

# Vagueness, lecture 8: Nihilism.

BENEDICT EASTAUGH, [benedict.eastaugh@lrz.uni-muenchen.de](mailto:benedict.eastaugh@lrz.uni-muenchen.de)

<https://extralogical.net/teaching/vagueness2019.html>

## 1. Against common sense

- The “view of common sense” holds that there are various sorts of “ordinary things” in the world (tables, chairs, etc.).
- Unger [1979] wants to argue that this view is badly mistaken.
- The argument will be concerned with “ordinary inanimate objects”, not people or portions of the “externals” world.

## 2. Direct and indirect arguments against the existence of heaps

- Unger puts forward two arguments using the sorites paradox that there are no heaps.
- One is direct, the other is indirect.
- Unger writes that

Eubulides’ seminal contribution has long labored under the misnomer of ‘the sorites paradox’. But, in any philosophically important sense, there is no paradox here. Rather, we are given two demonstrations of the non-existence of heaps, while no important logical problems come from accepting the conclusion. [Unger 1979, p. 118]

## 3. Decomposing into atoms

- Unger argues that the following set of propositions (p. 120) is inconsistent, and thus there can be no stones; and more generally, no ordinary things.
  1. There is at least one stone.
  2. For anything there may be, if it is a stone, then it consists of many atoms but a finite number.
  3. For anything there may be, if it is a stone (which consists of many atoms but a finite number), then the net removal of one atom, or only a few, in a way which is most innocuous and favorable, will not mean the difference as to whether there is a stone in the situation.
- Unger argues (p. 121) that this does not work as compellingly as a strategy to deny the existence of physical objects.

## 4. Two miracles

- What is the *miracle of metaphysical illusion*?
- Which accounts of vagueness hold that a miracle like this occurs?

- What is the *miracle of conceptual comprehension*?
- Which accounts of vagueness hold that a miracle like this occurs?

## 5. Scheid's argument

- Unger attributes to Scheid an argument based on the notion of an “obliterating part” whose removal from an object would result in the non-existence of the object in question (e.g. 97% of an apple).
- What is Unger's reconstruction of Scheid's argument?
- Is his reconstruction correct? If so, why doesn't it affect his conclusion?

## 6. Many-valued logics

- Unger argues against the possibility of many-valued logics saving the situation.
- Why is this? What exactly is his argument?
- How does his argument connect up with other accounts of vagueness we've discussed previously?

## 7. Aspects of Unger's sorites arguments

- What do you think of his response to the overly-long arguments idea?
- The sorites arguments are often presented temporally, but Unger doesn't take this to be essential. Is he right?
- Unger discusses the distinction between intensional and extensional systems, and argues that this cannot save the common sense view.
  - Is he right about this? Why?
  - How does his abstraction from real cases of destruction work?

## 8. Sorites of accumulation

- Unger proposes another sorites, not destructive but *accumulative*.
- This is supposed to be a *direct* argument that there are no ordinary things. How exactly should we reconstruct it?
- Does his direct argument rely on mathematical induction (top of p. 144)?

## 9. Other options

- Unger doesn't consider all of the rival accounts of vagueness we've studied.
- Do any of them have the conceptual resources to rebut his arguments?

## References

P. Unger. There are no ordinary things. *Synthese*, 41(2):117–154, 1979. doi:10.1007/BF00869568.