

A happiness fit for organic bodies: La Mettrie's medical Epicureanism¹

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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^e siècle*, vol.1

Julien Offroy 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,² described his system as 'épicuro-cartésien' in a minor work, *Les Animaux plus que machines* (1750), in the context of an apparent critique of those who think the body has primacy over the soul. I say 'apparent' because his critique is in bad faith: in fact, La Mettrie uses 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 – in their relation 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 épicuro-cartésien retourné et mal cousu'.³ La Mettrie is providing the reader with an important hint as to the nature of his system: it is 'épicuro-cartésien'.

1. I would like to thank Hans Blom, Dario Perinetti and John Robertson for their comments on this article.
2. As noted by Olivier Bloch, 'Le matérialisme et la Révolution française', in Bloch, *Matière à histoires* (Paris, 1997), p.321-47 (328).
3. In Julien Offroy de La Mettrie, *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. Francine Markovits, 2 vols (Paris, 1987), p.311. Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to this edition, and translations are my own. Title abbreviations are the following: AS for *Abrégé des systèmes*; DB for *Discours sur le bonheur*; DP for *Discours préliminaire*; EE for *Épître à mon esprit*; HM for *L'Homme-machine*; HNA for *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (also known as *Traité de l'âme*); SE for *Système d'Épicure*.

One might wonder what this system is,⁴ and the simplest answer would be to reconstruct the Epicurean and Cartesian traditions of which La Mettrie is the inheritor. On the Epicurean side this consists of (in a restrictive sense, without referring to figures like Saint-Evremond) Gassendi and the physician Guillaume Lamy, but also Montaigne; on the Cartesian side, radicalisers such as Regius, Régis, La Forge, Steno or Saint-Hyacinthe. Cyrano de Bergerac should also be mentioned, as an early synthesiser of Cartesianism and Epicureanism in physics, a synthesis which is also characteristic of the culture of clandestine manuscripts and their method of collage of various existing sources in radical thought (explicitly in anonymous texts such as *L'Âme matérielle* or the *Traité des trois imposteurs*), with a frequently reproduced page of Lamy's dealing with animal spirits and the 'world soul'.⁵

As to what La Mettrie himself meant by a 'système épïcuro-cartésien', the key 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 – perhaps one should speak of neo-Epicurean medicine, 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 specificity of living beings, the specifically medical argument in Lamy and La Mettrie seems to be a modern development.⁶ Indeed, Olivier Bloch has described 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'.⁷ Another indication that Epicurean medicine might be something of a construct is Diderot's article 'Epicurésisme' in the *Encyclopédie*, which names as 'disciples of Epicurus' mostly literary figures such as Saint-Evremond or Ninon de Lenclos.⁸ The theme of an Epicurean medicine is also a construct of the period inasmuch as it occurs in apocryphal tales such as that recounting an encounter on a mountaintop between Democritus and Hippocrates, with the former dissecting

4. 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 *La Mettrie: Ansichte und Einsichte: proceedings of the 2001 La Mettrie conference*, ed. Hartmut Hecht (Berlin, 2004), p.75-96.

5. On these radical traditions see Henri Busson's still invaluable *La Religion des classiques* (Paris, 1948).

6. I am grateful to Pierre-François Moreau for this suggestion.

7. O. Bloch, 'L'héritage libertin dans la pensée des Lumières', *Dix-huitième siècle* 24 (1992), p.73-82 (79).

8. Aram Vartanian, *La Mettrie's 'L'Homme-machine': a study in the origins of an idea* (Princeton, NJ, 1960), p.58.

corpses in order to find the 'seat' of melancholia.⁹ 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 – a history to which he hardly belongs. After all, La Mettrie is happy to name not only Epicurus but also Marcus Aurelius and Montaigne as his 'physicians' (*DB*, p.265)!

In what follows, I hope to 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. These comprise what I suggest is his 'medical Epicureanism'.

La Mettrie's materialism

We should note that La Mettrie proclaims himself to be an Epicurean in the broad sense, as the author of a *Système d'Epicure*, 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.¹⁰ 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 fulfilment in his own). Ann Thomson has emphasised, in this regard, that it is not helpful or fully accurate to interpret La Mettrie as a renegade Cartesian, or as a more materialistically oriented reader of Lockean sensationism.¹¹ Indeed, the figure of Epicureanism might be more important than either of those two figures.

My concern here is not with early modern Epicureanism in general, but with a more specific tradition to which La Mettrie belongs, and which he transforms in an original way: Epicurean medicine. Its most important figure was the Paris physician 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).¹² Lamy sought to articulate a combination of atomism (initially Gassendian) and

9. Mariana Saad, 'Cabanis, Destutt de Tracy, Volney: science de l'homme et épicurisme', *Dix-huitième siècle* 35, *L'Epicurisme des Lumières* (2003), p.103-105.

10. See for instance AS, p.275, where La Mettrie quotes Bayle's article 'Lucreté' from the *Dictionnaire*, thereby confirming Damiron's suspicions as voiced in the above epigraph.

11. Most recently, in her 'La Mettrie et l'épicurisme', in *Der Garten und die Moderne: Epikureische Moral und Politik vom Humanismus zur Aufklärung*, ed. Gianni Paganini and Edoardo Tortarolo (Stuttgart, 2004), p.361-81.

12. On Lamy, see Busson, *La Religion des classiques*; A. Thomson, 'Guillaume Lamy et l'âme matérielle', *Dix-huitième siècle* 24 (1992), p.63-71, 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, 1996). For additional

Cartesian science understood as a rejection of final causes, but ultimately rejected Gassendi's 'Christianised Epicureanism', in which the structure of organism is already a sign of purposiveness throughout the universe.¹³ As Henri Busson put it, 'Lamy is the first to move, by a necessary logic, from Gassendi's watered-down atomism to Lucretius' genuinely materialist atomism.'¹⁴ 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,¹⁵ whom 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*.¹⁶

The key difference between them is that Lamy (following Gassendi and then Willis)¹⁷ 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*, p.152-53). Yet he maintains an active concept of 'soul', albeit a materialised soul. Unlike Cyrano before him and Diderot 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' (p.147). His medical reductionism is thus not an ontological eliminativism, that is, his construal of higher-level, mental properties in bodily and globally physiological terms does not mean that he is denying their existence outright, but rather seeking to integrate them into a unified medical (and materialist) perspective. La Mettrie appears in contrast to proceed further with his reduction, for after the *Histoire naturelle de l'âme*, he will dispense with the concept of soul altogether. Much interesting work remains to be done on the intriguing concept of a 'material soul' in this period (Is it tantamount to a proto-subjectivity within a materialist framework? Does it set the stage for what will become the science of psychology?, etc.); suffice it to say that La Mettrie is quite close to Lamy in a variety of ways, not least the articulation of a

biographical information, see Alain Mothu, 'La mort de Guillaume Lamy', *La Lettre clandestine* 2 (1993), p.32-35, also available online at <http://www.univ-paris12.fr/scd/lc2-2d.htm>.

13. Lamy, *Discours anatomiques*, p.116-17, 123ff.

14. Busson, *La Religion des classiques*, p.149.

15. Lamy, *Discours anatomiques*, 2^e discours, p.61 (compare Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, IV.823ff.).

16. *HNA*, p.147, 188, 267; *HM*, p.96; *AS*, p.252 (Lamy rightfully suspects Descartes of having been a materialist) and especially *AS*, p.267.

17. For a good summary of Willis' theory of a material, 'Epicurean' soul as a 'life-principle', see John P. Wright, 'Locke, Willis and the Epicurean soul', in *Atoms, pneuma, and tranquility: Epicurean and Stoic themes in European thought*, ed. Margaret J. Osler (Cambridge, 1991), p.239-58.

connection between medical discourse and traditional philosophical discourse, though they differ on the status of the soul.¹⁸

As I have indicated, however, there is another passage in the *Abrégé des systèmes* which is important for our discussion; it is both convoluted and rich with implications. In it, La Mettrie actually discusses Hermann Boerhaave (1668-1738), the renowned iatromechanist physician and medical reformer, with whom he purportedly studied in Leyden (and whose work he translated).¹⁹ His aim is to defend Boerhaave against the charge of Spinozism: 'personne ne fut moins Spinosiste' (AS, p.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!²⁰ 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 to belong to the same 'party' – not that, in reality, a Newtonian mechanist physician, an Epicurean philosopher and an Epicurean physician belong to an identical context, but even Boerhaave the 'mechanist' describes medicine in a late work rather non-mechanistically as the science of reactions in the body, including those it elicits in other bodies.²¹ Radical motifs, whether Epicurean, Spinozist or otherwise materialistic, traverse the works and, equally importantly, the personas of these three admired predecessors of La Mettrie; in that sense they form a theoretical whole. From the La Mettrian standpoint, Boerhaave, Gassendi and Lamy are strategic allies in the process of complexifying mechanism with a focus on the animate features of the bodily machine.

In other words, to be a 'modern Epicurean' for La Mettrie is not just to

18. La Mettrie discusses the related Epicurean theme of the 'residual' soul (*HM*, p.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 *Le Matérialisme du XVIII^e siècle et la littérature clandestine*, ed. Olivier Bloch (Paris, 1982), p.149-65.
19. J. O. de La Mettrie, *Institutions de médecine de M. Herman Boerhaave*, 2 vols, then 3 (Paris, Huart & Cie, 1739, 1750).
20. 'On voit [...] combien ce Médecin célèbre était différent de ces deux Epicuriens Modernes, Gassendi et Lami' (AS, p.267).
21. Boerhaave, *Discourse on servitude as the physician's glory* (1730), in *Boerhaave's Orations*, ed. and translated by Elze Kegel-Brinkgreve and Antonie M. Luyendijk-Elshout (Leiden, 1983), p.237-63, cited in Hubert Steinke, *Irritating experiments: Haller's concept and the European controversy on irritability and sensibility, 1750-90* (Amsterdam, 2005), p.32. Harold Cook, in his recent study of the role of Dutch science and commerce in the scientific revolution, *Matters of exchange* (New Haven, CT, 2007), describes Boerhaave as an Epicurean both in his physics and in his ethics (p.385).

be, say, an atheist or 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 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.’²² Mandeville also comes to mind, for he has a materialist pneumatology – an account of brain–mind relations – in his *Treatise of the hypochondriack and hysteric diseases*, and an Epicurean social theory in the *Fable of the bees* – but the two are distinct, even if the latter includes an account of how individuals are determined by their quest for pleasure.²³ 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.

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 modern Epicurean 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 metaphysicians in their *cabinets*, but of the *médecin-philosophe*. Similarly, in a related usage of the term, La Mettrie challenges those he calls ‘les anti-Epicuriens modernes’ (*SE*, section 10) to explain phenomena such as the appearance of new species, and organic growth.²⁴

This is all rather reminiscent of the distinction Diderot draws in the *Encyclopédie* article ‘Spinosistes’ between ‘ancient Spinosists’ and ‘modern Spinosists’, in which the former stand for a metaphysics of substance and modes, whereas the latter specifically assert a metaphysics of living matter. This ‘modern Spinosism’ is tied to the new theory of biological epigenesis, that is, the theory of development according to which the individual form, the embryo, is formed by the successive addition of

22. Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of men, manners, opinions, times*, vol.2: *The Moralists: a philosophical rhapsody* (1711; Indianapolis, IN, 2001), part 2, section 1, p.132.

23. Bernard Mandeville, *A Treatise of the hypochondriack and hysteric diseases, in three dialogues* (1730), 2nd corrected edn (Delmar, NY, 1976); *Enquiry into the origins of moral virtue*, in Mandeville, Bernard, *The Fable of the bees, or Private vices, publick benefits*, ed. F. B. Kaye, 3rd revised edn, 2 vols (Oxford, 1924), vol.1, p.41-51.

24. Epicurus, Lucretius and La Mettrie do not describe the evolution or transformation of species; rather, species are viewed as appearing and disappearing; see Lucretius, *De rerum natura* IV.823-57, V.772-877. La Mettrie quotes the ancient view that the earth is like a womb (‘utérus’) which has now grown barren (*SE*, sections 8-11); he thinks the moderns can improve experimentally on this view, but does not reject it wholeheartedly.

material layers (rather than by the actualisation of a pre-existing form), so that the features of the mature organism are acquired gradually in development, as the embryo undergoes transformations under the influence of the environment.²⁵ Here is Diderot:

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.²⁶

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' (*EE*, p.233) – without, admittedly, specifying the content of this modern Spinozism. And he wavers terminologically: sometimes his name for the radical and emerging philosophy is 'Epicurean'; sometimes it is 'Spinozist'.²⁷ La Mettrie is indeed a self-made epicuro-Spinozist rather than a scholar of Epicureanism or Spinozism; but the Epicurean context has to be in place first, from the *libertin*, free-thinking tradition onwards, for his materialist reading of Spinoza to be possible.²⁸

25. The term first appears in William Harvey's *De generatione animalium* (1651); Descartes then defended a version of epigenesis because he wanted all laws of embryo development to be particular cases of the laws of motion. But the radically philosophical implications of the notion were spelled out by Diderot, notably in *Le Rêve de D'Alembert* and the text cited here. On the early scientific fortunes of epigenesis, see Linda van Speybroek, Dani de Waele and Gertrudis van de Vijver, 'Theories in early embryology', in *From epigenesis to epigenetics*, ed. Linda van Speybroek, Gertrudis van de Vijver and Dani de Waele (New York, 2002), p.7-49.
26. Diderot, 'Spinosistes', in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, 17 vols (Paris and Neufchâtel, Briasson, 1751-1765), vol.15 (1765), p.474a. The best commentary on this text is Alexandre Métraux, 'Über Denis Diderots Physiologisch Interpretierten Spinoza', *Studia Spinozana* 10 (1994), p.121-34.
27. As noted critically by Ann Thomson, 'La Mettrie et l'épicurisme', p.381; but it is equally plausible to view La Mettrie as perfectly instantiating Jonathan Israel's idea of 'Spinosism' as an artefact of the radical Enlightenment, as distinct from Spinozism understood as a systematic interpretation of Spinoza's actual doctrine (Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: philosophy and the making of modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford, 2001).
28. As noted by Jacques Roger, *Les Sciences de la vie dans la pensée française du dix-huitième siècle* (Paris, 1962), p.462-63. Antony McKenna points to the pre-existence of such a context as evidence, contra Israel, that there is no radical break (be it Spinosism or Spinozism), since

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, indeed vitalistic, since the basic properties of atoms have been expanded to include chemical and vital features. At the level of conceptual foundations, the shift is from classical atomism to a vision in which atoms are defined as tiny portions of living matter (the ‘vital’ reinterpretation of atoms, which is usually associated with Gassendi and Lamy, can actually be traced back further, to the Renaissance physician Girolamo Fracastoro).²⁹ At the level of overall theoretical intention, 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] and took up the physics and biological investigations as of interest in their own right.’³⁰ Recall that, in the *Système d’Épicure*, La Mettrie seems to equate being ‘pro-Epicurean’ (that is, not an anti-Epicurean) with specifically biological themes such as the appearance and disappearance of animal species (section 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

Enlightenment free-thinkers are the direct inheritors of an earlier Epicurean tradition (‘Epicurisme et matérialisme au XVII^e siècle: quelques perspectives de recherche’, in *Qu’est-ce que les Lumières radicales? Libertinage, athéisme et spinozisme dans le tournant philosophique de l’âge classique*, ed. Catherine Secrétan, Tristan Dagron and Laurent Bove (Paris, 2007), p.75-85. To the extent that I am claiming that La Mettrie invents something new with his materialist, medical Epicureanism, my view is methodologically closer to Israel’s.

29. Fracastoro (1478-1553) put forth a theory of contagious disease founded on an idea of contagious ‘seeds’ – tiny living bodies (see Vivian Nutton, ‘The reception of Fracastoro’s theory of contagion’, *Osiris* 6, 1990, p.196-234). This idea was then reinserted into editions of Lucretius, so that the latter was quoted in support of the idea of bacteria (Monte Johnson and Catherine Wilson, ‘Lucretius and the history of science’, in *The Cambridge companion to Lucretius*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie, Cambridge, 2007, p.131-48).
30. Morgan Meis, ‘Science as a cure for fear: the status of monsters in Lucretius’, in *Monsters and philosophy*, ed. Charles T. Wolfe (London, 2005), p.21-35 (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, *L’Épicurisme des Lumières* (2003), a special issue on Epicureanism which they edited (p.8-9).

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*, p.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,³¹ nor, conversely, grafted Hallerian irritability onto Cartesian automata, even if he quotes Haller favourably and, as is well known, dedicated *L'Homme-machine* to him.³² Both the property of irritability and the Gassendist emphasis on small parcels of living matter as 'semences' indicate that La Mettrian matter is definitely not reducible to extension (that is, specifiable solely in terms of shape, figure and motion). But what does this entail for his ethics? His medical Epicureanism will turn out to be far more ambitious in scope than that of Lamy (or Walter Charleton's contemporary project of explaining medical disorders in atomistic terms), since it encroaches on moral matters. For La Mettrie seeks to replace traditional moral philosophy with a medically grounded or, indeed, medicalised viewpoint: instead of an ideological happiness which we cannot attain, he thinks the only 'freedom worth wanting' is this 'organic happiness', the hedonistically, materially specifiable happiness of our organs.³³

La Mettrie's ethics

La Mettrie was always accused of being an immoralist – a nineteenth-century Protestant historian of French literature described him as 'un métaphysicien lubrique de la volupté'³⁴ – less because of the man-machine hypothesis, and more due to his writings in moral philosophy,

31. In her masterful study of Montpellier vitalism, *Naissance et développement du vitalisme en France de la deuxième moitié du 18^e siècle à la fin du Premier Empire*, SVEC 381 (2000), Roselyne Rey curiously repeats these older interpretations of La Mettrie: 'La Mettrie manque la spécificité du vivant' (p.137). She describes him as a mechanist (p.137, 176), then changes her mind and has him 'vitalising' the Cartesian machine (p.177), but ultimately reiterates her opposition between the Cartesian–La Mettrian machine and the more complex vitalist model of *organisation*. On the latter, see Charles Wolfe, 'Organisme et organisation: l'individuation organique selon le vitalisme montpelliérain', *Dix-huitième siècle* 41, *Individus et communautés au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 2009).

32. On La Mettrie's relation to Haller, see Steinke, *Irritating experiments*, p.194-97.

33. For further discussion of this notion see my 'La réduction médicale de la morale chez La Mettrie', in *Matérialistes français du XVIII^e siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d'Holbach*, ed. Jean-Claude Bourdin, Francine Markovits *et al.* (Paris, 2006), p.45-60.

34. Sayous, *Histoire de la littérature française à l'étranger* (1853), as quoted by Denise Leduc-Fayette, 'Le "cas" La Mettrie', in *Images au XIX^e siècle du matérialisme du XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Olivier Bloch (Paris, 1979), p.103-16 (108).

chiefly the *Discours sur le bonheur* or *Anti-Sénèque*.³⁵ (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*.³⁶ 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.³⁷ Instead, La Mettrie took the opportunity to assert his brand of extreme hedonism against Seneca and Stoicism in general, even though Seneca discusses pleasure in positive – if austere – terms in *De vita beata*, book 13).³⁸ Faced with this accusation, that La Mettrie at best reduced the moral to the physical or the physiological, and at worst was a deliberate immoralist, many La Mettrians respond by invoking his status as a medical doctor,³⁹ 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*, p.91). If only judges could be selected from the ranks of 'excellent physicians'! That is, La Mettrie deplores the fact that judgements of life and death are typically made without any knowledge of the physiological level of determination of

35. The observation is Ann Thomson's, in 'La Mettrie, machines and the denial of liberty', in *The Renewal of materialism*, ed. Charles T. Wolfe, *Graduate faculty philosophy journal* 22:1 (2000), p.71-86 (80). Earlier on, Thomson also noted that even post-Revolutionary defenders of La Mettrie, for instance 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, 1981, p.186-87).
36. *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, C. F. Voss, 1751) bore the same title, as the work has since then.
37. The anecdote regarding Maupertuis occurs in Laurent-Angliviel de La Beaumelle's *Vie de Maupertuis* (Paris, 1856), p.121-23, and Elie Fréron's *Lettres sur quelques écrits*, vol.1 (1752; Geneva, 1962). La Beaumelle's work was written shortly after Maupertuis' death, but published posthumously (see John Falvey's introduction to his edition of La Mettrie's *Discours sur le bonheur (Anti-Sénèque)*, *SVEC* 134, 1975, p.15, and Kathleen Wellman, *La Mettrie: medicine, philosophy and Enlightenment*, Durham, NC, 1992, p.214, n.6). On Fréron, see Raymond Boissier, *La Mettrie: médecin, pamphlétaire, et philosophe* (Paris, 1931), p.173.
38. This is a discussion which was itself influential in the reassessment of Epicureanism in early modern Europe. See Louise Fothergill-Payne, 'Seneca's role in popularizing Epicurus in the sixteenth century', in *Atoms, pneuma, and tranquility*, ed. M. J. Osler, p.115-33 (122ff.). On interrelations between Epicureanism and Stoicism in early modern thought see Hans Blom's article in this volume.
39. Notably Roland Desné, 'L'humanisme de La Mettrie', *La Pensée* 109 (1963), p.93-110; Pierre Rétat, 'Le "cœur" de La Mettrie', in *Mélanges de littérature française offerts à Monsieur René Pintard*, eds. Noémi Hepp, Robert Mauzi and Claude Pichois (Strasbourg, 1975), p.533-45; Boissier, *La Mettrie*; and, to a lesser extent, Wellman, *La Mettrie*.

action. Some years later, he explicitly stated that if materialism – in other words, just such knowledge – could have an effect on morals and society, that effect would be greater ‘modération dans les supplices’ (*DB*, p.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, not a purely mechanistic vision which reduces the body to a system of cogs, pulleys, funnels and the like:⁴⁰ ‘Tout cède au grand Art de guérir. Le médecin est le seul Philosophe qui mérite de sa Patrie.’ (*HM*, p.62).

The medical doctor is ‘le seul Philosophe qui mérite de sa Patrie’, first, because the doctor 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, as he delivers ‘brevets de vie et de mort’.⁴¹ Similarly – and recalling the medical motif in Descartes’ *Discours de la méthode*⁴² – ‘la médecine seule [peut] changer les esprits et les mœurs avec le corps’ (*HM*, p.67), and ‘la meilleure philosophie [est] celle des médecins’ (*DB*, p.36). Fair enough – but why is it the doctor’s homeland 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*, p.13). The fact that doctors are necessarily parts of society and engage in *Realpolitik*, as John Falvey puts it⁴³ (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*⁴⁴ and *L’Ouvrage de Pénélope, ou Machiavel en médecine*), does not

40. That La Mettrie’s machines are embodied, organic machines does not, however, mean that they are inspired by Leibniz’s ‘machines de la nature’, as strangely suggested by Peter H. Reill, *Vitalizing nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), p.61-62. La Mettrie never invokes infinite complexity, a monadic metaphysics or even a naturalised version of the monad (like Maupertuis’ ‘molécules’ or Charles Bonnet’s ‘corps organisés’).

41. La Mettrie, *La Faculté vengée* (Paris, Quillau, 1747), p.100.

42. 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*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 11 vols, Paris, 1964-1974, vol.6, p.62).

43. La Mettrie, *Discours sur le bonheur*, ed. J. Falvey, p.46.

44. 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*

make it any better. Doctors can be Machiavellian liars, ‘fausse monnaie’,⁴⁵ 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 ‘la meilleure philosophie [est] celle des médecins’, and, second, why a doctor should be ‘le seul Philosophe qui mérite de sa Patrie’.

It may be excessive of La Mettrie to claim that ‘La Médecine est sans contredit la plus utile et la plus nécessaire de toutes les sciences’,⁴⁶ not least since he also holds that the truth of materialism is for an elite, not something to be spread among the people. But his point applies quite smoothly to ethics – given that he understands moral matters eudaimonistically (in terms of happiness). Philosophy always claims to give us the straightest path to happiness, but La Mettrie rejects what he calls the ‘bonheur privatif’ of the Stoics (*DB*, p.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 ‘le bonheur organique, automatique ou naturel’ (*DB*, p.244): it is natural because ‘l’Ame n’y entre pour rien’ (p.244), organic because it ‘vient de l’organisation’ and is ‘le plus beau présent de la Nature’ (*DB*, p.240). This happiness is automatic in the sense that it obeys the laws of operation of our ‘machine’ (a term frequently used in French during this period to refer to the body).⁴⁷ It is worth noting that in the medical vitalism of the Montpellier school (e.g. Bordeu, Ménuret de Chambaud), but also in Diderot, who was influenced by them, *organisation* is asserted as a challenge to mechanistic models of life. An animal’s *organisation* is its organic structure, which is not explainable in purely mechanistic terms. While La Mettrie is by no means a vitalist, he shares this critique of mechanism, for instance regarding the secretions of the glands.⁴⁸

But it is in thinking about our *organisation* that La Mettrie produces some of his more shocking formulations: ‘Vautre-toi comme les porcs, tu seras heureux comme les porcs’ (*DB*, p.286), which could either mean that, as we have hedonistically determined bodies, our happiness is no

(Amsterdam, [1746]). Mandeville, too, emphasises the ‘politics’ of medicine, but without connecting this to his materialist views on the relation of mind and body.

45. La Mettrie, *Politique du médecin de Machiavel*, p.xv.

46. La Mettrie, *Politique du médecin de Machiavel*, p.xiv.

47. See for instance Gaston Cayrou, *Le Français classique: lexique de la langue du dix-septième siècle* (Paris, 1948), ‘Machine’, p.530.

48. Wellman, *La Mettrie*, p.116-20. It is beyond the scope of the present essay to show how *organisation* differs subtly from ‘organism’; see my ‘L’individuation organique selon le vitalisme montpelliérain’, and on the unexpected interrelations between mechanist and (Montpellier) vitalist models, Charles Wolfe and Motoichi Terada, ‘The animal economy as object and program in Montpellier vitalism’, *Science in context* 21:4, *Vitalism without metaphysics? Medical vitalism in the Enlightenment* (December 2008), section 4, p.537-80.

different than a pig's, or, recalling the analogy between matter thinking and a watch telling time, that we are happy, not literally in the same way as pigs, but analogously (opera delights the opera lover, or fashion the style maven, like pigs enjoy mud). But if we consider such proclamations in context, we begin to see the original aspect of La Mettrie's 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. Diderot's judgement on this brand of hedonism was quite severe, and was reminiscent of the accusation that La Mettrie sought to conceal his (original, modern) Epicureanism beneath a historical veil: 'Des efféminés, de lâches corrompus, pour échapper à l'ignominie qu'ils méritaient par la dépravation de leurs mœurs, se dirent sectateurs de la volupté, et le furent en effet, mais c'était de la leur, et non de celle d'Epicure.'⁴⁹ In contrast, La Mettrie argues that a more Stoic, less sensual medicine would ward off the fear of death, but would be dangerously ascetic: 'Les stoïciens sont inaccessibles au plaisir et à la douleur; nous nous ferons gloire de sentir l'un et l'autre' or, worse, 'Un Stoïcien n'a pas plus de sentiment qu'un lépreux.'⁵⁰

A hedonistically driven Epicurean medicine, by contrast, would be devoted to the organic fulfilment of our 'machine', since it is composed of organs which feel and by extension have an inbuilt desiring mechanism: 'Nos organes sont susceptibles d'un sentiment ou d'une modification qui nous plaît et nous fait aimer la vie' (*DB*, p.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,⁵¹ from the most hardened criminal to the most gentle, altruistic person, La Mettrie describes it as the 'pente inhumaine de l'humanité' (*DB*, p.262). Individuals are virtuous or vicious depending on their blood: 'le Tyran, l'assassin, comme l'honnête homme' (*DB*, p.262) – all are in pursuit of their happiness; these are the parts of La Mettrie that Sade liked especially.⁵²

Notice, however, that the organic dimension of this determinism gives it a great deal of 'plasticity' or modifiability: the orang-utan merely

49. Diderot, *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, in *Œuvres*, vol.1: *Philosophie*, ed. Laurent Versini (Paris, 1994), p.971-1251 (1192). On this aspect of the Diderot-La Mettrie relation see Timo Kaitaro's fine paper 'Diderot and La Mettrie: the unacknowledgeable debt', in *La Mettrie: Ansichte und Einsichte*, ed. Hartmut Hecht, p.63-73.

50. Respectively, *Discours sur le bonheur*, ed. J. Falvey, p.122, and *DB*, p.247.

51. 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.

52. Jean Deprun, 'La Mettrie et l'immoralisme sadien', *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest* 83:4 (1976), p.745-50.

requires an operation on his larynx and being sent to school in order to learn how to speak (*HM*, p.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 do not mean to obscure the bleakness of the social landscape implied by this vision, in which education cannot really, durably reform individuals and their appetites. Granted, it was mistaken and perhaps glib of Foucault to describe La Mettrie's man-machine as a figure of discipline and 'training' (*dressage*), like a philosophical avatar of tiny military automata lined up for the inspection of Frederick II,⁵³ but that does not mean that La Mettrian individuals are any more free than these automata. They are simply more complex and possessed of a biological uniqueness, their *organisation*.

La Mettrie's 'medical Epicureanism'

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*, p.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*. 'La Nature nous a tous créés uniquement pour être heureux' (*HM*, p.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*, section 31, p.363) without, however, turning his medically motivated Epicureanism into a specific, experimentally specifiable medical concept.

To be sure, 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.⁵⁴ This may explain

53. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris, 1975), ch.3, section 1, 'Les corps dociles', p.138.

54. Theo Verbeek's critical edition of La Mettrie's first philosophical work, *Le Traité de l'âme de La Mettrie, texte, commentaire, et interprétation*, 2 vols (Utrecht, 1988), is the classic, virtuoso 'decomposition' of the unity of La Mettrie's work into a welter of half-baked, derivative citations and paraphrases; as such, it suffers from an inability to recognise any originality or conceptual coherence in La Mettrie – a coherence which I argue for, here and elsewhere.

moments like the odd juxtaposition of Boerhaave, Gassendi and Lamy. 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 invention⁵⁵ 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'. If ancient Epicureanism was a physics that was meant to culminate in an ethics, and (mainstream) modern Epicureanism, as deplored by Shaftesbury, replaces the pleasures of the mind with the pleasures of the body, medical Epicureanism, as in Gassendi and Lamy, returns to the atoms themselves, but now as living, vitalised atoms. La Mettrie brings together the hedonistic and the vital-materialistic components of this new form of Epicureanism, promoting the happiness of our bodily *organisation*, which he describes as being organic, automatic and natural. Who is in a position to know the functional laws of our *organisation*? The physician-philosopher, which is to say, the medical Epicurean.

La Mettrie's 'Art de guérir' (*HM*, p.62) does away with the dilemma of happiness and virtue by invoking the deeper structure, as opposed to a surface ethics, which relies on the dualism of body and soul, or at least bodily properties and mental properties. It is the deep organic structure of the man-machine, which follows the norm of health: '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*, p.247).

55. I use this term partly in the sense in which Yves Citton has recently spoken of an 'invention of Spinozism' in the eighteenth century, in his inspiring work *L'Envers de la liberté: l'invention d'un imaginaire spinoziste dans la France des Lumières* (Paris, 2006). An invention in Citton's sense is a conceptual performance that extends well beyond recognisable textual commentary on an author (Epicurus, Spinoza and so on) and also includes the conceptual innovations of antagonists such as apologeticists.