry just means that 'bald' is such that, were it precisified in a certain way, it would stand in some *other* semantic relation to Harry. (But what is that *other* relation supposed to be? It is tempting to say that *it* is the relation of *describing*, but that cannot be what the supervaluationist has in mind, since she has told us that there is no relation such that 'describing' expresses it and only it.)

But if all this were true, there would be no indeterminacy or semantic indecision. What we would have instead is a cluster of relations gathered under the title 'describes', and the fact that it has been decided—somehow—that 'bald' stands in certain of those relations to Harry and fails to stand in the remainder of those relations to Harry. (Perhaps it has been "decided" by causal factors associated with our linguistic practices, as opposed to, say, a vote of English speakers.) But if there is a determinate fact of the matter as to whether or not 'bald' stands in each and every semantic relation expressed by 'describes' to Harry, then it seems that there is no linguistic vagueness.

Perhaps the friend of linguistic vagueness will object. She might say that a sufficient condition for *all she means* by 'linguistic vagueness' is that there are many relations properly called 'describes' and that some of them do, and some do not, relate a particular word and a given object.

In response, consider the intuitions that usually cause us to endorse, or at least tempt us to endorse, linguistic accounts of vagueness in the first place. We wonder whether a man with a particular number of hairs is bald. We conclude there is no fact of the matter. Then we explain this by saying that 'bald' is not so precisely defined as to pick out an exact maximum number of hairs—or a precise array of possible hair distributions, etc.—that a bald man can have; for if it were, then there would be a fact of the matter as to whether any given man is described by 'bald'.

The intuitive story that draws us to linguistic vagueness also tells us *why* 'bald' is not precisely defined. It is because, roughly, the referent, the meaning, the sense, and indeed all the semantic features of a term are fixed by the decisions and actions of the speakers of the relevant language. And the speakers simply have not gotten around to fixing all the semantic details of 'bald', either by decision or deed. We might add that to do so would be a waste of time, practically impossible, and so on. For these reasons, some things here have been left genuinely undecided.

The supervaluationist's line of argument in terms of the vagueness of 'describes' and $R_1...R_n$ is not true to this intuitive story. That line of argument presumes that *all the details are fixed in full.* For *any* semantic relation you please, there is a determinate fact of the matter as to whether 'bald' stands in that relation to Harry.[6] This is inconsistent with the intuitive picture that

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[6] Just as the supervaluationist maintains that 'describes' is vague, and so expresses R_1, $R_2...R_n$, she will probably hold that 'is related to' is vague, and expresses, let us imagine, $r_1, r_2...r_n$. So suppose 'bald' stands in some (or all) of $r_1...r_n$ to some of $R_1...R_n$ to Harry. Of course, the supervaluationist will presumably say that 'stands in' is vague, expressing $S_1...S_n$. And so on and so on (ad infinitum?).

   These added complications do not help the supervaluationist in the present context. They may even make her position all the more difficult to maintain. For she must maintain that, somehow, it has been decided that, for example, 'bald' is related to Harry by S_1 to r_1 to $R_1...$, but not by S_1 to r_{16} to $R_7...$ and so on. But how were *those* semantic decisions made? If this story of iterated supervaluations is true, it seems that the precise facts about

motivated linguistic vagueness in the first place, a picture of our language as rough-and-ready, rather than absolutely precise.

If we have *metaphysical* vagueness, however, the intuitive picture is easily salvaged. For instance, a friend of metaphysical vagueness might say that there simply is no determinate fact of the matter whether 'bald' is related by *describes* to Harry. Indeed, I think linguistic vagueness does justice to the intuitions that standardly motivate it only when understood as a species of metaphysical vagueness.

IV

The defender of supervaluations might insist that *all she means* by 'linguistic vagueness' is captured by supervaluations. She might even add, in light of some of the above remarks, that linguistic vagueness is consistent with language's being absolutely precise. Or, if she is really clever, she might add instead that the supervaluationist's story just told is one that includes all she means by 'lack of precision in language'.

So suppose that the supervaluationist's story above describes what could reasonably be called 'linguistic vagueness'. Recall that my objective in this paper is not to show that linguistic vagueness is metaphysical vagueness. It is rather to show that linguistic vagueness is *either* metaphysical vagueness *or* epistemic vagueness. And although the sort of linguistic vagueness that supervaluations deliver is not a kind of metaphysical vagueness, it is—I shall argue—nothing more than a sophisticated variety of epistemic vagueness.

I shall start the argument for this claim by repeating myself, by pointing out that according to this version of linguistic vagueness, for any semantic relation you please, it is determinately true or it is determinately false that that relation relates 'bald' to Harry. We do, of course, have feelings of indecision or ambivalence or doubt when we consider whether 'bald' describes Harry. But—if the supervaluationist's account of the roots of vagueness is right—these feelings can only be due to our ignorance about the exact nature of the relations expressed by 'describes' and about which of those relations, relations like R_1, relate 'bald' to Harry. If we knew all the facts of the matter about each and every semantic relation relating 'bald' and Harry, there would be no feelings of indecision. We would of course recognize the ambiguity in a claim about 'bald''s describing Harry, but recognized ambiguity of this sort is not vagueness.

To see why, let's consider a parallel case. Let us suppose that the expression 'one-or-two' refers to the number one and also to the number two.

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our language are much *more finely grained* than they initially seemed to be; but the intuitive idea behind linguistic vagueness is that language is coarsely grained. Because iterated supervaluations are of no help to the supervaluationist in this context, I shall ignore them for the remainder of this paper.

Suppose further that we all know this. Given what we are supposing, we know that the sentence 'one-or-two plus one equals two' expresses two propositions. And we know which propositions it expresses. It expresses that one plus one equals two and that two plus one equals two. We also know that one of them, the first, is true, and that the other is false.

Vary the case just a bit. Imagine that the sentence 'one-or-two plus one equals two' expresses no propositions. Add that were it precisified in one way, it would express the proposition that one plus one equals two; were it precisified in another way, it would express the proposition that two plus one equals two. And add that we know all of these things.

Whether 'one-or-two plus one equals two' expresses two propositions or none (but would express one or another depending on how it is precisified), there is nothing here that counts as vagueness of any sort, and so nothing here that counts as linguistic vagueness. Note that nothing remotely resembling a "borderline" case—the hallmark of vagueness—is possible here.

But, as far as the presence of vagueness goes, the situation just imagined involving 'one-or-two plus one equals two' does not differ from what would be the case if *both* the supervaluationist's story about linguistic vagueness were correct *and* there were no human ignorance regarding all the relevant relations and precisifications. Thus I contend that the sort of linguistic vagueness under consideration is one according to which all vagueness has its roots in ignorance, and so is just a sophisticated form of epistemic vagueness.

The supervaluationist might object that, while there are only two propositions related in the relevant way to 'one-or-two plus one equals two', there are many more than two propositions so related to ''Bald' describes Harry'. I reply that this difference is irrelevant to the point at hand. After all, we could run the argument above with the sentence 'one-or-two-or-...-or-six million plus one is greater than three million'.

The supervaluationist might object that applying the label 'sophisticated epistemic vagueness' to her view does not do justice to how it differs from standard (naive?) epistemic vagueness. For the difference between them, she might insist, is so great as to be a difference in kind. In defense of this, she might point out that she is not committed to anything so implausible as the claim that there is a determinate fact about exactly how many hairs a bald man can have, such that were he to have one more hair, he would no longer be bald. Nor is she committed to the additional claim that none of the users of 'bald' knows what that number of hairs is. Such claims, she might insist, are the heart and soul (and Achilles' heel) of standard epistemic vagueness.

The defender of linguistic vagueness is mistaken in her diagnosis of the difference between the views in question. For although she does not endorse the claims just attributed to her naive cousin, she must endorse analogous, and equally surprising, claims. Here is an obvious example: there is a fact of

the matter whether 'bald' stands in the semantic relation R_1 to Harry, but no competent speaker of English knows what it is. The only disagreement between the naive and the sophisticated versions of the epistemic theory of vagueness is over the locus of our ignorance, and hence (and only derivatively) over the locus of vagueness. But they must agree that the ultimate source of vagueness is ignorance.

Moreover, since the friend of "naive" epistemic vagueness thinks we do not know whether Harry is bald, she also thinks that we do not know whether 'bald' is related by *describes* to Harry. Indeed, we can state the naive view of Harry's vague baldness in the "formal mode" as simply being the claim that we do not know whether 'bald' describes Harry. And when we state the naive view in this way, we can see that the sophisticate disagrees with it *only* in that the sophisticate thinks our ignorance is about a great array of relations— not just the single relation of *describes*—relating 'bald' and Harry. So the naive and the sophisticated views agree that ignorance is the source of vagueness, and even agree that the ignorance in the case in question can be stated in terms of ignorance about the semantic relations relating 'bald' and Harry.

So we have seen that the sort of linguistic variety of vagueness under consideration in this section is like the naive epistemic variety of vagueness in that both are rooted in ignorance of the non-vague, precise facts of the matter. And we have seen that these varieties are alike in that the vagueness-generating ignorance can be accurately described as ignorance about which objects are related by which semantic relations to which words. Given these similarities, these are not two distinct varieties of vagueness. They are one.

V

One might grant that the considerations above show that supervaluation-ism—as I have described it—fails to provide for a sort of linguistic vagueness that is distinct from both metaphysical and epistemic vagueness. But one might object to how I characterize supervaluationism. Or, more to the point, one might object that there is nothing in the discussion above to suggest that the only possible account of linguistic vagueness relies on supervaluations, either as I have spelled them out or understood in some other way. So, one might claim, it is still at least an open question whether there is some account of linguistic vagueness that does not collapse into either the metaphysical or the epistemic. And one could conclude that such an account might also have the result that the sentence ''Bald' describes Harry' does not express a single proposition, undermining the argument of Section II above.

This objection misses the most important moral of the above discussion. For that discussion, while focusing on supervaluations in particular, illustrates a quite general point: If the semantic details are fixed in full, then any alleged linguistic vagueness would dissipate were we informed of those details. In other words, if all propositions asserting that an object and word

are related by a semantic relation have a determinate truth value, then any linguistic vagueness is explained entirely by our ignorance of the determinate facts of the matter and is, therefore, simply a species of epistemic vagueness.[7] The argument involving supervaluations succeeds only because this general point is true.

Of course, one might deny that all such propositions do have a determinate truth value. One might therefore wish to deny that linguistic vagueness issues from ignorance of the determinate semantic facts. Rather, one might think that linguistic vagueness is the product of genuine indeterminacy in whether a certain semantic relation holds between a word and an object. Obviously, such linguistic vagueness would not be rooted in our ignorance of the determinate semantic facts, since the relevant facts are not determinate. But this sort of linguistic vagueness would, of course, be a species of metaphysical vagueness.

So I think that the above discussion of supervaluations shows us that the following, quite general, argument is sound. Either every proposition asserting that an object and word are related by a semantic relation has a determinate truth value or some do not. If every such proposition has a determinate truth value, linguistic vagueness is epistemic. If some do not, there may be non-epistemic linguistic vagueness, but such vagueness will itself be metaphysical. Therefore, if there is any linguistic vagueness at all, it is either a species of epistemic vagueness or a species of metaphysical vagueness.

VI

One account of vagueness holds that all vagueness is due to our ignorance of the determinate facts of the matter. Another account holds that the facts "out in the world" can themselves be vague. Both of these views are generally regarded as extremes. Thus Michael Tye (1994, 18–19) characterizes epistemic vagueness as involving a "move to the right" defended by "arch conservatives" and metaphysical vagueness as requiring that "we shift to the left and embrace the liberal chic of alternative logics." In the spirit of good sense and moderation, then, both views are usually rejected in favor of the claim that all vagueness is linguistic. We have seen, however, that linguistic vagueness itself must either be metaphysical or epistemic. So one cannot avoid the "extreme" accounts of vagueness by claiming that vagueness is linguistic. There is no moderate option available.

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[7]   As the arguments of the preceding section were meant to show, this point holds even if the relevant semantic relations are *not* expressed by, e.g., 'describing', but are instead those relations to the effect that the word in question would stand in some other relation, to the object in question, given a particular precisification. An example of such a semantic relation might be that 'bald' is related to Harry in such a way that given precisification P_1, 'bald' would be related to Harry by R_1.

Even if linguistic vagueness is neither an independent nor moderate *variety* of vagueness, one might wonder whether the linguistic *theory* of vagueness is true. The linguistic theory of vagueness states that all vagueness is, somehow, a product of language. And one could insist that that theory is, strictly speaking, consistent with the claim that there are ultimately only two possible varieties of vagueness—metaphysical and epistemic. That is, one could maintain that all vagueness is somehow a product of language and also that the vagueness language produces is itself either metaphysical or epistemic.

So the fact that linguistic vagueness is not an independent variety of vagueness does not obviously and immediately undermine the linguistic theory of vagueness. But it does—and this is, I think, quite significant—rob that theory of its moderate appeal. And some reflection will show that linguistic vagueness's failing to be an independent variety of vagueness creates other troubles for the linguistic theory, at least as that theory is standardly presented.

Suppose, first of all, that linguistic vagueness is itself a species of metaphysical vagueness. Then a successful defense of the linguistic theory of vagueness would begin by endorsing the claim that there is metaphysical vagueness. After doing that, such a defense would then go on to establish that metaphysical vagueness is restricted to a certain domain, the domain that involves language in various ways.

But this is *not* how friends of the linguistic theory typically proceed. Rather than affirming that there is metaphysical vagueness, they generally begin by pronouncing metaphysical vagueness *unintelligible* (e.g., Russell, 1923; Dummett, 1975; and Lewis, 1986, 212). That is certainly not a promising start for one who wants to promote a species of metaphysical vagueness. If linguistic vagueness is a species of metaphysical vagueness, defenses of the linguistic theory of vagueness must begin by *asserting* what they have generally begun by *denying*, the intelligibility and existence of metaphysical vagueness.

Suppose, instead, that linguistic vagueness is a species of epistemic vagueness. A successful defense of the linguistic theory of vagueness would then start with a defense of the claim that all vagueness—wherever it is to be found—is due completely to ignorance of the precise, determinate facts of the matter. It would then argue that the specific kind of ignorance associated with vagueness occurs only in cases involving language.

Do any defenders of the linguistic theory argue in this way? Perhaps—but only those who are identified primarily with the claim that all vagueness is epistemic, such as Williamson (1994, 230–37 and 257ff) and Sorensen (1988). It is certainly safe to say that most devotees of the linguistic theory of vagueness never even hint that linguistic vagueness is a kind of epistemic vagueness.

Indeed, I think we can sum up the standard line of argument in defense of the linguistic theory as follows: Metaphysical vagueness is unintelligible; epistemic accounts of vagueness are silly; so vagueness must be accounted for in some other way; linguistic vagueness offers the only plausible alternative. The standard line, obviously enough, requires linguistic vagueness to be a variety of vagueness distinct from metaphysical and epistemic vagueness. So even if the linguistic theory of vagueness is consistent with the fact that linguistic vagueness is itself either metaphysical or epistemic, that fact implies that (setting aside defenses of epistemicism) the extant defenses of the linguistic theory of vagueness are woefully inadequate, attacking what they must defend.

Moreover, if one claims that linguistic vagueness is a species of metaphysical vagueness (and that metaphysical vagueness *is* intelligible), it is hard to see what could justify the claim that metaphysical vagueness is found in language alone. Maybe this could be justified. But the bald assertion that *metaphysical* vagueness is found only in cases involving language seems very implausible. And so if linguistic vagueness just is a kind of metaphysical vagueness, the linguistic theory of vagueness seems at least *prima facie* very implausible.

Note that I do not deny the intuitive force of the claim that *being described by 'bald'* is, in some cases, vaguely exemplified. But I would add that there is equal intuitive force to the claim that *being bald* itself is, in those same cases, vaguely exemplified. The same goes for the claim that some atom vaguely exemplifies *being a part of Mount Everest*. Once one says that metaphysical vagueness is possible, it seems impossible (and needless) to resist all of these intuitively compelling claims. Conversely, one should insist that *being a part of Mount Everest* and *being bald* are not, and cannot be, vaguely exemplified only if one rejects metaphysical vagueness out of hand.

Similar points apply if linguistic vagueness is epistemic. For then the linguistic theory of vagueness is committed to the view that intuitively vague cases are explained wholly by our ignorance of the precise and determinate facts. But once one grants *that*, it seems odd to claim that all vagueness is ignorance of *linguistic* facts alone. Perhaps Williamson and Sorensen have something compelling to say in support of this claim. But there is no denying that it is *prima facie* odd.

So even if the linguistic theory of vagueness is consistent with the fact that linguistic vagueness is either metaphysical or epistemic, that fact is an awkward one for the linguistic theory. Moreover, it seems to me that the standard linguistic theory—i.e., the non-epistemicist linguistic theory—is not merely *defended* by way of the claim that metaphysical vagueness is unintelligible and the claim that all vagueness is due to ignorance is absolutely ridiculous. Rather, it seems to me that those claims help to define what 'linguistic vagueness' is standardly supposed to *mean*. It *means,* among

other things, vagueness that is neither metaphysical nor epistemic. But then *linguistic* vagueness as standardly understood is unintelligible and the theory that all vagueness is thus linguistic false.

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