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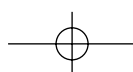
Supervaluationism and the Report of Vague Contents

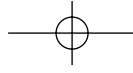
Manuel García-Carpintero

In two recent papers, Schiffer (1998, 196–8; 2000, 246–8) advances an argument against supervaluationist accounts of vagueness, based on reports of vague contents. Suppose that Al tells Bob ‘Ben was there’, pointing to a certain place, and later Bob says, ‘Al said that Ben was there’, pointing in the same direction. According to supervaluationist semantics, Schiffer contends, both Al’s and Bob’s utterances of ‘there’ indeterminately refer to myriad precise regions of space; Al’s utterance is true just in case Ben was in any of those precisely bounded regions of space, and Bob’s is true just in case Al said of each of them that it is where Ben was. However, while the supervaluationist truth-conditions for Al’s utterance might be satisfied, those for Bob’s cannot; for Al didn’t say, of *any* of those precisely delimited regions of space, that it is where Ben was. From a perspective more congenial to supervaluationism than Schiffer’s, McGee and McLaughlin (2000, at 139–7) pose a related problem about *de re* ascriptions of propositional attitudes and indirect discourse. The same difficulty is gestured at in this argument: ‘there are additional concerns about the ability of supervaluational proposals to track our intuitions concerning the extension of “true” among statements involving vague vocabulary: “No one can knowledgeably identify a precise boundary between those who are tall and those who are not” is plausibly a true claim which is not true under *any* admissible way of making “tall” precise’ (Wright 2004, 88).

In an earlier version of the material that I will present here (García-Carpintero 2000) I replied to Schiffer’s argument that supervaluationism has an independently well-motivated defense. The response is essentially based on the point that the occurrence of ‘there’ in Bob’s utterance (and of ‘tall’ in Wright’s argument) occurs

An earlier version of this chapter was presented at talks at the university of Navarra and Arché, St Andrews; I thank the audience for criticisms and suggestions. My work has benefited from comments by Pablo Cobreros, Richard Dietz, Cian Dorr, Dan López de Sa, Josep Macià, Daniel Nolan, Manuel Pérez Otero, Timothy Williamson, and Crispin Wright. Thanks also to Michael Maudsley for his grammatical revision. Financial support was provided by the research project HUM2006–08236, funded by the CICYT, Spanish Government, and by a *Distinció de Recerca de la Generalitat, Investigadors Reconeputs 2002–2008*, DURSI, Generalitat de Catalunya.





in indirect discourse, and supervaluationists may allow that it shifts its referent there.¹ Schiffer's (2000b) reply to this response shows that it was not made sufficiently clear.² In this chapter I will try to improve on that score. In his more recent reply, Schiffer (2000b, 325) dismisses a proposal like the one I will make, mainly because it 'undermines . . . a leading virtue of supervaluationism . . . its implication that vagueness is . . . not a feature of the world.' I will argue that my reply does not undermine the fundamental contentions of the supervaluationist account.

Suppose that, in a context where the size of a given rod is being discussed, Alex utters (1) while placing his symmetrically extended hands one opposing the other at a certain distance:

(1) The rod was this length.

In uttering (1) Alex makes an assertion, the kind of speech act that we routinely classify as true or false and has therefore *truth-conditions*, which illustrates the sort of data that theories of vagueness attempt to account for. The basic datum, put in a way as neutral as possible among possible potentially conflicting accounts, is this: the facts about the rod that Alex wanted to report might be such that it is indeterminate whether (1) is true, and it is indeterminate whether (1) is false; the size of the rod being discussed in the context might be a borderline case of the type of length that Alex signified with the predicate 'was this length'. Call this 'DV', the datum of vagueness. Supervaluationism is an account of vagueness that upholds certain claims for which DV poses a problem requiring theoretical elucidation. Or, rather, it is not supervaluationism *per se* that provides the account. Supervaluationism is a mathematical model-theoretic technique, and, as McGee says (1998, 156): 'It has been thought that the model theory provides a deep explanation of the way we use vague language; specifically, it has been thought to explain the fact that we are able to use classical logic even in the face of semantic indeterminacy. But that can't be right. Model theory is just mathematics, and, as such, it can't explain anything about language use.' The explanation is provided by a philosophical account that applies the model theory. It concerns the nature of vague language, illustrated by (1), and distinguishes itself from others by upholding those intuitions. Following David Lewis, I will refer to the explanatory philosophical theory as *vagueness as semantic indecision*, 'VSI'.

A first claim with which DV is *prima facie* in conflict is the *correspondence* claim. Language and thought are *representational* at their root: some expressions are semantically substantively related to objective, mind- and language-independent objects. Consider (1). As we said, it is used to make an assertion, assessable as true or false, and has therefore a certain truth-condition such that, together with the facts of the actual world, determines (1)'s truth value (and, together with the facts of

¹ After the reference shift, the term still refers indeterminately because of higher-order vagueness. The arguments here discussed differ from objections to supervaluationism based on higher-order vagueness; hence, for the sake of simplicity I will ignore it here.

² While he rejects my answer, he proposes 'to stay with the topic' so as 'to consider a supervaluationist response I was too quick to dismiss' (Schiffer 2000b, 322); the response is in substance the one I was intending to convey.



other possible worlds, its truth value across possible worlds). This truth-condition is compositionally determined by (1)'s logical form, its semantically relevant syntactical composition out of lexical units and phrases formed from them. The correspondence claim is that (1)'s truth-condition is such that, if it is met and (1) is true, there is a mind- and language-independent *truth-maker* in the actual world making it so, on which (1)'s truth would then depend. In particular, 'this length' in (1) contributes to (1)'s truth-condition a mind- and language-independent object constituting that truth-maker, a specific length.

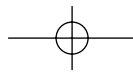
Secondly, there is the *clear-cut world claim*; this is the contention that the objective, mind- and language-independent world does not include vague objects, kinds or properties. D. Lewis provides a compelling rationale for it: 'I doubt that I have any correct conception of a vague object. How, for instance, shall I think of an object that is vague in its spatial extent? The closest I can come is to superimpose three pictures. There is the *multiplicity* picture, in which the vague object gives way to differences between precisifications, and the vagueness of the object gives way to differences between precisifications. There is the *ignorance* picture, in which the object has some definite but secret extent. And there is the *fadeaway* picture, in which the presence of the object admits of degree, in much the way that the presence of a spot of illumination admits of degree, and the degree diminishes as a function of the distance from the region where the object is most intensely present. None of the three pictures is right. Each one in its own way replaces the alleged vagueness of the object by precision. But if I cannot think of a vague object except by juggling these mistaken pictures, I have no correct conception' (Lewis 1993, 27).³

Finally, we have the claim that the logical validity of our ordinary arguments is to be accounted for ultimately on the basis of the classical, Tarskian model-theoretic validity of arguments, by formalizing them in the languages devised by logicians. Now, relative to our illustrative case (1), we can see how the three claims create a difficulty in the presence of DV. For given the third, a predicate like 'was this length' in (1) should signify a subset of a domain of discourse, a class of lengths; given the first and the second, this should be a class containing a precisely delimited length (one thus to which any given length either belongs or does not belong, *tertium non datur*). This conflicts with DV, unless we could account for it on epistemic grounds; but supervaluationists assume that this is excluded by the notion that semantic properties in general, and the truth-conditions in particular of speech acts and thoughts, depend on their role in rational activities in which conscious, potentially reflective beings like us engage, and that as a result such vagueness as it is illustrated by (1) is not a matter of ignorance.⁴

It is here that VSI, *vagueness as semantic indecision*, together with the supervaluationist technique, comes to the rescue, reconciling the claims with DV. As Williamson

³ Elaborating on suggestions from Evans, McGee (1998) provides an argument against the view that a term like 'Kilimanjaro', intending to refer to a mind- and language-independent mountain, refers to a vague object.

⁴ See, for instance, Horgan (1997) as an expression of this well-known form of skepticism about Williamson's (1994) epistemic theory of vagueness.



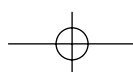
(1994, 142) aptly puts the idea:⁵ ‘the vagueness of a language consists in its capacity in principle to be made precise in more than one way. Not every substitution of precise meanings for vague ones counts as making the language precise . . . vague meanings are conceived as incomplete specifications of reference. To make the language precise is to complete these specifications without contradicting anything in the original content.’ As required by our three claims, the intended models for our discourse are the sharp models for, say, a logician’s first-order language; they allow for classical, bivalent definitions of truth in a model. Vagueness is due to the fact that ‘our thoughts and practices do not pick out a unique model as the actual model. They pick out a class of models’ (McGee 1998, 154). As McGee puts it, the fundamental hypothesis of VSI is that the semantics of a vague language can be described by singling out an appropriate class of models such that a sentence is determinately true if and only if it is true in every model in the class. According to VSI, there are two notions of truth required to account for DV while validating the claims. There is the fundamental notion involved in stating the truth-conditions of our assertions and judgments, given the representational character of language and thought. This is the fundamental non-bivalent *determinate truth* or *super-truth*, which comes hand-in-hand with a related correspondence notion of reference; the adjustment required by the correspondence claim in view of vague sentences such as (1), according to VSI, is that they do not just represent a unique truth-maker, but a plurality thereof. And there is, in addition, the semantically ancillary notion of truth, the bivalent *truth in a model*, and the related notion of reference.⁶

Let us consider now the original problem based on indirect discourse posed by Schiffer (1998, 197): ‘Suppose that in uttering “Harry is bald”, Renata said that Harry was bald. Then the sentence “Renata said that Harry was bald” is true. But the supervaluationist must say that it wouldn’t be true if the that-clause in [it], “that Harry was bald” . . . indeterminately referred . . . to various precise propositions . . . not one of those precisifications will be true, since, even taking into account the vagueness of “say”, Renata obviously didn’t say *any* precise proposition . . . Evidently, then, the supervaluationist must say that [its] that-clause refers to the vague proposition that Harry is bald’.

In my reply, I relied on the following theoretical basis: ‘propositional attitude verbs . . . express relations between agents and *interpreted logical forms* (ILFs). ILFs are annotated constituency graphs or phrase-markers whose nodes pair terminal and non-terminal symbols with a semantic value’ (Larson and Ludlow 1993, 305). Larson and Ludlow’s semantic values are classical semantic values: objects for terms, sets for predicates, truth values for sentences. On an alternative version (Pietroski, 1996), symbols are paired with Fregean senses in ILFs (which, in their turn, determine semantic values). ILFs, under either of those proposals, are the sort of entity that can be vague, in the sense that they admit different precisifications, and admit thereby a supervaluationist treatment. On Larson and Ludlow’s version, vague ILFs can be

⁵ Williamson is far from accepting it, of course.

⁶ This corresponds to the distinction by McGee and McLaughlin (1995) between the senses of truth answering, respectively, a ‘correspondence’ and a ‘disquotational’ conception.



neither true nor false as a result of the fact that (ignoring higher-order vagueness) at least some terminal node (say, the one corresponding to ‘bald’ in Schiffer’s example) is paired, not with an appropriate semantic value, but with a class of them (its admissible precisifications). On Pietroski’s version, the same obtains if the mode of presentation with which the symbol is paired does not determine a unique semantic value, but a class of admissible ones.

Before moving on to the problem posed by *de re* ascriptions which will be the main focus of the present chapter, let me emphasize that the proposal so far substantially agrees with Schiffer’s diagnosis, quoted two paragraphs back. To put it impressionistically, the supervaluationist agrees in accepting, besides the precise truth-makers indeterminately represented in vague sentences, some ‘vague entities’: i.e. vague contents, modeled along the ILF accounts. But, far from being incompatible with VSI, this is taken to be a crucial aspect of it. What matters is that truth and falsity (in their fundamental, non-ancillary senses linked to the correspondence claim) are ultimately determined relative to the class of precisifications.⁷

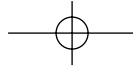
To make this more vivid, consider the following Schifferian argument. Supervaluationism treats all vague expressions as indeterminately referring to precise referents. In particular, supervaluationism treats ‘this length’ in (2) as indeterminately referring to precise lengths in a given class. However, none of those lengths is an observable property, if by ‘observable’ we understand something like *discriminable by the naked eye*. Thus, for any of the lengths to which ‘this length’ indeterminately refers, (2) is false. Hence, (2) should be superfalse, against compelling intuitions:

(2) This length is an observable property.

To provide an adequate response to this argument, it is enough to characterize a *prima facie* plausible way to reject it, compatible with VSI. The response could legitimately rely on contentious philosophical views, if they can be defended independently of the present issue. We do not need to go further into the details of a well-argued defense of the proposal; we do not need to defend the contentious philosophical assumptions. For we will have already shown that Schiffer has at most established a conditional: supervaluationism is false, *unless such-and-such philosophical view is correct*.

A response of this kind to the Schifferian argument goes like this. A first premise is that the very same expression (‘this length’) that in a given context (its occurrence in (1)) refers, albeit indeterminately, to the precise lengths constituting the objective world, in a different context (its occurrence in (2)) refers to something else. The second premise is that, in addition to containing precise types of lengths, the world also contains what, in a manner of speaking, can be intelligibly called ‘imprecise lengths’, of which it is not determinate of all lengths in the first group

⁷ García-Carpintero (2007) elaborates on this, on the basis of more detailed considerations on the nature of truth and its relation to *what is said*. Keefe (2008)—a nice presentation of the main ideas defining supervaluationism—also emphasizes the centrality of quantification over precisifications to the account, and its compatibility with ‘vague entities’ of some such representational sort.



whether or not they instantiate them. Combining these two premises, we can counter the Schifferian argument by saying that, although the occurrence of ‘this length’ in (1) should be semantically treated following the supervaluationist guidelines (it indeterminately refers to lengths of the precise kind), the one in (2) somehow shifts its reference, determinately denoting instead a length of the imprecise sort.⁸

The second premise might superficially appear to be incompatible with the philosophical motivation we have provided for supervaluationism. However, let us reflect more carefully on it, in order to clarify the qualification ‘in a manner of speaking’. Does it follow from the three claims that VSI tries to accommodate that there are no vague entities in the world at all? It is not just that the answer to this is negative; it should be clear that VSI rather *requires* that the world include vague entities. VSI only assumes that the *objective*, mind- and language-independent world does not contain vague entities, and that truth and falsity is ultimately to be accounted for on the basis of supervaluationist quantification over those entities. However, VSI assumes that representational facts create vagueness, and representational facts are, of course, facts (albeit obviously not mind- and language-independent facts). They induce (in a manner of speaking) new properties and kinds instantiated by the precise objects constituting the objective world, which are (in a manner of speaking) in their turn new objects, potential objects of reference, which can in a clear sense be called ‘imprecise’.⁹

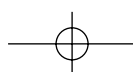
The first premise is also in good philosophical standing. It has it that the very same expression that in a context refers indeterminately to entities in the mind- and language-independent world, in a different context might refer (whether determinately or indeterminately, depending on the issue of higher-order vagueness, which we are putting aside here) to the indeterminately instantiated objects induced by the representational fact involving indeterminate reference in the previous context. Fregean theories assert the existence of this kind of systematic ambiguity to account for quotation and direct discourse in general, and for indirect discourse.¹⁰

This is what, on the present suggestion, happens to ‘this length’ in (2). It does not refer indeterminately to a length, but (as it were) to a new kind of ‘lengths’, a *length as referred to by a demonstrative expression with the contextual help of a certain way of grasping lengths*. This way is constituted by perceptual experiences of the same kind as that on which the speaker is relying, and takes his audience to be relying, in the context of his utterance (2). This way of grasping lengths is distinguished by its not being able to discriminate among a given set of (precise, as there are no others in the

⁸ Remember that, for the sake of simplicity, we are ignoring higher-order vagueness. A more realistic treatment should also use the supervaluationist strategy with respect to ‘this length’ in (2), allowing that it indeterminately refers to a length of the imprecise variety.

⁹ The mechanism through which ‘precise’ and ‘imprecise’ acquire a new sense is the same creating metonymies and other cases of ‘semantic transfer’; this is why I qualify my claims with ‘in a manner of speaking’. All these apparent references to, and quantification over, imprecise ‘objects’ should at a fundamental level be subjected to a fictionalist explanation; see García-Carpintero forthcoming.

¹⁰ As I indicated in my original contribution, we do not need to have recourse to a strictly speaking Fregean theory to justify this; a theory which attributes the shift in reference to the implicit presence in the utterance of a ‘hidden-indexical’ could serve as well, and in fact my own Davidsonian sympathies when it comes to the account of quotation suggest that much.



mind- and language-independent world) lengths. It induces a mind-dependent sort of (mind-independent, precise) length, an ‘imprecise’ kind of length which is not just one precise length instantiate, but several—a sort that counts thereby as *imprecise*.¹¹ Thus, for the present purposes, we can take the semantic value of ‘this length’ in (2), in contrast to (1), to be a length of such a sort.

These contentions involve no violation of the fundamental assumptions of VSI; on the contrary, they are to be properly justified ultimately on their basis. For these imprecise lengths are in effect representational entities, entities constituted by their role in representational activities; and the supervaluationist apparatus of precisifications is still required to obtain the truth-conditions of utterances—and mental states—whose content they help characterize, such as our original (1). This puts me in agreement with the main claim in Merricks (2001), that VSI is either a form of metaphysical vagueness, or a form of epistemic vagueness, by my embracing the first disjunct. Notice, however, that this is only because, in characterizing metaphysical vagueness, Merricks does not distinguish, as I have done, among entities in general, those responsible for fundamentally accounting for the semantic values of expressions, in particular the truth values of assertions and judgments. Metaphysical vagueness just consists for him in that ‘for some object and some property, there is no determinate fact of the matter whether the object exemplifies the property’ (145); properties are understood here in a fully liberal, ‘abundant’ sense. Merricks then considers a proposal like the one I have made concerning the sentence ‘*Bald*’ applies to Harry, with ‘Harry’ denoting a borderline case of baldness. Against the perhaps more orthodox supervaluationist line, on which such a sentence signifies many different precise propositions, I have granted that there is a sense in which such a sentence expresses a vague proposition, one ascribing to Harry the vague property $\lambda x(\text{‘Bald’ applies to } x)$: think of ‘Bald’, as previously suggested, as referring to a semantically individuated word. However, whether or not an object exemplifies such vague representational property is to be accounted for, at a fundamental level, relative to supervaluationist quantification over precise properties (as there are no others at the fundamental level).

Merricks (*op. cit.*, 155–6) is right, however, that supervaluationist arguments against metaphysical vagueness, such as the one by Lewis quoted before, do not mention any distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental entities of the VSI account. But it is not that difficult to insert adverbs such as ‘fundamentally’ at the proper places, and it seems to me more charitable to do so. Thus, what is unintelligible is not that there is a vague ‘object’, with an indeterminate spatial extent—we have already envisaged vague ‘kinds’ (vague sorts of lengths), and presently we will be considering vague “particulars” (vague locations). What is unintelligible is rather that such objects have an explanatory fundamental role in accounting for the truth-conditions of our assertions and judgments. And, on the present view, they don’t; those are explained in terms of supervaluationist quantification over precise entities.¹²

¹¹ At the risk of boring the reader, I should insist that I am ignoring higher-order vagueness.

¹² Williams (2008) diagnoses a loophole in the usual semantic ways of dealing with Evans (1978) infamous argument against vague objects, which question the λ -conversion step. That

Let us now move on to arguments involving *de re* ascriptions. Schiffer argues that a proposal along the previous lines cannot work in cases involving singular terms, such as (3) below, or ‘there’ in (5), taken as a report of Al’s utterance of (4):

- (3) Alex said that the rod was this length.
- (4) Ben is at that mountain.
- (5) Al said that Ben was there.
- (6) $\exists x(x$ is where Al said Ben was).
- (7) There is where Al said Ben was.

Notice that both ‘this length’ in (3) and ‘there’ in (5) are *de re* at least in that, say, (5) entails (6) and, (‘by demonstrative specification’), (7). ‘Here . . . the supervaluationist evidently has to take her standard line: in a sentence of the form “There is such-and-such”, “there” must be taken to indeterminately (or partially) refer to each member of a set of precise places, the set of places that can be used to give the supervaluationist truth-conditions of the sentence in which the demonstrative occurs’ (op. cit., 198). This is how Schiffer’s argument goes: ‘There was no problem initially in the idea that the that-clause in “Renata said that Harry was bald” referred to a vague proposition, because there was no problem initially in the idea that “bald” in that that-clause expressed a vague property, a property with a penumbra. The problem with (5) comes when we try to make sense of the idea of there being a vague place to which “there” might refer. What could possibly be both a place, a region of space, and fail to have precise boundaries? It might be thought that the supervaluationist could take a vague proposition to be a set of precise propositions, those used to give the supervaluationist truth conditions of the vague proposition. Then the reference of “there” can be taken to be a set of precise places. But I don’t think this will work . . . A set of places is not a place. The problem is that the occurrence of “there” in (5) is *de re* and thus occurs as a demonstrative seeking to refer to a place’ (op. cit., 198).¹³

step cannot be validly instantiated with referentially indeterminate expressions; but their referential indeterminacy could be the result of ontic vagueness, and not its cause. Thus, the argument does not after all dispose of ontic vagueness, even granting the controversial assumptions it requires. Williams goes on to provide a model for ontic vagueness, based on an ersatzist conception of possible worlds. On such a view, worlds are abstract maximal properties that the one and only Reality could have; ‘the’ actual world is one more abstract property, and not Reality itself. This allows that there is not just one ‘actuality’, if for w to be actualized is for w not to be determinately uninstantiated. On this view, propositions understood as sets of worlds—properties predicated of Reality, in assertions and judgments—are themselves indeterminately instantiated, and thus vague; by Merricks’s lights the view counts as propounding metaphysical vagueness. However, the truth or falsehood of assertions and judgments expressing those vague propositions is ultimately explained on the basis of supervaluationist quantification over precise propositions, and thus, to the extent that I find this view intelligible, it is just a form of VSI.

¹³ The problem that Weatherson (2003, 482) takes to be Schiffer’s, and for which he offers a solution, is that for (4) to be true, Al must have said of every candidate-mountain that Ben was there; but Al ‘could not have said all those things’. But this does not distinguish between the problem posed by predicates, as in Schiffer’s original example with ‘Harry is bald’, previously discussed, and the problem posed by singular terms, as Schiffer does here. The problem Schiffer poses is not that supervaluationism has Al saying too many things, if (4) is to be true, but that none of those

But Schiffer's conclusion does not follow. Let us take Kaplan's ('Quantifying In') account of the truth-conditions of *de re* ascriptions, as in 'Joan does not know that her best friend betrays her', which we could formalize (only for the sake of the discussion, for a full account should be more complicated) as (8), where 'R' stands for an appropriate representational relation, one (involving *acquaintance*, or what have you) sustaining correct *de re* ascriptions between constituents in ILF and their semantic values, 'VPA' for any verb ascribing propositional attitudes, and the Greek variables such as ' α ' range over modes of presentation (in Kaplan's original presentation), over parts of ILF on the view of attitude ascriptions I am assuming here:

$$(8) \exists \alpha (R(\alpha, \tau, S) \wedge S \text{ VPA } \ulcorner \sigma(\alpha) \urcorner)$$

On such a view, we describe the ILF in indefinite terms, existentially quantifying over some of its nodes, by indicating only its semantic value—the omitted complication consists in that typically some additional information about the mode of presentation α is given in *de re* ascriptions, such as that it is a mode of presentation of a mountain, it is demonstrative, or, indeed, it is (im)precise. Where α is a constituent of a vague ILF, the simplest theory is that an instance of this schema obtains just in the case that τ is one of the several semantic values with which the vague term in α is paired (one of the semantic values determined by its paired sense). Under this interpretation, the ascription (5) may well be true. It is misleading to object, as Schiffer does, that 'Al didn't say, of any precise place, that it was where Ben was'; for this rings true only by contextually suggesting that, under the proposal, the truth of (5) requires Al to have expressed a precise thought (one with a precise ILF); the omitted complication would properly deal with this, if it is explicitly specified that α was indexical and vague.¹⁴

The present proposal rejects this claim by McGee: 'In order for us to have *de re* beliefs, at least on our usual understanding of them, our thoughts and practices have to pick out one particular thing as the object the belief is about' (1998, 147); for (5) is

things, being precise, are good candidates for reporting what Al said; moving to saying-relations to imprecise contents is OK when we only consider predicates, as in 'Renata said that Harry was bald', but *de re* ascriptions, according to Schiffer, make this move irrelevant. Unlike Weatherston's proposal, mine properly deals with the problem posed by *de re* ascriptions which I take Schiffer to be raising here. I will come back later to Weatherston's views.

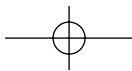
¹⁴ In her contribution to this volume, Rosanna Keefe (2009) provides a more orthodox reply, which avoids vague entities by assuming only the penumbral coordination of the precisification of the embedded sentence in an attitude report, and that of the reported sentence or mental item. She discusses an objection: 'Someone might object to the above solution that "Renata said that Harry is bald₁" should come out determinately *false* (where bald₁ is a precisification of "bald"), whereas on the above treatment, it comes out indeterminate. (Schiffer, 2000, 248, suggests something like this objection.) But, this intuition, if there is one, is far less strong than the intuition that "Renata said that Harry is bald₁" should not be determinately true.' On my account, however, we could say more, if we take the 'suggestion' that the representational device used by Renata was a precise one, produced by the use of a precise device in the ascription, to go into the truth-conditions of the report; for, if so, the ascription would turn out to be determinately false after all. (Otherwise, we could appeal to a pragmatic explanation of the incorrect impression that the ascription is false.) I take it that the possibility of thus capturing the intuition, even if it is a weak one, is an advantage of my proposal.

a correct *de re* report of a *de re* assertion, but neither the reported asserter, nor the reporting utterer, need in any way to have been in a position to ‘pick out’ one in particular of the several precise mountains that could legitimately be invoked in order to precisify the utterances. The proposal so far does not require that precisifications are coordinated so as to assign the same candidate-mountain to ‘that mountain’ in (4) and ‘there’ in (5), as in Weatherson’s (2003, 482–3) and Keefe’s (2009) more orthodox replies to Schiffer. (4) is (super-) true just in case, for each admissible value for ‘that mountain’, (4) is true; (5) is true just in case, for each admissible value for ‘there’, Al was in the proper R-relation with it through whatever corresponds in the thought he expressed to ‘that mountain’ in his utterance (4). But perhaps the proposal does require such coordination among precisifications *implicitly*, in the conditions for a candidate-mountain to be an *admissible* value for ‘there’ in (5). For in specific contexts, it may be part of the intended meaning of those singular terms in *de re* ascriptions that they are in a sort of anaphoric relation with corresponding ‘singular terms’ in the vehicle for the reported propositional attitude.¹⁵

I will conclude by discussing a different, but related objection, made by McGee and McLaughlin (2000, 145–6). They consider an atom at or around the base of Kilimanjaro, called Sparky, and define Kilimanjaro(+) ‘to be the body of land constituted . . . by the atoms that make up Kilimanjaro together with Sparky [and] Kilimanjaro(–) [to] be the body of land constituted . . . by the atoms that make up Kilimanjaro other than Sparky’ (2000, 129); and they argue as follows, about someone like Al in the previous example: ‘In fact, there isn’t anything, either in his mental state or in his neural state or in his causal relations with his environment that would make one of Kilimanjaro(+) and Kilimanjaro(–), rather than the other, the thing [Al’s assertion] is about. [The thought he expressed] can with equal justice be imagined to be the singular proposition obtained from the propositional function described by the English open sentence “that it is the snow-capped mountain within sight of the equator where Ben is” by supplying Kilimanjaro(+) as argument and the proposition obtained by supplying Kilimanjaro(–) as argument. But exactly one of those propositions is true. The possibility that [Al said] all of the countless billions of singular propositions obtained by supplying Kilimanjaro candidates as arguments of the proposition function can be readily dismissed, for it implies that, no matter how careful and knowledgeable a geographer [Al] may be, his every true [thought] about Kilimanjaro is accompanied by countless billions of false [thoughts]’.

In discussing this argument, we need to keep in mind a warning made by McGee himself (‘Kilimanjaro’, 152): ‘Just to make sense of the attachment of the word

¹⁵ As Keefe (2009) points out, Weatherson’s proposal that precisifications should be given wholesale, for every word in the language, is no modification of VSI, for penumbral connections, a fundamental ingredient of the supervaluationist account, are holistic in that way. That precisifications should be given in this holistic way not just for words, but for tokens thereof (or words-in-context), as Weatherson rightly insists, is a consequence of context-dependence in general, such as the long-term discourse anaphoric relations envisaged in the main text in particular. Keefe is nonetheless right that this coordination of token-precisifications raises further problems, which do not depend specifically on issues of vagueness.



“determinately” to an open sentence containing free variables is a bit of a stretch, since we primarily think of determinacy as an attribute of sentences. A sentence is determinately true, determinately false, or unsettled. We need to go beyond this familiar usage if we want to say of an object that it either determinately satisfies, determinately fails to satisfy, or is indeterminate with respect to an open sentence with one free variable’. This is a warning that Williams (2006) ignores, in providing an argument in support of Lewis’s (1993) supervaluationist solution to the problem of the many, a solution which differs from the equally supervaluationist one I prefer; let me elaborate, in order to provide a useful background for the discussion of McGee and McLaughlin’s argument.

The supervaluationist solution I prefer has it that on every way of making the language precise, exactly one of the many candidates for being the referent of ‘Kilimanjaro’ will count as a mountain. Williams (2006, 415) argues that, given what he takes to be the ‘standard’ treatment of ‘Definitely’ as applied to open sentences, this solution entails the falsity of (9):

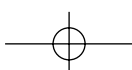
(9) $\exists x$ Definitely (x is a mountain)

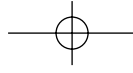
Williams argues that this is bad news for supervaluationists, because it conflicts with their standard ‘confusion’ explanation for our intuitions regarding the mayor premises in *sorites* arguments. The standard explanation is that we confuse ‘Definitely $\exists x \dots$ ’, truly stating that there is a cut-off point in every precisification, with ‘ $\exists x$ Definitely \dots ’, falsely asserting that there is a definite such cut-off; i.e. we read existentially quantified claims in terms of the ‘ $\exists x$ Definitely \dots ’ scope relations, not the other way around. If this account is generally correct, he contends, we should read ‘there are mountains’ as in (9), and therefore (given the proposal to deal with the problem of the many we are assuming) judge it false, against what our intuitions in fact tell us. To preserve the confusion explanation, Williams proposes to adopt instead Lewis’s solution to the Problem of the Many, according to which all mountain-candidates are indeed in the extension of ‘mountain’,¹⁶ and thus (9) turns out to be true, assuming that ‘standard’ interpretation of the interaction of ‘Definitely’ with open sentences.

But this will not do, because, generalizing the confusion explanation in the same way, we would read ‘there is exactly one snow-capped mountain within sight of the Equator’ as: $\exists!x$ Definitely (x is a snow-capped mountain within sight of the Equator), and, assuming now the Lewis solution that Williams is arguing for, judge it false — which is not what we in fact do.

Instead of arguing on the basis of claims about our intuitions very difficult to uphold in this area, it is in my view preferable to rethink the interpretation of the interaction of ‘Definitely’ with (what intuitively corresponds to) open sentences, attending to McGee’s own warning. Consistently with my account so far, I propose to appeal to a representational relation R (with a contextual parameter C instead of the subject parameter S), generalizing the previous proposal to interpret *de re* locutions in ascriptions of propositional attitudes. Thus, I propose to

¹⁶ Lewis deals with the problem by appealing to flexible standards for counting.





analyze sentences involving ‘quantifying in’ the Definitely-operator, such as (9), along these lines:

$$(10) \exists x \exists \alpha (R(\alpha, x, C) \wedge \text{Definitely } \ulcorner \sigma(\alpha) \urcorner)$$

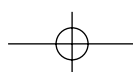
Thus: there is an ILF-part α , which in the context C represents x , such that the logical form consisting in plugging α in the frame $\ulcorner \sigma(x) \urcorner$ is supertrue. Given my preferred, standard supervaluationist solution to the Problem of the Many, in any particular precisification only one of the many Kilimanjaro-candidates will be in the extension of ‘mountain’, and will therefore be an acceptable candidate for being represented in the context C by the relevant instance of α . This proposal is therefore compatible with the confusion explanation of *sorites* reasoning.¹⁷

This proposal allows us to diagnose the problem with McGee and McLaughlin’s claims about the singular propositions obtained by supplying Kilimanjaro(+) or Kilimanjaro(–) as arguments for the propositional function described by the English open sentence ‘that it is the snow-capped mountain within sight of the equator where Ben is’—in particular, the claim that ‘exactly one of [them] is true’. What is true is only that, assuming the supervaluationist solution to the problem of the many, in each precisification the English open clause ‘that it is the snow-capped mountain within sight of the equator where Ben is’ is made true at most by assigning to “it” as value one of Kilimanjaro(+) or Kilimanjaro(–). But the issue is what follows from this with respect to the correctness of *de re* ascriptions like (11):

$$(11) \text{Al said of } n \text{ that it is the snow-capped mountain within sight of the equator where Ben is.}$$

Given the previous proposal, what McGee and McLaughlin’s considerations—including the assumption that Al is a careful and knowledgeable geographer—show is only that the conditions on a candidate-mountain to be an admissible value for the referential expression that Al used (the one on which ‘it’ in (11) is ultimately anaphoric), in particular the condition required to deal with the problem of the many that there is at most one snow-capped mountain saliently within sight of the Equator, will extend to the conditions a candidate-mountain should meet to be an acceptable value for ‘ n ’ in (11) in each precisification. Weatherson (2003, 488) is right in assuming that ‘there is a penumbral connection between the subject of [Al’s assertion] . . .

¹⁷ Williams (*op. cit.*, 415) argues that on the standard supervaluationist solution to the problem of the many ‘the ability of the confusion hypothesis to *explain* intuitions about the sorites premise is undermined. To illustrate this, let us put the explanatory challenge in the following contrastive form. (a) In the original case presented above, where we have a range of emanations from Kilimanjaro to Glastonbury Tor, decreasing in height by a few metres from one to the next, we have strong “no cut-off” intuitions. (b) Consider a new range, which consists in Kilimanjaro standing next to Glastonbury Tor. In this scenario, we have strong intuitions that there *is* a cut-off: a mountain standing next to a non-mountain. The datum to be explained is the contrasting intuitions in the two cases (a) and (b).’ The present proposal to understand the interaction of ‘Definitively’ and intuitively open sentences accounts for this datum. In both cases, we read the existential quantifier outside the scope of the definitely-operator; in (a), we get a falsehood (but the narrow-scope reading is in the vicinity, which explains our confusion); in (b), understood as I have proposed, in terms of (10), we get a truth.



and the word “mountain”’.¹⁸ Thus, in a sense Al said “all of the countless billions of singular propositions” (the same sense in which, against Schiffer, Al did say, of every relevant (precise) location, that it was where Ben was). But this does not imply at all that “his every true [thought] about Kilimanjaro is accompanied by countless billions of false [thoughts]”. Reckoning by the more intuitive counting in terms of vague thoughts, Al just had one true *de re* thought about Kilimanjaro.

Let me summarize. Both in his original paper and in his reply to my original criticism, Schiffer argues against the kind of proposal I have made, by contending (correctly in my view, as I have said) that claims like (3) are *de re* in that they entail reports like (12):

(12) This length is such that Alex said that the rod was it

But in view of our discussion about (2), this does not pose new problems. That the report (3) is *de re*, as shown by the fact that the inference to (12) holds, only requires that ‘this length’ in it—as in (2)—still refers to a type of lengths, an imprecise kind instantiated by particular lengths. This is compatible with its referring to a kind individuated in part by mind-dependent matters (a perceptual way of grasping lengths), which accounts for its being an imprecise kind in accord with the intuitions that VSI tries to support.¹⁹ In his reply, Schiffer (2000b, 322) asked me to characterize ‘the nature of the modes of presentation’ under which Alex said something about a myriad precisely delimited lengths; to say how a set of lengths, which is not a property, can be a property of modes of presentation; and what the truth-conditions of statements like (3) are. These requests are well taken, but I think I have met them here. The modes of presentation at stake are in part types of contextually salient perceptual experiences. The relevant property is the property of being a type of perceptual experience presenting any length in the given set to a perceiver experiencing it.²⁰ The truth-conditions can be given (with some licenses, mostly in the metaphoric reference to parts of contents) as follows: (3) is true iff Alex made an assertion whose propositional content ‘consist’ of a ‘part’ contributed by ‘the rod was’ and another ‘part’ signifying the imprecise kind of length determinately referred to by ‘this length’. As mentioned before, we may or may not additionally assume that a contextual indication of the sort of perceptual experience on which Alex contextually relied to refer to a length is part of the full characterization of that propositional content.

¹⁸ But this solution has nothing to do with Weatherson’s previous appeal to naturalness. I find it difficult to understand how, although ‘in reality Kilimanjaro(+) is no more natural than Kilimanjaro(-)’, nevertheless ‘according to any precisification, one of them will be more natural than the other, for precisifications determine content by determining relative naturalness.’ I cannot see how precisifications, which are arbitrary reinterpretations of the language, can determine naturalness; rather, naturalness and other facts about the language such as penumbral connections determine which of them are acceptable.

¹⁹ That is to say, it is compatible with the occurrence of ‘this length’ in (3) being only weakly *de re*, in terms of the distinction I made in my original reply to Schiffer, Garcia-Carpintero (2000).

²⁰ By referring to sets we *can* of course refer to the properties determining them, when we are not in a fastidious mood.

Schiffer (2000b, 325) criticizes accounts of this sort on three counts: ‘First, it requires finding truth-conditional ambiguity’ in forms like (1) and (2), ‘when in fact those forms don’t seem ambiguous in any relevant way. Second, the move looks suspiciously like saying that the supervaluationism is to be limited to those cases that aren’t clear counterexamples to it. Third, it undermines what some will have thought was a leading virtue of supervaluationism—namely, its implication that vagueness is either not a feature of the world at all, but of our ways of describing it, or, failing that, a feature of the world that is wholly reducible to, a construct out of, non-vague features of the world. Evidently, the supervaluationist theory that survives doesn’t have this “virtue,” since it recognizes that vague objects and properties may have features not possessed by the precisifications of those objects and properties.’

As regards the third and main point, as we have seen, properly understood supervaluationism is not only compatible with this consequence, but actually requires it. The relevant claim that VSI tries to validate is only about the mind- and language-independent world; the leading virtue of supervaluationism lies in its capacity to buttress this claim. The account, however, entails (rather than being incompatible with it) that our representational activities induce imprecise particulars, properties and kinds, possessing distinctive properties of their own; and these induced particulars, properties and kinds are, of course, also part of the wider world.²¹ Against what Schiffer says, this is compatible with their being ‘constructed out of’ the precise objects, at least in a sense which can be precisely explicated in terms of some form of supervenience: no difference in the imprecise objects, without a corresponding difference in precise objects. Schiffer’s main criticism is thus shown to depend on a misleading characterization of supervaluationism’s ‘leading virtue.’

As regards the first and second points, the claim of ambiguity, as I have suggested, can be motivated on independent, Fregean-like considerations. Schiffer only has validly argued for a conditional: if referential expressions never shift their referents in the way suggested by Fregean-like theories, then supervaluationism is wrong. However, the reader should only realize how wide-ranging ‘Fregean-like’ is in the antecedent of this conditional, to appreciate the extent to which its falsity is probable. As I said, even theories that explain the shift of reference attributing it to other expressions implicitly or explicitly present in the utterance (hidden-indexicals, or other expressions in the sentence) count, for present purposes, as Fregean-like. I conclude that Schiffer has not given us a compelling new argument against VSI.

Weatherson (2003) and Keefe (2009) offer alternative solutions to Schiffer’s challenge, on which I have made some critical remarks before. The main difference is that they do not countenance vague entities, such as the vague representational items my proposal envisages. I think that in that way they miss what I see as its main virtue, that it allows us to capture the sense in which, as Schiffer insists, Al didn’t say, of *any* precisely delimited regions of space, that it is where Ben was; or the corresponding sense in which Wright’s claim in the quotation provided in the first paragraph is correct.

²¹ As I said before, I take this reference to imprecise entities to be amenable to a fictionalist treatment; but we do not need to go into this for present purposes.

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