

Conference Report: Bishop Berkeley's *Querist* in Context

Daniel Carey and Marc A. Hight

Bishop Berkeley's *The Querist* (1735-37), a wide-ranging work addressing the potential for economic development, banking, and monetary reform in eighteenth-century Ireland, is perhaps the most important contribution to Irish economic thought in the period, even if his farsighted proposals had little practical impact on his peers. On 18-20 May 2017, an international group of scholars met at the Moore Institute, National University of Ireland Galway, to discuss the text's significance, both in relation to Berkeley's philosophical views and the history Irish economic thought and economic conditions. The conference, organized by Bertil Belfrage and Daniel Carey, coincides with the preparation of a new critical edition of *The Querist*, which has a complex publishing history, prepared by Belfrage, the first since Joseph Johnston's in 1970. (In parallel, Roselyne Dégremont is preparing a French translation of Berkeley's text.)

The speakers addressed the following topics:

Bertil Belfrage (Lund University) considered "Berkeley's Social Philosophy," discussing the development of Berkeley's moral philosophy from intolerant fundamentalism expressed in *Passive Obedience* (1712), to the steps towards a social philosophy in *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher* (1732), and a program for a welfare state in *The Querist* (1735-37).

George Caffentzis (University of Southern Maine) presented a paper on "'Exciting the Industry of Mankind': A Response to Critics", in which he responded to reviews of his book on Berkeley's economic thought, *Exciting the Industry of Mankind: George Berkeley's Philosophy of Money*. Caffentzis revisited the context of Berkeley's *Querist* and argued that he not only addressed libertine members of the gentry but also the same constituency that supported a repeal of the agistment tithe in 1735, a tithe that benefited the clergy. He also considered Berkeley's curious choice of the query form to advance his argument.

Daniel Carey (NUI Galway) discussed "Berkeley and Island Nations," describing Berkeley's exploration of the potential for isolating Ireland (as an island nation) from foreign trade in order to improve its prospects, operating in its own economic sphere, and driving its activities with a currency of its own. He proposed bracketing a colonial relationship with Britain, redirecting efforts away from an export-led economy towards one in which domestic interests dictated priorities and possibilities.

Daniel E. Flage (James Madison University) discussed "Social Engineering and Natural Law" in his paper on *The Querist*, suggesting that a natural law theory of social obligation underpins Berkeley's commitment to a concept of common good, with

implications for all members of society, requiring a distinctive system of government to make it possible.

Adam Grzeliński (Nicolaus Copernicus University) considered *The Querist* in relation to the “Development of Berkeley’s Thinking about Economics,” starting with *An Essay Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain* (1721), *A Proposal for the better Supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations* (1724), and *Alciphron* (1732), before turning to *The Querist* and Berkeley’s final iteration of the work in 1750. He argued that *The Querist* outlines a less paternalistic role for the state and a new understanding of how to manage the economic prospects of a religiously heterogeneous population.

Marc A. Hight (Hampden-Sydney College) discussed “From *The Querist* to *Nudge*: A Critical Analysis of Forms of Paternalism,” outlining the nature of Berkeley’s traditional social and economic paternalism, and then used that analysis to motivate new criticisms of contemporary forms of paternalism. In particular, he argued that advocates of the ‘libertarian paternalism’ of Thaler and Sunstein need to respond to challenges inspired by traditional paternalists like Berkeley. Those challenges include providing clear articulations of what constitutes a welfare improvement for individuals and concerns that ‘libertarian’ forms of paternalism are actually disguised versions of traditional paternalism.

David Hilbert (University of Illinois, Chicago) investigated “Money, Power, Vision and Touch” in Berkeley’s work. He proposed that Berkeley’s monetary theory is deliberately modelled on his theory of visual signs. The two domains have a related structure, as systems of signs without any intrinsic value that are used as a guide to what is valuable, produced by a benevolent authority.

Patrick Kelly (Trinity College Dublin) discussed the question: “Is There More to Berkeley’s Decision to Publish the Emasculated Version of *The Querist* in 1750 than his Prefatory Advertisement Implies?” Despite the fact that this version of the text appeared without Berkeley’s detailed arguments in favor of establishing a national bank that feature in the 1735–37 edition, Kelly suggested that Berkeley had not abandoned his ambitions for having the Irish parliament adopt his innovative banking proposals.

Edward McPhail (Dickinson College) and Salim Rashid (Universiti Utara Malaysia/ University of Illinois) discussed “Berkeley’s Rules for Sound Banking” and his guiding principles for maintaining a properly functioning system. Berkeley understood the powerful effects of a bank for promoting economic growth, but he also recognized the inherent instability and fragility of banking and finance. The paper focused on the safeguards he believed would help avoid financial crises, encouraging good behavior and punishing bad.

Eoin Magennis (Ulster University) spoke on “Berkeley’s *Querist* and Understanding the State of Ireland in 1735–37.” The economic predicament of the country was improving when the text appeared after a period of poor harvests, food shortages and declining rents. The political situation, meanwhile, was defined in part by the new speaker of the Irish

house, Henry Boyle MP. In Magennis's account, Berkeley emerges as a perceptive commentator on the economy and body politic of Ireland in a period of conflict and change.

Kenneth L. Pearce (Trinity College Dublin) examined "Berkeley's Immaterialist Monetary Policy." He argued that Berkeley's defense of fiat currency in *The Querist* rests on the same foundation, and formed part of the same basic project, as his defense of immaterialism in the *Principles* and *Dialogues*. Just as no idea could be intrinsically of or about anything independent of how it is used, so no object (like money) could be intrinsically valuable independent of its role in our practices.

Marta Szymańska-Lewoszewska (Nicolaus Copernicus University) addressed "The Influence of *The Querist* on Economic Theory in Poland in the 1740s and 1750s." The 1750 version of the text appeared in a summary by Bishop Józef Andrzej Załuski published in a book on the Polish economy by Stefan Garczyński in 1751. Garczyński had already provided a critique of the Polish situation in 1742. The paper examined the nature of the relation between the Załuski synopsis of Berkeley's work and Garczyński's earlier tract.

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