

## VAGUE WORDS

There are, within the philosophical tradition, two different and rather general approaches to the problem of vagueness. One approach, that of the essentialist, holds that there is an aspect of meaning, an essential part of the structure of words, which makes for vagueness. The other approach, that of the contextualist, holds instead that vagueness results from the way words are used. The essentialist, at the very least, holds that one kind of word ("material" object, abstract, etc.) is vague. For the contextualist some words (but never kinds of words) are vague: some words are vague because, more often than not, they are used vaguely. The former maintains that vagueness cannot be eliminated; the latter that it can be eliminated, at least in most cases.

Most essentialists would agree that a symbol is vague if there exist objects concerning which it is intrinsically impossible to say either that the symbol in question does, or does not, apply.<sup>1</sup> Symbols are held to be vague in this sense if, by representing things, they thereby share the indeterminate, the non-discrete, or the indefinite nature of things. Thus Locke maintains that there is "a natural and almost unavoidable imperfection in almost all the names of substance" because the simple qualities which make up our complex ideas of them are almost infinite.<sup>2</sup> Morris Cohen suggests that, because there is a sense in which there are regions of indetermination in the natural world itself, "the objective

denotation of our concepts may be of different degrees of definiteness."<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell maintains that, because of the apparent indiscreteness of things, we can never completely eliminate the element of indefiniteness when we define empirically given qualities.<sup>4</sup> And Stephen Ullman sums up the matter when he says that "a factor making for vagueness is the lack of clear-cut boundaries in the non-linguistic world."<sup>5</sup>

The contextualist, on the other hand, is not especially concerned with the word-object relation. He considers it equally, if not more important, to understand words in relation to the speaker and to the non-linguistic situation in which they have their setting. If we phrase it in Charles Morris' semiotic terms, we can say that the emphasis is almost entirely upon pragmatics as opposed to syntactics or semantics.

Instead of raising the rather tacky problem of the adequacy of individual names, the contextualist tends to focus his attention upon the functions and dysfunctions of descriptive statements. He maintains that an expression might be considered vague if, as a description, it is lacking in information and the situation is such that additional information is wanted.<sup>6</sup> Evidently at least two factors must be present. There must be some incompleteness of description, and more important, the incompleteness must be viewed as a failure on the part of some speaker to fulfill (what for want of a better term I shall call) normal expectations. The latter notion, the belief that adequacy is somehow determined by

non-semantic and non-syntactic criteria, is the distinguishing feature of the contextualist's approach. For example, Alfred Sidgwick writes that "the distinction between complete and incomplete description, though perfectly sharp and clear in the abstract, can only have a meaning - can only be applied to actual cases - if it be taken as equivalent to sufficient and insufficient description, the sufficiency being relative to some purpose."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, L. Jonathan Cohen maintains that a description "is judged by the relevant standards of completeness operative at the time, not by some metaphysical standard of absolute completeness that would make all finitely long descriptions incomplete and thus put complete descriptions beyond the reach of mortal beings."<sup>8</sup>

Now for the difficulties, first in the essentialist thesis.

(i) Consider what is probably the most influential definition of vagueness, namely, Max Black's. Black maintains that "a symbol's vagueness is held to consist in the existence of objects concerning which it is intrinsically impossible to say either that the symbol in question does, or does not apply."<sup>9</sup> Using this definition, he concludes that "all 'material' terms, all whose application requires the recognition of the presence of sensible qualities, are vague ..."<sup>10</sup>; for example, such terms as 'chair', 'love seat', 'sofa', 'red', 'pink', would be considered vague. But as Khatchadourian correctly observes: "material" terms are not regarded as vague in ordinary usage.<sup>11</sup> Although Black's analysis (especially his method of numerically determining the degree of marginal

indeterminacy) has great merit, he does not provide an analysis of the concept of vagueness as involved in ordinary speech.

This in itself is not a criticism, but a statement of fact. For Black in his introduction makes it clear that he is not concerned with the language of the so-called man in the street, but with language as used by scientists and philosophers.

The difficulty lies elsewhere. It involves the problem of neologism, and the question of whether or not Black's use of 'vague' and its cognates is legitimate. Or more precisely: it is a question whether or not this manner of speech, one which Black so brilliantly characterizes, is a legitimate extension or modification of ordinary, everyday usage.

But now let us come to cases. I should like to suggest that to use an established word like 'vague' in a new and different sense, without carefully examining the established usage, is like throwing away an old tool before checking to see if it can do the new job. This suggestion is based on rules of linguistic change, which are of great importance, and which are neglected, or perhaps not recognized by many philosophers: (a) In attempting to rectify an aspect of language, one must not only have good reasons, but the reasons must be better than countering arguments; and, (b) one cannot know whether these reasons are better (and therefore sufficient) unless the older patterns have first been examined.

In the special case before us, the neglect of these rules

results in a definition that is persuasive and, more important, in a definition that involves an unjustifiable change in modality.

(ii) A persuasive definition is one that changes descriptive meaning without substantially changing the emotive meaning.<sup>12</sup> The difficulty with Black's definition is that, while it changes the descriptive meaning, it does not rid the word of its negative, emotive overtones. The pejorative implications of 'vague'<sub>1</sub> (the word as it is ordinarily used) are transferred to 'vague'<sub>2</sub> (the word as Black suggests we use it). But using 'vague'<sub>2</sub> with the pejorative implications of 'vague'<sub>1</sub> is like using 'bastard' to characterize the phenomenon of test-tube babies: in both cases the new phenomenon does not warrant the old connotation.

(iii) Black's proposal would change the "modality of the defining characteristics" from that of "actuality" to that of "possibility." The change is such that we are no longer talking about a condition that is the case but about a condition that might be the case. For example, in ordinary speech when someone says that "'X' is a vague word" this is usually an elliptical way of saying "Given the word 'X' then such-and-such is the case." But if we use Black's characterization of vagueness we find ourselves in a different situation. According to Black, to say that "'X' is a vague word" is in effect to say "Given the word 'X' then such-and-such can be the case." However, it is one thing to say that such-and-such is the case and another to say that such-and-such can be the case.

Similarly, it is one thing to say that the extent of application of a word is in doubt. It is another to say that the extent of application of a word can be in doubt.

I have suggested elsewhere<sup>13</sup> that to put a word that signifies a contingency that may only be possible i.e. to put 'can' in the definiens of 'vague' makes about as much sense as it would to put it in the definiens of such words as 'fat' and 'ugly'. Instead of defining 'fat' (pertaining to human beings) as one "having an abundance or over-abundance of fatty tissue" we could define it as "having the potential for an abundance or over-abundance of fatty tissue." We could then "argue" that all human beings are fat. If, instead of defining 'ugly' as "being offensive to one or more of the human senses" we define it as "that which can be offensive to the senses", then it would follow that all human beings are ugly. Similarly, if Black and others are permitted to put the word 'can' in the definiens of 'vague' then it would follow that all physical object terms are vague. Truth is achieved, but by means of semantic shenanigans.

But you might say, surely "material" object words are marginally indeterminate; there is plenty of evidence to show that this is the case, and its occurrence is just a brute fact we have to accept. Moreover, by acknowledging the existence of marginally indeterminate words, we can avoid black-or-white fallacies. We can turn away from an inflexible, dogmatic, "either-or" kind of orientation. As such, we stand armed against the fallacy of supposing that any classification of natural objects can have

the absolute rigor of logical division.

To say that all "material" object words are marginally indeterminate is admittedly better than saying that they are vague. Moreover, it is important to realize that certain methods of classification have an arbitrary element about them and often obscure differences which are only a matter of degree. Nevertheless something is amiss. Something seems to be wrong with the notion of a word being marginally indeterminate. Do words have margins? Or, is marginality (strictly speaking) only a characteristic of things? And if the latter be the case, then are we not confusing the characteristics of things with the characteristics of words?

And if I may add another question, is this objection based on "brute fact" or is it based on the belief (a belief which, if not actually false, is certainly dubious) that even ordinary speech must somehow represent things exactly as they are?

Evidently what is needed is another term, one that will not be open to these objections. I suggest that instead of 'vague' or 'marginally indeterminate', we use a word that H. L. A. Hart has borrowed from the law.<sup>14</sup> It is the word 'defeasible'. In law it is "used of a legal interest in property which is subject to termination or 'defeat' in a number of different contingencies but remains intact if no such contingencies mature."<sup>15</sup> Hart extends the meaning of 'defeasible' to cover such concepts as "trespass" and "contract", concepts which can express the necessary and sometimes

sufficient conditions for the application of terms, but cannot express conditions which are always sufficient.<sup>16</sup> Instead of saying that words like 'chair' and 'red' are vague, we would, following Hart, say that concepts like "chair" and "red" are defeasible. They are defeasible because it is always possible to find objects concerning which it is intrinsically impossible to say either that the concept in question does, or does not, apply. They are defeasible because, although we can express the necessary and sometimes sufficient conditions for the application of these terms, we cannot express conditions which are always sufficient.

Let us now turn our attention to the position of the contextualist.

The contextualist correctly maintains that every lexical definition, however complete or incomplete in itself, is free from useful doubt in some of its applications and open to useful doubt in others.<sup>17</sup> Just as the existence of oil fires does not reflect upon the general adequacy of water, the existence of borderline cases does not reflect upon the general adequacy of lexical definition. Moreover, the contextualist maintains (and again correctly so) that there are different reasons for choosing to call certain uses of words vague, that "there is not just one way of being vague, or one way of being not vague, viz., being precise."<sup>18</sup>

Difficulties in the contextualist position are:

(i) The importance of speech is over-emphasized and the study of language is neglected. Starting from Wittgenstein's



careful observation that - "for a large class of cases, though not for all, in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language"<sup>19</sup> - the contextualist (and possibly only the extremist) interprets this to mean that words can be understood only by examining the linguistic and the relevant non-linguistic behavior as it occurs in each and every speech act. The difficulty here, and one that is shared by all contextualists, is that there is a difference between the complete understanding of a speech act and the understanding of a language.

A language is a storehouse of information and a highly complex system of rules. As a system of rules it contains phonological, syntactic, and semantic components. The phonological component specifies the phonetic properties of any string of symbols in so far as these properties are governed by the rules of language. The syntactic component specifies rules by which patterns of sound may be organized into sentential structures. The semantic component specifies rules by which sentences may be interpreted as meaningful units. The existence of these components, the fact that they form a homogeneous system, accounts for the fluent speakers ability to distinguish and understand well-formed sentences. Their existence, the existence of language (as opposed to the mere existence of speech) accounts for the possibility of successful communication.<sup>20</sup>

"Speech," on the other hand, "is the actual verbal behavior that manifests the linguistic competence of one who

has learned the appropriate system of abstract objects."<sup>21</sup> Speech is the actual use, misuse, or abuse of language. Or, if I may paraphrase Saussure:<sup>22</sup> The existence of language is comparable to the existence of a symphony, while the existence of speech is comparable to the existence of performances of that symphony. What the symphony actually is, stands completely apart from how it is performed. For the mistakes that musicians make in playing the symphony are not essential to it, but are accessories and more or less accidental.

The essential point is this: A complete understanding of human communication requires theories of both speech and language. However, since an adequate understanding of speech requires a prior understanding of language, it is difficult to see how the former can be achieved without the latter.

(ii) But if the appeal is solely to ordinary speech, then both the uses of words and words themselves (in ordinary as well as in non-ordinary speech), must be held to be vague. If, as the contextualist maintains, meaning is not being extended or modified but merely discovered, then he should realize that ordinary speakers hold some ordinary words to be vague. But, for reasons which will be given shortly, the contextualist finds this difficult to do.

For example, Austin admits that vague words occur in ordinary speech. There are, he tells us, "a few notoriously useless words - 'democracy', for instance - uses of which are always liable to leave us in real doubt what is meant; and here it seems reasonable enough to say that the word is vague."<sup>23</sup>

Notice the underlying difficulty. Yes; vague words do occur in ordinary speech. But if Austin's other point is well-taken, if only notoriously useless words are vague, then 'democracy' is not vague because it is not notoriously useless. Or better yet: if only notoriously useless words are vague then words in ordinary speech cannot be vague because they are not notoriously useless.

(iii) Haig Khatchadourian<sup>24</sup> avoids this pitfall and provides an extremely helpful analysis. But I suspect that his definition of 'vague' is too narrow.

Khatchadourian suggests that for "any non-vague expression 'Y', there exists some (usually at least several) paradigm or standard, hence generally uncontested, instances of 'Y's' employment." And by antithesis, that vague expressions are "expressions in whose case there are no relatively fixed, well defined linguistic rules or no paradigm instances of their employment."<sup>25</sup> Examples of vague expressions are: "'creation ex nihilo'; 'participate', 'copy', 'ingress' (Plato), and 'copy' and 'correspond with', (in some traditional formulations of the Correspondence Theory of Truth), 'fulguration' (Leibniz), 'emanation' (Plotinus) - if and to the extent in which these expressions have a literal meaning at all in the particular philosophy or school involved; the word 'like' in the classical dictum that an effect must be like its cause, and 'objectification' and 'manifestation' (e.g. Fichte and Schopenhauer). In addition, he maintains that such expressions as "'notion' in Berkely's use of it and as contradistinguished from 'concept',

'the General Will' in Rousseau, 'genius' as used in everyday life in relation to creative persons, 'romantic person', 'dread' in Heidegger and other existentialists and even perhaps 'sense data' in Moore, appear to express no concepts with any definite logical content."<sup>26</sup>

If I understand Khatchadourian correctly this means:

(a) the existence of at least one paradigm or standard instance of employment is sufficient to make a word non-vague; (b) except for rare cases such as 'genius' and 'romantic person', few ordinary uses of words are vague; and (c) except perhaps for high level philosophical abstractions, kinds of words are never held to be vague.

The difficulty is this: Khatchadourian believes that the nature of vagueness is one and the same in respect to all ordinary expressions and words; or stated in the formal mode, that the word 'vague' (as it applies to words and compounds) is non-ambiguous. He also claims to be giving a correct lexical definition of this sense of 'vague'. Now granting that a mistake has not been made in applying the definition, if these claims were true it would follow that the range of application of Khatchadourian's characterization would, more or less, coincide with the range the word has in ordinary speech. But this is not the case. Evidence indicates that in ordinary speech we hold many kinds of words to be vague. Aside from elusive philosophical abstractions, there are negated intensifiers (not all, not many, not very), indeterminate quantifiers (a bunch, few, some, many), expressions of multiplicity

(aspects, factors, sorts, kinds), expressions of possibility (may, might, chances are, could be), and expressions of probability (probably, sometimes, ordinarily, often, frequently). And I believe a similar case might be made for appraisive expressions ('good', 'bad', 'right', 'wrong') and expressions of feeling ('dread', 'anxious', 'content'), kinds of words which Khatchadourian holds to be perfectly non-vague.

Evidently it is notoriously difficult to expand upon the available (I was going to say vague) dictionary definitions and still provide a correct lexical definition. It is as if we cannot discover and more clearly explicate the ordinary meaning of 'vague' without adding to its intension and thereby restricting its extension.

But why is this so? And what alternatives do we have?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word 'vague' (adj.) derives from the 13th century French word 'vague' or the Latin 'vag-us' meaning: wandering, inconstant, uncertain, etc. Under entry 1 (Of statements, etc.: Couched in general or indefinite terms; not definitely or precisely expressed; deficient in details or particulars) the earliest quotation is from Vicary's Anatomy, 1548. Under entry 2 (Of words, languages, etc.: Not precise or exact in meaning) the earliest quotation is from An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690) where Locke writes: "Vague and insignificant forms of speech, and abuse of language, have so long passed for the mysteries of science." And under entry 3 (Of ideas, knowledge, etc.: Lacking in definiteness or

precision: indefinite, indistinct) the earliest quotation is again from Locke. In about 1704, he said: "These vague ideas, signified by the terms, whatsoever and thing."

This does not mean that 'vague' as a word type was not in use before this time; for there is evidence that it was used as a verb (meaning to wander) as early as the 15th century. Nor does it mean that all the concepts in the O. E. D. listing are new concepts. Quite the contrary. Parts of the first entry can be traced back to Aristotle's notion that things are to be called by their own names and not by vague general ones; the second entry has its roots in the Platonic notion that language is not an exact representation of things; and the third is an outgrowth of Hobbes' notion that vagueness often results from a failure to have clear-cut mental images of what words signify.

It does suggest, however, that the development of the word is such that it can be used, and used without fear of misnaming, to label any act or kind of "wandering from clarity." Note, I say wandering and not possible wandering. This is to emphasize the point made earlier, namely, that 'vague' is used to denote that something is wrong and not merely that something may be wrong. To say, for example, that the word-type 'transubstantiation' is vague is to say that something is wrong with the structure of the word and not merely that something may be wrong with its use. Again, I do not say wandering from the place of clarity; for there are different places or kinds. Yet we understand what the word means even though it is not

highly restrictive in meaning. Consequently, we must be absolutely clear about two things: (1) that the etymology and historical development of the word 'vague' suggest that it can and has been used to signify almost any kind of lack of clarity, and (2) that the word also functions as the most generic label for this kind of phenomenon.

This provides the clue as to why some thinkers run into difficulty and it suggests an alternative program. To make 'vague' more restrictive, for example to limit its meaning to any one kind of lack of clarity, is to change its meaning. 'Vague' is a vague word, and to make it appreciably clearer is to alter its meaning. But it does not follow that we should discard or modify its meaning.

In this regard, 'vague' is like 'ill'. Illness is the condition of being ill or sick; vagueness is the condition of being vague or unclear. Almost any kind of physical or mental disorder may be regarded as an illness and almost any kind of lack of clarity may be regarded as an example of vagueness. The exceptions also have a parallel. Just as mere possibility does not necessarily make for an illness, mere possibility does not necessarily make for a case of vagueness. And just as the having of an accident is not sufficient for holding a person to be ill, an inappropriate use of a word is not sufficient for holding the word, as a word-type, to be vague.

If I may press the analogy still further: Would we want to change the meaning of the word 'ill'? Would we want to say that a person be considered ill, only if, he has an aneurysm

of the heart? a heart disorder? or even a disease of the circulatory system? I suspect not. And I suspect that it is not because we sanctify ordinary speech or fear linguistic change, but because this kind of change makes little sense. Instead of changing the meaning of 'ill', we advisedly coin words or expressions which have the needed degree of specificity. The use of a less generic term like 'aneurysm' enables the speaker-hearer to more carefully specify what it is that he is talking about. On the other hand, the use of the more generic term ('ill' or its cognates) enables the speaker-hearer (whether he be layman or scientist) to refer either to the larger grouping of phenomena or to refer to a specific ailment the nature of which is poorly understood. The net result is that, by keeping the more generic word and adding less generic ones, the language is made considerably richer.

Here then are the seeds of a program. It is a program based upon rules of linguistic change, two of which have been previously mentioned: (a) In attempting to rectify an aspect of language, we must not only have good reasons, but the reasons must be better than countering arguments; (b) we cannot know whether these reasons are better (and therefore sufficient) unless the older patterns of meaning have first been examined; and (c) that if such an examination fails to reveal difficulties (such as misdescription or its like), and if this kind of semantic richness is judged to be desirable, then we should add new meanings and not discard the older.

.. If we could agree to these principles, and what is



probably more difficult, if we could avoid the polemics of sanctifying and vilifying ordinary speech, then we might be able to turn to more fruitful areas of study. We might be able to study and describe the various sources of vagueness, develop adequate theory, perhaps coin new terms, and hopefully make better prognostications.

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