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PAIN AND HUMAN ACTION: LOCKE TO BENTHAM

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The present paper is part of a major project on the theories of human action based on pain and pleasure, from Hobbes to Pareto. It is one of the assumptions of this project that what is usually considered as a single hedonistic - or sensationist - tradition was in fact the result of very different approaches to the analysis of individual decisions. Some of the differences between these approaches were also discussed by authors who aimed at improving hedonistic analysis, and who intended to use this analysis to discuss ethical and political problems. The interpretation of human action in terms of pleasure and pain was also criticized by authors who opposed sensationist philosophy and its utilitarian implications.

These debates are an interesting object for the historian of utilitarian ideas, to the extent that they can improve our understanding of the profits and losses of every stage in the evolution of hedonistic analysis.

It is known that many sensationist philosophers, starting from Locke and Condillac, were attracted by political economy and used their analysis of pain and pleasure to elaborate the principles of economic science. It could be useful to understand the role different approaches to pain and pleasure have in the formulation of economic theories. It is one of the hypotheses of this research that the consistence and the analytical depth of pre-marginalist "subjectivist" approaches to economic theory have often been undervalued, because of historians's propensity to read the economic writings of sensationist authors without a detailed reference to the philosophical foundations of their reasonings.

In this paper, I will study Bentham's criticism to Locke's and Maupertuis's theories of human action. Bentham does not agree with the view that pain - or uneasiness - is the main motive to individual activity. The pessimistic conclusion of this approach - drawn by Maupertuis - is that happiness is nearly impossible in human life, and this conclusion is for Bentham destructive of utilitarian ethics and politics. Such a theory is also implicitly destructive of political economy, inasmuch as for Bentham this science aims at improving the well-being of nations.

It is a fact that some exponents of the Italian Enlightenment adopt both Locke's sensationism and Maupertuis's pessimism. Among them are Gian Maria Ortes, Antonio Genovesi, Cesare Beccaria and Pietro Verri. Locke's approach plays also an important role in their economic writings. It would be interesting to examine the function of pain in the works of these authors, in order to evaluate the pertinence of Bentham's apprehensions.

In this paper, I will only deal with the works of Ortes and Verri.

1. Hobbes's approach and Locke's approach

In this paragraph, I will try to elucidate the main differences between two approaches to the interpretation of the basic determinants of human action. These approaches share the reference to pain and pleasure as the ultimate motives of action. However, they differ on a fundamental point: the former attributes the main role to the expectations of pleasure, while the latter sees in the removal of pain the basic incentive to action. For reasons of exposition I will call them 'positive' and 'negative hedonism'.

It seems acceptable to say that 'positive hedonism' was initiated by Hobbes, while Locke is the father of the second approach. It is obvious that these attributions of paternity are to be taken with circumspection: while Locke's ascendancy was recognised by his followers throughout the eighteenth century, the recourse to Hobbes seems more discutible. Bentham, for example, indicates Helvétius and Hume as his masters, whereas he rarely quotes or even mentions the author of *Leviathan*. It is also obvious that the conclusions that Hobbes draws from his analysis of human action are very distant from eighteenth-century reflections on the rationality of individuals acting under the incentive of private interest. However, Hobbes is the first philosopher who stresses the role of "future hunger" for pleasures in determining human behaviour, and some of his conclusions on human unlimited appetites are almost literally replaced in the context of later reformulations of 'positive hedonism'.

Pain and pleasure are for Hobbes (1588-1679) the result of the interaction between two causal mechanisms: the action of external bodies on senses, and from there to the head and to the heart, and the "vital movement" of human body. The confrontation of these causal mechanisms takes place in the heart. Pleasure is experienced when the external causation seconds the internal movement, while pain is the result of the clash between the two mechanisms. However, pain and pleasure are not passive sensations. Human bodies react to the influence of pleasurable and painful events, and are urged to approach the objects which are pleasant, or to escape from those which are unpleasant (Hobbes A: 49-50)¹. For this reason, the prime mover of action are inclinations and aversions, i.e. "foreseen and expected" pleasures and pains (Hobbes B: 147; C: I.vi). Individuals are also able to conceive the most rational means to attain the expected goals, on the basis of their previous experience (Hobbes C: I.iii). Appetites are for Hobbes unlimited. Human beings are the only ones who, thanks to their understanding and to their language, can see beyond their immediate needs and imagine conditions of greater well-being (Hobbes B: X). It is not necessary to say that unlimited appetites are the cause of the war of everybody against everybody (Hobbes C: I.xiii). What is characteristic of Hobbes's reasonments, is that struggle itself is the cause of further appetites, inasmuch as humans strive to obtain the greatest quantity of goods, in order to prevent others from becoming too powerful (Hobbes C: 93-94).

In Locke's (1632-1704) view, there are three kinds of sensations: pleasurable, painful and indifferent. "Good" is what increases pleasure or diminishes pain, while "evil" is what diminishes pleasure or increases pain (Locke 1690: II.xx). Passions are but different modifications of simple sensations. One of these passions is uneasiness, the painful sensation that humans experience for the absence of some object which is expected to be pleasurable. Starting from the second edition of the *Essay on Human Understanding* (1694), uneasiness is indicated as the main spur to human action. Without the pain of privation, Locke explains, humans would make no effort to obtain the objects they desire, and humanity would languish in a state of inaction.

¹ On the problems connected with this reaction see Guidi 1993, note 21.

It can be useful to point out an important difference between Hobbes's and Locke's approaches. According to the former, the moving cause of action is the expectation of future pleasures and pains. Pleasure expectations, in particular, are independent from painful sensations and would rather be the result of human imagination. According to this approach an individual while experiencing a pleasure is able to imagine another pleasure and try to satisfy it. This pleasure can be imagined as greater than the present one. Therefore, an individual can directly pass from one pleasure to a greater one. According to Locke, uneasiness is the basic determinant of action. This does not mean that humans cannot achieve increasing conditions of happiness. On the contrary, Locke claims to have explained the only way to do it. What is denied in his approach is the cumulative process: between a pleasure and another pleasure, pain is always experienced. In this sense, every sensation of pleasure is isolated and placed in a permanent condition of distress.

2. Maupertuis's pessimism

It is known that Maupertuis played a decisive role in the history of felicific calculus. It is perhaps less known that it was through Beccaria that this aspect of his thought was transmitted to Bentham (Bentham 1983: 291; Baumgardt 1952: 557).

What is more important at this point, are the consequences he derives from Locke's uneasiness. First of all, Maupertuis's definition of pleasure and pain could be considered as a (partially) undesired extension of Locke's approach. On the one hand, for Maupertuis every painful sensation is the source of uneasiness and consequently of action: pain constantly generates the pulsion to remove it. But on the other hand, pleasure is "every perception in which [the mind] would like to persist, and during which it does not desire either to pass to another perception, or to sleep" (Maupertuis 1749: 201). Pleasure is therefore an isolated condition of tranquillity, it is what Maupertuis calls "a happy moment". One should ask how Maupertuis could apply his calculations to pleasures defined in this way. In fact pleasure is for him an absolute sensation, without degree. What is certain, is that while humans experience it, they do not wish to pass to another pleasure. Hence, they do not aspire to what an external observer could estimate a greater pleasure.

Both the dependence from Locke's approach, and the partial distortion of Locke's arguments are evident in Maupertuis's *Essai de philosophie morale*. As in the case of Locke, action depends only on pain, or more exactly on that particular species of pain which is uneasiness. However, according to Maupertuis every pain generates uneasiness: so uneasiness is not the lack of pleasure, but a pulsion to remove every kind of pain. On the other hand, pleasure is - as in Locke's approach - an isolated moment between two pains. To that, Maupertuis adds that isolation makes every pleasure an absolute experience, that can not be graduated.

Once given these definitions of pain and pleasure, Maupertuis concludes that "happy moments" are rare and short, and that life is almost entirely dominated by pain. The problem is that individuals rebel to this fate, and this rebellion makes their condition worse: a strong desire of everlasting happiness seizes their minds (Maupertuis 1749: 202), while the fear of future distress governs their choices.

Pleasure expectations are another reason of affliction, as they are dominated by a sentiment of uneasiness which borders on frustration (Maupertuis 1768: 222-24). Therefore imagination is not the source of pleasure, but on the contrary it dashes hope and drives humans to melancholy (Maupertuis 1768: 227-28).

Compared to the force of desires, epicurean ethics is impossible for Maupertuis: humans are not inclined to accept Epicure's precept to accept the greatest happiness they can achieve. In the classical philosophical inventory, Maupertuis has a preference for stoicism, which has the merit of opposing every kind of unnecessary desire. But stoical ethics is in any case a negative solution. A better suggestion consists in finding an object of desire which is able to limit frustration and guarantee, if not happiness, at least a permanent state of inner peace². According to Maupertuis, individuals should replace "physical" with "spiritual pleasures": these are the pleasures deriving from "the practice of justice" and "the contemplation of truth" (Maupertuis 1749: 212-13). The practice of christian disinterested love is a further degree of "spiritual pleasure". The "sweetness" coming to the soul from this kind of love is the only medicine against melancholy. It should be clear that the fight against desires is the reason why Maupertuis refuses utilitarian ethics.

3. Bentham's criticism: sensationalism and utilitarianism reconciled

Bentham's criticism to Locke and Maupertuis is contained in several passages of his works. The most evocative among these passages are a page in an early manuscript published by David Baumgardt, and a paragraph of *Deontology*.

Bentham refuses to consider the reduction of pain as the sole motive of an individual's efforts to obtain a better condition (Bentham 1983a: 132). This refusal also applies to uneasiness. Bentham refuses to consider the imagination of future pleasure as pain, and according to him pain is not the necessary condition of pleasure. Humans who are experiencing a pleasure can imagine a greater one and strive to attain it (Bentham 1983a: 133). This way, Hobbes's cumulative approach is restored by Bentham.

Bentham's criticism against Maupertuis is a radical demonstration of the failures of 'negative hedonism'. One should notice that the opposition to Maupertuis brings Bentham to abandon the term "happiness", which is replaced by "well-being" (though this change is not a definitive one). Indeed, "happiness" could be intended as a "superlative" degree of pleasure, whereas "well-being" better expresses the idea of a positive balance between pleasure and pain. Only following this formulation, Bentham suggests, we are able to assert that most of individuals live in a situation of greater or lesser well-being (Bentham 1983a:

² Pierre Naudin (1975: 25) defines this 'positive' solution as a "sublimation" of desire. See also Callot (1964), p.28. It should be noted that this term was once employed by a follower of Pietro Verri, Emanuele Ortolani (1803: 62-63), to define the transformation of physical love into a moral pleasure.

130)³. Maupertuis's basic error consists in the wrong definition of the word "pleasure": according to it, only the highest pleasures can be defined as such. Hence derives the theory of pain as the dominant sensation in human life (Baumgardt 1952: 557). Just like pains, pleasures may be graduated, and every condition of well-being should be estimated in relation to the constraints to which individuals are submitted. Lastly, expectations and desires are not a cause of sufferings and melancholy, but a spur to better human lot on earth. In addition, the research of pleasures is accompanied by an additional "pleasure of hope" (Bentham 1983a: 133).

This is perhaps one of the more original and significant aspects of Bentham's thought: the full acceptance of the function of passions in individual and social improvement. The solitary of Westminster, who when he was a youngster feared "hobgoblins", who somewhere declared a platonic contempt for poetry (Bentham 1843; 19, 510), was always convinced that human ability to calculate does not depend only on reason. Passions also calculate and drive humans in the research of happiness (Bentham 1789: 173-4). Utilitarian ethics is possible for Bentham, because individuals are able to reach their own well-being and to concile it with the well-being of their fellows. Utilitarian politics is possible too, because laws can count on passions to achieve obedience and justice. But above all, it is possible for Bentham to accept an economic development based on pecuniary interest and on the propensity to risk of "projectors" (*entrepreneurs*), as well as on the cupidity of moneylenders, a passion which Adam Smith feared more than any other (Bentham 1787)⁴.

4. Ortes: pain and theodicy

As I have tried to explain, Bentham's critique of Locke and Maupertuis amounts to the assertion that 'negative hedonism' is inevitably condemned to pessimism on the improvement of human condition. The analysis of the works of Gian Maria Ortes (1713-1790) and Pietro Verri (1728-1797) can be a test to assess the validity of this charge.

It was under the influence of Maupertuis's *Essai de philosophie morale*, that Ortes wrote, between 1754 and 1756, two short tracts entitled *Calcolo de'piaceri e de'dolori della vita umana*⁵, and *Calcolo sopra il valore delle opinioni umane*⁶, both published in 1757⁷. The first of these writings presents two interesting elements: 1. a definition of the relation between pleasure and pain; 2. an explanation of human action in terms of these sensations.

³ On Bentham's hesitation between the terms "utility", "happiness" and "well-being", see the note added to the 1822 edition of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789: 11).

⁴ On this point, see Guidi (1989; 1992) and Pesciarelli (1989).

⁵ *A calculation of pleasures and pains of human life*.

⁶ *A calculation concerning the value of human opinions*. Ortes was in contact with Maupertuis, as it is shown by a letter to Francesco Algarotti written in 1747 (Ortes 1804: 326). See also Bianchini 1982: 63-75.

⁷ Pasquali, Venezia.

4.1. Nature and felicific calculus

Ortes's exposition moves from a set of hypotheses on human body and on the relation between the physical and the moral constitution, which seem to be derived from Cartesian philosophy. There is also a strong analogy between Hobbes's and Ortes's explanation of the origin of sensations. The body is made by more or less elastic fibres and by fluids. When all fibres are in a steady state, fluids freely circulate within the body. This circular flow equilibrium goes along with a state of psychical indifference: a state which seems to be more hypothetical than actual, but nevertheless possible. The contact of human physique with external objects alters the state of fibres, overtending or overrelaxing them, and necessarily driving to a disorder in the circulation of fluids, felt by the mind as pain. Pleasure is nothing else than the impression produced by a contrary movement of fibres, reestablishing the original state (Ortes 1754: 288-89). This restoration can have two possible effects: either pleasure disappears with the new equilibrium and indifference is felt by the mind (Ortes 1754: 289-90), or the contrary movement which had produced pleasure continues beyond the point of equilibrium, thus altering the state of fibers and producing new pains (Ortes 1754: 292). Therefore, pleasure has a quantitative limit given by the amount of pain it removes. One of the examples given by Ortes is the same that manuals of microeconomics often give to explain to undergraduate students the meaning of Gossen's laws: hunger which becomes indigestion once the satiety point is reached (Ortes 1754: 307-8). On the contrary, there are no limits to the extent of pain: every pain has a "fecundity" of its own, to the extent that the disorder in fibres can be communicated by fluids to other fibres, and so on in a chain reaction effect.

The assertion that the state of tranquillity can be altered only by pain (Ortes 1754: 307) leads Ortes to conclude that every kind of pain is a positive sensation, whereas pleasure should be defined as a negative sensation, i.e. the reduction of pain (Ortes 1754: 305). And from the fact that pleasure can be at least as intense as the corresponding pain, Ortes derives the canonical theory that "pains are (...) more abundant than pleasures" (Ortes 1754: 317).

It could be useful to spend some time in comparing Ortes's interpretation of sensations with those we have formerly encountered. There are two points in common between Ortes's and Maupertuis's theories. To begin with, both share the demand for a thorough calculation of pleasures and pains, even though Ortes does not go beyond some general hypotheses. In fact, he maintains that the infinite variety of human sensibilities - each taken in its "particular" - hinders what we would now call an exact "interpersonal comparison" of utility (Ortes 1754: 317). Secondly, Ortes, although with lesser emphasis than Maupertuis, reaffirms the predominance of pain in human existence. Ortes's originality should be found in the statement that pleasure is not a condition of tranquillity but a quantity of movement which restores tranquillity. Pleasure is limited in time not because it is almost unattainable, but because it is equal and contrary to pain.

It is obvious that some of Bentham's criticisms also apply to Ortes. In his version of 'negative hedonism' too, the research of pleasure seems to be limited by

human constitution. This research can not be indefinite and cumulative. Not only every pleasure is preceded and followed by pain, but its existence is conditioned by the existence of a correspondent pain. If Bentham could have known Ortes's pamphlet, he would probably have added that his viewpoint was, if possible, more pessimist than Maupertuis's: not only happiness is impossible, but so is well-being in the sense of a positive balance between pleasure and pain. The best condition to which humans may aspire, is a condition of indifference and of non-existence of pain. What a strange form of walrasian equilibrium, in which everyone's satisfaction goes together with absolute indifference and tranquillity of senses!

4.2. Pain and action

If pleasure is the feeling which removes pain, two possibilities are open to individuals: either pleasurable objects casually act on human bodies, or individuals have a sort of hobbesian *conatus*, urging them to seek the sources of pleasure.

In fact, Ortes reasons according to the latter option. The lockean element of his approach is that the reaction springing from the body is originated by a particular kind of pain - or, more exactly, by a metamorphosis of the initial pain. In order to elucidate the nature of this process, Ortes suggests to distinguish between two kinds of external objects: inanimate and animate (Ortes 1754: 295-96). If the objects we wish are inanimate, the reaction movement only depends on our forces (i.e. on the greater or minor elasticity of our forces)⁸. In this case, the original pain is transformed into a need (or desire), the painful imagination of a pleasurable object. On the contrary, if external objects are animate, an effort of reciprocal adaptation is required. Individuals choose the degree of resistance to others which is possible in every context. Such an effort is pain, and its first and most universal metamorphosis can be termed "fear" (Ortes 1754: 296). Then, depending on the degree of reciprocal resistance, this fear transforms itself into either *hatred* - if effort is impossible on one side - or *simulation* - if both resist - or *love* and *compassion* - if none of them resists (Ortes 1754: 297). All these passions are still a kind of pain. However, they are no longer passive sensations, but the result of human activity.

According to Ortes, simulation is the more frequent among these passions. Everyone tries to appear different from what one is, sometimes one shows oneself better, sometimes worse than one really is, and the reason is always that one wants to be entitled to a greater portion of pleasurable objects than one would have if one's real merits were discovered. Employing an elaborate baroque representation, Ortes defines "overwhelming" the pleasure which extinguishes the pain of simulation. This overwhelming is nothing else than the research of a certain reputation, of a social standing to which a certain quantity of privileges and goods is conventionally (Ortes 1754: 299) attributed. Ortes uses "opinion" - in a passive sense - to define this reputation (Ortes 1754: 298). This dialectics of simulation and overwhelming gives Ortes the elements for his definition of a

⁸ Ortes 1754: 309. It is a curiosity that Ortes is perhaps the first thinker which refers to the notion of elasticity in the context of a theory of individual decision.

hierarchical order in which every class is entitled to certain goods (from land property to public charity).

To conclude with, the research of "opinions" generates a special kind of pleasures, the "pleasures of opinion", which have nothing to do with sensible pleasures, and which are the result of the consciousness of being recognised as members of a particular social class. A noble person, Ortes adds, would accept sensible sufferings in order to be considered a member of aristocracy (Ortes 1754: 302-3). Of course, these "pleasures of opinion" and Bentham's "pleasures of hope" have a great deal in common: both are supplements of pleasure accompanying the research of desired objects.

4.3. Opinions and social bonds

The *Calculation concerning the value of human opinions* was oddly placed before the other one in the 1757 edition. In fact, Ortes moves there from his theory of "opinion pleasures" to analyse the genesis and the nature of the social bond. The reaction mechanism to the affronts of other individuals are now better articulated. Every individual, in his or her research of pleasure, tries to obtain the means that can procure it. The ensuing actions generate a conflict which is neither due - as in Locke's *Second Treatise* - to the pre-social indeterminacy of property limits, nor - as in Hobbes's works - to the unlimited greed of humans. According to Ortes, the problem is that everyone tends to acquire the control of any existing good, in order to become the "arbitrator" of the allocation of goods between himself or herself and the others (Ortes 1756: 259-60). We could state that every individual strives to exert an 'allocative arbitration' on "common goods". Now, if the number of competing individuals is small, the stronger prevails (Ortes 1756: 260-61). But if competitors are in a large number, none of them has a sufficient force to submit all the others. Ortes does not invoke at this point the power of coalitions, because coalitions are impossible in this 'originary situation' characterised by extreme individualism. Common interests rise only when the allocation of resources has already created 'opinion classes'. Meanwhile, fear prevails on the use of force in every individual. The ensuing situation is one of 'allocative stalemate': nobody takes decisions, and everybody is left with his or her needs and pains (Ortes 1756: 261-62). Like Hobbes, Ortes sees in fear the permanent psychological condition of pre-social state. However, according to him fear does not lead to unrelenting conflict and death, but to absolute inaction.

Fear, in its turn, enacts those mechanisms of "simulation" and "overwhelming" that Ortes had described in the other tract. The distribution of "opinions" among individuals forces everybody to put his or her force to the service of the others (and of himself), by furnishing a standard for allocation (in his contemptuous language, Ortes calls this standard "a pretext") (Ortes 1756: 264). More exactly, the cooperation of individual forces leaves to everyone the "arbitration" on the part of goods which is due to one's social standing. Ortes stresses that the real motive of this social cooperation is private interest (Ortes 1756: 265). However, the result of it is a kind of social order. Ortes also asserts that the allocation ensuing from opinion rules could substantially differ from another based on "true merits" or on "true virtue" (Ortes 1756: 264). This latter would be possible only if all humans

could act under the influence of "true knowledge". In fact, consensus based on opinion is simulated and inconstant. Moreover, money can buy it more easily than everything else (Ortes 1754: 298; 1756: 269). Nevertheless, this simulation game is necessary to produce cooperation and consensus under ordinary life conditions (Ortes 1756: 286-7).

Ortes ends his tract with a questionable "calculation" of the value of different social conditions. This calculation is based on the average income of every class and on an estimate of the money value of social privileges. The result of this calculation is the admission of the absolute prominence of the aristocratic condition in the society of his times (Ortes 1756: 271-73): a predominancy - Ortes emphasises - which is almost certainly submitted to historical decadence (Ortes 1756: 278-80).

4.4. Ortes theodicy and the revision of the theory of sensations

In 1780, the Florentine Michele Ciani, who corresponded with Ortes on questions of political economy and legislation (Pii 1993), was informed about the pamphlet containing the two *Calculations*. He asked Ortes to send him a copy of it, but Ortes answered that what he had written there was nothing else than a juvenile joke, "witticism" dictated by the desire to affirm himself in the republic of letters (Ortes 1804: 389-90, september 9th, 1780). After dispatching his pamphlet (december 23rd), Ortes, in a letter of february 3rd, 1781, took care of mentioning the elements of his earlier views he still agreed with:

"As to pleasures of whatever nature, I always believed, and still believe, that they are but the removal of pain. However, it seems to me that now I could prove this fact with much better reasons" (Ortes 1804: 399).

It would be interesting to know why Ortes was then dissatisfied with his earlier arguments, and what were the "witticism" he wished to avoid. An answer can be found in some philosophical works he wrote in those years.

The first of these writings is a preface he wrote in 1775 for his translation of Pope's *Essay on Man* he had begun in 1745⁹. This work aimed at explaining the differences between national languages, but in order to prepare his analysis, Ortes engaged himself in a wide-ranging discussion of the principles of human knowledge and of natural order. The newtonian ascendancy of his discourse is evident both in the definition of the natural laws which govern the physical and moral world, and in the natural theology foundations of his reasoning. Both the physical and the moral world are dominated by the same laws of motion (Ortes 1775: v-vi)¹⁰. In the moral world, in particular, ethical principles should be modelled upon the physical constitution of bodies. The examination of the uniform influence of motion laws is an occasion to introduce the canonical "argument from design" (Ortes 1775: vi-vii). Hence, Ortes infers that the harmony

⁹ The *Saggio sopra l'uomo* was published in 1776.

¹⁰ The pamphlet is paginated with Roman numerals.

of cosmic order is the product of a benevolent providence who regulated the world so that it could be constantly preserved (Ortes 1775: xxxii). What appears as a *particular* conflict or destruction is an element of the *universal* order. In the relations between the humans, while a virtuous behaviour points directly to the preservation of "the universal", vice destroys particular beings in order to preserve the universe (Ortes 1775: xxxi).

Ortes is here carrying on a controversy against two different currents of thought: philosophical pessimism, and "the doctrine of the annulment of contraries" (Ortes 1775: xli). Against pessimism he holds that providence can not be an instrument of evil. Against manicheism, Orte asserts that in nature there are no contrary objects. The opposite of an entity is a non-entity, the nothing, and this is impossible in God's plan. What does exist is a series of positive entities which, following the laws of motion, replace themselves reciprocally taking the place left empty by other things (Ortes 1775: xxviii-xxix). Such a doctrine is valid also for pleasure and pain, which appear as contrary objects in the experience of particular beings, whereas both of them are positive sensations (Ortes 1775: xl)¹¹.

An aspect of Orte's self-criticism is now clear at least. In 1775 Orte does not agree any more with the negative character of pleasure, even though pleasure is nothing else than the removal of pain from the viewpoint of an individual. The theory of the quantitative supremacy of pain is now revised too in order to refute pessimism. Pain, as everything else, concurs to the preservation of the universe, producing a world in which good always prevails on evil. In Orte's theodicy pain has the function of urging humans to action and cooperation.

Other aspects of Orte's earlier tracts on *Calculation* should now look like "witticism" to him. His theory of social action exclusively founded on simulation should seem to him an hyperbolic exaggeration. He was still convinced that a large part of mankind act on the basis of private interest and "apparent knowledge" (Ortes 1775: lxi, lxviii). By the latter term, Orte means that knowledge which is still muddled with the seduction of senses. Led by this kind of knowledge, humans are brought to overestimate the significance of events, in order to console and appease the needs of their senses (Ortes 1775: lxvi). This knowledge refers things to men and women's subjectivity, rather than to objective truth (Ortes 1785: 126-7). However, Orte affirms that "real knowledge" is accessible to human understanding, provided that the latter is placed in a state of absolute indifference, far from the influence of senses (Ortes 1785: 126-27, 129). To have access to real knowledge, humans must also accept the hard work of the research of truth. It is clear that such an attitude of mind is reserved to the few. For that reason, this minority has the duty, and the right, to be at the head of society (Ortes 1775: xxxi-xxxii). Some of them - the clergy - will act through persuasion, while others through force: the latter is the privilege of government.

¹¹ "As both pain and pleasure, e.g., exist, they are certainly different sensations. And being different, they are not contrary. However, when they are referred to particular events, they are felt as contrary, while the same can not be done when they are referred to what is common. A clear proof of this is the fact that one can suffer a pain with pleasure, provided that he refers this pleasure not to himself only, but to all other beings".

As to those who are unable to be detached from the seductions of senses, their behaviour is not necessarily inconsistent with social order, although they can see good only from the consequences of their actions. Only those who act under the influence of real knowledge can understand *ex ante* the requirements of social order (Ortes 1775: lxvii-lxviii). For that specific reason, they are entitled to ruling functions.

However, real and apparent knowledge are not completely distinct in human mind. In a work on *Useful and pleasant sciences* (Ortes 1785), Ortes maintains that real knowledge is reserved to the understanding, while apparent knowledge is the product of imagination (Ortes 1785: 115-16). Truth is apprehended when the understanding prevails over imagination: delight and apparent knowledge in the opposite case. However, a certain degree of imagination is always necessary to put knowledge and action into motion. Without a faculty which amplifies profits and losses and nourishes hope, individuals are unable to shake themselves from sluggishness of mind (Ortes 1785: 131). Therefore, imagination is another element of Ortes's theory of human action, an element which is placed between pain and the research of pleasurable objects. Nevertheless, this novelty is not sufficient to lead to a revision of Ortes's whole theory of action: need is still the first mover and pleasure the removal of pain.

5. Ortes's political economy: growth without development

Ortes's main work on economic subjects was *On national economy* (Ortes 1774). This was a vast and systematic treatise, of profound insight. Unfortunately, it was written in an obscure language, and it never received the attention it deserves. Since the *Introductory discourse*, Ortes reveals that his theoretical construction has a controversial object: his adversaries are all those who think that government intervention can increase wealth, population and employment beyond all limits. Mercantilist and colbertist policies are among the measures he opposes. The idea of an indefinite growth is a delusion of imagination (Ortes 1774: 41, 188): it must be confuted in the name of truth. In a letter to Michele Ciani, Ortes writes that religion, government and political economy are an unitary object in his thought (Ortes 1804: 401, march 10th, 1781). The link between these disciplines is sufficiently clear: if those who govern by means of persuasion and force must act in accordance with truth, they have to know the limits of economic improvement.

The only effects of government encouragements are the crowding-out of private demand and re-distributive effects to the benefit of those who already possess lands and capitals. The result is the concentration of wealth in a few hands (Ortes 1774: 42-43).

It should be noted that before displaying his arguments, Ortes explains that it is natural that policies benefit some citizens more than others, as public interest can be promoted only through the interest of individuals. "Every common interest - Ortes says - is nothing else that the combination and sum of all private interests" (Ortes 1774: 47): a statement that Bentham reproduced almost literally in his *Intoduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Bentham 1789: 122). In

order to distinguish between good and bad policies, Ortes suggests a rule which is very close to a Pareto-optimality standard:

"It is true that, as common interest can be pursued only through private interests for increasing goods, we should consider that only those who increase their goods without diminishing or taking away the goods of others, can be said to increase them rightly and fairly" (Ortes 1774: 47-48).

Government has the duty to implement Pareto-optimal processes.

As to Ortes's arguments on the limits to growth, they are strictly connected with his conception of human nature. Ortes states that nothing exists if there is no "sufficient reason" for it. Therefore, the amount of "common goods", i.e. of aggregate income, is limited by "needs", i.e. by aggregate demand (Ortes 1774: 43-44). It should be remarked that by the term "needs", Ortes does not mean only "necessaries". Common goods differ both in quantity and in quality. Everything depends on primary goods, but at different stages of civilization the chain of transformations varies in importance (Ortes 1774: 69-71). In a civilized country, the number of "qualifications", i.e. the number of secondary products, is higher and most of the labouring force is employed in manufactures (Ortes 1774: 196-98). "Qualification" of primary products has two different ends: first it serves to make the products of nature consumable, but also to provide an employment to that part of population which is not employed in the primary sector (Ortes 1774: 72-73). The problem is that, once the first end is met, a part of population is still involuntarily unemployed. In fact, Ortes estimates the productivity of every labourer to exceed what would be sufficient for his or her own consumption (Ortes 1774: 76-77, 172-74). Therefore, without needs there is no employment, and needs are limited by human nature. Qualifications increase well-being only to a certain degree: the excess of qualifications can also be a cause of "bother" and pain (Ortes 1774: 73). It is easy to detect Ortes's theory of sensations behind these arguments. Pleasure has a limit in the pain it removes: so useful and pleasurable goods can not be increased indefinitely.

Ortes's statement according to which one of the results "qualification" aims at is the employment of labourers, deserves a more detailed analysis. This aim is not a "final cause" in the aristotelian sense, but the immediate goal of some of the individuals acting in the market. At this point of his development Ortes is thinking to the unemployed who, thanks to their imagination, create new products, expecting that these products will be demanded by rich consumers¹². This way, they hope to attract a part of the income of rich people in exchange for their labour. This is a fundamental mechanism in Ortes system. Needs - food, clothes, housing and even amusements - are limited in every person (Ortes 1774: 128). However, income is inequally distributed among people. Those whose income is greater than their needs, can spend it only in more refined qualifications of the goods they consume (e.g., larger and more comfortable houses) (Ortes 1774: 195). These qualifications require additional labour, so part of the surplus of the

¹² Ortes calls these new products "decoys" (*zimbelli*) for the rich (Ortes 1774: 74).

wealthy will be given to those who produce these "qualifications" (Ortes 1774: 125-28). The latter will have an income to live on and to spend in the market. The problem is that the production of new goods is successful only if the expected (or "imaginary") utility is not greater than the actual one. Therefore, economic development has a limit in the ability to consume of population¹³. A highly civilized country is near to the point in which no new products are needed and employment can not be increased further. If there has been development to reach this condition, development is now ended.

This picture is not substantially modified by the introduction of capital (book 5). Capital is defined as the stock of accumulated labour which is necessary to start production (Ortes 1774: 240-41). Capital includes rough materials, production means and wage goods. Ortes defines "revenue" (*rendita*) the amount of goods produced within a year. In equilibrium, these goods are equal to the quantity of capital consumed during the year. It is now evident that, if this is an equilibrium state - and the amount of capital consumed during a year time is inferior to total capital - a period was devoted in the past to 'originary accumulation' of capital. During this period, an additional number of labourers was employed in the production of capital goods, and the rate of activity was higher than the current. Nevertheless, capital accumulation can not be carried on indefinitely, and has a limit in the ability people have to consume final goods (Ortes 1774: 241-43). One should note that this is the typical situation described by Th.R.Malthus in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1820).

The fact that capital accumulation is limited, does not imply that gradual growth is impossible. The condition is that the annual income flux should be superior to the capital consumed, that saved income should be invested, and that population (at given rates of productivity and activity) should increase in the required proportion to be employed by the extra-capital and to consume the extra-goods (Ortes 1774: 243). As one can see, we are here in front of some of the assumptions of post-keynesian theories of growth: growth is possible along a razor-blade path, depending on the coincidence of the rates of variation of several variables.

While equilibrium growth is possible, though not a necessary event, development in a schumpeterian sense, based on qualitative change and on the innovative choices of *entrepreneurs*, is not conceivable beyond certain limits. The reason is that needs can not be increased indefinitely, and as a consequence the growth of welfare is limited too. Remembering Bentham's allegations against 'negative hedonism', we can observe that Ortes's political economy is a good example of the undesirable consequences of this approach: the limits to growth are exactly the limits of a human nature in which the scope of pleasure is limited by the intensity of pain.

The rest of Ortes's political economy is largely dedicated to the justification of inequalities in the distribution of land and capital. The genesis of inequalities is explained through the notion of "fear" (Ortes 1774: 127-28). This passion drives humans to acquire a surplus in order to secure what is necessary to themselves.

¹³ at pages 197 and 201 Ortes adumbrates a mechanism of market equilibrium based on decreasing marginal utility and on increasing costs.

Ortes tries to justify inequality with many arguments: the main reason is that unequal distribution is necessary to oblige the poor to labour (Ortes 1774: 244-45). We know how much this statement is consistent with Ortes's theory of human nature.

It should be noted that also the "real knowledge" contained in Ortes's political economy contributes to the revision of some naïveties of his earlier works on *Calculation*. The allocation of goods between society members no longer appears to him as the result of arbitrary opinions. The constraints of social reproduction provide now a more objective standard. However, room is still left for opinion: this is the case with Ortes's justification of unproductive consumption. Like Malthus fifty years later, Ortes maintains that a class of "rich unemployed" which consume without producing must exist beside the class of poor unemployed supported by private and public charity (Ortes 1774: 180-81). In fact, if all rich proprietors would participate to production as farmers and manufacturers¹⁴, overproduction would be the unavoidable result. Unproductive consumption employs a substantial part of the working force in mere activities of personal service.

However there is a difference between Malthus's and Ortes's argumentations. While the desire of justifying the role of aristocracy was sincere in the former, the latter adopts a tone of explicit contempt. He ironically describes the aristocrat as someone who

"is concerned with nothing else than to suffer patiently that other people dress and undress him, feed him, and do their best to keep him unemployed, by producing for him a thousand of other trifling inventions" (Ortes 1774: 181).

Such an attitude remind Italian readers that of Giuseppe Parini, one of the members of the Milanese Enlightenment, who in *Il Giorno (A Day)*, depicted the frivolous life of a "young lord". As in the *Calculation on the value of opinions*, the aristocratic ideal of leisure is portrayed here as arbitrary and overwhelming. However, like any other human baseness "from the viewpoint of particular events", this too is providentially useful to the conservation of the universe. If one would characterize Ortes's theodicy with a phrase, the best portrait of it would be an oxymoron: the 'providential baseness' of human motives.

6. Pietro Verri: civilization as moderation of desires

Verri's definition of the principles of human mind is included in *A Discourse on the nature of pleasures and pains* (Verri 1781). Verri stresses the dynamic link between sensations and action: "human sensibility - he writes - is divided and resolved into two elements: the love for pleasure and the escape from pain" (Verri 1781: 7). The acceptance of Locke's tradition is motivated by a methodological assumption. Verri shares with other philosophers of the Italian Enlightenment a

¹⁴ Ortes calls active proprietors "primary producers", ditinguishing them from "secondary producers", i.e. waged labourers (Ortes 1774: 81-84).

tendency to radicalize Newton's methodological precept concerning the economy of theoretical principles. Such a precept is reinterpreted in the light of Condillac's analysis, and is part of a larger project aiming at submitting moral sciences to the rigorous standards of geometrical methodology (Bianchini 1982). Verri maintains that the analysis of human sensibility can be brought a degree further than the admission of the *two* principles of pain and pleasure. In his view, human experience suggests that pleasure is always preceded by pain (Verri 1781: 16). This could mean that pleasure is not an independent sensation: it is but the relief individuals feel when pain is removed. More exactly, pleasure is the result of a *rapid* relief from pain (Verri 1781: 36-38). As in Ortes, pleasure is only a negative sensation. However, Verri's description differs from Ortes's to the extent that the former makes no reference to the physical constitution of bodies: another effect, perhaps, of newtonian sobriety.

The peculiarities of 'negative hedonism' are present in Verri's texts too: uneasiness - as in Ortes - is extended to every kind of pain and to every need (Verri 1781: 17). Equally, Verri maintains that pleasure is always preceded and followed by pain, and that pleasure is limited by the quantity of the pain it removes (Verri 1781: 31). Finally, by stressing the "velocity" of those mental processes, Verri is driven to emphasize the rare and momentaneous character of every pleasure (Verri 1781: 16).

The pessimistic conclusion of his analysis is explicit. However, Verri is anxious to emphasize the positive function of pain: pain is not good in itself, but experience demonstrates that "good is generated by evil", and that "pain is the moving cause of all mankind" (Verri 1781: 55).

Like Maupertuis and Ortes, Verri believes that most of unhappiness is not the result of the brevity of "happy moments", but the consequence of the "chimaeras" created by fancy (Verri 1781: 26). Imagination is driven by the memory of past pleasurable experiences, and by the desire to reproduce and increase indefinitely these experiences. Thus individuals leave aside prudent calculation and are governed by passions which are able to produce only frustrations and sufferings. For that reason "the surplus of our desires over our power is the measure of unhappiness" (Verri 1781a: 74; 1781b: 129-30). Under the pressure of desires, individuals wish to acquire some typically "cumulative" objects of pleasure: power or wealth. Unfortunately, the mind is not able to enjoy these goods indefinitely. The result is additional uneasiness: some fear the loss of their properties, others the loss of their reputation. Power and wealth, which should be the means of human happiness, become the ends of every action: thus, they enslave humans and submit happiness to their impersonal rules (Verri 1781a: 76-77, 80-83, 104).

Desire is therefore a cause of instability and unhappiness. Such a passion hinders rational calculation of pleasures and pains. It is clear that an ethics based on "well understood interest" - and even less a thorough utilitarian ethics - can not be recommended to a human nature dominated by desire. Nevertheless, as a typical exponent of the Enlightenment, Verri is more confident than Maupertuis on human capacity to submit and govern desire. He is convinced that the development of civilization and politeness may impose discipline upon individuals. Urban society - with its *salons*, its clubs and its coffee houses - drives a growing number of individuals to adopt moderate views, good manners and

generosity towards their fellows. All these attitudes are synthesized by the term "civility", often repeated in Verri's works (Verri 1818: 211-14)¹⁵. Therefore, the "need of general reputation" leads humans to calculation and rational choice (Verri 1781a: 80). Verri's appreciation of civility is not reduced by Ortes's consideration on simulation: the social result of moderate action is more important than intentions.

Verri's support to the ideal of enlightened aristocracy - an ideal shared by all the members of the editorial board of *Il Caffé*¹⁶ - is reflected in his elitist conception of individual capacity to attain happiness. Only a few will achieve the model of the wise person, who prefers inner happiness to honours and riches, who is content with a little, and is proud of his "difference" vis à vis "vulgar people" (Verri 1781a: 103). Those who have attained this condition are the only capable of noble thoughts and of appreciating the "pleasures of the mind". Among the latter Verri includes "enthusiasm for virtue", "simpathy for the sentiments of other persons" (Verri 1781a: 104), and, at a higher degree, compassion and friendship (Verri 1781a: 111-12).

Consequently, Verri's theory of pain results in a sort of two-stages ethics: the lower stage is reserved to the many and is based on self-discipline and utilitarian calculus. The higher stage is occupied by a minority of wise persons, who share a noble ideal of sobriety, unselfishness and rousseauistic virtue.

7. Verri's political economy: desires at the origins of development

The theory of human action based on pain is central to Verri's *Meditations on Political Economy* (Verri 1781b)¹⁷. The work is opened by the statement that need, a species of pain, is the main spur to production and the principle of development and civilization:

"Need, i.e. the sensation of pain, is the spur by which nature stirs man and rouses him from that indolent state of vegetation, in which he would lie without it" (Verri 1781b: 129)¹⁸.

With theoretical understatement, Verri defines "a not very comforting paradox" the idea that human development is produced by sufferings. Behind this understatement, it is not difficult to see the shadow of Leibniz's theodicy, and of the justification of pain as a necessary part of the providential plan.

It is important to observe a difference between Ortes's and Verri's political economy: both attribute to need a fundamental position in their theoretical

¹⁵ On this point, see Revel 1986.

¹⁶ *Il Caffé* was a journal published for a short period in Milan. The members of its editorial board were young members of the Milanese aristocracy, like Alessandro Verri, Pietro's brother, and Cesare Beccaria. See Venturi 1969: 645-747; 1987: 425-834. A critical edition of *Il Caffé* is now available (Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1993)

¹⁷ The *Meditazioni* had a large diffusion in Europe. See Venturi 1970; Groenewegen 1987.

¹⁸ See also Verri 1781b: 148.

systems. However, whereas for Ortes need is a spur to cooperation and the principle of the conservation of mankind, for Verri it is the principle of human perfectibility and of the indefinite growth of welfare. Verri compares the condition of primitive society to that of a "polite" nation. Needs are limited in the former, and so are production and commerce. On the contrary, civilized nations are characterized by abundance of ideas and desires. In order to answer this quantity of needs, individuals are driven to increase their productivity, to invent new technologies and to enlarge the sphere of commerce (Verri 1781b: 129-30). The circle of reproduction is then transformed into a spiral, and this spiral has no definite limits.

It is clear that, by founding development on pain, Verri gives a new turn to 'negative hedonism'. Looking closer to his analysis, we see that imagination, the desire springing from new ideas, is the decisive link between needs and development. Needs grow under the influence of ideas, though action is still the result of uneasiness (Verri 1781b: 138). Only the savage state is a condition of inaction: what is missing there is just the role of ideas and desires. This is also the reason why Verri attributes an enormous importance to means of communication (transports, money, etc): ideas are stimulated and increased by communication and exchange (Verri 1781b: 133). Therefore, imagination is dangerous only when humans pay no attention to the relation between needs and power (Verri 1781b: 130): otherwise, it is the motive cause of development.

A comment is required at this point. The analysis of Ortes's and Verri's political economy lets us understand the function of this science in their theoretical discourse. On the one hand, the role of pain as a spur to cooperation and improvement is a guarantee against the pessimistic outcomes of 'negative hedonism'. On the other hand - symmetrically - need is presented as a necessary *law* of human nature, a law which warrants that happiness is possible here on earth.

Starting from these premises, Verri's economic theory concentrates on three subjects: 1. prices; 2. aggregate equilibrium; 3. distribution.

7.1. The theory of prices

According to Verri, the price of a commodity is directly related to "need" and inversely to plenty. By "need", Verri does not mean any indeterminate desire, but the effective demand of goods, i.e. the level of demand at which the expected utility of any good is higher than the cost individual are ready to pay in order to acquire it (Verri 1781b: 141-42). Verri stresses consumer sovereignty, by arguing that demand regulates supply and not the contrary (Verri 1781b: 142-44).

As to plenty, it basically depends on the market form: it is larger when the market approximates to perfect competition (Verri 1781b: 144).

7.2. Equilibrium between production and consumption

The problem of equilibrium between production ("reproduction" in Verri's terms) and consumption is analysed examining two opposed cases of disequilibrium (Verri 1781b: 137-39). Verri's contribution is strictly connected

here to the basic theoretical assumptions of his theory of action. It is also very original in its issues.

The first case takes place when national consumption is greater than production and the balance of commerce is unfavourable. Unlike Hume, Verri pays no attention to deflux of money and to the ensuing deflation. His interest is devoted to real re-equilibrating mechanisms. There are two possible solutions to disequilibrium: the first one is negative and consists in factor mobility (emigration of a part of the labouring force). When the other solution prevails, new productive branches are created in the country: these new industries compete in quality and price with those located abroad, toward which the demand for imported goods was addressed. This process of import substitution re-equilibrates the balance of commerce. Welfare grows in the country with the increasing size of the internal market. As everybody can see, the role of ideas is central to this picture: a class of individuals, thanks to entrepreneurial skill, understands the existence of national demand for certain goods and produces it at better conditions than foreign competitors.

In the second case, consumption is smaller than production, and the balance of commerce is favourable. As a matter of fact, Verri engages himself in demonstrating that a favourable balance of commerce is possible at certain conditions, that inflation is not a necessary outcome of it, and finally that a growth of the real side of economy is consistent with it. Hume's re-equilibrating mechanism based on inflation is considered as a possible outcome only if - in Verri's terms - the velocity of circulation of the extra-money is low. What he seems to have in mind, is that inflation takes place only if the extra monetary demand clashes with rigidities on the supply side (in this case, money "stops" in the hands of an unmodified number of sellers). However, this case is not very likely in a "polite" nation. Verri describes here a sort of Hume-Cantillon transmission mechanism *without inflation*. Additional money, passing from hand to hand, incites industry and puts unemployed factors at work. The verrian self-sustained mechanism of growth based on increasing income, new needs, and new productions, is the result of this first impulse. Here too, the entrepreneurial spirit plays an essential part.

7.3. Distribution

Like the other parts of his economic contribution, Verri's theory of distribution also springs from the theory of needs and desires. As many of the economists of his time, Verri has a preference for a society in which the weight of the middle class is large (Verri 1781b: 151). The members of this class, urged by their needs, are stimulated to work hard in order to better their condition. Inequality of fortunes, as far as it is moderate and gradual, is an additional stimulus, giving to everyone a hope to ascend in the social scale. On the contrary, when inequality is too high, society is condemned to poverty and to a stationary state. Rich landlords take no care of their goods, having no anxiety for future welfare. Moreover, the poor are too poor to be influenced by superior need and to hope to better their condition (Verri 1781b: 150-52). As in the savage state, the poor have primary needs, but imagination and desire play no role in their life.

Absolute equality of properties is not a better solution. The only effect of the roman agrarian laws and of similar institutions is that of destroying desire and hindering development (Verri 1781b: 151).

Lastly, Verri too engages himself in a difficult defence of unproductive consumption, a performance in which a marxist scholar would certainly see the result of class bias. Quoting Mandeville, Verri states that luxury commodities are an incitement to production, not only on the demand, but on the supply side. The desire of luxuries contrives land proprietors to look for an efficient exploitation of their estates, in order to maximise their rents (Verri 1781b: 207-11).

The last part of Verri's *Meditations* is an analysis of the function of political economy in the government of States, and of the reforms required by the promotion of welfare. Political economy is for Verri a normative science (Verri 1781b: 147-49). It studies the means to increase the power of a nation, in order to increase social happiness (Verri 1781b: 130)¹⁹. The classical cameralist definition of political economy is here restated in the light of Verri's sensationalism. In fact, the analysis of human decisions in terms of pain and pleasure brings Verri to the conclusion that no State intervention should be direct and repressive. Only indirect ("roundabout", in Verri's terms) intervention is efficient, i.e. encouragements to individual desires and industry.

It is not surprising, in the light of Verri's theory of aggregate equilibrium, that he supports moderate mercantilist policies (Verri 1781b: 174-75, 243-46)²⁰. In his view this kind of intervention can enlarge the spiral of desires and development.

A comparison between Verri's morals and political economy seems appropriate at the end of this analysis. The theory of pain and imaginations leads Verri, in his moral works, to recommend moderation and sublimation of desires. Political economy studies the means of answering the increasing desires of the humans. There is no need of inventing a *Pietro Verri Problem* to explain this apparent contradiction²¹: at any level of economic development, individuals must learn to confine desires within the range of their power. Political economy - and above all, the wise and enlightened legislator - has the task of removing all obstacles to the growth of social welfare.

Bentham seems to have ignored Verri's *Meditazioni*. If he had read them, he should have commented that if the desire for happiness is so vivid, there is no need to interpret it as a kind of pain. It can be assumed as an independent motive of human action and of social improvement. In any case, Verri's political economy, though founded on 'negative hedonism', is a development economics.

8. Conclusion

¹⁹ The research of the ends of society is left to other parts of the science of legislation.

²⁰ Another important field is strategic intervention in agriculture (Verri 1781b: 213-19).

²¹ It should be remembered that in 1781 Verri published his three discourses on happiness and on political economy in the same volume.

In this paper, two approaches to the analysis of pain and pleasure have been analysed. The first approach (which I have called 'positive hedonism'), was initiated by Hobbes: it attributes to pleasure expectations the main role in human action. The second approach ('negative hedonism'), originated by Locke's theory of uneasiness, sees in pain the prime mover of behaviour.

Bentham criticizes 'negative hedonism', alleging that this approach condemns utilitarian ethics and economic improvement to defeat.

Both Ortes's philosophy and his political economy seem to confirm a large part of Bentham's criticism. However, Ortes avoids pessimism by adopting the style of Leibniz's theodicy, and giving pain a central role in the conservation of mankind.

Verri grounds public happiness and economic development on the stimulus of need, a species of pain. This approach was followed by other Italian economists, the most important of which are Antonio Genovesi and, in the nineteenth century, Francesco Ferrara²².

In the light of Verri's conclusion, should we conclude that there is no difference between 'negative' and 'positive hedonism'? I believe that a fundamental difference still remains between these approaches. The force of 'negative hedonism' - as far as pessimism is avoided - is theodicy, or a more secularized belief in the harmony of natural laws. Those authors who ground social reproduction and development on pain, are looking for a compelling principle, an invariable law of nature which *warrants* positive outcomes: no motive to social improvement could be more universal than need.

'Positive hedonism', despite its apparent optimism, is in fact more indeterminate, and nothing proves it better than Hobbes's conclusions on human nature. Bentham's secularism (Crimmins 1990), together with his radical opposition to natural law theories (Hart 1992; Cot 1993), is another demonstration of the ambiguous character of this approach. Improvement is possible because humans have an unlimited appetite for pleasures and a rational capacity of calculating utility. However, human responsibility is entire: some institutions may be useful, other should be changed; some passions may contribute to welfare, other are a radical obstacle to it. In a word, improvement is possible, but no principle secures it invariably.

We could now advance a subtler interpretation of Bentham's statement that "passions too calculate". He was probably in search of a secular substitute of theological and natural law optimism, and could have found it in the universality of felicific calculus.

²² This peculiarity of the Italian tradition of political economy was discovered for the first time by a corporative economist, Attilio Garino-Canina (1942). I owe thanks to dr. Erica Morato for attracting my attention on this work.

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