

Study Questions

Reading for Week 4

Sept 29 Mechanist materialism and atheism**DE LA METTRIE, *Man a Machine* 1-76**

[Justin Leiber's intro. & La Mettrie's Preface]

1. Who is "M. Charp" and what explains La Mettrie's attack on him? What were the circumstances that produced *Man a Machine*? How many books had he written by the time he died (aged 42)?
2. What two discoveries (8) animated La Mettrie's materialism? What is the connection with Frankenstein? What is the significance of Trembley's polyp?
3. Does La Mettrie's materialism derive from Descartes' mechanistic views and rejection of final causes, or from Locke and Newton?
4. Is it possible that there is a way of reading Descartes that makes sense of both his mechanistic writings and his writings in the *Meditations*? How?
5. What were La Mettrie's relations with Haller (20)? What do you think is the point of this preface?

[La Mettrie's text]

1. On what reef does he think Locke ran aground, and how does he avoid it? (27) What does he think of Leibniz (27, 30)? ... of La Pluche (28-29)? What arguments does he give against La Pluche's appeal to Revelation?
2. What evidence does La Mettrie adduce from *human behaviour* for the interdependence of soul and body (29-36)? What is a "physiognomist"?
3. What evidence does La Mettrie adduce from comparative anatomy for the interdependence of soul and body (36-43)? Would it be possible to teach apes to speak? How does this compare with Descartes's views about language and reason?

4. Is there an essential difference between humans and other animals? Does man alone have internal access to a knowledge of natural law (48-51)? What are La Mettrie's views on the foundations of morality (51-54)?
5. Why does La Mettrie think that empirical observations are more persuasive than metaphysical treatises (54-57)? What evidence does he give to combat the deism that Diderot had espoused in his *Pensées philosophiques* (56-58)?
6. What is "Stahl's hypothesis" (66), and how is the example of the flute player supposed to refute it? What further evidence does La Mettrie give (58-76) for his view of the body as a machine and the soul as an "empty word"?
7. What is La Mettrie's take on animal rights (76)?