

ORTES AND VERRI ON PAIN, PLEASURE, HUMAN CHOICE AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

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Abstract

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 differences between these approaches were discussed in the eighteenth century by authors who aimed at using the analysis of pain and pleasure to discuss ethical and political problems. Basically, there were two opposed approaches: a first one (which might be called ‘positive hedonism’), was initiated by Hobbes: it attributes to pleasure expectations the main role in human action. The second approach (‘negative hedonism’), which originated in Locke's theory of uneasiness, finds in pain the primary motive of individual behaviour. Some of these authors, starting from Locke and Condillac, applied their analysis of pain and pleasure also to the study of economic problems. The present paper explores the consequences of different approaches to hedonistic analysis for ethical and economic analysis. After a short presentation of the opposed approaches represented by Hobbes and Bentham, on the one hand, and Locke and Maupertuis, on the other hand, the paper focuses on the relationships between the study of pain and pleasure and economic analysis in two Italian authors who followed the Lockean approach: Gianmaria Ortes and Pietro Verri.

Ortes avoids pessimism by adopting Leibniz's theodicy, and attributing to 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.