Review
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Vagueness introduces the reader to the main issues and approaches to vagueness. Linda Burns reviews conceptions of vagueness, puts the issues in historical perspective, debunks myths, and sorts through the various solutions to the sorites. She also tries to synthesize David Lewis’ uncharacteristically unsystematic thoughts about vagueness. Thus the sorites paradox motivates some philosophy of logic (supervaluationism, fuzzy logic, the status of logical principles) philosophy of language (ideal language, higher order vagueness), and metaphysics (nihilism, vague objects, continua).

Professor Burns’ own resolution of the paradox is analogous to a common solution to Grelling’s paradox. Recall that a predicate is autological if, and only if, it applies to itself. Thus, ‘word’ and ‘noun’ are autological. A word is heterological if, and only if, it does not apply to itself. For example, ‘verb’ and ‘toaster’.

But what about ‘heterological’? If ‘heterological’ is heterological, then it is autological, not heterological. But if ‘heterological’ does not apply to itself, it is heterological. Contradiction! The popular solution to Grelling’s paradox is to deny that ‘heterological’ has been successfully defined. Compare the puzzle to the Barber paradox. We are told of a barber who shaves all and only those who do not shave themselves. Does the barber shave himself? If he does shave himself, then the barber would not be among those he shaved. But if he does not shave himself, he is among those he does shave. Contradiction! The solution to the Barber paradox is to treat the contradiction as a reductio of the assumption that the Barber could exist. And just as there can be no Barber that shaves all and only those who do not shave themselves, there can be no predicate that applies to all and only predicates that do not apply to themselves.

According to Professor Burns, the sorites paradox also presupposes the possibility of a questionable kind of predicate—purely observational predicates. ‘Observational predicate’ is a term of art that is best known through Crispin Wright’s extensive commentary on the sorites.1 Professor Burns’ policy is to give Wright as much rope as he needs to hang himself. So like her, we’ll need to re-hash Wright’s characterization. (Of course my synopsis must be much more condensed than her thorough review.) Wright focuses on the inductive predicates of sorites arguments. In the following sorites, the inductive predicate is ‘hot’.

Base step: A spoon at 100 degrees Centigrade is hot.
Induction step: If a spoon at n degrees is hot, then so is a spoon at n - 1 degrees.
Therefore, a spoon at 1 degree is hot.

According to Wright, the induction step of a sorites argument is undeniable because the inductive predicate is tolerant. A predicate is tolerant just if there are changes which are too small to affect its applicability. ‘Hot’ is tolerant because a one degree difference cannot affect the accuracy of describing something as hot.

Wright predicts the existence of tolerant predicates from our need for predicates that can be applied on the basis of looks. These observational predicates are

1 At the head of Wright’s stream of articles on the topic is “On the Coherence of Vague Predicates” Synthese 30 (1975): 325–65.
an inevitable accommodation to the limits of perception, memory, and pedagogy. It would be absurd to confirm a child’s application of ‘hot’ to a 100 degree spoon and then correct his application of ‘hot’ to a 99 degree spoon. Since tolerance is essential to communication by observational predicates, the induction step of a sorites states a constitutive rule of usage for the inductive predicate. So a competent and sincere speaker must assent to the induction step. Yet the speaker must also apply the predicate to its paradigm cases, so he must also affirm the base step. But then the conclusion of the sorites validly follows by mathematical induction. Nevertheless, a competent speaker must also deny the conclusion because he must withhold the predicate from obvious foils. Since the speaker cannot avoid using vague predicates, it appears that ordinary language is incoherent.

Professor Burns is unimpressed. She boldly attacks this line of reasoning on its own terms. In an earlier paper, her procedure was to challenge the induction steps of particular sorites arguments. For example, she pointed out that one grain of sand can make a difference to whether something is a heap because heaphood is sensitive to how the sand is arranged. After all, one can turn a heap into a non-heap by simply raking it smooth. Most predicates are multi-dimensional. However, sorites arguments standardly use a single parameter in their induction steps.

The natural reply is to plead for a more charitable reading of the sorites argument. If pressed, one can deliver a more carefully formulated sorites free from technical glitches. The simplest solution would appear to be the use of a one dimensional predicate such as ‘noonish’. However, Professor Burns infers that all predicates are multi-dimensional from the premise of conceptual holism: “A concept does not determine the application of a predicate in isolation from other concepts” (p. 127). This transition from holism to inevitable multi-dimensionality is hasty. Even if we grant that every concept introduces a new dimension, it does not follow that it is a relevant dimension. In some cases multi-dimensionality leads to conflict cases but in other cases it does not. Presumably, the conceptual holist believes that mathematical concepts also depend on other concepts. But the reliance of ‘triangle’ on ‘enclosed’, ‘figure’, ‘composed’, ‘of’, ‘three’, ‘straight’, ‘lines’ is compatible with the precision of ‘triangle’. And conceptual holism had better be compatible with the wide success of mathematical induction in mathematics. But then why would holism selectively splinter the mathematical inductions in sorites arguments? Burns’ confidence in the efficacy of complexity as a spoiler is arbitrary. Finally, given that there are precise concepts, we should be able to vague up some of them along a single dimension. For example, define ‘near-104’ as an integer near 104. Then head down the slippery slope laid out by the number line.

Another option is to keep the induction step extensional. For instance the sorites monger can have a thousand men queue in order of height. He’ll arrange them so that no one can counterexample the induction step ‘If man n is tall, then man n + 1 is tall’. The sorites monger will deny that he has any special theory of language and modestly emphasize that his generalization is only intended for the particular chaps in his particular queue. This minimalist is a more formidable adversary than the more ambitious Mr. Wright. Crispin Wright’s writings on the sorites groan with heavy philosophical assumptions. Moreover, Wright presents his induction steps as semantic principles. Hence his induction steps are intensional and thereby vulnerable to hypothetical conflict cases. To resolve the

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sorites, one must rebut the version of the paradox that makes the mildest assumptions.

A third method of constructing an airtight sorites is to control the relevance of other dimensions by tailoring the slippery slope to a single individual. For example, in a 1989 reply to Burns, Stephen Schwartz offered the following:

A person exactly one second old is a child.

Any person who is a child when he is \( n \) seconds old is a child when he is \( n + 1 \) seconds old.

Therefore, anyone at any age is a child.

The induction step always refers to the same person and so is safe against counterexamples that play on the possibility of big differences between two different people along other dimensions.

*Vagueness* does not contain a reply to Schwartz. Professor Burns sticks to the kind of sorites arguments discussed by Crispin Wright and concentrates on refuting Wright’s defense of those arguments. This critique of his theory of observability leads to a discussion of indiscernibility, color, relational terms, phenomenal qualities, and perception and the views of Michael Dummett, Gareth Evans, John McDowell, Christopher Peacocke, etc. There are also important appearances by Nelson Goodman and Frank Jackson.

The omission of Stephen Schwartz’s criticism constitutes a distracting gap. As long as this hole remains unfilled, Burns’ loyalty to Wright’s framework will seem gratuitous. For if Schwartz is right, then a special theory of observability is not needed to sustain the paradox. There would then be no point in making heavy weather over Wright’s theory of observational terms.

The provinciality of Burns’ approach becomes most visible as one distinguishes it from the epistemic solution to the sorites. The epistemicists say that no predicate satisfies the tolerance condition but take the induction step as expressing a genuine predicate—and so conclude the induction step is false. This flat denial of the induction step has the striking metaphysical implication of hidden thresholds for ordinary, rough and ready predicates such as ‘hot’ and ‘heap’. (The epistemicist can still endorse the contemporary pieties about the inventive aspects of language by explaining precisification as an opportunistic redefinition of an old word rather than as the systematic filling of semantic cavities in predicates.) Moreover, epistemicism brazenly contradicts “Meaning is use” and much contemporary philosophy of language. Burns’ dissolutional approach only seems to differ from epistemicism in that it muffles these metaphysical consequences and talks around the conflict with philosophy of language.

Professor Burns thinks that her skepticism about tolerant predicates avoids the epistemicist’s commitments. But I don’t understand how. I do understand how the rhetoric of dissolution can generate an appearance of neutrality. For philosophers tend to picture the dissolver as an outsider who undermines a debate by refuting some underlying presupposition. Unlike the debaters, this trouble-shooter doesn’t enter the situation with special commitments and leaves the debate equally unfettered. (Recall Wittgenstein’s emphasis on philosophy as an activity rather

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than a doctrine—good philosophy is *knowing how* to extricate yourself from bad philosophy.)

However, the dissolver’s refutation of the debate’s worthiness proceeds from premises and ends with a conclusion. Hence, the dissolver goes into the pseudo-problem just as theory-laden as the participants and leaves his share of doctrinal residue. For instance, the dissolver of Grelling’s paradox must tacitly affirm a portion of classical logic, must explicitly and provocatively limit our power to create predicates by stipulation, and must posit psychological influences that lead us into the fallacious reasoning undergirding the paradox. Likewise, Burns’ dissolution requires a theory of predication hostile to purely observable predicates. Consequently, her dissolution also requires a theory friendly to sharp thresholds and thick-skinned enough to accept all the ensuing unpleasantries of epistemicism. There is no free lunch. It is telling that Professor Burns’ under-estimate of her own commitments is proportional to her over-estimate of the sorites monger’s commitments.

Since I favor the epistemic solution, I don’t think the awkward consequences of intolerance refute Professor Burns. However, I do think that these ultra-orthodoxies should be acknowledged and that we shouldn’t be shy about confessing to discomfort. The ancient paradox of the heap is an irritating grain of sand in the oyster of philosophy of language. Although I doubt that she has dissolved the problem, I think Linda Burns’ effort will contribute to the formation of a pearl.

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Contemporary film theory is in a mess, and it is so largely because it lacks a viable account of cinematic representation. So argues Allan Casebier, and in this book he sets out to correct the situation. The problem with the theories of representation that have dominated recent film theory, Casebier suggests, is that their proponents have been insufficiently critical with respect to the epistemological and ontological grounds of those theories. In particular, “contemporary film theory has been unquestioningly idealist with respect to epistemological grounds” (1), so that “what a motion picture depicts, portrays, or symbolizes depends on the spectator’s language, ideological beliefs, aesthetic sensibilities, unconscious processes, and so forth.” (2) And “with respect to ontology contemporary film theory has adopted a nominalist rather than a realist position,” so that there exist “only particulars with spectators’ constructive activity providing the cinematic representations.” (2) It is because its dominant theories of representation are founded on one or another version of nominalism and idealism, Casebier contends, that film theory has been unable to give adequate answers to some of the most fundamental questions of cinema, questions about the nature of documentary, about the relationships between sound and visual image in film, about the relationships between narrative and ideology, and about the form that a feminist film theory should take. (4) (The fact that the latter might be regarded by film theorists as one of the “fundamental questions of cinema” is revealing. However, although