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DAVID HUME'S ACCOUNT OF LUXURY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Scholarly discussions of the eighteenth-century luxury controversy invariably acknowledge the important role of David Hume, usually identifying him as one of the first to have made a strong case against the traditional view that luxury is morally corrupt and inimical to the survival of the state.[1] But, having said this, they tend to treat Hume rather summarily, often focusing exclusively on the 1752 essay "Of Refinement in the Arts"[2] and generally agreeing with one leading commentator that "Hume's arguments are straightforward, and can be dealt with briefly."[3] On closer examination, however, it appears that Hume's treatment of luxury was more complex in its historical development, and more subtle in its final form, than some have supposed. The first part of the following discussion considers the historical progression of Hume's thinking while the second consists in an analysis of "Refinement," with particular attention to an important but overlooked distinction between the appropriate moral and political responses to luxury.

As a preliminary point, it should be noted that the change and complexity in Hume's account of luxury had much to do with shifts in the term's meaning in the eighteenth century.[4] Having once been primarily a moral term standing for a

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[1]Marshall (2000, p. 635), Raven (1995, pp. 301–303), Coats (1992, vol. 1, pp. 74–75), Sekora (1977, p. 105), Johnson (1937, pp. 292, 295). Even contemporary writers acknowledged Hume's influence on the rehabilitation of the concept of luxury: see especially Pinto (1762, p. 13).

[2]Shortened to "Refinement" for balance of the article.

[3]Brewer (1998, p. 79). See also Marshall (2000, p. 635) and Berry (1994, p. 142ff). James Raven, in an otherwise informative essay on the luxury debate, characterizes "Refinement" as a turning point of the debate, but attributes it to 1742 rather than 1752, suggesting a lack of attention to the historical development of Hume's thought generally. See Raven (1995, p. 303).

[4]See Sekora (1977) and Berry (1994). The term's enduring connotation of moral viciousness tended to frustrate attempts to justify luxury spending from an economic point of view. Hume may have come to recognize the title "Of Luxury" as a rhetorical mistake that gave opponents a quasi-moral ground for responding to what was essentially an economic position rather than an endorsement of profligacy. In *The History of England*, he wrote with evident frustration of just this sort of response from "those who declaim so violently against refinement in the arts, or *what they are pleased to call luxury*" (Hume 1754–62, vol. 3, p. 76; emphasis added). Jean-François Melon

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character trait akin to lasciviousness and profligacy, the word "luxury" had in Hume's time developed two new senses: (1) a "de-moralized" sense (to borrow a term from Christopher Berry)[5] designating the mere *possession*, rather than the characteristic *pursuit*, of objects that gratify the senses without being necessities,[6] and (2) a "concretized" sense referring simply to luxurious objects themselves.[7] Given these developments, conceptual tensions in the luxury debate were nearly inevitable, and such tensions are indeed to be found both within and among the works of Hume.

II. HUME'S DEVELOPING THOUGHT ON LUXURY

Luxury was mentioned in many of Hume's philosophical, economic and historical treatises and essays. The development of his thought is suggested by references in a series of works that preceded "Refinement": *A Treatise of Human Nature* (*Treatise*) of 1739–40, *A True Account of the Behaviour and Conduct of Archibald Stewart, Esq; late Lord Provost of Edinburgh* (*True Account*) of 1748, and *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (*Enquiry*) of 1751. Emerging from these discussions was an inchoate doctrine of luxury that Hume revisited and improved upon in "Refinement," known until 1760 as "Of Luxury."

A Treatise of Human Nature

The single express reference to luxury in the *Treatise* occurs in a section distinguishing moral virtues (qualities of character such as justice and truth-telling) from natural abilities (qualities of character such as genius, prudence, patience, wit and industry). There Hume wrote: "*[P]rodigality, luxury, irresolution, uncertainty*, are vicious, merely because they draw ruin upon us, and incapacitate us for business and action" (1739–40, p. 389).

At the beginning of his philosophical period, therefore, Hume conceived of "luxury" in the traditional way, as a moral term standing for what was almost universally regarded as a vicious quality of character.[8] An admixture of economic thought can be detected even at this stage, however—luxury's *moral* viciousness being

had warned that "The Term Luxury is an idle Name, which should never be employed, in Considerations on Polity, and Commerce: Because it conveyeth uncertain, confused, and false Ideas, the misapplication whereof, might stop Industry in its very Source" (Melon 1734, p. 180).

[5]Berry (1994, p. 101ff).

[6]Mandeville defined "luxury" as "every thing . . . that is not immediately necessary to make Man subsist as he is a living Creature," arguing that trying to define the term less inclusively would be a hopeless task (Mandeville 1705–29, vol. 1, p. 107).

[7]See Raven (1995, p. 301). According to E. A. J. Johnson, these changes of meaning began in the seventeenth century (Johnson 1937, p. 289).

[8]It is not clear whether Hume considered luxury a vice *proper* or a vice in a broader sense paralleling the sense in which he held the natural abilities to be virtues. Luxury does seem to be something that we can control, and for which we might conceivably punished, so it would appear that Hume would have considered it a vice *proper*. (See Hume 1739–40, pp. 388–89.)

identified with its *economic* effects on the luxurious person, as the references to its "draw[ing] ruin upon us" and "incapacitat[ing] us for business" suggest.[9]

A second relevant discussion in the *Treatise*, generally overlooked in subsequent secondary literature, is found in the section "Of our esteem for the rich and powerful." There Hume observed that ordinary people tend to esteem the man of wealth. They do so, he argued, because they sympathize with the happiness that they suppose him to receive from his *de-moralized* luxury—that is, from his possession of such *concretized* luxuries as wine, music, gardens, tables, chairs, scritoires, and coaches (1739–40, pp. 232, 235).[10] Economic luxuries are therefore good, in Hume's view, not so much because they produce economic wealth but because they possess the curious property of generating what might be thought of as a "wealth of sentiment." This begins, as already noted, when the happiness that luxury produces in the man of wealth spreads sympathetically to others, arousing in them warm feelings of esteem. But there is more to it than that, for the rich man's recognition of the esteem of his "inferiors" will make *him* still happier in turn, and this additional happiness, through a further sympathy, leads *them* to esteem *him* all the more—a "third rebound of the original pleasure, after which 'tis difficult to distinguish the images and reflections" of sympathy (1739–40, p. 236).[11]

Thus the two discussions of luxury in the *Treatise* arrive at distinct conclusions. While disapproving *morally* of luxury as a character trait, the Hume of 1739–40 had little if any objection to the "life of luxury" *per se*; that is, in the de-moralized *economic* sense that focuses on the simple fact of possession of "concretized" luxury goods, rather than on the weakness of character that produces an unhealthy desire to acquire them.[12] A certain interpenetration of moral and economic thought is suggested by the rather curious fact that moral luxury was considered virtuous by Hume on account of its economic effects, while economic luxury was to be pursued in virtue of its psychological effects—which Hume, employing the language of his day, might well have described as "moral effects."

[9]This argument was often raised in contemporary moralistic arguments against luxury. For example, Samuel Fawconer wrote: "Many would rather risque the ruin of themselves and their dependants, than not gratify their vanity of distinguishing themselves in a degree of superiority, or at least an equality with their neighbour" (Fawconer 1765, p. 6).

[10]In its first iteration, the sympathy theory advanced in the *Treatise* implied that the rich and fortunate are loved, whilst the poor and miserable are loathed. Recognizing that, in fact, the unfortunate are often pitied, Hume introduced an "epicycle" into the theory, in the form of "extensive sympathy," the subject of Section 2.2.9 of the *Treatise*. However—and this is the relevant point for present purposes—he did not make a symmetrical correction to the other side of the argument. That is, Hume appears to have been content to accept that his theory should imply that we esteem the fortunate—further evidence, one might argue, of his generally favorable attitude to riches.

[11]Hume repeated this reasoning in Section 3.3.6 ("Some farther reflections concerning the natural abilities"), just a few pages after luxury was condemned in Section 3.3.4, indicating that the distinction between Section 3.3.4 and Section 2.2.5 was not the result of carelessness (Hume 1739–40, pp. 392–93). Charles L. Griswold, Jr. notes a similar argument in Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Griswold 1999, p. 128).

[12]The distinction would apply to those who had inherited their wealth, or who had come by it as a by-product of industry. Insofar as such persons were not motivated by a desire to acquire luxurious things, they would not have suffered from the defective character trait of luxury condemned by traditional moralists and by Hume in Section 3.3.4 of the *Treatise*. On the other hand, compare Adam Smith's account of the corruption of character that results from the poor man's attempt to imitate the rich: "To attain to this envied situation, the candidates for fortune too frequently abandon the paths of virtue; for unhappily, the road which leads to the one, and that which leads to the other, lie sometimes in very opposite directions" (Smith 1759, p. 76).

An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals

Luxury received more attention in the *Enquiry*, possibly reflecting Hume's growing interest in economic subjects. The discussion is clearly transitional between those of the *Treatise* and "Refinement," with a more nuanced analysis of the viciousness of moral luxury and increased emphasis on the positive economic effects of de-moralized and concretized luxury.

Hume considered luxury in the *Enquiry*'s discussion of the free-riding "sensible knave." The knave breaches the general rules of justice when it suits him to do so, secure in the knowledge that the system as a whole will be maintained by the reluctance of his honest compatriots to follow his socially duplicitous example. Hume proceeded to argue that the knave would come to regret his decision to sacrifice character for the sake of "worthless toys and gewgaws." For, with "a view to pleasure":

> what comparison between the unbought satisfaction of conversation, society, study, even health and the common beauties of nature, but above all the peaceful reflection on one's own conduct: What comparison, I say, between these, and the feverish, empty amusements of luxury and expence? (1751a, p. 82).[13]

In the *Enquiry*, luxury is condemned not because it "draws ruin" upon a man but because the trifling amusements that it produces come at the cost of forgoing the higher satisfactions of society. Those satisfactions are forgone because the sensible knave's selfish opportunism loses him "all future trust and confidence with mankind" (1751a, p. 82). While this is again a negative view of luxury, it is confined to the context of the sensible knave, a character defined by his willingness to sacrifice justice for the sake of self-interest. In contrast with his position in the *Treatise*, the Hume of the *Enquiry* did not characterize luxury as a vice in any broader sense, remaining silent with respect to those cases in which the pursuit of luxury did not interfere with the pursuit of more honorable and important ends. In its general profile, this foreshadows the doctrine of "Refinement."

The retreat from the *Treatise*'s broad condemnation of moral luxury is still more apparent in the conclusion to Section 2 of the *Enquiry* ("Of Benevolence"). Here, for the first time, Hume expressly recognized the ongoing luxury controversy, in which the traditional view of luxury as "the source of every corruption in government" had lost ground to the contrary opinion that "such refinements rather tend to the encrease of industry, civility, and arts" (Hume 1751a, p. 11). Hume endorsed the challengers' view, characterizing it as one of a number of "juster notions of human affairs" that had forced revisions to long-held "false opinions," requiring men of the day to "regulate anew [their] *moral* as well as *political* sentiments, and represent, as laudable

[13]Compare the following from Hume's 1741 essay "Of the Delicacy of the Taste and Passions":

> [E]very wise man will endeavour to place his happiness on such objects chiefly as depend upon himself: and *that* is not to be *attained* so much by any other means as by this delicacy of sentiment. When a man is possessed of that talent, he is more happy by what pleases his taste, than by what gratifies his appetites, and receives more enjoyment from a poem or a piece of reasoning than the most expensive luxury can afford (Hume 1741b, p. 5).

and innocent, what had formerly been regarded as pernicious or blameable" (1751a, pp. 11–12).[14]

The distinction between moral and political sentiments, and their respective responses to the luxury debate, is a crucial aspect of the argument of both the *Enquiry* and "Refinement." The newly prominent "economic" contributions to the luxury debate were changing the popular impression of luxury in its moral as well as its economic form. This dual effect was a consequence of the appeal by economic luxury's proponents to evidence of its "public utility," which, in Hume's view, was a normative foundation of *both* political and moral judgments. The difficulty with this, Hume implied, was that, while considerations of public utility were undoubtedly relevant to moral judgments, it remained that public utility was probably only "a *part*" of their normative ground (1751a, p. 12). Inherent in the success of the economic arguments, therefore, was a certain danger: that, having shown de-moralized luxury to be *economically* desirable, its proponents would assume that they had proven it *morally* desirable and therefore virtuous. As Hume was to argue in "Refinement," however, the economic and moral questions were separate: one could not conclude *a priori* that both would be resolved in the same way.

The *Treatise*'s discussion of the plain man's esteem for the rich and powerful was reprised in condensed form in the *Enquiry.* Unsurprisingly, this argument formed an important part of Hume's evaluation of economic luxury (1751a, p. 56). Hume wrote again—though with less dependence on the concept of sympathy—of the pleasure that the contemplation of rich men's lives and luxuries brings to others. But he added a further observation, indicative of the evolution of his thought toward "Refinement." Nations in which the possession of riches is the primary criterion of social standing are rife with "corruption, venality, [and] rapine," he wrote, but they are also those in which "[a]rts, manufactures, commerce, agriculture flourish" (1751a, p. 57). This passage, rather Mandevillean in tone, contrasts luxury's moral viciousness with its value as a stimulus of economic activity—the latter consideration being absent in the corresponding section in the *Treatise* but central to "Refinement."

A True Account of the Behaviour and Conduct of Archibald Stewart, Esq.

An anonymously published 1748 pamphlet, the *True Account*, is a third source of early Humean reflections on luxury.[15] Interestingly, the argument of the pamphlet is inconsistent with the position Hume was to take four years later in "Refinement" with respect to the widely discussed question of the effect of a culture of luxury on a nation's military strength. Hume's view in the *True Account*—that national defense requires a hardness of spirit incompatible with luxurious living—amounted to an endorsement of one of the leading contemporary arguments *against* luxury.

[14]In the annotations to his recent edition of the *Enquiry*, Tom Beauchamp suggests that this is a reference to Mandeville, as it might well be. As set out below, however, it is also a representation of what Hume was shortly to undertake in "Refinement" (Hume 1751a, pp. 132–33).

[15]C. George Caffentzis has discussed the significance of this essay for Hume's economic theory. Although he does so in a somewhat different context, he agrees that the *True Account* "posed a terrible paradox and was problematic for Hume as he was writing *Political Discourses*" (Caffentzis 2001, p. 310).

The circumstances that gave rise to the *True Account* made it almost inevitable that it would address the relationship between military strength and luxury. The Edinburgh of Hume's time was a place of refinement, while the Highlanders who bore down on the city during the 1745 rebellion, and quickly took control of it, were, as Hume wrote, "barbarous" (1748, p. 7).[16] The pamphlet was intended to defend Archibald Stewart, Lord Provost of the city, against charges of dereliction of duty.[17] Hume argued that while the unrefined peasant lived a life of drudgery, he looked forward for that very reason to military engagements as his "only source of Honour and Glory" (1748, p. 6). Furthermore, while the peasantry might lack discipline, "as long as they retain a devoted Obedience to their Chieftain" they cannot "be regarded as a contemptible enemy" (1748, p. 6). Edinburgh's man of culture was implicitly contrasted in the *True Account* with a Highlander replete with virtues that could scarcely be predicted on the basis of the later account in "Refinement":

> When Men have fallen into a more civilized Life, and have been allowed to addict themselves entirely to the Cultivation of Arts and Manufactures, the Habit of their Mind, still more than that of their Body, soon renders them entirely unfit for the Use of Arms, and gives a different Direction to their Ambition. Every Man is then desirous to excel his Neighbour in Riches or Address, and laugh at the Imputation of Cowardice or Effeminacy. But the barbarous Highlander, living chiefly by Pasturage, has Leisure to cultivate the Ideas of military Honour; and hearing of nought else but the noble Exploits of his Tribe or Clan, and the renowned Heroes of his Lineage, he soon fancies that he himself is born a Hero as well as a Gentleman (1748, p. 6).

Hume observed that in ages past, before the refinement of the Lowlander, the Highlander was comparatively impotent militarily. Battles in the "antient Civil Wars of *Scotland* ... were decided entirely by the *Douglasses, Carrs, Humes*, and other Low-Country Borderers" who were then of the same rough-hewn character as the Highlander, though more experienced in battle (1748, p. 6).

The concern that Hume felt in 1748 about the economic vulnerability of a luxurious society is also revealed in the following passage:

> I wish his Majesty would be pleased to honour me with the Command of either of the *Highland* Battalions, and that I had some honest *Jesuitical* Clergyman to lay my Scruples; I should think it a very easy Exploit to march them from *Dover* to *Inverness*, rob the Bank of *England* in my Way, and carry my Spoils, without interruption, thro' the whole Nation; provided the Army were disposed to continue mere Spectators of my Prowess (1748, p. 10).

None of what had happened was the fault of Archibald Stewart, he concluded. Little more could be expected of one charged with defending a city "deserted by its timid Inhabitants" (1748, p. 9). Their cowardice was the true cause: to attribute any of the blame to the Lord Provost would be to breach the philosophical principle that

[16]On the Highlanders' entrance into Edinburgh generally, see Robertson (1985).

[17]As a defense, however, its appearance was rather belated, as Stewart had been acquitted several months prior to the pamphlet's publication. See Mossner (1954, p. 183).

bars us from seeking "for more Causes then [sic] are requisite to explain any Phænomenon" (1748, p. 14).

In the *True Account*, therefore, Hume seems to have despaired of the capacity of enlightened society to defend itself against the remnants of barbarism, in which courage and willing self-sacrifice are the most prevalent and impressive virtues. But this was not to say, as Hume was later to suggest, jokingly, to John Wilkes,[18] that the possession of superior martial virtues made the Highlanders a "golden age" culture in comparison with Edinburgh or London. In spite of all their successes, the Highlanders were, in the last analysis, "the bravest *but still the most worthless*" of Scotsmen (1748, p. 8, emphasis added).

III. HUME'S FINAL POSITION: "OF REFINEMENT IN THE ARTS"

The three works considered above produce what is at best a shifting and incomplete account of luxury. A subject of such topical interest clearly deserved better, and Hume obliged by dedicating "Of Refinement in the Arts," one of his political essays, to it. Though barely ten pages long, "Refinement" has a structural complexity reflecting Hume's ambitious purpose of attacking two extreme (and mutually opposed) positions in the luxury debate. That is, Hume wished to refute the view of "libertines," such as Mandeville, that luxury is invariably good, while simultaneously countering the opinion of those "severe moralists," including many churchmen, who believed luxury to be, as it had ever been, an unmitigated and disastrous vice. That the rhetorical tone of "Refinement" should have been negative and oppositional meant that Hume's positive position on luxury emerged only obliquely as a compromise of sorts between the two "extremist" views.

Part I of "Refinement": The Social, Economic and Political Benefits of Luxury

Hume argued in the first part of "Of Refinement in the Arts" against the severe moralists (and his own view in the *Treatise*), that the social and economic effects of luxury are beneficial to the individual and to society at large. While his conclusions bore a distinct resemblance to those of Mandeville, the most prominent "libertine" defender of luxury, they were partly grounded in a distinctively Humean principle—that there is a fundamental human need for psychological stimulation.[19] The flourishing of industry and mechanical arts has a salutary effect on the minds of those who live in their midst:

> men are kept in perpetual occupation, and enjoy, as their reward, the occupation itself, as well as those pleasures which are the fruit of their labour. The mind acquires new vigour; enlarges its powers and faculties; and by an assiduity in honest industry, both satisfies its natural appetites, and prevents the growth of unnatural ones, which commonly spring up, when nourished by ease and idleness (1752a, p. 270).

[18]See page 22 below.

[19]See, for example, *Treatise* 1.4.7 and the illuminating discussion in Rotwein (1955, p. xxxvi ff), as well as the author's "Hume's Vitalism and Its Implications."

Aroused from their lethargy by the growth of weaving, shipbuilding, and other mechanical arts, the minds of men are "put into a fermentation" that leads them, before long, to "cultivate the pleasures of the mind as well as those of the body" (1752a, p. 271). Therefore, the ages that produce great weavers and shipbuilders tend also to be those of great philosophers, generals, and poets (1752a, p. 270).

Equally important were the economic benefits of luxury, referred to in the *Enquiry* but more carefully considered in "Refinement." There Hume argued, for example, that the prospect of luxury acts as a spur to industry:

> where luxury nourishes commerce and industry, the peasants, by a proper cultivation of the land, become rich and independent; while the tradesmen and merchants acquire a share of the property, and draw authority and consideration to that middling rank of men, who are the best and firmest basis of public liberty (1752a, p. 277).[20]

In "Of Commerce," Hume argued that luxury and industry are mutually reinforcing:

> *[D]elicacy* and *industry*, being once awakened, carry [men] on to farther improvements, in every branch of domestic as well as foreign trade. And this perhaps is the chief advantage which arises from a commerce with strangers. It rouses men from their indolence; and presenting the gayer and more opulent part of the nation with objects of luxury . . . raises in them a desire of a more splendid way of life (1752b, p. 264).[21]

Hume's argument that luxury produces increased employment responded to the mercantilists' concern with the same subject, while suggesting that their solution—putting people to work in whatever manner that the national government determined would most effectively improve the country's trade balance—admitted of a less starkly statist alternative.[22]

Nor is increased employment the only beneficial economic effect of industry as stimulated by luxury. There is also the emergence of "extensive commerce," leading to salutary reductions in interest rates, profits, and prices (1752c, pp. 297–302; 1752d, pp. 291–93). In Hume's view, therefore, industry was the ultimate source of national prosperity—in contradistinction to the prevailing mercantilist doctrine that the health of an economy is directly related to its capacity for the accumulation of stocks of precious metals.[23]

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[20]Similar arguments can be found in the work of Hume's immediate predecessors and contemporaries. Melon, for example, had characterized luxury as "the Destroyer of Sloth and Idleness" and as an "Incitement" to follow commercial occupations (Melon 1734, pp. 174, 177), while Mandeville had described it in the *Grumbling Hive* as employing "a Million of the Poor" (Mandeville 1705–29, vol. 1, p. 25). Montesquieu, in *Persian Letter* 106, argued that a culture of luxury produced a passion for getting rich that spread through all classes of society, producing "universal industry and ingenuity" (Montesquieu 1721, p. 195).

[21]This passage might also be interpreted as identifying imitation as an important stimulus to luxury, particularly in the context of foreign trade. While it bears some likeness to Hume's position in the *Treatise* with respect to demoralized and concretized luxury, there was an important difference. In the *Treatise*, Hume had argued that acquaintance with the rich characteristically produces esteem in ordinary men. This psychological argument had its place where the subject was human nature, but in his economic works, with their characteristic focus on human action, Hume argued more ambitiously that such encounters between have-nots and haves resulted in active *emulation* rather than—to use an archaic term—merely passive *estimation*.

[22]See Hollander (1992, pp. 20–21), and Furniss (1920, p. 42 ff.).

[23]See Furniss (1920, ch. iii), and Hollander (1992, p. 19).

Finally, Hume argued that industry and refinement in the arts produce an urbanity that makes men more sober and more sociable—it being unthinkable that one could live happily in solitude "when enriched with science, and possessed of a fund of conversation" (1752a, p. 271). Town life, with its emphasis on luxury and refinement, develops from this: "They flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge; to show their wit or their breeding; their taste in conversation or living, in clothes or furniture. Curiosity allures the wise; vanity the foolish; and pleasure both" (1752a, p. 271).

As the "habit of conversing together" in the close confines of a town produces an "encrease of humanity," Hume was drawn to the conclusion that "*industry, knowledge*, and *humanity*, are linked together by an indissoluble chain" (1752a, p. 271).

In championing the humanity of urban life, Hume opposed the received wisdom of luxury's critics, who considered the burgeoning cities of the eighteenth century as exemplars of the depravity of refinement and unconstrained pleasure-seeking. Erasmus Jones had written of London as "this unwieldy City" where "the *Mall, Play-houses*, and *Masquerades*, are fill'd with Citizens and Young Tradesmen, instead of Gentlemen and Families of Distinction" (1736, p. 4). John Dennis had similarly referred to the capital as an "over-grown Town" and "a visible, palpable Proof of the Growth of *British* Luxury" (1711, p. 11).[24]

To those who thought luxury inimical to the progress of liberty, Hume responded that, in fact, "progress in the arts is rather favourable to liberty, and has a natural tendency to preserve, if not produce a free government" (1752a, p. 277). Where "luxury nourishes commerce and industry," he wrote, members of the peasant class may themselves rise to become independent centers of power and influence. The creation of a "middling rank of men"—the English and Scottish middle classes—had strengthened the lower house of parliament, the "support of our popular government" (1752a, p. 278). As he had argued in *The History of England*, the abolition of the system of entail in the reign of Henry VII had combined with the "beginning luxury and refinements of the age" to dissipate the fortunes of the barons and to increase, correspondingly, the property of the commons (Hume 1754–62, vol. 3, p. 77). In the essay "Of Civil Liberty," however, Hume cited the case of France for the proposition that even the most extraordinary prevalence of refinement in a state will not produce liberty where none existed before (1741a, p. 91).

Hume admired the middle class for this democratizing influence rather than for its wealth as such—an attitude evidenced by his low regard for stockholders. He wrote in "Of Public Credit" that stockholders are of no benefit to the state, no matter how wealthy they might become:

> Adieu to all ideas of nobility, gentry, and family. The stocks can be transferred in an instant, and being in such a fluctuating state, will seldom be transmitted during three generations from father to son. Or were they to remain ever so long in one family, they convey no hereditary authority or credit to the possessor; and by this means, the several ranks of men, which form a kind of independent magistracy in a state, instituted by the hand of nature, are entirely lost; and every man in authority derives his influence from the commission alone of the sovereign (1752e, p. 358).

[24]J. Martin Stafford (1999) argues that the first of the two parts of "Refinement" is primarily a response to Dennis. The second, of course, is directed at the arguments of Mandeville.

Influence is a product of authority, and to have authority one must be able to inspire esteem. As we learn from the *Treatise*, the esteem, or "love," that others might feel for us is produced not only by our characters but by "whatever objects are in the least ally'd or related to us" including riches, houses, gardens, clothes, and other luxurious things (1739–40, p. 183).[25] One whose wealth was not associated with the steady presence of particular objects—but instead with notional or fungible items such as stock—could not as easily arouse the passion of love in others and could not therefore develop the authority and influence necessary to stand, in support of free society, as an independent locus of power.[26] This novel argument, grounded in Humean psychology, provides further support for the social value of ostentatious luxury.

John Dennis was one of many who had raised what was considered one of the most damning arguments against luxury, namely that it made men soft, languid and passive—indeed, "more soft, more languid, and more passive than Women" (1711, p. 15). This he (and others) saw as a matter of grave concern for the State, which could not survive without brave and hardened men to defend it. Classical sources were often referred to as evidence, the following example being found in another of Dennis' works:

> The Pompeyan Army, it seems, was full of Roman Beaus; And Julius Cæsar, says Vertot, who knew the false Delicacy of those effeminate Youths, ordered his Soldiers, in the Battle of Pharsalia, instead of darting their Javelins at a Distance, to strike directly at the Face with them. And it happen'd exactly as that great Man had foreseen; for those effeminate Youths, who were Idolaters of their own Beauty, turn'd their Backs and fled, through the Fear of being deform'd by the Javelins of Cæsar's Soldiers (Dennis 1724, pp. 66–67).

The association of luxury with the military decline of Rome, and of the absence of luxury with the martial strength of Sparta, was arguably the greatest single reason for its poor reputation among many eighteenth-century writers.[27]

As our discussion of the *True Account* showed, Hume himself believed as late as 1748 that luxury leads to the military enfeeblement of the state. By 1752, however, he had clearly changed his mind. For in "Refinement" he was at pains to stress the military superiority of luxurious societies. By stimulating industry and reducing indolence, he reasoned, luxury creates "a *storehouse* of labour" which, because it is normally devoted to superfluities (i.e., the production of commodities that "serve to the ornament

[25]Hume actually wrote these words in respect of the passions of pride and humility, but it is clear that he intended the same analysis to apply to love and hatred. See Hume (1739–40, p. 214).

[26]In the early essay "Whether the British Government Inclines More to an Absolute Monarchy or a Republic," Hume argued that the wealth of the country was then becoming so heavily concentrated in the hands of George II that British liberty was at risk. Even though many Britons may have been modestly prosperous, with a combined wealth exceeding that of their sovereign, the influence of any individual was something closer to an exponential than a linear function of his wealth, Hume appears to have believed. Thus thousands of small holdings would not add up, in respect of influence, to a single fortune even if they should exceed it in simple monetary value (Hume 1741c, p. 49).

[27]Mandeville's response, that luxury will spoil only the upper classes, leaving the "meanest Indigent Part of the Nation, the working slaving People" to fight the wars, as they had always done (Mandeville 1705–29, vol. 1, p. 119), was ridiculed by Dennis: "Luxury can no more be confin'd to any one Part of the Nation, than could the Plague" (Dennis 1724, p. 194). The metaphor of luxury as "contagion" was invoked repeatedly in the eighteenth century. See Dennis (1711, p. vi), Jones (1736, p. 1), and Fawconer (1765, p. 5).

and pleasure of life"), can be painlessly conscripted to "public service" in times of war (1752a, p. 272).[28] Moreover, increased economic activity increases the national revenue, which in turn permits the maintenance of larger standing armies than had been possible in the past. In his accustomed manner, Hume countered ancient examples with a modern one: Louis XIV, he noted, had been able to pay an army of 400,000 in a time of luxury and prosperity, while in the fifteenth century Charles VIII had almost bankrupted the French state by invading Italy with a force of only 20,000.

Hume allowed that the profusion of luxurious habits will produce citizens who are less inclined to violence and cruelty. But he argued that they would not thereby be unfit for war: "Nor need we fear, that men, by losing their ferocity, will lose their martial spirit, or become less undaunted and vigorous in defence of their country or their liberty. The arts have no such effect in enervating either the mind or the body" (1752a, p. 274).

On the contrary, Hume continued, refinement in the arts promotes industry, discipline, virtue and honor, all qualities conducive to military strength. Indeed, honour and virtue were precisely the qualities that Rome lacked, its empire having been lost when luxury crossed the line from innocence to viciousness, leading the Romans to pursue greed and gratifications to the point that they corrupted themselves.[29] Hume also argued that the love of money motivates the unrefined no less than the refined, adding that the chief points of comparison between these two classes of men—virtuousness, discipline, and industry—uniformly favored the latter (1752a, pp. 275–76).

Hume made one interesting concession: he had to admit that Sparta's culture of severe asceticism had not precluded its emergence as a military power. Nevertheless, he insisted that this was an exception and a matter of purely historical interest. In Hume's time there were no populations with the "unnatural" psychological peculiarities of Spartans, nor could a Spartan psychology easily be produced in a people that did not already possess it. This suggests that Hume believed in a historical progress of human nature in which stoicism gave way, with time, to sensibility. He again expressed his belief in such a progression in a 1754 letter to John Wilkes. Professing disappointment that Wilkes had not visited the Highlands during a recent trip north, Hume wrote:

> You woud there have seen human Nature in the golden Age, or rather, indeed, in the Silver: For the Highlanders have degenerated somewhat from the primitive Simplicity of Mankind. But perhaps you have so corrupted a Taste as to prefer your Iron Age, to be met with in London & the south of England; where Luxury & Vice of every kind so much abound. There is no disputing Tastes; and no Opinion is so extravagant as not to find some Partizans (Hume 1754, p. 195).

While Hume's Rousseauian inversion of the scale, with "primitive Simplicity" the high point and London's luxury the low point, must surely have been ironic, the

[28]The last part of this sentence represents an interpretation of Hume's text that may appear to extend its meaning beyond what Hume intended, but which is confirmed by the passage cited from "Of Commerce," as well as by the last words of "Refinement": "And if the sovereign . . . demands the service of his subjects, the labour of the state suffices only to furnish the necessaries of life to the labourers, and can afford nothing to those who are employed in the public service" (Hume 1752a, p. 280; cf. Hume 1752b, p. 263).

[29]Hume referred to this form of luxury as "Asiatic" (Hume 1752a, p. 275). Melon similarly distinguished a type of "indolent Laziness" as "Eastern Luxury" (Melon 1734, p. 176).

suggestion of a progression from one state to another appears to represent a sincerely held view. Hume's assertion in "Of Commerce" that "[s]overeigns must take mankind as they find them, and cannot pretend to introduce any violent change in their principles and ways of thinking" (Hume 1752b, p. 260) suggests that he considered it impossible, as a matter of human psychology, to turn a man of the "Gold" age into one of the "Iron" (or *vice versa*)—or a witty conversationalist of Edinburgh's New Town into a fierce and self-denying Spartan.

Part II of "Refinement": Hume's Case Against Luxury

The second and briefer part of "Refinement" is directed against the second of the two extreme early eighteenth-century views—that, as a rule, the pursuit of luxury is more advantageous to society than its virtuous avoidance. In responding to this "libertine" opinion, Hume had to walk a fine line, establishing that luxury was vicious (in some appropriate sense) while at the same time remaining true to the "pro-luxury" thesis of the essay's first section. He began by distinguishing innocuous and vicious forms of luxury. Focusing his attention on the latter, he argued ingeniously, with the aid of a second distinction, that the libertines have it both right and wrong. They are right inasmuch as the *magistrate*, facing the *practical* task of managing a society of morally imperfect men and women, may find it economically optimal to allow his subjects certain vicious forms of luxury. Nevertheless, Hume held, the libertines are wrong in supposing that this imperative of *policy* (governing the activity of the magistrate) can be transformed into an imperative of *morality* (governing the activity of particular moral agents). However justified the magistrate might be in his "realism" about human moral weakness, it remains the duty of each *individual* to strive for moral perfection. In a final twist to his argument, Hume showed that, were such perfection universally attained, the resulting society would be economically superior to that of the libertines.

Let us now turn to these distinctions. At the beginning of "Refinement," Hume defined "luxury" as a quality of character marked by a "great refinement in the gratification of the senses" (1752a, p. 268). Gratifications, being nothing more than simple moments of pleasure, could not be vicious in themselves, Hume held, and so it followed that luxury could not be vicious in itself. Vicious forms of luxury (the existence of which Hume continued to acknowledge) must therefore be vicious in a *relational* sense—in other words, the moral quality of the luxurious character must depend in some fashion on the circumstances in which it acts.

That Hume thought this to be so is evident from his definition of "vicious luxury"[30] as consisting *only* in that form of luxury that "engrosses all a man's expence, and leaves no ability for such acts of duty and generosity as are required by his situation and fortune" (1752a, p. 279). In contrast, certain cases of luxury are "entirely innocent" simply because "they entrench upon no virtue, but leave ample subject whence to provide for friends, family, and every proper object of generosity or compassion" (1752a, p. 269).

These definitions of "luxury" in its innocent and virtuous forms can be characterized as relational inasmuch as the innocence (or viciousness) of a particular instance of

[30]Hume added that luxury is a "folly" (i.e., imprudent) where it interferes with a man's pursuit of his own greater interest (Hume 1752a, p. 269).

luxury is made to depend on something outside the action itself: namely on the maintenance of (or the failure to maintain) a place in one's life for morally virtuous activity. That the moral viciousness of vicious luxury should be a product of its interference with worthier pursuits was an idea that Hume had begun to develop in the *Enquiry*, although there, curiously, the worthier pursuits were identified as social enjoyments rather than moral duties.[31]

The identification of entrenchment on virtue as the point of distinction between innocent and vicious moral luxury is one of the noteworthy features of "Refinement." Similar views had been advanced by several of Hume's immediate predecessors. Among these was Archibald Campbell, whose *Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue* would likely have been familiar to Hume.[32] In the third of its "treatises," bearing the argumentative title "That *Moral Virtue* promotes *Trade*, and aggrandizes a *Nation*," Campbell had written as follows:

> [I]f a Man indulges to himself the Pleasures which he feels in Meat and Drink, in Buildings, Furnitures, Equipages, and Clothes,[33] or the like, so as to live above his Income, or squander away his Estate, and thereby put himself out of Capacity to serve the Interests of that universal Society whereof he is a Member; or so as thereby to reduce those he is bound immediately to provide for, to Want and Misery . . . I say, if a Man, in his Pursuit after Pleasure, follows any of these, or the like Courses, his Gratifications are vicious, and he is guilty of *Luxury* . . . For Luxury does not ly in any particular Set of agreeable Perceptions, but in our pursuing or indulging them, *after such a Manner, to such a Degree*, or in *such Circumstances, wherein ourselves and others are* Losers, or wherein we run counter to the Self-love *of God*, and our own Species (1733, pp. 495–98).

Campbell's words are suggestive of the view later adopted by Hume that the moral quality of luxury does not depend on the nature of the gratification it involves, but rather on the circumstances in which we indulge ourselves in it.

Among those who had influenced Campbell was John Trenchard. In his anti-Catholic publication *The Independent Whig*, Trenchard had stated that "the Luxury of the Rich (when it does not exceed the Bounds of Vertue and Prudence) is the Wealth and Support of the Poor, and the best judged Charity" (Trenchard 1720, p. 202). Though summary in form, this, too, bears a noteworthy similarity to the argument of "Refinement."

Finally, there was Francis Hutcheson, who in *An Inquiry concerning the Original of our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good* had written:

> And yet if we examine the Matter well, we shall find, that the greatest part of the Actions which are immediately prejudicial to our selves, and are often look'd upon as innocent toward others, do really tend to the publick Detriment, by making us

[31]See page 7, above.

[32]Campbell's *Enquiry* has largely been overlooked by historians of the luxury controversy, e.g., Berry (1994), Sekora (1977), and Johnson (1937). Beauchamp briefly mentions Campbell as a possible influence on Hume's view of luxury in his notes to *Enquiry*. See Hume (1751a, p. 133).

[33]Mandeville referred also to these four items in the same order: "The greatest Excesses of Luxury are shewn in Buildings, Furniture, Equipages and Clothes," although the point that Campbell made in the work under discussion is not the one that Mandeville was making in Remark (L) to *An Inquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue* (Mandeville 1705–29, vol. 1, p. 119).

> incapable of performing the good Offices we could otherwise have done, and perhaps would have been inclin'd to do. This is the Case of Intemperance and extravagant Luxury (1726a, vol. 1, p. 118).

That text contains the essential elements of Hume's thesis, and even hints that only "extravagant" luxury has the bad effects Hutcheson described. Hutcheson had argued elsewhere that the rich man should share his wealth with family, friends, and other deserving persons, but having discharged the duty, he was free to indulge himself as he wished:

> If there be sufficient Wealth to furnish the most Sumptuous Dress, Habitation, Equipage, and Table to the Proprietour, and discharge all Offices of Humanity, in a proportionable rate, why should this be called Vice? It plainly tends to the public Good and injures no Man (Hutcheson 1726b, p. 399).

It was on very similar ground that Hume was to build his own justification of "innocent luxury" in "Refinement." Whatever its motivation might have been, this understanding of luxury reflected the ethic of a secular, commercial society in which morality makes firm but constrained demands. In such a society, one is obliged to extend one's generosity to a limited range of persons, but not indefinitely. Having discharged one's duty to one's intimates, and having shown a measure of compassion to the unfortunate, one may be "luxurious" innocently enough (though imprudent or self-destructive excess—which Hume called *folly*—is to be avoided as assiduously as "other-destructive" *vice*). It does not seem an exaggeration to say that the opening or broadening of the space between virtue and vice played an obstetrical part in the "birth of the modern," permitting choices to be made, interests pursued, and individuality expressed without fear of moral sanction. This neutral space, containing what Hutcheson had called actions of "a middle nature,"[34] was, according to a view widely held in the eighteenth century, the realm of commerce (Hutcheson 1738, pp. 87–88).[35]

Having considered the moral-theoretical background of Hume's thought on luxury—its relational and generally morally neutral character and its connection with the growth of bourgeois life and corresponding devaluation of self-denial—we

[34]This passage is not present in the second edition (1726) of *An Inquiry*, referred to elsewhere here, although it replaced a passage in that edition which was generally to the same effect.

[35]Compare Hume on this point to Smith, who, as Charles L. Griswold, Jr. has observed, offered a limited and "underdetermined" account of the content of a just character. Griswold writes: "And this certainly fits with [Smith's] view of a large commercial society structured in accordance with modern ideas of liberty and rights, for such a society is bound by principles of justice and harbors a great variety of character types" (Griswold 1999, p. 239). To observe that Hume's definition of "luxury" was "relational" is not to categorize it as an instance of moral "relativism." One does not become a relativist merely by holding that a general moral principle might produce different moral judgments in distinct circumstances. Hume made this point himself in "A Dialogue," an appendix to the *Enquiry*, when he wrote: "The RHINE flows north, the RHONE south; yet both spring from the same mountain, and are also actuated, in their opposite directions, by the same principle of gravity. The different inclinations of the ground, on which they run, cause all the difference of their courses" (Hume 1751a, p. 116). However, even this "relational" relativism marks a development for Hume: the idea that a single, consistent moral principle might produce different moral judgments in various circumstances of time and place is absent from the *Treatise*, an intensely psychological analysis of human nature more universalistic in its presuppositions, and thus in its approach to ethics, than the *Enquiry* or "Refinement."

can now focus more closely on the concluding pages of "Refinement," in which Hume attempted to reconcile his moral and economic views of luxury. He began by reaffirming the innocent vs. vicious luxury distinction. Innocent luxury—existing in the vast normative "middle ground" of the neither-right-nor-wrong—was morally permissible by definition, and even economically desirable given its consequences as described in the first part of "Refinement." The question, as Hume framed it, was whether vicious luxury was actually more "advantageous to the public" than the virtuous avoidance of luxury. Were this demonstrably not so—if virtue no less than vice could provide the necessary incentive for industry, prosperity, culture, and defense—the libertines' case would be greatly weakened.

Hume endeavored to prove virtue equal to this task. He asked his readers to imagine a man who, in his eager pursuit of luxury, neglected duty. In so doing, he would contribute to the "indissoluble chain" of industry and cultural activity that Hume had described in the first part of "Refinement"—indeed it was precisely to the resulting social benefits that the libertines typically pointed in justifying their support of luxury over virtue. Hume responded, however, that precisely the same benefits would arise were the man to "correct the vice" and direct his efforts and funds to the relief of the poor or to the education of his own children. In either case, "the same consumption would arise" and similar social and political benefits would surely follow. There would, however, be a distributional difference between the two situations, as Hume illustrated with the following example, "[T]hat labour, which, at present, is employed only in producing a slender gratification to one man, would relieve the necessitous, and bestow satisfaction on hundreds. The same care and toil that raise a dish of peas at CHRISTMAS, would give bread to a whole family during six months" (1752a, p. 279).

In contrast with self-centered luxury, the generous and charitable virtues tended to effect broad distributions of goods, a difference that tipped the balance in virtue's favor, Hume argued. Because virtue produced an equal amount of economic and social activity, while at the same time distributing benefits more fairly, it was arguably more "advantageous to the public" than vicious luxury. Given that public utility was the principal ground cited in luxury's favour by its libertine supporters, Hume's observation, if valid, was a significant and persuasive response to them.[36]

Hume did not overlook the obvious reply—that "without a vicious luxury, the labour would not have been employed at all" (1752a, p. 279). He allowed that the prospect of luxury can generate economic activity that would not have occurred otherwise.[37] And yet, while the vicious pursuit of luxury might be socially more productive than its righteous avoidance, this (in Hume's view) reflects only a

[36]We might therefore wonder whether, in Hume's view, both the political and moral evaluative standpoints are fundamentally utilitarian, with the former recommending a set of actions that are actually maximizing, without insisting on fairness of distribution, and the latter recommending a set of actions that are ideally maximizing and fair from a distributive point of view, but which fall short of being actually maximizing because, given human selfishness, agents are often insufficiently motivated to carry them out. See the related discussion of *Enquiry* at page 235 above.

[37]Hutcheson had also noted that, whatever desirable heights of consumption might be attained by allowing the pursuit of luxury could also be attained by having the rich hand over their surplus wealth to family, friends, or "worthy Persons in Distress" (Hutcheson 1726b, p. 399). Hume's faith in the motivational power of benevolence was weaker than that of his mentor, however.

"defect in human nature" and not a shortcoming in virtue *per se.* "Indolence, selfishness, inattention to others" and other weaknesses might well stand in the way of the utopia of perfect virtue. But—to come to the crucial point—were it to exist, such a world would be morally and economically preferable to any possible world in which vicious luxury existed. Mandeville and his followers were therefore not justified in pretending that the vicious pursuit of luxury is a greater ideal than its virtuous avoidance, or that we should strive, as individuals, for the former rather than the latter. Thus Hume concluded that we must "never pronounce vice in itself advantageous" (1752a, p. 280).

Such, then, was Hume's position on luxury as a matter of morality—a vice when it interferes with duty, neither a vice nor a virtue otherwise. But as a matter of political and economic policy, his opinion of luxury was more favorable. In contrast with personal morality, where we are properly moved by ideals, politics is the art of the possible, a category into which the eradication of indolence and selfishness from human nature does not fall: "For whatever may be the consequence of such a miraculous transformation of mankind, as would endow them with every species of virtue, and free them of every species of vice; this concerns not the magistrate, who aims only at possibilities" (1752a, p. 280).

By stimulating industry and producing the social and political benefits described in the first part of "Refinement," vicious luxury counterbalances and remedies indolence and selfishness, at least "in some measure" (1752a, p. 279).[38] Thus, while Hume agreed that the elimination of every vice would produce a utopian result, he also held that removing just *one* vice from the delicate balance would "render the matter worse": "By banishing *vicious* luxury, without curing sloth and an indifference to others, you only diminish industry in the state, and add nothing to men's charity or their generosity" (1752a, p. 280).

Thus, Hume concluded, there is a vast difference between the answers that we must give to the "moral" and "political" questions of luxury. The magistrate "ought to prefer what is least pernicious to society": "Luxury, when excessive, is the source of many ills; but is in general preferable to sloth and idleness, which would commonly succeed in its place, and are more hurtful both to private persons and to the public" (1752a, p. 280).

Permitting some vicious luxuries is therefore prudent and justifiable from the standpoint of policy. As Hume wrote in "Of Commerce," were it possible to "infuse into each breast ... a passion for public good" it would be possible to banish luxury; however, "as these principles are too disinterested and too difficult to support, it is requisite to govern men by other passions, and animate them with a spirit of avarice and industry, art and luxury" (1752b, p. 263). While each of us is called upon to live by the ideals of virtue, and therefore to avoid vicious luxury, the magistrate is not required to discharge his function as though the citizens of the state have achieved this unreachable ideal—he must deal with his subjects as they are, and is justified in allowing them such vices as will mutually interact to produce a greater good.

[38]Albert O. Hirschman (1977) is the leading authority on eighteenth-century arguments for the virtuous deployment of vice.

In allowing the pursuit of vicious luxury, the magistrate would implicitly endorse an "entrenchment" on duties of beneficence and charity—an unfortunate fact that follows logically from the definition of "vicious luxury" in "Refinement."[39] It is therefore of considerable interest that Hume appears to have believed that redistributive taxation could make up in some measure for the resulting loss to the worse off. One finds evidence of this in "Of Taxes," where he argued that "the best taxes are such as are levied upon consumptions, especially those of luxury; because such taxes are least felt by the people" (Hume 1752f, p. 345). And in a 1751 letter to Mrs. Dysart of Eccles, he had written that "Taxes on Luxury are always most approv'd of," giving the example of his own "portly Belly" as evidence that he enjoyed "greater plenty than he [put] to a good use," making it "fit to reduce him to a level with his fellow subjects by Taxes & impositions" (1751b, p. 160).

IV. CONCLUSION

This analysis of "Refinement" reveals the inaccuracy of the position, adopted by several commentators, that Hume differentiated innocent from vicious luxury on the basis that the one is beneficial, and the other pernicious, to political society (Popkin 1976, p. 1707; Berry 1994, p. 150), or that the distinction is that innocent luxury produces "economic and social goods," while vicious luxury is the "socially unproductive consumption of a small elite" (Marshall 2000, p. 635). Both forms of luxury—innocent and vicious—can be socially beneficial: in fact, as the first part of "Refinement" powerfully reminds us, luxury in general is vital to the prosperity of society, providing an incentive mechanism for industry and, indirectly, *via* the "indissoluble chain," support for military strength and civilized culture.

Where luxury is innocent, it is acceptable from a moral standpoint (as by definition its pursuit is not at cross-purposes with virtue) as well as from the point of view of political or economic policy. Vicious luxury, distinguished from innocent luxury by its inherent inconsistency with the demands of virtue, is a more difficult matter. One of the central questions of "Refinement" is: *When should the distinction between innocent and vicious luxury serve as a guide for action?* Hume's answer, from the standpoint of individual morality, is *always*: from a moral point of view it will always be permissible to pursue innocent luxuries and impermissible to pursue vicious ones. When it comes to economic or political policymaking, however—the standpoint of Hume's "magistrate"—the distinction may be ignored where general economic, political, or military advantage would result from vicious luxury, even though (ironically) those advantages exist only because men and women invariably fail to be perfectly virtuous.

This position on luxury marked the conclusion of a period of development in the course of which Hume shifted from a traditionally negative view of the moral status (the *Treatise*) and military consequences (*True Account*) of luxury to progressively more accepting and liberal views, with a growing focus on economics and policy concerns. Taking these various efforts as a whole, it is reasonable to conclude that

[39]See page 12 above.

Hume's overarching goal was to find a plausible "middle way" between the two extremist positions in the contemporary luxury debate.[40] In "Of Refinement in the Arts," he accomplished this, showing that one might recognize the economic importance of luxury without being compelled to construe it as a moral virtue, and (conversely) that one could acknowledge the moral imperative to avoid luxury without also rejecting social policies encouraging "refinements in the arts"—policies which, in the mind of the Enlightenment, held out the promise of ever-increasing prosperity, freedom, and cultural attainment.

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[40]Clearly, Hume's compromise was weighted heavily in favor of the libertines. More than four-fifths of "Refinement" is devoted to an enthusiastic exposition of Mandevillean arguments demonstrating the social and economic benefits of luxury. The argument against the libertines, on the other hand, barely fills two pages and is so opaque that its substance, as set out in this article, must surely have escaped most of those who have read it. Moreover, the concession that Hume makes to the "severe moralists" is a rather small and technical one: while both innocent and vicious luxury may be properly condoned by the magistrate, vicious luxury should be recognized as a necessary evil and not celebrated as "better" than its virtuous avoidance—virtuous avoidance of vicious luxury being a rather utopian moral imperative that it remains our duty to recognize as individuals.

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