

# ON SMITH'S NOTION OF PLEASURE

Estrella Trincado, Universidad Complutense de Madrid  
estrinaz@ccee.ucm.es

Recibido: 3 de marzo de 2014

Aceptado: 7 de septiembre de 2014

**Abstract:** Smith's scholars have not made explicit the fact that the definition of "pleasure" that Adam Smith uses is different from that of his contemporary interlocutors and, in particular, from those used by the utilitarian theorists. Although, in affirming that the moral feeling is created through the taking into account of the judgement of another person, Smith reproduces the Kantian distinction between the idea of the self and that of the other - on the contrary, with regard to the theory of sensations, he breaks with Kant's separation (for whom pleasure is a reflexive perception) (Kant 1978) and he does not distinguish between the image of pleasure and pleasure itself. This implies the break with the homo economicus definition of human action.

**Keywords:** Adam Smith, feeling, pleasure, utilitarianism, psychology

**Resumen:** Los estudiosos de Smith no han hecho explícito que la definición de "placer" que Smith usa es diferente de aquella que usan sus interlocutores contemporáneos y, en particular, de aquellas usadas por los teóricos utilitaristas. Al afirmar que en la construcción del sentimiento moral el hombre tiene en cuenta el juicio de otra persona, Smith reproduce la distinción Kantiana entre la idea del yo y la idea del otro, pero Smith rompe con esa separación Kantiana en el caso del placer (para Kant el placer es una percepción reflexiva mientras que Smith no distingue entre la imagen de placer y el placer mismo). Esto implica romper con la definición de acción humana en términos de homo economicus.

**Palabras clave:** Adam Smith, sentimiento, placer, utilitarianismo, psicología

## Utility as a “Alienating” Beauty

Although Hume and Smith maintained a warm friendship from the very moment they met, probably in 1752<sup>1</sup>, until the death of Hume, in 1776, they debated in an intense mutual criticism. In particular, Smith considered David Hume to be a defender of a kind of utilitarianism and Smith devoted himself to the construction of a full social theory whose basis confronted the foundations of the theories that supposed that men act seeking utility<sup>2</sup>. According to Smith, human action is not based in the love of a mental system, that is to say, a structure that their memory retains of longed for pleasures and pains feared. But Humean passions are, precisely, based in that structure: in the habit of the association of ideas, threatened by the survival desire and, in short, by death instinct. We are carried away irremediably by instinctive pleasure, but it is “the good” for men; instinctive pain, that we can neither avoid, is “the evil” for men. So, as Hume himself tells us, men are slave of their own passions.

To Smith, men experience of the world does not consist in the attraction of an individual system of beauty even though we think that shapes that instinctively captivate us will provide us with a sensation of pleasure. Even cause and effect is a type of subtle beauty that impresses men strongly, the same as animal and vegetable kingdom beauty does, the great natural ecosystem in which every element seems to fit as a great puzzle and every specie suits in the niche for whom it seems to have been created<sup>3</sup>. That is to say, utility is like beauty, something similar to imitative arts (Smith 1983) and of little importance to Smith's moral theory<sup>4</sup>.

Hume himself provided this conception of utility as a way of beauty. Probably, Smith adopted this idea from his philosophical theory. (For their different concepts of utility, see Long 1990, 12-39)<sup>5</sup> Hume's theory is based in

---

1 Even though, according to Dugald Stewart, it is not clear when their relation began (Smith 1980 (Vol. II): EPS).

2 We leave this clear because some authors, Haakonssen included, consider Hume's theory as “non utilitarian”. And this is true if we describe utilitarianism in the restricted view of Philosophical Radicalism, but it cannot be doubted that Hume introduced the idea of utility as a central element of social sciences (Haakonssen 1981). For different interpretations of Hume's intentions, see Dow, 2002.

3 Berkeley in his *Theory of vision* and in *Alciphron* was a more earnest defender of this type of functionalist theory, in which all beauty depends on the subordination of the uses to the ends. In fact, in this period, this authors from “the analysis of riches” normally raised the mechanical efficiency principle to the category of beauty and talked about organic beauty, or adaptation of a shape to the environment, and about the mechanical beauty, the perfect adaptation of the shape to his end, use or utility (Marchán 1996, p. 50).

4 Haakonssen and Vivenza freed Smith from the utilitarian label in moral and in his law theory (Haakonssen, p. 97-10; Vivenza 2001, p. 143). The problem of Smith utilitarianism has also been presented, amongst other works, in the book of Griswold 1999, p. 540, and Trincado 2003.

5 Haakonssen calls “utility of the means” to Hume's, confronted to Bentham's “utility of the ends”. But he do not make explicit if Hume was aware of this distinction (Haakonssen, p. 41). Bentham's

a collection of atomic beauties perceived only individually<sup>6</sup>, and based in the idea of spectator<sup>7</sup>. As beauty is defined as a taste or sensation, it can be concluded that it is no more than a shape that provides pleasure, and deformity pain. Apart from instinctive pain, that seeks survival, Hume's notion of beauty is centred in the motives of habit and fashion. The idea of beauty is communicated through sympathy: for instance, an asymmetric figure is disagreeable because it conveys the ideas of fall, a kind of pain. In Hume's theory, the simple contemplation of a beautiful object is agreeable, and virtue consists in the production of this beauty that we relate to the ego. The utility of an object pleases his owner because it suggests the pleasure and convenience it can produce, so the owner is proud of the relation of the object with himself. The spectator sympathises with this owner's pride and with the pleasure he imagines that the object generates. This sympathy that the object produces in others generates in the proprietor an additional pleasure and esteem. This reflection is secondary to the original pleasure; but finally it becomes the more important recommendation of riches and the main reason for our desiring it or admiring it in others. (Hume 1964). As Schliesser (2009) comments, Smith appears to view human nature as a collection of human propensities, either bedrock parts of human nature or the (necessary) consequence of such bedrock human nature (original or derived propensities). For instance, the original propensity to feel with others' makes us construct language and language makes us construct division of labour necessary consequence of the faculty of reason and speech.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, utility is only an image that we chase in our mind. Smith makes it clear, adding a critical nuance. In the seeking of utility – or of riches - we do not value the pleasure or pain provided, but the reducing of an anxiety we put in the accurateness of that shape of beauty, in which we see the means adapting to the ends. The search of utility is, so, love of system, a love that creates temporal or fictitious illusion, but not pleasure. The conceited son of the poor that, to obtain the conveniences that he supposes the rich enjoys, courts his hateful enemies and lives in an endless intrigue, is not looking to the comfort of the agent, but to the surprise of the real spectator, admired by the grandiosity of the image (Smith 1976, 181-3).

---

concept of pleasure is, by the way, a bit different from, and more rational than Hume's, as shows his poem: "Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure/ Such marks in pleasures and in pains endure/ Such pleasures seek, if private be thy end./ If it be public, wide let them extend./ Such pains avoid, whichever be thy view/ If pains must come, let them extend to few" (Stark 1954, "The Psychology of Economic Man", p. 435). For further concepts of utility, see Stigler 1950, 58: 4: pp. 307-27; and 58: 5: 373-96, p. 392.

<sup>6</sup> But, it is true that the valuating mechanism of Hume's ethics seems to imply an objectivity and ethical cognitivism (see Tasset 1999, pp. 74-86; Mackie 1980; or Norton 1982).

<sup>7</sup> Foucault's interpretation of Las Meninas suggested the presence of man as an aesthetic subject – artist or spectator (Foucault 1970).

<sup>8</sup> For language, see (1974), Levy (1997); Otteson (2002a), Otteson (2002b) and Dascal (2006)

Smith, with his famous example of the watch that generates an anxiety of looking the “exact” hour one time and another, shows that the idea of utility is a mental hallucination (Smith 1976, 180).

Finally, then men are not *homo economicus*<sup>9</sup> as, with regard to pleasure, they do not make judgments as a maximization of their subjectively defined ends, but they accept reality with gratitude or they reciprocate with reality (in modern ethics, the concept of “*homo reciprocans*” has been forged to make a contrast with individual utilitarianism idea of action (Godelier 1999) and, besides, there is an emphasis made on intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, see Frey 1992, Caruso 2012). According to Adam Smith, with regard to moral sentiments, we may reciprocate with an image of ourselves that represent what others' may expect from our actions<sup>10</sup>.

### Smith's Concept of Pleasure

As stated in Trincado (2006), if anticipation is to Hume the source of pleasure, to Smith men seek joy that does not need anticipation. “I have, however, a mortal aversion to all anticipations” (Smith 1987, 270)<sup>11</sup>. Smith defines pleasure as something near to gratitude, that is to say, a natural gift that is not necessary to bring forward, and can be felt in every human gesture, in every external or imaginary creation. This gratitude is felt in calm events, from which pleasure can begin, “for whatever is the cause of pleasure naturally excites our gratitude” (Smith 1980, 48). Happiness consists of and depends on tranquillity and enjoyment. A wise man will be in every situation of his life equally calmed, joyful and satisfied. He is not blinded by frivolous pleasures and lives in the present. Our great evils come from not knowing the price of our own happiness, and wanting to change it for an illusory one (Smith 1976, 149).

Pleasure is a way of contemplative gratitude, and “nothing is more graceful than habitual cheerfulness, which is always founded upon a peculiar relish for all the little pleasures, which common occurrences afford” (Smith 1976, 41-2).. That is the case of the observation of the Statuary and Painting, in which we enjoy the pleasure of knowledge; or of the performers of

---

<sup>9</sup> This term “economic man” was used by Bentham for the first time in the first nineteenth century when he describes action in maximization terms (Stark 1954, *The Psychology of Economic Man*, p. 435). Afterwards, critics of John Stuart Mill (1836) stressed the idea. See Persky 1995 and Zabieglik 2002.

<sup>10</sup> However, the economic man of the *Wealth of nations* does not contradict the ethical man of the TMS (Grampp 1948, Macfie 1967, and Macfie 1959).

<sup>11</sup> Letter 232 of Smith to William Strahan, Canongate, Edinburgh, 20 November 1783.

Dancing and Music, in which we enjoy the pleasure of movement (Smith 1980, 176-207). “After the pleasures which arise from the gratification of the bodily appetites, there seem to be none more natural to man than Music and Dancing” (Smith 1980, 187).

But pleasure for Smith is not corporal, neither mental. As is well known, Smith criticises the Epicurean system that considered the search for corporal pleasure and the avoidance of corporal pain – the body as a centre of sensations – as the only motive of action and the last and final objectives of natural desire and aversion. According to Epicurus, every mental pleasure or pain is derived from one of the body and from the self-preservation principle; but mental pleasures and pains are more acute than corporal pleasures. The body only experiments the present sensation, while the brain can also feel past and future sensations, the one through memory, the other through anticipation, and consequently suffers and enjoys more. When we are exposed to the greater physical pain, Epicurus said, we will always find, if we pay attention, that it is not the suffering of the present moment that basically torments us, but the recall of the past and the fear of the future. The present pain, alone and separated from what happened in the past or is bound to come in the future, is a trifle that does not deserve consideration. At the same time, when we enjoy the more intense pleasure, we will always find out that the physical sensation of the present moment is just a little fraction of our happiness and that our enjoyment emerges mainly from the evocation of the past or the bringing forward of the future (Smit 1976, 294-300).

Nevertheless, in Epicurus system, future uncertainty is painful; so the abstention of the seeking of pleasures let man live quiet, without fears, waiting the unavoidable death. When body is free from pain and brain from every anxiety, the added sensation of physical pleasure is of little importance. Smith refutes this need of apathy and affirms that the wise man is sensible to whatever pleasure. Epicurus fails in the more customary mistake of science: excessive simplification (Smith 1976, 299.). All his theory is based in the seeking of prudential pleasure, not in the correction of active sensations. But there is a contradiction, because for Epicurus human action is passive.

In this sense, for Smith we do not seek this mental tranquillity to freeing ourselves from uncertainty, another type of pain. That is what Epicureans affirmed, that agreed stoicism in the ethical ideal of apathy, that will reduce to the minimum the more acute pain, that of imagination, the anxiety of anticipation. But, for Smith, we seek tranquillity because only from that mood reality emerges and we are capable of having sensations (the contrary to “apathy”).

Besides, Epicurean pleasure based on self preservation cannot exist without pain: when pain oppresses us, his relief creates a comparative pleasure. But, Smith says, the first movement is not due to self-preservation, an ex post sensation of utility, but to a desire of instinctive movement that does not depend on past experiences.

“Nature has directed us to the greater part of these by original and immediate instincts. Hunger, thirst, the passion which unites the two sexes, and the dread of pain, prompt us to apply those means for their own sakes, and without any consideration of their tendency to those beneficent ends which the great Director of nature intended to produce by them” (Smith 1976, 77-8).

So, the hedonist idea of pleasure and pain, that sensations are supposed to produce, are ex post to movement, and this tendency to movement, in the other part, implies a preconception of the self and of distance – something contrary to Hume phenomenalism.

“Those sensations appear to have been given us for the preservation of our own bodies... But the desire of changing our situation necessarily supposes some idea of externality; or of motion into a place different from that in which we actually are; end even the desire of remaining in the same place supposes some idea of at least the possibility of changing. Those sensations could not well have answered the intention of Nature, had they not thus instinctively suggested some vague notion of external existence” (Smith 1980, 167-8).

Little by little, with the memory of the past man creates a system of usual pleasures and discriminates between external objects: it emerges the idea of beauty and, in particular, that of utility. But when he identifies himself with this system created by him, we can say that his own creature controls him and his identification with it uproots him.

That is to say, man, after feeling the penetration of an ordered world, is grateful to it without demanding anything in change for it, and this is the first step necessary to feel the joy of living. Without this first gratitude, human feeling cannot begin<sup>12</sup>. As gratitude leads naturally to the search of correspondence and to receive, in return, gratitude, man reflects in his fellow beings and makes them subject of his gratitude. That is what men seek in their action: to feel themselves loved by their fellows and to be in consonance with others judgements. In addition, this is the moment when moral sentiment emerges, with the recognition of our equality with another being and his seeking to harmonise his feelings with our own.

---

<sup>12</sup> Burke was grieved by those who, as had everything in live, they have nothing to feel the joy of living, as they do not allow Nature to continue its own process and even anticipate the desire and overcome enjoyment with pondered outlines and tricks of pleasure, so there is not interval or obstacle between desire and achievement (Burke 1909, p. 23).

Also, unlike the Stoics, for Smith, not only our sensibility to others feelings is compatible with self-command nature, but it is the very same principle on which it is based. The propriety of our feelings and sensations seems to be exactly in proportion to the force and vivacity with which we enter into and conceive the feelings and sensations of others. The individual that feels the more the joys and grieves of others is better endowed to obtain the fullest control of his own joys and grieves (Smith 1976, 152).

Contrary to Hume's argumentation, Smith says that the virtues and passions we acquire by habit are not so admired, because we find it difficult to enter into another person's habit, as we have not acquired it by ourselves. In consequence, we approve of prudential self-command, in which a present object interests ourselves as much as a future one, but we do not admire it. The search of self-preservation is implicit in nature and, according to Smith, it is not a great achievement "supplying all the necessities and conveniences of the body, which are always very easily supplied" (Smith 1976, 213.). But prudence not addressed to the care for one-self is necessarily admirable (Smith 1976, 216.). Self-command allows us to address our passive feelings to the objective of Justice. Aiming to the accomplishment of virtue, it can control fear and rage; or the longing for comfort, pleasure or applause; and is "independent of the beauty, which it derives from its utility" (Smith 1976, 238). So, when we observe someone controlling his fear to death addressed to a noble motive (as in Smith 1976, 238-9), the decreasing of his fear to death allows us to empathise with his noble search without being blocked by the sympathy with his pain. Thus, the self-command increases our admiration<sup>13</sup>.

This idea of pleasure, obviously, challenges the idea of an *homo oeconomicus* rational calculator of pleasures and pains constructed in the nineteenth century (Persky 1995).

## **Conclusion**

In brief, according to Smith, we act partly, it is true, to satisfy a mental system, although its main objective is to feel ourselves loved by our fellow feelings; but partly also we are guided by a moral reality when we do not listen to the applause of the real spectator, but to that of the impartial spectator. This provide us with the tranquillity of knowing that we are worthy of love, a peace of mind that allows grateful reality to emerge and that is a necessary condition for our capability to have feelings to "the

---

<sup>13</sup> Besides, this is due to the fact that, according to Smith, and as Griswold points out, the fear to death is a pain of the imagination and, in consequence, is easier for us to sympathise with it than with a corporal pain (Griswold, p. 119).

other". The search for utility is, as we have seen, a love of system that can create a temporal and fictitious illusion, but not pleasure; in short, is a mental hallucination that makes us sacrifice real happiness that we always have within our reach. The pleasure is gratitude, a gift of nature that do not needs to be foreseen, and that the very same anxiety of anticipation forbids. In fact, the first movement was not due to self-preservation, but to a desire of instinctive movement that does not depend on past experiences.

Hume will say it, the man attracted unavoidably to pleasures and repelled by pains is slave of his own passions. So, Smith gave especial importance in his moral theory to self-command, based on a definition of freedom in positive terms. But self-command, according to Smith, does not provide – only – the avoidance of the “painful” uncertainty, but in it we find the propriety of actions: that is to say, it allows to pursuit truth and Justice or, what is more, gratitude to life.

## REFERENCES

- Berry, Christopher (1974). "Adam Smith's Considerations on Language," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 35, no 1, pp. 130-138.
- Caruso, Sergio (2012). *Homo oeconomicus. Paradigma, critiche, revisioni*, Firenze University Press, Florence.
- Dascal Marcelo (2006). "Adam Smith's Theory of Languages" in Knud Haakonssen, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, CUP, Cambridge.
- Dow, Sheila C. (2002). "Interpretation: The Case of David Hume", *History of Political Economy*, vol. 34, no 2, pp. 399-420.
- Burke, Edmund (1909). *On Taste. On the Sublime and Beautiful. Reflections on the French Revolution. A Letter to a Noble Lord*, The Harvard Classics, New York.
- Foucault, Michael (1970). *The Order of Things*, New York.
- Frey, Bruno S. (1992). *Economics as a Science of Human Behaviour. Towards a New Social Science Paradigm*. Kluwer Academic Publishers, Boston.Dordrecht.London.
- Godelier, Maurice (1999). *The Enigma of the Gift*. University Of Chicago Press, Chichago.
- Grampp, W. D. (1948). "Adam Smith and the Economic Man", *Journal of Political Economy* no 56, p. 4.
- Griswold, Charles L. JR. (1999). *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, CUP, Cambridge.
- Haakonssen, Knud (1981). *The Science of a legislator*, Cambridge, CUP.

- Hume, David (1964). *A Treatise of Human Nature being an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects* (first edition 1739-40), edited by Green and Grose in 4 volumes, London [1886] (*The Philosophical Works*, volume 2).
- Kant, Immanuelle (1978 [1790]). *The Critique of Judgment*, Oxford.
- Levy, David M. (1997). "Adam Smith's rational choice linguistics," *Economic Inquiry* vol. 35 nº 3, pp. 672-678.
- Long, D. G. (1990) "'Utility' and the 'Utility Principle': Hume, Smith, Bentham, Mill", *Utilitas. A Journal of Utilitarian Studies*: May, vol. 2, no 1, pp. 12-39.
- Macfie, A.L. (1959). "Adam Smith's Moral Sentiments as Foundation for his Wealth of Nations", *Oxford Economic Papers*, no 11, pp. 209-28.
- Macfie, A. L. (1967). *The Individual in the Society*, Papers on Adam Smith, G. Allen & Unwin, Londres.
- Mackie, J. L. (1980). *Hume's moral Theory*, London.
- Marchán, Simón (1996). *La estética en la cultura moderna*, Madrid.
- Mill, John Stuart (1836). *On the Definition of Political Economy, and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It*, London and Westminster Review.
- Norton, D. F. (1982). *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician*, New Jersey.
- Otteson, James (2002a), "Adam Smith's First Market: The Development of Language," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 19(1): 65-8.
- (2002b). *Adam Smith's Market Place of Life*, CUP, Cambridge.
- Persky, Joseph (1995). "Retrospectives: The Ethology of Homo Economicus." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring,), pp. 221-231.
- Sen, Amartya K. (1977). 'Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 4, p. 317-344
- Schliesser, Eric S. (2009). "From Adam Smith to Darwin" (July 27). Available at SSRN:<http://ssrn.com/abstract=1440166> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1440166>
- Smith, Adam (1976). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, Oxford, Oxford University Press [1759]: (*The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 1).
- (1980). *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, edited by W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce, with Dugald Stewart's Account of Adam Smith, Indianapolis (*The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*. Vol. II: EPS).
- (1983). *Lectures on Rhetoric and belles lettres (with Consideration concerning the First Formation of Languages)*, edited by J. C. Bryce, General Editor A.S. Skinner,

- Oxford [1958] (The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith. Vol. IV).
- (1987). *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. by Ernest Campbell Mossner and Ian Simpson Ross, Indianapolis, (The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, vol VI).
- Stark, Werner (1954). *Jeremy Bentham's Economic Writings. Critical Edition Based in his printed Works and unprinted Manuscripts, Volume 3*, London, Published for The Royal Economic Society by George Allen & Unwin LTD.
- Stigler, George J. (1950). "The development of Utility Theory", *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 58, no 4, pp. 307-27; and vol 58, no 5, pp. 373-96, p. 392.
- Tasset, José Luis (1999). *La ética y las pasiones*, La Coruña, Servicio de publicaciones de la Universidad de A Coruña
- Trincado, Estrella (2003). *Crítica a la teoría de la utilidad y revisión de las teorías de Hume, Smith y Bentham*, Madrid, UCM.
- (2006). "Adam Smith Criticism of the Doctrine of Utility: A Theory of the Creative Present", en Montes, Leonidas y Schliesser: *New Voices on Adam Smith*, Routledge, Nueva York y Londres, 313-327.
- Vivenza, Gloria (2001). *Adam Smith and the Classics. The classical heritage in Adam Smith's thought*, Oxford.
- Zabieglik, Stefan (2002). "The Origins of the Term Homo Oeconomicus", Gdansk, 123-130.