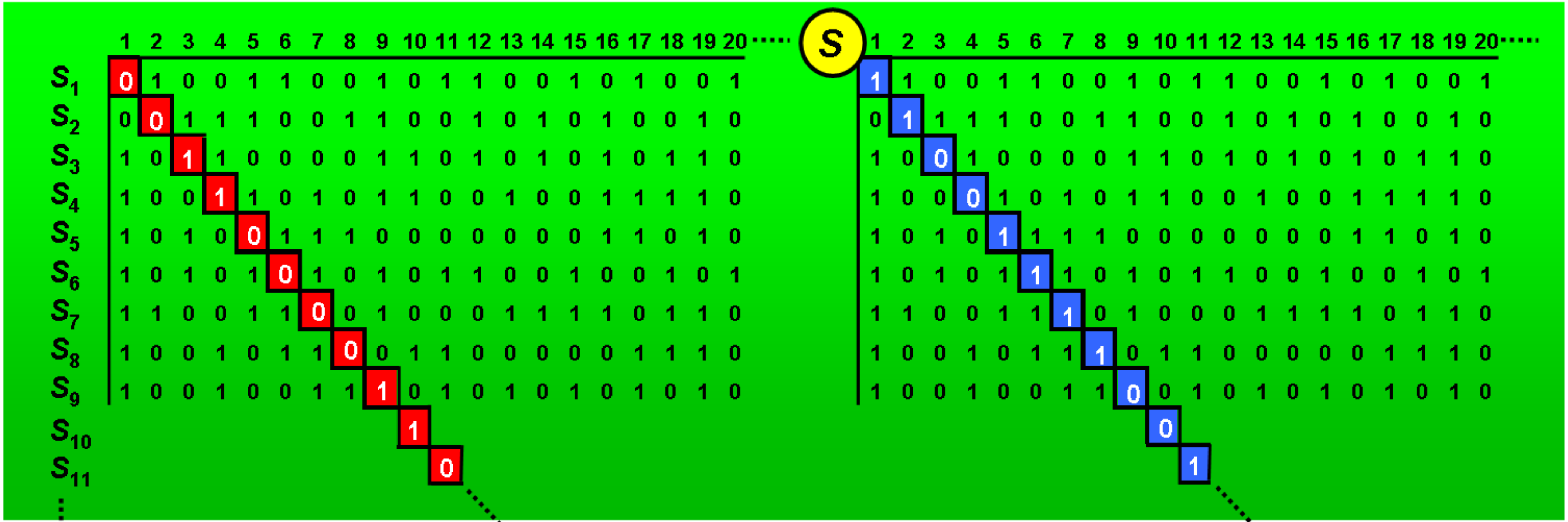
THEOREM OF THE DAY

Cantor's Uncountability Theorem *There are uncountably many infinite 0-1 sequences.*



Proof: Suppose you *could* count the sequences. Label them in order: $S_1, S_2, S_3, \ldots$, and denote by $S_i(j)$ the j-th entry of sequence S_i. Now define a new sequence, S, whose i-th entry is $S_i(i) + 1 \pmod 2$. So S is $S_1(1)+1, S_2(2)+1, S_3(3)+1, S_4(4)+1, \ldots$, with all entries remaindered modulo 2. S is certainly an infinite sequence of 0s and 1s. So it must appear in our list: it is, say, S_k, so its k-th entry is $S_k(k)$. But this is, by definition, $S_k(k) + 1 \pmod 2 \neq S_k(k)$. So we have contradicted the possibility of forming our enumeration. QED.

The theorem establishes that the real numbers are *uncountable* — that is, they cannot be enumerated in a list indexed by the positive integers $(1, 2, 3, \ldots)$. To see this informally, consider the infinite sequences of 0s and 1s to be the binary expansions of fractions (e.g. $0.010011\ldots = 0/2 + 1/4 + 0/8 + 0/16 + 1/32 + 1/64 + \ldots$). More generally, it says that the set of subsets of a countably infinite set is uncountable, and to see *that*, imagine every 0-1 sequence being a different recipe for building a subset: the i-th entry tells you whether to include the i-th element (1) or exclude it (0).

Georg Cantor (1845–1918) discovered this theorem in 1874 but it apparently took another twenty years of thought about what were then new and controversial concepts: 'sets', 'cardinalities', 'orders of infinity', to invent the important proof given here, using the so-called *diagonalisation method*.

Web link: www.math.hawaii.edu/~dale/godel/godel.html. There is an interesting discussion on mathoverflow.net about the history of diagonalisation: type 'earliest diagonal' into their search box.

Further reading: *Mathematics: the Loss of Certainty* by Morris Kline, Oxford University Press, New York, 1980.