

## Vagueness and Indirect Discourse

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Most of this commentary is devoted to offer a rejoinder to an argument by Schiffer against semantic accounts of vagueness (typically relying on supervaluationist techniques) based on indirect discourse. A short sketch of the argument can be found on pp. 246–48 of “Vagueness and Partial Belief”; a more elaborated presentation occurs in “Two Issues of Vagueness”.

Supervaluationism is not by itself a theory of vagueness, but a logical technique with several applications. In one such application, supervaluationism serves to alleviate a tension between, on the one hand, the rejection of bivalence for some utterances which characterizes what I take to be the correct view on vagueness (*vagueness as semantic indecision*—‘VSI’ henceforth—, to put it in the terms of a well-known defender of the view, David Lewis), and, on the other, well-established facts about the semantics of logical expressions. Schiffer’s argument questions VSI, and not the supervaluationist technique as such. I will address it by putting forward some considerations on the concept of *de re* thoughts which I take to undermine it, at least when certain assumptions germane to VSI are granted.

I will first discuss the argument in “Two Issues of Vagueness”; it will be easy to adapt later the main points to the shorter ver-

sion in “Vagueness and Partial Belief”. Schiffer considers (Schiffer 1998, p. 197) an utterance [\*] involving indirect discourse:

[\*] Al said that Ben was there.

(I will use ‘[\*]’ to refer to the utterance, and not to the sentence displayed beside it; quotations referring to expressions should be understood accordingly.) The first premise of Schiffer’s argument is that the that-clause in [\*] does not refer partially or indeterminately to each of a range of precise propositions. Now, subject to a certain qualification, I accept this claim. VSI requires a distinction (which of course can also be motivated on independent grounds) between a level of reference (or *signification*, as I prefer to say), and a level of sense; the distinction applies at least to singular terms, basic predicates, and propositional signs like ‘Ben was there’ in [\*]. For atomic propositional signs constituted like this by an  $n$ -adic predicate and  $n$  singular terms in particular, VSI requires a distinction between something like a “Russellian proposition” (coarsely individuated by an  $n$ -adic property referred to by the predicate,  $n$  objects referred to by the singular terms, and structural facts like their respective logical categories and so on), and something more finely individuated, akin to a (neo-) Fregean thought.

VSI therefore sees Schiffer’s term ‘proposition’ as ambiguous: it may be understood as referring to the former (which I will call, to disambiguate, a *state of affairs*) or to the latter (to be referred to henceforth as a *thought*). As will become clear, given VSI it is redundant to qualify state of affairs as the one signified by ‘Ben was there’ as *precise*. Thoughts may be more or less precise, but it is of the essence of state of affairs like that one to be (as far as we have good reasons to judge) precise; this is a consequence of the main tenet of VSI, which is that vagueness is a representationally induced phenomenon. The qualified version of Schiffer’s first premise that I accept is then this:

- (1) The that-clause ‘that Ben was there’ in [\*] does not refer (partially or indeterminately) to each of a range of (relatively) precise thoughts.

The reason for (1) is that (as I should put what Schiffer says) Al didn’t say *any* of the relatively precise thoughts referred to by those that-clauses we obtain when we replace the vague ‘there’ with singular terms that do refer to precise regions of space.

There is a second qualification we need to make before proceeding with our discussion of Schiffer's argument. Let  $\sigma(\tau)$  be any atomic utterance like 'Ben was there', and let  $\tau$  be a genuine singular term occurring in it.<sup>1</sup> Consider now the truth-conditional import of  $\tau$  when the sentence  $\sigma(\tau)$  occurs in an indirect context. Contemporary discussions of the semantics of indirect discourse have made us familiar with a sort of position intermediate between traditional Fregean views and radical directly referential approaches. Traditional Fregean views assumed that the signification of  $\tau$  in indirect contexts is a mode of presentation which exists independently of the signification of the term in ordinary contexts; the term may even lack a referent as it occurs in ordinary contexts, and it would still have one in the sort of indirect context we are contemplating. Radical directly referential approaches claim on the contrary that there is no difference between the contribution of the term in ordinary and indirect contexts. Standing in contrast to both, the syncretic views that I have mentioned contend that the term may well preserve the reference it has in ordinary contexts, and at the same time help to make an additional contribution of a mode of presentation. (This may or may not be combined with the claim that which specific truth conditional import the term has in indirect contexts is a contextual matter, which can vary from utterance to utterance of one and the same sentence-type.) For reasons clearly summarized by Schiffer (1992), it is more plausible to think that the additional contribution is not of a mode of presentation, but of a property of modes of presentation, and this is what I will assume. The second qualification I need to make is that the appeal VSI makes to a distinction of sense and signification is made relative to the framework of one of these syncretic theories, instead of a more traditional one.

It is not the case in all of the syncretic approaches that the additional reference to a mode of presentation is made by  $\tau$ . This is indeed so, for instance, in neo-Fregean theories that posit so-called *de re* modes of presentation, partly individuated by the referent which  $\tau$  has in ordinary context, like Evans's (1985); also in the somehow Davidsonian approach of Larson and Ludlow (1993), and in the Sellarsian theory by Boër and Lycan (1986). But the theories of Crimmins and Perry (1989) and Richard (1990) also count as syncretic, and in them it is not strictly speaking  $\tau$  that refers to a mode of presentation, when such reference is made; it is rather a "hidden indexical", in the first theory, or the attitudi-

nal verb, in the second, while  $\tau$  just keeps its ordinary reference. In theories of the latter kind, thus, it is not strictly speaking a that-clause, like 'that Ben was there' in [\*], which refers to a thought. I do not need to choose between these views. I will go on speaking as if it were the that-clause which referred to a thought, but this is only a convenient simplification.

Let us go back to Schiffer's argument. From the premise we have already granted (1), Schiffer concludes that VSI is committed to this (put again in terms of my disambiguation):

- (2) The that-clause 'that Ben was there' in [\*] refers (perhaps indeterminately) to a vague thought.

I also accept that VSI is committed to (2). Schiffer thinks it false, and therefore he concludes against VSI. More specifically, he thinks false a proposal which I will adopt as a convenient elaboration of (2) in the context of this discussion of VSI's merits;<sup>2</sup> namely:

- (3) The expression 'there' in [\*] refers (perhaps indeterminately) to a set of precise places (as opposed to referring, perhaps indeterminately, to a precise place).

(Schiffer credits Hartry Field with the suggestion.) His argument against (3) is this:

A set of places is no kind of place. The problem is that the occurrence of 'there' is [\*] is *de re* and thus occurs as a demonstrative seeking to refer to a place. Witness the transformation from [\*] to

$\exists x$  ( $x$  is where Al said Ben was),

and from there, by demonstrative specification, to

There is where Al said Ben was.

Here, as regards this last example, 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. (Schiffer, *op. cit.*, p. 198)

This argument, however, is a *non-sequitur*. The defender of VSI can grant the claim that the occurrence of 'there' in [\*] is *de re*, without being in any way forced to conclude the falsity of (3) from it. He will accept that, being *de re*, the occurrence of 'there' in [\*] refers (indeterminately) to a place and not to a set of places. But he will point out that it *additionally* refers—or contributes to

a reference made by a “hidden indexical”—also indeterminately, to a set of places.

From Quine’s classic “Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes”, *de dicto* or “notional” occurrences of singular terms in indirect contexts are discerned from *de re* or “relational” occurrences on the basis of two criteria. Firstly, existential generalization fails; secondly, substitutivity of coreferential singular terms fails too. Let me say that an occurrence of a singular term is *strictly de re* if both existential generalization and substitutivity apply to it. Let me say that an occurrence is *weakly de re* if only substitutivity fails, while existential generalization still preserves truth.

A singular term in a *strictly de re* occurrence is there, so to say, just to identify an entity referred to in the discourse or propositional attitude attributed, without indicating anything about how the entity was presented in the attributed propositional attitude. In the most natural interpretation of an utterance of ‘John is so naive that he believes that his wife’s lover is his most loyal friend’, ‘his wife’s lover’ is *strictly de re*. If the occurrence of  $\tau$  in *S-VAP*- $\sigma(\tau)$  is *strictly de re*, the logical form of the attribution can be perspicuously represented with the help of the notation introduced by Kaplan in “Quantifying In”, as:

$$(4) \exists \alpha (R(\alpha, \tau, S) \wedge S \text{ VAP } \ulcorner \sigma(\alpha) \urcorner)$$

Distinguishing *de re* from *de dicto* occurrences on the basis of the two criteria taken together was only natural when the only account of indirect discourse was the traditional Fregean one. However, all the syncretic views I have mentioned earlier allow for *weakly de re* occurrences too, and intuitions about particular examples suggest that the possibility is well-taken. (For instance, when Kripke (1979) sets the stage for his famous puzzle, he insists that ascriptions of attitudes to Pierre about London are to be considered *de dicto*; nevertheless it is reasonable to consider the relevant attributions *weakly de re*.) If a singular term preserves its ordinary signification when occurring inside an indirect context, then existential generalization on the position it occupies should preserve truth. On the other hand, if the term is there doing something else than merely referring to whatever it refers to in ordinary contexts, like contributing a property of modes of presentation to the signified state of affairs (or helping such a contribution to be made by another expression), then it is not guaranteed to be substitutable *salva veritate* by a coreferential

singular term. Resorting still to Kaplan's techniques, we might represent the logical form of an attribution *S-VAP- $\sigma$* ( $\tau$ ) in which the occurrence of  $\tau$  is weakly *de re* thus:

$$(5) \exists \alpha (R(\Psi(\alpha), \tau, S) \wedge S \text{ VAP } \ulcorner \sigma(\alpha) \urcorner),$$

where  $\Psi$  represents a property of modes of presentation contributed by the occurrence of  $\tau$ .

It should be clear now why Schiffer's argument is not valid. Even though—for the reasons he gives—the occurrence of 'there' in [\*] refers indeterminately to a place, this is compatible with the occurrence being only *weakly de re*. Nothing that Schiffer says questions this suggestion available to the defender of VSI. In fact, this is what we should expect him to think, independently of the issue raised by Schiffer's argument. Thus, although Schiffer is right that 'there' in [\*] refers (indeterminately) to a place, the term may also contribute (also indeterminately, as it happens) something like a property of modes of presentation; and (at least for present purposes) this property of modes of presentation can be individuated as a set of places. As Schiffer says (assuming our distinction between states of affairs and thoughts), Al did not say any precise thought; he did not say, for instance, any of the thoughts expressed by sentences resulting from substituting a precise designation of any of the regions of space to which 'there' in [\*] can be taken to refer indeterminately. Al said an imprecise thought; but, compatibly with VSI, the utterer of [\*] does capture this fact (indeterminately, because as is well-known the indeterminacy of terms like 'there' reappears at higher orders of discourse). He does this by using a token of 'there' by means of which he does two things: (i) he identifies (indeterminately) a component of state of affairs, a region of space—thereby indeterminately capturing the signification of whatever term Al used; and (ii) he identifies (also indeterminately) a set of regions of space—thereby indeterminately capturing a feature of the sense through which Al presented a region of space, its imprecise character.

By doing (i)—as a neo-Fregean would put it—the utterer of [\*] captures the fact that the thought said by Al included a *de re* mode of presentation of a region of space. This is what justifies the existential generalization over [\*] to which Schiffer appeals in the quoted paragraph: as Schiffer says, 'there' refers in [\*] (albeit indeterminately) to a place, and a place is not a set of places. But, additionally, by doing (ii) the utterer of [\*] captures the

indeterminacy of the place-characterization in what Al said: by using himself a vague term for regions of space, the utterer of [\*] characterizes the imprecision of the corresponding thought said by Al. Our semantic account captures this second feature by associating with 'there' a *set* of different regions of space constituting semantically acceptable precisifications of the term the utterer of [\*] uses; I take this to be the suggestion by Field that Schiffer reports. According to the suggestion, then, the utterer of [\*] characterizes the imprecision of the corresponding thought said by Al, in effect, by using the set of places corresponding to the vague term he uses to represent the vagueness in what Al said.<sup>3</sup> This double role of 'there' in [\*] corresponds of course to the familiar double role which, according to syncretic views of attitude ascriptions, terms play when occurring in indirect discourse.

My diagnosis is thus that Schiffer can only insist that the defender of VSI is committed to interpret any ascription like [\*] as attributing to the subject the expression of one of a range of precise thoughts by confusing, under the ambiguous 'proposition', states of affairs and thoughts. Part of what the utterer of [\*] is doing with the *that*-clause is indeterminately referring to a state of affairs, by assumption precise. If this were all that he is doing, Schiffer would be right; but we have seen that, on the contrary, VSI involves the contentions that it is not all.<sup>4</sup>

The same disregard of a move manifestly open to the defender of VSI reoccurs in the outline of the preceding argument that Schiffer provides in "Vagueness and Partial Belief". Discussing an example similar to the one we have been considering, Schiffer says: "But it's not only not determinately true that Betty said each of those *n* propositions; even allowing for the vagueness of 'say', it's determinately false that she said any of those propositions. Betty said nothing about some absolutely precisely delimited region of space" (this volume, p. 248). In the attribution to Betty that Schiffer contemplates (which, following his notation, we will refer to as '◆'), 'there' plays a double semantic role.<sup>5</sup> It indeterminately refers to each of a series of precise regions of space. Given that—we are assuming, against Schiffer's conclusion—the attribution is true, any of this possible precisifications for 'there' in ◆ is also (putting higher-order vagueness aside) a possible precisification of the referent signified by Betty with the term she herself used. Now, if this were the only role of 'there' in ◆, this will certainly characterize Betty's semantic activity as (indeterminately) just that of signifying one of a series of precise state of affairs. And this is not the case, because it fails to distinguish her

from someone putting forward a precise thought. So Schiffer is right that “Betty said nothing about some absolutely precisely delimited region of space”; disambiguating: she did not express a (relatively) precise thought.

But in thinking that he has thereby refuted VSI, Schiffer is again trading with the ambiguity VSI requires us to disclose. For ‘there’ is playing in [♦] a second semantic role, if, as we are assuming, it is a true attribution. It is also indicating something about the mode of presentation by means of which the term that Betty used presented a region of space. (An absolutely precise one; this should go without saying, because the main tenet of VSI is that there are no regions of space of other sort referred to by us.) It is indicating, at least, that it was indexical, and—more importantly for present purposes—that it was vague. We have proposed to capture the latter aspect, following the suggestion by Field reported by Schiffer, by representing the second semantic role of ‘there’ in [♦] as that of signifying, also indeterminately, a class of regions of space. The class will include regions of space each of which might count in an acceptable precisification as a referent for the term that Betty used. Once this second role of ‘there’ is acknowledged, Schiffer’s conclusion is blocked. The attribution does not merely represent Betty (indeterminately) as having signified each of a series of precise locations; it also represents her as having been in that relation by means of a term admitting (also indeterminately) as precisifications each of a class of locations; i.e., as having been in that relation by means of a vague term.<sup>6</sup>

I have been defending VSI, an account of vagueness based on the claim that vagueness is a representationally induced phenomenon which uses supervaluationist techniques, from Schiffer’s argument that it conflicts with our practices of indirect report. I have assumed that it is of the essence of VSI that saying (and any other representational activity) splits into two semantic relations (of course, themselves intimately related). Firstly, signification of an objective, mind- and language-independent state of affairs. Secondly, individuation of the constituents of the signified state of affairs relative to mind- and language-dependent features. VSI is the view that vagueness is to be located in the second feature, because, as far as it is sensible to judge, there are not two subclasses of state of affairs, the precise and the imprecise ones. True attributions of saying, therefore, should capture the two aspects; and, for all Schiffer has given us reasons to think, they do capture them, compatibly with VSI.



I will outline now the main justification deriving from VSI for distinguishing two levels of content. In some or other sense, every theorist will grant that a term like 'there' in an utterance  $u$  of 'Ben was there' refers to objective entities, regions of objective space. One aspect of that objectiveness is that there might be alternative characterizations of the referent; another, that among the alternative characterizations of the regions of space which might be candidates aspiring to count as the referent of 'there', there are some *more precise* than 'there'. Let  $l$  be one such more precise characterization. We now come to the following question: Does it follow, from the adumbrated differences between 'there' and terms like  $l$ , that we cannot identify the objective signification of the former with the referent of any term of greater precision like the latter? A positive answer would involve acknowledging, in a problematic sense,<sup>7</sup> that there is "vagueness in the world", that there are objects which are, in themselves, vague. VSI characteristically refuses to answer affirmatively.

The main reason for the refusal is that VSI offers the only intelligible notion of vague contents we have, as has been indicated by Lewis: "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, p. 27).

Refusing to accept that the differences in precision between 'there' and terms like  $l$  we have highlighted entail that the objective signification of the former cannot be identified with the signification of any more precise term like the latter, VSI suggests instead that the lack of precision is only in the representation. As far as we can tell, the objects that are candidates to being the referent of 'there' are as precise as we could desire. It is just that (borrowing a convenient turn of phrase from McGee and McLaughlin

(1995)) the thoughts, experiences and practices of language users—only relative to which has ‘there’ a signification—are not precise enough to discriminate between several candidate-referents that can be proposed. The thoughts, experiences and practices of language users are only sufficient to definitely rule out some candidates, and to definitely rule in some other candidates; which is enough to endow them with the function from which their ability to give a semantic role to expressions derives, probably better than more precise terms could perform them.

Of course, given that representational and referential relations are facts in the world, in some sense, even according to VSI there is “vagueness in the world”. All VSI suggests is that, as far as we can tell, the relative imprecision in ‘Ben is there’ is not explained in that the objective entity signified by ‘there’ is a “vague object”. Because corresponding things could be said about the predicates and other referential expressions occurring in an utterance like ‘Ben was there’, we can correspondingly say that what VSI suggests is that, as far as we can tell, the utterance’s imprecision does not depend on the state of affairs signified by it (or the fact it constitutes, if the utterance is true) being “vague”. State of affairs “restrict reality to two alternatives: yes or no” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.023). Assuming a designated sense of ‘fact’ (“extralinguistic” or “extracognitive” facts, say) according to which those signified by true utterances like ‘Ben was there’ are properly so called, the main claim of VSI is the contention that the facts themselves, as far as we can meaningfully tell, are precise.<sup>8</sup>

This is ultimately why VSI contends that there need be no difference at the level of the referents themselves between an utterance like ‘Ben was there’ and one like ‘Ben was at *l*’; because there need not be any difference at that level between ‘there’ and *l*. However, there is an important semantic difference between the two terms, and the two utterances; otherwise, we would lack an account of their differences in precision. This is construed as a difference in the modes of presentation respectively associated with them, giving rise to a difference in the relation of reference (but not in the referents themselves). For present concerns, we have represented the difference in that the mode of presentation associated with ‘there’ (but not that associated with *l*) is such that there is a set of regions of space signified by terms like *l*, each one of which is an acceptable referent for ‘there’.<sup>9</sup> This is how the account of vagueness as semantic indecision motivates all by itself the main assumption I have been making in my reply to Schiffer—that saying splits into two semantic relations.

Every theorist will accept that there are utterances whose contents differ in precision in the way ‘Ben was there’ and ‘Ben was at l’ differ. The distinguishing trait of Schiffer’s own proposal lies in that, to account for the difference, he appeals to a “*primitive and underived* feature of the conceptual role” (“Vagueness and Partial Belief”, p. 232) of the concept of a place associated to ‘there’. This is what is to be expected from a theorist holding a deflationary conception of propositions: to account for a *prima facie* difference between the character of the propositional, truth-conditional import of two classes of thoughts by positing primitive, unexplainable differences in the conceptual roles of their thought-vehicles.<sup>10</sup> VSI does not reject the existence of differences at the level of conceptual role of the kind Schiffer posits (although it should be obvious that a believer in the virtues of the supervaluationist technique cannot be fully satisfied with the details of his proposal). What VSI rejects is the *primitiveness* of those distinguishing features of the conceptual roles of vague content-constituents. By relying on an inflationary conception of propositional content (of truth, really) VSI offers an explanation (along the preceding lines) of such features, instead of taking them as primitive and underived.

The point in dispute is thus not whether there is a distinction analogous to the one Schiffer makes between *VPBs* and *SPBs* (if not specifically the one he makes). The point at stake is rather whether speakers have beliefs with the distinguishing conceptual roles of Schiffer’s *VPBs* (or others similar) as a result of their sensitivity to the semantic peculiarities of the contents of those beliefs, as explained by VSI, or this is rather a brute unexplainable fact. Once the dispute is seen for what it really is, I think that an unprejudiced observer would grant that a position like Schiffer’s can only be accepted in despair that any alternative like the one suggested by VSI can ever work. One obvious reason that the unprejudiced observer might provide for this anti-Schifferian claim can be put as a methodological principle: do not multiply primitive conceptual roles without necessity. In other words, how could differences in conceptual roles analogous to those unveiled by Schiffer be *primitive*? How can we make sense of the urge any sensible pirot-designer (as in Grice’s famous story) must have found, if Schiffer is right, to build his charges according to Schiffer’s plan? This is why, to resist Schiffer’s views, the most urgent task lies in countering his arguments against *prima facie* more sensible suggestions than his, like the one VSI offers; and this is the project to which this paper has tried to contribute, by replying to Schiffer’s newest argument against VSI.

## NOTES

1. Genuine singular terms include at least indexicals and proper names. Also definite descriptions “referentially used”, if we are contemplating contents expressed in non-literal uses among the range which our theory is intended to encompass.
2. The proposal does not constitute the best way of theoretically representing thoughts, when we take into consideration all the theoretical roles they have to play. But it does not distort anything essential, and it is very convenient for present purposes.
3. The semantic task (ii) is also performed in an indeterminate way by the utterer of [\*]. This is the familiar fact of higher-order vagueness: there are different sets of regions of space all of which can be taken to consist of *acceptable* precisifications of the token of ‘there’ in [\*], and likewise (in all probability) for whatever vague term Al himself used.
4. Schiffer’s disregard for this possibility manifestly open to the defender of VSI and the supervaluationist technique that usually goes with it is understandable given his deflationary view of propositions; for VSI presupposes an inflationary conception of content.
5. To avoid complicating matters more, I will put the point by assuming a straightforward supervaluationist account, instead of the Edgingtonian proposal Schiffer is specifically arguing against in the quoted text. Nothing relevant for my argument hinges on this.
6. This account of the attribution might still be charged with disclosing in indirect reports more precision than there in fact exists in them. But this worry boils down to the well-known objection to supervaluationist accounts based on higher-order vagueness, and Schiffer makes it clear at different places that he does not think of his argument as just another form that that well-known objection might take. The task was to show that, if the problem posed by higher-order vagueness has a solution compatible with VSI, Schiffer’s argument does not constitute any additional worry.
7. Williamson presents in terms of what he calls “unclarity *de re*” (Williamson 1994, sec. 9.3) an unproblematic sense according to which there are “vague objects”, entirely compatible with VSI.
8. The approach I have been suggesting is close to Horgan’s “transvaluationism” (see Horgan 1998). I dislike to describe vague discourse as involving “logically disciplined logical incoherence”, as Horgan does. But all that logical incoherence comes to is the characteristic supervaluationist combination of acceptance of classical validities with rejection of bivalence—so that a disjunction can be true, although no disjunct is true. And, as Fine (1975) puts it, “it would be perverse” not to acknowledge a certain strangeness in this. Aside from this, whereas Horgan has a distinction of “direct” and “indirect” correspondence, I invoke the traditional distinction of sense and signification; and where I appeal to a dependence of semantic facts on the thoughts, experiences and practices of their users, Horgan relies on what he calls “contextual semantics” for similar effects.

9. As I have been insisting, there is a further imprecision here that originates in the metasemantical qualifier 'acceptable', which gives rise to higher-order vagueness.
10. Field (1994) explains the need for the deflationist to pursue this strategy, and explores it for different cases (including vagueness).

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