

Vagueness

**A compact seminar (24 hours)
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Vagueness is a phenomenon that is so pervasive in language and in thought that we are usually not aware of it. Yet, its familiarity notwithstanding, it gives rise to intricate theoretical problems and paradoxes. The discussion of some of these paradoxes already starts in antiquity. But reflection on some supposed common feature of expressions—called ‘vagueness’—which is underlying these paradoxes only emerges in the early 20th century. Within the last four decades, the problem of vagueness has in effect taken center stage in contemporary philosophy of language—with its bearing reaching far beyond, into epistemology, the philosophy of thought and action, and metaphysics.

The aim of this seminar is to make students engage with intriguing questions such as the following ones: Can we sustain the idea that vague predicates are useful ways of classifying things in reality? Do vague predicates pick out properties, which objects either possess or not? How to describe our epistemic situation in borderline cases? Is vagueness some indeterminacy that affects reality itself, or only ways of representing it, or in fact merely our state of information? Is vagueness some sort of indeterminacy in the first instance? Is vagueness maybe boiling down to some sort of context-sensitivity? Does vagueness fit well with the idea that linguistic competence is a matter of gaining access to certain linguistic rules, which govern the correct use of expressions with regard to every possible circumstance?

Note: Literature referred to as ‘core reading’ below is mandatory. Literature referred to as ‘further reading’ is optional. Discussion will focus on the core readings. But in providing more background, the further readings may provide some helpful supplement to the core readings.

Meeting 1 | Mon, Aug 25, AM: *Introduction*

Vagueness gives rise to a characteristic kind of paradox, also known as ‘sorites paradox’, which has captured the minds of philosophers since antiquity. To set the stage for discussion, we will look more closely into the paradox and some philosophical views on how to solve it.

Core reading:

Mark Sainsbury: *Paradoxes*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: CUP, 2009. chapter 3: Vagueness: the paradox of the heap.

Mark Sainsbury and Timothy Williamson: "Sorites", in: Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (eds): *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, Blackwell: Oxford, 1997, pp. 458--84.

Further reading:

Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith: "Introduction: theories of vagueness", in R. Keefe and P. Smith (eds): *Vagueness: A Reader*, Cambridge/MA: MIT Press, 1997, pp. 1--57. [A useful introduction into some main themes in the previous philosophical discussion of vagueness.]

Richard Dietz: "The paradox of vagueness", in: *The Continuum Companion to Philosophical Logic*, L. Horsten and R. Pettigrew (eds), London: Continuum Press, pp. 128--79. [A state-of-the-art survey article on the philosophy of vagueness, focussing more on formal issues.]

Meeting 2 | Mon, Aug 25, PM: *Nihilism: There are No Ordinary Things*

Some authors, so-called 'nihilists' about vagueness, have suggested that we should bite the bullet and embrace the absurd sounding bottomline of sorites paradoxes. According to this, vague general terms as such are incoherent. Considering that most (if not all) general terms we find in natural languages are vague, this approach has a pretty radical implication. In effect, it is suggested that the types of ordinary things we mean to pick out by using vague general terms (such as 'table', 'red', 'tall', etc.) do not exist. We will discuss Peter Unger's famous paper "There are no ordinary things", which may be considered as something like a 'manifesto' of nihilism.

Core reading:

Peter Unger: "There are no ordinary things", *Synthese* 41 (1979), pp. 117--54.

Further reading:

Timothy Williamson: *Vagueness*, London: Routledge, 1994, chapter 6 (Nihilism) [A critical discussion of this approach.]

Meeting 3 | Tue, Aug 26, AM: *Epistemicism: Vagueness as Ignorance*

Epistemicists about vagueness advocate the view that vagueness is just a particular type of ignorance. According to this, vagueness is neither about language (vague terms pick out certain types of things determinately) nor about reality (reality is something that may be fully described in precise terms).

Vagueness, on this account, is only about us, the speakers. We will focus on a paper by Timothy Williamson, the most outspoken proponent of this view.

Core reading:

Timothy Williamson: "Vagueness as ignorance", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol. 66 (1992), pp. 145--62.

Further reading:

Rosanna Keefe: *Theories of Vagueness*: Cambridge: CUP, [chapter 3 \(The epistemic theory of vagueness\)](#). [A critical discussion of epistemicism, highlighting some of its main problems.]

Timothy Williamson: *Vagueness*, London: Routledge, 1994, [chapters 7 \(Vagueness as ignorance\) and 8 \(Inexact knowledge\)](#). [A thorough elaboration of the ideas presented in the (1992) paper.]

Meeting 4 | Tue, Aug 26, PM: *Agnosticism: The Quandary View*

While epistemicists claim that in borderline cases, there are determinate facts we are ignorant of, Crispin Wright has famously endorsed a different sort of epistemic characterisation of vagueness. On his account, cases of vagueness present a quandary, a sort of intellectual bafflement, where we do not even know whether there are any determinate facts we are ignorant of---in this sense, the ignorance we are supposed to be in, in borderline cases, is not adequately pictured by epistemicism. Wright's case for his quandary view comes in association with his case for a particular sort of non-classical logic (viz., intuitionist logic).

Core reading:

Crispin Wright: "On being in a quandary: relativism, vagueness, logical revisionism", *Mind* 60 (2001), pp. 45--98. [Have a look especially at the [sections 7 and 8](#), in which Wright sets out his particular epistemic account of vagueness.]

Crispin Wright: "Vagueness: a fifth column approach", in JC Beall (ed.): *Liars and Heaps*, Oxford: OUP, 2004, pp. 84--105.

Meeting 5 | Wed, Aug 27, AM: *Supervaluationism: Vagueness as Semantic*

Perhaps the most popular philosophical view of vagueness is supervaluationism. According to this view, vagueness is a sort of semantic indeterminacy---that is, a sort of indeterminacy that neither affects us, nor reality, but ways of representing reality. As popular seems to be the objection that supervaluationism does not supply sufficient means of describing genuine instances of vagueness. We will discuss Richard Heck's recent case in defense of the idea that vagueness-related indeterminacy is semantic in nature.

Core reading:

Richard G. Heck, Jr.: "Semantic accounts of vagueness", in JC Beall (ed.): *Liars and Heaps*, Oxford: OUP, 2004, pp. 106--27.

Further reading:

Timothy Williamson: *Vagueness*, London: Routledge, 1994, (chapter 5: Supervaluations). [A critical discussion which has been quite influential for the discussion of supervaluationism since.]

Meeting 6 | Thu, Aug 28, AM: *Degree Theories: Vagueness as Closeness*

'Degree theories' is an umbrella term for various sorts of semantic frameworks which employ a continuum of semantic values for describing vagueness. In most frameworks of this type, these values are interpreted as 'degrees of truth'. The literature on degree-theoretic frameworks for vagueness is vast, and to the most part, quite technical in nature. On the other hand, only few efforts have been made to provide a solid philosophical foundation for this type of semantics. A rare exception is Nicholas J.J. Smith's case for a degree-theoretic approach, which deserves a closer inspection.

Core reading:

Nicholas J.J. Smith: "Vagueness as closeness", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83 (2005), pp. 157--83.

Further reading:

Rosanna Keefe: *Theories of Vagueness*: Cambridge: CUP, chapter 4 (Between truth and falsity: many-valued logics). [A critical (and not too technical) overview of degree theories of vagueness.]

Meeting 7 | Thu, Aug 28, PM: *Contextualism I: Shifting Boundaries*

Contextualism about vagueness is the methodological view that contexts are indispensable for an account of vagueness. Typically, contextualists about vagueness propose a boundary-shifting approach. On this model, vague predicates have sharp boundaries, however, these boundaries may shift back and forth with varying contexts. A prominent version of this view has been offered by Delia Graff Fara. On her account, the question of what differences are negligible in applying a vague predicate may be answered differently--- depending on what we pay attention to, and depending on our practical interests.

Core reading:

Delia Graff Fara: "Shifting sands: An interest-relative theory of vagueness", *Philosophical Topics* 28 (2000), pp. 45--81.

Further reading:

Jonas Åkerman: "Contextualist theories of vagueness", *Philosophy Compass* 7 (2012), pp. 470--80. [An overview of applications of contextualism to vagueness.]

Diana Raffman: "Vagueness without paradox", *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994), pp. 43--74. [The idea that shifts in salience may make for a shift in boundaries is anticipated in this paper.]

Meeting 8 | Fri, Aug 29, AM: *Contextualism II: Localism*

Another variety of contextualism, here labeled 'localism', follows a different strategy. The idea is that vague predicates are usually evaluated only locally, that is, with respect to restricted domains, which do not contain all objects but only some objects we take into consideration as relevant. Importantly, the suggestion is that in normal contexts, the semantic constraints that factor into the paradox are safe from contradiction. Only in contexts where we consider an instance of the paradox, some (or all) of these constraints are defeated. There are various proposals in this spirit, most of which are quite technical. We will turn to a more informal and yet original defense of this approach, by Tim Maudlin.

Core reading:

Tim Maudlin: "Grading, sorting, and the sorites", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 32 (2008), pp. 141--68.

Further reading:

Agustin Rayo: "A plea for semantic localism", *Nous* 47 (2013), pp. 647--79. [Defending a broadly localist account of vagueness and submitting a novel conception of linguistic competence.]