Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, November 28

I. Common sense, and atheism, materialism and skepticism

Berkeley urges that his position is more commonsensical than materialism (and the materialistic side of dualism) which leads to atheism and skepticism, §92.

Materialism makes the world independent of God.
We claim that our sensations depend on a world of objects.
This seems to dismiss God from our natural science.
At least it pushes God out of our explanations.
Berkeley sees natural scientific explanations as evidence of atheism.

Berkeley says that materialism also entails that we do not experience the objects in themselves.
We can not get out of our minds into those objects, so we are forced into skepticism.
This is just the Empiricist's Problem.
See Berkeley §86, and following.

Skepticism and atheism are wrong, says Berkeley.
Thus, idealism is right.

Berkeley gets to retain colors, sounds, and smells.
Recall §1 and the apple.
The apple is just how I experience it.
Remember, he thinks there is a real world.
It is just not a material world, §38.

The drawback is that we are left with only our mental states.
Berkeley's world is purely psychological.

II. The Principle of No Good Reason

Remember that Descartes claimed that if the world were Berkeleyan, God would be a deceiver.
Here is an argument that would support Berkeley, against Descartes.
It is an argument for Berkeley's idealism from a Principle of No Good Reason.
The Principle of No Good Reason: God will not do anything if there is no good reason to do it.
Corollary: If God does something, there must be a good reason to do it.

1. If God exists, then he can either create physical objects or not create them.
2. We do not need physical objects in order to have all of our experiences, since God can implant them in our minds directly. (He has to create *and* preserve, anyway!)
3. So, there is no good reason for him to create physical objects, in addition to minds.

4. God exists.
5. God will not do anything if there is no good reason to do it. (The Principle of No Good Reason.)
So, God will not create physical objects.
God just creates our ideas directly, instead of taking the detour through physical objects.

Note that Berkeley does not present this argument himself, though it is implicit in his work.
The argument is a way to draw a wedge between Descartes and Berkeley.
Descartes and Berkeley agree on the key points.
For example, it relies on the existence of God.
This is no problem here, since Descartes and Berkeley agree on it.
If Descartes could have a clear and distinct understanding of this argument, he would have to give up his beliefs in the physical world.

III. The Big Question for Berkeley:

Can we get out of our mental states to refer to, or understand, the world, even if it is not a physical world?
The solipsistic picture of Descartes here returns.
Hume shows that the prospects are even worse for the empiricist, even if you reject Berkeley's idealism.

Recall that Descartes relied on pure reason to generate the knowledge of which he was most certain: of his and God's existence, and of the truths of mathematics.
Locke rejects Descartes' innate knowledge and tries to account for all knowledge while starting with a blank slate.
This made his account of mathematics weak.
Berkeley eliminates mathematics, urging that it is useful, but that our mathematical terms are empty names, like 'physical object', 'redness', or 'table'.

You might think that Berkeley could make mathematical terms refer to our mental states, make them mental objects, as he does with 'apple', a collection of particular experiences.
But to do so would rely on the same process of abstraction which led us to the error of positing physical objects, §118.
Berkeley thinks infinite divisibility is a paradox, §127.
We think that we can divide an inch into ten thousand parts, because we can use it to represent a much larger segment, as on a map, which does represent the longer length.
But to think that we can divide a finite segment into arbitrarily many segments violates the constraints of the minimum sensibilia, the smallest perceivable segment.

Infinite divisibility was an important element of the new science, because the calculus depends on continuity.
That is, the abstraction that Berkeley rejects also serves as the basis for science, for the laws of motion.
Descartes thought these were innate truths.
If these laws were universally valid, then that might serve as an argument for their truth.
And hence for the legitimacy of abstraction.
Berkeley has to construe science in a different way, given his empiricism.
But he doesn't, §30-§32.
This sets the stage for Hume, who will show how laws of nature are completely beyond the reach of the empiricist.