

The Sorites Argument and Its Application to the Genesis of People

1. A man with zero hairs on his head is bald.
2. The addition of one hair cannot change a man from bald to non-bald. So if a man with n hairs on his head is bald, a man with $n+1$ hairs on his head is also bald.
3. Every man is either bald or non-bald.
Therefore,
4. Even a man with a full head of hair is bald.

Lesson: The argument is valid. We must reject premise (2), premise (3) or both. (I'm for rejecting both.)

The Linguistic Theory of Vagueness: If it is vague or indeterminate whether x is F , then the predicate “ F ” or the singular term “ x ” must be vague. A word is vague when there are (actual or potential) decisions about how to determine the predicate’s extension—or the boundaries of the objects to which the singular term applies—that have not been settled by competent users of the term.

Examples of vague predicates: “bald” “hot” “heap”

Examples of vague singular terms: “midtown” “the Outback”

The Sorites Argument Applied to People

1. A human zygote is not a person.
2. The addition of one cell cannot change a zygote from non-person to person. So, if a zygote with n cells is not a person, a zygote (or embryo) with $n+1$ cells is not a person.
3. Every entity is either a person or not a person.
Therefore,
4. Even a newborn child is not a person.

Questions: Is “person” a vague predicate? Is it up to speakers of the language to make it more determinate for their conversational purposes? If this is right, does it show that moral argumentation will determine the extension of the predicate “person,” so that the nature of personhood is something that we in part construct rather than discover independently of our moral and political conversations and deliberations?

Thomson’s solution: “Person” is a phase sortal. A fetus becomes a person in the same sense in which an acorn becomes an oak tree, though there will be some vaguely defined interval in which the entity in question is neither a person nor determinately not a person, just as there is some vaguely defined interval in which a given entity (which was an acorn) is neither determinately an oak tree nor determinately not an oak tree.