

“The Torch of Experience”:

Understanding the Didactic Poem through the Comparison of the Materialist Philosophy
of La Mettrie’s Man a Machine with the Dualist Philosophy of Armstrong’s The Art of
Preserving Health

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The eighteenth century didactic poem is founded on the ideas of observation, reason, and the purpose to inform. Two examples of this form are La Mettrie's Man a Machine and Armstrong's The Art of Preserving Health. These works share common themes, namely that each attempts to describe a philosophy—materialism and dualism, respectively—through the respective author's observation and discussion on the material and substantive nature of the universe, the relationship of man's mind and body, the way to best approach medicine, and concepts of morality and the way to best ensure happiness. Analysis of these two works reveals starkly contrasting philosophies, but appreciation on a higher level reveals that the *overall* themes of the two works are in fact quite similar and that both are excellent examples of the didactic poem and its influence.

Julien Offray de La Mettrie's didactic text, Man a Machine, exemplifies the philosophy espoused by eighteenth century materialists. At the highest level, materialists believe that everything in the universe consists of one type of substance and that only varying combinations or mutations of this substance accounts for all of the diversity of objects and beings in existence. This crucial assumption is the foundation for the philosophical, medical, and ethical ideas argued in Man a Machine. La Mettrie, a physician by trade and the preeminent materialist of the eighteenth century, attempts to illustrate characteristically materialist views of matter, mind, body, morality, and happiness in his work, his aim being to relate these ideas to support his assertion that "man is a machine, and that in the whole universe there is but a single substance differently modified" (pg. 148).

The method by which La Mettrie makes his argument is essential to the appreciation of his materialist stance. La Mettrie implores his readers to "break the chain

of your prejudices, arm yourselves with the torch of experience” (pg. 146). In doing so, La Mettrie takes a Lockean epistemological position. La Mettrie believes that faith and prejudice, which he frequently refers to as “fanaticism”, offers little when it comes to the acquisition of knowledge, especially in the realm of “supernatural things, incomprehensible in themselves” (pg. 88). Instead, when analyzing a highly enigmatic area, such as the nature of man, “Experience and observation should therefore be our only guides here” (pg. 88). La Mettrie observes that this rigorous, scientific method is “found throughout the records of the physicians who were philosophers, and not in the works of the philosophers who were not physicians” (pg. 88). He notes that it has been the physicians who have most thoroughly explored the human body and since they know it the best are the most likely to take an unbiased stance when evaluating its nature. Therefore, when determining the nature of man, La Mettrie bluntly states, “Only the physicians have a right to speak on this subject” (pg. 89). The significance of these assertions strikes at the heart of materialism. The outright rejection of a faith-based philosophy stems from La Mettrie’s view that the supernatural or intangible offers no insight into the operation of man. Man is composed of matter and matter is all that exists. Since La Mettrie believes that only experience can provide knowledge, who but the physician has more experience with the raw material of man? Furthermore, one can conclude that La Mettrie believes that the mind and all of human action is solely a function of the material body. This is the materialist stance and explains why La Mettrie rejects traditional philosophy and believes that insight must come by the hands of physicians. Even La Mettrie’s writing and argumentative style show signs of his materialist view. Throughout the work, La Mettrie frequently draws medical analogies

and responds to criticism in a question and answer form. This integration of ideas and their immediate physical cause as supported by material, often physiological evidence is an argumentative and writing style that takes the very form of the materialist ideas La Mettrie presents.

The belief that the mind is a mechanistic function of the body is crucial to the materialist belief and espoused in the work of La Mettrie. It is through this lens that La Mettrie presents his medical arguments that range from the explanation of common maladies to the nature of man's consciousness. La Mettrie begins the argument by acknowledging Descartes' claim that "medicine alone can change minds and morals, along with bodies" (pg. 90). This again provides support for the view that the mind and body are of unified substance. Medicine, which is material in nature and operates on the body, will also affect the mind and even the morality of men. He continues by invoking the theory of the humors as evidence of a physical cause for both personality and mental disorders when he writes:

It is true that melancholy, bile, phlegm, blood, etc.—according to the nature, the abundance, and the different combination of these humors—make each man different from another.

* * *

What was needed to change the bravery of Cais Julius, Seneca, or Petronius into cowardice or faintheartedness? Merely an obstruction in the spleen, in the liver, an impediment in the portal vein? Why? Because the imagination is obstructed along with the viscera, and this gives rise to all the singular phenomena of hysteria and hypochondria.¹

In doing so, La Mettrie makes the astounding claim that physical proportions of different material substances in the body are not only the cause of somatic disorders, but that each man's mental temperament is a result of these very substances. While this view may anachronistically seem too simplistic, it is absolutely consistent with the materialist

¹ La Mettrie, Man a Machine pgs. 90-1

philosophy, for according to a materialist what else could possibly dictate the actions of the mind but its physical makeup? La Mettrie continues by relating this assertion to his original claim that man is deterministic when he states, “As we are gay or brave; everything depends on the way our machine is running” (pg. 95), or alternatively put, “The diverse states of the soul are always correlative with those of the body” (pg. 97). He continues with many more examples to support this idea ranging from the claim that the brains of the insane or imbecile are physically softer than normal to the assertion that a person’s countenance is indicative of their mental attributes. Great writers and thinkers have “strong faces and eagle eyes”, claims La Mettrie in arguing for his belief that the face of a man “can always distinguish the man of talent from the man of genius, and often even an honest man from a scoundrel” (pg. 96).

La Mettrie’s theory on human morality and happiness follows a similar path consistent with the materialist view. First, La Mettrie rejects outright the theory of innate ideas when he replies to their proponents, “I certainly would not give myself a quarter of the trouble that M. Locke took, to attack such chimeras” (pg. 111). Understandably, La Mettrie does not subscribe to the belief that man is born with innate ideas for to do so would ascribe these ideas to matter, the substance which La Mettrie clearly states cannot think in and of itself. However, La Mettrie does not deny a fundamental natural law, and in fact, goes on to declare that this fundamental law exists in all animals. Through understanding La Mettrie’s view on natural law one will see the means by which he deduces his theory on the possibility of human happiness.

The bedrock upon which La Mettrie bases the following ideas is the notion that man is fundamentally an animal. He immediately assails the idea that men and animals

are somehow fundamentally different with man being enlightened and the animal not because as he sees things, man and beast are both machines with none fundamentally favored over the other. He states, “Man is not moulded from a costlier clay; nature has used but one dough, and has merely varied the leaven” (pg. 117). He continues then by describing what he finds to be the common characteristic observed in all animals, namely the feelings of empathy and remorse. He recalls the anecdote of a man who is thrown to a lion, yet the lion does not attack because it recognizes the man as his benefactor. Conversely, he asserts that it is known that humans feel empathy by a “from the reader’s personal experience” style argument. Therefore, since animals and man are made of the same material, they must both have this faculty despite the fact that animals may at times not display it to our understanding out of their necessity for pleasure. He proceeds to describe how a person will flinch when they witness another person being hit as an example of the type of empathy that runs throughout men and animals. He deems that this phenomenon *is* the natural law and argues that this law can be reduced to “a feeling that teaches us what we should not do, because we would not wish it to be done to us” (pg. 121). La Mettrie continues that fear is what motivates all of us and is the compass that directs our morality.

From here, La Mettrie offers his theory on human happiness when he asserts, “Nature has created us all solely to be happy” (pg. 121). According to La Mettrie, man is denied happiness primarily because, “With Pliny, he blushes over the wretchedness of our origin” (pg. 87). This sentiment is harshly rebuffed by La Mettrie when he states, “No; matter contains nothing base, except to the vulgar eyes which do not recognize her in her most splendid works; and nature is no stupid workman” (pg. 145). The implication

here is the concluding argument of Man a Machine, namely that accepting the materialist philosophy does not destroy the prospect of happiness, but instead allows for permanent happiness. According to La Mettrie, once man stops feeling ashamed of his animal ancestry and his material composition, he can appreciate the glory of the complex machines that surround him, including himself. This appreciation coupled with the understanding that he is “designed for happiness” rounds out La Mettrie’s theory, namely the materialist view of lasting happiness.

However, La Mettrie’s view of man and materialism were not without their critics. During the same time period there existed another major school of thought termed dualism. Whereas a materialist like La Mettrie believed in a single substance that composed all of the universe, a dualist believed that there were two of such substances, the first being material, the second being something metaphysical or intangible. The intangible substance was usually attributed to an immortal soul which oftentimes was deemed responsible for human characteristics such as mind and will. La Mettrie stated that only a physician was qualified to philosophize on the nature of man, but this should not be taken to mean that all physicians were materialists. John Armstrong, also a physician, takes a dualist stance towards the composition and operation of man in his didactic poem, The Art of Preserving Health. Comparing his work with Man a Machine, in the context of material philosophy, medicine and disorder, and morality and happiness provides insight into the relationship between the dualist and materialist philosophies, respectively.

Unlike La Mettrie, who begins Man a Machine by invoking “the torch of experience” as his guide, Armstrong opens book four of The Art of Preserving Health by

invoking, “Ye poetic Shades, / Who know the secrets of the world unseen, / Assist my song!” (4.7-9). Immediately, a contrast between the two works appears in terms of each author’s manner of acquiring knowledge. The style of Man a Machine was cold and medical, invoked tangible experience, and was presented in plain prose – much like the straightforward and physical materialist philosophy. The Art of Preserving Health, however, seems more enigmatic, invokes “poetic Shades” for inspiration and knowledge, and is written in blank verse. One could argue that, again, the style of the argument and writing is representative and supportive of the type of philosophy being offered. Invoking the supernatural for inspiration implies the existence of the intangible and its link to the mind—a strongly dualist position. The blank verse seems more complex, coupling semantic meaning on one level with spoken rhythm on another. Although this two-tiered approach may be entirely coincidental, there is at least *some* support for the notion that each author’s style is representative of their respective philosophies.

Armstrong proceeds by stating his dualist belief upon which the rest of his work relates when he declares:

There is, they say, (and I believe there is)
A spark within us of th’ immortal fire,
That animates and moulds the grosser frame;
And when the body sinks escapes to heaven,
Its native seat, and mixes with the Gods.
Mean while this heavenly particle pervades
The mortal elements; in every never
It thrills with pleasure, or grows mad with pain,
And, in its secret conclave, as it feels
The body’s woes and joys, this ruling power
Wields at its will the dull material world,
And is the body’s health or malady.²

This statement is loaded with assertions that explain the dualist position and, in many instances, contrast it with the materialist view. First, Armstrong professes his belief in an

² John Armstrong, The Art of Preserving Health 4.10-22

“immortal fire” that animates the body in the form of “heavenly particles”. Clearly, this contrasts with the materialist view of an animating force that terminates with the mortal body and is most certainly conflicts with the idea that there is only one type of substance in the universe. Furthermore, this particle can feel (“grows mad with pain”) and is apparently undetectable, the interpretation of the “secret conclave”. Finally, in direct opposition to the materialist view that the mind is a function of the body due to the nature of its composition, Armstrong presents a dualist position that the mind consists of the material of the second, “heavenly”, variety and that it is fluctuations of *this* substance, not the material substance of the body, which is responsible for mood and ultimately the physical health of the body itself. Armstrong states that “the labours of the mind corrode / the solid fabric” (4.25-6), in doing so, he sets up the dualist hierarchy that he argues in this work, namely that the intangible mind not only exists, but governs the material body.

Therefore, one can see the major contrast of the materialist and dualist philosophy. Where the materialist, La Mettrie, places the state of the mind as a function of the body, the dualist, Armstrong, places the state of the body as a function of the mind. Recall that La Mettrie claimed that the physical appearance of a man dictated his personality. Armstrong presents a contrasting view when he states, “The Lover’s paleness; and the sallow hue / Of Envy, Jealousy; the meager stare / Of sore Revenge: the canker’d body hence / Betrays each fretful motion of the mind” (4.48-50). These lines exemplify the fundamental difference between the two philosophies, namely that La Mettrie states that the mind takes on the characteristics of the body (e.g. “sharp eyes” mean a sharp wit), Armstrong claims that the body takes on the characteristics of the mind (e.g. “sore Revenge” leads to canker sores on the body). These two converse

hierarchies of body and mind constitute one of the major differences between a materialist and dualist philosophy.

Additionally, the two philosophies differ on their views of medicine and affliction. Whereas La Mettrie claimed that misalignment of the body leads to certain disorders of the mind, Armstrong believes that all maladies enter through the mind and subsequently “decay the passive Body” (4.6-7). Armstrong claims that such afflictions can be caused by many things such as overwork, unrequited love, or other negative emotions, but the consequence is the same. The negative energies, or negative passions “when the mind / They first invade, the conscious body soon / In sympathetic languishment declines” (4.136-8). Although these passions are “without the body’s fault” (4.140), they will ultimately lead to the body’s decay. Therefore, another contrast emerges. Whereas the materialist ascribes to the body responsibility for the state of the mind, the dualist ascribes to the mind responsibility for the state of the body. As such, it comes as no surprise that in contrast to La Mettrie’s medical advice that to “treat the mind one should treat the body”, Armstrong advises essentially that “to treat the body one must treat the mind.”

Finally, the dualist philosophy of Armstrong presents a very different position on human happiness than that of the materialist philosophy of La Mettrie. Recall that La Mettrie believed that embracing the deterministic nature of man and the materialist view of the world would lead of to sustained happiness. Armstrong rejects this notion when he states, “’Tis not for mortals always to be blest. / But him the least the dull or painful hours” (4.260-1). In lines reminiscent of Pope, Armstrong declares that perpetual happiness is not in man’s design, a point contrary to that of La Mettrie. Instead,

Armstrong advises his readers to follow his advice to with the aim of keeping unhappiness to a minimum. In a strange turn, he moves on to declare that there does exist one force able to quell the negative passions that afflict the mind and body, and “That power is Music” (4.483). He claims that music, by its virtue of being divinely inspired, has the power to appeal to this same heavenly element in the mind. In doing so, “Music exalts each Joy, allays each Grief, / Expels Diseases, softens every Pain, / Subdues the rage of Poison, and the Plague” (4.512-14). The result is another contrast in philosophy, namely the materialist view of a philosophical route to happiness, contrasted with the dualist view of a spiritual route to happiness.

However, there two philosophies are not polar opposites. Take, for example, the last contrast on happiness. Though on the surface, it may seem that the two philosophies are very different, the underlying theme is the same, namely that happiness must be achieved on a mental level. Simple stimulation of the body is not advocated by either writer. While each philosophy’s view on what constitutes the mind is certainly different, stripping away this point of disagreement leaves one with a fair degree of harmony. Both philosophies agree there is a strong correlation between the body and the mind, and that changing one will change the other. Both acknowledge that maladies affect the body and the mind in concert, even though the mechanism by which the malady operates is a source of disagreement.

Therefore, there are some common themes that run through what may seem like even the most contrasting works, the greatest of these themes can be seen in the approach and aims of the authors. Both physicians, La Mettrie and Armstrong each approach the ideas of philosophy, medicine, and happiness with a similar approach. They look to their

own experience—one more analytical, one more introspective—with the aim of better understanding the mysteries of man and then conveying their ideas to the populous. This is, in essence, the theme of the didactic poem of the eighteenth century. The focus of each of these works is increasing and conveying knowledge. These are not works of “overflowing emotion”, but rather they are careful, deliberate attempts to elucidate the reader by the familiar tools of observation, reason, analogy, and argument. Ultimately, the disagreement between whether there exists an immaterial soul has not, and in fact cannot be solved. The materialist / dualist argument, by the inherent immateriality in question, cannot be solved by any scientific means, but the attempts of the authors have had a lasting impression on the very means we use to be convinced. The didactic poem may be an outdated artistic form, but the rigorous and instructive qualities it espoused are both the foundation of and the greatest part of the scientific culture of today.