

Misunderstanding Ourselves: Vagueness and Two Systems of Classification

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A great many of our concepts are vague in the sense that they appear to draw no boundary separating those things that fall under them from those that do not. To take a famous example, by removing one grain at a time from a heap of grains of sand, there will not be a point – a particular number of grains – at which the heap becomes a non-heap. There will be borderline cases of heap before we reach the non-heaps: collections that are neither clearly or determinately heaps or non-heaps. But this seems to suggest that there must be boundaries between the determinate and the borderline cases. Introducing higher order borderline cases to eliminate boundaries at one level merely seems to multiply them a level above.

Attempts to capture the boundaryless nature of vague concepts seem always to bring us back to boundaries. In this paper, I explore whether vagueness and our inability to make sense of it have their roots in a conflict between two systems of categorisation that we have: the pragmatic and the scientific. I explore whether we can say that the pragmatic system is part of System 1 with the scientific is part of System 2 (using the terminology of Stanovich and West). Pragmatic classification is rough and ready classification with the aim of generating a taxonomy good enough for management of the world relative to a creature's aims and restrictions. Scientific classification is classification with the aim of mapping reality at its joints.

Vague concepts are pragmatic classifiers that we attempt to understand from within the scientific system. In so doing, we distort them and generate problems that we can't solve. The distortion is entirely natural, however, for three reasons. First, analysis is naturally undertaken from a scientific perspective. Second, scientific classification is required for complex classification. Third, there is a desire for vague concepts to be stable that leads us to think of them as bounded. If so, there may be no analysis of vagueness that dissolves the tension between being bounded and being boundaryless. Vagueness will always feel problematic.