

## **A happiness fit for organic bodies: La Mettrie's medical Epicureanism**

Charles T. Wolfe (UQAM, Philosophy)

Montréal Inter-University Workshop in History of Philosophy  
October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006

### Abstract

La Mettrie is best known for his *L'Homme-Machine*, about which there has been a tenacious *malentendu* for many generations, partly tied up with the influence of German Idealism, then Hegelian Marxism, on the historiography of materialism: namely, that a work entitled *Man a Machine* is, of course, a statement of *mechanistic* materialism. Recent scholarship has shown not only that is this not true about La Mettrie in particular, who is interested in living, organic bodies and uses machine metaphors both loosely and heuristically, but more broadly, that there may be no such thing as a mechanistic materialist, certainly not in the eighteenth century. La Mettrie's materialism focuses on, and is motivated by, the existence of *animate* matter. Slightly less known is La Mettrie's contribution to moral thought, his *Anti-Sénèque ou Discours sur le bonheur*, which is a few years posterior to *L'Homme-Machine*. It turns out that most of the scandals associated with his name, most of the opprobrium attached to it, even by fellow materialists such as Diderot or d'Holbach, was in reaction to this work, which defends a particularly radical brand of 'modern Epicureanism', i.e. hedonism. My interest is in articulating a connection – and a coherent, doctrinal connection – between La Mettrie's materialism and his moral (or immoral) work; I claim that it is under the aegis of Epicureanism that the two come together. That is, La Mettrie is not a materialist about mind, body, soul and medicine, and an Epicurean about ethics as the pursuit of happiness understood as pleasure. Rather, he is what I term a 'medical Epicurean' (in the tradition of Gassendi and Lamy) for whom an understanding of "animate bodies" applies equally to metaphysics and to ethics. As he asks in the *Discours sur le bonheur*, if man were not a machine, why would we need doctors?

### Résumé

Il subsiste depuis fort longtemps un malentendu tenace autour de *L'Homme-Machine*, l'œuvre la plus connue de La Mettrie – qui tient probablement à l'influence de l'idéalisme allemand, puis du marxisme hégélien, sur l'historiographie du matérialisme. Dans cette optique, un ouvrage intitulé *L'Homme-Machine* ne peut exprimer qu'un matérialisme *mécaniste*. Des recherches récentes ont bien montré que ceci n'est vrai ni de La Mettrie en particulier, qui s'intéresse aux corps organiques vivants, et emploie des métaphores mécaniques de manière à la fois légère et heuristique, ni du dix-huitième siècle en général, au sein duquel il

n'existerait *aucun* matérialisme mécaniste. En bref, le matérialisme de La Mettrie se concentre sur, et est motivé par l'existence de la matière *animée*. Or, La Mettrie est également l'auteur d'un ouvrage un peu moins connu, qui représente sa contribution à la philosophie morale : l'*Anti-Sénèque ou Discours sur le bonheur*, de quelques années postérieur à *L'Homme-Machine*. La plupart des scandales associés au nom de La Mettrie, l'opprobre qu'il porta, y compris aux yeux d'autres matérialistes tels que Diderot ou d'Holbach, furent en fait des réactions à cet ouvrage (*Anti-Sénèque*), qui défend une variante particulièrement crue d'un épicurisme « moderne », c'est-à-dire un hédonisme. Mon but est de parvenir à articuler un lien, et qui plus est, un lien cohérent sur le plan de la doctrine, entre le matérialisme de La Mettrie et son œuvre morale (ou immorale) ; je suggère que les deux forment un tout « épicurien ». En d'autres termes, La Mettrie n'est pas d'une part un matérialiste concernant l'esprit, le corps, l'âme et la médecine, et d'autre part, un épicurien concernant la morale en tant que recherche du bonheur (défini comme plaisir). Il serait plutôt ce que j'appelle un « épicurien médical » (dans la tradition de Gassendi et Lamy), pour lequel une doctrine des « corps animés » s'applique aussi bien à la métaphysique qu'à l'éthique. Comme il le dit dans le *Discours sur le bonheur*, si l'homme n'était pas une machine, pourquoi nous faudrait-il des médecins ?

C'est dans son exposition du système d'Épicure que La Mettrie se donne surtout carrière ; car . . . cette exposition n'en est pas une, et n'est qu'une forme donnée au propre matérialisme de l'auteur.

Jean-Philibert Damiron,  
*Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la philosophie au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*<sup>1</sup>

Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751), the great, scandalous materialist from Saint-Malo best known as the author of *L'Homme-Machine* (1748), and probably the first important thinker to refer to himself explicitly as a materialist,<sup>2</sup> described his system as “Epicuro-Cartesian” in a minor work, *Les animaux plus que machines* (1750), in the context of an

---

<sup>1</sup> Damiron, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la philosophie au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1858; reprint, Geneva: Slatkine, 1967), vol. I, 1<sup>ère</sup> leçon, pp. 27-28.

<sup>2</sup> As noted by Olivier Bloch, “Le matérialisme et la révolution française,” in Bernard Balan, dir., *Enjeux du matérialisme* (Rouen: Presses de l'Université de Rouen, 1997), p. 59.

apparent critique of those who think the body has primacy over the soul. I say an ‘apparent’ critique because it is in completely bad faith: in fact, La Mettrie is using the excuse of an anonymously published work to supposedly attack the ideas of ‘the author of *L’Homme-Machine*’, which enables him to further explicate these ideas and give them greater publicity. Discussing the status of the will, understanding and sensation – do they properly belong to the soul or to the body? – he refers to those who wrongly (i.e., in fact rightly) relate them to bodily mechanisms: “ce que certains attribuent au mécanisme des corps animés, dans leur système épïcuro-cartésien retourné et mal cousu”<sup>3</sup>; that is, these misguided materialists have “a topsy-turvy, poorly put together Epicuro-Cartesian system.”

One might wonder what this ‘system’ is,<sup>4</sup> and the simplest answer would be to give a list of names which would correspond to the Epicurean and Cartesian sides of La Mettrie. On the Epicurean side (and speaking in a restrictive sense, without referring to figures like Saint-Évremond): Gassendi and the physician Guillaume Lamy, but also Montaigne; on the Cartesian side, ‘radicalizers’ such as Regius, Régis, La Forge, Steno, or Sainte-Hyacinthe. Cyrano de Bergerac should also be mentioned, as an early synthesizer of Cartesianism and Epicureanism in physics, a synthesis which is characteristic of the clandestine tradition (explicitly in *L’Ame Matérielle* or the *Traité des trois imposteurs*), with a frequently reproduced page of Lamy’s dealing with animal spirits and the “world soul.”

As to what La Mettrie himself meant by an “Epicuro-Cartesian system,” the key hint is the phrase “animate bodies”: this should tell us that Epicuro-Cartesianism is not just a grafting of Epicurean hedonism in ethics onto a Cartesian mechanistic framework for understanding bodies. Instead, with the theme of small parcels of animate matter (e.g. “semences”), it speaks to the tradition of Epicurean medicine.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I hope to

---

<sup>3</sup> In Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. Francine Markovits (Paris: Fayard, coll. “Corpus,” 2 vols., 1987), p. 311. Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to this edition, and translations are my own. Title abbreviations are the following: APM = *Les Animaux plus que machines*; AS = *Abrégé des systèmes*; DB = *Discours sur le bonheur*; DP = *Discours préliminaire*; EE = *Épître à mon esprit*; HM = *L’Homme-Machine*; HNA = *Histoire naturelle de l’âme* (= *Traité de l’âme*); SE = *Système d’Épicure*.

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed this aspect of La Mettrie’s thought at greater length in “‘Epicuro-Cartesianism’: La Mettrie’s materialist transformation of early modern philosophy,” in Hartmut Hecht, hrsg., *La Mettrie. Ansichte und Einsichte* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2004) (Proceedings of the 2001 La Mettrie Conference).

<sup>5</sup> A better term might be ‘neo-Epicureanism’, since apart from the existence of a school of Epicurean physicians in antiquity (of which we know very little), and a recognition in Lucretius of the

show that both La Mettrie's 'materialism' and his 'ethics' are Epicurean in a unique (and coherent) way, which hinges on this understanding of "animate bodies" and, as we shall see, the only kind of happiness that might possibly be fit for them.

## I.

We should note that La Mettrie proclaims himself to be an Epicurean in the broad sense, as the author of a *Système d'Épicure*, not of a *Système de Descartes*. In section 41 of this work, he says that he has feebly ventured to identify himself with Epicurus, and elsewhere he identifies himself ideologically with Epicureanism *qua* materialism (AS 275, where he quotes Bayle's article "Lucrèce" from the *Dictionnaire* – thereby confirming Damiron's suspicions as voiced in the epigraph of this paper). The Cartesian side of 'Epicuro-Cartesianism' receives less emphasis in his work, even if he sometimes says that Descartes was really a materialist (but this may be more of a rhetorical gesture to embrace all predecessors and claim that their thought reaches its ultimate fulfillment in his own). Ann Thomson has emphasized, in this regard, that it is not helpful or fully accurate to

---

specificity of living being, the specifically medical argument in Lamy and La Mettrie seems to be a 'modern' addition. (Thanks to Pierre-François Moreau for pointing this out.) Similarly, Olivier Bloch describes Epicurean medicine as ultimately a rather *literary* medicine – "une médecine assez littéraire en somme . . . qui se réclame de Démocrite et Lucrèce face à Aristote et Galien" ("L'héritage libertin dans la pensée des Lumières," *Dix-huitième siècle* vol. 24 [1992], p. 79). Another indication that Epicurean medicine might be something of a 'construct' is Diderot's article "Epicurisme" in the *Encyclopédie*, which names as 'disciples of Epicurus' mostly literary figures such as Saint-Évremond or Ninon de Lenclos (as noted by Aram Vartanian, *La Mettrie's "L'Homme-Machine."* *A study in the origins of an idea* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960], p. 58). An amusing early modern tale which claimed to show that atomism had a medical dimension involved an encounter on a mountaintop between Democritus and Hippocrates, with the former dissecting corpses in order to find the 'seat' of melancholia (see Mariana Saad, "Cabanis, Destutt de Tracy, Volney: science de l'homme et épicurisme," *Dix-huitième siècle* 35 [2003]: *L'Épicurisme*, pp. 103-105). Of course, none of this affects the concept of 'medical Epicureanism' put forth here with respect to La Mettrie, since it is not a concept derived from or subsumable under the history of medicine. After all, La Mettrie is happy to name not only Epicurus but also Marcus Aurelius and Montaigne as his "physicians" (DB 265)! (For some adjustment to the claim that there was no such thing as an Epicurean medicine, see now P.H. Shrijvers, *Lucrèce et les sciences de la vie* (Leyden: Brill, 1999); I have not been able to see this work.)

interpret La Mettrie as a renegade Cartesian, or as a more materialistically oriented reader of Lockean sensationism.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the figure of Epicureanism might be more important.

However, my concern is with a more specific tradition to which La Mettrie belongs, and which he transforms in an original way: Epicurean *medicine*. The most important figure therein was Guillaume Lamy (1644?-1683), chiefly in his works *De Principiis rerum* (1669), *Discours anatomiques* (1675) and *Explication mécanique et physique des fonctions de l'âme sensitive* (1677).<sup>7</sup> Lamy sought to articulate a combination of atomism (initially Gassendian) and Cartesian science understood as a rejection of final causes, but ultimately rejected Gassendi's "Christianized Epicureanism," in which the structure of organism is already a sign of purposiveness throughout the universe.<sup>8</sup> As Henri Busson put it, "Lamy is the first to move, by a necessary logic, from Gassendi's watered-down (*édulcoré*) atomism to Lucretius' genuinely materialist atomism."<sup>9</sup> When La Mettrie uses classic Epicurean-Lucretian themes such as our eyes, which are not 'made for seeing' but with which we see because we have them, these themes are in fact derived from Lamy,<sup>10</sup> who he quotes approvingly in his early *Histoire naturelle de l'âme*, mentions in *L'Homme-Machine* and, as we shall see, describes in curious terms in the later *Abrégé des systèmes*.<sup>11</sup>

The key difference between them is that Lamy (following Gassendi and then Willis) made use of the Epicurean distinction between the *âme sensitive* and the rational soul, mainly as a way of concealing a materialistic, reductionistic position in which the brain is the "source" or "reservoir" of the soul (*Explication*, pp. 152-153). Yet he maintains an active concept of "soul," albeit a materialized soul. Unlike Cyrano before him and Diderot

---

<sup>6</sup> Most recently, in her "La Mettrie et l'épicurisme," in *Der Garten und die Moderne. Epikureische Moral und Politik vom Humanismus bis zur Aufklärung*, eds. Gianni Paganini & Edoardo Tortarolo (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> On Lamy, see Henri Busson's still invaluable *La religion des classiques* (Paris: PUF, 1948), Ann Thomson's "Guillaume Lamy et l'âme matérielle," *Dix-huitième siècle* 24 (1992), and Anna Minerbi Belgrado's extensive and extremely informative introduction to her edition of Lamy's *Discours anatomiques & Explication mécanique et physique des fonctions de l'âme sensitive* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1996). For additional biographical information, see Alain Mothu, "La mort de Guillaume Lamy," *La Lettre clandestine* 2 (1993), which is available online at <http://www.univ-paris12.fr/scd/lc2-2d.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Lamy, *Discours anatomiques*, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117, 123f.

<sup>9</sup> Busson, *La religion des classiques*, p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> Lamy, *Discours anatomiques*, 2<sup>e</sup> discours, p. 61 (cf. Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, IV, 823f.).

<sup>11</sup> *HNA* 147, 188, 267; *HM* 96, *AS* 252 (Lamy rightfully suspects Descartes of having been a materialist) and especially *AS* 267.

after him, Lamy does not believe that all of matter senses: there is an essential variety within matter, such that the soul, for instance, is a body which possesses “a particular nature, different from other bodies” (*ibid.*, p. 147). His medical reductionism is thus not an ontological eliminativism. In contrast, after the *Histoire naturelle de l’âme*, La Mettrie will dispense with the concept of soul. Much interesting work remains to be done on the intriguing concept of a ‘material soul’ in this period, but this is not the place; suffice it to say that La Mettrie is quite close to Lamy in a variety of ways, not least the articulation of a connection between medical discourse and traditional philosophical discourse; they differ on the status of the soul.<sup>12</sup>

However, as I have indicated, there is another passage in the *Abrégé des systèmes* which is important for our discussion; it is both convoluted and rich with implications. La Mettrie is actually discussing Boerhaave, the renowned iatromechanist physician and medical reformer, with whom he purportedly studied with in Leyden (and who he translated<sup>13</sup>). His aim is to defend Boerhaave against the charge of Spinozism that had been leveled against him: “personne ne fut moins Spinosiste” (*AS* 267). Boerhaave is not a Spinozist since he (supposedly) saw God’s work everywhere in nature; *therefore*, La Mettrie adds, *he is not to be identified with the two modern Epicureans, Gassendi and Lamy!* (“On voit . . . combien ce Médecin célèbre était différent de ces deux Epicuriens Modernes, Gassendi et Lami,” *ibid.*) Gassendi and Lamy are the “Epicuriens Modernes” who dismiss finalism and teleology when it comes to the structure of the human body. Once we remove the rhetorically added negation from this description, Boerhaave, Gassendi and Lamy appear as part of the same ‘party’.

In other words, to be a “modern Epicurean” for La Mettrie is not just to be, say, a hedonist, which is what most early moderns meant when they attacked someone for being an Epicurean – or even a “modern Epicurean,” since usage of the term is not restricted to La

---

<sup>12</sup> La Mettrie discusses the related Epicurean theme of the ‘residual’ soul (*HM* 107-108), but finds it too obscure and prefers the Leibnizian idea of a “force motrice.” On the concept of the “material soul” in the clandestine tradition, including in Lamy, see Aram Vartanian, “Quelques réflexions sur le concept d’âme dans la littérature clandestine,” in Olivier Bloch, dir., *Le matérialisme du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et la littérature clandestine* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1982), and John P. Wright, “Locke, Willis and the Epicurean soul,” in Margaret J. Osler, ed., *Atoms, pneuma and tranquility. Epicurean and Stoic themes in European thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> J.O. de La Mettrie, *Institutions de Médecine de M. Herman Boerhaave*, 2 vols., then 3 (Paris: Huart & Cie, 1739, 1750).

Mettrie: Shaftesbury, for one, deplors that “The Satisfactions which are purely mental, and depend only on the Motion of a Thought; must in all likelihood be too refin’d for the Apprehensions of our modern Epicures, who are so taken up with Pleasure of a more substantial kind.”<sup>14</sup> (Mandeville also comes to mind, for he has a materialist ‘pneumatology’ in his *Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Diseases*, and an Epicurean social theory in the *Fable of the Bees* – but the two are distinct.) La Mettrie includes this mainstream sense of Epicureanism in his ethics, as I discuss in the next section: he takes ‘on board’ this generic modern sense in which the *ancient* Epicurean disdain for bodily pleasures is replaced with an emphasis on these very pleasures.

However, La Mettrie is also a modern Epicurean in a more original, idiosyncratic sense: if, following the indication given in the passage from the *Abrégé des systèmes*, he is a such *inasmuch as he is like Gassendi and Lamy*, this means (a) that he is a materialist for whom matter is animated, as it is composed of atoms, molecules, and seeds (*semences*), and (b) that this animate matter is not the object of study of the metaphysician in her cabinet, but of the *médecin-philosophe*. Similarly, in a related usage of the term, La Mettrie challenges those he calls “les anti-Épicuriens modernes” (*SE* § 10) to explain phenomena such as the appearance of new species, and organic growth.

This is all rather reminiscent of the distinction Diderot draws in the *Encyclopédie* article “Spinosistes” between “ancient Spinosists” and “modern Spinosists”: the former stand for a metaphysics of substance and modes, whereas the latter specifically assert a metaphysics of living matter, tied to the new theory of biological epigenesis.<sup>15</sup> And in the satirical work *Epître à mon esprit ou l’anonyme persiflé* (1749), La Mettrie opposes the obscurity of the “Spinosiste Ancien” to the luminous clarity of the “Spinosiste Moderne”

---

<sup>14</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of men, manners, opinions, times*, II: *The Moralists: A Philosophical Rhapsody* (1711; 6<sup>th</sup> corrected ed., London: Purser, 1737-1738; reprint, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), part II, section 1, p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> “SPINOSISTE, s. m. (*Gram.*) sectateur de la philosophie de Spinoza. Il ne faut pas confondre les *Spinosistes* anciens avec les *Spinosistes* modernes. Le principe général de ceux-ci, c’est que la matière est sensible, ce qu’ils démontrent par le développement de l’œuf, corps inerte, qui par le seul instrument de la chaleur graduée passe à l’état d’être sentant & vivant, & par l’accroissement de tout animal qui dans son principe n’est qu’un point, & qui par l’assimilation nutritive des plantes, en un mot, de toutes les substances qui servent à la nutrition, devient un grand corps sentant & vivant dans un grand espace. De-là ils concluent qu’il n’y a que de la matière, & qu’elle suffit pour tout expliquer ; du reste ils suivent l’ancien spinosisme dans toutes ses conséquences” (Diderot, s.v. “Spinosistes,” in Diderot & D’Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie* [1751-1780], vol. XV [1765], 474a).

(EE 233) – without, admittedly, specifying the content of this modern Spinozism.

(Sometimes the name for the radical and emerging philosophy is ‘Epicurean’, in his vocabulary; sometimes it is ‘Spinozist’.<sup>16</sup>)

If one were to take the distinction between ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ Spinozists and apply it to Epicureanism, one might say, then, that the ancient Epicurean is a physicalist who derives consequences from this physics for the goal of attaining happiness and avoiding fear, whereas the modern Epicurean is more immediately biologicistic.<sup>17</sup> That is, where ‘ancient’ Epicureanism was concerned with balance, freedom from disturbance (*ataraxia*) and from fear (superstition), its modern variant brings its hedonistic and materialistic overtones to the fore. As Morgan Meis puts it, “many of the early modern thinkers who became interested in Lucretius and Epicurus and their materialist natural science reversed the order of priorities in the Epicurean system. They essentially ignored the ethical standpoint that is the ultimate goal of natural science [for Epicurus, CW] and took up the physics and biological investigations as of interest in their own right.”<sup>18</sup> Recall that in the *Système d’Épicure*, La Mettrie seems to equate being ‘pro-Epicurean’ (that is, not an “anti-Epicurean”) with the proto-transformist motif of the emergence of new species (§ 10), similarly, in the next section, he recounts the first stages of the Earth as a fertile, nutritive ground which produces living beings, reminiscent of Lucretius’ “Alma Venus.” It is not just materialism *simpliciter*, but rather a materialism of *living matter*; and it is not a materialism without an ethics, since it is bolstered by a medical standpoint in which the ethical returns, as “organic, automatic happiness” (as I discuss immediately below; see DB 244).

So La Mettrie’s Epicureanism has a vital flavour to it; it is bound up with an idea of animate matter. This tells us that he has not just extended Cartesian mechanism to humans,

---

<sup>16</sup> As noted in more critical terms by Ann Thomson, “La Mettrie et l’épicurisme,” p. 381.

<sup>17</sup> Mariana Saad makes a very similar distinction, between the doctrine of “Democritus and Epicurus,” in which moral matters are not predicated on physical matters, and that of Cabanis, the nineteenth-century *Idéologue* and physician (“Cabanis, Destutt de Tracy, Volney,” *op. cit.*, pp. 103-105, quoting Cabanis’ *Rapports du physique et du moral* [1802; in *Œuvres philosophiques*, dir. Claude Lehec et Jean Cazeneuve Paris: PUF, 1956], p. 138); I would simply date this shift earlier, with Lamy and La Mettrie.

<sup>18</sup> Morgan Meis, “Science as a cure for fear: the status of monsters in Lucretius,” in Charles T. Wolfe, ed., *Monsters and Philosophy* (London: King’s College Publications, 2005), p. 35. For more details on how modern Epicureanism ‘betrays’ its ancient model, see Pierre-François Moreau and Anne Deneys-Tunney, “Nouveaux visages de l’épicurisme,” their introduction to *Dix-huitième siècle* 35 (2003), a special issue on Epicureanism which they edited (pp. 8-9).

nor, conversely, grafted Hallerian sensitivity onto Cartesian automata. But what does this entail for his ethics? His medical Epicureanism will turn out to be far more ambitious in scope than Lamy's doctrine, since it encroaches on moral matters. For La Mettrie seeks to replace traditional moral philosophy with a medically grounded, or indeed medicalized viewpoint: instead of an ideological happiness which we cannot attain, he thinks the only 'freedom worth wanting' is this "organic happiness."<sup>19</sup>

## II.

La Mettrie was always accused of being an immoralist – a nineteenth-century Protestant historian of French literature described him as “a lecherous metaphysician of physical pleasure”<sup>20</sup> – less because of the man-machine hypothesis, and more due to his writings in moral philosophy, chiefly the *Discours sur le bonheur* or *Anti-Sénèque*.<sup>21</sup> (This work was initially intended as a biography of Seneca, and indeed first appeared as an essay accompanying his translation of the latter's *De vita beata*.<sup>22</sup> Maupertuis had procured this assignment for La Mettrie, hoping – mistakenly, as it turned out – that it would restore some of his reputation, in addition to being a source of income. Instead, La Mettrie took the opportunity to assert his brand of extreme hedonism *against* Seneca and Stoicism in general.<sup>23</sup>) Faced with this accusation, that La Mettrie at best reduced the moral to the

---

<sup>19</sup> I have discussed this aspect of La Mettrie's thought in greater detail in “La réduction médicale de la morale chez La Mettrie,” in J.-Cl. Bourdin, F. Markovits *et al.*, dir., *Matérialistes français du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d'Holbach* (Paris: PUF, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> “Un métaphysicien lubrique de la volupté” (Sayous, *Histoire de la littérature française à l'étranger* [1853], as quoted by Denise Leduc-Fayette, “Le ‘cas’ La Mettrie,” in Olivier Bloch, dir., *Images au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle du matérialisme du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* [Paris: Desclée, 1979], p. 108).

<sup>21</sup> The observation is Ann Thomson's, e.g. in her “La Mettrie, machines and the denial of liberty,” in Charles T. Wolfe, ed., *The Renewal of Materialism (Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* vol. 22, #1, 2000), p. 80. Thomson also notes that even post-revolutionary defenders of La Mettrie such as Sylvain Maréchal would only defend works such as *L'Homme-Machine*, not the *Discours sur le bonheur* (*Materialism and society in the mid-eighteenth century. La Mettrie's “Discours préliminaire”* [Geneva: Droz, 1981], pp. 186-187).

<sup>22</sup> *De vita beata: Traité de la vie bienheureuse de Sénèque, avec un discours du traducteur sur le même sujet* (Potsdam: C.F. Voss, 1748). In 1750 a second edition appeared from the same publisher, now entitled *Anti-Sénèque ou le Souverain bien*; the third edition (Amsterdam, 1751) bore the same title, as the work has since then.

<sup>23</sup> Despite La Mettrie's aversion to Stoicism and his (predictable) reaction to Seneca, it has been noted that the latter's discussion of pleasure in positive – if austere – terms in *De vita beata* was itself influential in the reassessment of Epicureanism in early modern Europe. See Louise Fothergill-

physical or the physiological, and at worst was a deliberate immoralist, many La Mettrians respond by invoking his status as a medical doctor,<sup>24</sup> which may strike one as odd: how does someone's professional status affect their philosophical arguments, and even more, their moral credibility?

In fact, La Mettrie himself creates a conceptual equivalence between *médecin* and *moraliste*: “Il serait sans doute à souhaiter qu'il n'y eût pour juges que d'excellents médecins. Eux seuls pourraient distinguer le criminel innocent du coupable” (*HM* 91). If only judges could be selected from the ranks of “excellent physicians”! That is, La Mettrie deplores the fact that judgments of life and death are typically made without any knowledge of the physiological level of determination of action. Some years later, he explicitly stated that if materialism – i.e., just such knowledge – could have an effect on morals and society, that effect would be “greater moderation in [the usage of] punishments” (*DB* 264). Thus he reduces the traditional domain of moral philosophy to that of medicine. But which medicine? La Mettrie is definitely not calling for a reduction of intentional, psychological processes to non-intentional physical processes, both because of his vision of animate matter (and its corollary, body as necessarily ‘sensitive’), and because his definition of the role of medicine is an expansive one: “Tout cède au grand Art de guérir. Le médecin est le seul Philosophe qui mérite de sa Patrie” (*HM* 62).

The medical doctor is the “only philosopher to whom her country should be grateful,” first, because she deals with truth as defined by the materialist, not the truth of ethical, social or religious conventions, and second, if we recall that the traditional task of philosophy is to meditate on life and death, the doctor deals much more directly with this,

---

Payne, “Seneca’s role in popularizing Epicurus in the sixteenth century,” in *Atoms, pneuma, and tranquillity*, ed. M.J. Osler, *op. cit.* For the anecdote regarding Maupertuis, there are two sources: Laurent Angliviel de La Beaumelle’s *Vie de Maupertuis*, written shortly after Maupertuis’ death, but only published posthumously (Paris: Ledoyen, 1856), pp. 121-123 (discussed in John Falvey’s introduction to his edition of La Mettrie’s *Discours sur le bonheur (Anti-Sénèque)* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1975 = *SVEC*, vol. 134), p. 15, and Kathleen Wellman, *La Mettrie: Medicine, philosophy and Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 214, n. 6); Élie Fréron’s *Lettres sur quelques écrits*, vol. 1 (1752; reprint, Geneva: Slatkine, 1962), as quoted by Raymond Boissier, *La Mettrie, médecin, pamphlétaire, et philosophe* (Paris: Éditions Belles Lettres, 1931), p. 173.

<sup>24</sup> Notably Roland Desné, “L’humanisme de La Mettrie,” *La Pensée* vol. 109 (June 1963), Pierre Rétat, “Le ‘cœur’ de La Mettrie,” in *Mélanges René Pintard* (Strasbourg: Centre de Philologie et de Littératures Romanes, 1975), Boissier, *op. cit.*, and to a lesser extent, Wellman, *op. cit.*

“delivering certificates (*brevets*) of life and death.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly – and recalling the medical motif in Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*<sup>26</sup> – “la médecine seule [peut] changer les esprits et les mœurs avec le corps” (*HM* 67), and “la meilleure philosophie [est] celle des médecins” (*DB* 36). Fair enough – but why is it the doctor’s *patrie* that should be grateful?

On the one hand, this sounds hypocritical on La Mettrie’s part, since he consistently opposes ‘Truth’, which belongs to the discourses of medicine and materialist philosophy, to ‘Convention’ or ‘Appearance’, the category to which not only society and politics, but also ethics belong in his view (*DP* 13). The fact that doctors are necessarily parts of society and engage in *Realpolitik*, as John Falvey put it<sup>27</sup> (and his intuition is confirmed if we consider the titles of La Mettrie’s lesser-known works such as *Politique du médecin de Machiavel ou le chemin de la fortune ouvert aux médecins*<sup>28</sup> and *L’ouvrage de Pénélope ou Machiavel en médecine*) does not make it any better. Doctors can be Machiavellian liars, “counterfeit money,”<sup>29</sup> or – on the other hand – they can be Epicurean materialists, legitimate currency. It is with this Epicurean reference that something positive emerges, which explains, first, why “the best philosophy is that of the doctors” (*DB* 36), and second, why doctors should be “the only philosophers to whom their homeland should be grateful” (*HM* 62).

It may be excessive of La Mettrie to claim that “medicine is the most useful and necessary of the sciences,”<sup>30</sup> not least since he also held that the truth of materialism is for an élite, not something to be spread among the people. But his point applies quite smoothly to ethics – given that he understands moral matters eudaimonistically. Philosophy always claims to give us the straightest path to happiness, but La Mettrie rejects what he calls the “privative happiness” of the Stoics (*DB* 239), which consists in fearing nothing and desiring nothing; its chief figures, in his view, are Seneca and Descartes. Privative happiness is opposed to what he calls “organic, automatic or natural” happiness (*DB* 244): it is natural

---

<sup>25</sup> La Mettrie, *La faculté vengée* (Paris: Quillau, 1747), p. 100.

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth part of the *Discours de la méthode*, Descartes had granted that the mind is “strongly dependent” on our temperament and the arrangement of our organs, so that our improvement – both intellectual and practical – is most likely to be achieved by medicine (*Œuvres*, eds. Charles Adam & Paul Tannery, 11 vols. [reprint, Paris: Vrin, 1964-1974], vol. VI, p. 62).

<sup>27</sup> Falvey, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> Subtitled *Ouvrage réduit en forme de conseils par le Dr Fum Ho Ham, traduit sur l’original chinois par un nouveau maître es arts ... contient les portraits des plus célèbres médecins de Pékin* (Amsterdam, n.d. [1746]).

<sup>29</sup> La Mettrie, *Politique du médecin de Machiavel*, p. xv.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

because “our soul has nothing to do with it” (*ibid.*), organic because it “flows from our *organisation*,”<sup>31</sup> and is “Nature’s greatest gift” (*DB* 240). This happiness is automatic in the sense that it obeys the laws of operation of our ‘machine’.<sup>32</sup>

Here we encounter some of La Mettrie’s more shocking formulations: “Wallow in filth like pigs and you will be happy like pigs” (*DB* 286; this could also mean: you will be happy *in the way* pigs are happy). But if we consider such proclamations in context, we begin to see the original aspect of his Epicureanism: the connection between a medical-materialist approach to the body and a rethinking of morality, a connection which no other contemporary, particularly not Diderot, made or was willing to make (**with the possible exception of Mandeville**).<sup>33</sup> A more Stoic, less sensual medicine would ward off the fear of death, but would be dangerously ascetic: “the Stoics are unaffected by pleasure or pain; we will be proud to feel either of these,” or worse, “a Stoic has no more feeling than a leper.”<sup>34</sup>

In contrast, Epicurean medicine would be devoted to the organic fulfillment of our ‘machine’: “our organs are capable of feelings or of [undergoing] modifications (*sont susceptibles d’un sentiment ou d’une modification*) which is pleasing to us and makes us love life” (*DB* 238). This kind of organic determinism which is unique to each ‘machine’ is described in terms of the “blood” that flows through our veins and the “slope” or “incline” (*pente*) we follow; given that this “incline” is both unique to each individual, and a ‘law’ governing all organic beings,<sup>35</sup> from the most hardened criminal to the most gentle, altruistic person, La Mettrie describes it as “the inhuman incline (*pente*) of humanity” (*DB* 262). An individual is virtuous or vicious depending on her blood: “tyrants and assassins,

---

<sup>31</sup> In the medical thought of the period, notably in Montpellier vitalism (e.g. the articles by Ménuret de Chambaud and Bordeu in the *Encyclopédie*), but also in a thinker like Diderot, who is influenced by this tradition, the notion of *organisation* is a key expression of the challenge towards mechanistic models of life. An animal’s *organisation* is its organic structure, which is not reducible to mechanistic explanations. While La Mettrie is by no means a vitalist, he concurs with this critique of mechanism, e.g. on the topic of the secretions of the glands (Wellman, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-120).

<sup>32</sup> It is perhaps a commonplace to point out that “machine” in French during this period was an expression used to refer to the body.

<sup>33</sup> On this relation see Timo Kaitaro’s fine paper “Diderot and La Mettrie: the unacknowledgeable debt,” in Hartmut Hecht, hrsg., *La Mettrie. Ansichte und Einsichte* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2004) (Proceedings of the 2001 La Mettrie Conference).

<sup>34</sup> Respectively, *Discours sur le bonheur*, ed. Falvey, p. 122 and *DB* 247.

<sup>35</sup> As Hans Blom put it (discussion, Oxford, June 2006), what makes man a swerving atom also makes him a reliable part of the social structure.

just like honest men, are in pursuit of their happiness” (*ibid.*); these are the parts of La Mettrie that Sade liked especially.

Notice, however, that the organic dimension of this determinism gives it a great deal of ‘plasticity’: the orang-outang merely requires an operation on his larynx and being sent to school, in order to learn how to speak (*HM* 76-77). If we are the creatures of our *organisation* (in fact, we *are* our *organisation*), this does not mean that we are Turing machines, or that we lack individuality, since no one has the same ‘blood’ or total *organisation* as anyone else. Of course, I don’t mean to obscure the bleakness of the social landscape implied by this vision, in which education cannot really, durably reform the individual and her appetites.

### III.

At the very beginning of *L’Homme-Machine*, La Mettrie explains that he belongs to the oldest philosophical tradition, materialism, whereas spiritualism is a more recent arrival (*HM* 63). Aside from the strict emphasis on animate matter, Epicureanism also provides him with a hedonistic theory of the pursuit of individual happiness, which turns out to be “organic” happiness, the happiness of our *organisation* or organism. “La Nature nous a tous créés uniquement pour être heureux” (*HM* 92): humans are made to be happy rather than to be the possessors of *knowledge*. This anti-rationalistic claim is motivated by La Mettrie’s view that all claims about ‘rational animals’ or rationality as the specific difference of humans remain blind to the instinctual level, the organic determinism which is proper to each individual machine or *organisation*. In this sense, then, he brings a kind of medical empiricism to bear against ‘Reason’ writ large (“A force de Raison, on parvient à faire peu de cas de la Raison,” *SE* § 31). It is only by observation and experiment that one can come to know the nature of the soul: *experimentally* and *a posteriori*, and not through the *a priori* knowledge dear to previous philosophers (*HM* 66).

Granted, La Mettrie is not a scholar of Epicureanism; many of his references, including perhaps those to Gassendi, may be second-hand. In addition, he occasionally attributes doctrines belonging to one author, to another, whether deliberately or out of carelessness. This may explain moments like the odd juxtaposition of Boerhaave, Gassendi

and Lamy, as if all three were medical practitioners. Nevertheless, whether we consider his combination of materialism and ethics, of doctrines and practices, to be mere *bricolage* (“retourné et mal cousu”!) or not, the result should be considered as the ‘invention’<sup>36</sup> of a new and perhaps unique form of Epicureanism in and for the Enlightenment: neither a mere hedonism nor a strict materialist speculation on the nature of living bodies, but a ‘medical Epicureanism’.<sup>37</sup> As a *médecin-philosophe* who practices the “grand art de guérir” (*HM* 62), La Mettrie eliminates the dilemma of happiness and virtue by invoking ‘deep structure’, as opposed to a surface ethics, which relies on the dualism of body and soul. It is the deep structure of the man-machine, which is organic and follows the norm of health alone: “De toutes les espèces de bonheur, je préfère celle qui se développe avec nos organes, et semble se trouver plus ou moins, comme la force, dans tous les corps animés” (*DB* 247).

---

<sup>36</sup> I use this term partly in the sense in which Yves Citton has recently spoken of an “invention of Spinozism” in the eighteenth century (*L’Envers de la liberté. L’invention du spinozisme dans la France des Lumières* [Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2006]).

<sup>37</sup> I thank Justin E.H. Smith for his invitation to the Workshop. An earlier, summary version of this paper was presented at a conference on ‘Epicureanism in the Enlightenment’ at Saint Anthony’s College, Oxford University, on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006. I benefited then from comments by Hans Blom and John Robertson.