Smith and Kant: An Enquiry into the Ambivalences of Luxury

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This study examines the concept of luxury through the contrasting perspectives of two 18th-century philosophers, exploring its moral, economic and political dimensions in the context of an emerging commercial society. Historically, luxury has been debated as both a driver of social progress and a source of inequality and moral concern. Unlike other contributors to this debate, this analysis focuses on two thinkers, Smith and Kant, who held marginal views on luxury, yet whose work reveals its complex role in liberal political theory. Smith takes an empirical approach, viewing luxury as intertwined with the rationality, sociability and sensitivity of human nature. In this view, luxury supports commerce, industry, and social refinement, ultimately benefiting society despite its association with vanity and excess. It promotes economic development, property rights, and the legal systems necessary to sustain a commercial society. Kant conceptualises luxury through a moral-philosophical lens, viewing it as a matter of duty and autonomy. He condemns luxury when it leads to excesses that are detrimental to individual dignity and communal welfare. This perspective highlights freedom, moral virtue, and culture as being essential to understanding the limits and implications of luxury. Juxtaposing these two perspectives sheds light on the differing conceptions of human nature, morality and societal progress found in modern thought. While one sees luxury as a natural and positive force in economic and social evolution, the other warns of its potential to undermine virtue and social cohesion. Together, these views provide a nuanced understanding of the ambivalent role of luxury in shaping modern liberal societies.

Keywords: Smith, Kant, luxury, philosophical anthropology, commercial society

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In recent decades, luxury has attracted renewed interest from historical and philosophical perspectives. In a previous article[1], I proposed investigating the concept of luxury itself to establish a luxuology, distinguishing three key aspects: the moral, the aesthetic, and the economic. In this article, I will focus on an aspect of my analysis that was previously ignored: the relationship between luxury and political theory. I will pay special attention to two classical authors from the 18th century, whose aesthetic and political considerations were closely interlinked. The choice of the XVIII century is not by chance: one of the greatest debates of that period was the one on luxury. Maxime Berg and Elisabeth Eager once declared extensively that « luxury was the defining issue of the early modern period » [2]. The reason for the pervasiveness of such a topic was, on the one hand, the emergence of commercial society and, on the other hand, the anxieties generated by the pace and extent of social change. A large repertoire, coming from classical antiquity (mainly the Roman one), was used to remark social changes occurring as a consequence of the commercial and financial revolutions.

The arguments of its defenders and critics were almost standard. On the one hand, luxury encourages population growth and the well-being of states circulating money, it serves to replace savage with polite civilised manners, to advance progress and the cultivation of fine arts and to increase the happiness of individuals and the power of the nations. On the other hand, according to the luxury critique, it sustains inequality in

[1] G. Fiori Carones, *Una singola definizione di lusso? Verso una lussuologia*, in "Itinera", XXIX, 2025, pp. 401-413.

[2] M. Berg and E.Eager (ed. by), *Luxury in Eighteenth Century,* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2003, p. 70.

wealth, it ruins the countryside by encouraging city-living, it leads to depopulation, stifles patriotism and weakens courage. Mandeville, Roberston, Hume, Hutcheson, Melon, Voltaire were notably the ones who expressed more loudly such arguments.

In this paper I focus, instead, on two authors who are relatively at the margin of the debate: Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant. A comparison between Smith and Kant's views is relevant insofar both authors were, and somehow are still, considered as theorists of liberalism and Western modernity. Questioning their idea of luxury is then a way to put into question the role of luxury in a modern liberal society. The standard view of this question has generally been limited to describing both Smith's and Kant's rejection of sumptuary laws, whose condemnation lies not so much in their inefficiency as in the rejection of a state that pretends to guide the conduct and pursuit of happiness of its citizens, free human beings[3]. Since such a theme is fairly well known, my aim is to question the relationship between a specific philosophical anthropology[4] and a specific account of luxury in relation to civil life.

Once established the importance of such comparison, two elements deserve attention. Firstly, both Smith and Kant were not so interested in luxury. Secondly, their philosophical systems are very difficult to compare given their methodologies.

Concerning the first matter, Christopher Berry described Smith's attitude toward the luxury critique as characterised by indifference[5]. Smith gives neither a definition of the concept nor provides an analytical framing to establish the pros and cons of the spreading of luxury. Nonetheless, he shares some postures common to his contemporaries: he deals with luxury and effeminacy, with luxury and sumptuary laws, with luxury in opposition to necessities and conveniences. Smith's indifference towards luxury is a common trait with Kant. There is no monograph or article specifically focused on the role luxury plays in Kant's works. The first aim of this article is then to give reasons for Smith and Kant's arguments on luxury.

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[3] S. Fleischacker, *Values behind the market: Kant's response to the "Wealth of Nations"*, in "History of Political Thought", XVII/3, 1996, pp. 379-407.

[4] The analysis of anthropological assumptions for an analysis of luxury is not an entirely new undertaking. Barbara Carnevali has already analyzed the relationship between luxury-prestige and certain philosophical anthropologies, in particular those of Plessner and Gehlen. See B. Carnevali, *Social appearances. A philosophy of display and prestige*, Columbia University Press, New York 2020.

[5] C. Berry, *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment,* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2015, p. 167.

With regard to the comparison between the different views on luxury of such philosophers, my attempt may appear, as just mentioned, a risky undertaking. Among political philosophers, the relationship between Smith and Kant is rarely highlighted, mostly for valid reasons. Firstly, Smith is historically seen as the founding father of a capitalist ethos, that, at first sight, is far away from Kant's interest in the limit of knowledge and in a morality based on duty. Secondly, Kant was not *stricto sensu* a political economist, even though he was keen on reading Turgot, Quesnay and Cantillon. Thirdly, concerning their general methodology, Smith was an empiricist, while Kant was a 'rationalist'. Accordingly, contrary to Smith who saw thinking as a physiological activity congruous and contiguous with all other empirical phenomena, Kant is commonly recognized as the one who wished to investigate the possibilities of cognition, both in relation to the person and to society.

Given such premises, it is obvious that their consideration of morals, strictly linked to a consideration of luxury in the XVIIIth century, should be completely different. According to Smith, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* morality is not only a consequence of intersubjective relations, but general maxims of morality are formed only from experience and induction after having determined what pleases and displeases us[6].

Moreover, he notably writes that they work only in society, in his well-known metaphor it acts as a mirror. Thanks to the presence of others a person is led to think about her character and of the merit and demerit of his sentiments and conduct[7]. The implicit idea is that if there were no human society operating, morality as we understand it would cease to exist. Such an idea would have never been shared by Kant. According to him moral knowledge or laws are outside of or a priori to causal experience. As argued in *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*[8] and the *Kritik der praktische Vernunft*, therefore, the moral practice is conceived as an exercise of free will and not, as Smith claimed, as a behavioural reaction. Moreover, moral truth, according to Kant, cannot be

[6] I. Hont, M. Ignatieff, *Wealth and Virtue*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983, p. 11.

[7] A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), ed. by K. Haakonssen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 129, henceforth TMS.

[8] I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), ed. by M. Gregor and J. Timmermann Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, henceforth *Groundwork*.

reduced to moral contingent practices, linked to social psychology, as a theory of sympathy seems to suggest[9].

Kant's subject, in summary, is capable of being determined by the consciousness of the moral law, an objective entity, in virtue of his freedom[10]. For this reason, luxury is judged in a precise way as I will show. Smith's subject, on the contrary, is only world-based and this is why he limits his analysis to the understanding of which and how sentiments encourage and produce moral behaviour. Smith's luxury, as a consequence, is a more empirical entity than Kant's one, and strictly interlinked with an analysis of human passions.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned differences, which are more interesting for a moral philosopher, do not preclude a comparative analysis in my political and historical perspective and help to better understand their conceptualisation of luxury. Beyond their above-mentioned general relevance to liberal thought, the direct influence of Smith's thought on Kant can be questioned. Indeed, it has recently been shown that Kant was not ignorant of the debates of the Scottish Enlightenment, including those on luxury, but that he also responded to them indirectly[11].

Fleishhacker indeed highlights that Kant had enthusiastically read Smith's earlier works, for example the *TMS* in the early 1770s, when the first translation into German

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[9] The aim of the research was also completely different. Both valued the study of the system of morals of the highest importance. Nonetheless Smith, in the *TMS* underlined, more than Kant, its usefulness and agreeableness. The value of a moral theory, as a consequence, cannot be measured in the precision of precepts, but in their success in helping the philosopher inspire others to act accordingly.

[10] Upon this claim also the way in which a moral subject should behave in relation with another gains relevance. To treat others as ends in themselves depend exclusively on their being free and autonomous beings: « If only rational beings can be ends in themselves, this is not because they have reason, but because they have freedom. Reason is merely a means . . . Reason does not give us dignity . . . But freedom, only freedom alone, makes us ends in ourselves » (*Naturrecht Feyerabend, 1784*) (P. Guyer, *The inclination toward freedom*, in A. Cohen (ed. by), *Kant's Lectures on Anthropology. A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, p. 116).

[11] E. Robinson and C. W. Surprenant (ed. by), *Kant and the Scottish Enlightenment*, Routledge, New York 2018.

appeared[12]. Smith's main work, *The Wealth of Nations*[13], on the contrary, was not so common in Germany. Between 1779, when a review appeared in Nicolai's *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, and the mid-1790s, the *Wealth of Nations* was practically ignored. Nonetheless, Kant alludes to Smith already in 1784-5[14], and the main work of the Scottish philosopher is directly quoted in the *Rechtslehre* of 1797 and in the *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Insight*[15] of 1798. Kant's relationship to Smith appears then evident, and, on this basis, a comparison on the topic of luxury seems warranted.

1. Smith and luxury

Given this chronological primacy of his work, Smith's idea of luxury will be the first under inspection. My aim is then to compare his and Kant's positions with their overall account of the status of a person and her role in society. In particular, I focus on the *Wealth of Nations* and on the three Kantian works[16], dating to the so-called Kant's second period, ie of his critical analysis. Both authors conceive the idea of a human nature common to all men, even though a degree of historicity in the development is relevant in the transformation of habits and passions.

Smith, like other prominent authors in the debate, demonstrates a lack of uniformity in his usage of the term luxury. According to *The Index of the Works of Adam Smith*[17], compiled by K. Haakonseen and A.S. Skinner, Smith mentions the terms luxury and

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[12] C. Lai, *Adam Smith Across Nations: Translations and Receptions of the Wealth of Nations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. XVI.

[13] A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and the Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), W. Playfair (ed. by), Routledge, Abingdon, New York 1995, henceforth WN.

[14] S. Fleischacker, *Values behind the market: Kant's response to the "Wealth of Nations"*, cit., p. 380.

[15] I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), ed. by R.B. Louden, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, henceforth *Anthropology*.

[16] Beyond the previously mentioned *Groundwork* and *Anthropology* also the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* is taken into account, because in all these work, posterior to the publication of Smith's work, the word luxury is present. See I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), ed. by P. De Guyer, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 299, henceforth *CPJ*. The *Groundwork* dates back to 1785, the *CPJ* to 1790 and the *Anthropology* to 1798.

[17] A. Smith, *The Index of the Works of Adam Smith*, ed. by K. Haakonssen and A.S. Skinner, Oxford University Press, Indianapolis 2001.

luxuries in *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of the Nations*, *The Lectures on Jurisprudence*, and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Unlike Kant, Smith does not provide a specific definition of the term. However, his usage aligns with the prevailing meanings of luxury in the ongoing discourse and the English language. In Book Five, for example, luxury is portrayed as an inclination associated with excessive and disorderly merry[18], but luxury is also used to identify, among consumable commodities, non-essential goods in contrast to necessary ones [19].

In essence, there are four main meanings of the term in Smith's quoted works. Firstly, luxury can be understood as an inherent attitude of individuals, related to their private enjoyment of material possessions (« richer clergy have vanity, luxury and spend upon their own pleasures »[20]). Secondly, luxury also refers to the abundance of refined goods found in urban centres and prevalent in a commercial society. Thirdly, the only strict definition of luxury is given in Book Five, in the chapter addressing taxes on commodities. Smith notably writes: « consumable commodities are either necessities or luxuries - under necessaries, therefore, I comprehend, not only those things which nature, but those things which the established rules of decency have rendered necessary to the lowest rank of people. All other things I call luxury; without meaning, by this appellation, to throw the smallest degree of reproach upon the temperate use of them. [...] Nature does not render them necessary for the support of life, and customs nowhere renders it indecent to live without them »[21]. Luxury among consumable commodities is then not here related to a mere logic of price or rarity, but to all the categories of goods, such as tobacco or whisky, a person living in a community with shared costumes, can live without, being not diminished in her self-esteem, given by public recognition. In Book Four Smith mentions soap, salt, leather and candles as examples of necessities in England[22], because they are deemed necessary to conduct a proper life in the public sphere. Lastly, luxury encompasses expenditures associated with the possessions of the wealthy, which also

[18] A. Smith, *WN*, v. III, p. 199.

[19] *Ivi*, v. III, p. 345.

[20] *Ivi*, v. III, p. 217.

[21] *Ivi*, v. III, p. 345.

[22] *Ivi*, v. II, p. 205.

pertains to the dignity of the sovereign[23]. Upon this typology of goods, it is possible, as Smith argues, to levy some taxes in order, for example, to repair the roads to be used by merchants for the necessary commerce. Such luxury is strictly related to vanity and with the attitude of the richer clergy above-mentioned.

The third definition, upon closer inspection, contradicts a bit the second and the fourth ones. Considering the second meaning of the term luxury, leather shoes, soap, etc. are a luxury in the sense of being objects of refinement and being at disposal in a commercial society. Similarly, the goods for the kings are reputed by Smith as necessary to show his magnificence abroad and to his court. In theory, it should be indecent for a king to live without them (and this is the reason why the expenditures for the king are considered by Smith as necessary as the ones for the system of justice and education). Nonetheless, my point is that also the expense of the rich for vanity cannot be considered by an impartial spectator as something more than a necessity and a convenience. Otherwise, they would not work as signs of the social distance they have to represent.

Following this last consideration and given this discrepancy in the meanings of the term, I subsume all the objective definitions to the third one, in book Five. Luxury as an attitude, given the very rare mentioned, is instead not taken into account in my analysis. I am not indulging in discussing a definition, because my standpoint of analysis is a philosophical anthropology perspective. I only wanted to provide a single and generic definition of the term, upon which I shall lead my interpretation of luxury in Smith, departing from his conceptualisation of human nature. I claim that only by answering the question "what human nature, according to Smith, is" it is possible to give reason to his praise or condemnation of it, especially in relation to the system of society.

Smith's depiction of human nature places emphasis on rationality, as efficiency. as a defining characteristic. In a passage in book Five, he asserts that a person who lacks the proper use of intellectual faculties is deemed more contemptible than even a coward, as they are deemed to be mutilated and deprived of an essential aspect of human nature. However, while rationality is undeniably fundamental, it is not the sole attribute of man, as there exists a sensitive element that necessitates gratification, often reliant on external sources. This second attribute is apparent in Smith's exploration of the effect of taxes on

[23] *Ivi,* v. III, p. 235, in "On the expense of supporting the dignity of the Sovereign" (« a greater expense king »); *Ivi*, v. II, p. 94 (« carriages of luxury »); *Ivi*, v. III, p. 416, where a moral judgement is evident (« the costly trinkets which compose the splendid, but insignificant pageantry of a court »).

luxury. In a very short footnote, he contends that heavy taxation on luxury, which has the merit of relieving human nature, should be avoided. Luxury is, indeed, deemed essential to provide individuals with certain indulgences to endure the hardships of life[24]. Imposing excessively burdensome taxes on such enjoyments would be counterproductive, as it would breed resentment towards the legislator. Man, recognizing the need for gaiety, often turns to wine and other « luxuries » despite their potential harm, as the sensitive aspect of human nature cannot be adequately satisfied through rationality alone[25].

In addition to rationality and the pursuit of enjoyment, human beings possess an inherent social nature, thus naturally engaging in trade and commerce. Smith expresses this concept through his assertion that individuals possess an innate inclination to engage in transactions, barter, and exchange goods with others. As Berry states, this predisposition gives rise to the notion that « a commercial society is a natural society »[26]. In other words, it is human nature itself that has propelled mankind to advance into the fourth stage of historical development, representing the pinnacle of civilization. This stage is a consequence of what all human beings share with other human subjects, that is, for Smith, not pure reason or moral status (as in Kant), but the desire to act and feel, in ways of which others will approve, and thereby to achieve self-approval. Commercial society appears as a game of appearances based on people's desire for esteem and self-esteem[27].

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[24] *Ivi*, v. III, p. 350.

[25] Smith does not claim that only certain luxuries, such as tobacco, can provide relief. When he discusses the right policies that a good government should implement against superstition and sects, he proposes as antidotes the spread of education and public diversions, such as painting, poetry, music and dancing, because considered able to confer gaiety against gloomy humour (*Ivi*, v. III, p. 203). Nonetheless, even though education and public spectacles are for sure unproductive expenditures he did indicate them as luxury and, especially the latter, are able, as tobacco, to provide relief.

[26] C. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 153.

[27] Self-esteem and esteem relate to worthiness that does not relate only to external appearance (i.e. clothes, but also others' opinions), but also to the means of acquisition, such as money. Smith quotes a famous Scottish adage: « We say of a rich man that "he is worth a great deal" (A. Smith, *WN*, v. II, p. 146): through money, a man is judged as being worthy of esteem. Money, both in the ostentation of it through show-off or by simple having, arouses esteem and confers self-esteem that can be passed on to heirs. Ancient aristocrats, for example, having no money, can still count on the superiority of their birth, only because it "supposes an ancient superiority of fortune in the family of the person who claims it [superiority of birth]" » (*Ivi*, v. III, p. 72).

Based on these underlying premises of anthropological philosophy, Smith's political economy perspective encompasses the comprehensive examination of production, accumulation, and consumption. Within the realm of production and accumulation, both rationality and the inherent human inclination for exchange come into play. Conversely, in the domain of consumption, the focus shifts towards the pursuit of enjoyment and the predisposition to engage in buying and consuming. This is to say, that in the analysis of the economic cycle, all three main characteristics of human nature are taken into account. Given the tripartition of human anthropology, reflected in the economic system, then it is possible to derive the overall positive figure of *Homo œconomicus*: human nature is essentially an economic nature. Developing this point there is the famous Smith's definition, in accordance with which, by pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectively than when he really intends to promote it[28].

My modest proposal is that to understand the relation between luxury and society I have to consider the reflection that the basic features of human beings have on economic dynamics. My thesis is that Smith gives a generally positive account of luxury in relation to society because he suggests that human nature through the mechanism of economy, where luxury is taken into consideration, develops herself to an increase of life chances with the full establishment of a commercial society.

Smith, in fact, effectively explains the notion of the development of society, thanks to natural human inclinations, through his well-known juxtaposition of the inclination to save and the inclination to squander resources. He articulates, as noted in Book Two, that « the principle which drives expenditure, referred to as profusion, is rooted in the passion for immediate enjoyment »[29]. Even though such behaviour is partly condemned, Smith also suggests the positive effect, the unintended consequence of it. Contrary to this common behavioural pattern, which Smith regards with disapproval, exists another principle: « The principle that motivates saving is the desire to improve one's condition—a desire that, although typically calm and detached, is inherent within us from birth until

[28] 'The sentence where the nature of homo œconomicus is summarised is the following: « Every individual is continually exerting himself to find the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command. it is his own advantage, indeed, and not that of society which he has in view. but the study of his own advantage, naturally, or rather necessarily, leads him to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to the society » (*Ivi*, v. II, p. 186).

[29] *Ivi*, v. II, p. 20.

death »[30]. The augmentation of fortunes serves indeed as the means by which the majority of individuals envision and aspire to enhance their condition.

Consequently, the human being, characterised by rationality, a propensity for enjoyment, and a natural inclination toward sociability (and commerce!), manifests an inherent tendency to save for future betterment while concurrently possessing a passion for immediate gratification. In the end, Smith puts forth the suggestion that the fundamental driving force for individuals is the pursuit of enjoyment, as evidenced by their use of money either for capital accumulation (= enjoyment postponed in time) or immediate gratification (= immediate enjoyment). On one hand, there exists a natural inclination towards adopting an indulgent attitude towards possessions, while on the other hand, there is a desire to save. Those who seek to improve their circumstances engage in saving for future well-being, whereas individuals who are influenced by lavish tendencies are primarily motivated by present enjoyment. Both saving and spending activities are mediated by money, which is never an end in itself but rather holds significance based on its ability to facilitate the acquisition of desired goods. As Smith states, « it is not for its own sake that men desire money, but for the sake of what they can acquire with it »[31]. The ultimate objective of obtaining money is to fulfil one's wants and enhance the overall enjoyment of life.

In summary, according to Smith, both consuming/squandering and saving are related to wants and a quest for private enjoyment, that depends on the sensitive feature of human nature highlighted in his anthropological assumptions. Enjoyment essentially depends on desire. The greater the desire to satisfy, the higher the degree of enjoyment. In Maslow's terms, human desires are then hierarchically ordered and may vary in their development. Consumption is a necessity for individuals as they utilise their resources to acquire gratifying goods, allocating a portion of their money towards this purpose. Man, being driven by certain wants, recognizes the essential needs of food, clothing, and shelter, as highlighted by Smith in his statement: « After food, clothing and lodging are the two great wants of Mankind »[32]. However, there exists a notable distinction among these desires. Smith expounds upon this disparity, stating that « the desire for food is limited in every individual by the capacity of the human stomach, but the desire for conveniences,

[30] *Ivi*, v. II, p. 21.

[31] *Ivi*, v. II, p. 162.

[32] *Ivi*, v. I, p. 259.

ornaments, building, clothing, vehicles, and household furnishings seems to have no limit or definite boundary... What exceeds the satisfaction of limited desires is expended on the pursuit of endless desires »[33]. Such pursuit is associated with greater expenses that only the rich can sustain.

In essence, while the desire for sustenance is constrained by physiological limits, the longing for the comforts, embellishments, and material possessions associated with building, dressing, and furnishing displays a seemingly insatiable nature. Such desires seem to be altogether endless and, even though they are common to all men, only a few have the material capability to satisfy them in order to have enjoyment. In wants' satisfaction, the inequality of fortunes is evident[34].

Given such human nature, the question is if Smith is really condemning the immediate enjoyment as it seems in the quotation from page 20 previously mentioned. In this case luxury could only be the object of blame. My thesis, however, is that Smith conceives positively, at least in the outcome for society, the immediate private enjoyment. I only previously touched upon the issue of the united consequence of it. He generally claims that it is parsimony and not industry that increases capital. It is by parsimony that a person shows her desire to have a brighter future. Immediate enjoyment should then be only a negative element. Nonetheless, without industry, the circulation of capital, based on labour, would not happen. Industry is necessary and the private, immediate enjoyment is the precondition for it. In order to increase industry it is necessary the quest for the enjoyment of wealthy consumers. The squandering is then one the indirect mean of civilisation: « The wool of England, which in old times could neither be consumed nor wrought up at home, found a market in the then wealthier and more industrious country of Flanders, and its price afforded something to the rent of the land which produced it »[35]. Thanks to the manufactures of Flanders it was possible to increase the quality of the English production of wool and create the first manufactures on the island, offering jobs to the lowest rank of society.

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[33] *Ivi*, v. I, p. 264.

[34] Smith clearly states that « wherever there is a great property, there is a great inequality » (*Ivi*, v. III, p.72) and that richness and poorness depend essentially on the degree of private enjoyment. In Book One he writes: « Every man is rich or poor according to the degree in which he can afford to enjoy the necessaries, conveniences, and amusement of human life » (*Ivi*, v. I, p. 46).

[35] *Ivi*, v. I, p. 261.

Consumption of expensive and refined items is the object of immediate enjoyment by aristocrats. Because of their habits and conventions, they are led to spend in superfluities only to satisfy their vanity: « the situation of such a person [=a man born to a great fortune] naturally disposes him to attend rather to ornaments which please his fancy than to profit for which he has so little occasion »[36]. If, from a traditional moral point of view, such usage may be condemned, actually Smith, following Mandeville[37], suggests the positive outcome for the society of such a luxury. More clearly, Immediate enjoyment has then a positive outcome for society on three levels, which mainly concerns human sensitive traits.

On the one hand, the diffusion of a desire for enjoyment relates to the diffusion of commerce, of the commercial society. The first consequence is an increase in production and labour, the source of the wealth of the nation. Progress indicates in commercial society that every citizen has more items at disposal:

> Among civilised and thriving nations, on the contrary, though a great number of people do not labour at all, many of whom consume the produce of ten times, frequently for a hundred times more labour than the greater part of those who work; yet the produce of the whole labour of society is so great, that all are often abundantly supplied, and a workman, even of the lowest and poorest order, if he is frugal and industrious, may enjoy a greater share if the necessaries and conveniences of life that it is possible for any large to acquire[38].

Here is the famous sentence, taken from Locke, that the poorest worker in England is richer than a king in the new continent. In the *Wealth of the Nation*, Smith makes the famous claim: « the accommodation of an European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceed that of many African kings, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages »[39]. People indulging in private enjoyments to satisfy their self-

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[36] *Ivi*, v. II, p. 90. Moreover, such persons, living in precise ranks, are always submitted to emulative desire. See: *Ivi*, v. III, p. 234.

[37] See, among the others, M. Simonazzi, *Le favole della filosofia : saggi su Bernard Mandeville*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2008.

[38] *Ivi*, v. I, p. 3.

[39] *Ivi*, v. I, p. 20. In the *Lectures of Jurisprudence*, less than ten years before his main work (1776), he already wrote: « When nation is cultivated and labour divided, a more liberal provision is allotted them; and it is on this account that a common day labourer in Britain has more luxury in his way of living than an

love[40], create new forms of interdependence for the material well-being of both the private and the state.

The second positive outcome, which is also a consequence of the diffusion of luxuries (tobacco, sugar as well as refined potteries) and human attraction for them, is that the power of feudal lords constantly diminishes because they squander all their resources in superfluous items instead of conserving their dominion upon their peasants:

> For a pair of diamond buckles or for something as frivolous and useless they exchanged the maintenance or the price of maintenance of a thousand men for a year, and with it the whole weight and authority which it could give them. the buckles, however, were to be all their own, and no other human creature was to have any share of them; whereas in the more ancient method of expense they must have shared with at least a thousand people [...] and thus, for the gratification of the most childish, the meanest and the most sordid of all vanities, they gradually bartered their whole power and authority[41].

Luxury is then positive for society because its spread causes a fall in the relation of domination between landlords and peasants. In the cities, new rules as well as new morality can be established, because the wealth that Hobbes considered the source of all power, confers, in the new commercial society, only economic power. Political and cultural ones are outside of his sphere. In the commercial society, because money favours squandering while increasing possibilities in the development of personal virtue of industry and parsimony, it is easier to become independent from the holder of economic power. This is also due to another consequence of the spreading of luxuries, the development of a justice system.

The third positive outcome, more indirect, is then represented by the normative consequence, the creation of a law system, that inequalities in enjoyment render necessary. The luxuries enjoyed by the wealthy often evoke envy among the less fortunate[42], thereby giving rise to the establishment of property rights. Property and

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Indian sovereign » (A. Smith, *Lectures of Jurisprudence* (1763), ed. by R. L. Meek, D.D. Raphael, P.G. Stein, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1982, p. 489).

[40] A. Smith, *WN*, v. I, p. 23.

[41] *Ivi*, v. II, p. 130.

[42] « The affluence of the rich excites the *indignation* of the poor, who are often both *driven by want and prompted by envy*, to invade his possession » (*Ivi*, v. III, p. 72).

justice are the necessary means to have a commercial society, which represents, in Smith's eyes, the fulfillment of civilization:

> Commerce and manufactures can seldom flourish long in any state which does not enjoy a regular administration of justice, in which the people do not feel themselves secure in the possession of their property, in which the faith of contracts is not supported by law, and in which the authority of the state is not supported to be regularly employed in enforcing the payment of debts from all those who are able to pay[43].

Without the contract, the basic feature of the private law, commerce of luxuries cannot be made, but without the negative passion that luxury in itself arises there would have not been a quest to protect property and, with it, liberty. Even though the system of law was indeed established to protect the rich against the ambitions of the poor[44], the establishment of property is the natural path to enjoy more personal liberty, because « a person who can acquire no property can have no other interest but to eat as much and to labour as little as possible »[45] and as a consequence of industry alone, in Smith's commercial society, is possible to enjoy true liberty as independence from others. Through the protection of property, the freedom of all is affirmed, which is guaranteed by the system of justice. This consequence is a natural one, given the above-mentioned features of human nature that is always in between enjoyment and industry. Enjoyments can be more increasingly refined moving on with stadial evolution[46] or always vulgar[47], but, upon it, the intelligent legislator can levy taxes that are an object of Smith's political economy. On luxuries taxes can be levied, as in the case of the carriages already mentioned or in the case of luxuries of the definition of Book Five, because the public gains benefits from it[48].

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[43] *Ivi*, v. III, p. 419.

[44] « The rich are necessarily interested to support that order of things, which can alone secure them in the possession of their own advantages. [...] Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all » (*Ivi*, v. III, p. 79.).

[45] *Ivi*, v. III, p. 92.

[46] A taste for the finer and more improved manufactures was in this manner introduced by foreign commerce into countries where no such works were carried on (*Ivi*, v. III, p. 115.).

[47] For example, alcoholism among the poorest strata of society (*Ivi*, v. III, p. 349).

[48] The direct benefits consist of resources to have education, a justice system, the court, etc. The indirect one, very important in the debate on the populousness and richness of a country, is the diminished ability of the disorderly families to bring up new children. Such an anti-birth policy is not against Smith's idea of

In summary, man possesses a tripartite nature, enabling his progression within the dynamics of stadial history. If he refrains from consumption, it paves the way for capitalist accumulation, promoting investment and innovation. Conversely, indulging in consumption results in an increased enjoyment experienced by expanding sectors of the population. As Smith articulates: « As art and industry advance, the materials of clothing and lodging, the useful fossils and minerals of the earth, the precious metals and the precious stones should gradually come to be more and more in demand, should gradually exchange for a greater and greater quantity of food, or, in other words, should gradually become dearer and dearer »[49]. This evolving pattern necessitates the establishment of legal frameworks to legitimise these widespread enjoyment: this is the positive outcome of luxury for the society, given the sensitive and commercial (alias intersubjective) natures of men. Such conclusions, as already advanced in the introduction, have to do with the peculiar perspective of the Scottish philosopher. In a system of political economy human nature has to be observed (= empiricism) in order to provide solutions to increase the well-being of all members of society. Luxury is then, by Smith, judged positively on an empirical basis and in relation, not to all individuals, but to society as a whole. More clearly, on a subjective level luxury still represents something morally condemnable, because having to do with vanity and an exaggerated will for enjoyment, but it is a possibility linked to human nature itself. In fact Smith suggests that some products, such as tobacco or precious stones, exercise a natural attraction upon all men[50].

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the necessary relation between the wealth of the nation and its population, because forbidding some birth « would not probably diminish much the useful population of the country » (*Ivi*, v. IIII, p. 349).

[49] *Ivi,* v. I, p. 283.

[50] « The demand for those metals arises partly for their utility and partly from their beauty [...] that renders them peculiarly fit for the ornaments of dresses and furniture. No paint or dye can give so splendid a colour as gilding. The merit of their beauty is greatly enhanced by their scarcity. With the greater part of rich people, the chief enjoyment of riches consists in the parade of riches, which in their eyes is never so complete as when they appear to possess those decisive marks of opulence which nobody can possess but themselves. [...] These qualities of utility, beauty and scarcity, are the original foundation of the high price of those metals, or of the great quantity of other goods for which they can everywhere be exchanged… [precious stones] are of no use, but as ornaments, and the merit of their beauty is greatly enhanced by their scarcity » (*Ivi*, v. I, p. 278).

In conclusion, a liberal and commercial society cannot move against such human natural inclinations, because from them also industry and diligence arise. Luxury is, ultimately, a path to social refinement.

2. Kant and luxury

It has already been mentioned above that Kant deals with the issue of luxury in a limited way and only in the three works quoted in the introduction. This is particularly evident in the notorious *Kant-Lexikon*. There one finds a (partial) definition of luxury for Kant: « Luxus oder Üppigkeit bezieht sich auf übermassigen Komfort in der gesellschaftlichen Öffentlichkeit, der mit einem gewissen Geschmack einhergeht. Als Luxus können einerseits Gegenstände und Praktiken, andererseits ein bestimmter Zustand einer Gesellschaft oder Kultur bezeichnet werden »[51]. As in Smith, luxury thus indicates an attitude, concrete objects, but also an actual state.

Looking directly at the texts, Kant offers two brief definitions of luxury. The first in the *CPJ*: « the height of which [culture], when the tendency to what is dispensable begins to destroy what is indispensable, is called luxury » [52]. The second is found in *Anthropology* (1798): « Luxury (*luxus*) is the excess, in a community, of social high living with taste (which is thus contrary to the welfare of the community). Excess without taste, however, is public debauchery (*luxuries*) »[53]. Luxury detects an excessive dimension that is absolutely harmful to the community, not to the individual.

This luxury is closely connected to Kant's anthropological analysis, which is the subject of the homonymous work of 1798. With it, Kant aims to investigate what man does or can do or should do with himself, passing through phenomena, such as fashion and luxury precisely, in which something of human nature is revealed. Like Smith, Kant also defines man as a potential rational animal, but for Kant, this characteristic, as we have seen, is what everyone not only has, but must have[54]. More precisely, Kant uses the famous

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[51] M. Willaschek, J. Stolzenberger, G. Mohr, S. Bacin, T. Höwing, E. Förster (ed. by), *Kant-Lexikon*, vol. 2, De Gruyter, Berlin, Boston 2015, p. 1446.

[52] I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., p. 299.

[53] I. Kant, *Anthropology*, cit., p. 147.

[54] On this basis Kantian anthropology may be conceived both as a descriptive and a normative (even though with empirical elements) discipline. For example, it may be claimed that Kant's analysis of the vocation of

expression of *animal rationabile*, endowed with the capacity of reason, not necessarily with reason itself (*animal rationale*)[55]. Far from being an economic man who plays with appearances and is oriented by an instrumental reason, Kant's man differs from Smith's man in that he focuses on the use of intellect, reason and also imagination. In the play of the faculties he reveals his own reason as well as the characteristic human feature. By virtue of this, like Smith, he also recognises that sentience has a fundamental value in human experience, as it provides the basic, but disordered, material for knowledge. However, Kant adds an element that should characterise man as man, which transcends the rationality of the intellect and sentience: the will, which is the basis of freedom as autonomy insofar as it is goodwill. It is man's will as a free being that in its naturalness, and thus in the state of being unaffected by passions, precludes him from merely indulging in the pleasures of the senses: « he cannot possibly will that this [to let personal talents rust and be intent on devoting private lives merely to enjoyment] become a universal law of nature, or as such be placed in us by natural instinct. For as a rational being, he necessarily wills that all capacities in him be developed, because they serve him and are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes »[56]. The human will is capable of providing for itself universal laws that guide conduct, and therein lies the dignity of a man as Man, beyond rationality and sentience. Kant's man is, as mentioned at the beginning of the article, subject to duty and the moral dimension is intrinsic to human nature. The will is

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human beings is his peculiar answer to the last question Kant wanted to answer in his critical activity, that is what a human being is (P. R. Frierson, *What is the Human Being?*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York 2013, p. 4). As I have already mentioned, Kant's answer, that become more evident in the political writing of the final part of his life, is that human beings are oriented to and must orient themselves to become more civilised, cultivated, moral human beings, avoiding wars and assuring the dominion of the public law (I. Kant, *Anthropology*, cit., p. 229). Shortly, human beings characterised themselves having a vocation to realise their moral autonomy in a civil society. This is the reason why Kant may be read as having both a descriptive and a normative attitude in the answer to the question he formulated in the *Logic* in 1800. This is even more true if we consider the very famous essay *On the Common Saying: This may be true in theory, but it does not apply in practice* (1793). At the end of it, Kant reveals to have more a belief about humanity and the connected morality than a certitude of it to be simply described: « I cannot and will not take it to be so immersed in evil that morally practical reason should not, after many unsuccessful attempts, finally triumph over evil and present human nature as lovable after all » (I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. by M. J. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 309).

[55] I. Kant, *Anthropology,* cit., p. 226.

[56] I. Kant, *Groundwork*, cit., p. 75.

the faculty that values such human tendency. The most evident difference with Smith is that there is no mention of being a trader and therefore condemned to a logic of mere exchange of appearances.

Kant's man is rational and an end in himself, in that he has free will, aided by culture. Culture means the production of the aptitude of a rational being for any ends in general (thus those of his freedom). It is, in turn, both a culture of skill (*Geschicklichekeit*) and a culture of training (*Cultur der Zucht, Disiciplin*)[57]. The former concerns working, through a particular art, for the development of disciplines such as art and science, the necessary elements of culture.

This premise is fundamental to understanding the relationship between luxury, well-being and culture. Kant is convinced that man's end, by natural necessity, is happiness: « There is one end that can be presupposed as actual in all rational beings (in so far as imperatives suit them, namely as dependent beings), and thus one purpose that they not merely can have, but that one can safely presuppose they have and all actually do have according to a natural necessity, and that is the purpose of happiness »[58]. This purpose is presupposed as such for everyone and happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) properly means preservation (*Erhaltung*) and prosperity (*Wohlergehen*)[59]: just as Smith, Kant recognises a human tendency to seek to preserve oneself by improving one's condition. This stems from man's sensible nature. Kant is, however, very explicit that an objective happiness is out of reach, because of its subjectivity. For happiness is nothing more than an ideal of the imagination and not of reason[60], so no person would be able to define with certainty what it is that makes him truly happy. However, each person gets it through the increase in possibilities, even of possession, to which he or she may have access. Such happiness is therefore only declined in material well-being (*Wohlleben*), derived from the satisfaction of instincts.

Nonetheless, given the description of the role of the will and culture, which sets itself ends, it is clear that happiness as well-being cannot be man's only end, because it would not be determined by free will, but man would be determined, i.e. constrained, only by sentience. And this cannot be: « for his nature is not of the sort to call a halt anywhere in

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[57] I.Kant, *CPJ*, cit., p. 299.

[58] I. Kant, *Groundwork*, cit., p. 59.

[59] *Ivi*, p. 19.

[60] *Ivi*, p. 64.

possession and enjoyment and to be satisfied »[61]. Kant's human being is not an empirical human being that can simply be attracted by jewels because of their brilliance or by alcohol because of the gaiety it provides, as Smith suggested.

Different is the case with « *gesitteten Glückseligkeit* », moral happiness, which arises from the encounter of material well-being with virtue (*Tugend*)[62]. If there were not this possibility of encounter, well-being and virtue would remain on two separate lines. This emerges clearly when Kant writes: « inclination to good living and virtue conflict with each other, and the limitation of the principle of the former through the latter constitute, in their collision, the entire end of the well-behaved human being, a being who is partly sensible but partly moral and intellectual »[63]. The *Groundwork* opens, in fact, with the distinction between mere happiness given by well-being and true happiness, with one's consciousness of being worthy of it, which derives instead from knowing that one has a good will:

> Power, riches, honour, even health, and the entire well-being and contentment with one's condition, under the name of happiness, inspire confidence and thereby quite often overconfidence as well, unless a good will is present to correct and make generally purposive their influence on the mind, and with it also the whole principle for acting; not to mention that a rational impartial spectator[64] can never more take any delight in the sight of the uninterrupted prosperity of a being adorned with no feature of a pure and good will, and that a good will thus appears to constitute the indispensable condition even of the worthiness to be happy[65].

Given what has been said, i.e. the human being's destination to reconcile virtue and well-being, it is easier to understand Kant's first condemnation of luxury in the *CPJ*. Here Kant, in fact, writes: « The height of which [culture], when the tendency to what is dispensable begins to destroy what is indispensable, is called luxury »[66]. Culture has been defined as the capacity to set oneself arbitrary ends in general, hence freely. This means that luxury per se derives from man's ability to construct ends for himself and thus from his freedom,

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[61] I.Kant, *CPJ*, cit., p. 298.

[62] I. Kant, *Anthropology,* cit., p. 178.

[63] *Ibid*.

[64] This expression is derived from Smith.

[65] I. Kant, *Groundwork*, cit., p. 15.

[66] I. Kant, *CPJ*, cit., p. 299.

beyond any natural inclination of the senses. Empirically, the development of any culture and thus of luxury requires that it should not always be determined from the outside. For example, Kant argues that art and science are elements of culture and can only be developed by the upper strata of society because they must not, in order to live, indulge in mechanical operations for which it is not necessary to have developed a particular art (*besonders Kunst*). Art and science, in particular, are about the culture of skill, which only develops because of the inequality between men. There is luxury, consequently, at the moment when such ability arouses a need (*Hang zum Entbehrlichen*) that is detrimental to what is necessary (*Unentbehrlichen*). Luxury is thus a level beyond which what is a consequence of the development of culture leads to neglect of what is necessary for the human being. What is this about? What for Kant is necessary for the human being? It is not possible to know, since the definition is in a short parenthesis.

However, the tone of the discourse is very similar to Smith's, beyond the negative characterisation of the term luxury. The progress of culture, in fact, in itself has as its counterpart both the oppression of others and the intimate dissatisfaction of some[67], but it is also the natural end of nature itself that is realised empirically through civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*). In its direct consequences, the development of culture (for Smith the development of the arts through the refinement of trade) can be negative, but indirectly it is positive and allows one to lean towards the development of that society in which a legitimate power prevents mutual infringements of freedom. Contrary to Smith luxury is terminologically negative and there are no direct positive effects on industry and parsimony, but through culture one nevertheless arrives at a civilised society, which is in any case different from Smith's. Beyond this judgement, however, Kant's condemnation seems to be moral in nature: luxury occurs, even in science and the arts, when reaching an extreme refinement of one's own abilities neglects the double human dimension, which should not only aim at well-being, but also at virtue. To be clearer, there is luxury when there is a unidirectional excess of development that, although the fruit of human nature, does not lead to its highest destination, that of man.

The greatest condemnation comes, however, in the *Anthropology*, where Kant, instead of the term « *Luxus* » uses « *Üppigkeit* », with the Latin noun in brackets. On the one hand, luxury is defined as « the excess, in a community, of social high living with taste (which is thus contrary to the welfare of the community) ». On the other hand, luxuries stands for

[67] *Ivi*, p. 19.

« excess without taste, which is public debauchery ». Smith had somehow dealt, as I have previously shown, more with luxuries than with luxury (in Kantian sense). Luxury is connected to high living, to material expenditure, which refers to the sensitive nature of men, but it is also associated with the culture of people, through art and science, as it was in the *CPJ*.

My hypothesis is that Kant formulated here a distinction on a mere aesthetic basis between luxury as refinement and luxury as a negative taste. The former is connected with taste, following the famous Hume's essay *Of the Refinements in the Arts*, because Kant recognises in some buildings as well as in some private goods a taste. As works of art, for example, they are products of a genius who gives rules of taste. Such works are of interest because of an aesthetic judgement, which has to do with the faculty of imagination, and not only with the attraction of the senses that is the basis of the agreeable. Nonetheless, when goods are only apt to arouse interest because of the attraction of colours, materials, etc and interest as for extrinsic qualities, i.e. the price, then they are considered luxuries used only for debauchery. In this second case, no taste is involved. What is at stake with luxuries is only private enjoyment, while luxury, having to do with taste, involves the sharing with others of a sentiment of pleasure or pain. Contrary to luxuries, whose possessor has an hedonistic nature, luxury involves a public dimension, since the pleasure of others, in relation to it, is already presupposed.

Given this situation, it is clear why luxury, as a natural indulgence of human being, who always plays with all the three faculties, and that concerns an intersubjective dimension, is, at first sight, not condemned: « For luxury still provides the advantage of enlivening the arts, and so reimburses the commonwealth for the expenses that such a display might have entailed for it »[68]. The gain is double: the arts ennoble the souls of the people and better their conditions, being at the same time sources of wealth. Nonetheless, such refinement is not synonymous with living well with sociability, which is supposed to be the best solution for a human being with a goodwill[69]. Kant firmly declared that a simple dinner where humanity is established is, for human nature, better than every refinement or luxury. The state may even gain advantages from it, but in the end such

[68] I. Kant, *Anthropology*, cit., p. 147.

[69] In *Anthropology* he famously writes: « The way of thinking characteristic of the union of good living with virtue in social intercourse is humanity [...] The good living that still seems to harmonise best with true humanity is a good meal in good company (and if possible, also alternating company) » (*Ivi,* p. 178).

luxury is a source of poverty (not only material) for the citizens. This is why people working on the luxury of science and arts may envy the joy of the lower strata of society.

If luxury is not completely condemned here, the same path is not shared by luxuries, accused of being a source of illness. Luxuries are condemned on a deeper moral ground. Kant's thesis is then completely different from Smith's one, because there is nothing rather than condemnation for such indulgence. No positive consequences are provided by the indulgence of someone in such luxuries. Why? Because such illness is poison not only for the individual, but also for the community, whose citizens are judged unable to see beyond their own pleasure or interest. Those men are unable to use their will and their reason, they renounce to be fully men and civil society can never count upon them.

In summary, even though Kant apparently condemns luxury both as *Luxus* and as *Üppigkeit*, the reasons can be differentiated. In the *CPJ* the condemnation is exclusively moral for the individual[70], but society benefits from the developments in culture. In the *Anthropology*, on the contrary, there is a contradiction. On the one hand, luxury makes society poorer. On the other hand, it assures, however, an increase of well-being because of the public dimension of taste. Luxury for Kant, because of the relation with taste, is always a public phenomenon, at least in its consequences. Here is the positive value for the individual and the questionable one for society. The private hedonism of luxuries is instead completely condemned. Luxuries are poisons for both the private and civic well-being.

Conclusion

Kant's account of luxury moves clearly from another point of view in comparison to Smith's one. Smith's overall positive judgement of luxury is due to his belief, somehow

[70] In another occasion the relationship between Kant's condemnation of passions and the one of luxury in CPJ would deserve attention. As for luxury, also for passion an idea of harmful disproportion is involved. A passion is, in fact, an inclination that represents its object as desirable out of all proportion to its actual worth, and also often as obtainable under circumstances, or in ways that it plainly is not. Passions, according to Kant, imply a level of rationality that a person willingly overcome, hurting her own sense of moral value. Moreover, social passions can result from human culture. These acquired passions are the manias for honour, dominance and possessions (*Ivi,* p. 167). For an in-depth analysis of Kant's account on passions, see A. Cohen (ed. by.), *Kant's Lectures on Anthropology. A Critical Guide*, cit., pp. 133-150.

derived from Mandeville as filtered through Hume, that the consequences for society are positive. Nonetheless, as shown, he still condemned the vanity as source of some expenditures as the gluttony of the poorest strata of society in their indulgence. The main difference is that the human being that Smith foresees is provided by passions that are judged impossible to delete. They may be refined through education and justice which arises only from a rich government built upon luxury. This is definitely not the view of Kant, according to whom passions, as evident in the *Anthropology*, are a negative contingency for people, intended to be rational and with a good will. All that forbids a person to achieve such status, directly through luxuries and indirectly through luxury, can only be judged negatively. Moreover, the community cannot profit from luxuries, which are the great protagonists of commercial society, even though there can be some positive consequences for the commonwealth.