# Vagueness as Semantic Indecision: Metaphysical Vagueness vs Indeterminate Reference

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**Abstract** After presenting a negative characterization of metaphysical vagueness and the main tenets of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, the paper critically discusses the objection that such a view requires that at least some vagueness not be just constituted by semantic indecision—but rather by the metaphysical vagueness of some semantic relations themselves submitted by Trenton Merricks and, more recently, Nathan Salmon.

**Keywords** Vagueness · Semantic indecision · Metaphysical vagueness · Indeterminacy

According to a prominent view about the nature of vagueness, vagueness just *is* semantic indecision. As David Lewis once famously put it:

> The only intelligible account of vagueness locates it in our thought and language. The reason it's vague where the outback begins is not that there's this thing, the outback, with imprecise borders; rather there are many things, with different borders, and nobody has been fool enough to try to enforce a choice of one of them as the official referent of the word 'outback.' Vagueness is semantic indecision (Lewis 1986, p. 213).

The salient contrast is with *metaphysical* vagueness—a view according to which some vagueness could possibly have a source other than semantic indecision: some non-representational items of reality—objects, properties, states of affairs—could themselves *be* vague.

There is a long, venerable tradition of attempts to elaborate on the charge of ultimate lack of intelligibility of the view that there could be such vagueness in rebus, notably in the vicinity of the infamous Evans' argument—as well as contrasting attempts to provide accounts that would vindicate such intelligibility, on the face of the strength of the skeptical challenge. The focus of this paper is not given by these, however, but rather by what can be seen as an interesting *indirect* line of thought to the effect that there is a certain sort of inherent instability in such charge of lack of intelligibility on part of the defender of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision. For the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, the thought has it, turns

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out to be committed to certain *semantic* aspects of reality being *themselves* vague, in the envisaged way, after all. So it better not be true that the *only* intelligible account of vagueness is semantic indecision, according to this line of thought, because vagueness as semantic indecision requires that at least *some* vagueness *not* be just constituted by semantic indecision—but rather by the metaphysical vagueness of some semantic relations themselves. Although, as we will see, they would probably not state the worry exactly this way, I take this to be the core of the objection put forward against the view of vagueness as semantic indecision by Trenton Merricks (2001) and, more recently, Nathan Salmon (2010).

The aim of this paper is to present and critically assess such indirect consideration against the contention that the only intelligible view of vagueness is semantic indecision. More in particular, in response to Merricks, I will claim that according to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, the relevant semantic statements exhibit themselves an indeterminacy that is constituted by semantic indecision concerning the involved semantic vocabulary (Section 3). And, in response to Salmon, I will argue that the kind of "regress" that such a feature gives rise to is not explanatorily vicious—but rather of the familiar, innocuous variety we are familiar with in relation to related cases, such as that about truth (Section 4). In order to do that, I will first briefly elaborate on the working characterization of the notion of metaphysical vagueness involved—a suitably *negative* characterization, in light of the presence of the charge of ultimate lack of intelligibility of the notion (Section 1), and summarize the main tenets of the view of vagueness of semantic indecision that will be involved in responding to mentioned critical indirect consideration (Section 2).

## 1 Negative Characterizations of Metaphysical Vagueness

According to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, vagueness in statements involving the outback has its source in the semantic indecision of the word 'outback' regarding various, equally natural, "precise" candidate referents.

What could it possibly be for the outback *itself* to be vague? One natural, straightforward thought seems to be: for the vagueness is some of the statements in question *not* to have its source in such semantic indecision, but rather in something *else*—"the outback itself."

Suitably generalized, this seems indeed to constitute a common working characterization of *metaphysical* vagueness: vagueness that would *not* issue from semantic indecision.[1]

Consider for instance Katherine Hawley's:

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[1] Or: that would not issue from semantic indecision nor (vagueness–characteristic) ignorance. Or: that would not issue from semantic indecision nor (vagueness-characteristic) ignorance nor… Regarding *epistemicism*, see discussion below. A note on terminology. One can decide to reserve talk about *ontic* or *ontological* vagueness and vagueness *in rebus* for when focusing on the issue concerning vague *objects* specifically. If so, the issue of *metaphysical* vagueness may well be more general, as the vagueness in question could have other metaphysical sources—say concerning *properties* and *relations*, or *states of affairs*. In this paper, however, I will be using all these locutions interchangeably. Also, I will be taking *vagueness* to be a particular variety of the more general phenomenon of *indeterminacy*, characteristically manifested in sorites-susceptibility.

When I say that the indeterminacy of some utterance is ontic I will mean that the indeterminacy is not a consequence of semantic indecision in the component terms of the utterance (Hawley 2001, p. 104).

This is, in essence, very similar to the proposal advanced more recently by Elizabeth Barnes:

Sentence S is ontically vague iff: were all representational content precisified, there is an admissible precisification of S such that according to that precisification the sentence would still be non-epistemically indeterminate in a way that is Sorites-susceptible (Barnes 2010, p. 604).

Admittedly, these provide just *negative* characterizations of metaphysical vagueness. That doesn't make them unsuitable as characterizations, of course. But, by themselves, they don't constitute a vindication of the intelligibility of the notion, if one had worries about such. To illustrate, consider the following (inspired by an example from Eklund (2011)). Suppose one is (reasonably) skeptical as to whether the notion of a variety of bachelors constituted by the married ones is ultimately intelligible. In order to express that with respect to which one is (reasonably) skeptical, the following negative characterization might well do as a working definition:

A man is a *married bachelor* iff he is a bachelor but married.

But that being satisfactory enough for some such purposes notwithstanding, this quite clearly does not necessarily amount to a vindication of the intelligibility of the characterized notion. Similarly, for the case at hand.

As I said, this is admittedly so, as neither Hawley nor Barnes suggests otherwise. Barnes and Williams are explicit in commenting on this:

The definition [of Barnes 2010] isn't meant to make sense of metaphysical vagueness or render it 'kosher'—you can agree that the definition is extensionally adequate while still being strongly skeptical about the very idea of metaphysical vagueness (Barnes and Williams 2011b, fn. 8).

Thus, providing one such negative characterization of metaphysical vagueness, adequate as it might be for certain purposes, does not constitute per se a vindication of the intelligibility of the notion.[2]

## 2 Vagueness as Semantic Indecision

According to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, vagueness in statements involving the outback has its source in the semantic indecision of the word 'outback' regarding various, equally natural, "precise" candidate referents. As it is often stated, whatever it is that in the thoughts, experiences, and practices of language users

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[2] Barnes and Williams (2011a) do aim to offer a characterization that, in their view, succeeds in vindicating the intelligibility of the notion. For some misgivings, see Eklund (2011) and López de Sa (2013).

determines the meaning of the expression, it fails to determine any single one thing as referent of the word 'outback,' from a given range of equally natural things, each with different precise boundaries.

Similarly for the more familiar case of vagueness in expressions such as 'bald.' Assume, as it is common to simplify, that baldness was a matter of the number of hairs on one's scalp. Whatever it is that in the thoughts, experiences, and practices of language users determines the meaning of the expression, does for instance determine that some properties are not candidates for reference—that of having exactly 234,789 hairs on one's scalp, say. Because someone with those many hairs is *clearly* (*determinately*) not bald—but quite hairy. But there are a number of different, equally natural properties such that nothing in whatever it is that in the thoughts, experiences, and practices of language users determines meaning, singles out one as opposed to the rest as *the* referent of 'bald.' As Lewis was voicing it, nobody has been fool enough to try to enforce a choice of having exactly 3,832 hairs on one's scalp, say, as opposed to having exactly 3,833, as the official referent of the word 'bald.' This semantic indecision is what, according to the view, constitutes the vagueness of 'bald'—and not there being a certain property, "*being bald*," that is (determinately) referred to by the word, and which is *itself* vague—what could this possibly be?

According to the view of *vagueness as semantic indecision*, then, whatever it is that in the thoughts, experiences, and practices of language users determines the meaning of expressions, it fails to determine any single one entity as referent, from a given range of equally natural ("precise") candidates. Each way of deciding what is semantically undecided would give rise to a *precisification* or *sharpening* of the original vague expression. Although all such are "arbitrary," not all of them are *admissible*. In the case of predicates, admissible ones should preserve *clear cases*, both of application and of non-application—Yul Brynner should count for 'is bald,' while Andy García cannot—and they should also preserve *penumbral connections*—'Whoever is bald is bald,' 'Everybody is either bald or not bald,' 'If someone is bald, then so is anyone who is balder,' and so on.[3]

A vague sentence is *true*, according to this view, if it would be true however one (admissibly) precisifies it—if it counts as true according to all admissible sharpenings. And it is *false* if it counts as false according to all of admissible sharpenings. Otherwise, if there are admissible ways of precisifying it which give rise to truths, but also admissible ways of precisifying it which give rise to falsehoods, the vague sentence is *indeterminate*: neither true nor false. Take borderline Harry, having exactly 3,833 hairs on his scalp. Whatever it is that in the thoughts, experiences, and practices of language users determines the meaning of expressions, it fails to determine whether or not someone with this very number of hairs falls under 'is bald.' Thus 'is bald' can be admissibly precisified by (let us assume) 'has at most 3,834 hairs on his scalp,' but also by 'has at most 3,832 hairs on his scalp.' Hence, 'Harry is bald' fails to be true, given that 'Harry has at most 3,834 hairs on his scalp' is false,

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[3] Thus, sharpenings are, strictly speaking, of the language as a whole and not of isolated expressions; see Fine (1975). How to characterize in an explicit satisfactory way the notion of *admissible* constituted by these connections (possibly among others)—though central to a full defense of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision—is not crucial to our present concerns. Notice that 'is admissible' is, of course, itself vague: this is arguably part of what accounts, in this framework, for the phenomenon of "higher-order" vagueness. Complications arising from this will be set aside here.

but it also fails to be false, given that 'Harry has at most 3,832 hairs on his scalp' is true. And this is what constitutes Harry's being borderline bald, according to the view, as opposed to it's being indeterminate whether Harry has a particular property, "*being bald*," which is *itself* vague—what could this possibly be?

This characteristic failure of *bivalence*—borderline meaningful sentences such as 'Harry is bald' failing to be either true or false—poses, according to some, a major difficulty for the view of vagueness as semantic indecision. For it is incompatible, according to some, with a basic Tarskian insight about truth and falsity. Andjelković and Williamson (2000)—as I read them—convincingly argue that Williamson's (1994) famous argument to that effect depends on a dialectically inappropriate formulation of the Tarskian principles:

(T)     $\forall s \forall c \forall P[Say(s, c, P) \supset [True(s, c) \equiv P]]$
(F)     $\forall s \forall c \forall P[Say(s, c, P) \supset [False(s, c) \equiv \neg P]]$

which should instead be formulated say:

$(T^*)$     $\forall s \forall c[True(s, c) \equiv [\exists P Say(s, c, P) \wedge \forall P[Say(s, c, P) \supset P]]]$
$(F^*)$     $\forall s \forall c[False(s, c) \equiv [\exists P Say(s, c, P) \wedge \forall P[Say(s, c, P) \supset \neg P]]]$

where, crucially, '*Say*' stands for—according to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision—the relation between sentence $s$ at context $c$ and the many things its many precisifications signify.[4]

Let me elaborate on this, as it will prove useful for the discussion to come. I have been talking about *sentences* (in context) being true and false and in particular borderline sentences such as 'Harry is bald' (in context) failing to be either true or false—according to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision. What about the truth-value of "what is said" or the "propositions" expressed by sentences in context? There are a number of things that people might intend by the use of such locutions—those that insist in using such locutions, that is. One possibility is that people mean the objects of psychological attitudes appropriately connected to sentences in context—perhaps something to be individuated at the level of *Fregean thoughts*. So if 'that Harry is bald' signifies one such entity, then the sentence 'Harry is bald' (in context) arguably expresses the unique "proposition" à la Fregean thought *that Harry is bald*. On such usage, not only sentences, but also the "propositions" they express can be, intuitively, vague—and the view of vagueness as semantic indecision offers a similar kind of account of the vagueness of the relevant representational item—be it linguistic or mental, as it were. (There is of course room for debate regarding priority dependence relations among these.) Hence, admitting vague "propositions" in this sense need not involve metaphysical vagueness, according to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision.

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[4] Andjelković and Williamson (2000) argue, against the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, that (T*) and (F*) suffice for (T) and (F) in the presence of (independent) principles about biconditionals. In López de Sa (2009), I argue that essentially their very same reasons against (T) and (F) as dialectically appropriate formulations of the Tarskian principles suffice for a case against (E1):
$$\forall s \forall t \forall c \forall P \forall Q[[Say(s, c, P) \wedge Say(t, c, Q)] \supset Say(Est, c, P \equiv Q)]$$

One other possibility is that by "proposition" people mean something like *reference* for the entire sentence, as opposed of subsentential constituents thereof, perhaps to be individuated at the level of *state of affairs*—or the corresponding collections of possible situations where they obtain. According to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, in as much as the vagueness of 'bald' is constituted by its not being determined which out of a set of admissible candidate properties is the referent of the predicate, the borderlineness of the sentence 'Harry is bald' is correspondingly constituted by its not being determined which out of a set of admissible candidates is the "proposition" à la state of affairs signified. As opposed to there being one particular state of affairs (determinately) signified—say, "the state of affairs *of Harry's being bald*"—which is itself indeterminate—what could this possibly be?

Clearly, it is only the latter sense that could be involved in a dialectically appropriate formulation of the Tarksian principles about truth and falsity. According to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, a vague sentence is true iff it would be true however one (admissibly) precisifies it; that is, iff all of the "propositions" à la state of affairs that are admissible candidates for its signification hold; that is, iff all of the things that it "says" hold—on an appropriate understanding of 'say,' which (T*) invokes. Similarly, for falsity.

To sum up: according to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, vagueness of sentences—or the "propositions" à la Fregean thoughts they express—consists in its being indeterminate which out of a set of admissible "propositions" à la state of affairs, the sentence—or the thought—expresses.


## 3 Indeterminate Reference

According to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, if Harry is a borderline case of baldness, the sentence 'Harry is bald' is neither true nor false but indeterminate and that indeterminacy is constituted by the fact that although Harry (determinately) has the property of having 3,832 hairs on his scalp and (determinately) lacks the property of having exactly 3,833 on his scalp, nothing determines one as opposed to the other of these equally natural candidates as the referent of the predicate. Crucially, as we have seen, such indeterminacy is *not* constituted by the fact that Harry "indeterminately" has a given property, "*being bald*," which is itself vague—what could that possibly be? The only intelligible account of vagueness, the view has it, locates it in our thought and language: vagueness just is semantic indecision. But is it?

Trenton Merricks (2001) has offered an indirect consideration against such contention that the only intelligible view of vagueness is semantic indecision. The consideration is disjunctive in nature: if the view of vagueness as semantic indecision is not to collapse into a form of *epistemicism*—having it that (appearance of) indeterminacy is ultimately constituted by a special sort of *ignorance* with respect to ((non-epistemically) determinate) facts—then the view turns out to require a variety of metaphysical vagueness. So it better not be true that the *only* intelligible account of vagueness is semantic indecision, against what prominent defenders proclaim.

For take again borderline Harry and his baldness and consider now the metalinguistic version

(1)   'Bald' describes Harry.
On a very natural reading, this states something very similar to
(2)   Harry is bald
perhaps along the lines of

(2a)   The extension of 'bald' has Harry as a member.
(2b)   The property that 'bald' signifies is had by Harry.
(2c)   'Bald' applies to Harry.
Under that reading, (1) should come out as *indeterminate*, in as much as (2) does.
(Sure one can impose another reading on 'describes' such that, on that reading, it states something very akin to

(3)   'Harry is bald' is true;
perhaps along the lines of

(3a)   'Bald' is true of Harry.
(3b)   'Bald' truly describes Harry.
(3c)   'Bald' truly applies to Harry.

Under such alternative reading, (1) should come out as *false*, in as much as (3) does. But let's focus on the previous reading, which is the one relevant for Merricks' consideration.)

So, under the relevant reading, (1) should come out as indeterminate, in as much as (2) does. Now, "Bald" and 'Harry' are (relevantly) precise (we can assume).[5] So, on the assumption that 'describes' (as well as 'applies,' 'extension,' 'refers,' 'signifies,' and the like) doesn't exhibit itself semantic indecision, the indeterminacy of (1) is not the result of semantic indecision. So, by our negative characterization, it is a form of *metaphysical* indeterminacy, constituted by the expression 'bald' and Harry standing in an indeterminate relation of *describing*, being itself vague. So vagueness as semantic indecision requires that at least *some* vagueness *not* be just constituted by semantic indecision—but rather by the metaphysical vagueness of some semantic relations themselves.

So, *if* 'describes' and the like fail to exhibit semantic indecision, *then* the indeterminacy of (1) provides a form of metaphysical vagueness. Quite clearly, however, this assumption is precisely what the defender of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision will be expected to reject. Discussing such rejection gives the second horn in Merricks' consideration. According to him, the main form such rejection takes is the following:

One could hold that 'describes' expresses many different relations, some of which relate 'bald' to Harry, some of which do not…[6] That 'describes' thus expresses many relations implies that the sentence "Bald' describes Harry'

[5] Most plausibly, they are certainly *not* precise—but as Merricks observes, their vagueness seems immaterial with respect to the indeterminacy of (1) and (2).
[6] The suppressed material contains the parenthetical: "(Or one could hold that 'describes' expresses no relations, but would express one relation if precisified in one way, another if precisified in another, and so on. This sort of variation is irrelevant to substance of my argument.)" See discussion below, where I will be claiming that it is crucially relevant to vindicate the response on part of the defender of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision.

expresses some true propositions and some false propositions, and is therefore itself neither true nor false (Merricks 2001, p. 149).

In this situation, he contends, the (appearance of) indeterminacy is, however, ultimately constituted by a special sort of *ignorance* with respect to ((non-epistemically) determinate) facts—so that the view of vagueness as semantic indecision collapses into a form of *epistemicism*. Here is the core of it:

> But if all this were true, there would be no indeterminacy or semantic indecision. What we would have instead is a cluster of relations gathered under the title 'describes,' and the fact that it has been decided—somehow—that 'bald' stands in certain of those relations to Harry and fails to stand in the remainder of those relations to Harry… But if there is a determinate fact of the matter as to whether or not 'bald' stands in each and every semantic relation expressed by 'describes' to Harry, then it seems that there is no linguistic vagueness… If we knew all the facts of the matter about each and every semantic relation relating 'bald' and Harry, there would be no feeling of indecision. We would of course recognize the ambiguity in a claim about 'bald''s describing Harry, but recognized ambiguity of this sort is not vagueness (Merricks 2001, pp. 150–51).

This seems to me to be problematic, however, in at least two important respects. First, there is the suggestion about our *ignoring* which of these (non-epistemically) determinate facts hold. But given the nature of precisifications and their admissible arbitrariness, there is no necessary bar into our assuming that we do know such—in as much as it was innocuous to assume that we knew that Harry (determinately) has the property of having 3,832 hairs on his scalp and (determinately) lacks the property of having exactly 3,833 on his scalp. So let us assume we do know which of these relations (determinately) hold and fail to hold between 'bald' and Harry—the issue regarding epistemicism turns out to be neither here nor there.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Merricks contends that, upon such knowledge, one would recognize *ambiguity* in (1) and, one must agree, ambiguity is not (the indeterminacy that is) *vagueness*. But this is because in his envisaged way of allowing for semantic indecision in the relevant semantic vocabulary, Merricks seems to be contemplating that 'describes' (determinately) expresses the various candidate relations—which is indeed illustrated by his describing them as *semantic* relations. For consider again the object-language case, 'Harry is bald.' *Suppose* 'bald' (determinately) expressed the various candidate properties. Then, upon knowledge of (non-epistemically) determinate facts such as that Harry (determinately) has the property of having 3,832 hairs on his scalp and (determinately) lacks the property of having exactly 3,833 on his scalp, there would be no remaining indeterminacy regarding 'Harry is bald' but just recognized *ambiguity*—and ambiguity of this sort is not vagueness. It would just be like 'bank,' *determinately* signifying the various kinds of banks. Now there *is* vagueness precisely because that supposition is precisely *not* the one characteristic of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision. According to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, it is *indeterminate* which of the properties is expressed, as opposed to being determinate that *all* of them are—hence the semantic *indecision*, which is vagueness. As I emphasized in discussing the principles for truth and falsity, vagueness of sentences consists

precisely in its being *indeterminate* which out of a set of admissible "propositions," in the relevant sense, the sentence expresses.

*Mutatis mutandis*, however, for the semantic indecision in 'describes' and other semantic expressions. The semantic indecision that is vagueness, as opposed to ambiguity, is constituted by the fact that it is *indeterminate* which of the (known, we may assume) candidate relations the semantic term signifies On the contrasting assumption Merricks offers, that *all* the relations are (determinately) expressed, one would have, as one would expected, upon relevant knowledge, just ambiguity, as opposed to vagueness.

As I signaled, in the suppressed material in the quote above Merricks does contemplate what may seem close enough to the contention that 'describes' exhibits semantic indecision according to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision:

> Or one could hold that 'describes' expresses no relations, but would express one relation if precisified in one way, another if precisified in another, and so on (Merricks 2001, p. 149).

But he adds:

> This sort of variation is irrelevant to substance of my argument (Merricks 2001, p. 149).

But that kind of variation, understood along the considered lines, *is* precisely what distinguishes vagueness and ambiguity, I daresay—according to the view of vagueness as semantic indecision. The substance of his argument does seem to depend on this, most relevantly.


## 4 Further Indeterminate Reference

In his more recent contribution to this discussion, Salmon (2010) offers a nice summary of the situation, making in passing what I take to be a close relative to the complaint I have been elaborating on:

> According to the thoroughgoing vagueness-in-language point of view, for any relation $R$ between expressions and objects there is always a fact whether a given expression bears $R$ to a given object or instead bears the complement non-$R$. To each appropriate pairing of attributes with objects corresponds a fact. It may seem, ironically, as if this tenet in itself in fact precludes possibility [that there is no fact of the matter concerning whether the sentence expresses any particular candidate content], since for every semantic relation and for every pairing of an expression with a potential semantic value, there is always a corresponding fact either that the expression bears the relation to the potential semantic value or that it bears the complement. Every purely semantic question then has a correct answer. But to conclude that this requires a fact whether 'Princeton, New Jersey' designates the municipality-fusion is evidently to misunderstand how vagueness is supposed to arise according to a thoroughgoing vagueness-in-language approach, assuming [that possibility]. On that approach, there is no fact concerning whether 'Princeton, New Jersey'

designates the municipality-fusion not because of a missing fact—all the semantic facts are in place—but because of semantic indecision with regard to some expression, or expressions, in predicates like 'designates the fusion of Princeton Borough and Princeton Township'. In this case the indecision is evidently meta-semantic, located in semantic terms like 'designate,' 'refer,' 'denote,' 'stands for,' 'extension,' etc... Some designation-like relations obtain between 'Princeton, New Jersey' and the fusion while the complements of other designation-like relations do so, and it is not settled which candidate designation-like relation 'designate' metadesignates, i.e. it is not settled exactly which semantic relation the word designates in the metalanguage (Salmon 2010, p. 143).

With respect to borderline baldish Harry, as we have seen, we have as much reason to hold that the metalinguistic

(1)   'Bald' describes Harry

is indeterminate (under the relevant reading) as we do with respect to the object-language

(2)   Harry is bald.

"Bald" and 'Harry' are (relevantly) precise, yet (1) is indeterminate. As vagueness is semantic indecision, that is not in virtue of there being a particular semantic relation, "*describing*," which indeterminately holds between the expression and the man. Rather, it is the result of the semantic indecision in the semantic locution 'describes,' indeterminately expressing equally natural, admissible candidate referent relations.

But now, consider the following claim about the expression 'describing' itself (under the relevant reading):

($1_2$) 'Describes' describes 'Bald' and Harry.

The reason why (2) and (1) are indeterminate makes ($1_2$) also indeterminate. And so on and so forth. So on the face of it, once there is vagueness in a certain object language statement, that would transmit to corresponding elements in a hierarchy of suitable metalinguisitic counterparts.

According to Salmon, however, this gives rise to a kind of "regress" which, he contends, seems explanatorily vicious.

Now if there is indeterminacy whether 'designate' meta-designates a particular designation-like relation $R$, this also cannot be attributed to a deficiency in the meta-designation relation, else again we lapse into vagueness-in-the-world, a relation and appropriate objects with no corresponding fact. Instead the indeterminacy must be located in the word 'meta-designate' (or in the phrase 'designate in the metalanguage', etc.). But if there is indeterminacy whether 'meta-designate' meta-metadesignates a particular meta-designation-like relation, this cannot be attributed to a deficiency in the meta-meta-designation relation and must instead be located in the word 'meta-meta-designate', and so on. Hence, if any object-language expression suffers from semantic under-determination, the entire hierarchy of semantic expressions—'designate,'

'meta-designate,' 'meta-meta-designate,' etc.—is infected with indeterminacy all the way up (Salmon 2010, p. 143).

Introducing the hierarchy of new semantic expressions—'designate,' 'meta-designate,' 'meta-meta-designate,' etc.—may obscure the fact that, in the present case, the relation—actually, the family of admissible candidate relations—can arguably be claimed to be the same old one, applied to the suitable further expressions. Which in turn may obscure the fact that the envisaged hierarchy seems to be as innocuous—and for essentially the same kind of reasons, as we will shortly see—as the relative hierarchy concerning *truth* in the case of

(4) 'Harry is a man' is true.
(4$_2$) "'Harry is a man' is true' is true.
(4$_3$) "''Harry is a man' is true' is true' is true.

And so on and so forth.

We could decide to say that, on face of this, 'Harry is a man' is not only *true*, as per (4), but also *meta-true*, as per (4$_2$), *meta-meta-true*, as per (4$_3$), and so on and so forth. But such a hierarchy of truth-predicates would not constitute a "regress" that is explanatorily vicious, in the present kind of case.

Similarly, I contend, for our semantic series of indeterminate statements involving Harry's baldness.

Salmon seems to disagree:

This infinite hierarchy of vagueness may not seem especially problematic, until one recalls our original question: What exactly does semantic under-determination amount to? We are told that there is no fact of the matter whether 'Princeton, New Jersey' designates the fusion of Princeton Borough and Princeton Township but that this is due to a deficiency of language (the appellation 'Princeton, New Jersey'), not of the world. When we ask what the semantic under-determination of 'Princeton, New Jersey' amounts to then, we are told it is due to semantic underdetermination with regard to the semantic word 'designate.' The attempt to explain semantic under-determination does not reduce the phenomenon to a 'previous case;' instead it 'reduces' it to a new case: semantic under-determination of 'designate.' When we ask what the semantic under-determination of 'designate' amounts to then, we are told it is not some deficiency in the putative designation relation, but rather semantic under-determination with regard to 'meta-designates.' When we ask what this last amounts to, we are told it amounts to semantic under-determination with regard to 'meta-meta-designates,' and so on. At no stage in our deduction is any account ever offered, only a 'reduction' to a new case. At each stage, the explanation passes the buck to the next stage up. This is analogous to each commander in a chain of command delegating responsibility to a subordinate. Only here there are no buck privates; the buck never stops, the responsibility is never met (Salmon 2010, pp. 143–44).

But the worry here seems to depend on Salmon's contentions about explanatory priority that, I think, are to be contested by the defender of the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, along the lines above. And the analogy with the case of truth seems apt to illustrate the point. The reason why the hierarchy with truth-predicates in

the kind of case under consideration is arguably not a "regress" that is explanatorily vicious is, in essence, that it is *because* 'Harry is a man' is true that it is meta-true, and it is because it is meta-true that it is meta-meta-true, and so on and so forth—it is because (4) holds that $(4_2)$ does, and because $(4_2)$ holds that $(4_3)$ does, and so on and so forth. *Not* the other way around.

Similarly, I contend, for our semantic series of indeterminate statements involving Harry's baldness. The reason why the hierarchy with semantic predicates in the kind of case under consideration is arguably not a "regress" that is explanatorily vicious is, in essence, that it is *because* 'designates' is indeterminate that 'meta-designates' also is, and it is because 'meta-designates' is indeterminate that 'meta-meta-designates' also is, and so on and so forth—it is because (1) is indeterminate that $(1_2)$ is, and so on and so forth. In the more basic case, it is because (2) is indeterminate that (1) is, under the relevant reading. *Not* the other way around.

In both cases, hierarchy without problematic "regress:" the responsibility was met from the beginning—and then just transmitted all the way through.

## 5 Conclusion

Harry is borderline bald. Therefore it is indeterminate whether 'bald' describes Harry. Which is due to semantic indecision in 'describes' as the result of the semantic indecision in 'bald'—as opposed to indeterminacy in the relation of *describing* itself. What in turn gives rise to indeterminacy in corresponding meta-statements. Which in turn is due to semantic indecision of the relevant expressions as the result of the semantic indecision in the more basic cases—as opposed to indeterminacy in any relation itself. And so on and so forth.

For all we have seen, it seems as if it could be indeed the case that the only intelligible account of vagueness would still locate it in our thought and language—and that vagueness just is semantic indecision.

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