

## **The Italian Enlightenment and the Rehabilitation of Moral and Political Philosophy**

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### **Abstract**

I reconstruct the fragmented movement known as the Italian Enlightenment. I argue that, Italy's political fragmentation notwithstanding, there was nonetheless a constant circulation of ideas among different groups based from various states, made possible by the shared language, and that a few shared traits resulted from such constant circulation: first, absence of a radical trend such as French materialism-atheism and British Deism, and the shared option in favour of religious reformation stressing the moral dimension of Christianity; second, rejection of inhumane laws and institutions, capital punishment, torture, war and slavery; third, the idea of public happiness as the goal of good government and legislation; fourth, a view of the economy as a constellation where social capital consisting of education, morality and civility plays a decisive role.

### **Keywords**

religion; morality; public happiness; equality; civil economy

#### 1. Introduction: what is properly *Illuminismo*

Cesare Beccaria's *Of Crimes and Punishment* is universally recognized as a decisive step in the history of law, not to say of civilization. In fact, immediately after publication, it had a vast circulation and was translated into all major languages. However, the work remained sort of an erratic boulder. In fact, the intellectual environment in which it originated is little known and the philosophical inspiration emerging in several passages has always seemed baffling to commentators. And yet, an Italian Enlightenment did exist, it had a certain importance in Italian social and political history and some impact on European intellectual history at large. Perhaps it is not by chance that the Italian language has – like German and Spanish but unlike French and English – a couple of terms to indicate the intellectual movement and its promoters, namely *Illuminismo* and *Illuministi*. It is as well to note

that Enlightenment qua national movement existed in Italy within certain limits. It did exist as a movement widespread in a homogeneous linguistic area where publications circulated easily, and indeed the high level of political fragmentation offered welcome opportunities to elude censorship by publishing across borders or declaring fake places of publication. Yet, it never was such a unified movement as the French *Lumières*, which developed within a national political community with a capital town as its centre. In some ways, the Italian Enlightenment can be compared to the English-speaking Enlightenment, which developed within three different intellectual communities located in three distinct countries. Indeed, one more point of contact may be the fact that the two driving intellectual centres, Naples and Milan, were, not unlike Edinburgh, two provincial capitals. The former was the capital of a former Spanish and then Austrian possession recently turned independent in the far south of the continent, and Milan was the capital of a peripheral province of the Austrian Empire. Hotbeds of intellectual life also developed in other towns such as Modena, Bologna, Venice, Turin and in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany with its two intellectual centres of Florence and Pisa but the only two schools that created each its own robust tradition of ideas were those of Milan and Naples<sup>1</sup>.

The character that gave birth to the new movement was the Catholic priest Ludovico Antonio Muratori, who lived in Modena where he was the librarian to the enlightened duke Rinaldo I d'Este. A historian, philologist and philosopher, he proposed a mild way to defend the Christian faith from libertinism through a return to its evangelical origins. In Naples, the no less moderate leading character was another priest, Antonio Genovesi, a university professor of philosophy and the holder of the first chair of economics in Europe. All the protagonists of the Neapolitan Enlightenment, including Gaetano Filangeri and Mario Pagano, were his direct or indirect disciples. In Milan, it was Pietro Verri, an aristocrat who had been a student of the Jesuit college in Piacenza and had studied law at Pavia University without ever graduating, who created an intellectual circle gravitating around the *Accademia dei Pugni* and the literary journal *Il Caffè*. Among his followers were his brother Alessandro, and Cesare Beccaria. Last but not least, Giammaria Ortes, a Venetian priest, was an eccentric figure who never created a school even though he had correspondents and followers, especially in Tuscany; he was a mathematician and formulated a program for the application of calculation to the study of man and society; for some aspects he was a counter-enlightener in so far as he was a pessimist, a critic of those he believed were just dreams of changing the world; for other aspects he shared the same moral inspiration as Verri and Genovesi, that is, a critical attitude to power, wealth, prejudice no less than the same intellectual ammunition.

## 2. A rehabilitation of the moral and political science

A decisive concern for the *Illuministi* was the rehabilitation of the moral and political sciences. They realized that the few works of moral philosophy published in their country were no more than paraphrases of Aristotelian ethics. They were aware of the fact that, while mathematics and natural sciences had enjoyed some importance – despite the fact that in Italy the seventeenth century had not been a season of intellectual flourishing, notwithstanding the interest shown by the Court of the Holy Office in the work of Galileo Galilei – the moral and political sciences had been marginalized because they were felt by established authorities to be still more dangerous. As a result, in Italy, there was no tradition of practical philosophy. Scholastic ethics with the auxiliary discipline of casuistry were virtually relegated to theological seminaries. The Renaissance tradition of *studia humanitatis*, within which ethics was taught as an integral part of character formation, had flourished in the fifteenth century coming to an end in the mid-sixteenth century. A shared concern for Italian *Illuministi* was precisely a need to reintroduce ethics, understood as a philosophical discipline or as “natural morality” independent of divine revelation, in the layman’s education, at least for those destined to higher education.

Muratori’s *Filosofia Morale* is an introduction to philosophical ethics, that is, an ethics based on reason alone, independently of Christian revelation. It starts with a double metaphor: the world is a book, the world is a theatre. We should obtain knowledge of man from observation of the world. To know man is in effect to know oneself, and “consists in uncovering all the different secret wheels that move him as a reasonable creature to so many moral actions, whether good, bad, or indifferent; and the sources of virtue, of vices, of passions, of customs; and the rules, which one has to observe in order to govern oneself wisely”.<sup>2</sup> Moral philosophy carries out a task complementary to that of religion. Religion consists of a few truths accepted by faith and the moral teachings of the Christ (5). Moral philosophy has the task to “teach to be judicious, that is, wise.”<sup>3</sup> The common people do not need instruction in moral philosophy because “philosophy is for the few, that is, for the learned people, whereas religion is for all the people” (46). It should be noted, however, that even in religion there can be an excess as well as a defect when it degenerates into superstition imposing “arbitrary and superficial works while neglecting the duties commanded by God to the particular state of persons” (47).

Francesco Maria Zanotti, a professor at the University of Bologna, wrote *La Filosofia morale secondo l'opinione dei peripatetici*, a book not too far from Muratori though more didactic and closely following Aristotelian orthodoxy, that is, he wanted to provide an introduction to ethics based only on arguments of reason. His book provided one more example of non-scholastic Aristotelianism, like the teaching imparted at the Universities of Lutheran Germany and at Oxford, unlike Cambridge where the Platonic rationalism held sway. Zanotti’s is accurate enough, albeit far from original, in

addressing the main themes of Aristotelian ethics while covering also Hellenistic, Roman and Medieval developments. It includes discussion of the relationship between the honest and the useful, existence of morally indifferent actions and, above all, natural law, defined as consisting “of the rules of the integrity; not only in the first ones, which are called principles but also in the others, which are derived from the principles through argumentation”<sup>4</sup> and “are heard by a certain voice of nature, which proclaims them in everybody’s soul” (39).

Antonio Genovesi in *Della diceosina*, whose curious title is a neologism cast on the Greek *dykaiosyne*, that is, justice, provides one more introduction to philosophical ethics.<sup>5</sup> He starts with the assertion that “the moral sciences are the most necessary” (14) and the circumstance that they are neglected in the education imparted to future elites is a source of serious imbalances. The ethical system developed gives pride of place to natural law, but somewhat modified vis-à-vis the scholastic notion. It is “a general right given to us by God” and “the faculty to use such right for our happiness” (15). This right is part of the order of the universe, it is the law of the universe, known by everybody, known by the divine intellect since eternity and then transfused into the world at the time of Creation. It distinguishes among different creatures while ascribing them distinct properties and ordering them with a view to the goal fixed for them by the Creator. It is immutable in its course, and all the laws of nations derive from it in so far as they are just laws. The laws by which the entities of this world are governed arise from the very nature of such entities” (16), and “man is such a being as to participate in what is in the universe [...] he is subject to all laws and perhaps to the nature that surrounds him”, and therefore “the physical laws of the world are the foundation upon which the moral laws rest” (51).

To prove the existence of natural law and the argument of consensus would suffice: There is no population “which does not feel that there is a natural rule to distinguish between right and wrong” (40). But he admits that – unlike Locke – the moral sciences are not a subject-matter for a priori knowledge since “just their basic principles are evident, and the science of probable truths is also required, and such probable truths are to be found in both the field of reason and that of the senses.”<sup>6</sup> While echoing Hume and Hobbes, he admits that there is no a priori rational morality because “reason is but the calculating faculty: but to calculate well it needs certain evident and fixed maxims” (33). Accordingly, the first standard of moral judgment is “the ideas of the useful and the harmful” (40). These differ from the ideas of right and wrong but in the kind of relationship they consider, either between the individual and his family or between the republic and the invariable course of the world (40). The general law that reason can establish on the basis of the mentioned criterion and the knowledge of a certain number of facts, is the following: “respect the rights of each individual, and if you have violated them, try to restore them to the former degree” (50); this law does not request us

anything else than respecting each individual's rights, and the moving force that impels us to comply with it is fear of punishment and desire for reward.

Pietro Verri, in his "Meditazioni sulla felicità," accounts for the nature of moral sentiments as follows: "Every time a man who knows what pain is faced with the sight of a grieving sensitive being, through that secret connection which runs between the action of external objects and our feelings, be it through internal vibration of inner fibres or in any other way, the fact is that our soul feels part of that pain, and the more it feels it, the more it is driven to make so that misery in that object cease, and this is how purely human charity is an emanation of love of pleasure. This is the moral feeling, which is born not from some distinct sense, as some have suggested, but from an association of simple ideas that I would like to call, by analogy, the curvilinear motion of human sensitivity".<sup>7</sup> He also develops a theological argument for the coincidence of interest and duty, but he also adds that behaviour conforming to the moral law is justified also independently of the divine command. He writes that although "honesty is the human basis of religion, so that whoever violates the laws of the former also violates those of the other, it must nonetheless be respected by the enlightened man for its own sake" (746), and that "reason makes me aware that the first law is the divine one, and it is my duty to sacrifice everything to the obedience of the greatest Being. Thus, I need to work out clear and precise ideas of virtue; I am not talking of that which has its source in theology but just of that which is common to all human societies, to all centuries and to all sects. An act generally useful for men is called virtue, and the virtuous soul is the one which has the desire to do things generally useful for men" (748). While Verri's intimate beliefs on religious matters may be questioned without a definite answer, the above considerations should not be hastily read as an elegant way of doing without religion while paying lip service to it; it should be noted, at least, that existence of natural morality is also clearly asserted by orthodox enough clergymen such as Muratori and Genovesi.

In "Sull'indole dei piaceri e dei dolori" Verri states, first, that virtues have two different sources: the first is reason, which is the basis of "justice, loyalty, discretion and prudence," and the second is sentiment, "which impels us to act positively for good"<sup>8</sup>; secondly, that virtue is the only way to happiness, to the limited extent that it is attainable; thirdly, that interest and duty are not necessarily in conflict but are in relation to each other "as genus and species" (235) and that "happiness is made only for the enlightened and virtuous man" (274), that "reason makes us aware that it is in our interest to be virtuous; fourthly, that virtue alone can lead us to live our days in a less unpleasant way" (274), and that the source of virtue is "a need of general esteem and compassion" (89). He suggests a definition of physical pleasures as sensations whose origin comes from immediate action of external bodies on our organism, and of "moral pleasures" – a notion that is found also in Kant – as sensations whose origin we are unable to ascribe to such action (72-3) and adds that the

moral sense derives from moral pain and moral pleasure, when “through the succession of a long series of sensations accumulated as a crowd of ideas, man comes to understand the succession of different ways of existing” (79), thus becoming able to feel both hope and fear. Even moral pleasure, since it is always preceded by pain, shares the negative character of any pleasure; it is born of hope and consists in the “probability of existing in a way better than the one in which I now exist. And, therefore, hope presupposes perception of a lack of good” (79).

In “Discorso sulla felicità” he adds that “those religions which authorize actions contrary to honesty are false: true religion is always offended when honesty is violated [...] Thus, I conclude that mere reason can keep a man on the path of moral justice if he will constantly exercise it.”<sup>9</sup> He declares that the “immortal laws” prescribed by the Divinity are “simple and invariable” (226), and yet he believes that the fact that the “first of all the laws is divine law” (235) is compatible with the claim that the idea of virtue “does not include the acts of religious worship but only that class of actions which by general consent of men at all times and places were constantly considered to be virtuous, such as forgiving generously the enemy, being trustworthy, grateful, liberal, human” (236), that is, “acts useful to men in general” (236). He adds that, once one admits that “aversion to pain and love of pleasure is a universal law always obeyed by sentient beings, it will come from this principle that man ought to choose essentially the lesser sum of sorrows and the greater sum of pleasures. Eternal and infinite bliss is greater than any finite good and eternal and infinite unhappiness is greater than any finite pain. It follows that man never ought to seek those pleasures which are forbidden by divine law, nor reject those pains which divine law obliges us to endure” (226-7). It is worth remarking that the fact of talking of pleasure and pain as motives while theorizing the convergence between interest and duty does not make Verri a proponent of utilitarianism, a school that did not exist before 1789, the year when Bentham published his main work. If we look at the actual contents of Verri’s writings, and particularly at the role of such notions as moral feeling and moral pleasure, he looks, more than one of the countless “precursors” of utilitarianism, as one of Kant’s fellow-travellers.<sup>10</sup>

Cesare Beccaria, Verri’s disciple, was the author of the celebrated *Dei delitti e delle pene*, published in 1764 and immediately translated into several languages, thus exerting extraordinary influence, among other things abrogation of capital punishment in the Duchy of Tuscany in 1786, and in the Austrian Empire in 1787. The writing of the book had been occasioned by Verri’s suggestion, and its contents were the joint result of the whole Milanese group, with a strategic role for Verri’s contribution, as documented by a manuscript on torture.<sup>11</sup> Beccaria starts by deploring the fact that “the most remote and trivial ideas about the revolutions of the heavens should be better known than the moral notions which are near to hand and of the greatest importance,”<sup>12</sup> but provides an explanation of this paradox with the consideration that “objects which are too close to our eyes

become blurred” (26) and excessive proximity of moral ideas “makes it easy for the many simple ideas that compose them to become muddled” (26). He distinguishes three sources of the “moral and political principles,” namely “revelation, natural law and the conventions arrived at by society” (4). While justice deriving from the first two sources is immutable and constant, the third kind of justice, that is, human or political justice, “being nothing but a relation between an action and the varying state of society, can vary according to how necessary or useful the action is to society” (5). To understand the reasons for this possible variation it is necessary to analyse “the complex and ever-changing relations of civil association” (5), and only on this basis it becomes possible to establish “the relationship between political justice and injustice, that is to say, what is useful and what is harmful to society” (5).

Genovesi’s disciple Gaetano Filangieri set out to improve a branch of the moral and political science, the “science of legislation,” by detailed analysis of “all the rings of which the mysterious chain by which legislation should lead human beings to happiness is composed”<sup>13</sup> that he believed to be necessary, since nobody had provided until then “a complete and reasoned system of legislation [...] a certain and well-organized science, combining means with rules and theory with practice” (19). He believed that this one was the art worth practising and improving instead of the one most improved in recent times, namely, the art of war, an art that had just one problem to solve: “finding the way to kill more men in the shortest possible time” (11). He believed that the degree of perfection reached by the art “most harmful to humankind” was precisely a proof of the existence of “a vice in the universal system of government” (11). To start such a reformulation of the science, he contends, we should distinguish between the absolute and relative goodness of laws. The former consists of “their harmony with the universal principles of morality” (22) which, in turn, are the same as the law of nature as understood by Genovesi. Yet, even though “the law of nature contains immutable principles of what is just and fair in all cases” (61), that is, “the dictates of that principle of universal reason which is the heart’s moral feeling” (61), natural law should be, on the one hand, preserved as the ultimate criterion of judgment, on the other, relativized as not directly applicable to historically given societies. The “relative goodness” of laws is the “relationship between the laws and the state of the nation that receives them” (75). The key to the science of legislation is, therefore, the history of society. In his account, indebted to Giambattista Vico, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot and Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat de Condorcet, social life arose out of the desire for “conservation and tranquillity” (51); early natural society did not recognize any inequality but “the one arising from the strength and robustness of the body” (50); in later times, in search of a social bond that would guarantee security for all, men realized that “physical inequality could not be conquered without sacrificing moral equality” (51); from such realization, those hierarchies were

born that characterize civilized societies. In historically given societies, the problem that can be stated and settled is not how to re-establish absolute equality, but rather how to make so that all society's members may partake in the benefits of "a rich and happy" state (53), that is, in public happiness.

Mario Pagano, another one of Genovesi's disciples, with his *Saggi politici*, wanted to complement Filangieri's contribution with an evolutionary reconstruction of human societies. Like Genovesi, natural law is the starting point. Every man has his own predefined rights that allow him to preserve himself, and the same number of duties that require him to help others. This "chain of rights and obligations" is a "law as old as the existence of men on Earth and social conventions should be modifications and applications of that law qua universal law."<sup>14</sup> The universal law is tantamount to the moral order, that order which allows us to eschew moral chance just as the physical order avoids natural chaos (330). Taking up an idea of Genovesi, he affirms that the "centripetal force" in man is "self-love, love of existence." Order in society is born, first, out of the limitation carried by "connection and balance of many powers, which arises from mutual resistance" (331); second, from the limitation of beings a need arises "to act in view of one's own end and of that which is common to nature as a whole" (329), and this is "order, law, harmony and justice" (329). Such are the results of the "limitation, connection and balance of so many powers, arising from mutual resistance" (331). Not unlike Verri and Genovesi, the physical-moral analogy plays an important role; in fact, he writes that the "force which pushes men to society, is certainly no different from the force of gravity" (257), and that "there is a parallel between physical and moral laws" (139). In more detail, society possesses, no less than nature, an order that shields its members from physical or moral chaos, and this order arises from interaction between opposing forces; in the savage state, coexistence is made somehow possible by "fellow-feeling, piety and benevolence towards beings like oneself" (22); in this state there is full equality while in the civilized state such equality is inevitably eroded, since men "combine strength, will, counsel, rights" and "what anyone contributes to the pool of common assets is not the same as what somebody else contributes" (26) and, therefore, "the wisest and most virtuous as well as the richest are bound to have greater rights" (27). Man is made for social life, because the union of forces is "in conformity with nature's goals, among them preservation of the goods produced" (156), but – unlike Hobbes – the reason why man is made for society is not that he is the weakest animal; instead, what makes man sociable is just "the quality of perfectibility" (156) he is endowed with. It is only in the social state that "man can satisfy so many of his own needs" (158), only in society can he shape "those needs which are necessary to keep his mind's activity alive" (158), and it is society that "both creates such needs and satisfies them" (160).

A partially dissonant voice is that of Giammaria Ortes. On the one hand, he gives unique importance to mathematical calculation, on the other, he does not believe in the possibility of applying



an exact science to ethics, politics and economics, which are all located beyond the scope of possible reliable knowledge.<sup>15</sup> In a fragment from about 1760, he sketches out an ethical theory based on his theory of pleasure and pain. According to his theory, *vice* consists “in promoting one’s own interests by contrasting those of others<sup>16</sup>; *pure interest* is “to promote them without such a contrast” (165); *virtue* is “to promote the interests of others in order to be assisted in promoting our own” (165); all of them “proceed from the same origin to promote our own interests” (165), which would be exemplified by the traditional precept to do to our neighbour what we want him to do to ourselves, which would highlight how “everyone, by promoting the interests of others, has no other aim than to advance his own” (165-6). In “Calcolo sopra il valore dell’opinioni e sopra i dolori e i piaceri della vita umana,” he defends the claim of a purely negative nature of pleasure. He affirms that “all that is commonly called pleasure is but a removal of pain and sorrow”<sup>17</sup> and that any “pain or anxiety of any kind is always something positive, but pleasure is not, since the former consists of excess or lack of tension or motion and the latter of mere removal of such excess or lack. This implies that the objects themselves do not bring the same pleasure to all people and not in all places and times, as it would happen if pleasure were something positive” (142). He believes that application of the calculus to every aspect of life, including morals, does not yield absolute certainties such as those dreamt of by the radical trend in the French Enlightenment, but that the calculus can but unmask, for the few who are able to understand, the delusions or the sway of Opinion on men. He writes that the latter is “no less necessary to society” than “desire of pleasure cannot be removed from men” (123), and its sway deludes us into believing that “the forces of us all are employed to benefit each of us, while in fact they are used in favour of just one” (124), and therefore “all the pains and pleasures of this life are but delusion” and “all human reasoning is just madness” (147).

### 3. A debate on pleasure, pain and happiness

The eighteenth century was obsessed with the theme of happiness and, in connection with this, with the question of the nature of pleasure.<sup>18</sup> Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis gave the start to a debate on pleasure and happiness with his *Essai de Philosophie Morale* where he wanted, on the one hand, to refute Julien Offray de La Mettrie’s Epicurean materialism and, on the other, to refute Neo-Stoic ethics, while proposing a sort of altruistic hedonism at once allegedly compatible with Christianity, and based on a pessimistic view of life and a definition of pleasure in terms of relief caused by cessation of pain.<sup>19</sup> Zannotti’s abovementioned treatise was completed by an appendix dedicated to Maupertuis’s doctrine,<sup>20</sup> where he raises the following objections: first, Maupertuis reduces happiness to pleasure, and this yields a sort of ethical egoism whereby “man ought not nor shall he be able to direct any action of his own except to his own pleasure; nor shall he care of his wife, children or

relatives” (194), while in fact “we want a few things because of the pleasure we derive from them and others because of their excellence and dignity” (195); secondly, Maupertuis contends that in life there are more evils than goods on the ground that we always desire change, without considering the possibility that we may desire change just in order to move from a lesser to a greater good (197). By this appendix, Zanotti occasioned a debate on Maupertuis’s ethics to which several writers, including Zanotti himself, contributed.<sup>21</sup>

Another Professor from Bologna University, Marco Antonio Vogli, in *La natura del piacere e del dolore*, defended a view close to Maupertuis’s, namely, that pleasure seems greater when it follows pain, seems smaller when it follows a greater pleasure, and when it follows a smaller pleasure it “remains such as it is.”<sup>22</sup> He disagrees with Maupertuis in denying that the amount of pain in life is greater than that of pleasure, contending that Nature keeps a balance between both.<sup>23</sup>

Genovesi adopts a eudemonist doctrine, apparently close to Aristotle and Aquinas, but in fact, radically transformed by the adoption of a theory of pleasure and happiness not far from Maupertuis’s. Man is moved by the “pleasure we long to achieve,” “every yearning or desire is a pain”; “pleasure is nothing but the cessation of pain and boredom”<sup>24</sup>; “every man feels he is led by nature to love his existence, to try to attain that condition of existence where he considers himself extremely comfortable and satisfied. It is in such a condition that human happiness consists” (19). Virtue should be concerned with rescuing us from the evils that make us unhappy, and “the kind of happiness, which here on earth can be experienced by us, consists only in experiencing those evils that crowd us in the slightest quantity [...] we can only achieve this by virtue [...] so we must be virtuous in order to be happy.”<sup>25</sup> Human society’s order is kept by forces analogous to those of the physical world. In the latter world these are “the force of cohesion, and of mutual attraction”<sup>26</sup>; in the former cohesion is kept by two principles: self-love or the “centripetal force,” and “love of humankind,” or the “expansive force.” Note the role Genovesi ascribes to sympathy. He writes that “as in the strings of a cymbal when we touch one also the octave resonates for the consonance of the tension [...] in that same way, since our natures have been designed [...] with the same rule and moulded with the same mould, it is impossible that, when we meet each other, one’s mood would not sympathetically affect the other [...] what is tantamount to saying that that for the planets, the force of gravity which attracts them to the centre is the daughter of the force of projection which distances them” (30).

Ortes adopts Maupertuis’s negative definition of pleasure while declaring that “any pain or restlessness whatsoever is always something positive, but not so pleasure since the former consists in the excess or defect of tension or motion, and the latter in the mere removal of that excess or defect.”<sup>27</sup>

Pietro Verri, instead, in “Sull’indole dei piaceri e dei dolori,” attacks Maupertuis’s alleged inability to give a proper definition of pain and pleasure: “He defined pleasure in this way: pleasure

is a sensation that man wants to have rather than not have. But, if one reflects carefully, this is no definition; it would be the same to say that pleasure is what pleases: an assertion as self-evident as it is superfluous.”<sup>28</sup> In “Discorso sulla felicità,” he carries out an analysis of the role of imagination in our perception of close and distant objects and, while quoting Locke, heads to claims not unlike those by Adam Smith, for example, that the imagination “is always willing to enlarge the evils we fear and the goods we desire,”<sup>29</sup> and yet reason “has accustomed us to correct the optical illusion and to judge the extent even of distant objects without depriving you of true greatness” (207). On wealth – when he writes that “those few who obtain it actually become more miserable than before” (208), and when he writes that ambition is “the most grim and at the same time the most beneficial passion,”<sup>30</sup> because it is, in one respect, a necessary spring for human activity and therefore a source of benefits, and, in another, a cause of irrational behaviour and a source of unhappiness, adding that “it is an inviolable law that the goods that one possesses have always less value than those which one desires, but the difference is greater for those who are irrational” (208) – he seems to paraphrase Adam Smith’s celebrated passage on the Poor Man’s Son.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. The idea of public happiness

The discussion of happiness at some point merged with that of *pubblica felicità* – a phrase that translates the current Latin motto *felicitas publica*. This is not just a translation of the Aristotelian notion *eudaimonia*, and even less does it “forerun” the Benthamite notion of happiness as a state of mind where the balance of pleasure over pain is positive. The idea had been launched by Muratori in 1749, inspired by a phrase formulated in the Roman Imperial tradition and renewed by the Austrian empire’s official propaganda.<sup>32</sup> In *Della pubblica felicità* he starts with the statement that the “substance of the happiness which one can hope for on earth consists in the tranquillity of mind and body”<sup>33</sup> and adds that, although we “mainly believe that happiness of living creatures consists of the abundance and enjoyment of many good things, which we name wealth, honours, positions of command, pleasures” (10), yet one cannot “call a heart happy which is a hotbed of continuous desires, for one cannot find true happiness where there is restlessness, where peace of mind is lacking” (11). What the good ruler should be seeking is “public happiness,” which does not mean a condition “in which everyone should be or might be called happy” (11) but rather “that peace and tranquillity which a wise and loving prince, or minister, strives to make his people enjoy as much as he can” (12). Alongside the wise action of the ruler, another factor required to guarantee peace of mind for the citizens and cooperation between them is provided by such virtues as “justice, harmony, charity” (46). That these are widespread can be assured by two different sources: the first is the Christian religion which is “the first and most effective teacher of such virtues”(46) since “it was instituted to benefit

also the civil status of peoples”(46), and its task is not only to teach the true divine cult but also “to preach and persuade to practice the most ordered customs, all sorts of virtues, and to introduce in its professors that private tranquillity and that universal union and love which [...] make human society happy” (46). The second is moral philosophy, which also tends “to this aim” (46) even though “philosophy is for the few, that is, for the learned people, while religion is for all the people” (46). The sovereign will take care of public happiness “by preventing possible disorders and remedying those disorders which have already occurred; by ensuring that life, honour and substances of any of the subjects are not only preserved but also made safe, by means of exact justice, by exacting tributes with as much moderation as those who are content with the wool of their sheep without wanting also their skin, as well as by procuring for the people any comfort, advantage and benefit that is in their power” (12), and therefore it will include a prosperous economy, fair administration of justice, promotion of science and culture, and diffusion of education.<sup>34</sup>

The same idea was mentioned by Zanotti a few years later, while distinguishing the happiness of the lonely, or theoretical happiness from the citizen’s happiness, “consisting mainly of the practice of virtue”<sup>35</sup>; the magistrates themselves are subject to the *honestum*, that is, they have moral duties, which oblige the Prince “to consider in his laws always public happiness [...] providing citizens with wealth, which sometimes harms, but also, and even more, with virtue, which always benefits” (40).

Genovesi, in *Lezioni di economia civile*, distinguishes the *strength* from the *happiness* of nations. Not always the strongest nations are the happiest or the weakest the most miserable. The true strength of a state is judged “by the extent of the land, its population, its achievements either intellectual or manual,”<sup>36</sup> but its happiness consists of “domestic peace and safety, satisfaction of natural wants [...] dwelling in a mild climate, and enough land as to be able to comfortably provide food in proportion to the number of inhabitants, and besides its rulers’ wisdom and virtue” (415). In other words, public happiness is not an arithmetic sum of quanta of individual happiness as opposed to wealth as measurable in monetary or physical terms. It is, instead, a more complex entity. It consists of a constellation of factors: first, those independent of individual and collective choices such as the climate and availability of indispensable goods; secondly, those depending on political choices, such as basic income accessible to everybody in exchange for a moderate amount of work, good governance, and absence of conflicts; and, thirdly, moral factors such as wisdom and virtue practised by the elite. In conclusion, it is something different from what twenty-first-century happiness studies try to explore, that is, more than subjective perceptions of one’s own state of satisfaction, a complex of objective conditions concerning more the community than the individual. And by way of conclusion, *pubblica felicità* is something not too far from the goal of good government as described by Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson.

Among factors described by Genovesi, there is “public faith,” that is, widespread mutual trust. This is kept alive by the fundamental principles of “civil society”: firstly, justice, which has the effect of making it possible to draw up agreements and expect them to be respected, and to ensure that laws and the administration of justice are a serious business and not merely appearances or traps; secondly, humanity, which avoids that “each looks at the other with suspicion” (341). One final point worth mentioning is that Genovesi believes that any prosperous society needs to provide a remedy to boredom. He writes that the arts and crafts, besides being a source of numberless goods if wisely used, are also an opportunity for fatigue that is a “balm to heal the boredom of life” and, without them, “since men neither can nor want to be left in idleness, make war, which is the most horrible of the crafts. Such is the life of the savages and barbarians.”<sup>37</sup> It goes without saying that this passage seems to echo both Montesquieu’s views on the civilizing effect of *doux commerce*, and the conclusions of Voltaire’s *Candide*.<sup>38</sup>

Pietro Verri mentions the notion of *pubblica felicità* in “Considerazioni sul lusso,” where he writes that “the purpose of any legislation cannot depart without a violent corruption of the principles of law-making from public happiness, and the latter means the greatest possible happiness *shared among the greatest possible number*.”<sup>39</sup> In “Meditazioni sulla felicità,” he connects the idea of happiness with that of a social covenant whose goal is “the well-being of everyone who cooperates in constituting society, which is accomplished in public happiness or the greatest possible happiness being *shared with the greatest possible equality*. All laws enacted should, therefore, aim at public happiness.”<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting that, more than directly inspiring *policies* to be implemented, public happiness should provide a standard for assessing the goodness of *laws*, to distinguish good from bad legislation no less than a link between interest and duty; in fact, in a society “where the social covenant has not been torn, the interest of each person carries out the function of the moral obligation insofar as it leads to the observance of the covenant” (751).<sup>41</sup>

Cesare Beccaria in *Dei delitti e delle pene* repeats Verri’s definition of public happiness in a shortened form but with no mention of the phrase itself. While attacking legislation in force at his time, he declares that existing laws, which should be “pacts of free men,” have been enacted arbitrarily or inherited from barbarous ages. They should be formulated instead “by a cool observer of human nature, who has brought the actions of many men under a single gaze and has evaluated them from the point of view of whether or not they conduce to the greatest happiness shared among the greatest number.”<sup>42</sup> The absence of the word “equality,” which had been instead Verri’s keyword, is remarkable. We may charitably conjecture that omission resulted from a desire to use the shortest possible formulation or, less charitably, that it was the effect of Beccaria’s taste for rhetoric, and comparative carelessness in matters of theory. Unfortunately, such reformulation had unforeseen

consequences. It is well known that Verri's definition closely follows a phrase by Francis Hutcheson, in turn, providing a definition of virtuous action, namely, "that action is the best, which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers."<sup>43</sup> Similar formulations were later used by various French authors.<sup>44</sup> Verri's phrase is closer to Hutcheson's than to Beccaria's abridged formulation which, in turn, had become even more troublesome in the English version read by Bentham,<sup>45</sup> namely, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number."<sup>46</sup> This seems to have been precisely the source for Bentham's phrase, even though, while writing twenty years after, he seems to believe he had found it in Joseph Priestley.<sup>47</sup> Note that Bentham's intentions in adopting it were different from Verri's and Beccaria's, and closer to Hutcheson's, since it summarized the standard of right action no less than of correct legislation. It is as well to note that it was later abandoned by Bentham himself (1779-81). Was this precise wording responsible for serious troubles utilitarianism went through, that is, the counterintuitive consequences carried by a preference for the total sum of happiness over equality in its distribution, with which Bentham tried to fight during the rest of his career? It is hard to say. Perhaps the dream of a universal felicific calculus as the key to a new practical reason was so deeply rooted in Bentham's mind as to be independent of different wordings he might stumble in.

It is as well to end this overview with Ortes, who, on the one hand, insists more than any other on the distinction between the notion of *common* happiness and the (deceptive) ideas of wealth and power of a state and, on the other, proves to be aware of the caution with which the very idea of happiness should be treated. In a letter, he speaks with condescension of "that patriotic spirit of which there is so much pomp in the present and which it is believed should be directed to the growth of common riches to increase happiness."<sup>48</sup> The source of all mistakes is "the idea of greatness and national power"<sup>49</sup> that amounts to pure fantasy; in fact, differences in wealth between different nations with roughly the same population are lesser than rulers seem to believe, and the idea of a strategy to promote the wealth of a nation is just a dream. At about 1789 he writes that "the wealth of a nation consists of the goods it possesses and consumes if each person consumes as many goods like any other."<sup>50</sup> And he goes on poking fun at the "political economists, very busy in increasing wealth in nations regardless of how and for whose benefit it is increased" (211), because the art of politicians consists in making us believe that wealth grows for the whole nation while it grows instead only for the Sovereign and the wealthy ones, and in talking all the time of increased wealth and never of misery coming with it. Ortes remarks that, in a given society, its members' activities may be useful to themselves and harmful to others, or useful to some and harmful to the majority, and thus a science is illusory which purports to measure and add up commodities and services that are useful only to a few while being possibly harmful to the majority, believing thus to be measuring a phantom national wealth and, even worse, that such non-existing wealth carries, in turn, public happiness.

Note that Ortes is the only one to confer a negative connotation to the term *political* economist. Verri instead mentions *political* economy with a neutral connotation,<sup>51</sup> while Genovesi constantly talks only of *civil* economy, arguably as a synonym of *political* economy. In fact, *civilis* is the Latin translation of the Greek *politikòs*, and we may safely conjecture that *economia civile* meant for Genovesi precisely the same as *political economy* meant for Verri and others. Ortes, on the other hand, adopted such phrases as *national economy* or *common economy* to designate either the economy or economics, and talked of *geometric* economy as opposed to *political* economy when he wanted to characterize the correct way to do economics, as contrasted with the deceptive one.<sup>52</sup> *Geometrical* economists are those who limit themselves to using measurement and calculation in a proper way, taking population and physical goods as the subjects of empirical enquiry. *Political* economists, instead, are those who deal with “imaginary wealth,” and believe “that by means of the money equivalent to real wealth, real wealth itself may be increased,” and indeed “consider the former more than the latter” (168). By way of conclusion, the error of the political economists is “to prefer imaginary wealth, that is, money, to real wealth, that is, real and consumable goods. Such an endeavour is no different from that of alchemists, albeit carried out in a reverse direction, that is, instead of converting consumable substances into gold [...] political economists of our time endeavour to convert gold or money into consumable substances.”<sup>53</sup> And so, “with so much chatter of wealth, opulence, greatness, one can only obtain to confine all this to the few, leaving all others poorer and more wretched than before; and *common happiness* does not lie in increasing and improving common goods, but in sharing them among all with *the least possible inequality and with less arbitrariness.*”<sup>54</sup>

##### 5. Conclusions: a breed of moderate radicals

I have briefly described a movement of ideas that developed in an area linguistically unified and yet politically divided, while reconstructing a few shared elements: first, a program of religious reform that would bring the dominant religion back to its original inspiration; second, limited scepticism expressed to different degrees, from limited expressions by Genovesi to extreme ones by Ortes; third, a firm refusal of legislation and practices inherited from “barbarous centuries,” namely war, colonial violence, the death penalty and torture. With the exception of Beccaria’s pamphlet, the movement had almost no impact abroad. Besides, even within the Italian speaking area its influence was short-lived, due to the sharp break carried by the Napoleonic conquest, and then by Restoration of the *ancien regime*, and the sharply different ideal mould where the Italian Risorgimento was cast, which exchanged universalism, pacifism, and reasonable religion for nationalism, militarism, and an alternative between traditionalist religiosity or atheism.

The notion of *pubblica felicità* may be taken as a mark of a ground shared by the *Illuministi*, and their comparative originality vis-à-vis other national Enlightenments. It may be the emblem of a research program that in this peripheral European country proved highly productive, and when seen in the light of twenty-first-century discussion in economics, sociology, politics and ethics, discloses aspects of extraordinary interest. It is worth repeating that none of these authors, even though they kept discussing pleasure, interest, and even the greatest happiness, was a “forerunner” of utilitarianism. Instead, their shared trait is a critique of too systematic ethical, political and economic doctrines, and a remarkable awareness of the complexity of happiness, a too rich concept to be translated into a measurable magnitude. In adopting the far from novel formula *felicità pubblica*, yet, they were far from coming back to Aristotelian *eudamonia*, and even less to Aristotelian *philia* (roughly, friendship) as the basis of politics. On the contrary, they were aware that the individual is bound to look after his own happiness, and thus *public* happiness is *less* than communal happiness, being just such a framework – consisting of absence of conflicts, safety, intellectual and technical progress – as to make the pursuit of individual happiness viable.<sup>55</sup> In their awareness of the complexity of modern society vis-à-vis the Greek polis, our authors are close to Pufendorf, the natural law tradition, and Cameralism to which they are indebted, and follow a path of inquiry parallel to that of the Scottish Enlightenment. In other words, there was no Mediterranean, Italian, Catholic, altruist and communitarian tradition of social theory alternative to a Northern European, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, individualist social theory.<sup>56</sup> Genovesi, Verri and Ortes faced challenges posed by modern societies in the context of absolutism, where the *Prince* was still the protagonist of any possible path to public happiness, and the formula *felicità pubblica* is far from a lost treasure that could be unearthed and productively employed in contemporary liberal-democratic societies. On the other hand, the formula does not convey anything different from what Adam Smith and other Scots had to say in different words, for example, that the opulence of a nation should be defined in terms of provision of goods available to the meanest labourer.

To sum up, the Italian Enlightenment, not unlike the Scottish Enlightenment, enjoyed the asset of being *both* cosmopolitan and local.<sup>57</sup> This is what allowed keen awareness of modern society’s complexity and inspired prudence vis-à-vis shortcuts, and it is this trait that still recommends their writings as fruitful reading – still waiting, apart from a couple of exceptions, for translation – for twenty-first-century philosophers and social scientist.

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<sup>1</sup> See Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, volume 1, 3-58; for a glimpse at Venturi's path-breaking work see Venturi, *Utopia and Reform and Italy in the Enlightenment*; for a list of publications in English by other historians see Wahnbaek, *Luxury*, 2 fn 4.

<sup>2</sup> Muratori, *La Filosofia Morale*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Muratori, *Della pubblica felicità*, 46.

<sup>4</sup> Zanotti, *La Filosofia morale*, 38-9.

<sup>5</sup> On Genovesi see Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, volume 1, 523-644.

<sup>6</sup> Genovesi, *Diceosina*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Verri, "Meditazioni sulla felicità", 752-3; on Verri see Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, volume 1, 645-747.

<sup>8</sup> Verri, "Sull'indole dei piaceri", 256.

<sup>9</sup> Verri, "Discorso sulla felicità", 229.

<sup>10</sup> Rother, "Felicità", 233-6.

<sup>11</sup> Verri, "Osservazioni."

<sup>12</sup> Beccaria, *Delitti*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Filangieri, *La scienza*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Pagano, *Saggi politici*, 21

<sup>15</sup> On Ortes see Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, volume 1, 403-410.

<sup>16</sup> Ortes "Calcolo de' vizi", 165.

<sup>17</sup> Ortes, *Calcolo sopra il valore dell'opinioni*, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Mauzi, *L'idée du bonheur*.

<sup>19</sup> Maupertuis, *Essai*.

<sup>20</sup> Zanotti, *La filosofia morale*, 189-231.

<sup>21</sup> Ansaldi, *Raccolta*; see Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, volume 1, 353-403.

<sup>22</sup> Vogli, *La natura del piacere*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Vogli, *La natura del piacere*, 83-4.

<sup>24</sup> Genovesi, *Diceosina*, 28; see Guasti, "Antonio Genovesi's 'Diceosina'."

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- <sup>25</sup> Genovesi, *Meditazioni*, 3.
- <sup>26</sup> Genovesi, *Diceosina*, 342.
- <sup>27</sup> Ortes, *Calcolo sopra il valore dell'opinioni*, 142.
- <sup>28</sup> Verri, *Sull'indole*, 68.
- <sup>29</sup> Verri, *Discorso sulla felicità*, 200.
- <sup>30</sup> Verri, *Discorso sulla felicità*, 208.
- <sup>31</sup> Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, 181.
- <sup>32</sup> D'Onofrio, "On the Concept Of 'Felicitas Publica'."
- <sup>33</sup> Muratori, *Pubblica felicità*, 10; on Muratori see Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, volume 1, 177-186; for an alternative view see Continisio, "Governing the passions", particularly p. 384.
- <sup>34</sup> On Muratori's awareness of the gap existing in the private pursuit of happiness, both a potential source of disorder and a possible civic virtue, and the Prince's promotion of public happiness, a pursuit more general in its scope but more limited in its content, see Continisio, "Governing the passions", 384.
- <sup>35</sup> Zanotti, *La filosofia morale*, 27-8.
- <sup>36</sup> Genovesi, *Lezioni*, 415.
- <sup>37</sup> Genovesi, *Lezioni*, 426.
- <sup>38</sup> Voltaire, *Candide*, 256-60.
- <sup>39</sup> Verri "Considerazioni sul lusso", 157; my emphasis; the quoted essay is a shorter version of his "Considerazioni sulla proposizione di restringere il lusso."
- <sup>40</sup> Verri, *Meditazioni sulla felicità*, 750; cf. 751; my emphasis.
- <sup>41</sup> Cf Verri, "Discorso sulla felicità", 241-2.
- <sup>42</sup> Beccaria, *Delitti*, 7.
- <sup>43</sup> Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 164.
- <sup>44</sup> See Francioni, Gianni, fn 119 to Verri, "Discorso sulla felicità", 242-3.
- <sup>45</sup> Beccaria *An essay*; Cf Shackleton, "The greatest happiness, 1472-4.
- <sup>46</sup> Beccaria, *An essay*, 2.
- <sup>47</sup> Shackleton, "The greatest happiness", 1477.
- <sup>48</sup> Ortes, "Lettera a Marco Lastrì."
- <sup>49</sup> Ortes, "Dell'ingerenza", 176.
- <sup>50</sup> Ortes, "Dell'uguaglianza", 210.
- <sup>51</sup> Verri, "Meditazioni sulla economia politica", 3, 19, 37.
- <sup>52</sup> Ortes, "Discorso", 168.
- <sup>53</sup> Ortes, "Dell'ingerenza", 174.
- <sup>54</sup> Ortes, "Al Sig. dott. Paoli"; my emphasis.
- <sup>55</sup> See Continisio, "Governing the passions", 384.
- <sup>56</sup> See Bruni and Zamagni, *Economia civile*, particularly 98-9. For a plausible critique see D'Onofrio, "On the Concept of 'Felicitas Publica'."
- <sup>57</sup> Wahnbaek, *Luxury*, 191.