V

VAGUENESS

Vagueness, 'the quality or condition of being vague' (OED), has kept philosophers busy since ancient times. This 'lack of distinctness or preciseness' (ibid.) means that vague predicates admit borderline cases – cases where it is not clear whether or not the predicate applies (viz. there are truth-value gaps). Thus, 'short' is vague because some people fall on the border: they are neither short nor not short.

A time-honoured riddle occasioned by vagueness is the paradox of heap ('sorites' paradox). The removal of a single grain from a pile of wheat still leaves a heap. However, one ends up with a single grain in the end if one carries this procedure out, say, 9,999,999 times (assume that the number of grains in the original heap is 10,000,000). An absurd conclusion is apparent: the solitary grain is a heap!

Modern discussions of vagueness owe a debt to RUSSELL who rejected sorites-like arguments on the ground that they contain vague expressions whereas LOGIC strives to be precise. He also recognized that the borderline cases of a vague predicate are not sharply bounded. Precise expressions could generate no borderline cases, and Russell presented this as a theoretical ideal. Max BLACK, taking an early pragmatic turn, noted discrepancies over the application of a vague predicate among different speakers.

DUMMETT and WRIGHT wrote rich papers that initiated later debate. Dummett argued that neither *modus ponens* nor universal instantiation can be given up as rules of inference as a way to deny the validity of the sorites argument. He maintained that we cannot but accept the paradox and that the paradox reveals the incoherence of the rules regulating vague terms. Wright coined the phrase 'tolerant' to denote expressions for which minute changes do not affect applicability. Thus, 'short' is a tolerant predicate, for a negative change of a hairbreadth does not make a difference to someone who counts as borderline short (i.e. does not turn him into someone who is straightforwardly short).

Williamson offered a brilliant defence of the epistemic view, according to which vagueness is a type of ignorance. The fuzzy nature of a vague predicate (in Frege's immortal words, its 'dividing logical space as a blurred shadow divides the background on which it is reflected') is to be understood in terms of our lack of knowledge. Fine's detailed treatment of 'supervaluationism' offers a non-classical semantics for vagueness. The basic innovation is that a proposition involving a vague predicate, say 'short', must be true (respectively, false) if and only if it comes out true (respectively, false) on all the ways in which a sharp boundary for 'short' is drawn (a.k.a. precisification). Edgington analysed the rudiments of 'degree theory', an approach that posits that TRUTH comes in degrees.

Ontic vagueness (is it only expressions that can be vague?) drew the attention of EVANS who provided a slingshot argument to give a negative answer to the question 'Can there be vague objects?'. Harold Noonan and R.M. Sainsbury expanded upon his ideas.

Despite all these thought-provoking works, the most effective treatment of vagueness is unsettled. (This remark also applies to the best way to resolve the sorites paradox.) In particular, higher-order vagueness – how the range of borderline cases for a vague predicate is itself imprecise – receives considerable attention and demonstrates the depth of vagueness.

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See also Ontology

VANE, Henry, the younger (1613–62)

Henry Vane was born in Debden near Newport, Essex in May 1613 and executed at Tower Hill on 14 June 1662. He was educated at Magdalen Hall, Oxford and in Geneva. Vane was the son of the elder Sir Henry, a diplomat and advisor of Charles I who served as a Privy Councillor from 1630 and as Secretary of State in 1640–41. The younger Vane had religious scruples about the Laudian Church of the 1630s, and in 1635 sailed to New England, becoming governor of Massachusetts the following year. His rule soon attracted strong opposition and in 1637 he returned to England. In 1640 he was knighted and elected to the Short and Long Parliaments. He was a leading Parliamentarian in the civil war. In 1643 he was a Commissioner for Parliament in its negotiations with the Scots, and was responsible for drawing up the treaty in such a way that it did not commit England to introducing the Presbyterian form of Church government which the Scots wanted. Vane was a leading member of the anti-Presbyterian coalition in Parliament. He took no part in the king's trial in 1649, but after Charles's execution he continued to serve in Parliament and became a member of the new Council of State. While the Rump Parliament sat Vane was a close associate of Oliver Cromwell, but in 1653 Cromwell dissolved the Rump and Vane retired from politics. He believed that Cromwell was a mere usurper who had subverted the rights of the sovereign people and their elected representatives, and he refused to commit himself to taking no action against the Cromwellian regime. As a result he was imprisoned for some months in 1656. He sat in Richard Cromwell's Parliament, speaking in favour of REPUBLICANISM and against the Protectorate. After the restoration of the Rump in 1659, Vane took a leading part in governing England. When the army again closed down the Rump, he continued in office. The army's efforts to rule collapsed at the end of 1659 and the Rump was once more restored. Vane was expelled because of his collaboration with the army, which had made him widely unpopular, as had his support for radical religious sects. After the Restoration of Charles II, Parliament excepted Vane from the general amnesty, and he was executed for treason in 1662.

Vane was the author of a number of speeches in Parliament and elsewhere, and of religious and political writings, including the mystical and millenarian *Retired Mans Meditations* (1655), a political manifesto entitled *A Healing Question* (1656), and *A Needful Corrective or Ballance in Popular Government* (1659), which took issue with some of the ideas of James HARRINGTON. Vane argued for the sovereignty of the people represented in Parliament, and for religious freedom. He wanted a constitutional convention to be summoned to establish a written constitution which would safeguard religious liberty. Thenceforth, supreme power was to be exercised by a single-chamber Parliament. Vane held that all legitimate political power rests on the consent of the people, and that in England the House of Commons represented the people. The executive – whether king or (in the case of Cromwell) Lord Protector – was subject to control by Parliament. Individuals who opposed tolerating the godly, or who undervalued political LIBERTY, were to be excluded from power. Indeed, the people who were to rule England in Vane's scheme were godly Puritans – or at least those amongst them who were willing to tolerate each other – and not the nation as a whole. Harrington, by contrast, wanted to empower a much wider range of people.

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