Chapter 7

Improving Ireland: Luxury, Virtue, and Economic Development

Following his return from Rhode Island in 1732 and the assumption of his new post as the Bishop of Cloyne, Berkeley became acutely engaged with Irish issues. From Berkeley’s vantage point, the primary problems facing Ireland during this period were economic and moral in nature. Cloyne was not particularly wealthy and much of his flock was mired in poverty, but even worse from his perspective was the overall state of the Irish economy. Crippled by British trade restrictions Ireland sorely lacked industry and trade, which limited the general well-being of the nation as a whole. For an individual such as Berkeley who was deeply concerned with the spiritual health of others, the stifling effects of endemic material suffering hampered moral upliftment. As a result, his primary interest upon arriving in Cloyne was to devise a strategy that could alleviate these pressing economic problems.

Berkeley’s Bermuda plan had been predicated upon the notion of transplanting European culture to the New World, but before his departure from Rhode Island he had reconsidered the moral and economic conditions of Europe. Berkeley’s renewed interest in the problems facing Britain and Ireland are shown by his *Alciphron* (1732), which not only took aim at the pernicious doctrines of the freethinkers but also included an extended critique of Mandeville’s defense of luxury that was to prove central to his analysis of vice and virtue in the Irish economy.

Once ensconced at Cloyne, Berkeley launched a “patriotic” call for national renewal that aimed to improve the nation’s economy. In doing so, Berkeley was responding to the dire contemporary economic conditions facing Ireland, a situation that was exacerbated by the dearth of coinage.

S. Breuninger, *Recovering Bishop Berkeley*  
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and fears of foreign luxury consumption by the gentry. Members of the Dublin Society also addressed these problems and their writings provide an important context for understanding the nature and scope of his proposals. With the support of Thomas Prior and Samuel Madden, Berkeley published *The Querist* (1735–37), which illustrates his attitudes toward the sectarian and class differences that plagued Irish society. Berkeley’s hopes for the economic development of his native land were grounded in a vision of Irish patriotism that sought to create a self-sufficient state able to weather the storms of social upheaval.

In his attacks on luxury in *The Alciphron* and broader economic analyses of *The Querist*, Berkeley espoused an appreciation of the need for individuals throughout Ireland to eschew their private interests and work together for the common good. This chapter locates Berkeley’s writings during the 1730s within two related contexts. The first is Berkeley’s engagement with Mandeville over the question of luxury, since this moral critique laid the foundation for his more detailed and practical analysis of the Irish situation. After identifying his position in *The Alciphron*, it will be possible to place his *Querist* within the context of Irish economic thought of the 1730s and examine how he hoped to improve the economic health of the nation and thus ensure the betterment of Ireland as a whole.

I. The Good Bishop and the Luxurious Doctor: Berkeley and Mandeville on Luxury

During the early eighteenth century one of the leading figures calling for the decoupling of morality from the marketplace was Bernard Mandeville, whose *Fable of the Bees* (1705–14) called into question the easy identification of private and public virtue. Outlining the complex relationship between individual actions and their effects on society at large, Mandeville suggested that personal avarice might have benefits for the nation. Berkeley’s *Alciphron* attacked Mandeville’s defense of luxury, basing his argument on an economic system imbued with an ethical dimension grounded in religious devotion.

In *The Fable of the Bees*, Mandeville argued that self-love acted to motivate individuals and that this was beneficial for the common good. In the *Fable*, Mandeville describes a hive living in “luxury and ease” whose inhabitants were nonetheless “knaves.” Although dominated by their “lust and vanity,” the interplay and predictability of these desires among the population ensured that “Luxury Employ’d a Million of the Poor, and odious Pride a Million more.” When the hive decided to cast aside the