The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 2024, **XX**, 1–10
https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpae037
Advance access publication XX XX XXXX
Special Issue

OXFORD

Topiary and false jewels: Adam Smith on magnificence, aesthetic value, and market value

Rachel Zuckert*

Department of Philosophy, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208, United States

*Corresponding author: Department of Philosophy, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208, United States. Email: r-zuckert@northwestern.edu

ABSTRACT

In his essay, "Of the Nature of That Imitation Which Takes Place in What Are Called the Imitative Arts," Adam Smith discusses two examples, topiary and false jewels, apparently coming to opposed conclusions: that aesthetic value is, and that it is not, independent of market value. I unpack the reasoning behind these conclusions, arguing that Smith's position is consistent: he recognizes that aesthetic value can be occluded by market prices—as when one dismisses the beauty of something cheap out of snobbery—or heightened by them, as in the case of the aesthetic value of magnificence. Because aesthetic value can thus be heightened *or* corrupted by market value on Smith's analysis, I suggest, speculatively, that for Smith the *bad* influence of economic considerations in aesthetic matters (faulty snobbery or an economically-derived corruption of taste) is identified by reference to moral, not purely aesthetic criteria.

I. INTRODUCTION

Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (henceforth WN) is widely considered the foundational text of modern economics.[1] Less well known is Smith's deep interest in aesthetics, most expressed in a lengthy, unfinished, and posthumously published essay, "Of the Nature of That Imitation Which Takes Place in What Are Called the Imitative Arts" (henceforth IA).[2] Smith's main concern in IA is to characterize artistic imitation and to consider to what degree it is the source of beauty in the different fine arts. Smith's famous interest in economics makes a brief appearance, however: in his discussion of two striking examples—the topiary and false jewels of my title—wherein (according to Smith) consideration of the market value of an object informs aesthetic appreciation. As I will indicate, this discussion is puzzling: Smith appears in one case to assert and in the other case to deny that aesthetic value is independent of market value. I will argue that Smith's position is nonetheless consistent: he recognizes that aesthetic value can be occluded by market value, *or* reflected and heightened, as in the case of the aesthetic value of magnificence. Because aesthetic value can thus be heightened *or* occluded by market values on Smith's analysis, I will suggest finally and speculatively that corruption of taste (the *bad* influence of economic considerations) is identified for Smith by reference to moral, not aesthetic criteria: aesthetic value found in unselfish celebration of human achievement is superior to that used for self-aggrandizement.

Before turning to an overview of Smith's account of artistic imitation in IA (part II), and discussion of the two examples (parts III and IV), I provide a brief clarificatory remark about terminology.

Received: 23 September, 2024. **Accepted:** 8 October, 2024
© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Society for Aesthetics. All rights reserved. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com.

II. TERMINOLOGY

I will use "value" in our contemporary sense: as a global term for the goodness of something, with species of epistemic, economic, moral, instrumental, aesthetic values, and so forth. This terminology is helpful not only because it is familiar, but also because it allows at once for distinctions among types of value, and recognition that they can conflict or overlap, contributing severally to the overall value of an object, all of which is at issue in Smith's discussions.

Smith's own terminology is different, however. He does not seem to have a correlative overarching term but uses many species (and sub-species) terms, of which I will mention four, as relevant to my purposes: merit, beauty, utility (use value), and exchange value. That is, first, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (henceforth TMS), Smith characterizes the "merit" of an action as the quality "of deserving reward" (TMS 2.1.1). As he elsewhere uses this term also to describe objects (see, e.g., WN 1.11.c.32), perhaps it could be broadly characterized as objective worth: good in a way that *deserves* praise, love, or reward, for itself, dependent neither on opinions or preferences, nor on some further good it serves.[3] In IA, he refers to "merit or beauty," suggesting that beauty is a kind of merit. Finally, at least in WN,[4] Smith asserts that "value" refers to two species of goodness:

> The word, VALUE, … sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object conveys. The one may be called 'value in use;' the other, 'value in exchange.' The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; and, on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. Nothing is more useful than water: but it will purchase scarce any thing; scarce any thing can be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the contrary, has scarce any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it. (WN, 1.4.13)

For Smith "value" therefore appears to mean instrumental value, that is, goodness for and conditional on a further end (so contrasting to merit), differentiated into species according to whether something is so directly or indirectly (i.e., to be used for the further purpose, or for procuring something else that one will use).[5](As in Smith's example of water, however, value need not be subjective, that is, relative to opinion or preference.) I will refer to these species as "use value" or "utility" and "exchange value." Exchange value—how many goods an object will "purchase" in an exchange—is the more important for the purposes of this paper; I will be discussing it primarily in the form of "market value" or "price," that is, how the purchasing power of an object is estimated in societies where exchange occurs in markets, using money.[6]

III. SMITH ON ARTISTIC IMITATION

It is common in eighteenth-century British aesthetics to describe (some) art as engaged in "imitation." Correlatively, thinkers often identify resemblance as a source of beauty, or, as we might put it, as a source of aesthetic value in art.[7] In IA, Adam Smith attempts to work out an account of artistic imitation, arguing (implicitly against his contemporaries) that resemblance is necessary, but insufficient for artistic imitation.[8] Twins resemble one another, he argues, but one does not *imitate* the other (IA, 177–8). Rather, Smith contends, an artist "imitates" when he "shapes or fashions …a thing of one kind into the resemblance of another thing of a very different kind" (IA, 207). On Smith's view, then, an artistic imitation is an artifact in an *asymmetrical* resemblance relation to another object (or kind of object): that is, it (but not the original) has been "shaped" to bear that resemblance.

Smith proposes, moreover, that the artistic imitation *manifests* both its difference from the original (kind of) object and its artifactuality (its "shaped" character). The artistic imitation does not simply resemble something else because it is intentionally made to do so, but it *shows*—and is appreciated as showing—*that* it was made to do so. Smith takes it, that is, that artistic imitations are neither mere copies nor deceptive. They are not imitative in the way of carpets, each made by copying a guiding pattern, much less that of a "servile imitation," that is, an artwork that exactly copies a previous artwork (IA, 176).[9] Nor do they aim at *trompe l'oeuil*, leading a viewer to mistake them for the object

that they resemble (IA, 184–5). (Thus, to anticipate, false jewels—though sometimes referred to as "imitation" jewels—do not count as [artistic] imitations on Smith's account, as they precisely do not manifest their artifactual origins, but aim to deceive.) Viewers explicitly recognize and take account of the media of artistic imitations—their difference in kind from their originals (in what they are made of)—in judging the degree and manner of achieved resemblance to their originals (IA, 182).

Smith argues indeed that the *value* appreciators find in artistic imitations arises from this manifested difference and (yet) artisanally created resemblance: "the proper pleasure which we derive" from artistic imitations, Smith writes, "is founded altogether upon our wonder at seeing an object of one kind represent so well an object of a very different kind, and upon our admiration of the art which surmounts so happily that disparity which Nature had established between them" (IA, 185). In this crucial passage, Smith makes clear that it is not just that imitations *are* artifacts but also that their value rests upon the artistry involved in making them: the artist's transformational ability, displayed in the work through its manifestly (if partially) "surmounted," disparity from its original.

Though Smith does not make such categorizations explicitly, one may, moreover, understand him to identify this value as having two sources, or as belonging to two kinds of value: epistemic and aesthetic.[10] First, in describing the "wonder" that one feels in regarding an achieved imitation, Smith writes that artistic imitations "carry their own explication along with them, and demonstrate, even to the eye, the way and manner in which they are produced… [And thus] the pleasing wonder of ignorance is accompanied with the still more pleasing satisfaction of science" (IA, 185). Smith's claim echoes traditional connections between wonder and epistemic aspiration, a central theme in his (likewise posthumously published) essay, "The History of Astronomy." As commentators have remarked, however, it is implausible concerning artistic imitation: though appreciators can recognize *that* an object was intentionally made to be as it is and perhaps, broadly, *how* (e.g., by seeing brushstrokes or chisel marks), they do not thereby gain much "scientific" knowledge about how such a transformation was effected, much less a know-how that would allow them to bring it about themselves.[11]

As a friendly reconstruction of Smith's view, reflecting (I believe) the central point in the crucial passage, I propose that the epistemic value in artistic imitation is better understood as human collective self-knowledge. That is, the appreciator does learn something from artistic imitations, but not about how to make such a thing. Rather—interpersonally—she learns about human transformative labor, about the possibilities of human "art." ("Look what someone has done, what humans can do!") Indeed, she learns about the variety and individuality of such skills. For, in a brief gesture at the concept of individual artistic style, Smith remarks (by contrast to mirrors, which always operate in the same way) that an imitation displays the *distinctive* "means" and "manner" used by individual artists in molding their materials (IA, 185). Smith's reference to the "explication" that imitations "carry with them" may be understood, then, as emphasizing that the artistic imitation *manifests* its (specific manner of) artifactuality. It is not a hidden device that produces an effect—as with mirrors (which in fact but *not* manifestly produce their images because they are made by human beings to do so)—but rather discernibly an effect of human making. Imitations "display" the artist's abilities (IA, 210).

"Display" brings me to the second, aesthetic aspect of the value of artistic imitation. Smith pervasively refers to artistic imitation as a form of beauty. Likewise, he distinguishes it from his non-artistic-imitative comparison cases—carpets, twins, mirrors—on the grounds that they lack such beauty (see, e.g., IA, 176–7).[12] Smith provides no explicit account of beauty or aesthetic value generally, however.[13] Like many of his contemporaries, he appears to hold that beauty is that which pleases in perception; correlatively, he claims that the "proper purpose" of the fine arts is "to please" (IA, 212). He appears in turn to have a loose, eclectic view about which properties might so please. In one passage, he quickly lists an object's fitness for its purpose: colors, smoothness of surface, and unity of variety as sources of beauty (TMS V.i.9; see also IV.i.11); he refers elsewhere to symmetry and regularity (as well as imitation), as sources of beauty (see IA 176, 183). Particularly in discussing music (IA, Part II), Smith also recognizes that the fine arts may achieve aesthetic value in ways other than imitation, including formal (non-imitative) beauty, emotional expression, spectacle, grandeur of subject matter, and probably more.

This looseness of Smith's view of aesthetic value will be pertinent below; at present I note two ways in which the aesthetic character of the value of imitation is connected to its epistemic value. First, like epistemic values, aesthetic value appears, for Smith, to be achieved or appreciated in

contemplation—and not as directly, practically useful.[14] (Beauty is a form of "merit," not "use value" in the terms above.) Correlatively, what imitation does—what is valued in it—is *mere* display of human artisanal skill; it does not put that labor to work, for achieving some other end. Second, I would argue that the aesthetic value of artistic imitation modifies the (reconstructed) epistemic value that Smith attributes to artistic imitation: the appreciator does not come to have knowledge about other human beings simply, but specifically knowledge of *admirable* qualities of those human beings: of *achievements*.[15] This point is tricky (and again not worked out by Smith): perhaps what is achieved by such skill *is* beauty (and so we admire human abilities to accomplish that), or perhaps this kind of beauty consists in the display of *other* admirable (pleasing) artisanal abilities, such as fineness of touch, insightful vision, and so forth. Whichever it may be, the appreciator finds aesthetic value in contemplating such human laboring ability; she admires its perceptible manifestation, its display.

As noted above, Smith also briefly hints at an intersection of this epistemic-aesthetic value with market value in his discussion of topiary and false jewels, to which I now turn.[16]

IV. TOPIARY, FALSE JEWELS, AND SNOBBISH CORRUPTION OF TASTE

After developing his account of artistic imitation, Smith discusses an example that appears to raise an objection to it, namely topiary in a characteristically French mode: "yew and holly trees, clipped into the artificial shapes of pyramids, and columns, and vases, and obelisks" (IA, 183). Such objects are instances of artistic imitation, he claims: the gardener aims "to imitate in a growing tree the ornaments of… precious materials [for example, porphyry obelisks]" and does not expect "that it should be understood to have grown in that shape," but rather that it was "made to" take that shape "by art," that is, "to make an object of one kind resemble another object of a very different kind" (IA, 183).[17] Thus, it ought to have the beauty of imitation. However, in his context, it is unpopular and devalued—not taken to have beauty. Since Smith aims—in a broadly empiricist manner—to characterize and explain beauty as actually appreciated,[18] he sees the need to explain why topiary has been "brought into such universal disrepute among us" (IA, 184).

Smith's answer is "vulgarity" or "cheapness": his compatriots do not care for topiary because it is not the sole possession of the rich; because its materials and labor are relatively inexpensive, it can be seen even in the "garden of a tallow-chandler" (IA, 184; see also TMS 5.1.4). (Smith patriotically compares Britain to France: the French do appreciate topiary because their tallow chandlers cannot afford it, and so it remains a feature of gardens of the rich.) But, he insists, topiary is in fact "not without some degree of beauty," and one can see this if one pays proper attention—presumably by ignoring its "cheapness" as irrelevant to its beauty (IA, 184).

In a passage preceding this discussion, accordingly, Smith distinguishes beauty from market value, while noting that they often are intertwined in experience. "The appearance of great expence [sic], of being what few people can purchase," he writes, often stands "*in the place of* exquisite beauty" and can contribute "equally to recommend their productions" while "cheapness" can "tarnish the lustre even of very agreeable objects" (IA, 183, my emphasis; Smith often uses "agreeable" as a near synonym for "beautiful"). Smith suggests, too, that manifested market value ("the appearance of great expence") in turn has social meaning, offering resultant pleasures: a pleasure in and admiration for social superiority furnished by wealth and displayed in objects that are markedly exclusive.[19]

Smith's distinction, and his use of it in discussing topiary, are plausible: objects may be both beautiful and cheap (e.g., sunsets); people are moved by a wish for or admiration of distinction, however, and thus may dismiss cheap but nonetheless genuine beauties. Conversely, fashion—a much-discussed negative comparison case to "true" taste, and a growing socioeconomic phenomenon in the eighteenth century—throws up many examples of objects purportedly found aesthetically appealing, later revealed to be appealing (to have been appealing?) only because of their "great expence" and consequent exclusivity (TMS 5.1.4; see Noggle 2012, 156–66). One can select at will an ugly luxury handbag as example. Tastes are of course much swayed by considerations of prestige, not always toward true beauty.

Smith thus not only distinguishes these values but also suggests that beauty is—as I will put it, colloquially—more important than market value. That is, not only does price not *track* beauty (the cheapness of topiary does not reflect its beauty), but also, and more importantly, beauty can and

should *override* considerations of price (one should ignore cheapness to discern the true beauty of topiary). Conversely, market value does not undermine aesthetic value; one's aesthetic appreciation should not be corrupted by concern for price and the social distinction it can convey.

But Smith also briefly discusses another example—between the comment concerning "great expence" and the discussion of topiary—that suggests a different view. "Even the experienced eye of a jeweler can sometimes with difficulty distinguish" between "real and false jewels," Smith writes. They both have the same color and sparkle, the same source of beauty. Nonetheless, he claims, once one knows that a tiara is made of "false stones," one will find it no longer "an object of the most splendid magnificence" but rather "an impertinent piece of tawdry…finery."[20] Smith expresses no criticism of such an appreciator, no sense that one could or should ignore price to appreciate sparkle. In this case, then, admiring pleasure for manifested wealth (market value) seems to override pleasure in beauty. More strongly, here aesthetic value seems to be destroyed by low market value—the false jewels have no "splendor" but are "tawdry"—and thus is neither independent of nor more important than market value.[21]

So, we are left with a question: how *does* Smith conceive of the relation between market value and aesthetic value? Why are false jewels "tawdry" (because cheap) while topiary has "some degree of beauty" (regardless of its cheapness)? I now argue that Smith's answer is that false jewels lack *magnificence*, an *aesthetic* value that is dependent on market value. I do so by attending to Smith's account of the price of real jewels in WN.

V. THE SPLENDID MAGNIFICENCE OF REAL JEWELS

Smith's initial WN distinction of use and exchange values (quoted above) raises a question that he answers at some length: if exchange value is *not* based on the object's utility, how is it determined? While the details of his answer are too many to discuss here, two points are pertinent. First, Smith initially proposes that exchange value is grounded in labor: "the value of any commodity…to the person who possesses it and…means…to exchange it for other commodities, is equal to the quantity of labor [of others] which it enables him to purchase or command" (WN 1.4.1). That is, one would have had to exert—and someone else did have to exert—considerable "toil and trouble" (WN 1.4.2) to acquire a diamond. This quantity of labor, Smith claims, can explain why, though they are not very useful,[22] diamonds have a high exchange value.

Partially as a correction of this initial proposal, Smith also identifies supply and demand as crucial for establishing market prices (WN 1.7). With demand, use-value—or other values such as (to anticipate) beauty—reenters the determination of exchange value: something that one toiled over but is otherwise valueless—perhaps a misshapen popsicle-stick palace, constructed over many hobbyist hours—is not likely to command a great price. Even if one does not oneself intend to use the object or otherwise value it, someone else must, if the object is to have exchange value. Supply in turn incorporates but broadens the role of labor in setting prices: as in the case of diamonds, more labor costs contribute to scarcity (low supply) (WN 1.11.c.32). Correlatively, and famously, Smith argues that assembly-line-style division of labor lowers prices, by allowing for a dramatic increase in supply (WN 1.1.3). In both cases, however, there are other reasons (beyond labor) for scarcity or plenty: jewels are naturally rare, and the *way* some "amount"[23] of labor is organized makes for more, or less, efficient production.

Concerning jewels, then, Smith concludes: their "high price" arises because they are scarce (both rare in nature and requiring much toil—considerable "wages"—to obtain) *and* in demand. That demand, he claims in turn (and in line with his initial contrast of diamonds and water), "arises altogether from their beauty. They are of no use, but as ornaments" (WN, 1.11.c.32).

Now, to return to the relation(s) between aesthetic and market value, we may note first that for Smith—and plausibly—market price *can* and perhaps often will track beauty, perhaps even degrees of beauty.[24] Crudely put: the beauty of something is a reason why one might want to buy it—and its greater beauty is a reason why one might be willing to pay more. (Anyone who has longed for a gorgeous sofa out of her economic reach will recognize this point.) Market value is, then, not always independent of beauty—though of course there can be other sources of demand, so that it is neither always grounded upon it, nor reliably an indicator of it, as in the case, for example, of sunsets or topiary.

But, this is not the most central form of dependence for our purposes. So far, the *beauty* of jewels remains independent of their market value. This aesthetic value precedes and (partially) explains their price and, presumably, remains constant through price fluctuations occasioned by changes in supply. This beauty is also the aesthetic value that real and false jewels share. I suggest now, however, that Smith's terminology—if not his explicit theoretical claims—indicates that real jewels (and not false jewels) also obtain aesthetic value beyond such initial beauty, *consequent* to their price, namely "magnificence".

As remarked above, while "beauty" is Smith's dominant term for aesthetic value, he uses many other such terms, without characterizing them, or their relation to beauty, explicitly. It appears, however, that by "magnificence" Smith means to convey a beauty that is combined with, or characterized by, greatness. Thus Smith uses "magnificence," as others in his period use "grandeur," to describe the starry heavens ("History of Astronomy," Smith 1980a, 62, 46),[25] or clothes portrayed in paintings that are "large, loose, and flowing" (IA, 180). Such associated greatness often seems to be great *expense*: not only do real jewels have "splendid magnificence," but also an elaborate building has "the most expensive magnificence" (IA, 176, 183, respectively), and so forth.[26]

I suggest, then, that in Smith's usage "magnificence" often connotes a distinct aesthetic value or species of beauty that we might call sumptuousness or luxuriousness: a beauty (or otherwise agreeable quality) with an extra sheen of being expensive, an expense that again in part rests on its already-present beauty combined with its scarcity. ("Costly" also, I think, is used to mean high-priced *or* luxurious in this aesthetic sense, or indeed both at once.) Here one might think of goods made from fine leather or velvet or angora: such materials have delicious, smooth and soft texture—that is, they have tactile beauty, if one follows Edmund Burke (1990 [1757], III.14, 103–4)—conjoined with and heightened by a frisson of luxury, of cost, rarity and exclusivity (as velour or fleece, soft as they may be, do not).[27] Such luxuriousness has traditionally belonged to materials like gold, marble, and purple dye, and has been long exploited in artistic practice, particularly in the production of works celebrating institutions or persons of high social importance (churches and nobility, and perhaps now banks and celebrities).

Indeed, this aesthetic value—luxuriousness, magnificence—is closely related to a form of social utility to which I referred above: the use of an object to manifest, and thereby cement or promote, one's high social status—or, as Smith puts it more softly, to gain wealth in order "to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation" (TMS 1.3.2.1).[28] One might note, correspondingly, the ambiguity in a WN passage quoted above: Smith is arguing that jewels have little use-value (compared to precious metals), but rather are in demand (only) because beautiful. Yet, strikingly, he puts this point in terms of their "only use": "as ornament" (WN 1.11.c.32). This locution probably testifies to oft-recognized difficulties in specifying what "utility" consists in. But it also reflects, I think, Smith's recognition of two signal facts: that this "use as ornament" *presupposes* (1) beauty, as a distinct, preexisting value of the means (the jewel) to the end of self-adornment and social display, *and* (2) the price itself. One cannot use jewels to parade one's wealth unless they already are, and already are known publicly to be, expensive. Thus, price cannot be determined (initially) by this use-value, whose determination is Smith's focus in the quoted passage. Smith's ambiguity suggests, however, that these values (of beauty, then magnificence, then social utility) could feed one another over time: if a beautiful costly item has accrued, because of its cost, the further value of social-status display, it will be more in demand, and therefore command a higher price, thereby accrue heightened magnificence (and so on).

Because of this close connection to social display, one might think that magnificence is not an aesthetic value, but a use value (for displaying wealth and gaining social position). But it does accord with Smith's (loose) understanding of aesthetic value discussed above. As Smith's term, "splendor"—which he often joins to magnificence—conveys, objects with magnificence *manifest* their costliness; it (as it were) shines forth in and for perception. Correlatively, though objects with such a value may be used for broadly practical purposes—to enhance the possessor's social standing—the value itself is recognized contemplatively, in perception: one appreciates, with pleasure or admiration, the *appearance* of wealth, rather than using that wealth to accomplish some further end. Indeed, just as the beauty and price of jewels is presupposed for their "use as ornament," so too the appearance of wealth—its manifestness, its noticeability, its overt symbolic meaning (of superiority and exclusivity)—is presupposed by its subsequent use for social display. And not every appearance of wealth (or consequent utility for social display)

can amount to magnificence: gaudy ostentation also presumably displays wealth in appearance, and could be socially useful in doing so. But gaudy ostentation lacks the *aesthetic appeal*—perhaps one could say, the tasteful luxuriousness or the beautiful sumptuousness—of magnificence proper.[29]

Of course, on certain views (such as a strict Kantian view), Smithian magnificence will not count as an aesthetic quality: it is closely linked to interest, and its appearance and appreciation are dependent upon social conditions and knowledge extrinsic to "pure" perception of the object. If one takes such a line, one will be unable to characterize the feel and the shine of the luxurious, the splendid, the magnificent, but in any case, that approach is not available to Smith. He not only has a much looser, more capacious understanding of the aesthetic, as noted, but such strictness would also rule out the beauty he attributes to artistic imitation. For, in marking persons or institutions as wealthy, magnificence perceptually conveys interpersonal information (or, in the case of false jewels, aims to deceive, that is, provide false information)—just as artistic imitations show us what human artisanal skill can do. And artistic imitations have their beauty—are recognized as displaying skill—precisely in the context of background social conditions and drawing upon contextual knowledge, concerning the malleability of the materials used, the ways in which they have been previously treated, and so forth.

In fact, these two aesthetic values appear more closely related: as we have seen, the value of artistic imitation lies (according to Smith) in its manifestation of a distinctive, skilled form of labor; magnificence also can accrue to the display of human labor (artistically imitative or otherwise). Here, one may think of intricate jewelry (manifesting labor not just of diamond miners, but also of the goldsmith), or of (notably expensive, because labor-intensive) architectural works such as the pyramids, Aya Sofia, and so forth. Likewise, artistic imitations can themselves be magnificent—perhaps especially if adorned with elaborately carved gilded frames—and have often been used to contribute to a larger work's magnificence, for example, the stone cutter's gargoyles enhance the grandeur of a cathedral. Such conjunctions make sense on Smith's analysis, for, as we have seen, price itself (in part, often) reflects labor—and high price (often) great labor; likewise, one way to understand the high social standing conferred by wealth is that it allows one to "purchase or command" others' labor (WN 1.4.1). Thus, the shining-forth of wealth (in magnificence) may well occur through manifestation of (one may say) coalesced labor power—for example, in artistic imitations, on Smith's analysis.

In sum, it is this aesthetic value, magnificence, that false jewels lack; they may have beauties of color and sparkle, but no extra "lustre" of magnificent splendor.[30] Here, we have an aesthetic value that is neither independent of, nor more important than, market value—in contrast to the beauty of artistic imitation in topiary, on Smith's analysis. Taste concerning topiary is corrupted by socioeconomic prestige considerations, while taste for jewels is appropriately thereby informed; topiary is beautiful regardless of its cost, while jewels are magnificent only because they are costly.

VI. SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS, AND AN APOLOGETIC FINAL REMARK

Despite the initially puzzling contrast between the two examples in his discussion, Smith does not contradict himself. As he appears to be an aesthetic pluralist, Smith is free to say that some aesthetic values (e.g., beauty of artistic imitation) are independent from and more important than market value, but others (e.g., magnificence) are not. Even magnificence, as we have seen, incorporates (as it were) a preceding and market-value-independent beauty (e.g., the color, sparkle, smoothness, and so on, of gems).[31]

But Smith does not, I think, just leave it there—or we cannot quite leave it there, in understanding his view. For, I suggest, in this discussion, in particular in coming to his conclusions about the overall aesthetic value of an object, Smith appears not to treat each aesthetic value as one among many, or to treat the plural values simply as additive or alternative sources of aesthetic value of an object overall. Rather, he appears implicitly to rank them (beauty of imitation over magnificence over sparkle). That is, on Smith's analysis, false jewels and topiary both have an aesthetic value (sparkle and beauty of imitation, respectively), and both lack magnificence. Overall, however, Smith concludes differently in the two cases: false jewels do not have aesthetic value (they are "tawdry") whereas topiary does (it has beauty); sparkle apparently does not compensate for cheapness, but beauty of imitation apparently does. Aesthetic pluralism alone cannot explain these intra-aesthetic conclusions: why should *this* aesthetic value (of imitation in topiary) outweigh *that* aesthetic demerit ("cheapness")?

In a passage quoted only in part above, Smith similarly suggests that lack of genius is an aesthetic demerit that outweighs magnificence:

> To build another St. Peter's, or St. Paul's church, of exactly the same dimensions, proportions, and ornaments with the present buildings at Rome, or London, would be supposed to argue such a miserable barrenness of genius and invention as would disgrace the most expensive magnificence. (IA, 176)

The copy-church would, Smith indicates, be magnificent. Nonetheless, he judges that it would lack overall aesthetic value—it (or, more properly, its magnificence) would be "disgraced"—owing to its character as a "servile imitation" (a phrase Smith uses in the preceding sentence). Smith's reasoning here is underdeveloped: presumably some objects (such as sunsets) lack the beauty of "invention" without thereby incurring an aesthetic *deficit* that outweighs or undermines ("disgraces") beauties they do possess. Such a deficit must accrue only to those objects (because of their kind, or the presumed intentions of their makers, perhaps) that should have such a value, but lack it. Smith's apparent presumption that "servile imitation" is a failed form of artistic imitation (thus that this is a deficit or lack of appropriate imitation) could also use further explication: innovation is not obviously the same sort of capability as that demonstrated in artistic imitation, even if both comprise exercise and display of admirable human capacities. Regardless of these complications, however, Smith appears here again not simply to accept plural aesthetic values, but to rank them: some are more important than others for an object's overall value, their deficits undermining its other positive values.

Smith does not explicitly state, nor justify, such a ranking. As I have suggested, his understanding of aesthetic value seems too loose, vague, eclectic to do so.[32] In light of the overlaps between artistic imitation and magnificence sketched above, I suggest—speculatively—that Smith's ranking reflects moral, rather than aesthetic criteria. Color and sparkle, though pretty, have no intersubjective, human—moral—significance, little to no epistemic import (particularly, again, concerning human beings), and thus stand "lower" in the ranking of beauties. Magnificence and artistic imitation, by contrast, provide epistemically valuable, perceptually manifest displays of human labor; both have intersubjective social significance (as would "invention"). But, while Smith seems willing to countenance some forms of magnificence, as aesthetically appealing and appropriately grand, it is an aesthetic quality deployed especially in "arts which address themselves not to the prudent and the wise, but to the rich and the great, to the proud and the vain" (IA, 183). (It is in *those* arts, Smith claims, that "great expence" can "take the place of beauty.") The socially significant information conveyed by magnificence concerns wealth, and thereby exclusivity and social status; it is well suited to the proud, both to express their characters and to promote their self-aggrandizing agenda (for this sort of condemnation, see WN, 3.4.10). By contrast, taste for artistic imitations (or for "invention") is morally salutary: it is pleasure in recognizing human achievement, an admiring celebration of what others can do (or of their "genius"). This is not, I have suggested, a distinction that can be made according to purely aesthetic standards—magnificence and the beauty of artistic imitation are both aesthetic values for Smith—but perhaps it can be made on moral grounds.[33]

What, though, of capitalism? The term, "capitalism", came into usage after Smith, but in WN Smith does attend to (and to some degree endorses[34]) central features of capitalism, such as the distinctive economic role of capital or the benefits yielded by exchange in free markets, by contrast to feudal or protectionist agricultural economies. It is not clear, however, that the intersections between aesthetic and market value that I have discussed are especially pertinent to capitalist economies. Most economies (including but beyond capitalism) involve some form of market value; most societies (including but also beyond capitalist societies) have class divisions; as noted, elites in ancient (non-capitalist) societies exploited the aesthetics of magnificence to celebrate themselves. It seems likely that individuals in those societies also wrongly dismissed true, but insufficiently prestigious, beauties.

If anything, capitalism may tend to undercut magnificence. Smith himself seems to associate magnificence with aristocratic or feudal social orders: he claims that, unlike nobles, capitalists do not (or should not) engage in lavish display, but save their cash to invest in business ventures.[35] More broadly, greater social mobility (or precariousness of social position), deeper-going monetization of more human activities, and more plentiful supply of consumer goods—all perhaps characteristic of capitalist economies—may tend to dilute the aesthetics of magnificence. For the sheen of high price is

thereby at once spread to more objects and made more impermanent (the elites must change their signals if they are to retain social status manifestly distinct from other aspirational consumers, greater supply lowers prices, and so forth). This is not to say that individuals in capitalist economies are less vain, or less aesthetically attracted to manifested rarity or exclusivity, but that such human tendencies may express themselves in different aesthetic qualities than magnificence, ones that are perhaps yet to be characterized by new, acute observers of socioaesthetic practice in a Smithian mode.[36]

REFERENCES

Batteux, Charles. 2015 [1746]. *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*. Translated by James O. Young. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brady, Emily and Nicole Hall. 2021. "Adam Smith's Aesthetic Psychology." In *Beyond Autonomy in Eighteenth-Century British and German Aesthetics*, edited by Karl Axelsson, Camilla Flodin, and Mattias Pirholt, 112–32. London: Routledge.

Burke, Edmund. 1990 (1757). *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited by Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

De Marchi, Neil. 2006. "Smith on Ingenuity, Pleasure, and the Imitative Arts." In *Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, edited by Knud Haakonssen, 136–47. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fleischacker, Samuel. 2004. *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: A Philosophical Companion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gerard, Alexander. 1759. *An Essay on Taste*. Edinburgh: Millar, Kincaid and Bell.

Griswold, Charles. 1999. *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hanley, Ryan. 2009. *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hutcheson, Francis. 2004 (1726). *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, edited by Wolfgang Leidhold. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Jones, Peter. 1992. "The Aesthetics of Adam Smith." In *Adam Smith Reviewed*, edited by Peter Jones and Andrew Skinner. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ngai, Sianne. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2015. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Noggle, James. 2012. *The Temporality of Taste in Eighteenth-Century British Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rothschild, Emma and Amartya Sen. 2006. "Adam Smith's Economics." In *Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, edited by Knud Haakonssen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schliesser, Eric. 2017. *Adam Smith: Systematic Philosophy and Public Thinker*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2023. "On Art and Value in Use (or Exchange) and Merit in Adam Smith." *Digressions and Impressions*. April 18. https://digressionsimpressions.substack.com/p/on-art-and-value-in-use-or-exchange

Smith, Adam. 1976a (1759). *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press. I have used the Liberty Fund reprint of this edition. (cited as TMS)

———. 1976b (1776). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, edited by R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner. Oxford: Oxford University Press. I have used the Liberty Fund reprint of this edition. (cited as WN)

———. 1980a (1795). "Of the Nature of that Imitation which takes place in what are called The Imitative Arts." In *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, edited by W.P.D. Wightman, 176–213. Oxford: Oxford University Press. I have used the Liberty Fund reprint of this edition. (cited as IA)

———. 1980b (1795). *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, edited by W.P.D. Wightman. Oxford: Oxford University Press. I have used the Liberty Fund reprint of this edition.

Zuckert, Rachel. 2024. "Adam Smith on Aesthetic Imagination and Scientific Enquiry." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 64: 49–65.

END NOTES

1 See Rothschild and Sen (2006).

2 Friends of Smith's published several manuscripts they found after his death in 1795 under the title, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*. Citations to IA are to page numbers of Smith 1980, a reprint of the Glasgow edition of this volume (Smith 1980a, 1980b).

3 In accord with standard practice, I cite Smith's two major works by part, section, then paragraph numbers (Smith 1976a, 1976b).

4 According to Schliesser (2023), Smith does not use "value" as a technical term in TMS. W.P.D. Wightman, the editor of the Glasgow edition of *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, tentatively estimates the composition date of IA as nearer to WN (1776) than to TMS (1759) (Smith 1980a, 172), however.

5 I pass over several large issues both philosophical and interpretive: it is not clear whether Smith has a realist or anti-realist conception of merit; nor how precisely to draw Smith's apparent distinction (held in common with many in his time and ours) between merit (virtue and beauty) and (instrumental) value; nor to what degree Smith aims simply to describe the normative commitments that people actually have, or to endorse some version of them. I proceed by assuming that the first question does not bear upon the more specific questions that I discuss; that somehow the contrast between beauty and use could be made out; and that Smith in fact means to endorse (not just describe) some values (he is an intense admirer of beauty). But these points all warrant further discussion.

6 In a barter economy, exchange-value would not be equivalent to market price (in money). There are other complexities: for example, Smith distinguishes between "natural" and "market" price (see WN 1.7.1–8), and contemporary economists apparently distinguish between "market value" and (actual) "market price" (the first is "true" price, what one would pay for an item if offered in a "fair and open market"). These distinctions will not be relevant here, as I am concerned simply with a public sense of something as pricey (leaving aside most details of how it is so established). Thus, I use "market value," "price," and "market price" interchangeably.

7 See, for example, Hutcheson (2004 [1725], 42–3); Gerard (1759, 49). This position was developed in Batteux (2015 [1746]), a work influential on most subsequent British thinkers.

8 I focus on Part I of IA, which presents Smith's general account of imitation, though I draw occasionally on parts II and III (on music and dance respectively).

9 Smith allows that prints are artistic imitations, but emphasizes that the "merit" of artistic imitation is endowed not by the print's copy-relation (to other copies or to a model), but its relation to an original, different thing (that which it represents, in our terms) (IA, 178).

10 Like many eighteenth-century British thinkers, Smith does not distinguish sharply among these types of value. As discussed in Zuckert (2024), however, he does note tensions among them, implying that they are distinct.

11 For example, see Jones (1992, 70); cf. de Marchi (2006, 141–2). Smith does qualify the appreciator's comprehension: one learns "in some measure" (IA, 185).

12 Smith's account of artistic imitation is therefore fundamentally evaluative: artistic imitation is, for him, definitionally something valuable. (For clarity, I have reformulated some points in more descriptive terms.) Smith is not, moreover, trying to persuade his readers that there is such value, much less to find things so valuable. Rather, he is taking it that we do attribute value to some objects more than others, and he is attempting to locate in what that value consists, how such objects differ from others we find less valuable, and so forth.

13 Smith does not explicitly discuss a broader category of 'aesthetic value,' but he does refer to values that we would so identify, apparently taking them to be similar to beauty: sublimity, magnificence, grace, elegance, and so forth (see, e.g., IA, 182, 206, 221).

14 See IA, 205. While Smith's celebration of the purely contemplative pleasure in musical beauty in that passage seems to me decisive, scholars debate whether Smith endorses cognitive values divorced from practice (see Schliesser 2017).

15 Hence, despite Smith's suggestions in the crucial passage, I incline to think that aesthetic value is predominant, over epistemic value, on his view of artistic imitation—and this would accord with his understanding of the imitative arts as a species of fine (that is, beautiful) art.

16 This is not the only connection to pursue between IA and Smith's economic theory. De Marchi (2006, 147–56) argues that IA recalibrates Smith's apparent disapproval of "unproductive labor" in WN.

17 Smith therefore rejects a common criticism of topiary in his context: that it appears "unnatural"; in line with his view of artistic imitation, he takes it that topiary rightly manifests its artifactuality (IA, 183).

18 As noted in note 12 above, Smith presupposes such actual experience—we might say, "intuitions"—of value in his readers, though (as the topiary example suggests) he also allows for some "correction" of their responses.

19 Smith argues that this admiration arises from a pleasing sympathy for the (imagined) advantages of the wealthy (TMS 1.3.2; see also TMS 4.1.8–9). One may wonder whether such pleasures are differentiated according to class position of the admirer (the wealthy may take different pleasures in such social display than do the poor). Unfortunately, I cannot discuss this proposed explanation, or its complications, here.

20 All quotations are from IA, 183.

21 As is often the case, Smith's discussion here has more than one purpose. It also—less puzzlingly—supports his account of artistic imitation: topiary *is* beautiful artistic imitation (one must simply avoid socioeconomic corruption of taste to discern its beauty), while imitation jewels are not, as they are meant to deceive, neither manifestly artifactual nor manifestly different from their originals. Smith's discussion thus leaves space for appreciation and value of manifestly (honestly) "costume" jewelry.

22 In our present economy, this is of course false—diamonds are very useful as cutting tools, though they are of course still not as useful as water.

23 Smith recognizes the difficulty of comparing "amounts" of different forms of labor (WN 1.10.b).

24 This correlation may be why Smith appears occasionally to use price ("value") as an indicator of beauty (or "merit") in IA (particularly 178–9). Schliesser (2023) suggests that "value" here refers to a certain use-value: to display taste and thereby gain social standing. I concur that desires for social standing are significant for Smith, but disagree concerning this passage: given Smith's methodology in IA—namely, that he calls upon shared, "intuitive" senses of which objects have (more) aesthetic value—it makes sense to use price, that is, a shared, public estimate of value, as an indicator of beauty. Smith is careful to avoid *identifying* aesthetic value with price, however, as I discuss.

25 Smith also uses "great" or "sublime" to characterize objects with similar aesthetic quality ("History of Astronomy," Smith 1980a, 33, 46, 53, 105).

26 I return shortly to the more complex point of the second quoted passage.

27 Similarly, Smith suggests that "custom" can heighten beauty (TMS 5.1.2 and 5).

28 Smith's recognition of the human desire for such "sympathy" is emphasized by Sen and Rothschild (2006, 330).

29 I owe this point to Bob Stecker (private communication), who remarks that magnificence may be a composite value, combining (social) use-value with beauty. It then would be an aesthetic value because one of its necessary constituents (beauty) is an aesthetic value. I am inclined to think that magnificence does not just incorporate beauty, but is itself a *kind* of beauty (a beauty with the sheen of expense); for present purposes, however, either view suffices.

30 IA, 183. As Melissa Zinkin notes (editorial communication), if the manufacture of false jewels involved significant labor (or "wages"), they too would be costly and so potentially magnificent on Smith's analysis (if such cost is known/manifested). (Smith seems not to allocate any particular value to *naturalness* or *authenticity* as such.) That said, in those circumstances false jewels might not be produced at all, since their entire point is to look the same as, but be cheaper than, real jewels.

31 Smith also discusses what one might call pure fashion: an arbitrary item, with no aesthetic appeal itself, can come to seem "genteel and magnificent," if worn by those of "high rank," and "joined to the usual richness and magnificence of their dress" (TMS, 5.1.4; see Noggle 2012, 156–8).

32 Brady and Hall (2021) suggest importing Smith's concept of an "impartial spectator" from his moral theory into his aesthetics, to use as a standard of taste; perhaps it could be used to rank values within an aesthetic pluralism (if one wished).

33 Griswold (1999, 334–5) also notes the moral ambiguity of aesthetic value on Smith's view.

34 Smith's criticisms of capitalism, particularly concerning the treatment of workers (for example, WN 1.8.44), are often noted (e.g., Fleischacker 2004; Hanley 2009).

35 Smith contrasts accruing magnificence through investment in durable "ornamental" goods to frittering away one's money on consumable items like banquets (WN 2.3.38) and to the frugality of the true capitalist merchant who saves money, to invest in productive ventures (WN 2.3.14–19).

36 Such as Ngai (2005 and 2015). I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a research fellowship, grant no. FEL-281344-22 that supported work on this essay, to Melissa Zinkin, Robert Stecker, Eric Schliesser, and Katalin Makkai for insightful comments on earlier drafts, and to Abigail Iturra, Amelia Perkins, and Kenni Zellner for helpful discussion of Smith's aesthetics.