VAGUENESS AND INDUCTIVE MOLDING

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ABSTRACT

Vagueness is epistemic, according to some. Objects have clear boundaries, and vague talk results from ignorance of these boundaries. Vagueness is ontological, according to others. Objects like Mount Everest are inherently fuzzy, and vague language reflects the underlying fuzz.

This paper deploys what I take to be a compromise position. It discusses the central case of vague predicates, though adjectives, adverbs, quantifiers, definite descriptions, and proper names may also exhibit vagueness. Predicates are coined in specific contexts for specific purposes, but these limited practices do not automatically fix the extensions of predicates over the domain of all objects. The linguistic community using the predicate has rarely considered, much less decided, all questions that might arise about the predicate's extension. To this extent, then, I take the ontological view to be correct: there may be no fact of the matter of whether a man with 229 hairs on his head is bald. But this is not the end of the matter. A predicate that clearly applies in some contexts can be reasonably extended to other contexts where it is initially vague. This process of development approximates the cognitive remedy for vagueness that the epistemic view prescribes.

In addition, this developmental process appears to be what von Wright was groping for in his reflections on molding concepts. This paper proposes to mold concepts and thereby reduce vagueness through a process of inductive inference. The argument is modest in that I will not claim that inductive molding can eliminate vagueness. The law of excluded middle does not always hold. However, I will argue that the truth-value gaps associated with these failures need not be permanent, that they can be reduced on a piecemeal basis. The engine of reduction, I claim, is quantitative inductive logic.