Review

Scott Breuninger. *Recovering Bishop Berkeley: Virtue and Society in the Anglo-Irish Context.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xi + 243 pp. ISBN: 978-0-230-10280-4

Berkeley's Moral and Social Considerations Vindicated

Despite some interest in the moral and social views of George Berkeley, few books have been published exclusively on such topics. Scott Breuninger's *Recovering Bishop Berkeley: Virtue and Society in the Anglo-Irish Context* is a rare example of a monograph in English that deals with Berkeley's discussions of practical philosophy.[1] Breuninger's study draws on a distinction between Berkeley the well-known philosopher and the neglected and forgotten bishop. The author assigns Berkeley's moral and social views to the latter persona and suggests that "although his social and political writings may not have placed him among the upper tier of social theorists during this time, his engagement with these figures allows Berkeley to be seen as a "representative figure, a perceptive critic who gave voice to and popularized a number of important ideas during a crucial moment in the formation of modern society" (12).

Recovering Bishop Berkeley is a historical study. As Breuninger claims, it recovers the neglected historical context that has often been omitted in discussions about the philosophical problems broached by Berkeley (5). Influenced by the techniques of contextual intellectual history—represented by Q. Skinner, J. Dunn and J. G. A. Pocock—Breuninger aims at restoring the proper balance in Berkeley studies. For him, this implies recovering "the Bishop Berkeley known to his peers by contextually examining his works that relate to Irish social, moral, and economic problems" (2). Within 243 pages, the author takes up the difficult task of referring to a wide range of Berkeley's works and an impressive list of secondary sources. The study combines a new look at old problems with a panorama of recent interpretations of the moral and social aspects of Berkeley's philosophy.

It is important to emphasize that Breuninger's analysis of Berkeley's social and moral ideas aims to erase the stigma of the "middle empiricist" philosopher. To do that, Breuninger shows Berkeley as a man not only of his particular time but also one of his particular place: Ireland. And so he asserts that Berkeley's "engagement with questions of human nature, political economy, and sociability was central to his goals for improving Ireland and thus marks a crucial part of his contributions to the Irish Enlightenment" (4). According to Breuninger, recognizing the Irish context of Berkeley's views deserves special attention because it is crucial for understanding his arguments on social and moral matters (7).

The main thesis of the study is that Berkeley was an Irish and cosmopolitan patriot. This characterization is based on two ideas (viz., virtue and society) that express the moral and social

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[1] Other monographs considering Berkeley's moral and social philosophy include Paul J. Olscamp, *The Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970); and Stephen R. L. Clark, *Money, Obedience, and Affection: Essays on Berkeley's Moral and Political Thought* (New York: Garland, 1989).

aspect of Berkeley's patriotism and permeate his thinking about the moral and social problems of his times. However, depending on the particular stage in the development of Berkeley's thought, they take different forms. This is shown in the nine chronologically ordered and richly footnoted chapters of the book. Chapters 2–5 refer to Berkeley's presence in the Irish debates concerning religion and politics, and Chapters 6–8 are focused on Berkeley's ideas connected with the New World and later with Ireland.

In Breuninger's view, the issue of Irish patriotism engaged the whole of Ireland, independent of political, religious, and cultural divisions. This is important to keep in mind, especially when discussing Berkeley's alleged Jacobitism. Breuninger recalls, *inter alia*, David Berman's suggestion of Berkeley's double stand on Jacobitism—that is, the supportive one in *Passive Obedience* (1712) and the opposing one in the *Advice to the Tories Who Have Taken the Oaths* (1715). However, his own interpretation rests upon the assumption that the events of the Glorious Revolution were not part of Berkeley's immediate history (16). Breuninger tries to persuade the reader to treat *Passive Obedience* "less as a Tory political pamphlet and more as an exercise in political theory, admittedly one of a conservative bent" (33-34). In attempting to show Berkeley as a coherent thinker, Breuninger notices that Berkeley admits an exception to passive obedience to the sovereign in cases where the sovereign is insane or where the supreme power is undermined by craft or violence. That argument allows Breuninger to claim that "while this may seem to be only a small exception, it shows that Berkeley was willing to entertain the idea that sovereigns need not be obeyed at all times: especially Catholic monarchs who sought to upend the political order of Ireland" (31). This may also be seen as an argument for not considering *Passive Obedience* as a Jacobite pamphlet.

As Breuninger suggests, the practical part of Berkeley's Irish patriotism involved his general attempts to ameliorate the problems of the whole of Ireland, including the morality of its people as well as the economic condition of the state. Berkeley's interest in the latter was expressed, for example, in his *Essay Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain*, the dialogues of *Alciphron*, and late in *The Querist*. He supported the idea of a balance between luxury and poverty, and believed in the human ability to oppose the determinist vision of the cyclical view of national prosperity. Focusing on the importance of work and the industry of people, he rejected mercantilist ideas of the welfare of a state. He represented the trend of contemporary thinking on ameliorating British social conditions by arguing for the restoration of public spirit, morality, popular virtue, and the healing power of religion (84-85). His arguments in the *Guardian* essays against the *Discourse of Free-thinking* by Anthony Collins were directed against the dangers of relying on freethinking and natural religion alone. Breuninger suggests that, unlike the philosophical polemics by Peter Browne and Edward Synge written against John Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious* for an educated audience, Berkeley's discussions are aimed at a popular readership.

As Breuninger claims, in addition to the defense of religion and virtue in society, Berkeley proposed a "cosmopolitan vision of 'improvement' that drew upon Stoic principles" (69). The cosmopolitan perspective present in his works published after 1712 parallels his Irish patriotism. When Berkeley moved to cosmopolitan London in 1713 he "turned his eyes from the traditions of political theory within a nation and towards the more general issues facing humans across different societies" (34). Breuninger does not present his definition of cosmopolitanism *expressis verbis*. Nonetheless, it seems to refer to a broader perspective of the whole human race and care

for its well-being. As such, Berkeley's cosmopolitanism touches neither the questions of international law nor those of a transnational society (as found, e.g., in the works of Grotius and Pufendorf). Instead, Berkeley's interests focus on the situation in Ireland and Britain and the human race generally.

An additional aspect of Berkeley's cosmopolitanism may be seen in his optimistic Bermuda project. Breuninger points to the historical context of Berkeley's plan (i.e., the contemporary writings of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts founded by Thomas Bray in 1701) as well as the classic belief of the migration of empire and learning (the notion of *translatio imperii* or *studii*) popular at the time in Britain (96). Referring to Berkeley's poem "America or the Muse's Refuge" and its popular and contested final stanza, Breuninger considers the interesting question of the possible millennialistic and eschatological interpretations of Berkeley's plan. Regarding this, he presents the reader with a range of different interpretations.[2]

For Breuninger, the source of Berkeley's patriotism and cosmopolitism—the key concepts of the book—lies in Stoicism. This is consistent with a recent interpretive trend.[3] As Breuninger describes it, Berkeley builds his moral and social theory on the Stoic concept of *oikeiôsis,* which means an individual's development in becoming a part of a society (45). Especially in his works written after 1712, Berkeley connects the Stoic *oikeiôsis* not with self-preservation but with our motivation to social life, "a divine imperative for individuals to recognize their connections to others and elevate their own minds, which in turn would lead to the moral uplift of the human race" (39). Together with the religious sentiment, this concept is the core idea of the Berkeley's *Guardian* essay #126, titled by Luce "The Bond of Society." In Breuninger's opinion, this is a seminal work in which Newtonian language is used to express Ciceronian ideas and the parallel between the natural and moral world—something crucial in Berkeley's social and moral thought. In this respect Breuninger shares the point of view of David E. Leary, who like the American historian and sociologist Harry Elmer Barnes, regarded the work as one of the most suggestive essays in the whole history of social philosophy."[4]

Breuninger's picture of Berkeley seems to imply that he was a thinker whose moral and social ideas were consistently developed throughout his life. On the one hand, nothing seems controversial in the general claim that the good of the human race *per se,* as much as that of the Irish people, were constant aims of Berkeley both as a scholar and as a bishop. On the other

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[2] For example, David Berman, *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Costica Bradatan, *The Other Bishop Berkeley: An Exercise in Reenchantment* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); Harry Bracken, "Bishop Berkeley's Messianism," in *Millenarism and Messianism in English Literature and Thought*, ed. R H. Popkin (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 65-80;

[3] See, for example, Stephen Daniel, "Berkeley's Stoic Notion of Spiritual Substance," in *New Interpretations of Berkeley's Thought*, ed. Stephen Daniel (Amherst, MA: Humanity Books, 2008), 203-30; and idem, "Stoicism in Berkeley's Philosophy," in *Berkeley's Lasting Legacy: 300 Years Later*, ed. Timo Airaksinen and Bertil Belfrage (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), 121-34.

[4] See D. E. Leary, "Berkeley's Social Theory: Context and Development," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38 (1977), 635; and H. E. Barnes, ed., *An Introduction to the History of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1948), 52.

hand, when details are taken into consideration, problems arise. For example, Breuninger's emphasis on the category of social appetite and benevolence—which is implicit (in his opinion) in Berkeley's Essay #126—seems to ignore the duty of acting according to set rules (something insisted upon in *Passive Obedience*). Indeed, in *Passive Obedience* paragraph 13, Berkeley criticizes the idea of acting according to benevolence as allowing oneself to succumb to illusory passions.

With its focus on historical context, Scott Breuninger's study enables us to see Berkeley and his commitment to social stakes with the eyes of his contemporaries. The study allows several ways of reading Berkeley. Those who are interested in Berkeley's moral and social philosophy will find it inspiring. Placing Berkeley's works in a wide context which is simultaneously Irish and more general, the study paves the way for further comparative studies on Berkeley's moral and social views at different times in his life. The book may be also regarded as revelatory for those whose interest lies generally in epistemological and metaphysical aspects of Berkeley's thought. For example, in Breuninger's study, the Molyneux problem—which David Berman calls "the root metaphor of Irish philosophy"—takes on added meaning, in that as "a staple of Irish philosophic and religious discourse," it highlights the close connections between philosophy and theology in seventeenth and eighteenth century Ireland (57).[5] Just as other Irish intellectuals (e.g., Peter Browne, Edward Synge) raise questions about the theological implications of the problem, so also does Berkeley. As Breuninger remarks, "If humans could not rely upon their perceptions of physical objects, what assurance could they have of metaphysical (or divine) ones?" (57).

Without doubt *Recovering Bishop Berkeley* is a must-read book for anybody interested in a comprehensive picture of Berkeley's interests, their genesis as well as their contemporary significance. As such, the study is definitely an important item in the bibliography on Berkeley. Moreover, it may also turn out to be a revolutionary one. With its thorough and objective presentation of the social, moral and economic aspects of Berkeley's thought, special focus on its Irish component, and new interpretations of controversial aspects of Berkeley's philosophy, the study is thought provoking. Hopefully, it will discourage future discussions of Berkeley's life and philosophy from beginning with the complaint that there has been less interest in his practical philosophy and the historical context than in his ideas in the fields of epistemology and metaphysics.[6]

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[5] Cf. David Berman, *Berkeley and Irish Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 125.