

ON VAGUENESS: A WITTGENSTEINIAN DISCUSSION

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Abstract. I will here use Wittgenstein's scarce comments on vagueness in *Philosophical Grammar* as a perspective for discussing Boulanger's use of the same concept. The aim is presenting a view on the vagueness not presupposing that vague concepts can be treated as determinable in the same way as non-vague concepts, instead vagueness calls for a high degree of context sensitivity and understanding of purposefulness.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, vagueness, ambiguousness, philosophical grammar

Boulanger's (2017) focus in this issue centres on the lack of a concept of vagueness in both the dialogical self theory (DST) and the social representational theory (SRT). Despite both theories recognize that the socio-cognitive environment of a person is uncertain "[...]they also identify some clear points of reference—anchor (and objectified content) and position respectively—that are partially stable entities involving the entification of reality" (Boulanger, 2017, p. 117-118). The primary idea behind both DST and SRT involves versions of making the unfamiliar familiar, i.e. the vagueness of the unfamiliar is made functionally equivalent to familiar. Generally this takes place by providing a space where the unfamiliar (the stranger, the absent) is seen as *not yet* familiar, that is, a space for familiarizing the unfamiliar. This space, then "[...]potentially reinforces certainty and thus possibly restrains the dialogical confrontation with the stranger as a condition of innovation" (Boulanger, 2017, p. 122). Hence, the result is that vagueness is not really an option, because any unfamiliar piece of object or person is inherently determinable.

The point of Boulanger's (2017) paper is remedying this, by discussing concepts of vagueness complementing DST and SRT in the following way:

[V]agueness implies unclarity in the application of a term with respect to, at least, two regions (A and B): the internal and external zones in Moscovici's study or the zones of presence and absence. The object located in the gap between regions A and B is called a boundary case (p. 123).

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So, as in many other paradoxes the boundary case makes us indecisive of whether it is either A or B. If we ask, for example, how many hairs on one guy's head does it take for him not to be bald, we can easily imagine a whole lot of cases in between a little hair and a lot of hair, where people, depending on context, will claim some guys bald and others not. It wouldn't be easier to coin a formal rule here either. Say, formally adding one hair continuously to a bald head, $n + 1$, we end up with a head full of hair but still being bald. Furthermore, this would be unable to account for the different contextual dimensions, even culturally and ideologically loaded uses of vagueness. Boulanger's (2017) point is, then, "that certain cases are not (yet) determined by practice, representation, and language, even if culturally canalized" (p. 124) and should entail negotiation and tolerance of vagueness.

Boulanger (2017) shows this by presenting and questioning a concrete case, whether the parental engagement in the community library is "a case of school's presence or absence of parent? What if it is neither? And what if it is one *or* the other?" (p. 125). The solution is seeing vagueness not as something to be excluded but as a possibility. Hence conceptualizing parents as embodying "tolerance and authorization of possibility (not yet seen)" (p. 124) implies considering the vagueness involved, the invisible, as a "possible actuality" (p. 127, for a similar point also see Marshall, 2008). What is not recognized in the parents, and would have been rejected if it was, is rather seen as a resource, and vagueness therefore "entails not only tolerance to uncertainty and unfamiliarity, but also the exploitation of these uncertain conditions as a way to get beyond what now seems visible to us" (p. 128).

I agree basically with Boulanger's (2017) claim on being tolerant of vagueness, which also echoes Marshall's (2008) claim that vagueness within assessments of educational settings does not imply unreliability due to lack of evidence, but instead the need to emphasize a different and equally important notion of judgemental competence working within fuzzy situations. Despite this, however, I will question this idea of vagueness as some sort of resource, as being essentially determinable, by using Wittgenstein's considerations on vagueness. The problem entailed by the last quotations above is that there might be something *hidden* within the vagueness that can be exploited to get beyond what is visible to us now. As I see it, this might end up trading the tolerance in for certainty, of making right what cannot be determined, or making clear what cannot be made clear. I assume this is very close to what Boulanger would also claim (despite the metaphysical urge to claim something hidden), hence this critique is more of a joint work in progress in understanding the role of vagueness in social science. In the following I will first present Wittgenstein's thoughts on vagueness, I will then relate this to Boulanger's discussion, and point towards understanding vagueness as context related but without having relativistic consequences.

Wittgenstein on Vagueness

As Umberto Eco has claimed it is part of European heritage to think (dream) about a perfect and clear language, the one language serving as the basis of all languages (the language of Eden, or the common language presented in the myth of the tower of Babel, Genesis 11:1-9) (Eco 1995). Modern examples of this involves Frege's effort of creating a *Begriffsschrift*, a perfect conceptual notation, the function of which was formalizing and serving as a foundation of mathematical language, but not everyday languages, which was less capable due to its inherent vagueness (logic can only recognize sharply delimited concepts, he writes to Peano in 1896).

In his early years, Wittgenstein rejects Frege's denigration of everyday language by understanding vagueness as a surface phenomenon, the meaning of which depends on this everyday language being essentially determinable and not vague: "The requirement that simple signs be possible is the requirement that sense be determinate" (Wittgenstein, 1921/1961, 3.23) All we have to do is discover the sense of a vague expression, which was all along there but just hidden. And it is this notion of determinateness, which Wittgenstein (also) questions in his post-*Tractatus* writings including *Philosophical Grammar*, which I will refer to below.

Let me first notice that vague is not the same as ambiguous. Ambiguous words and concepts are ambiguous in a direct sense; they have multiple meanings. Vagueness on the other hand is more indirect through words having a vague sense. Ambiguity can be resolved by stating which of the multiple meanings one intended. When the taxi driver asks, "Should I go left here?," and the passenger says, "Right," the ambiguity can be solved fairly easy by the taxi driver pointing while saying, "Right as in we go left, or right?" This is not possible in the same sense when we deal with vagueness, for we cannot just restate a vague concept and thereby, through an act of intending, resolve the vagueness. Think about the vagueness of how many grains it takes to make a heap. Is it three hundred, four hundred, or some other number? If we say three hundred, does that dissolve the vagueness? It might or it might not, for would it not make sense to claim that 299 grains also make up a heap? And if we just claim that 300 makes up a heap, we have, as Wittgenstein claims, created a new rule, one which fails to bring any light to our previous inquiries. So in the case of Boulanger (2017) above, a first point would be to ask whether the example of the parents is a case of vagueness, or more likely a case of ambiguity. When the dynamic aspect of both SRT and DST are to be made *visible* by introducing what is claimed as vagueness (Boulanger, 2017), could that not be handled by using ambiguity?

If I leave this question and proceed focusing on the notion of vagueness, the new rule created when deciding on three hundred grains implies that the concept of "heap" would be altered as well. "For that, there exists no delimitation (and if we fix one, we are altering the concept); it is just that there are cases that we count as within the

extension of the concept, and cases that we no longer count as within the extension of the concept.” (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 240). As an example imagine I say, to you, “go stay over there” you do, even though I haven’t specified exactly where. You probably even have a conception of the area within which you think I would want you to stay in, expressed by your saying “here” and therefore also if you stay too far away. The vagueness involved implies “staying over there” as a borderline case, with “there” and “here” denoting, not an exact spot, but what Wittgenstein compares to intervals without any precise limits. And this means that

it is bounded not by points, but by converging intervals which do not converge on a point (Like the series of binary fractions that we get by throwing heads and tails.) The special thing about two intervals which are bounded in this *blurred* way instead of by points is that in certain cases the answer to the question whether they overlap or are quite distinct is “undecided”; and the question whether they touch, whether they have an end-point in common, is always a senseless one since they don’t have end-points at all. (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 237).

Hence, to approach a vague concept as if it is a non-vague one—as we are able to *decide* about it once and for all, thereby dissolving the indeterminateness of exactly *where* by making *there* and *here* converge in an endpoint—is a wrong way to go about vagueness, according to Wittgenstein. Also misplaced is the idea, again referring to the “stay over there” example, that both you and I have a determinate sense of where to stay, but the concept itself, the “stay over there” is indeterminate. This way the concept is made to function just like a non-vague one, whereby we can close in on the exact spot as if both of our determinate senses can converge or approximate towards the spot as an endpoint. Why is this misplaced? Because in most cases where “stand over there” is uttered, the exact spot down to the exact centimetre does not matter. The utterance does not express the intention of placing someone at an exact location, but more like intentions of “don’t get in my way”, or “watch out for what I am doing”. So, Wittgenstein seeks to dissolve this idea of three clearly demarcated zones, determinate-indeterminate-determinate, with our progressing towards making the indeterminate area smaller and smaller, instead providing an alternative way of conceiving vague concepts, namely as converging intervals. The coin-tossing example he refers in the quote above aims to show that.

When tossing a coin, the number of times it shows heads or tails does not converge on one value, rather it oscillates between the two. Hence, when tossed many times the dispersion between heads and tails will show proportionality, where sometimes the number of heads is bigger than tails and vice versa. The convergence claimed by Wittgenstein is therefore not directed towards an endpoint, but to a proportion or a relation instead. I take this to mean that it makes no sense to claim a progression towards resolving vagueness, i.e. either heads or tails, because each toss does not bring me closer to a final decision of the sum of either/or. All I can say is that

convergence implies that a stability over time will occur. If I transfer this to the “stand over there” example, then I can imagine a number of uses where this is meant to convey “watch out”, perhaps by similar contexts—a repetition of experiments, or dad drilling yet a hole in the wall—creating a familiar resemblance. But I can also imagine a case where “stand over there” means do not get in my way, hence as a result of irritation, not caring, or as a kind of punishment. All uses will express a certain convergence by being stabilized practices over time (think of a big brother annoyed by his kid brother, or certain older school practices punishing children by making them stand in a corner); they will be connected but different also. Already here I can see how the phrase “stand over there” can mean a whole lot of things. By itself it is vague, but when I contextualize the claim, and tries to understand the specific purpose behind it, the vagueness seems to dissolve. There is no essence behind the vagueness, the different uses of the expression cannot be explained by being of a similar nature, i.e. caring and irritation display different contextual and functional understandings. Nevertheless, a familiar resemblance exists between the examples, someone is told by someone to stay at some place. Hence, the vagueness seems to evolve from instances of de-contextualization; as long I do not question what the particular circumstances are, “stand over there” seems quite indeterminate and a vague expression. But what does this show in relation to Boulanger (2017) above?

When Does Vagueness Matter?

I think Read (2012) can help supplement this interpretation in a way relevant for Boulanger’s (2017) case of the parents above. First of all, there is a sense in which a pure logicist or a priori approach will never serve as a solution. It isn’t a numbers game as Read (2012, p. 117) terms it, the actual numbers of hair on the head is less important than the context in which baldness is addressed. The indecisiveness Wittgenstein puts forth as central in my interpretation above revolves around not being able to resolve the vagueness once and for all using logical methods, or any other method wanting to discover some hidden meaning within the vague expression. Instead it is the “relationships of *cases of baldness to one another*, their complicatedly overlapping resemblances, that is the ‘basis’ for our understanding of what are and what are not cases of baldness, etc.” (Read, 2012, p. 127). There is a tapestry of cases where baldness is addressed and expressed, different converging intervals, which form the background on which baldness matters for our understanding and discussion. The same would apply to the use of the notion parent, how this is used is observable in Boulanger’s (2017) examples. The use of a concept like parent, of course, changes over time and space, but again if I look close at how it is used, it need not pose a challenge unless I consider the use of the concept as predetermined. I look to the concrete cases where different understandings of parents matter to different people, “Context matters. And part of context is the mattering of the case. It matters whether it matters or not.” (Read, 2012, p. 130). Because it matters to people, it is easier to dissolve the vagueness

concerned, than from a disengaged and predetermined view on what hides behind vagueness.

Second, any pre-determinateness implies context independency, so I risk ending up with what I take as a vague notion as “*both context-bound and context-independent* in its use” (Read, 2012, p. 130). Now I will claim that Boulanger’s (2017) considering vagueness as a sort of invisibility, as a “possible actuality”, comes close to claiming a context independence, or indeterminateness. Now I might not consider anything wrong with considering or focusing on possibilities, and I basically agree, but it might also blind us for situations with no need for considering possibilities, or where they actually do not exist. In these situations, a possible actuality becomes metaphysical construct, the essence of vagueness, as a result of an urge to transcend context, instead of tolerating the possibility of not being able to dissolve the vagueness. This is the indecisiveness Wittgenstein speaks of, there are situations of a tragic character, where vagueness is expressed by people unintentionally not understanding each other, or situations of a sad character where the lack of understanding is intentional.

Third, my discussion here is not to be understood as yet another context-independent theory of vagueness. It is, as Read 2012 claims, foremost a kind of indexical approach to vagueness, emphasizing the different purposes and context-related trajectories of vague expressions, but also without ending up in a relativism that vagueness, the role of being a parent, is just what we each choose to denote as such. Since being a parent *matters* in different ways to those involved, it is not reducible to what each take it to be.

Conclusion: Need and Non-Need for Vagueness

When I become aware that there is no essence within a vague term, there is no determinate “stuff” beneath it, but that there are several different ways words are used, some related more than others, then I become aware of the real differences the use of words have in different contexts. Hence, the use of the word “parent” (how parenting is understood) matters to people within these contexts in different ways, and as the quotes by Boulanger (2017) expressing the different views on parents and schools, it is right there in front of us. Nothing is hidden. The many ways of being a parent, the resemblances and differences involved in parenthood as this relates to schools, is there in the quotes. I do not need a metaphysical theory of vagueness, about possible actuality for example, at least not *at first*, I just need to be attentive to the differences on display in different contexts, and then the vagueness will often be dissolved. I say *at first* deliberately, because there might be cases, which eventually call for understandings involving larger frames than the particular context. I am not thinking of metaphysical but more in the vicinity of macro-oriented sociological and social-psychological frames, like political-economic changes involving how the school-parent relationship is conditioned.

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Returning to the focus on context I will at first be able to draw some more or less stable boundaries of the vagueness in question, by focusing on what really matters in the given context. Whether a guy is bald or not, has less to do with the number of hairs on his head but with the circumstances and purposes for my enquiring into it. In most cases I will just claim of a bald guy that he is bald, I don't need to count his hairs. Or I will say he is bald on top of his head and not in the sides. Some monks, valuing baldness as a sign of religiousness, will envy people with a natural bald spot on the top of the head, other people's religious or not, will try to hide a beginning baldness. In both cases we understand the circumstances and purposes for addressing baldness even when they are different, they display two related but still different intervals in Wittgenstein's sense. They are convergent, since both valuations of baldness can be understood as practices developed and stabilized over time. The first, the practice of tonsure, is a well-known practice in different religions, the second, wig-making, has been known since the ancient Egyptians; which is not to say that the problems about parent-school will go away, but vagueness in itself need not always be a problem. There are, of course, instances where the vagueness cannot be dissolved, but that shouldn't come as a surprise. Sometimes vagueness calls for specification or making its meaning precise, and at other times we need to fail in that. In either case, what I need is first of all to look closely at the circumstances in which I use these allegedly vague words.

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