Is the Problem of the Many a Problem in Metaphysics?

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(Qualifiedly) No. With the qualification explicit: assuming the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, the problem of the many is one about semantics. Or so I argue.

1. The Problem of the Many

Kilimanjaro is a paradigmatic mountain, if any is. Consider atom Sparky, which is neither determinately part of Kilimanjaro nor determinately not part of it. Let Kilimanjaro(+) be the body of land constituted, in the way mountains are constituted by their constituent atoms, by the atoms that make up Kilimanjaro together with Sparky, and Kilimanjaro(–) the one constituted by those other than Sparky. On the one hand, there seems to be just one mountain in the vicinity of Kilimanjaro. On the other hand, both Kilimanjaro(+) and Kilimanjaro(–)—and indeed many other similar things—seem to have an equal claim to be a mountain: all of them exhibit the grounds for something being a mountain—like being an elevation of the earth's surface rising abruptly and to a large height from the surrounding level,[1] or whathaveyou—and there seems to be nothing in the vicinity with a better claim. Hence, the problem of the many.[2]

Similarly for Tibbles—the cat on the mat—Cloudy—the cloud in the otherwise clear blue sky—and Peter—the person who first submitted the problem. In all these cases we confront a paradox, as constituted by the following contrasting intuitions pulling in different, opposite directions: (i) there is just one thing of a kind (*counting*); (ii) there are many things, each of which has an equal claim to be of the kind, and nothing in the vicinity has a better

claim (*grounding*). Any solution to the problem should ultimately reject, and aim to explain away, one of these. An *egalitarian* solution aims to vindicate the good claim of the many, rejecting the counting intuition: either there is nothing of the kind, or there are indeed many things of the kind. By contrast, a solution *by disqualification* aims to disqualify most or all of the many, rejecting the grounding intuition: there are not many things, or not all of them have an equal claim, or there is something else that has a better claim.

Is the problem of the many a problem in metaphysics? There are, to be sure, some solutions to the problem that would qualify as metaphysical. As just mentioned, one can reject that there exist all the many things, or one can hold that there is a further entity with a better claim—which is merely (indeterminately) constituted by the many, or which is in itself vague. There are well-known problems with these views. Be this as it may, what I want to argue for is that, once one grants the plausible—although controversial— view of vagueness as semantic indecision, the different solutions on offer no longer differ metaphysically. The defenders of the different solutions agree in which objects do or do not exist, and in which properties they do and do not instantiate—when they are specified in a suitably neutral way. Their characteristic contentions involve how these are to be described in terms of our predicates 'is a mountain,' 'is a cat,' 'is a cloud,' or 'is a person.' The problem of the many is thus one about semantics. This need not have a "deflationary" flavor: there seems to be a genuine distinction between the different solutions. But as it is of a semantic nature, it constrains what the relevant considerations are. A subsidiary aim of this paper is actually to illustrate that the claim that a certain dispute is semantic rather than metaphysical is to be distinguished from the claim that the dispute is merely apparent and not genuine.

2. Vagueness as Semantic Indecision: "Supervaluationist" vs "Almost-Identity" Solutions

According to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, (roughly) whatever it is that—in the thoughts, experiences and practices of language users— determines the meaning of expressions, it fails to determine any one referent in particular from a given range of equally natural candidates, for vague expressions. Every way of ("arbitrarily") fixing what is left semantically indeterminate gives rise to a "precisification" or "sharpening" of the original vague expression. Although all such sharpenings are, by their essence, arbitrary to a certain extent, not all of them are *admissible*. In particular, for the case of predicates, they should preserve clear cases of both application and non-application, and they should respect penumbral connections.[3] Finally, what one says by means of a vague expression is true if it counts as true

according to all admissible sharpenings; is false if it counts as false according to all of them; and is indeterminate otherwise. See *inter alia* (Lewis 1993).

Take the expression 'Kilimanjaro.' Arguably nothing in the thoughts, experiences and practices of language users determines Kilimanjaro(+) rather than Kilimanjaro(–)—nor any other, for that matter—as its determinate referent. 'Kilimanjaro(+)' and 'Kilimanjaro(–)' admissibly precisify 'Kilimanjaro,' which thus indeterminately refers to Kilimanjaro(+) and Kilimanjaro(–). 'Kilimanjaro is in Tanzania' is true, as it is counted as true by each admissible sharpening; 'I've climbed Kilimanjaro a number of times' is false, as it is counted as false by each admissible sharpening, and 'Kilimanjaro has Sparky as a part' is indeterminate, as it is counted as true by some but not all admissible sharpenings. In other words—using the notion of determinacy within the object language as the appropriate correlate of the metalinguistic ones—determinately Kilimanjaro is in Tanzania, determinately I've never climbed Kilimanjaro, but Sparky is not determinately part of Kilimanjaro nor determinately not part of it.

There are two different solutions to the problem of the many that defenders of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision offer, one by disqualification, and an egalitarian one.

Not only is 'Kilimanjaro' vague, but 'is a mountain' is too: clearly one can imagine a sorites series going from the paradigmatic mountain Kilimanjaro to the hill Montjuïc. According to the so-called *"supervaluationist" solution* to the problem of the many, each sharpening of 'is a mountain' is such that one and only one of the different candidates counts as a mountain, according to it—a different one, according to different sharpenings. Therefore, one and only one of the many is indeed a mountain, although it is indeterminate exactly which one. This is the way in which the solution rejects and aims to explain away the grounding intuition: the arbitrariness felt in having one of the candidates with a better claim than the rest comes from the fact that it is indeterminate which of them is the one with this better claim. Defenders of such a solution include (McGee & McLaughlin 2000), (Varzi 2001), and (Weatherson 2003).[4]

By contrast, one can hold that vagueness is semantic indecision, that 'Kilimanjaro' and 'is a mountain' are both vague, but that each sharpening counts all the candidates in the vicinity of Kilimanjaro as being mountains. According to the *"almost-identity" solution* to the problem, all the candidates are indeed mountains: certainly *different* mountains, but not *distinct* mountains: they are *partially identical*—i.e., they have a part in common. Actually, any two of them are almost identical: many mountains, but almost one. Conversational mechanisms about counting—motivated, according to the solution, independently of the present problem—would make it the case that, in most conversations, one should count by almost-identity, delivering the answer 'Just one' to the question of how many mountains are in the vicinity of Kilimanjaro. For, once one is counted, the rest of the things almost identical to

it are disregarded. Thus the way in which the counting intuition is explained away. Defenders of such a solution include (Lewis 1993), (Williams 2006), and (López de Sa MS).[5]

I claim that the dispute between defenders of the so-called "supervaluationist" vs "almost-identity" solutions is genuine, but semantic—not metaphysical. The views agree about what things there are and which properties they have—when they are described in a suitably neutral way—and disagree about the semantics of 'is a mountain,' 'is a cat,' and the like.

3. Exclusive and Tolerant Predicates

Let me say that a predicate F is *exclusive* if it satisfies the following *exclusion principle*:

> (EP) If several things overlap massively, then at most one of them is an F.

And let me say that it is *tolerant* if it satisfies the following *principle of minute differences*:

> (PMD) If something is a *paradigm* case of an F, and something else is very similar to the former with respect to the features relevant for something being an F, then the latter is also an F.[6]

In order to illustrate my claim, and also to provide the means for a suitably neutral way of describing the facts on which both views agree, let me introduce stipulatively two new predicates—in a somewhat metaphorical manner:

> (#) 'is a mountain#' is the exclusive predicate that is semantically closest to 'is a mountain;'

> (*) 'is a mountain*' is the tolerant predicate that is semantically closest to 'is a mountain.'

The main contention of the defender of the so-called "supervaluationist" solution to the problem of the many is that 'is a mountain' is an exclusive predicate, and thus matches 'is a mountain#.'[7] The main contention of the defender of the "almost-identity" solution is that it is a tolerant predicate, and thus matches 'is a mountain*.'

There is a genuine dispute here, but it concerns the semantics of 'is a mountain.' Both views agree that one can provide a suitably neutral complete description of the facts in the suitably neutral terms provided by the new predicates introduced. This description is *complete* in that, both views agree, there are no further facts involving mountains that have not been mentioned, in one or the other terms. The views differ concerning the facts

involving *mountains*, to be sure—but, both views agree, these are not facts over and above those already described neutrally in terms of facts involving mountains# and facts involving mountains*. Differing about the facts involving mountains is after all, both views agree, differing about which of the facts are to be described also as facts involving mountains. Thus the dispute is genuine, but semantic—not metaphysical.

4. One Mountain#, Many Mountains*, and the Semantics of 'is a Mountain'

And what are these facts? Among others, the following:[8]

($1_{\#}$) Kilimanjaro is a mountain#.

(1_*) Kilimanjaro is a mountain*.

($2_{\#}$) Determinately Kilimanjaro is a mountain#, but Kilimanjaro is not such that it is determinately a mountain#.

(2_*) Kilimanjaro is such that it is determinately a mountain* (and hence determinately Kilimanjaro is a mountain*).

($3_{\#}$) Both Kilimanjaro(+) and Kilimanjaro(–) are borderline for 'is a mountain#.'

(3_*) Both Kilimanjaro(+) and Kilimanjaro(–) are determinate cases for 'is a mountain*.'

($4_{\#}$) 'is a mountain#' does not have determinate cases.

(4_*) 'is a mountain*' has, as borderline cases, those in the middle region of a sorites series for 'is a mountain' from the mountain Kilimanjaro to the hill Montjuïc.

($5_{\#}$) Determinately, there is one and only one mountain# in the vicinity of Kilimanjaro, but it is indeterminate exactly which.

(5_*) Strictly speaking, there are many mountains*, which are almost-identical. However, in most contexts, the appropriate answer to the question 'How many mountains* there are? ' is 'Just one.'

It is thus by reflecting on how these should be described in terms of 'is a mountain' that one would obtain the appropriate materials for a consideration in defense of one or the other of the views. To my mind, it is clear that, on reflection, the hypothesis that 'is a mountain' is tolerant rather than exclusive fares better, thus vindicating the egalitarian solution. To elaborate: the relevant instances of (PMD) are direct expressions of the grounding intuitions, whereas the instances of (EP) are, by contrast, candidate explanations of the counting intuitions. That is to say, once alternative explanations about the pragmatics of counting are independently motivated, delivering

appropriate 'just one' answers in most ordinary conversations, the case in favor of the relevant instances of (EP) just vanishes.[9]

Be this as it may, it was not my aim to argue in favor of the "many" solution here. Rather I have argued that, assuming the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, the dispute between defenders of the so-called "supervaluationist" solution and defenders of the "almost-identity" solution is genuine, but semantic in character. It may well be, however, that appreciating that the two views agree in the relevant metaphysical facts, neutrally statable as facts about mountains# and mountains*, could help to mitigate some of the initial reluctance some might have had against egalitarian "many" solutions, after all.[10]

Notes

[1] *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2004.

[2] See (Unger 1980) for the original presentation of the problem; the present one is due to (McGee & McLaughlin 2000).

[3] Strictly speaking, sharpenings are of the language as a whole, and not of isolated expressions. The vagueness in 'admissible' is arguably part of what accounts for higher-order vagueness in this framework.

[4] The labelling is, though standard, less than felicitous, as 'supervaluationism' is also sometimes used for the general view about the nature of vagueness as semantic indecision, as understood here. Hence the scare quotes when speaking of the so-called "supervaluationist" solution.

[5] Consideration of cases in which the many candidates overlap massively, but not quite so much as to be almost-identical, might motivate a similar but more general egalitarian "many" solution, of which almost-identity is just one particular case. Hence the scare quotes when speaking of the "almost-identity" solution.

[6] Both principles are mentioned in (Unger 1980), although I have altered the particular formulations. Notice that due to the restriction to paradigm cases in the antecedent but not the consequent, the instances of (PMD) are not soritical. For further discussion, see (López de Sa MS).

[7] (Sider 2001) says that a property F is *maximal* iff (roughly) large parts of an F are not themselves Fs. The defender of the so-called "supervaluationist" solution, he says, holds that with respect to each sharpening 'is a mountain' refers to a maximal property. This is equivalent to a particular way of holding that the predicate is exclusive, in my sense.

[8] I assume a standard way of characterizing what it is for something to satisfy a determinately-involving matrix, see (McGee 1998): (roughly) something is such that it is determinately F if it is such that it is F according to all admissible sharpenings.

[9] For further discussion of this issue, see again the papers mentioned in section 2.

[10] Earlier versions were presented at the universities of Leeds, St Andrews, Sussex, at the 2006 Arché Reading Party, and at the 2007 Joint Session. Thanks to the audiences in all these occasions, to the members of the Arché Vagueness Project, and to Elizabeth Barnes, Ross Cameron, Manuel García-Carpintero, Patrick Greenough, Katherine Hawley, Carrie Jenkins, Robbie Williams, Timothy Williamson, Crispin Wright, and Elia Zardini. Thanks also to Mike Maudsley for his linguistic revision.

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