The concept of luxury has had an eventful history. Its current commonplace commendatory usage in the rhetoric of advertising is far removed from the opprobrium to which it was subjected by Cato the Elder and subsequent generations of Roman moralists. While it is the Roman usage that achieved paradigmatic status for future thought, at least down to the eighteenth century, that usage itself was not without precedent. In this brief paper I wish to examine perhaps the most notable precedent - Plato's account in Book II of the Republic. This examination is here conducted for its own sake and I forbear from any extensive comment on the relationship between Plato's account of luxury and that of his successors.

Plato himself broaches the subject in the context of his celebrated proposal to study the nature of justice and injustice in the individual as it is writ large in the form of justice and injustice in the polis (368e). The proposed method is a thought-experiment that will focus on the polis as it comes into being (369a). The origin of the polis is to be found in the common needs (chreia) that all have. Three basic common needs are identified - food, dwelling and clothing (369c). It is significant that these needs are identified by
Plato as pertaining explicitly to the 'body' (soma). But though these needs apply to the individual's body this fact goes hand in hand with the further fact that no one individual is self-sufficient (ouk autarkes) (369b). To meet these common needs necessitates some degree of co-operative interdependence. This co-operative interdependence is, says Plato, called a 'polis' and it thus has its origins in necessity.

The polis at its barest, the necessary polis (anagkaiotate polis), will consist of four or five men (369d). Even this polis will, however, practise the division of labour. Since the division of labour constitutes one of the major motifs in the whole work it is in keeping with its importance that Plato introduces it at this fundamental level. He states that the three needs will each require a corresponding technē - farming, building, weaving - and since individuals are by nature diverse the result is that each 'craft' is best done by those who are best fitted by nature to execute it. Through each utilising their natural bent (kata phusin) (370c) the outcome is more and better goods.

However, this principle of the diversity of natural aptitudes produces an enlargement of this minimal polis. In fact it is probable that the polis of four or five 'men' is intended as illustrative of the principle since the initial definition of the polis referred to 'us' having 'many needs' that require 'many persons' to help us meet them (369c). Plato proceeds to depict the scope of these 'many needs' and