

## 05 Can we believe what we do not understand? Kenneth Pearce

In *Christianity Not Mysterious*, the Irish philosopher John Toland (Seán Eoghain) argues that it is not possible to believe what we do not understand. If this is so, Toland maintains, then ‘mysteries’ like the Trinity can form no part of religion.

Shortly after the book’s 1696 publication, it was burnt by the public hangman on College Green. A member of the Irish parliament proposed burning the author. Toland fled the country, never to return.

Four years later, George Berkeley, aged 15, arrived in Trinity College Dublin. Toland had not been forgotten. Indeed, Peter Browne – a reactionary conservative who had made a name for himself with a pamphlet opposing Toland’s book and calling for the author’s arrest – had just been elected provost. The problems raised by Toland occupied a central position in Berkeley’s thought throughout his career, but they have often been ignored by scholars.

A churchgoer who recites the Nicene Creed claims to believe that “Jesus Christ...[is] of one substance with the Father.” Toland, Berkeley, and even Browne agree that none of us has any idea what’s meant by the phrase ‘of one substance’. The question that then arises is: *why* do churchgoers say this phrase? If it does not express an idea, what does it accomplish?

According to Toland, religious mysteries are a tool of ‘priestcraft’. By forcing the laity to repeat nonsense words,

the clergy can prevent them from thinking and convince them to adhere blindly to one sect and persecute all others.

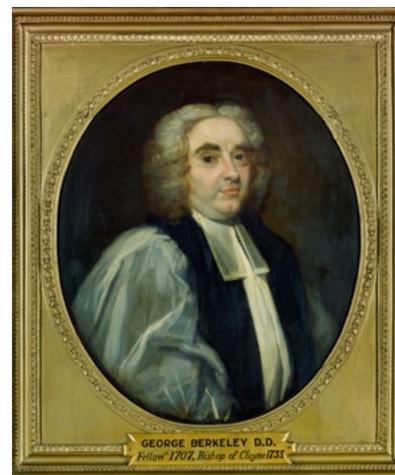
But how could nonsense words do a thing like that? If the sounds have no meaning, how could they do *anything*? This puzzle pushed Berkeley’s thinking about language away from the question *what idea does this word stand for?* and toward the question, *what is this word doing?* Berkeley agrees with Toland that religious words are used to shape the lives of believers, and not to express ideas. From this perspective, the fundamental question between Berkeley and Toland is one that is still with us today: *is this kind of religious talk a force for good or evil in our society?*

This approach to Berkeley is very different from the one found in textbook treatments of early modern philosophy, where Berkeley is one of the three ‘British empiricists’, serving as a bridge between John Locke and David Hume. I’ve previously argued that attention to Berkeley’s local context and his religious concerns can help us better understand his philosophical work. In particular, I believe that this question about how we use words within a community to accomplish practical ends is a driving force throughout Berkeley’s philosophy.

My current book project is further pursuing this contextualization of Berkeley’s thought within early modern Anglicanism. In addition to Toland

and Browne, I am examining other neglected philosophers such as William King, Damaris Masham, Mary Astell, and Anthony Collins. As well as gaining better understanding of Berkeley’s thought, this research will recover forgotten insights into philosophical questions about the nature and rationality of religious belief and its role in religious communities. I hope to complete the book, tentatively entitled *Berkeley’s Religion: A Study in the History of Anglican Philosophy*, by 2023.

**BELOW** – George Berkeley (1685–1753), Ireland’s most famous philosopher, was librarian and Junior Dean in TCD, and subsequently served as Dean of Derry and Bishop of Cloyne.



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**BELOW** — John Toland (1670–1722) was born in Inishowen, Co. Donegal. A philosopher and radical Whig pamphleteer, he is credited with (or blamed for) launching the Deist Controversy in Britain and Ireland.

**BOTTOM** — An early Berkeley manuscript (TCD MS 453) contains extensive discussion of the Toland problem, framed by St Paul's talk of a heavenly reward which "Eye hath not seen nor Ear heard nor hath it enter'd into the Heart of Man to conceive." If we have cannot conceive of this reward, how can St Paul's words be meaningful to us?

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