

Anticipations in La Mettrie

Post by “Hiram” of January 25, 2020 at 12:45 PM

I have been reading Julien Offray de La Mettrie's "Natural history of the soul" and "Système d'Epicure" (thank you [Charles](#)), and will read his "Man Machine" and "Anti Seneca" soon. I have many initial impressions, of which I will write in the future, but I'd like to bring up some points regarding La Mettrie's study of the canon, noting the following initially:

1. He was unfamiliar with Epicurus as a direct source. His familiarity was with Lucretius, which was a popular document in the intellectual life of anti-clerical intellectuals of his day.
2. Much of what he wrote were commentaries on Lucretian ideas.
3. He does not use the same words as Lucretius may have, or as Epicurus may have, in his native language to name things that we know as anticipations, canon, dogmatism, etc. He used "système" for dogmatic systems of philosophy, and referred to anticipations as they related to memory and speech.
4. This specifically bears to mind that the word "recognition" itself gives us the anticipation of a re-encounter with something that we have known previously: re-cognition. I don't know if a careful evaluation of anticipations as they relate to memory has even been done, but either way we have modern scientific insights on memory that any discussion should be checked against.
5. La Mettrie regards reason and the canonic faculties similarly to how the orthodox Epicurean does. He says of reason that it's a "mechanism which often fails". In page 93, he argues that the fact that we remember or recognize ideas with or without the consent of the will is seen as proof that they are pre-rational; ergo sub-conscious. He frequently uses the term "internal causes" here (as opposed to "external"), perhaps admitting some acknowledgement of the existence of the unconscious or subconscious mind. But **that he goes to such lengths to argue that these faculties are pre-rational is very interesting** to me.

The following are a few notes I've taken from La Mettrie's "Natural history of the soul" which seem to constitute, again, a commentary on Lucretius.

The first note is that he establishes anticipations as a pre-rational ("mechanic" in his words) faculty.

Quote

The cause of memory is in fact mechanic, as memory itself is. It seems to depend on that which the bodily impressions of the brain that trace ideas that follow it, are nearby, and which the soul can not discover a trace, or an idea, without remembering the others which customarily went together. - La Mettrie, speaking of the "bodily impressions of the brain in p 88-89 of "Natural history of the soul"

Notice:

Ideas are "bodily impressions" in the brain. This is remarkably scientific, considering when it was written. Today we know that ideas are, concretely, electric signals shared by neurons according to established connections in the nodes between them, which are tied to habitual and instinctive behavior by the animal.

Also notice "trace ideas that follow it". This may be my awkward direct translation from the French, but the clear connotation is a pathway inside the brain. The established Epicurean conception of ideas is that they are physical and are lodged in (or happen to) the brain.

Quote

Because in order for a new movement (for instance, the beginning of a verse or a sound that hits the ears) to communicate on the field its impression to the part of the brain that is analogous to where one finds the first vestige of what one searches (that is, this other part of the brain **) where memory hides, or the trace of the following verses, and represents to the soul the follow-up to the first idea, or of the first words, **it is necessary that new ideas be carried by a CONSTANT LAW to the same place to where the other ideas of the same nature as these were carried.** - La Mettrie, speaking of the "constant law" by which memory functions in p 89-90 of "Natural history of the soul"

** (note: he uses the word *moelle*, which translates as "bone marrow", but he must be referring to brain tissue or brain lobe of some sort)

These passages in particular relate to the passage where Lucretius mentions neural pathways in the brain.

There is a reason why this was an important teaching where the ethics are concerned. Epicurus is the only teacher who ever posited a theory of moral development based on the physical structure of the brain. This has been a long-buried jewel of his genius. In his "[On moral development](#)" we find that Epicurus claimed that, in the process of moral development, one has the power to change one's beliefs, and even to atomically change one's mind. He speaks of how we may transform our dispositions in order to have a final *developed product* (a mature,

happy, and healthy character)--but **he SPECIFICALLY frames this in terms of changing the material / physical structure of the brain. And it's here that his moral theory rests on his physics theory.**

Elsewhere La Mettrie speaks of "la penetration", of attention, of focus as a faculty of the soul. The word in Greek, epibole (translated as the act of focusing a particular faculty) is one of the words that Epicurus used in [On Nature Book 18](#) and which seemed to be of great importance. I'm not sure what word Lucretius would have used, but if he did, then this portion of La Mettrie might be a commentary of that portion of Lucretius, which might link back and be related to the conversations from book 18 On Nature, which focuses on the importance of clarity of thought and speech.

I have many more notes on many other subjects from La Mettrie, but wanted to share these ideas here in the hopes that others make other connections I'm not making, particularly those with more familiarity with Lucretius (or the science of how memory works).

My impression is that La Mettrie was DEEPLY steeped in the study of the canon, and that his "Natural history of the soul" was an attempt to posit a non-religious theory of the self and of the mortal soul that was as scientific as you could get in the pre-Darwinian generations.

Post by "Cassius" of January 25, 2020 at 12:53 PM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

1. He was unfamiliar with Epicurus as a direct source. His familiarity was with Lucretius, which was a popular document in the intellectual life of anti-clerical intellectuals of his day.
2. Much of what he wrote were commentaries on Lucretian ideas.

Hiram so you are saying that as far as you can tell La Mettrie did not have access to Diogenes Laertius?

If I recall correctly much of Gassendi was based on Diogenes Laertius, so that would seem unlikely, but maybe so, as I am totally unfamiliar with his writing.

I know Dewitt argues that anticipations are hardly mentioned, if at all, in Lucretius, so if La Mettrie was not incorporating what Diogenes Laertius had to say, and what Cicero has Velleius say about anticipations in "On the Nature of the Gods," then that would be a severe limitation

on La Mettrie's analysis, at least at to the nature of "anticipations" themselves.

Post by “Hiram” of January 25, 2020 at 2:26 PM

The Gassendi and Laertius lineage of ideas is something I have not considered, so am unfamiliar if / how this came to his knowledge. Maybe [Charles](#) knows something?

But I don't think these are "severe limitations", except insofar as you consider his writing a commentary on previous thinkers. I think a case could be made that his evaluation of an anatomy of the soul is ESPECIALLY valuable if it's not based on previous sources because it would mean that, without knowing these Epicurean sources, a student of nature is able to come to similar ideas than Epicurus. I almost see it as a demonstration of the soundness of the system.

Also, another thing I noticed is what seem like almost parallel sayings in La Mettrie and in Few Days in Athens. I know Thomas Jefferson lived in France, knew French and may have read La Mettrie. Many arguments against the clergy ("the theologians") and their grip on the intellectual life of people are similar in both works. Same with the insistence that people reason "without bias or prejudice", which informs the anti-dogmatism that seems to appear in La Mettrie in spite of his acknowledgement that he has created "an Epicurean SYSTEM"--and his critique of the pendency and arrogance of philosophers, which (when he starts naming names), specifically refers to idealists of whom he says they "build castles in the air". So I wonder to what extent a transfer of ideas from La Mettrie - to Jefferson - to Wright took place.

Post by “Charles” of January 25, 2020 at 2:38 PM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

So I wonder to what extent a transfer of ideas from La Mettrie - to Jefferson - to Wright took place.

I don't have the time to get into a large wall of text explaining Mettrie at the moment, but he was heavily censored and faced constant backlash, he was "kicked" out of France during the War of Austrian Secession to escape punishment at the hands of the clergy, prompting him to the more tolerant Netherlands - in which he was later evicted and he was practically saved by his friend "Pierre Louis Maupertuis" who secured him a spot in Fredericks Court (I've yet to read

the letters between the two).

Back to Mettrie, his works were so controversial that other materialists had to tone down the ideas of Mettrie that they had incorporated, and much of his ideas live on in the legacy of psychology, specifically behavioralism in the works of other, lesser known thinkers.

However, I mentioned this once very briefly and haven't had the chance or opportunity to look into it further, since Mettrie's introduction to Epicurean Physics was *not* from Gassendi, it was from Guillaume Lamy who said of Gassendi's Epicurean-Christian atomism that it was "watered-down". If that means that Mettrie had not been exposed to Laertius, I cannot say yet as there's still quite a large number of works I haven't delved into yet, as for context with Epicurus as he mentions him by name quite a few times in the three works I've been studying (Anti-Seneca, System of Epicurus, & School of Volup.).

Regardless, it's absolutely clear that Mettrie has an extremely heavy and prolific reader of: history, poetry, and scientific works; having very keen and astute knowledge of all the leading theories and popular poets of his day (he drops the names of his contemporary poets left and right in School of Volup.). But the nature of his works has less to do with acknowledging history, than it does with speculating & hypothesizing and stating his beliefs on various subjects or findings.

Post by “Cassius” of January 25, 2020 at 4:41 PM

This is the kind of research that takes time and lots of effort to pursue, so maybe over time we can figure it out.

I think it's pretty clear that the Epicurean material in Cicero's "On Ends" and "On the Nature of the Gods" was probably never lost to the world for any considerable length of time, and I get the impression that Diogenes Laertius, which has the bulk of the core stuff, was generally available too.

We seem to get the impression in talking about the recovery of Lucretius that the atomic theory was brand new upon its "rediscovery," but if Diogenes Laertius was available (as appears so) then the core of the teaching was available through the Letter to Herodotus.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 25, 2020 at 6:49 PM

Stenger, in *God and the Atom*, chapter 2 "Atoms Lost and Found", gives a very brief account of atomism through the Dark Ages.

He mentions St. Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century as being aware of and condemning atomism. Then: "While the Church did its best to suppress the writings of the Epicureans, medieval scholars of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam showed sufficient interest that knowledge of the philosophy and physics of atomism survived in their writings."

He gives the names Adelard of Bath (1075–1150), Thierry of Chartres (ca. 1100–ca. 1150), and William of Conches (ca. 1090–1154) as thinkers interested in atomism. Also William of Ockham (ca. 1288–1348) and Nicholas of Autrecourt (ca. 1299–1369).

The Karaites were a Jewish sect of atomists who were condemned by Maimonides (1135–1204). Maimonides also mentions Epicurus dismissively: "As for those who do not recognize the existence of God, but who believed that things are born and perish through aggregation and separation, according to chance, and that there is no being that rules and organizes the universe—I refer here to Epicurus, his sect and the likes of him, as told by Alexander—it serves no purpose for us to speak about those sects; since God's existence has been established, and it would be useless to mention the opinions of individuals whose consciousness constructed their system on a basis that has already been overthrown by proofs."

Additionally, some Islamic scholars pursued atomism. For the most part any acceptance of atomism was accomplished by overlaying (or perverting) it with monotheism; it seems this was where things stood when Poggio came across DRN.

This is a summary of a summary. Stenger summarizes other sources and provides footnotes which look like they'd be quite useful for anyone pursuing this topic in detail.

Post by "Cassius" of January 25, 2020 at 6:58 PM

Thanks! Lots of good points for research in there!