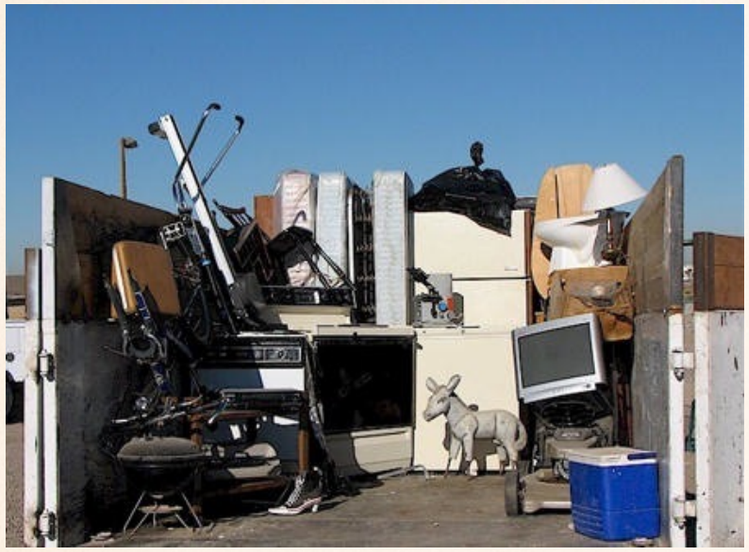
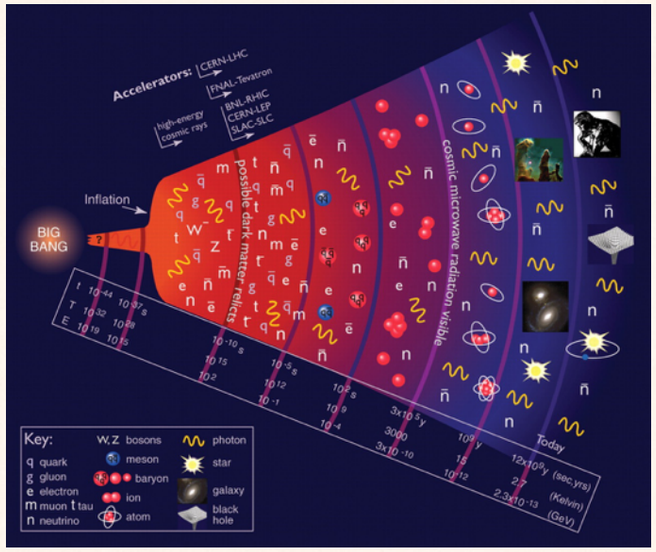
ON WHAT THERE IS

Quine's Criterion of Ontological Commitment

CLAIMANTS TO EXISTENCE



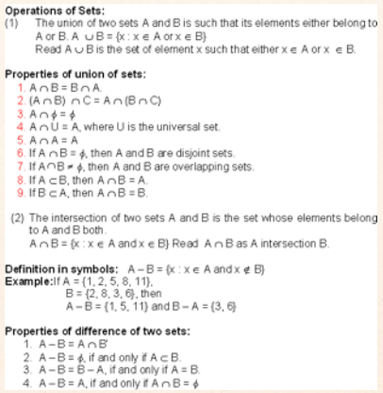
Physical Objects?



Quarks?

Mary, the Mother of God? God?

Universals?



Operations of Sets:

(1) The union of two sets A and B is such that its elements either belong to A or B. $A \cup B = \{x : x \in A \text{ or } x \in B\}$
Read $A \cup B$ is the set of element x such that either $x \in A$ or $x \in B$.

Properties of union of sets:

1. $A \cap B = B \cap A$
2. $(A \cap B) \cap C = A \cap (B \cap C)$
3. $A \cap \phi = \phi$
4. $A \cap U = A$, where U is the universal set.
5. $A \cap A = A$
6. If $A \cap B = \phi$, then A and B are disjoint sets.
7. If $A \cap B \neq \phi$, then A and B are overlapping sets.
8. If $A \subset B$, then $A \cap B = A$.
9. If $B \subset A$, then $A \cap B = B$.

(2) The intersection of two sets A and B is the set whose elements belong to A and B both.
$A \cap B = \{x : x \in A \text{ and } x \in B\}$ Read $A \cap B$ as A intersection B.

Definition in symbols: $A - B = \{x : x \in A \text{ and } x \notin B\}$
Example: If A = {1, 2, 5, 8, 11},
B = {2, 8, 3, 6}, then
A – B = {1, 5, 11} and B – A = {3, 6}

Properties of difference of two sets:

1. $A - B = A \cap B'$
2. $A - B = \phi$, if and only if $A \subset B$.
3. $A - B = B - A$, if and only if A = B.
4. $A - B = A$, if and only if $A \cap B = \phi$

Sets?

Numbers?

AN EASY SLIDE BY MCX

- Things named, must be. . .
  - . . .else we could not be talking about anything at all when we attempted to talk about them.
    - If we weren't talking about anything at all, we would be saying nothing.
      - Yet, we do manage to say *something*—something meaningful—when talking about the things we name.
        - Perhaps, then, things named just are the things we mean.
          - So, our naming discourse is made meaningful by the things we mean. Things meant provide meaning to our naming discourse.
            - Why, things meant just *are* meanings.
              - So, there are meanings; and things named must be.

THE STRUCTURE OF QUINE'S DISCUSSION

- First: stare down the ontologically profligate:
  - Deny Meinongian objects, using Russellean techniques.
  - Decry universals, by lampooning one rather limp argument for their existence.
  - Appeal to Fregean senses in combatting movements to commitment (but then take it back. . .).
- Second: determine when and how and why a theory has ontological commitments.
- Finally: gesture towards selection criteria as between theories with competing ontological commitments.

PLATO'S BEARD

- 'It is some such line of thought that leads philosophers like McX to impute being where they might otherwise be quite content to recognize that there is nothing. Thus, take Pegasus. If Pegasus were not, McX argues, we should not be talking about anything when we use the word; therefore it would be nonsense to say even that Pegasus is not. Thinking to show thus that the denial of Pegasus cannot be coherently maintained, he concludes that Pegasus is.'
—Quine (1948, 1)

PLATO'S BEARD'S ARGUMENT

- Arguing with McX is a mug's game:
  - To say of any *x* '*x* does not exist' is already to say something about *something*, viz. *x*.
  - So, one may argue:

1. One may say meaningfully of any *x* that '*x* does not exist'. [Negative existentials are meaningful.]
2. One says something meaningful of *x* only if one successfully refers to *x*.
3. One may successfully refer to *x* only if *x* exists.
4. Hence, one says something meaningful of *x* only if *x* exists.
5. Negative existentials say something meaningfully of *x*, namely that *x* does not exist.
6. So, negative existentials say meaningfully of *x* that *x* does not exist only if *x* exists.
7. So, negative existentials are bound to be self-undermining: to say of any *x* that *x* does not exist is already to presuppose the existence of *x*.

WHAT?! PEGASUS EXISTS?

- Well, Pegasus exists, but as an idea and not as a physical object.

- ‘McX cannot, indeed, quite persuade himself that any region of space-time, near or remote, contains a flying horse of flesh and blood. Pressed for further details on Pegasus, then, he says that Pegasus is an idea in men’s minds. Here, however, a confusion begins to be apparent. We may for the sake of argument concede that there is an entity, and even a unique entity (though this is rather implausible), which is the mental Pegasus-idea; but this mental entity is not what people are talking about when they deny Pegasus.’ —Quine (1948, 1)

A HIDDEN MULTIPLICITY?

- No, Pegasus is not an idea; and yet Pegasus does not exist *as ordinary horses exist.*

- Instead, Pegasus exists in some other way: some things *subsist*. So, we can in a way maintain:

  - (3) One may successfully refer to *x* only if *x* exists.

- It is just that some of the things which exist are unactualized possibiles.

  - We deny *actualism*, the thesis that what exists is coextensive with what is actual.

QUINE'S COMPLAINTS

- 'Exists' is perfectly univocal.
  - We are not embroiled in a lexical quibble here.
- Wyman's view is unseemly from an aesthetic point of view.
  - It offends the sensibilities of those preferring desert landscapes.
- It takes us into the realm of *de re* modalities, whereas we should restrict ourselves to the more felicitous *de dicto*.
  - We may happily say, 'Necessarily, nine is greater than five.' but we must abjure saying 'Nine is necessarily greater than five.'
    - Or, if you like: 'Possibly, horses fly.' but please *not* 'There are possible flying horses.'
- In any case, impossible objects offer a reductio of this entire approach.

QUINE'S (RUSSELL'S) WAY OUT)

- 'Russell, in his theory of so-called singular descriptions, showed clearly how we might meaningfully use seeming names without supposing that there be the entities allegedly named. The names to which Russell's theory directly applies are complex descriptive names such as 'the author of Waverley', 'the present King of France', 'the round square cupola on Berkeley College'. Russell analyzes such phrases systematically as fragments of the whole sentences in which they occur. The sentence 'The author of Waverley was a poet', for example, is explained as a whole as meaning 'Someone (better: something) wrote Waverley and was a poet, and nothing else wrote Waverley'. (The point of this added clause is to affirm the uniqueness which is implicit in the word 'the', in 'the author of Waverley'.) The sentence 'The round square cupola on Berkeley College is pink' is explained as 'Something is round and square and is a cupola on Berkeley College and is pink, and nothing else is round and square and a cupola on Berkeley College'.'

- $\exists x(Wx \,\&\, Px \,\&\, \forall y(Wy \rightarrow y{=}x))$

- The meaning of a name is its description-theoretic content.

THAT WAY OUT

- ‘We commit ourselves to an ontology containing numbers when we say there are prime numbers larger than a million; we commit ourselves to an ontology containing centaurs when we say there are centaurs; and we commit ourselves to an ontology containing Pegasus when we say Pegasus is. But we do not commit ourselves to an ontology containing Pegasus or the author of Waverley or the round square cupola on Berkeley College when we say that Pegasus or the author of Waverley or the cupola in question is not. We need no longer labor under the delusion that the meaningfulness of a statement containing a singular term presupposes an entity named by the term. A singular term need not name to be significant.’—Quine (1948, 5)

LET US TURN TO UNIVERSALS

- ‘Now let us turn to the ontological problem of universals: the question whether there are such entities as attributes, relations, classes, numbers, functions. McX, characteristically enough, thinks there are. Speaking of attributes, he says: “There are red houses, red roses, red sunsets; this much is prephilosophical common sense in which we must all agree. These houses, roses,and sunsets, then, have something in common; and this which they have in common is all I mean by the attribute of redness.” For McX, thus, there being attributes is even more obvious and trivial than the obvious and trivial fact of there being red houses, roses, and sunsets. This, I think, is characteristic of metaphysics, or at least of that part of metaphysics called ontology: one who regards a statement on this subject as true at all must regard it as trivially true. One’s ontology is basic to the conceptual scheme by which he interprets all experiences, even the most commonplace ones. Judged within some particular conceptual scheme—and how else is judgment possible?—an ontological statement goes without saying, standing in need of no separate justification at all. Ontological statements follow immediately from all manner of casual statements of commonplace fact, just as—from the point of view, anyway, of McX’s conceptual scheme—“There is an attribute” follows from “There are red houses, red roses, red sunsets.”’ — Quine (1948, 5-6)

MCX'S ARGUMENT

1. Mother Theresa is humble.

2. Muhammed Ali is humble.

3. So, there is something MT and MA share, viz. humility.

TWO OBSERVATIONS

- McX: Do not saddle me with a confusion between naming and expressing: these predicates express rather than name the universal *humility*.
  - They are meaningful—and so have meanings.
- Quine: Do not infer 'has a meaning' from 'is meaningful'—not, at any rate, if you mean to reify meanings.
  - We are committed only to those entities whose putative existence cannot be paraphrased away.
    - It is meaningful to say 'The average Swedish couple has 1.7 children.'
      - We do not thereby incur a debt to the existence of a 1.7 child.

PARAPHRASE TESTS

- ‘We may say, for example, that some dogs are white and not thereby commit ourselves to recognizing either doghood or whiteness as entities. “Some dogs are white” says that some things that are dogs are white; and, in order that this statement be true, the things over which the bound variable “something” ranges must include some white dogs, but need not include doghood or whiteness. On the other hand, when we say that some zoological species are cross-fertile we are committing ourselves to recognizing as entities the several species themselves, abstract though they are. We remain so committed at least until we devise some way of so paraphrasing the statement as to show that the seeming reference to species on the part of our bound variable was an avoidable manner of speaking.’ —Quine (1948, 7)

PRELIMINARIES

- Let us say that ϕ is a universal only if:
  - ϕ is an abstract, mind- and language-independent entity which has all of its intrinsic properties essentially (MLIE).
- Let us say that ϕ is a universal if:
  - ϕ is multiply exemplifiable or instantiable or predicable
- If ϕ is able to be spatially located at all, then ϕ is able to be fully present in more than one spatial location concurrently

THE ARGUMENT EXPANDED

1. The queen's crown (a) is circular (is golden . . .)
2. This Olympic medal (b) is circular (is golden. . .).
3. So, there is something, circularity (ϕ) (or being golden (ψ)), which is present in both a and b.
4. The ϕ (ψ) in a and b is either the same or different.
5. It's not different.
6. So, the ϕ (ψ) in a and b is the same in both.
7. No particular can be in more than one place at one time.
8. So, the ϕ (ψ) in a and b is not a particular.
9. Everything which exists is either particular or universal.
10. So, ϕ (ψ) in a and b is a universal.