Web of Belief

Willard Quine (1908-2000) Joseph Ullian (1930- )

I exist (as a thinking thing)

God exists

C & D perceptions are accurate

Math
Geom.

Phys obj’s exist

Mind ≠ Body

Descartes’ Architectural Metaphor

Web of experience

World of experience

Tree branches =

Web attachments =

Observation sentences

Observation Sentences

- Man with a hat putting a white envelope into a mailbox.
- Dean of the law school mailing a birthday check to his daughter in Belgium.
- First sentence is an observation sentence, second one is not.
- Observation sentence: all competent language-users who witness the event will agree whether the sentence is true or not.
- Observation sentences can be false.

Quine’s

Web

Metaphor

What do you see?

Observation Sentences
Observation Sentences

- Observation sentences formulate our beliefs that most directly tie us to the world:
  - “There’s a buzzing sound.”
  - Not: “Dad is sawing.”
  - “Here’s a white patch of color.”
  - Not: “Here’s my pen.”

Non-Observation Sentences

- Starting with observation sentences, I form new beliefs by drawing inferences:
  - From: “I hear a buzzing sound.” and other information I might get: “Dad is sawing.”
  - From: “I see a white patch of color.” and other information I might get: “Here’s my pen.”

What are Deep-seated Beliefs?

- Far removed from direct experience.
- Play a central role in my thinking.
- Belief in God?
- Belief that people are basically good?
- Belief that you are a failure?
- Others?
- Major, career, marriage, children.

What are Deep-seated Beliefs?

- Can these beliefs change? How?
- Conversion experiences.
- How does this look using the web metaphor?
Deep-seated Beliefs

Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997)

"Why a single central principle?"

"The Hedgehog and the Fox" (1953)

Archilochus: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”

Belief

• Evaluate by standard of “reasonable” rather than “absolutely certain.”
• I know something if (p. 13):
  - I believe it.
  - It is true.
  - I have firm grounds/good evidence for my belief.
• More useful for science and everyday life than Descartes’ standard.
Belief

• What is a belief? (p. 10):
  – Not an feeling
  – Not an activity
  – Disposition: to react in certain ways in certain circumstances.

• Can a computer-robot have a belief?

Belief

• How do we form/change beliefs?
  • Some by observation.
  • Most by inference.
  • What set of beliefs best fits together?

Belief

• Detective story (p. 17):
  • Abbott, Babbitt and Cabot are the only suspects in a murder case.
  • Abbott has an alibi (registered in a hotel far away at the time).
  • Babbitt has an alibi (brother-in-law says he was with him, far away).
  • Cabot has an alibi (shown on TV).
  • ∴ Cabot did it?

Belief

• Detective story (p. 17):
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  • Cabot has an alibi (shown on TV).
  • Can’t all be true.

Belief

• Detective story (p. 17):
  • Which of the four statements will we give up?
  • Look for other suspects?
  • Reexamine the alibis of the current suspects.
  • Reject or withhold judgement on at least one of the statements.

Belief

• Reject or withhold judgement on at least one of the statements:
  • Theism: Belief that God exists.
  • Atheism: Belief that God does not exist.
  • Agnosticism: Withhold belief as to whether or not God exists.
Belief

- “Abe Lincoln was the greatest president.”
- “I don’t believe that.”
- Opposite belief: “I believe that is false.”
- Withhold judgement: “I don’t have a belief about that one way or the other.”

Belief

- Are there any guidelines for what beliefs to adopt?
- Not “absolute certainty”.
- The “Virtues” of hypotheses.
- Next time: Chapters 5, 6 & 8 in *The Web of Belief*.