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Christopher J. Berry

Excerpt

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PART I

Preliminary essay

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CHAPTER I

Luxury goods

On 31 December 1987 *The Times* carried the following report,

A Lake District Hotel is offering weekend breaks costing nearly £1,000 a day. Guests paying £1,995 each will be served grouse, venison, fillet steak, lobster, caviar, truffles and pâté de foie gras. Miss Carolyn Graves, a director of the hotel, said,

‘The big-spending break is for people who work so hard that holidays are a rarity and have to be crammed full of a year’s worth of pleasure.’ . . .

Those include return helicopter travel from up to 200 miles, a self-drive or chauffeur driven Rolls-Royce, the hotel’s luxury suite with its spa bath and sunbathing tower, a case of champagne per person, the pick of the cellar, a personal chef to cook whatever takes the guests’ fancy, and two sheepskin coats and personalized crystal decanter and glasses as souvenirs.

The Times called this a ‘luxury weekend’ and it does indeed represent, even to the possible extent of self-parody, what would appear to be commonly conjured up by the use of the word ‘luxury’.

Open any newspaper or magazine, turn to the advertisements placed by commercial retailers, and the word ‘luxury’ will recur and recur. Since this is a commercial context, we can be reasonably confident that this rhetoric must be thought to be a selling-point. Obviously in the competitive market-place advertisers are not going to proclaim their products deficient, inadequate or even average. It is, therefore, fair to infer that labelling a consumption good (‘capital’ goods such as steel mills or power stations are not at issue) or a service as a ‘luxury’ is also to make a claim about its ‘desirability’.

At this superficial level there seems to be a definite connexion between a good being a luxury and it being an object of desire. Since it is being publicly proclaimed, the implication is that this connexion is thought to be innocent or innocuous. From a historical perspective the fact that the desire for luxury goods can be assumed to be innocuous is a point of considerable significance. From the Greeks

onwards, luxury had always been associated with desire but, up until the eighteenth century, this association had been deemed pernicious and harmful. While an important evaluative change occurred at that time, a morally censorious attitude toward luxury persisted throughout the nineteenth century, attaining a prominent place in France in the last decade of the century (see, for example, Laveleye, *Luxury*) and echoes can be heard in some aspects of contemporary cultural criticism. I will examine these issues in Parts II and IV. In this chapter I explore contemporary usage to the end of establishing both a general conceptual framework and a *terminus ad quem*. I also introduce or 'signal' many of the themes that will be adopted in fuller detail in later chapters. In that sense this chapter is a preliminary to what follows.

While my exploration will, in the course of establishing the framework, aim to explicate the presence of certain standard assumptions, the bulk of contemporary usage is, of course, generally unreflective. Although this does not absolve me from heeding possible contrary cases, the exploration does not pretend to fit all usages into some conceptual straitjacket. That would be a pointless task because it is inherent in the very use of language that it is fluid; the expression 'play on words' is very apt. Nevertheless it is reasonable to maintain that much of such 'playfulness' relies on existing received meanings: it is those meanings that are being inventively exploited through irony, pun, hyperbole, litotes and so on. Similarly while 'luxury' may well be an ingredient in what is dismissively labelled 'adspeak', along with terms like 'executive' or 'premium', the choice of the term is not purely arbitrary; it rests upon or exploits certain assumed connotations. The following analysis of 'luxury' thus fixes upon the standard (whether direct or oblique) usage and its assumptions.

THE CATEGORIES OF LUXURY GOODS

I open by pursuing an implication of the salience of the label 'luxury' in contemporary advertising. The initial response would seem to be that we are dealing with a paradox. On the one hand retailers want to sell as much of their product as they can while, on the other hand, their very object in proclaiming their product a 'luxury' might seem to imply exclusiveness. It is in line with this exclusivity that luxury goods are seemingly to be associated with expensiveness and rarity. I want to argue, however, firstly and unremarkably, that the image of the 'exclusive' luxury good is a gambit to increase consumption and,

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secondly and perhaps less obviously, that neither expense nor rarity are of themselves sufficient conditions for a good to be accounted a 'luxury'.

If we reflect upon the argument that the label 'luxury' is an inducement to consumption, then clearly for that to be effective it must be assumed that the good in question is not only desired but widely desired. The image is that although only a (select) 'few' now enjoy (I will return to the aptness of that verb) the good, many others would also like to enjoy it. Here we can discern one reason why rarity is not a sufficient condition. For example, (though I shall have to come back to this) it is possible to purchase a first edition of Hobbes's *De Cive* for a couple of thousand pounds, but the bookseller, while declaring that the copy was 'scarce' (*Blackwell's Rare Book Catalogue*, January 1989) did not proclaim it a 'luxury'.

This example reveals an important distinction. A desire can be characterised either by its general incidence, the extent of its diffusion, or by the intensity with which it is held. Accordingly while few desire a copy of *De Cive*, a book-collector might crave a first edition. As we will now see it is this factor of extensiveness or general desirability that enables us to identify the range of goods to which, in contemporary society, the term 'luxury' is standardly applied. We can make a start by returning to the package offered by that Lake District hotel. In this package four categories of luxury goods can be discerned.

The first category is *sustenance* or food and drink. The hotel makes much of its menu – caviar, champagne – as well as the provision of a personal chef to cook whatever is the guest's fancy. The second category is *shelter*. The hotel itself is offering accommodation with its spa bath, sunbathing tower and presumably also the other standard features provided by luxury hotels ('luxury' applied to and by hotels about themselves is one of the commonest of current usages). The third category is only vestigially present in this package in the form of the 'gift' of sheepskin coats, that is, the third category is *clothing* or apparel, with their various accessories like jewellery and also – though the link is admittedly more tenuous – perfume. The final category is *leisure*. This package is most ostensibly provided by the hotel as a holiday. Under this category is also to be included various entertainment and sporting goods like videos and polo ponies.

The list of categories of luxury goods is thus sustenance, shelter, clothing and leisure. We shall have more to say later about other

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possible categories and the extent to which these four *as categories* are able to subsume other putative candidates. In the meantime I take it as some corroboration of this list that W. Hamish Fraser in his *The Coming of the Mass Market* states that from the mid-nineteenth century, when the British had some surplus to spend it was expended on 'more and better food, on a wider range of clothing, on more elaborate furnishing for their homes and on a greater variety of leisure pursuits' (1981: p. ix). My claim therefore is that the goods that advertisers prefix with the label 'luxury' fall into one or other of these categories. Why should that be?

As a preliminary to the answer to that question it will be fruitful to address another, namely, what other sorts of consumption goods are there? Is anything here being ruled out? It is important that very little is excluded and apparent examples like 'health goods', as we shall see, are inappropriately labelled 'luxuries'. The importance of the inclusivity of the four categories stems from its negative implications. The fact that almost any consumption good can be a 'luxury good' means that luxury goods do not constitute a discrete, separate category superadded to some other category, such as 'necessities'. This latter notion would imply that luxury expenditure is residual, but this implication is to be resisted on two grounds. First, it gives to 'necessity' some fixed or determinate sense as, for example, in the Stoic notion of a 'natural life' or the idea of 'subsistence' in classical economics (cf. Levine, 1988: pp. 5–6), but such determinacy is unsustainable. Second, it axiomatically yet unwarrantedly prioritises needs over desires. Both of these arguments will be taken up in later chapters.

The relationship between needs and desires is fundamental to this enquiry. This relationship is at the heart of the answer to the initial question: why do advertised 'luxuries' fall into the four identified categories? The vital element in the answer to this question is the extensiveness or generality of the desires for luxury goods. The source of this extensiveness is the fact that the above four categories all relate to satisfactions that are universally experienced. It is the nature of this relationship that is crucial.

We can elicit just why this is so crucial if instead of 'universally experienced satisfactions' we refer to needs. Sustenance, shelter, clothing and leisure are all needs and, for reasons that we shall shortly bring out, because of their 'universality' they can be identified as 'basic needs'. There has been a remarkably consistent agreement that the first three of my quartet are needs of that sort. From Plato and

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Seneca in the Classical period to Steuart in the eighteenth century to Kropotkin in the early twentieth century, food, clothing and shelter are time and again cited as basic needs.

The fourth category – leisure – is arguably more problematic. In particular there is the fact that a common understanding of leisure is as a residual rather than a basic category. On this understanding, leisure is that sphere of life remaining after ‘the practical necessities of life have been attended to’ (*Dictionary of Sociology*, quoted in Parker, 1972: p. 21). But this definition imposes too sharp a division. In many societies work (practical necessity) is not distinguished from leisure. Keith Thomas (1964: p. 51) cites the case of the Dogans of Sudan who use the same word to indicate both cultivation of the ground and ceremonial dancing.

Leisure activities are not, I am claiming, to be understood as residual but as activities that are rooted in the universal requirements of human life – just as eating, being clothed and sheltered are. Of course, these requirements differ from age to age and culture to culture but no more so for leisure than for diet, forms of dress or modes of abode (cf. Herskovits, 1952: pp. 271–5). Accordingly, just as humans have always had to eat, be clothed in some measure and be sheltered so too have they always given expression to ‘leisure’. One indication (no more) of this is that holidays and feast days are known throughout all human cultures. More generally the element of ‘play’ is similarly ubiquitous. There is no need to endorse fully Huizinga’s thesis that civilisation itself arose in and as play to recognise its universal dimension (1949: p. 172). Moreover, if it is thought a defect in this fourth category that it lacks a historical pedigree, Huizinga supplies a citation from Plato’s *Laws* (7.830) in support of his notion of *homo ludens*.

Regardless of its historical antecedents, leisure, in my categorical sense, is now generally included in lists of human needs. (I shall take up later the importance of these being ‘human needs’.) David Braybrooke, for example, not only has a need for recreation amongst his list of course-of-life needs but also includes needs for periodic rest and exercise (1987: p. 36). Nor is this recognition confined to academic theory. In a 1980s survey many respondents regarded a hobby or leisure activity as a necessity (Mack & Lansley, 1985: p. 126). In our terms these activities are universally experienced satisfactions which can thus establish categorically the basis for a widespread desire for goods to meet those satisfactions.

Before proceeding to analyse the relationship between needs and desires we have to ask the question, given that these four are basic needs, why this four? The assumption behind the question is that there are other basic needs. There is no simple straightforward answer to the question but, as a 'working hypothesis', we can hold that this quartet has in common a reference to physical or bodily satisfactions. The consequence of this is to exclude what can be loosely called 'mental needs' such as 'autonomy' (Plant, 1991), 'creative consciousness' (Doyal & Gough, 1984), 'plans of life' (Miller, 1976) or 'freedom and justice' (Simpson, 1982). This is not an arbitrary exclusion as I shall hope to vindicate as the argument proceeds. However, two observations can be made at this juncture.

First, this restriction to physical needs is warranted by the fact that throughout its history 'luxury' has been closely associated with physical or sensory enjoyment. Originally this association was a ground for complaint but later it became, as contemporary advertising exemplifies, a connexion to be celebrated. Second, the identification of needs is not unproblematic, which is one of the reasons why there is no simple answer to the question. Thinking about needs has a history itself, and one feature of that history is particularly pertinent. Traditionally, 'attributes' such as autonomy were not thought of as *needs*. One implication of this tradition is a rejection of the initial assumption that there are other basic needs of a 'mental' sort. Indeed the notion of 'mental' needs was invoked deliberately to counter the traditional accounts, which were thought to over-emphasise the physicality of needs. We shall have more to say about needs-theorising in Chapters 7 and 8.

NEEDS AND DESIRES

I now explore the precise nature of this crucial relationship between needs and luxury goods. I shall aim to bring out certain features common to all four categories. But, of course, it follows from this that there is more to say about each category than I will cover here.

Let us start our guided tour in the kitchen. Food is both a need and, as a category of luxury good, an object of desire. *Prima facie* this dual character appears uncontentious for it seems self-evident that we both need and want food. This appearance is, however, deceptive. It was because of this deceptiveness that I earlier deliberately referred to the *relationship* between needs and luxury goods. To uncover the source of

the deception it is necessary to heed the more general, and for us fundamental, relationship between needs and desires or wants (for my purposes I shall take these latter two terms as synonyms). This is an involved and complex question. All I wish to do at this preliminary stage is outline in a non-definitive way certain central arguments and draw attention to some distinctions (later chapters will elaborate the arguments and explore further the distinctions).

One central aspect of the analysis of need is to differentiate it from 'wanting'. This is a conceptual and not merely a semantic differentiation. That is to say there is a conceptual difference even if the common usage does not invariably reflect it. To similar effect, *besoin* and *Bedürfnis* can in context be translated as either 'need' or 'want' but that does not make these terms conceptually conterminous. Among the various (inter-related) criteria put forward to differentiate them, two are particularly apposite.

First, wants, unlike needs, are intentional. Wiggins's observations are here typical. He writes,

What I need depends not on thought or the workings of my mind (or not only on these) but on the way the world is. Again, if one wants something because it is F, one believes or suspects that it is F. But if one needs something because it is F, it must really be F, whether or not one believes that it is. (1985: pp. 152–3)

In less technical language, wants are privileged. If I say that I want cherry pie you cannot contradict that by declaring that I want apple pie. Needs, by contrast, are not privileged. Thus, unlike wants, others can know better than you what your needs are. For example, you *need* vitamin C (that is the way the world is) to avoid scurvy whether or not you believe this and, hence, whether or not you *want* to consume fruit. This now broaches the second criterion. Needs, unlike wants, are objective or universal; they are attributes of us not *qua* individuals but *qua* 'generic men' (Minogue, 1963: p. 112).

These two criteria of non-intentionality and universality are what characterise basic (or, as they are sometimes called, absolute or fundamental) needs. As we have seen, sustenance, shelter, clothing and leisure can be so characterised. What makes these needs 'basic' is that they embody a stringency such that they are necessary rather than contingent features of human life. They are, by virtue of this stringency, not in their entirety reducible to any possible voluntary set of circumstances or purposive goals.

This analysis, however, does not exhaust the contexts within which the language of needs is employed. This language possesses other idioms. A good can, for example, be needed as an instrumental means to an end. This instrumentalist sense is, perhaps, the predominant use of the word 'need'. These usages concern volitional or purely instrumental needs; in contrast to 'basic needs' they are entirely reducible to purposive or intentional goals. For example, I need a pen so that I might fill in my pools coupon; but I want to fill in my pools coupon so that I might win a large sum of money which will enable me to enjoy a life of luxury. It is clear from this example that the need in question (for a pen) is subordinate to the desire. Although subordinate, the pen is still 'needed' in the strict sense that without it my coupon will remain empty. Moreover, regardless of any belief I might entertain, I need a pen for this task and not a stick of celery since, given 'the way the world is', only the former, and not the latter, will enable me to complete the coupon. However, unlike the putatively basic needs, this need is only called forth by virtue of the prior desire or want. Hence, while the possession of basic needs is involuntary or necessary, instrumental needs arise as a consequence of some volition and are thus possessed contingently. I shall, as promised, return to these questions. There is another issue which, again, at this point can merely be noted. Needs are an important element in moralistic discourse and the extent to which a particular need can be judged to be morally compelling will be affected by whether it is judged to be a fundamental or 'merely' an instrumental need.

For the moment I wish to use this analysis to demonstrate why it can be misleading to say we both need and want food. Such a statement conflates two different levels of generality. To identify basic needs is to identify certain abstract universals. The task that these identifications perform is to categorise certain postulated constants in human life and, generally, to impart to them moral significance. What they do not do is differentiate concretely between particular foodstuffs or particular fabrics or particular shelters or particular pursuits. We all possess needs for (to repeat) food, clothing, shelter and leisure; these possessions are states of the world, they are not principles of action (cf. Thomson, 1987: p. 16). By contrast, wants are principles of action as they specify or particularise the need; we have, accordingly, desires for lamb or pork, for a suit or a sports-jacket, for a flat or a detached villa, for soccer or opera.

Luxury goods

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Although all desires specify in this manner, they are not all of a piece. We have, therefore, to locate the desires for luxury goods more precisely. This will be a lengthy process. We can commence by elaborating further the idea of 'desire'. By means of this elaboration we can identify two characterising formal features: luxury goods are refined and positively pleasing. These characterise luxury, they are not sufficient of themselves to *define* it.

REFINEMENT

The first feature is that the desires for luxury goods are desires for (what I shall term) increasingly 'refined' goods.¹ The specificity definitive of desiring expresses itself in the greater refinement of the goods that serve generically to meet universally experienced satisfactions or needs. This increasing refinement imparts a dynamism to luxuries. One consequence of this dynamism is that it also imparts a basic transience to the status of a luxury good.

The refinements that characterise luxuries are the qualitative or adjectival aspects of goods. The clearest example of this principle is provided by food. The stomach can only hold so much – there is a natural limit to its capacity (an important idea as we shall see in later chapters). Although the Romans did their best to increase these limits quantitatively in as much as it was common for guests to be sick in the middle of a banquet, so that they might continue to gorge themselves, the scope for such increase is severely circumscribed. Accordingly the increase is to be understood qualitatively.

But once the qualitative dimension is broached then limits are evanescent. It is not now a question of need – bread to assuage hunger – but of desire – for fresh bread (the example is Seneca's). The same applies to clothing or housing or leisure: not a goatskin for warmth but a cashmere coat, not a wattle-and-daub dwelling for protection but a Georgian town-house, not a sing-song round the fire for entertainment but a compact-disc player. Since it is in principle never possible to give a complete description – it is always possible to add another adjective or qualify an existing qualification – then the process of refinement is itself in principle infinite (cf. Hampshire,

¹ I have chosen this terminology in order in part to echo two 'classical' discussions – that of Hume, who changed the title of his essay 'Of Luxury' to 'Of Refinement in the Arts' (see Chapter 6), and that of Sombart (1913: p. 72), who makes a historical link between luxury goods and refined goods.