

PHIL/LING 8300: Seminar in Philosophy of Language

Fall 2009

Monday, 9:05 am –12:05 pm

219 Peabody Hall

Yuri Balashov

Topic: Vagueness

Many (perhaps most) expressions of natural language are vague in that they have borderline cases of application. ‘Bald’, ‘child’, ‘short’ and ‘Mount Everest’ are all in this category. A one day old human being is clearly a child, and a forty-five year old is clearly not (well...). But what about a 2587-day old human being? If she’s a child, then it would seem that a 2588-day old human being is: one day cannot make a difference. But this rule seems to apply to any number of days: For every n , if an n -day old human being is a child, then an $n+1$ -day old human being is a child. Combined with ‘A one day old human being is a child’, this entails that a forty-five-year old human being is a child. Something is clearly wrong with this reasoning. Reflection on what, exactly, may be wrong with it has generated a philosophical industry focused on the puzzling and pervasive phenomenon of *vagueness*.

READINGS:

- Timothy Williamson, *Vagueness* (Routledge, 1994)
- R. Keefe and P. Smith, eds., *Vagueness: A Reader* (The MIT Press, 1996)

WORK AND EVALUATION:

- Leading discussions & class participation: 33%
- Take-home midterm: 33%
- Research paper or final take-home exam: 33%

PLAN (**very preliminary, at this point**):

- Weeks 1 – 2: Introduction and Overview
- Weeks 3 – 4: A bit of (fairly recent) history: vagueness versus precision, Frege, Russell, the Black-Hempel debate
- Weeks 5 – n : Many-valued logics and degrees of truth (Machina, Tye, Edgington et al.)
- Weeks $(n+1)$ – m : Supervaluationism (Fine et al)
- Weeks $(m+1)$ – k : The Epistemic View (Williamson)
- The rest is vague, at this point...