VAGUE SINGULARS, SEMANTIC INDECISION, AND THE METAPHYSICS OF PERSONS[*]

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I. Introduction

The view that human persons are composite material objects, hereafter 'composite materialism', is the prevailing view about the metaphysics of persons, at least among contemporary philosophers. In this paper, I develop and investigate an argument—what I call 'the Vague Singulars Argument'—for the conclusion that composite materialism is false. My primary aim, however, is not to endorse the Vague Singulars Argument; rather, I will be most interested in arguing that cogent or not, it has philosophically rich implications. One such implication is that semantic indecision theories of vagueness entail that composite materialism is false, a significant result given that semantic indecision theories also enjoy widespread acceptance. To set this implication in high relief and for concreteness, I initially develop the Vague Singulars Argument in the context of a semantic indecision theory of vagueness. We shall also see, however, that the Vague Singulars Argument extends to extant developments of epistemicism, an increasingly popular rival theory of vagueness. Indeed, we shall see that the only remotely plausible replies to the Vague Singulars Argument commit one to either a metaphysical theory of vagueness or a significantly amended and heretofore undeveloped version of epistemicism. I begin with a brief discussion of semantic indecision theories of vagueness.

II. Vagueness as Semantic Indecision

Henryk Mehlberg and David Lewis have stated well the gist of semantic indecision theories of vagueness:

> A vague term may be characterized tentatively as one the correct use of which is compatible with several distinct interpretations. The term "Toronto" is vague because there are several methods of tracing the geographical limits of the city designated by this name, all of them compatible with the way the name is used. It may be interpreted, for instance, either as including some particular tree on the outskirts of the city or as not including it. The two areas differing from each other with respect to the spot where this tree is growing are two distinct individual objects; the word "Toronto" may be interpreted as denoting either of these two objects and is for that reason vague. Of course the vagueness of this name is much

greater than is suggested by the two areas just referred to, since there are a great number of admissible interpretations. (Mehlberg, 1996, 86)

The only intelligible account of vagueness locates it in our thought and language. The reason its 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, 212)

According to semantic indecision theories, the vagueness of 'bald', for instance, consists in its having multiple candidate meanings—often called 'precisifications', 'sharpenings', or 'admissible interpretations'. The rough and ready idea is that the candidate meanings for 'bald' can be given by more precise predicates of the form 'has less than or equal to n hairs on one's head'.[1] Moreover, according to the theory of semantic indecision, it is indefinite which of the multiple candidate meanings is expressed by 'bald'. Two remarks on indefiniteness: First, as a matter of definition, it is indefinite whether 'bald' expresses some meaning, say m, if and only if it is neither definitely the case that 'bald' expresses m nor definitely the case that 'bald' fails to express m. Second, the indefiniteness here is not merely epistemic. According to the theory of semantic indecision, it is not that 'bald' in fact expresses some particular meaning but we are ignorant of which one. Rather, we do not know what meaning 'bald' expresses because there is no fact of the matter about what 'bald' expresses.

As the Mehlberg and Lewis passages indicate, predicates do not exhaust the category of vague expressions. For instance, singular terms, such as 'Toronto' and 'outback', may be vague, as well. Suppose, as seems plausible, that it is a vague matter whether the outback comprises an even number of grains of sand. What is the source of the vagueness here? Some may answer by saying that there is an object to which 'outback' definitely refers and the vagueness at issue is the result of it being indefinite whether this object has a certain property, viz., the property of comprising an even number of grains of sand. Those who account for the vagueness in question in this way subscribe to a metaphysical theory of vagueness.[2] This is not, however, how a semantic indecisionist explains this sort of vagueness. Recall Lewis' remark that it is not that there is this thing, the outback, with imprecise borders. Rather, according to a semantic indecisionist, the *sole* source of the vagueness in the above example is the semantic indefiniteness of 'outback'. The singular term 'outback' has multiple candidate referents and it is indefinite to which of these many candidates 'outback' refers. And it is a vague matter whether there is an even number of grains of sand in the outback, according to semantic indecisionists, because some but not all of the candidate referents of 'outback' comprise an even number of grains of sand. Furthermore, the vagueness is not the result of anything else. Most importantly, it is not the result of the predicate 'comprises an even number of grains of sand' and it is not the result of it being indefinite whether something has the property expressed by that predicate.

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[1] Why rough and ready? Because being bald depends on more than just hair cardinality. It also depends on hair distribution, length, thickness, etc.

[2] Metaphysical theories of vagueness are endorsed and defended by Kent Bach (1976), Terence Parsons and Peter Woodruff (1995), Terence Parsons (2000), Michael Tye (1990) and (2000), and Peter van Inwagen (1990). Metaphysical theories of vagueness are typically augmented with some kind of degree theoretic account of the logic and formal semantics of vagueness.

This concludes my discussion of semantic indecision theories of vagueness; albeit brief the above remarks capture those features salient for my purposes here.[3] As already noted, semantic indecision theories have proven attractive to many philosophers. But as we shall see in the development of the Vague Singulars Argument these theories come with, what will seem to most, the not so attractive cost of denying composite materialism.

III. The Vague Singulars Argument

I exist. That is, there is something identical with me. But not only that, I *definitely* exist. That is, there is something that is *definitely* identical with me. For maximal precision, I express this latter claim as follows:

(I_{dr}) $\exists x$ definitely I am identical with x.

It is important not to confuse (I_{dr}) with the following claim:

(I_{dd}) definitely $\exists x$ I am identical with x.

(I_{dd}) can be thought to predicate definite truth of the proposition that I exist. Now certainly, that proposition is true. But it seems just as certain that the proposition that something is definitely identical with me is also true. However, the conjunction of a semantic indecision theory of vagueness and (I_{dr}) entails that composite materialism is false. Moreover, I will argue that the apparent truth of (I_{dr}) is genuine. And if I am right, what follows is that a semantic indecision theory entails the falsity of composite materialism.

Let us begin with the following point: If the theory of semantic indecision is true and 'outback' is a vague singular term, then it is not the case that there is something such that it is definitely the case that it is identical with the outback. For if there were, then there would be something to which 'outback' definitely refers. And this would contravene the indefiniteness of reference characteristic of semantic indecision theories. The point can also be put as follows: If the theory of semantic indecision is true and 'outback' is a vague singular term, then every admissible interpretation of 'outback' assigns a numerically distinct eligible candidate referent to 'outback'. And so, there will be no x such that the open sentence 'definitely, the outback $= x$' is true of it under every admissible interpretation of 'outback'.

Now, what is true of 'outback' should also be true of other singular terms that purport to refer to composite material objects. Suppose, as seems plausible, that it is a vague matter whether my cat Fluffy has an even number of hairs. According to a semantic indecisionist, this is because it is indefinite to which of its many eligible referents 'Fluffy' refers. And here too, a semantic indecisionist cannot accept, 'There is something such that it is definitely identical with Fluffy'. For otherwise there would be something to which 'Fluffy' definitely refers.

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[3] The above discussion leaves open questions about the logic and formal semantics of vagueness. And what a semantic indecisionist says about such issues will determine what kind of semantic indecision theory of vagueness he adopts, e.g., supervaluationism, sub-valuationism, finite valued degree theory, or infinite valued degree theory. See Keefe and Smith, 1996 for a nice overview of these versions of semantic indecision as well as other theories of vagueness.

These results generalize. Let *t* be a singular term that purports to refer to a composite material object. Then a semantic indecisionist should think that some instance of the following schema is true:

S1: It is a vague matter whether *t* is F

where the vagueness at issue is due solely to the semantic indefiniteness of the use of '*t*' in S1. And given the semantic indecisionist's account of the vagueness of the use of '*t*' in a true instance of S1, the following would be false:

S2: ∃*x* definitely *t* is identical with *x*.

For again, if S2 were true, then there would be something to which '*t*' definitely refers, thus eliminating the semantic indefiniteness of '*t*'. We are now in a position to develop the Vague Singulars Argument.

Assume that (I_{dr}) and a semantic indecision theory of vagueness are true and for *reductio* composite materialism, in particular, suppose that I am a composite material object. Then my uses of 'I', a singular term, purport to refer to a composite material object. A semantic indecisionist, then, should think that some instance of S1 involving one of my uses of 'I' is true and the following is as good a candidate as any:

IS1: It is a vague matter whether I comprise an even number of elementary particles.

But, given IS1 and a semantic indecision theory, the following is false:

IS2: ∃*x* definitely I am identical with *x*.

But obviously, that IS2 is false contradicts our assumption that (I_{dr}) is true. Hence, if a semantic indecision theory of vagueness is true and (I_{dr}) is true, then I am not a composite material object. I, however, am not essential to the argument. If the above argument is sound, then it shows that semantic indecision theories of vagueness and (I_{dr}) entail that composite materialism is false. This completes the first stage of the Vague Singulars Argument. I consider below an objection to this stage of the argument. For now I continue by defending the truth of (I_{dr}).

An extreme way of denying (I_{dr}) is to deny that I and all other human persons exist. But Personal Nihilism, as we might call it, is simply unacceptable. That I exist, and that you do as well, is a non-negotiable pre-philosophical datum. At any rate, if you think the lesson of the above argument is that we do not exist, then that is a surprising result to say the least. Drawing that lesson only confirms my earlier claim that the Vague Singulars Argument has interesting ramifications. I, however, maintain that Personal Nihilism is false. Is there a more plausible way of denying (I_{dr})? Not as far as I can see. As I will argue shortly, denying it along with accepting that I exist has implausible consequences.

First, I should like to make the following broadly Cartesian case for (I_{dr}): It is impossible for me to falsely believe that I exist. That is, I cannot falsely believe that something is identical with me. But then how could I falsely believe that something is *definitely* identical me? In order for me to believe that something is the case, I must *definitely* be around to believe it. And this requires there to be something that is definitely identical with me and for there to be something

definitely referred to by the uses of 'I' and 'me' in this paragraph. I simply cannot see how I could falsely believe (I_{dr}). But I do believe it and so, it is true.

Set aside the above Cartesian argument. There are semantic and metaphysical difficulties that accompany denying (I_{dr}). First, consider its denial:

> ($\sim I_{dr}$) $\forall x$ either definitely it is not the case that I am identical with x or it is indefinite whether I am identical with x.

A consequence of accepting ($\sim I_{dr}$) is that for anything whatsoever either my previous uses of 'I' definitely fail to refer to it or it is indefinite whether they refer to it. To highlight the implausibility of this, note that if I accept ($\sim I_{dr}$) and I believe that I exist, then I am committed to the truth of the following sentence:

> ODD: I exist and $\forall x$ either the use of 'I' in this sentence definitely fails to refer to x or it is indefinite whether the use of 'I' in this sentence refers to x.

ODD, however, is odd. If I assert it, then I take myself to have successfully self-referred with the use of 'I' in ODD. (In ODD, 'I' is mentioned twice, but used only once.) But I am one of the things the universal quantifier in ODD quantifies over. So, if I assert ODD, then I assert of myself that either I definitely fail to refer to myself with the use of 'I' in ODD or it is indefinite whether I refer to myself with that use of 'I'. So, if I assert ODD, then I take myself to have successfully self-referred with the use of 'I' in ODD *and* either to be such that the use of 'I' in ODD definitely fails to refer to me or to be such that it is indefinite whether that use refers to me. But if I sincerely take myself to have successfully self-referred with a use of 'I', then I cannot sincerely take myself to be such that the use of 'I' in question *definitely fails* to refer to me. And it also seems that I cannot sincerely take myself to be such that it is *indefinite* whether that use refers to me. It is puzzling to be committed, and to see that one is committed, to the truth of something that one cannot sincerely assert. But this is just the position I would be in if I believed that I exist and that ($\sim I_{dr}$) is true.

Consider now a more metaphysical oddity. If ($\sim I_{dr}$) is true, then there are some things for which it is indefinite whether the use of 'I' in ODD refers to them. (Hereafter, it is implicit that I am speaking of some particular use of 'I' such as the one in ODD.) For simplicity let us assume that there are two such things, D1 and D2. D1 and D2 are equally eligible candidate referents for 'I'. This is an important point worth pausing over. That D1 and D2 are equally eligible candidate referents for 'I' entails the following: (a) no semantic fact—e.g. facts about the way 'I' is used— privileges D1 over D2 and vice versa as a referent for 'I' and (b) no metaphysical fact about D1 privileges it over D2 as a referent for 'I' and vice versa for D2. If either (a) or (b) were false, then either D1 or D2 would be a more eligible referent for 'I'. It is (b) that is of special interest here. Let us consider it in more detail.

We can get a better grasp on (b) and its implications by considering features that would metaphysically privilege D1 over D2 as a referent for 'I'. If, for instance, D1 were the sort of thing that is conscious and D2 were not, then D1 would be a more eligible referent than D2. (If one insists, this point and ones to follow could be put meta-linguistically, as well: If 'is conscious' were to apply to D1 but not to D2, then D1 would be a more eligible referent than D2.) Similarly, if D1 were the sort of thing that had beliefs, formed desires, experienced pain and pleasure, performed actions, etc., and D2 were not, then again D1 would be a more eligible

referent. Similar remarks of course apply to D2, as well. The upshot: If (b) is true, then D1 and D2 are both the sorts of things that are conscious, have beliefs, form desires, experience pain and pleasure, and perform actions, etc.[4]

But most of us I think will find it very hard to believe that there are two conscious, belief-having, desire-forming, pain-experiencing and action-performing entities in such proximity whenever 'I' is used. And things are really much worse. Assuming just two eligible referents for 'I' was done for the sake of simplicity. If ($\sim I_{dr}$) is true, it is hard to see how there could fail to be many more eligible referents for 'I', hundreds, thousands, perhaps infinitely many under certain assumptions about the continuity of space and matter. At the very least, there would clearly be many more than two. And given the above remarks, each of these equally eligible candidate referents for 'I' would be the sort of thing that is conscious, experiences pain, has beliefs, forms desires, performs actions, etc. This is a very substantive and wildly implausible metaphysical commitment incurred by anyone who accepts ($\sim I_{dr}$). There simply is not, so it seems to me, this massive collection of conscious, pain-experiencing, action-performing entities. In summary, (I_{dr}) has much going for it pre-theoretically, it is hard to see how one could falsely believe it, and its denial carries implausible semantic and metaphysical commitments.

I conclude that (I_{dr}) is true. And from the first stage of the Vague Singulars Argument—the conclusion of which was that a semantic indecision theory of vagueness and (I_{dr}) entail that composite materialism is false—it follows that a semantic indecision theory of vagueness entails the falsity of composite materialism. Add to this the claim that a semantic indecision theory is true and it follows that composite materialism is false. That completes my development of the Vague Singulars Argument. Here is a bare bones outline of its structure:

(1) If a semantic indecision theory of vagueness and (I_{dr}) are true, then composite materialism is false.
(2) (I_{dr}) is true.
Therefore,
(3) If a semantic indecision theory of vagueness is true, then composite materialism is false.
(4) A semantic indecision theory of vagueness is true.
Therefore,
(5) Composite materialism is false.

I have said all I would like to say in defense of (2). For the reasons given above, rejecting it, strikes me as a highly implausible way of resisting the Vague Singulars Argument. The only other options for resistance are rejecting either (1) or (4). In the following section, I will discuss these options. What we shall see is that rejecting (1)—the only remaining avenue open to semantic indecisionists—is very unattractive and that the success of rejecting (4) depends on what alternative theory of vagueness is adopted.

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[4] Someone might reply that (b) fails to have said implication since for all it shows both D1 and D2 might fail to be the sorts of things that are conscious, etc. This is mistaken. For if neither D1 nor D2 are the sorts of things that have these features then neither would be eligible candidate referents for 'I'. But they are *ex hypothesi* eligible referents.

IV. Objections to The Vague Singulars Argument

Objection #1: Is 'I' Vague?

Recall that the first stage of the Vague Singulars Argument proceeds by assuming composite materialism and then maintaining that a semantic indecisionist should accept the following instance of S1:

IS1: It is a vague matter whether I comprise an even number of elementary particles,

where the vagueness at issue lies solely in the semantic indefiniteness of the use of 'I' in IS1. Also recall that IS1 and a semantic indecision theory entail that (I_{dr}) is false. Hence, if a semantic indecision theory and (I_{dr}) are true, then composite materialism is false, i.e., (1) is true. There is but one available objection to this line of reasoning. I present it with the following speech:

SPEECH: I accept a semantic indecision theory for vague singulars and I accept (I_{dr}). I also believe that you and I and all other human persons are composite material objects. I deny, however, that IS1 is true. That is, I deny that it is a vague matter whether you or I or any other human person for that matter comprises an even (or odd) number of elementary particles. Indeed, I deny that S1 has any true instances for the first personal pronoun 'I' except where the vagueness is due to the predicate to be substituted for the occurrence of 'F' in S1. In short, I maintain that 'I' is not a vague singular term.

The first thing to notice is that SPEECH is a strange speech for semantic indecisionists to make.[5] For there would seem to be nothing to prevent them from making similar speeches about other putatively vague singular terms such as 'outback' and 'Toronto'. Both 'outback' and 'I' are singular terms used to refer to composite material objects. If one of them is vague, then how does the other fail to be vague? SPEECH seems a touch *ad hoc*. But, there is another deeper difficulty: SPEECH implies that there is far less vagueness than there seems to be. To see this, consider the following remarks.

Suppose, as SPEECH implies, that we are composite material objects and that 'I' is not a vague singular term. If we are composite material objects, then some material sortal term describes us. For instance, if we are bodies, then the sortal term 'human body' describes us. If we are something smaller than a body, say brains, then the sortal term 'human brain' describes us. For simplicity, I shall assume that if we are composite material objects, then we are bodies and so the sortal term 'human body' describes us. The points to be made could be made just as well if we are something smaller than a body. I will now argue that if SPEECH is correct, then the sortal term 'human body' and other sortal terms fail to be vague.

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[5] One reader suggested the following way for a semantic indecisionist to fill in the details of SPEECH: Perhaps a proper name such as 'Suzy' is vague and indeterminate in reference among many "Suzy"-candidates but 'I' is not; each "Suzy"-candidate determinately refers to herself when it says 'I am hungry' as well as 'I definitely exist'. The fate of this suggestion is overdetermined: the view in question (i) is subject to the general objections I raise against SPEECH, (ii) implies that each "Suzy"-candidate speaks *falsely* when it says 'I am Suzy', and (iii) is saddled with the same metaphysical commitments incurred by denying (I_{dr}).

If SPEECH is correct, then a semantic indecision theory of vagueness is true. Recall that according to such a theory, the vagueness of 'bald' consists in its having multiple candidate meanings and it being indefinite which of these it expresses. Suppose that the predicate 'human body' is vague. Then SPEECH implies that 'human body' has multiple candidate meanings. And the candidate meanings for this vague sortal term will be sortal kinds. Let us suppose for simplicity that HB1 and HB2 are the only two candidate sortal kinds for 'human body'. Consider now the sentence, 'I am a human body'. According to SPEECH, the use of 'I' in the aforementioned sentence is not vague. So, since the truth of a semantic indecision theory is part of SPEECH, there is only one candidate referent for 'I'. However, since HB1 and HB2 are distinct candidate sortal kinds for 'human body', there are distinct objects, O1 and O2 such that O1 falls under HB1 and O2 falls under HB2. But then each of O1 and O2 will be a candidate referent for the use of 'I' in the above sentence. For if each of O1 and O2 is equally eligible for being described by 'human body' and we are human bodies, then each of them is eligible to be a referent of the personal pronoun 'I'. But this contradicts the claim that there is only one candidate referent for 'I'.

The above contradiction followed from assuming that SPEECH is true and that 'human body' is vague. Hence, SPEECH implies that 'human body' is not vague. This alone may cause some to have serious reservations about SPEECH. For one might think that 'human body' is a paradigmatic vague term. Can we not imagine borderline cases of application and sorites paradoxes for 'human body'? Moreover, SPEECH also implies that many other sortal terms fail to be vague. If 'human body' fails to be vague, then it is hard to believe that sortal terms for other living organisms are vague. For instance, if 'human body' is non-vague, then it is eminently plausible to believe that other sortal terms such as 'feline body', 'canine body', 'equine body', and so on, are also non-vague. SPEECH then implies that there is far less vagueness than one might have initially thought there to be. For it seems initially plausible to believe that sortal terms such as 'feline body', 'canine body' and 'equine body' are vague.

I suspect many will be unwilling to accept that the above sortal terms fail to be vague. I suspect, then, that many will reject SPEECH. Not only does SPEECH seem *ad hoc*, but it also seems mistaken. I conclude that SPEECH—the only available response to the earlier argument for (1)—is inadequate and so I conclude that (1) is true. This is significant since rejecting (1) is the only feasible reply to the Vague Singulars Argument open to semantic indecisionists. Semantic indecisionists, then, are committed to denying composite materialism. For most philosophers, this should constitute a powerful reason for rejecting semantic indecision theories of vagueness. It remains to be seen, however, whether jettisoning semantic indecision theories provides a robust reply to the Vague Singulars Argument. For it might very well be that the argument can be extended to other theories of vagueness. A discussion of objections to (4)—that a semantic indecision theory is true—shall reveal which, if any, alternative theories of vagueness are truly helpful in replying to the Vague Singulars Argument.

Objection #2: Epistemicism to the Rescue?

Let us begin with epistemicism, according to which vagueness is rooted in some way or another in ignorance. Epistemicists maintain that even if it were vague whether I was bald, it would still be definitely true or definitely false that I am bald. Moreover, they maintain that there is something definitely expressed by various uses of 'bald' and something to which our various uses of 'outback' definitely refer. Even so, the most developed versions of epistemicism,

viz., those developed by Roy Sorensen (1988, 2001) and Timothy Williamson (1994), have much in common with semantic indecision theories of vagueness. For this reason, I shall from now on call such a version of epistemicism 'semantic-epistemicism'.[6]

According to semantic-epistemicism, the ignorance characteristic of vagueness is constituted, at least partly, by ignorance of what the meanings or referents for vague words are. The semantic-epistemicist and the semantic indecisionist agree that vague predicates such as 'bald' have multiple candidate meanings and that vague singular terms such as 'outback' have multiple candidate referents. Of course, they disagree about what this entails. The semantic-epistemicist denies semantic indefiniteness; according to him, what makes the multiple candidate meanings of 'bald' *candidate* meanings is that any one of them could have easily been definitely expressed by 'bald' given ever so slight modifications in the actual patterns of use governing 'bald'. So, when it is vague and so deeply unclear to us whether someone is bald, this is at least partly due to it being deeply unclear to us which of its many candidate meanings 'bald' expresses. According to semantic-epistemicism, then, even though there is a meaning definitely expressed by 'bald', there is no particular meaning *clearly* expressed by it. And similar remarks apply to vague singular terms. The semantic-epistemicist will say that the vagueness of 'outback' at least partly consists in its having multiple candidate meanings. Hence, when it is vague and so unclear whether we are in the outback, this is at least partly because it is deeply unclear to us what 'outback' refers to. Here too, according to semantic-epistemicists, even though there is something definitely referred to by 'outback', there is nothing to which it *clearly* refers.

So much for a sketch of the relevant elements of semantic-epistemicism. Obviously, if semantic-epistemicism is true, then (4) of the Vague Singulars Argument is false. Semantic-epistemicism, however, is only superficially useful in avoiding the denial of composite materialism. For the Vague Singulars Argument can be harmlessly modified so as to apply to semantic-epistemicism. To begin to see this, consider the following remarks, which should ring a bell. If semantic-epistemicism is true and 'outback' is a vague singular term, then it is not the case that there is something such that it is *clearly* the case that it is identical with the outback. For if there were, then there would be something to which the 'outback' *clearly* refers. And this would contravene the unclarity of reference characteristic of the semantic-epistemicist account of vague singulars. This point also generalizes. Recall, that where '*t*' is a singular term that purports to refer to a composite material object, it is plausible to think that some instance of the following schema is true:

(S1) It is vague whether *t* is F.

Moreover, recall that the vagueness in question need not have its source in the predicate to be substituted for the occurrence of 'F'. Now, given the semantic-epistemicist account of the vagueness of '*t*' in a true instance of (S1), the following claim would be false:

(S3) ∃*x* clearly *t* is identical with *x*.

Here, if (S3) were true, then there would be no *deep unclarity* of reference.

We are now in a position to modify the Vague Singulars Argument. First, replace (I$_{dr}$) with following:

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[6] Mark Heller (2000) also notes the similarities between semantic indecision theories and extant versions of epistemicism and coins the term 'episteme-linguistic' to describe the latter.

($I_{clear-dr}$) $\exists x$ clearly I am identical with x.

The modified argument now proceeds in virtually the same fashion as the original. Assume ($I_{clear-dr}$), semantic-epistemicism, and for *reductio* composite materialism. Then my uses of 'I' purport to refer to a composite material object. And again, given this, the following instance of (S1) is bound to be true:

(IS1) It is a vague matter whether I comprise an even number of elementary particles.

But (IS1) and semantic-epistemicism entail that the following is false:

(IS3) $\exists x$ clearly I am identical with x.

That (IS3) is false obviously contradicts our assumption that ($I_{clear-dr}$) is true. Hence, if semantic-epistemicism is true and ($I_{clear-dr}$) is true, then composite materialism is false.[7]
  Moreover, ($I_{clear-dr}$) is just as plausible as (I_{dr}). Not only is it plausible to believe that there is something to which my uses of 'I' definitely refer, but it is also plausible to believe that there is something—namely, me—to which my uses of 'I' clearly refer. It is not deeply unclear what thing is referred to by my uses of 'I'. Furthermore, denying ($I_{clear-dr}$), along with accepting that I exist, carries the very same wildly implausible metaphysical commitment as denying (I_{dr}). To see this, consider its denial:

($\sim I_{clear-dr}$) $\forall x$ either clearly it is not the case that I am identical with x or it is
     unclear whether I am identical with x.

  The problem with ($\sim I_{clear-dr}$) is that it implies that there are multiple objects for which it is *unclear* whether 'I' refers to them. These objects are the semantic-epistemicist's candidate referents for 'I'. Again, for the sake of simplicity, let D3 and D4 be the only two candidate referents for 'I'. Given semantic-epistemicism, that D3 and D4 are candidate referents for 'I' does not imply that there is no semantic fact that privileges D3 over D4 or vice-versa as a referent for 'I'. Indeed, the semantic-epistemicist thinks that something about the overall actual patterns of use governing 'I' makes one of D3 or D4 the official referent of 'I'. From a semantic perspective, D3 and D4 are not equally eligible referents. In order for D3 and D4 to be equally eligible candidate referents for 'I', then, it must be that there is no *metaphysical fact* that privileges D3 over D4 as the referent of 'I'. And as I argued earlier, this implies that D3 and D4 are the sorts of things that are conscious, experience pain, have beliefs, form desires, and perform actions. So, accepting ($\sim I_{clear-dr}$) requires the very same substantive and implausible metaphysical commitment as did accepting ($\sim I_{dr}$).
  I conclude that ($I_{clear-dr}$) is true. And from this and the earlier conclusion that semantic-epistemicism and ($I_{clear-dr}$) entail that composite materialism is false, it follows that semantic-epistemicism entails that composite materialism is false. If we add here the claim that semantic-epistemicism is true, it follows that composite materialism is false. And this completes the

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[7] Here too SPEECH—more precisely a version of SPEECH in terms of semantic-epistemicism—is an objection to the argument. The modified version of SPEECH, however, does not differ substantially from the original and is thereby vulnerable to the very same objections.

advertised modification of the Vague Singulars Argument. Lesson: Objecting to (4) by endorsing semantic-epistemicism provides only temporary relief from the conclusion of the Vague Singulars Argument. For, as we have seen, a parallel argument shows that semantic-epistemicism is also committed to the denial of composite materialism.

Someone might reply that I have failed to show that the Vague Singulars Argument extends to *epistemicism*, as opposed to a particular version of it, viz., semantic-epistemicism. This is a fair objection and it may very well be that some alternative version of epistemicism is not vulnerable to the Vague Singulars Argument. In reply, though, I reiterate that the most developed version of epistemicism is semantic-epistemicism. Alternative characterizations of epistemicism are certainly worth exploring but none as far as I am aware has been developed in any detail. Moreover, if an alternative version of epistemicism is to succeed as a reply to the Vague Singulars Argument where semantic-epistemicism fails, it shall have to avoid accounting for vagueness in terms of multiple candidate meanings and referents. And this would constitute a significant amendment to extant versions of epistemicism. Hence, even if the above reply is correct, the Vague Singulars Argument still has important implications for theorizing about vagueness.

Objection #3: Metaphysical Vagueness and The Vague Singulars Argument

When describing semantic indecision theories of vagueness in section II, I briefly mentioned what a metaphysical theory of vagueness says about it being vague whether the outback comprises an even number of grains of sand. The outback, so a metaphysical theorist will say, is a metaphysically vague object. In contrast to semantic indecisionists, a metaphysical theorist says that the outback—that thing definitely denoted by 'the outback'—neither definitely comprises nor definitely fails to comprise an even number of grains of sand. That is, according to the metaphysical theorist, there is a property, viz., comprising an even number of grains of sand, and it is indefinite whether the outback has that very property. And 'the outback' is a vague singular term by virtue of denoting such a metaphysically vague object. The crucial question here is this: Does a metaphysical theory of vagueness, unlike semantic-epistemicism, provide a robust reply to the Vague Singulars Argument? Yes and here is why.

According to a metaphysical theory of vagueness, my uses of 'I' can definitely refer to something and remain vague provided that I am a vague object, i.e., provided that for some property, it is indefinite whether I have it. So, a metaphysical theorist can perfectly well accept (IS1)—that it is a vague matter whether I comprise an even number of elementary particles. (Such a person will say that (IS1) is true because I neither definitely have the property of comprising an even number of elementary particles as parts nor definitely fail to have that property.) Moreover, a metaphysical theorist can perfectly well accept (I_{dr}) as well as ($I_{clear-dr}$) and composite materialism. No contradiction can be derived from the supposition of (I_{dr}) or ($I_{clear-dr}$), (IS1), composite materialism, and a metaphysical theory of vagueness. Unlike semantic indecision theories, combining a metaphysical theory with (IS1) and composite materialism does not entail the denial of (I_{dr}). And unlike semantic-epistemicism, combining a metaphysical theory with (IS1) and composite materialism does not entail the denial of ($I_{clear-dr}$). Hence, in contrast to semantic-epistemicism, a metaphysical theory of vagueness blocks the Vague Singulars Argument and parallel modifications thereof, as well. As far as the arguments of this paper are concerned, a metaphysical theory of vagueness is compatible with composite materialism.

Of course, this reply to the Vague Singulars Argument is only as plausible as is a metaphysical theory of vagueness. And many find metaphysical theories objectionable if not outright unintelligible. One reason for this is the thought that metaphysical vagueness commits one to the possibility of indeterminate existence and identity, which in turn many—due in large part to Gareth Evans (1978)—find objectionable if not outright unintelligible. In this paper, I shall not consider this and other objections to metaphysical theories.[8] For my purposes here, it is sufficient to point out that among the most developed extant theories of vagueness only a metaphysical theory allows one to genuinely resist the Vague Singulars Argument.

V. Conclusion

Again, I have not endorsed the Vague Singulars Argument as a cogent argument against composite materialism, nor have I maintained that the argument is fallacious. Cogent or not, however, we have seen that there is something of philosophical importance to take away from the argument. Of course, if the argument is cogent, then we learn that composite materialism is false, a significant lesson indeed. In my view, non-materialists about human persons could do much worse than the Vague Singulars Argument when arguing for their view. But what if the argument is not cogent? In that case, we learn that the most popular extant theories of vagueness—semantic indecision theories and semantic-epistemicism—are false. The lesson can be put thus: If one endorses composite materialism, then one should either adopt a metaphysical theory of vagueness or develop an alternative version of epistemicism, in particular, a version that does not rely on multiple candidate referents for vague singular terms. And this lesson is no less significant than the first.

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[8] In my dissertation, I argue that metaphysical theorists are committed to the possibility of indeterminate existence and identity. For the record, then, I register my view that if you believe that existence and identity cannot be indeterminate, then you should not accept a metaphysical theory of vagueness. It should be noted, though, that some proponents of metaphysical vagueness dispute this. See, for instance, Edgington, 2000 and Tye, 2000.

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