

Vagueness, existence and the existential quantifier

The assumption that '∃' and 'exist' are not vague provides the grounds for the famous argument by Lewis (1986) that mereological composition is unrestricted and an argument proposed by Sider (2001) in favour of four-dimensionalism. This assumption seems to be quite problematic to any supporter of ontic vagueness. Sider (2003) – challenged by Koslicki (2003) – offers a defence of this assumption. I will argue that Sider's defence is not convincing.

Sider offers an argument for the thesis that '∃' and 'exist' are not vague. The argument depends on the following premises:

- 1) Vagueness requires multiple precisifications
- 2) Wherever there is a unique natural kind, there are no multiple precisifications
- 3) (Unrestricted) existence is a unique natural kind

From these premises, it follows

C) Therefore, 'exist' and '∃' are not vague

Even if premises 1) and 3) are granted, I will argue that Sider does not offer suitable support of premise 2). In order to defend premise 2), Sider appeals to Lewis's (1983 and 1984) argument against the meaning-skepticism of Putnam (1981, 1980 and 1978, part IV) and of Kripkenstein (Kripke 1982). According to Lewis, meaning is secured by use plus eligibility. When our use of a term is more apt to a single, particular candidate for meaning than to the others, this candidate is the meaning of the term and it is a natural kind.

Adopting this picture of meaning determination, Sider identifies each candidate for meaning of a term with a precisification of that term and, in so doing, he defends premise 2). If each candidate for meaning corresponds to a single precisification, then whenever the use of a term individuates a unique natural kind as its meaning, there is a single precisification for that term and there are no multiple ones.

I will argue that identity conditions for meaning candidates are different from precisification conditions and, for that reason, that each natural kind cannot be paired with a single precisification. Suppose for example that the use of the term 'lion' individuates one natural kind, this does not mean that each instance of lion allows for a single precisification: indeed lions have vague spatial and temporal boundaries. Imagine that a lion eats a piece of meat, is there a specific instant in which the piece of meat is part of the lion? Obviously not, and so the lion has vague spatial boundaries. Is there an instant of time in which its life starts? Obviously not, and so the lion has vague temporal boundaries. Whoever accepts premise 1) recognizes that whenever there is vagueness, there are multiple precisifications. And if it is accepted that each instance of a natural kind has vague spatial and temporal boundaries, it should be recognized that it allows for multiple precisifications. So, contrary to premise 2), even if the use of a term individuates a specific natural kind as eligible, this is compatible with the fact that any instance of the specific natural kind is subject to multiple precisifications. And if premise 2) is not adequately supported, the conclusion of Sider's argument is not demonstrated.

References

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