

## **Vagueness G9525 Seminar Plan**

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Vagueness is an essential feature of every human language. It marks a certain gap between the language (as well as the thought it reflects) and the “world”, due to limited epistemic capacities. The phenomenon is ubiquitous and, with the exception of mathematics, artificial languages, and theoretical science, it affects every part of linguistic usage. Some philosophers saw in the Sorites paradox, which is linked to vagueness, a serious threat to the very possibility of setting up a coherent semantics for natural language. Vagueness can however be treated systematically in a way that illuminates its underlying mechanisms.

The seminar aims at treating vagueness within that perspective. The plan is to cover some early reaction to the phenomena and go on to describe the main proposals that have emerged in the last forty years: theories of degrees of truth, supervaluations, and epistemicism. We shall also treat the question of higher order vagueness and of the so-called ontological vagueness — are there vague objects and a vague identity relation? A large part will be devoted to my own work, which has been on my website in the last eight years and which, following a proposal from the editors of *Synthese*, will appear in a forthcoming issue of that journal. I may also include very recent work concerning possible ways of accommodating ontological vagueness.

The plan (tentative) is to cover, more or less in the given order, the following subjects:

1. The Sorites paradox
2. Some early attempts to deal with vagueness
3. Supervaluations
4. Degree theories
5. Epistemicism
6. Borderline vagueness versus tolerance
7. Contextual logic and its use in resolving the Sorites
8. Borderlines and higher order vagueness
9. Ontological vagueness.

For those taking the seminar for credit there will be opportunities to make class presentations instead of writing papers.

The 1996 anthology is *The Vagueness Reader*, edited by Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith is useful and recommended. Many of the papers there are also in journals accessible via JSTOR.

The first meeting on Wednesday January 20 (16:10 – 18:00, Philosophy Hall 716) will be devoted to an overview and organization.