

Semestre d'automne 2019, jeudi 10h15-11h45,
Mirabeau

SE L'indétermination

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Contact and office hours

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Moodle

Course website on moodle:

<https://moodle.unige.ch/course/view.php?id=5523>

All readings will be made available there.

Requirements

- Official requirements for the module MA 3 : Travail écrit de recherche avec soutenance (env. 25 pages, 50'000 signes)
- There will be a possibility to submit a preliminary version of the paper with the opportunity to submit a revised version for the final note

- Participants will be asked to do a short presentation (5-10 minutes) of one of the readings which should only mention the main points and will serve as the basis for the discussion

Course description

Background

Most words of ordinary language are vague. Consider for example the word ‘heap’: There is no precise number of grains n such that n grains (suitably arranged) form a heap, but $n-1$ grains don’t. It is arguably part of the meaning of the word ‘heap’ that there is no such sharp boundary between the heaps and the non-heaps. This lack of a sharp boundary gives rise to the ancient paradox of the heap, the sorites paradox:

1. 100.000 grains form a heap.
2. If n grains form a heap, then $n-1$ grains also form a heap.
3. Therefore, 0 grains form a heap.

This argument is paradoxical, since it consists of two very plausible premises, but ends with an evidently absurd conclusion. Instances of the sorites paradox can be constructed for all or most vague words.

Does this mean that our ordinary language is in itself paradoxical? A range of different theories of vagueness have been proposed to explain what vagueness is and to propose a solution to the paradox.

Vagueness is not the only kind of indeterminacy of interest to philosophers. For a long time, the standard attitude towards indeterminacy echoed David Lewis’s claim that ‘[t]he only intelligible account of vagueness locates it in our thought and language.’ (Lewis (1986), p. 212.) There have however been a few attempts in the literature to make sense of metaphysical indeterminacy, indeterminacy in the world as opposed to in language or our representations of the world, often under somewhat misleading labels like ‘ontic’ or ‘metaphysical vagueness’. Some of these attempts take an influential one page paper by Evans

([Evans \(1978\)](#)) as their point of departure, others focus on the so called Problem of the Many (see [Unger \(1980\)](#)). In the last few years, there has however been a surge of interest in whether quantum mechanics may give rise to metaphysical indeterminacy (see e.g. [Darby \(2010\)](#)).

Omissions

Starting in the 1970s, a huge literature on vagueness has accumulated over the years. This literature cannot be adequately covered in any single seminar or lecture. Our focus in this seminar will be on some of the standard theories of vagueness. Theories which we will not be able to discuss include Nihilism (see e.g. [Braun and Sider \(2007\)](#)), paraconsistent and subvaluational theories (see e.g. [Cobreros \(2013\)](#), [Hyde \(1997\)](#)), or a theory based on a non-transitive notion of logical consequence (see [Cobreros et al. \(2012\)](#)). We will also not discuss more specific topics, such as higher-order vagueness (see e.g. [Bobzien \(2013\)](#), [Williamson \(1999\)](#)) vagueness in the law (see e.g. [Endicott \(2000\)](#), [Keil and Poscher \(2016\)](#)), or the linguistic perspective on vagueness (see e.g. [Kennedy \(2007\)](#), [Van Rooij \(2011\)](#)).

Similarly, we will not attempt to cover the whole literature on indeterminacy, leaving many interesting kinds of indeterminacy, such as perceptual indeterminacy (see e.g. [Armstrong \(1968\)](#), [Stazicker \(2011\)](#)) or indeterminacy in fiction (see e.g. [Ingarden \(1985\)](#), [Paganini \(2019\)](#)).

We will also have to set aside some influential papers on metaphysical indeterminacy including e.g. Akiba's papers developing his variant of metaphysical supervaluationism ([Akiba \(2000, 2004\)](#)) and papers on the openness of the future understood metaphysically and branching spacetime (see e.g. [Barnes and Cameron \(2009\)](#), [Belnap \(1992\)](#)).

Aims

The aim of the seminar is to introduce the participants to the contemporary discussion about indeterminacy with a focus on two important forms of indeterminacy, linguistic vagueness and metaphysical indeterminacy, allowing us to compare and contrast the ways in which these two kinds are discussed and

modelled in the literature.

Participants who take the course for credit will have the opportunity to practice giving a brief introduction to one of the seminar's sessions and leading a discussion with their peers in English. They will also be able to learn how to revise their written work based on received feedback.

Programme

Vagueness

- 19.09. – Introduction: Vagueness and Indeterminacy
- 26.09. – Vagueness – One view of what vagueness is and why it is problematic [Wright \(1976\)](#)
- 03.10. – Supervaluationism: [Keefe \(2000\)](#), ch. 7
- 10.10. – Contextualism: [Fara \(2000\)](#)
- 17.10. – Epistemicism: [Williamson \(1992\)](#)
- 24.10. – Degree theory: [Machina \(1976\)](#)

Mid-semester intermission

- 31.10. – SPECIAL SESSION: Talk by Nick Zangwill 11h00 – Auditoire RDC Battelle, Route de Drize 7, 1227 Carouge (Geneva) – Lake Geneva Graduate Conference: Kinds: In Philosophy and Its History
- 07.11. – NO SESSION - reading week

Metaphysical indeterminacy

- 14.11. – The problem of the many [Lewis \(1993\)](#)
- 21.11. – Vague identity: [Evans \(1976\)](#)'s infamous argument and two responses: [Lewis \(1988\)](#), [Parsons and Woodruff \(1995\)](#)

- 28.11. – A degree-theoretic perspective on metaphysical indeterminacy: [Rosen \(2002\)](#)
- 05.12. – Metaphysical supervaluationism: [Barnes and Williams \(2011\)](#) and its problem with quantum mechanics [Skow \(2010\)](#)
- 12.12. – Quantum indeterminacy I: [French and Krause \(2003\)](#)
- 19.12. – Quantum indeterminacy II: [Calosi and Wilson \(2018\)](#)

Books on vagueness and indeterminacy

- [Akiba and Abasnezhad \(2014\)](#) – Recent collection of papers on vague identity and vague objects
- [van Deemter \(2010\)](#) – Monograph focusing (partly) on the positive aspects of vagueness written by a computational linguist; written with a general audience in mind
- [Dietz and Moruzzi \(2010\)](#) – Collection of papers on different aspects of vagueness and on metaphysical indeterminacy
- [Égré and Klinedinst \(2010\)](#) – Collection of papers on vagueness with an orientation towards linguistics
- [Égré \(2018\)](#) – New monographic introduction to vagueness in French
- [Keefe and Smith \(1997\)](#) – Collection of classic papers (many of which we are reading in the seminar) with a good general introduction
- [Keefe \(2000\)](#) – Monographic introduction; defends supervaluationism
- [Shapiro \(2006\)](#) – Defends a version of contextualism
- [Smith \(2008\)](#) – Defends a version of the degree theory
- [Sorensen \(2001\)](#) – Defends a version of epistemicism
- [Williamson \(1994\)](#) – Monographic introduction; defends epistemicism – in many ways the standard book on vagueness

Overview articles

- Hyde and Raffman (2018) – Introductory article on the sorites paradox in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sorites-paradox/>
- Sorensen (2018) – Introductory article on vagueness in the Stanford encyclopedia – <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/vagueness/>
- Weatherson (2016) – Introductory article on the problem of the many in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/problem-of-many/>

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