

### AUSTIN ON VAGUENESS

The discussion of vagueness in *Sense and Sensibilia*<sup>1</sup> occurs as part of Austin's polemic against Ayer's phenomenalism. Ayer maintains that the meaning of a sentence which refers to a sense-datum is precisely determined while the meaning of a sentence which refers to material objects is not.<sup>2</sup> Austin claims that Ayer is mistaken in saying that expressions by themselves are necessarily vague or precise. According to Austin "there is no reason to say that expressions used in referring to 'material things' are (as such, intrinsically) vague; and there is no reason to suppose that expressions used in referring to 'sense-data' would be (as such, necessarily) precise."<sup>3</sup>

Austin substantiates his claim by describing some of the ways in which the word 'vague' is used in ordinary discourse. Suppose that we say that something, for instance somebody's description of a house, is vague; there is a rather large number of possible features— not necessarily defects— any or all of which the description might have which might lead us to pronounce it vague.

It might be (a) a *rough* description, conveying only a 'rough idea' of the thing to be described; or (b) *ambiguous* at certain points, so that the description would fit, might be

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<sup>1</sup>J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 124-131.

<sup>2</sup>A. J. Ayer, *Foundations of Knowledge* (London: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 110 and 242.

<sup>3</sup>Austin, p. 131.

taken to mean, either this or that; or (c) *imprecise*, not precisely specifying the feature of the thing described; or (d) not very *detailed*; or (e) couched in *general terms* that would cover a lot of rather different cases; or (f) not very *accurate*; or perhaps also (g) not very full, or *complete*. A description might, no doubt, exhibit all these features at once, but clearly they can also occur independently of each other. A rather rough and incomplete description may be quite accurate as far as it goes; it may be detailed but very imprecise, or quite unambiguous but still very general. In any case, it is clear enough that there is not just *one* way of being vague, or one way of being not vague, viz. being *precise*.<sup>1</sup>

If we add two entries of our own to Austin's list, we see that there are at least nine different reasons for choosing to call an expression vague. An expression might be considered vague if, as a description, it is (i) too rough; (ii) ambiguous; (iii) too imprecise; (iv) not very detailed; (v) couched in terms that are too general; (vi) not very accurate; (vii) not complete; (viii) lacking in certain quantifiers; or (ix) couched in obfuscating language.

As to (i): A description is vague if it is too rough; i.e., if for the purpose at hand it is too crudely formulated and the situation is such that it is reasonable to expect a more polished version. For example, it might be appropriate in some situations to tell someone, say a child, that electricity "feeds" light bulbs very much the way food "feeds" our body. But it's evident that there are other situations where this description would be inappropriate and where we might want to call the description vague because it gives too rough an idea of what electricity is like.

As to (ii): A description is vague if it has multiple meanings and the situation is such that it does not clarify what is meant. A description is vague, in other words, if it suffers from being ambiguous. Consider the following two situations. In the first we enter a room and hear someone say that "The seal is on the table." We glance at the table and notice that it is empty except for a rather gawky looking mammal which is quite busy flapping his flippers. We smile understandably and conclude that by "The seal is on the table," he means that "such-and-such an animal is on the table." The description; i.e., this particular expression-token, is neither ambiguous nor vague. Suppose we now enter another room. By strange coincidence we again hear someone say that "The seal is on the table." But on the table in this room are several different things. On this table there is a seal-skin, a notary public stamp, and a Christmas seal. We are perplexed.

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<sup>1</sup>Austin, pp. 125-26.

We know that the word 'seal' can be correctly used to refer to any one of these items; but we do not know what particular item the speaker is here referring to. The English sentence, 'The seal is on the table' in abstractum has multiple meanings and this situation is such that it fails to dispell the ambiguity. In other words, the description is vague because it has multiple meanings and the situation, this *particular* situation, is such that it does not clarify what is meant.

As to (iii): When we say that a description is vague in the sense of being imprecise, we usually are drawing attention to the fact that the type of measurement being used is not a fine (precise) type of measurement as is wanted. For example, the question, "How high is the Empire State Building?" would normally be answered quite satisfactorily by saying "The Empire State Building is exactly 102 stories high." But if we change the question and ask, "Precisely how high is the Empire State Building?" we would expect a different, a more precise answer, for the number of stories in a building is not a reliable indication of its height.<sup>1</sup> A more precise answer would be "The Empire State Building without its television tower is 1250 feet in height and 1172 with the tower."

As to (iv): A description is vague in the sense of not being very detailed if the recipient of that description wants a more particularized account. Suppose a robbery occurs. The victim is asked to describe his assailant. "The man who robbed me was Caucasian, about 5'10", and was wearing a blue serge suit." To this the police sergeant replies: "You're being much too vague. After all he held you up in broad daylight. Surely you can remember more details. What color was his hair? His eyes? Did he have any distinguishing features?" Obviously the sergeant wants as much relevant detail as is possible for the victim to remember.

As to (v): A description is vague if it is couched in terms that are too general for the purpose at hand. The point to be made is this. It is perfectly proper to use very general terms if the situation calls for them but the situation does not always do so. In other words, there are times when it is inappropriate to use a more general term if a less general one can be correctly substituted. For example, suppose we see someone eating but we do not see that he is eating an apple. We ask: "What are you eating?" If he replies by saying "I am eating some thing," we would probably object. We would object because the answer is vaguer than it need be. The speaker should have said "I am eating a piece of fruit" or (and this would be still better) he should have said "I am eating an apple."

As to (vi): It is difficult to say exactly what Austin has in mind when he said that he might pronounce a description vague if it was

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<sup>1</sup>Compare the Bank of Manhattan with the 60 Wall Street Building. The former has 71 stories and is 900 feet tall; the latter has only 67 stories but is 950 feet tall.

"not very accurate." His treatment of 'accurate' is interesting but it sheds little light on the matter.

Plainly enough, neither a word nor a sentence can, as such, be accurate. Consider maps, for instance, where accuracy is most comfortably at home; an accurate map is not, so to speak a *kind* of map, as for instance is a large-scale, a detailed, or a clearly drawn map — its accuracy is a matter of the *fit* of the map *to* the terrain it is a map of. One is tempted to say that an accurate report, for instance, must be *true* whereas a very precise or detailed report may not be; and there is something right in this idea, though I feel rather uneasy about it. Certainly 'untrue but accurate' is pretty clearly wrong; but accurate and therefore true' doesn't seem quite right either. Is it only that 'true', after 'accurate', is redundant? It would be worth while to compare here the relation of 'true' to, say, 'exaggerate'; if 'exaggerated and therefore untrue' seems not quite right, one might try 'untrue *in the sense that* it's exaggerated', 'untrue, *or rather*, exaggerated', or '*to the extent that* it's exaggerated, untrue'.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently Austin wants to suggest that a description can be vague *in the sense that* it is not very accurate. But what does this mean? An exaggerated description may not be very accurate but we would not say that it is vague. The very notion of being "not very accurate" seems to be something of a mis-description. Either a map "fits" the terrain or it does not; either a description is accurate or it is not.

There is an alternative interpretation. Austin is quite right in maintaining that we often use 'accurate' as a synonym for "being in exact conformity with truth." But we use the word (though not quite as often) also to stand for a kind of carefulness, a kind of *carefulness concerning truth*. At one time in the development of English, to say that a description was accurate was to say that the description *fitted because it was carefully executed*. But there has been a gradual shift in meaning. (Possibly because it is so very difficult to know when care has or has not been exercised). Now the emphasis tends to be upon the exactness of the fit. The map fits or it does not. Nevertheless the old meaning, the old overtones still linger. The word's etymology<sup>2</sup> still exerts an influence. Austin's intuitions are right. 'Untrue but accurate' is clearly wrong. 'Accurate and therefore true' is not quite right either. Nor is 'accurate' perfectly synonymous with 'true'. When we say to a cartographer that his map is a true report we are in essence praising the map; but when we say that his map is accurate

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<sup>1</sup>Austin, pp. 128-29

<sup>2</sup>'Accurate' comes from the Latin *accurare* meaning "to take care of."

we laud both the man and his work.

Therefore, to say of a description that it is vague (in the sense of its not being very accurate) is to say that the description has been carelessly executed in regard to the truth. It is to criticize someone for being neglectful. It is to say that not enough care has been taken to secure an accurate description of all that has to be described. Notice that what is wanted here is a description "of all *that has to be described*" and not a description only "of all *there is to describe*."

For example, consider the case of a mother who is defending her son against the charge of being cruel. Suppose she lists all his virtues. However, she deliberately neglects to mention the fact that he has a long history of throwing children down and viciously kicking them in the head. Knowing this, someone might object that the mother is deliberately being vague in order to protect her child. Instead of complete evidence, she presents one-sided evidence. What she says is true; but her description of her son simply does not cover all that ought to be covered.<sup>1</sup>

As to (vii): A description is vague if it is not very complete; i.e., if it is lacking information *and* the situation is such that it is clear from the context that more information is required. For example, if someone who is going swimming asks "How is the water?" and someone replies "It's cold," then this reply (this description) is not very complete; yet, it is not vague. It is not vague for the reason that if these conversants are ordinary people in a common situation, then there is nothing wrong with the reply. That is exactly the kind of information wanted. However, if we change the situation, if the conversants are oceanographers who are speaking in a professional vein, then this would make a difference. In such a situation we would probably be justified in saying that the description "The water is cold" is vague.

As to (viii): A description is vague if it lacks certain quantifiers (usually universal or numerical quantifiers) and it is clear from the context that such quantifiers are required. For example, the statements "Skyscrapers are office buildings" and "Some skyscrapers are office buildings" may be considered vague in this respect. But the statements "All skyscrapers are office buildings" and "Ten skyscrapers are office buildings" would not be vague because both indicate how much of the class of skyscrapers the word 'skyscraper' is referring to.

As to (ix): When we say that a description is vague because it is couched in obfuscating language, we are usually objecting to one or a combination of factors. We may be objecting to the use of too many

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<sup>1</sup>In logic this is called a *fallacy of special pleading*. This fallacy occurs when in a dispute we elaborate the factors favorable to our own position but refrain from mentioning the unfavorable ones because we know that by doing so we would jeopardize our own position. In other words; it is to present knowingly only part of the truth in order to gain advantage.

qualifying words or phrases. Quite often so many qualifications are added to a passage as to render it nearly unintelligible. Consider the following passage which was sent as part of a directive to internal revenue agents, expounding the inwardness of a proposed amendment to the Income Tax Act of 1914:

The effect of the amendment, as explained on the floor of the Senate, if finally enacted into law, would be to permit, after having made an adjustment in an item affecting the excess profits tax, in a year to which the amendment is made applicable, which has an effect on the normal or surtax for the year, any resulting adjustment necessary in the normal or surtaxes may be accomplished although the statute of limitations for assessment of any deficiency or making any refund of such taxes, has expired.<sup>1</sup>

It is possible, however, that we may be objecting to the use of jargon. Instead of being brief and writing directly to the point, one uses circumlocutions. Instead of saying "England expects every man to do his duty" (Lord Nelson), one says:

England anticipates that, as regards the current emergency, personnel will face up to the issues, and exercise appropriately the functions allocated to their respective occupational groups.<sup>2</sup>

Or consider what is perhaps the most famous piece of bombast, namely, the sign which hung in the men's washroom of the British Museum that read: "These basins are for casual ablutions only." In such cases it is not that we cannot understand what is being said (though at times we may not), but that the use of jargon makes understanding much more difficult than it need be.

These various ways, ways in which a description might be vague, stand as substantiation for both of Austin's contentions: First, "there is not just *one* way of being not vague; viz., being precise."<sup>3</sup> Second, "usually it is *uses* of words, not words themselves, that are properly called 'vague'."<sup>4</sup>

If the foregoing is sound, then it suggests two complementary programs. The first urges that we continue to use the word 'vague' as the most generic label signifying almost any kind of lack of clarity; while, advisedly coining and using other expressions, less generic ones, which

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from H. L. Mencken's *The American Language, Supplement One*, p. 415.

<sup>2</sup>An example of how one can abuse the language given by a British member of Parliament, A. P. Herbert. Quoted in H. L. Mencken's *The American Language, Supplement One*, p. 413.

<sup>3</sup>Austin, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

have the needed degree of specificity.<sup>1</sup> The second, and bolder program, is to explain more adequately why speech may be vague while language seldom is. Several hypotheses come to mind. But the most fruitful seems to be that of maintaining that for fluent speakers all material object words denote perfectly determinate classes. We may express this metaphorically as follows: for the fluent speaker all words which refer to sensible objects or their qualities do so as concepts having sharp boundaries.

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<sup>1</sup>For a more detailed discussion of this proposal, see: Marvin Kohl, "Vague Words," *Reprints of Papers in 1968 International Conference on General Semantics*, ed. Murray Elwood (Lakeville, Connecticut: Institute of General Semantics, 1969), mimeographed.