

LUXURY AND WASTE OF LIFE

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Luxury and waste of life by E. J. Urwick

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E. J. URWICK

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"Do you not see that your individual life is and can be only secured at the continual sacrifice of other lives?"

"And that therefore you can only hold it on condition that you are ready in your turn to sacrifice it to others?"

EDWARD CARPENTER, "Towards Democracy."

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UNIVERSITY OF
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INTRODUCTION

THIS book is intended primarily to answer two questions: first, Is there any reason, apart from legal and charitable claims, why people should not spend upon themselves and their families and friends the whole of their incomes, whatever these may be? And secondly, What is the effect of "luxurious" expenditure upon trade, or upon any class of traders, upon the poorer classes, and upon the community generally? More briefly, the two questions may be stated thus: How far do moral considerations enter into the subject of our expenditure? and, What are the economic and social effects of luxury? The questions involve both the ethical and the economic aspects of luxury; and these are treated, as indeed they must be, not separately, but in close relation to each other.

It may be objected that such an inquiry is, to

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say the least of it, rather superfluous. Part of it, at any rate, should need no answer nowadays. If there is any single doctrine upon which economists have been unanimous for more than a century past, it is this : that expenditure upon luxuries always tends to be unproductive and wasteful, and therefore bad, in the long run, for industry and trade alike. Their verdict has been supported by arguments which common sense finds irrefutable. Why then waste time in rediscussion of issues which sensible people ought to consider closed ?

Two reasons may be given. First, there is the strange fact that the unanimous verdict of the economists is persistently rejected, and the fallacy which it demolishes as persistently accepted, by at least three-fourths of our population. The majority of people of every class have an obstinate belief that to spend money as freely as one's income permits is an excellent thing, for it "gives employment" to the working classes, causes wealth to circulate, and stimulates prosperity generally. The majority of rich people amplify this belief into the satisfactory doctrine that their expenditure upon luxuries is