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VAGUE IDENTITY: EVANS MISUNDERSTOOD

By DAVID LEWIS

GARETH EVANS's article 'Can There be Vague Objects?' ([1]) is Gover-brief, cryptic, and often misunderstood.¹ As misunderstood, Evans is a pitiful figure: a 'technical philosopher' out of control of his technicalities, taken in by a fallacious proof of an absurd conclusion. Rightly understood, Evans endorses neither the bad proof nor the bad conclusion. Instead he is making a good argument in favour of a very different conclusion. To honour his memory, and to make his point more clearly available, it is worth setting the record straight.

Evans discusses a purported proof that there can be no such thing as a vague identity statement. There are two problems about this proof. One problem is that its conclusion is plainly false. There are vague identity statements. Example: 'Princeton = Princeton Borough'. (It is unsettled whether the name 'Princeton' denotes just the Borough, the Borough plus the surrounding Township, or one of countless somewhat larger regions.) The other problem is that if we understand vagueness as semantic indeterminacy, a deficiency in our language, we can diagnose a fallacy. The proof twice invokes an alleged equivalence between statements of the forms (1) and (2):

- (1) it is vague whether ... a ... ,
symbolized as $\nabla(\dots a \dots)$,
- (2) a is such that it is vague whether ... it ... ,
symbolized as $\hat{x}\nabla(\dots x \dots)a$.

If vagueness is semantic indeterminacy, then wherever we have vague statements, we have several alternative precisifications of

¹The misunderstanding I have in mind can be found in about half of the published discussions of 'Can There Be Vague Objects?' known to me; though never, I think, in the pages of *Analysis*.

the vague language involved, all with equal claim to being 'intended'. These alternative precisifications play a role analogous to alternative worlds in modal logic. The operator 'it is vague whether ...' is analogous to an operator of contingency, and means 'it is true on some but not all of the precisifications that. . .'. A term like 'Princeton' that denotes different things on different precisifications is, analogically speaking, non-rigid. When *a* is non-rigid, the alleged equivalence between (1) and (2) is fallacious. It is analogous to the fallacious modal equivalence between 'It is contingent whether the number of planets is nine' (true) and 'The number of planets is such that it is contingent whether it is nine' (false), or between 'It is contingent whether the number of planets is the number of planets' (false) and 'The number of planets is such that it is contingent whether it is the number of planets' (true). For a fuller discussion see Thomason [2].

The misunderstanding is that Evans overlooks the fallacy, endorses the proof, and embraces the absurd conclusion that there can be no vague identity statements. Besides ascribing folly to a man who was no fool, this interpretation makes nonsense of the title and first paragraph of Evans's article:

Can There be Vague Objects? It is sometimes said that the world might itself be vague. Rather than vagueness being a deficiency in our mode of describing the world, it would then be a necessary feature of any true description of it. It is also said that amongst the statements which may not have a determinate truth value as a result of their vagueness are identity statements. Combining these two views we would arrive at the idea that the world might contain certain objects about which it is a *fact* that they have fuzzy boundaries. But is this idea coherent?

How could Evans think that the purported proof — which occupies the rest of the article — addresses his question whether vagueness is due to vague objects, as opposed to vagueness in our mode of describing? A proof that there cannot be vague identity statements would be trouble for the vagueness-in-describing view, no less than for vague objects.

The correct interpretation is that Evans trusts the reader — unwisely! — to join him in taking for granted that there are vague identity statements, that a proof to the contrary cannot be right, and that the vagueness-in-describing view affords a diagnosis of the fallacy. His point is that the vague-objects view cannot accept this diagnosis, because it says that a name like 'Princeton' rigidly denotes a certain vague object. In fact, the vague-objects view does not afford *any* diagnosis of the fallacy, so it is stuck with the unwelcome proof of an absurd conclusion, so it is in bad trouble. (Or better, what is in trouble is the value-objects view combined with the view that vague identity yields identity statements with indeterminate truth value.) On this interpretation, every bit of what Evans says fits into place. However, he has left some important things unsaid.

You might think that charity can be overdone and the textual evidence is inconclusive. One way, Evans comes out saying too much; the other way, too little. What's to choose?

Therefore I end by reporting an exchange of letters in 1978 that ought to settle the matter. A friend sent me a draft taking Evans to task for overlooking the fallacy, endorsing the proof, and embracing the conclusion. I wrote back, hesitantly proposing the interpretation that I have here called correct; and I sent a copy (with my friend's name blanked out) to Evans. Evans replied: 'Exactly! Just so! Yes, Yes, Yes! I am covered with relief that you see so clearly what I was doing . . . and that you were able to ward off the misunderstanding of Anonymous so effectively.'²

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- [1] Gareth Evans, 'Can There Be Vague Objects?' *Analysis* 38 (1978) 208; reprinted in Gareth Evans, *Collected Papers*, Oxford University Press, 1985.
[2] Richmond Thomason, 'Identity and Vagueness', *Philosophical Studies* 42 (1982) 329-32.

²I thank Antonia Phillips for her kind permission to quote this passage.

VAGUENESS AND IDENTITY

By B. J. GARRETT

THE thesis that there can be vague objects is the thesis that there can be identity statements which are indeterminate in truth-value (i.e. neither true nor false) as a result of vagueness (as opposed e.g. to reference-failure), *the singular terms of which do not have their references fixed by vague descriptive means*.¹ (If this is *not* what is meant by the thesis that there can be vague objects, it is not clear what *is* meant by it.) The possibility of vague objects should not be taken, in itself, to imply the more radical thesis that the identity relation can be one of *degree*. One can hold that the

¹It seems uncontentious that there can be vague identity statements the vagueness of which is a consequence of the vagueness of their component singular terms — e.g. 'the greatest ruler was the wisest ruler' (Wiggins, p. 174).