

Alberto Luis-López\*

## The Perils of Freethinking According to Berkeley (1685-1753)

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**Abstract:** George Berkeley's (1685–1753) condemnation of freethinking arose from the social, political, and, above all, moral repercussions that he believed this heterogeneous group was bringing about in British society. In the first part of this paper, I set out the challenges posed by the freethinking movement, drawing extensively on Berkeley's *Alciphron*. In the second part, I address both the reasons behind his aversion to freethinking and his response, which involved advocating for the union of Church and state and while rejecting secular governance. This analysis relies primarily on lesser-known works from Berkeley's socio-political writings. The paper argues that Berkeley's opposition to freethinkers was driven by his concern for the public good and his belief that the Christian religion, particularly in its Anglican tradition, was the most effective means to achieve it.

**Keywords:** Berkeley; freethinking; Christianity; magistrates; Anglicanism; state

### 1. Introduction

Most historians of philosophy know George Berkeley as the philosopher who denies the existence of matter (i.e., for his immaterialism based on the tenet *esse est percipi aut percipere* (NB 429),<sup>1</sup> mainly developed in *Principles and Dialogues*), and as the British empiricist among Locke and Hume. Berkeley, however, was more than that. He was also a

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\* **Corresponding author: Alberto Luis-López**, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada,  
E-mail: [aluislop@uottawa.ca](mailto:aluislop@uottawa.ca)

<sup>1</sup> I use the following abbreviations: AMP = *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher* (dialogue, section, page); ATT = *Advice to the Tories*; DAM = *A Discourse Addressed to Magistrates*; G = *Essays in The Guardian*; M = *Maxims concerning Patriotism*; NB = *Notebooks*; NTV = *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*; PO = *Passive Obedience*; Qu. = *The Querist*; RGB = *An Essay towards Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain*; TVV = *The Theory of Vision*; WW = *A Word to the Wise*. Berkeley's works are cited from *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London: Nelson & Sons Ltd., 1948–1957). *Principles* (PHK) and *Dialogues* (DHP) are cited from Desmond M. Clarke, ed., *Berkeley. Philosophical Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

thinker concerned about the social situation (moral, political, and economic) of his time.<sup>2</sup> For example, his economic interests – inspired by the efforts of the American colonies to combat a depression of trade by issuing paper money,<sup>3</sup> – led him to propose in 1737 the first National Bank in Ireland (Querist 459) which aimed at reforming the Irish monetary system. Despite this, the majority of monographs on Berkeley – with exceptions such as Olscamp (1970), Clark (1989), Caffentzis (2000), Berman (2005), Breuninger (2010), Charles (2015), Airaksinen and Gylling (2017), and Jones (2021),<sup>4</sup> – set aside his socio-political, moral, and economic ideas. Some writers do not even mention these ideas, perhaps because they think they are not germane to immaterialism, theory of vision, or natural science,<sup>5</sup> and those that do usually draw on only two texts, PO and AMP, ignoring the rest.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to this reading, I hold that these ideas are significant because they allow us to understand Berkeley’s project as a unity since they pursue the same goal as his epistemological and metaphysical posits; namely to consolidate a Christian (Anglican), enlightened (rational), and humanistic (doing good),<sup>7</sup> society as Jones (2021), Breuninger (2010), and others have argued before. The

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<sup>2</sup> Sullivan emphasizes this same point by saying of Berkeley: “No books, and less than a handful of articles, have been devoted to his moral philosophy. When we remember that morality and religion were the main interests of Berkeley’s life this hardly seems to do his philosophy justice. He was a social and moral thinker; in active life a missionary, reformer and economic propagandist.” Timothy D. Sullivan, “Berkeley’s moral philosophy,” *Philosophical Studies* 19 (1970), 193–201, at 193.

<sup>3</sup> See James Livesey, “Berkeley, Ireland and Eighteenth-Century Intellectual History,” *Modern Intellectual History* 12 (2015), 453–73, at 454. Also, Hermann Wellenreuther, “Britain’s Political and Economic Response to Emerging Colonial Economic Independence,” in *The Empire of Credit: The Financial Revolution and the British Atlantic World, 1688–1815*, ed. Daniel Carey and Christopher J. Finlay (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 122–39.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Olscamp, *The Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970); Stephen R.L. Clark, *Money, Obedience, and Affection: Essays on Berkeley’s Moral and Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 1989); Constantine G. Caffentzis, *Exciting the Industry of Mankind George Berkeley’s Philosophy of Money* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000); David Berman, *Berkeley and Irish Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2005); Scott Breuninger, *Recovering Bishop Berkeley, Virtue and Society in the Anglo-Irish Context* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Sébastien Charles, ed., *Berkeley Revisited: Moral, Social and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment, 2015); Timo Airaksinen and Heta Gylling, “A Threat Like No Other Threat, George Berkeley against the Freethinkers,” *History of European Ideas* 43 (2017), 598–613; Tom Jones, *George Berkeley: A Philosophical Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Among many examples, I mention only a few: Anthony C. Grayling, *Berkeley: Central Arguments* (London: Duckworth, 1986); Jonathan Dancy, *Berkeley: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); John R. Roberts, *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Talia Mae Bettcher, *Berkeley: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2008); Nick Jones, *Starting with Berkeley* (London: Continuum, 2009); Margaret Atherton, *Berkeley* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019); David Berman, *The Essential Berkeley and Neo-Berkeley* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see James O. Urmson, *Berkeley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Steve Daniel, *Reexamining Berkeley’s Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Bertil Belfrage and Richard Brook, eds., *The Bloomsbury Companion to Berkeley* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Samuel Rickless, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Berkeley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> For Berkeley’s aim to improve the lives of Irish people regardless of creed, see *Two Letters on the Occasion of the Jacobite Rebellion*, *Maxims concerning Patriotism*, and Letter to Thomas Prior, 5 March 1736/37 in Marc A. Hight, ed., *The Correspondence of George Berkeley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 323. See also Aida Ramos, “‘An Invitation to All Persons’: The Dublin Society and Public Reason in Eighteenth-Century Ireland,” *OEconomia* 9 (2019), 436–41.

difference is that while his epistemological and metaphysical ideas constitute his theoretical side, his socio-political ideas, not only religious ones, represent his practical side, so to speak.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Berkeley's philosophical and life project has at least two equally important pillars: the speculative and abstract postulates (which have practical implications) and the socio-political, economic, and moral concerns (which presuppose the other pillar).

This paper, drawing on primary texts and secondary literature from various disciplines, focuses on the latter pillar and has a twofold aim: (i) to present four explanatory motives or causes of Berkeley's concerns about the social impact of freethinkers, from which I will conclude three central ideas about his philosophy, and (ii) to explore the kind of relationship that for him ought to prevail among religion, the Established Church, and civil authority.

## 2. The Challenges Posed by Freethinking

Berkeley's reaction against freethinkers has as a precedent the so-called deism, mainly influenced by Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, and the new physics. Olscamp argues that deism was never a well-formed doctrine, but there were common principles – opposed to those of Berkeley<sup>9</sup> – such as the inclination for natural religion rather than revealed one, the opposition to mysteries, the belief in the ability of each person to discover the truth for themselves (excluding the role of the Church), the thesis that Christianity must be a reasonable religion, and the idea that God is unrelated to His creation, which implied denying divine providence. Some of its main figures were Herbert of Cherbury, Charles Blount, Matthew Tindal, and John Toland, authors who had a direct impact on the next generation.<sup>10</sup>

As for the eighteenth-century freethinkers, they were a diffuse mélange of deists, atheists, skeptics, irreligious, libertines, and non-jurors, that concerned Berkeley all his life. Indeed, he already has them in mind in his early commentaries written between 1707 and 1708, in which he indirectly refers to them in the notes NB 17, 625, 824, and 825. But it is in the 1710 Preface of the PHK where he points out that freethinkers are his target – something that he iterates in PHK 92. There he explains that his work is true, useful, and addressed “to those who are tainted with scepticism, or want a demonstration of the existence and immateriality of God.” The 1713 Preface of the Dialogues points in the same direction as the NB and the PHK, but it incorporates a new element that has important social implications (government): “Whatever may be the result of that loose, rambling way, not altogether improperly termed free-thinking by certain libertines in thought, who can no more endure the restraints of logic than those of religion or government.”<sup>11</sup>

<https://www.degruyter.com/journal/key/jemc/11/2/html>

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<sup>8</sup> Berkeley's immaterialism (NB, PHK, and DHP, from 1707 to 1713), his critique of concepts like force and gravity (*De Motu*, 1721), and his rejection of infinitesimal calculus (*The Analyst*, 1734) were all means for defeating skepticism and atheism and consolidating a Christian society.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Percival of 2 March 1731, in Hight, *Correspondence*, 335. See also TVV §§2, 3, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Olscamp, *Moral Philosophy*, 185–222. See also Sarah Ellen Zweig, *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature, Ancient Heresy, and the Politics of Freethinking, 1660–1760* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 42 ff.

<sup>11</sup> DHP, 153.