

Indeterminate Reference

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The only intelligible account of vagueness locates it in our thought and language. The reason it's vague where the outback begins is not that there's this thing, the outback, with imprecise borders; rather there are many things, with different borders, and nobody has been fool enough to try to enforce a choice of one of them as the official referent of the word 'outback.' Vagueness is semantic indecision. (Lewis, 1986, 213)

According to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, whatever it is that in the thoughts, experiences and practices of language users determines the meaning of expressions, it fails to determine any single one entity as reference, from a given range of equally natural ("precise") candidates. According to a view where there is vagueness *in rebus*, by contrast, some objects or properties can themselves be vague.

But is the view of vagueness as semantic indecision committed to vagueness in *semantic rebus*? (Merricks, 2001) suggests that it does, in this paper I argue that it does not.

(1) is indeterminate and (2) is false:

- (1) Harry is bald.
- (2) 'Harry is bald' is true.

How about (3)?

- (3) 'bald' applies to Harry.

I guess one may use 'applies' in a way that makes (3) match (1)—along the lines of (4)—and in a way that makes (3) match (2)—along the lines of (5). If the former, (3) is itself indeterminate, if the latter, it is simply false.

- (4a) The extension of 'bald' has Harry as a member.
- (4b) The property 'bald' signifies is had by Harry.
- (5) 'bald' is true of Harry.

Similarly, (6a) is true, (6b) indeterminate, and (6c) false:

- (6a) 'Everest' refers to Everest.
- (6b) 'Everest' refers to Everest₁₇.
- (6c) 'Everest' refers to Kilimanjaro.

So the view of vagueness as semantic indecision makes (3)—understood along the lines of (4)—indeterminate. According to (Merricks, 2001), assuming that "bald" and 'Harry' are (relevantly) precise, the view is then committed to vagueness in (semantic) rebus. But this is so *unless* 'applies' (as well as 'extension,' 'refers,' 'signifies,' and the like) exhibits itself semantic indecision. In the paper I argue that the view of vagueness as semantic indecision actually predicts such indeterminacy in semantic vocabulary.

Merricks considers this, and says that in that case “there would be no indeterminacy or semantic indecision.” But I argue show that his reasons depend on the wrong contention that ‘applies’ *determinately* refers to all of its precisifications—instead of *indeterminately* referring to each one of them.

(Salmon, 2007) objects that semantic indecision of the semantic vocabulary would generate a vicious hierarchy of different semantic notions. I finally argue that the hierarchy doesn’t need to involve than just the same notions once and over again, and that it is as innocuous as that of truth in:

- (7a) Everest is a mountain.
- (7b) ‘Everest is a mountain.’ is true.
- (7c) “Everest is a mountain.’ is true.’ is true.
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References

- Lewis, D. (1986). *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Merricks, T. (2001). Varieties of Vagueness. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 62, 145–157.
- Salmon, N. (2007). Vagaries about Vagueness. Presented at the *Arché Vagueness Conference*.