# How to Reason about Vague Objects

PETER VAN INWAGEN

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

It is tempting to think that all vagueness is due to language (just as it was once tempting to think that all necessity was due to language). It is tempting to think that if a speaker asserts something, and if what he has asserted is neither definitely true nor definitely false, this must be because the speaker has employed some vague predicate like 'tall' or 'rich.' Is this right? Does vagueness exist *in sola lingua*, or can vagueness also exist *in re*? Is there vagueness "in the world"? Can there (in some sense) be vague *objects*? I believe that there can be vague objects, and that there are in fact several ways in which this can happen. In this paper I will discuss one of these ways: There could be an occasion (A) on which a speaker refers to an object without making use of any vague predicates; and there could be another such occasion (B); and it could be that it is neither definitely true nor definitely false that the object referred to on occasion A is identical with the object referred to on occasion B. This obviously implies that there can be terms X and Y (terms that neither contain vague predicates nor are defined by means of vague predicates) such that [X = Y] expresses a proposition that is neither definitely true nor definitely false; these terms, moreover, can be such that the question [When we are talking about X and Y, how many things are we talking about?] has these features: (a) 'None' is definitely a wrong answer to it, (b) 'Three', 'Four', etc., are all definitely wrong answers to it, and (c) neither 'One' nor 'Two' is either a definitely right or a definitely wrong answer to it.

If all this is true, then it seems fair to say that there are vague objects.

In this paper, I shall do two things. First, I shall argue for the thesis that "all this" is indeed true. Secondly, I shall address an argument devised by the late Gareth Evans to show that "all this" is incoherent.[1] (Nathan Salmon has a different argument—but I think it is equivalent—for the same conclusion.[2])

Suppose we give a man the pure or "Kripkean" proper name, 'Alpha', and that our act of naming is a clear and unproblematic case of the successful conferring of a name. Suppose that later we give a man the Kripkean name 'Omega' (a similar success). Since Kripkean names are not abbreviations for phrases containing

predicates, there is no way in which these names can "inherit" vagueness from the language of the namers. Suppose that these two acts of naming are parts of the following longer story. A man receives the name 'Alpha'; he steps into a science-fictional machine that effects changes in his brain of just such sorts and magnitudes as to create the greatest possible embarrassed hesitation in the making of identity-judgments by someone who holds *your* theory of personal identity: Whatever factor *you* say constitutes the temporal continuity of a person, the machine does its science-fictional best to produce a troublesome borderline case of it. A man, composed, more or less, of the matter that had composed Alpha steps out of the machine and receives the name 'Omega'. I contend that you should conclude that the sentence 'Alpha is identical with Omega', spoken in the circumstances imagined, would express a proposition that is neither definitely true nor definitely false.

Evans argues as follows. Consider Omega, who is supposed to be "indefinitely identical" with Alpha. If Omega is indefinitely identical with Alpha, then Omega has the property: being indefinitely identical with Alpha. But it is false that *Alpha* is indefinitely identical with Alpha, and therefore, Alpha *lacks* this property. Furthermore, the possession of this property by Omega, and the non-possession of this property by Alpha, would seem to be perfectly definite facts. Therefore, by the principle of the non-identity of discernibles, Alpha and Omega are not identical—and definitely so, *contra hyp*.

I shall develop a fragment of a semantics for statements about vague objects, a fragment that contains a treatment of the abstraction operator. This fragment is extremely intuitive, and has the consequence that the inference, 'It is false that Alpha is indefinitely identical with Alpha; *hence*, Alpha lacks the property: being indefinitely identical with Alpha' is invalid.

## Notes

[1]"Can There be Vague Objects?", *Analysis* 38, 1978.
[2]*Reference and Essence* (Princeton: 1981), p. 243.