

4.3 "Game" and Other Words

4. VAGUENESS

So far, we may have the impression that the relation between words and the world is fairly neat and tidy. Here is a definition of a term, "X"; these are its defining characteristics: A, B, and C. And these are the characteristics that often go along with the defining ones but that aren't part of the definition: D, E, and F. But the situation is far from neat and tidy. We have already considered *ambiguity*: the use of a word to mean more than one kind of thing, as in "bank of the river" and "bank of Manhattan." Most words are ambiguous in one way or another—they are used with more than one meaning, as you can see by consulting any dictionary. But there is another feature that is even more prevalent and less likely to be recognized, namely *vagueness*. Vagueness plays havoc with our neat classification of defining versus non-defining characteristics.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees all of us "due process of law." But what exactly is due process? If you are convicted without a trial, that is clearly not due process; but what if you are tried by a jury that's prejudiced against you? That isn't due process either—but what jury is really impartial (unprejudiced)? If Smith had an expensive defense lawyer, and Jones had only a public defender, is there a difference in due process?

The Constitution prohibits what it calls "cruel and unusual punishment," but doesn't say what this is. Presumably torture and flogging are cruel, and so is a year of solitary confinement. But what about capital punishment? Throughout most of American history, it was not considered cruel, and was surely far from unusual, except for a brief period in the late 1960s when it was outlawed by the Supreme Court. Some consider it exactly the appropriate punishment for murderer; others say that since it involves the taking of a life, it is the cruelest of all. There are some punishments we would say are definitely cruel and others that are definitely not, but in between we can't be sure: the word is vague.

"You've been hanging around this street corner for several hours," the officer says,

and you don't seem to have any aim or purpose. So I'm arresting you for vagrancy." But I'm not a vagrant, says the man; "I had an appointment and the person never showed up."

The term "vagrancy" is vague—fuzzy at the edges; its *range of application* is not clear. The officer is supposed to arrest vagrants and doesn't quite know what to do in this case. So later the law is changed: a vagrant is now defined as anyone who remains in the same city block for at least three hours and has less than five dollars on his or her person. Now the definition of "vagrant" is more precise ("vague" is the opposite of "precise"), and the officer knows what to do. But now we have a different problem: the definition doesn't cover what we want it to cover. Many people with less than five dollars on their person may for various reasons walk a city block for three hours and yet, we believe, not qualify as vagrants. The new law thus seems quite *arbitrary*.

Sometimes the information we can give is not very precise: "Yes, I know he was running fast, but I don't know how fast." If you are a witness in court you may be asked for more precise information, but vague information may be all you can give. (One witness, asked how far the door of the building was from her at the time of the robbery, replied "18 feet, 7½ inches." "How did you know?" asked the astonished attorney, "I was sure that some fool would ask me, so I measured it.")

In daily life we need vague words, but for special purposes, such as science, they are too vague to be useful; for example, we want to know exactly how long a column of mercury is. If the U.S. Bureau of the Census wants to draw a distinction between a town and a city, it draws the line at 5,000 inhabitants, and when a child is born, what was a town of 4,999 is now a city. The borderline is arbitrary, but any other borderline would be just as arbitrary. Yellow shades into orange

and orange into red, and there is no clear break to divide one color from another. Any place we want to draw the line—"That's yellow; no, that's orange"—is arbitrary.

To be convicted, a defendant must be "guilty beyond reasonable doubt." But the phrase "reasonable doubt" is vague; two jurors watching the same trial might disagree as to whether there is reasonable doubt. A person's life might depend on where the line is drawn. Yet to make the phrase more precise seems to be even worse; circumstances differ greatly from case to case, and we can't anticipate which ones should induce doubt. If we were to say "beyond all possibility of doubt," there might be no convictions at all. Other legal terms, such as "due process," are similarly vague.

Sometimes a word is vague not because there is no single cutoff point, but because there are *multiple criteria* for its application. A term may be associated with characteristics A, B, C, D, and E. But if a thing has A, B, and C, the term may apply without D or E. Or, it can have B, C, D, and E but not A and still apply. As long as it has some of the features, the term is applicable. But there may be no one feature that *all* members of the class have in common; the term may be applicable no matter which feature is absent as long as all or most of the others are there. And the others needn't have the same *weight*; having D may count more heavily than having E. In a famous passage, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) said:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games." I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say, "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games,'"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them, you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't

think, but look!—Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all "amusing"? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or: is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience [solitaire]. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like rings-a-ring-a-rose; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the same; many other groups of games in the same way; we can see how similarities crop out and disappear.

Source:

Hospers, John. *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*. 4th Ed. Oxon, UK: Routledge, 1997. 21-23.

- Questions:
- 1) Think of one phrase that has multiple meanings.
 - 2) Think of one meaning with multiple ways of saying it.
 - 3) If we cannot classify games, then why are they so important to us?