

Topic: Outline the luxury debate and explain why it was important?

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The luxury argument in eighteenth-century Britain centred on the satire *The Fable of the Bees*, which was published in 1723. There is a clear distinction between essentials and luxury items, with the latter bearing negative moral and economic implications. However, the conceptual boundary between these two sorts of products began to melt with the recognition of the usefulness of luxury spending for economic progress towards the end of the eighteenth century. By that time, political economics had neutralised and, in some cases, fostered luxury consumerism.

The word "consumption" was rarely used by Enlightenment philosophers, but they spoke frequently of "luxury," a multifaceted phrase that became the primary vocabulary through which writers explored the moral, social, and political ramifications of consumption. The fight over luxury served as a surrogate for the first contemporary debate over consumption.

The dispute over luxury changed dramatically around the start of the eighteenth century, when two writers, François Fénelon and Bernard Mandeville, lay the groundwork for a fervent Enlightenment debate. Fénelon maintained, based on ancient and mediaeval criticisms, that luxury corroded morality, disrupted social order, and destroyed governments. Mandeville responded with a frank apology for luxury. He contended that, rather than weakening governments, luxury produced affluent and powerful nations. Gender would play an important part in the subsequent debate.

While opponents of luxury, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, cautioned that excessive consumption rendered men effeminate and unsuited for public duty, supporters of luxury, like David Hume, argued that financial prosperity was a sign of a civilised society where men and women socialised regularly.

The dispute was attempted to be settled by certain intellectuals in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Luxury spending, if excessive, has always raised eyebrows among moralists, but in the framework of the middle-class family home, luxury has taken on an essential economic and social function, leading to a "democratization of consumption."

Political economists thought that if money and power were directed toward constructive objectives, affluent and powerful governments would escape corruption and persist. Meanwhile, luxury companies embraced critiques of luxury by producing ecological and healthful items. Luxury criticism did nothing to reduce consumption.

The modern world appears to be fascinated with stuff: how to obtain it, what to do with it, and how to get rid of it. Although historians previously considered that growing consumption began with industrialization, we now know that consumption surged far before the advent of mass production.

Women and men in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe grew to amass more apparel, carry more personal accessories, adorn their homes with more furniture, and consume copious amounts of colonial products.

Although historians disagree on whether this increase in consumption was "revolutionary" or "evolutionary," they all agree that it was transformative. It altered how people appeared, ate, socialised, and thought, sparking moral progress discussions, and bringing in new kinds of revolutionary thought.