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**Luxury**

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Introduction

David Hume published the essay “Of Luxury” in 1752. To look at it today is to get a disconcerting feeling that not so much has changed since then! The text reads as if it had just been written recently. This is particularly the case for the main assertions. Hume makes it clear: there are just two opinions that shape thinking about luxury: “While men of libertarian principles bestow praise even on vicious luxury and represent it as highly advantageous to society, men of strenuous morals blame even the most innocent luxury and represent it as the source of all the corruptions, disorders, and factions, incident to civil government”<sup>1</sup>. It is in this respect that the situation has hardly changed — although today we would not be speaking only of men. Nor is it very remarkable, for it must be said: the literature on luxury is modest. It is not central to contemporary research in the humanities, and the few relevant contributions there are oscillate back and forth, incessantly and inflexibly — between censure and glorification. It is still the case today:

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<sup>1</sup> Hume himself published the essay “Of Luxury” under two different titles; David Hume (1993) [1752] “Of Refinement in the Arts,” *Selected Essays*, edited by Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 21.

No matter where one looks, whether in philosophy, in sociology, in economics, theology or even in the broad field of self-help literature for every walk of life, there is hardly anything beyond variations of the two classic views. It seems as if some *tertium non datur* is in effect: luxury is either treated as a problem — if not condemned outright — on social and moral grounds, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau put it in *Emile* of 1762: “This is how luxury and bad taste become inseparable. Wherever taste is expensive, it is false.”<sup>2</sup> Or luxury is defended, if not glorified outright, on economic and political grounds, always returning to the argument familiar from Bernard Mandeville’s famous work of 1714, *The Fable of the Bees*: “The Root of evil Avarice, That damn'd ill-natur'd baneful Vice, was slave to Prodigality, That Noble Sin; whilst Luxury Employ'd a Million of the Poor.”<sup>3</sup> In short: from looking over the literature on luxury over the last three hundred years, one could diagnose an “ambivalence toward excess in the modern period,” as is aptly suggested in the subtitle of Christine Weder and Maximilian Bergengruen’s 2011 anthology *Luxus*.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to cast doubt on the value of discussing the benefits and disadvantages of luxury. Yet it may be equally uncontroversial that for just such a discussion it would be advantageous to know what luxury actually is. We would like to know, after all, what is being praised and condemned. It really is a serious problem: for if we consider the discussion of luxury’s economic and moral value – or the absence of value – from this point of view, we must be prepared for a disappointment. Normally it is simply assumed

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or on Education* (1979) [1762] Translated by Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books, p.341.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Mandeville (1724) [1714] *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, London: J. Tonson, p.10.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Weder and Maximilian Bergengruen, eds. (2011) *Luxus. Die Ambivalenz des Überflüssigen in der Moderne*, Göttingen: Wallstein.

that everyone knows what luxury is. If it is defined at all, then only in passing in a few sentences, or in a concise dictionary definition such as the one found in the work by luxury's great defender, Werner Sombart: "Luxury is an expenditure that exceeds necessity (tr)."<sup>5</sup> Apologists as well as critics work with an easy definition of luxury, usually associating it with excess and prodigality, prestige objects or status symbols, with wealth and comfort, with freeloading and conspicuous consumption, lumping expensive bric-a-brack and pretentious ostentation together. The tenor of the treatment of luxury in the literature is consistent: it is frequently evaluated, but rarely described. The situation is thoroughly familiar from other discussions. At least there is a close correspondence between the forms of inquiry and interests that have almost always determined the way luxury has been studied and those that shape the discussion of, for example, atomic energy. Here, too, the dominant questions are: Is atomic energy sinful, necessary, anti-social, inevitable, irresponsible, or imprudent? Would we rather live in a world with or without atomic energy? The same questions guide reflections on luxury: Is luxury sinful, necessary, anti-social, inevitable, irresponsible, or imprudent? Does luxury make human life better or worse? Would we rather live in a world with or without luxury?

This very comparison with atomic energy, although perhaps unexpected, can show how odd the situation is for the discussion of luxury. For what is easy with atomic energy is difficult with luxury. At least the question "What is atomic energy?" has a clear answer, very different from the question "What is luxury?" If we would like to know what a nuclear reactor is and how it works, we turn to physicists and engineers. If

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<sup>5</sup> The new edition of this book appeared under a different title: Werner Sombart (1996) [1913] *Liebe, Luxus und Kapitalismus. Über die Entstehung der modernen Welt aus dem Geist der Verschwendung* [Love, Luxury and Capitalism. On the Emergence of the Modern World from the Spirit of Extravagance], Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, p.85.

there is disagreement about whether atomic energy is a boon or a threat to a modern society, we know what we are arguing about. And still more important: those in dispute can be sure that they have different views of the same object. Not even that is the case for the controversy about luxury.

It is in fact inexplicable and incomprehensible: The question “What is luxury?” is not a field of systematic research in the humanities. Compare this topic with other social, aesthetic and cultural phenomena. How much theoretical and scientific effort is invested in answering the question “What is beauty?” for example? Or “What is justice?” Hardly anyone would be content with a dictionary definition in answer to these questions. There are long-standing, intensive debates about the sense and meaning of these concepts. That is, there is a concern with understanding the intension of the concept, or to say it in another way: What do we know when we know that something is beautiful or that it is just? In comparison with this, we must emphasize: there is no study of luxury that even comes close to this standard — at least not in the sense of a number of people currently working systematically on the problem of what is meaningfully intended by the concept of luxury. The field rather continues to consist of isolated suggestions.<sup>6</sup> We are very far from such a complex, differentiated research field as we obviously find for concepts of, say, beauty and also justice. Opinions diverge on the question of whether luxury is to be judged good or bad. But with respect to the question of the criteria that make it possible for something to be a luxury in the first place, there has been no discussion, to say nothing of any articulation of differing philosophical positions that would understand the concept and with it the relevant criteria in entirely different ways. The questions at hand

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<sup>6</sup> In particular Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury. A Conceptual and Historical Investigation*. Cambridge 1994.

are: What must be the case for an object to be rightly called a *luxury*? What does one know about something when one knows that it is a luxury? In the process, we should not overlook the excellent historical contributions that carefully reconstruct details of the way the controversy over luxury developed. As already mentioned: The ambivalence of luxury in the modern period — at once the object of contempt and the object of glorification — has been and is thoroughly researched.<sup>7</sup> But as helpful and necessary as historical knowledge is, it cannot replace systematic work toward a meaningful understanding of luxury.

This book is neither an apology for nor a criticism of luxury; there will be no judgement of its existence. The goal of the work is rather to answer the question “what is luxury?” This is to be done solely by means of a description of luxury, and more specifically by means of a resolutely phenomenological description. The phenomenological perspective was chosen because it suits the topic, and this for a simple reason: The question “what is luxury?” can be answered neither scientifically nor in any other way that refers to objective, material facts about luxury goods. You can ask a jeweller to examine a necklace to see whether it is made of genuine gold — but not to see whether it is genuine luxury. You cannot tell from looking at something whether it is a luxury, for it may be one for one person and not for another. But if this is the case, it raises the question “why isn’t everything a luxury?” How can it be that calling something a luxury is not perfectly arbitrary? If not its material qualities, what is it that

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<sup>7</sup> John Sekora, *Luxury. The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1977. Thorsten Meyer and Reinhold Reith (eds.) *Luxus und Konsum. Eine historische Annäherung* [Luxury and Consumption: An Historical Approach], Münster: Waxmann, 2003. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds.) *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century. Debates and Delectable Goods*, London: Palgrave, 2003.

determines whether something has the status of a luxury? Here is a suggestion for resolving these problems. It goes: Something becomes a luxury by being experienced by a person in a particular way. So luxury is always something for someone — and more specifically for someone whose possession of that something is bound up with a particular kind of experience. The approach to the description of luxury just suggested has been known in aesthetics for a long time. For it is also the case that beauty — at least if we hold to Immanuel Kant's understanding of it — does not depend for its existence on the material qualities of something, but rather on the particular experience of its recipient. This furnishes the basic methodological idea of the argumentation that follows: luxury is no more explicable by means of ontological qualities than beauty is; something is beautiful and something is a luxury on the basis of its mental effect on people — and this is the reason the phenomenological perspective fits so well. A luxury is a phenomenon in the specifically phenomenological sense of the word: a something that is *for* someone. Nuclear power stations can be described either scientifically or phenomenologically, luxury only phenomenologically. For luxury is nothing other than a phenomenon. In other words: Without people there would be no luxury. If human beings disappeared from the world, luxury, too, would cease to exist. But nuclear reactors would still be there, for their existence is not bound to human experience. This is the reason the description of luxury presents a truly classic phenomenological task, namely the determination of what in particular characterizes the way luxury goods are given. That is the subject of this book: the search for characteristics of the way something must be experienced in order for it to be a luxury for someone. The thesis of this book goes: This experience, which constitutes luxury in the world of human beings, is a properly aesthetic

experience.

It is not unlikely that this thesis on luxury as an aesthetic experience will irritate, if not actually aggravate some readers. This may arise from a simple misunderstanding, but may also be based on a clear difference of opinion. The simple, if annoying misunderstanding arises when the description of luxury is thought to be extolling something aesthetically noteworthy about ostentation, conspicuous consumption, and exaggerated wealth. In order to avert this misunderstanding from the start, let it be said here as clearly as possible that these frequently unsympathetic expressions of a not infrequently naïve self-aggrandizement by means of a phenomenological description of luxury will not be ennobled or in any way glossed over. The opposite is the case: by thinking of luxury as a form of *aesthetic self-awareness*, doubt arises about whether the *symbolic self-expression* through ostentation can be called luxury at all. Luxury and ostentation are treated as two phenomena with categorically different foundations — and this in particular supports the belief that the question “what is luxury?” cannot be answered using the methods of a theory of symbols. For by fulfilling a symbolic function for someone, for example by putting the owner’s purchasing power on display, an object may become a mark of ostentation or of prestige, but not luxury. Being luxury — and this is the main idea of this book — is bound up with a specific aesthetic experience on the part of the owner.

The next two points are meant to position the following description of luxury with respect to the critical tradition of Theodor W. Adorno. In 1941, in a short, little-noticed yet enormously rigorous critique of the sociologist’s Thorstein Veblen’s critique of luxury, Adorno put forward the idea that substantially shaped the phenomenological

description of luxury attempted here: namely the idea, first, of strictly, categorically distinguishing luxury from “meaningless ostentatious display,”<sup>8</sup> so as, second, to think of it instead as a special moment of “emancipation from the realm of utility.”<sup>9</sup> One can actually say: According to Adorno, a phenomenology of luxury has the task of showing, through description of the phenomenon itself, that the experience of luxury — like the experience of art, to which both he and most other aestheticians devote far more attention — belongs to the basic possibilities for an autonomous subject to “escape the slavery of utility.”<sup>10</sup> It may be immediately clear, as well as in keeping with the sense of Adorno’s statement, that such a phenomenon of luxury is being credited with an aesthetic, ultimately anthropological relevance that contradicts the notions of the *Bildungsbürgertum* [educated middle-class]. For the thesis goes: The subject with a mind of his own, who does not want to be completely co-opted by a functional society, is present in, among other things, luxury.

Still, it is not only when the difference between luxury and ostentation is overlooked that the description of luxury as an aesthetic experience *sui generis* provokes irritation; it also runs into an explicit, overt rejection by representatives of traditional reception aesthetics: From the standpoint of the well-educated middle class, aesthetic experience necessarily arises from an artistic attitude of disinterestedness — which in this respect coincides exactly with Kant’s view; in conventional aesthetics, a recipient is understood to be a contemplative viewer. But this ideal of the receiver cannot be reconciled with the thesis of luxury as a form of aesthetic experience. On the contrary:

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<sup>8</sup> Theodor W. Adorno (1981) [1941] “Veblen’s Attack on Culture,” in: *Prisms*, trans. S. Weber, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981, p.82.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p.74

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 79

This thesis casts doubt on the foundation of an aesthetic in which only mental, intentional objects are suitable for aesthetic experiences, and the possession of an aesthetic object plays no part. In keeping with the basic assumption that continues to shape reception aesthetics, an aesthetic experience is one that changes one's own perception: seeing, hearing, feeling, even smelling — but not possessing. Possession is simply not there. Even if we think of all the forms of sensual perception, even if we include fantasizing and reading, the wide spectrum of possible forms of aesthetic experience is unnecessarily narrowed and reduced as long as aesthetic experience is thought to be exclusively a *special experience of perception*. But human beings don't experience the world through perception alone, after all, and do not depend exclusively on perception for their experience of the world. The phenomenology of luxury makes an effort to expose possession as a mental condition that has a capacity to be modified into a genuine aesthetic experience of autonomy. Possessing something brings a subject into an intentional relationship to the world, a relationship that can, like any other relationship to the world, be performed for performance's sake. For possessing is — in complete contrast to property! — an intentional mental state, in which someone actually has conscious and deliberate control over something. This possessing, like perception, may be performed for the sake of possession, which in turn, in the case of the possession of certain things, leads to an aesthetic experience of luxury. These things are luxury goods — the crucial point being that without the effect of an experience of luxury, these luxury goods would be no luxury goods at all. This is, in any case, the idea that guides this phenomenological description and the reason luxury is considered a form of aesthetic experience. To say it concisely: What for Kant is beauty in the case of perception, is

luxury in the case of possession. Neither beauty nor luxury is an effect of sensuality. It therefore needs to be demonstrated: For the experience of luxury, the recipient need not reflect on the matter in the same way as for beauty, but does need to reflect, in a different way, on the sense of an object prior to any luxury judgment. For he has to judge beforehand *whether such a great expenditure has any meaning, or whether it is exceeding what is technically necessary for something as well as what is anthropologically necessary for someone*. This judgement of something as superfluous, irrational, inappropriate, wasteful and exaggerated, based on reflective powers of judgement, is the condition upon which an aesthetic experience *sui generis* rests in the case of possession. It is in any case given if an object — whether by means of a *disinterested perception oriented toward performance for performance's sake*, or through an *interested possession oriented toward performance for performance's sake* — puts a subject into the special mental state in which he “feels himself”<sup>11</sup> — in Kant’s supremely apt formulation. And in fact: Just as Kant calls for a description of the beautiful as a “*Lebensgefühl*”<sup>12</sup> [feeling of being alive], so too does the description of luxury adhere to this distinctly anthropological interest: it concerns an exceptional mental state in which people sense, feel, notice or become aware of that which characterizes human beings as human beings: their freedom. Neither the causality of the world nor the constraints of rationality determine a human being. In moments of experiencing luxury, the living person feels that he is alive, and that a person can be reasonable only if he or she is not forced to be reasonable.

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<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant (1914) [1789] Kant’s Critique of Judgement, trans. J.H.Bernard, London: Macmillan, p.46.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p.46.

In this book, luxury is presented as a state of human existence that certainly may be attained by means other than the experience of luxury goods. On the contrary: luxury may be placed in a tradition: Friedrich Schiller finds moments of discovery about being human in play, Ernst Jünger in war and in delirium, and Martin Heidegger in fear. But in light of an ever-increasing demand for instrumental rationality and heightened efficiency, luxury in particular seems to gain in appeal as a form of transgression against rationalizing effectiveness. Here the circle closes: For the way this protest against instrumental rationality is to be evaluated, whether one welcomes or rejects it, is another question. This book does not want to judge luxury, but to try to introduce it. It is about the question “what is luxury?” This should not be understood in terms of a dictionary definition, but in a decidedly radical sense. The method is phenomenological, the topic of the book is anthropological: What does luxury mean for human beings?