

"D'Argens 'Sacrifices' Le Mettrie" - A posthumous attack on La Mettrie's Epicureanism

Post by "Charles" of May 25, 2020 at 5:54 PM

D'Argens "Sacrifices" La Mettrie

(Bold denotes Watson, Italics denote Boyer, Bold Italics denote La Mettrie)

Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens (1704-71) is possibly now best known as a possible author of the libertine novel *Thérèse Philosophe*, but he wrote a number of famous works, including the *Lettres juives*. As with Diderot, d'Argens crossed paths with La Mettrie in the game of attributing anonymous works (he is named in the first English version of *La Mettrie's Man a Machine* as its author), and likewise seems to have felt a strong need to disassociate himself from him. As a courtesy to the late La Mettrie's friend and protector (and his own patron), d'Argens detailed his reasons for so severely attacking La Mettrie in a letter to king Frederick dated 11/03/1761:

I have been busy translating the most ancient Greek philosopher still extant, called Ocellus Lucanus...Not a single month has gone by that hasn't seen the publication, this year, of some libel against the philosophers...Their great war-horse is La Mettrie's work; but, far from defending him, when I came to this point, I choice rather to prove that La Mettrie had never spoken or thought in line with the philosophers, but that, in many things, he made the same mistakes as the theologians...

And in a follow-up letter on 11/12/1761

*I have been obliged to abandon La Mettrie; he is a lost child whom I have had to sacrifice in the war. But, if he became such a necessary victim, at least I have watered his tomb with the blood of the theologians, and I hope that in the future it will cease to be said, as the author of the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* has, that we may judge the manner of thought of the *Philosopher of Sans-Souci* and the men of letters who approach him, by the works of doctor La Mettrie.*

And so, the piece that follows should, I think, be read as a hit piece, especially since some of what he says is plainly contradicted by the facts (for example, what he says about La Mettrie's education and his language skills). Interestingly for so severe a critic, d'Argens was also an inheritor of part of La Mettrie's royal pension (see his letter to King Frederick II, 10/21/1752 (in *Oeuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, Vol. 19.)

From Ocellus Lucanus (1761), pp. 236-62

Boyer d'Argens

...Here, then, is the morality of the philosophers who have denied Providence. It's easy to judge that those who have known it have had principles no less useful for society: this can be seen with Cicero, Epictetus, and Seneca. As for the modern philosophers, they have lived in too enlightened an age to have failed to lay the foundations of the most rigid morality in all their writings. In order to be convinced, all it takes is to see what Spinoza, Hobbes, and Collins have written, when discussing virtue.

I will respond to the only objection that might be raised, and with one stroke I will destroy the bitter rebukes which certain a writer's delirium has attracted for the past few years against the philosophers, and nullify all the slanders which have been spread, and which equal doses of dishonesty and ridiculous ostentation. By now it will be clear that I am referring to the Doctor La Mettrie. This man, as was wisely said by a philosopher who had been attacked on his account, composed many books during fits of madness, in which morals, probity and the most essential rules of morality were attacked. These works aroused the indignation of the public. Indeed, what good citizen would not shudder in horror while reading fearsome thoughts like these?

O you who are so often called "unhappy", and who truly are unhappy vis-a-vis society, you may rest easy, when face to face with yourself. All you need to do is to stifle your remorse ny reflection (if you have the willpower), or by habits that are able to contravene and overpower it. If you had been raised without the ideas that form its basis, you wouldn't have this enemy to contend with. That's not all: you must despise life itself as much as you do public esteem. Then, truly I maintain: you parricides, incestuous, thieves, miscreants, notorious criminals; you who are rightly despised by the good: you will be happy anyways. For, what unhappiness or sorrow can be caused by actions that, as black and horrible as they are thought to be, would not leave (in this hypothesis) any trace of crime in the soul of the criminal? But if you want to live, be careful: the law is less accommodating than my philosophy is. Justice is its daughter; the hangman and the gallows stand ready: you should really be more concerned about them than about your conscience or the gods. - La Mettrie, Discours sur le bonheur (Anti-Seneca)

Here are the false and baseless arguments of a man, whom the enemies of philosophy call an Epicurean philosopher. Let us destroy from bottom to top, the frightful views of this frenzied man, using those of Epicurus: after this, will they go on saying that he was the latter's disciple? "The just man," says this wise philosopher, "is the only man who can live without trouble and without disorder: the unjust on the other hand always lives in fear and agitation." - (Diogenes Laertius, Book X)

Before I come to the personal side of this madman, who was set up as a philosopher by those who were delighted at the mortification which these views inspire, in those who detest them; let us compare his opinions with those of Lucretius on the subjects of voluptuousness and temperance; our frenzies author says:

And you, you voluptuary, since without pleasures you could never live a happy life, leave your soul behind and Seneca too; all the Stoic virtues are nothing to you? Think only about your body: what you have by way of soul does not really deserve to be distinguished from it. Prejudice, teachers, and fanatics will mobilize against you, but even if all the elements joined with them... What can rain, hail, and unbridled winds do to Tibullus when he's in the arms of his Cloris? They add to his felicity, which can handle anything that comes. So enjoy the good times, whenever and wherever they come your way; enjoy the present; forget the past which is no more, and don't worry about the future. Remember that the grains of wheat still land outside the field's boundaries are still wheat; that nature is no more concerned about a lost grain than the sea is to lose a drop of water; that its whole delight is pleasure, and that nothing is against it, except pain. May pollution and enjoyment, these lecherous rivals, take turns melting in voluptuous delight by day and night, making your soul, if possible, as greasy and lusty as your body is. Finally, since you have no other option, go ahead and revel in it: drink, eat, sleep, snort, dream; and if your brain flickers once in a while, let it be between two wines, and always keep it fixed on the pleasures of the moments, or on some desire you're saving for the next hour. Or, if perfecting the great art of voluptuousness isn't your thing, maybe villainy and debauchery are: stench and infamy will be your reward; wallow like a pig, then, you'll be happy like one. - La Mettrie, Discours sur le bonheur (Anti-Seneca)

Would a madman born and raised from infancy in the worst part of Paris, be able to speak any differently? O you who want to slander the philosophers, how can you base your critique on the writings of a man whose folly is visible in each of his thoughts, whose style shows how drunk his soul is? Now, listen to a real philosopher on the same subjects that you criticize. Epicurus says:

We must accustom ourselves to eat soberly and simply without seeking out all these delicately preserved meats; health finds in this frugality its preservation, and man by this means becomes more robust, and much better suited for all the actions of life. That is the cause why by intervals a better meal is found, and is eaten with greater pleasure: but the principal thing is that by this aid we won't fear the vicissitudes of fortune, because, being accustomed to content ourselves with little, whatever abundance it removes from us, it will only restore us to a state that it cannot take away, by the praiseworthy habits that we have adopted. Thus, when we assure ourselves that pleasure is the aim of the happiest life, we must not think that what is meant is the pleasures that are found in the enjoyments of love, or in lusts and excesses of feasts, as some ignoramuses have sought to insinuate, as well as the enemies of our sect, who have imposed in this way, by an ill-intentioned interpretation of our opinion. This pleasure, which is the center of our happiness, is nothing but having the mind without any agitation, and that the body be exempt from pain; drunkenness, excessive eating, that criminal commerce of women and boys, the delicacy of drinks, and all that seasons feasts, contain nothing that leads to a pleasant life, only the frugality and tranquility of the mind can produce this happy effect; it's this calm that facilitates the enlightenment of things which must

determine our choices, or those from which we should flee; and it is by this that do away with those opinions that trouble the disposition of this motor of our life. (Diogenes Laertius, Book X)

Here is another comparison between reason and madness; La Mettrie says:

All the wicked, can be happy, if they can be wicked without remorse. I also venture to say that he who feels no remorse, who has such familiarity with crime that vices are his virtues, he will be happier than anyone else, who after a fine deed will not repent of having done it.

This is vice, as explained by the voice of a twisted mind: here is virtue, will speak by the organ of wisdom. Epicurus says that:

Philosophy is the source of all the virtues, which teach us that life is unpleasant, if prudence and honesty and justice do not guide all our movements; but by always following the route they trace out for us, our days will flow with this satisfaction from which happiness is inseparable; for these virtues are part of a life full of happiness and pleasantness, which can never be without their excellent practice. (Diogenes Laertius Book X, Section 132)

La Mettrie is, therefore, no Epicurean. And it is wrong to rebuke him with such bitterness against the philosophers. This man resembles a disciple of Epicurus, as Father Malagrida resembles a Minister of State for the Court of Portugal.

... (Skipped 8 pages to bring discussion back to Epicurus - Charles)

...But the philosophers don't need this argument, as convincing as it might be, since they rightly deny that La Mettrie ever possessed the least notion philosophy; they prove this by showing that his opinions are directly opposed to those of every philosopher, among whose number their enemies want to place him.

On the contrary, it is among certain theologians that La Mettrie must be ranked, it's with writers like Samuel Sa, Delrio, Aquapontanus, Bellarmine, Molina, Salmeron, Gregory of Valencia, Mariana, Scribani, Juan azor, Gretzer, Vasquez, Suarez, Jean Lorin, Lessius, Tolet, Santarek, Tonner, Becan, Pirot, Escobar, Tirin, Busenbaum, Lacroix, the journalists de Trevoux, those apologists and panegyrist of Busenbaum and Lacroix: it's with all these theologians who teach that a ruler may be killed, where La Mettrie should be placed; for, instead of speaking like the philosophers, whom he has maintained precisely the same view as the authors of these books, who have been convicted by an arrêt du Parlement of teaching that it is permissible to kill a king. On this subject La Mettrie explains himself as clearly as these Theologians. Listen to him speaking, one would think they were reading a passage from Mariana or Busenbaum.

Prince, I won't take away the cursed impulses that drives you, how could I? They're the source of all your wretched happiness. Bears, lions, and tigers love to devour other animals; since you're ferocious like them, it is only right for you to indulge the

drives that you share with them. I only feel sorry for you, the way you feast on public calamities; but who wouldn't feel even sorrier for a state where no man could be found, a man with enough virtue to deliver it, even at the peril of his own life, from a monster like you? - La Mettrie, Discours sur le bonheur (Anti-Seneca)

Look who's arguing as a Molinist theologian; but if La Mettrie had wanted to speak like an epicurean philosopher, he would have joined Epicurus in saying that the wise man should not mingle in state affairs, and that he should always obey his prince.

Neque accessurum ad rempublicam, neque tyrannidem quaesiturum. (Diogenes Laertius Book X, Section 119); Principem in tempor obsequio culturum. Section 121.

(Kirk Watson translations)

“Nor will he take part in politics, nor will he make himself a tyrant”

“He will pay court to a king, if need be”

- "A Hazardous Materialist: Le Mettrie's Life and Ideas", Kirk Watson