

Remarks on Vagueness and Arbitrariness

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Mind 116 (2007): 115-119.

Suppose that composition supervenes on relations that come in degrees. Suppose further that, necessarily, composition occurs if and only if those relations hold to a certain degree or greater. Imagine a first case in which those relations hold only to a very low degree. Then imagine a continuum of cases, beginning with this first case, that ends with a case in which those same relations hold to a very high degree. Call this a ‘composition continuum’.

Theodore Sider (1997, 2001) assumes, for *reductio*, that composition is restricted. (That is, he assumes that there are some composite objects and also that some objects jointly compose nothing.) And he thinks that if composition is restricted, composition supervenes on relations that yield a composition continuum. Sider argues that a composition continuum will have a first case in which (at least some of) the original objects come to compose a new object.

That is, Sider argues that, when it comes to the existence of a new composite object, restricted composition implies that there is a ‘sharp cut-off’ in a composition continuum. But Sider claims that, even if composition is restricted, it is implausible that there is such a cut-off. So Sider concludes that, because it has an implausible implication, restricted composition must go.

Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that the following story is true.
Necessarily, all simples are silent but all composite objects whistle. The whistling of

composite objects, according to this story, is not reduced to the collective activity of their parts. And so, in virtue of their whistling, composite objects are not ‘reduced to’, but are instead ‘something more than’, their parts. Moreover, it cannot possibly be vague whether the whistling occurs.

Now consider a composition continuum that starts with only simples at one end, composing nothing. I say that if the whistling composites story were true, it would not be implausible that there is a sharp cut-off at some point or other in this composition continuum. And Elizabeth Barnes seems to agree. Barnes (2007) says:

Merricks contends, correctly, that if we were to suppose something analogous to the ‘whistling’ story was in fact the case, then the argument from vagueness wouldn’t get off the ground, because the cut-off in the composition continuum wouldn’t be arbitrary.¹

Every story relevantly like the whistling composites story says, first, that, necessarily, a composite object is something ‘over and above’ its parts and, moreover, that the way in which a composite object is over and above its parts cannot be vague. I argue in ‘Composition in Vagueness’ that every story relevantly like the whistling composites story implies that it is not implausible that there is a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum.

Moreover, I argue that if composition is restricted, then some story or other relevantly like the whistling composites story really is true. And so I conclude that if

¹ I say that it would not be *implausible* that there is a sharp cut-off. Barnes says that it would not be *arbitrary*. Moreover, Barnes (2007) makes a number of other claims about what would be ‘arbitrary’, as opposed to ‘implausible’. But the portion of my paper she is criticizing is framed entirely in terms of what is (and is not) implausible, not in terms of what is (and is not) arbitrary.

composition is restricted, then it is not implausible that there is a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum. Thus one of the claims defended in ‘Composition and Vagueness’ is that Sider’s attack on unrestricted composition—one premise of which is that it is implausible that there is a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum—fails.

Barnes (2007) claims that my argument against Sider begs the question. She says:

Merricks assumes restricted composition for his argument, claiming that ‘this begs no questions’ (Merricks 2005, p. 627). And this is quite correct – the key issue at hand is to ascertain what restricted composition implies, so for the sake of argument we assume that it’s true. He then goes on, however, to assume that, ‘it cannot possibly be vague’ (Merricks 2005, p. 629) whether an object whistles. Let’s call this:

(VW) It’s never vague whether something whistles.

But (VW), it seems, does beg a few questions.

I disagree with Sider only about whether it is implausible that there is a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum.² Therefore I can beg the question against Sider only by presupposing that a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum is not implausible. (VW), however, says nothing about the implausibility of a sharp cut-off. So (VW) does not—cannot—beg the question.³

² That is, when it comes to the argument Barnes is here criticizing, I disagree with Sider only about whether it is implausible that there is a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum. Elsewhere in ‘Composition and Vagueness’, I argue that we should not grant Sider’s assumption that if composition were restricted, then it would supervene on relations that yield a composition continuum (2005, pp. 625-626). Barnes (2007) seems to object that there is a short list of candidate relations upon which restricted composition would supervene and that those relations do yield a composition continuum. Thus Barnes seems to rely on (something like) David Lewis’s version of the Vagueness Argument (see Merricks, 2005, p. 625n7). For a reply to that version—and, by extension, to Barnes’s defense of a composition continuum—see Merricks, 2005, pp. 619-623.

In the course of defending the mistaken charge that (VW) begs the question, Barnes hints at a different objection to my argument. Here is Barnes:

Whatever force there was behind Sider's original intuition that any sharp cut-off in the composition continuum would be arbitrary (and thus that any composite/non-composite demarcation must instead be vague) would serve as equal motivation to deny the co-satisfiability of Merricks' two key stipulations: that all and only complex objects whistle, and that it can never be vague whether something whistles. Merricks has therefore done nothing more than deny the basic intuition that Sider takes as a presupposition of his argument.

Sider's 'basic intuition' is that it is implausible that there is a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum. Thus if Barnes is correct in the passage just quoted, those who share Sider's basic intuition should insist that, even if the whistling composites story were true, it would be implausible that there is a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum.

Of course, I deny that this would be implausible. And, as we saw in a passage quoted earlier, Barnes denies this as well. But, given the passage just quoted, I think that Barnes should not deny this. She might even want add that those who deny this somehow beg the question against Sider. At least, Barnes should add this if she wants to stand by her objection that I beg the question against Sider.

I object to this addition. I deny that I beg the question against Sider by claiming that if the whistling composites story were true, then a sharp cut-off would not be implausible. But rather than quibble about this, let us instead consider what

³ Merricks (2005, p. 632-63) provides two reasons that any feature relevantly like whistling cannot be vague. Neither reason assumes that a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum is not implausible.

more might be said to support that claim. That is, let us consider what more might be said to support the claim that if the whistling composites story were true, then it would not be implausible that there is a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum.⁴

The first case involves one straw on the camel's back. The next case involves two straws. And so on, until we reach the final case, in which the camel's back was broken many straws ago. Pretending that a broken back is an all-or-nothing affair, this straw continuum contains a sharp cut-off with respect to the camel's back's breaking.⁵ That there is some such sharp cut-off or other is not implausible. Moreover, a sharp cut-off in the straw continuum has no implications with respect to vagueness. For example, acknowledging that there is a sharp cut-off does not commit one to (anything like) epistemicism about vagueness.

The first case involves a man with a full head of hair. In each subsequent case, the man has one hair fewer, until not a hair remains. Arguably, it is implausible that in this hair continuum there is a sharp cut-off with respect to baldness. Moreover, such a sharp cut-off would imply something controversial with respect to vagueness, perhaps even epistemicism.

It is not implausible that a trivial difference in straw leads to a non-trivial difference in the brokenness of a camel's back. But, at least arguably, it is implausible

⁴ Sider's argument for there being a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum requires the claim that existence can never be vague. Sider's defense of this claim turns on existence's marking a 'joint in nature'. Arguably, that existence marks such a joint implies that there being a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum is not implausible. Barnes (2007) objects that taking existence to mark a joint does not by itself imply that the specific location of the resultant sharp cut-off would be intuitively 'non-arbitrary'. But this objection ignores the central point: if existence marks a joint, then there being some sharp cut-off or other with respect to the existence of a new composite object in a composition continuum is not as implausible as there being some sharp cut-off or other with respect to (for example) the baldness of a man in the relevant continuum. See Merricks, 2005, pp. 626-627.

⁵ If you refuse to pretend that the camel's back's breaking is all or nothing, replace the camel with a trap door that remains completely shut until the crucial straw is added, at which point the door drops wide open.

that a trivial difference in hair leads to a non-trivial difference in the baldness of a man's head. What explains this difference in plausibility?

I think that at least part of the explanation is that, when the crucial straw is added, something occurs—the breaking of the camel's back—that is altogether different from the mere addition of that final straw. Again, there is no sense in which the camel's back's breaking is somehow constituted by (or is nothing over and above or is reduced to) the addition of that final straw (cf. Merricks, 2001, pp. 124-130). On the other hand, in the hair continuum there is—in some sense—nothing more to a man's becoming bald than his coming to have the resultant number (and distribution, etc.) of hairs.

With all this in mind, suppose that a composite object is nothing over and above its parts and how they are arranged. Then the existence of a composite object is somehow constituted by that object's parts and their arrangement. And then a composition continuum is relevantly like the hair continuum. And so Sider might be right that it is implausible that a trivial difference in the parts would lead to a non-trivial difference in the existence of a composite object.

On the other hand, suppose that the whistling composites story is true. Then a composite object is something more than its parts and how they are arranged. And then a composition continuum is relevantly like the straw continuum. And so a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum is no less plausible than a sharp cut-off in the straw continuum. That is, a sharp cut-off in a composition continuum is not implausible at all.

Of course, the whistling composites story is false. But, as already noted, I

argue in ‘Composition and Vagueness’ that if composition is restricted, then some story or other relevantly like the whistling composites story is true.

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