La Mettrie

Medicine, Philosophy, and Enlightenment

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Julien Offray de La Mettrie, best known as the author of *L’Homme machine*, appears in most accounts of the Enlightenment as either a purveyor of scandalous ideas or as a briefly acknowledged forerunner of materialists like d’Holbach—in short, as a figure of secondary importance. But in this new intellectual biography, the first in English to treat all of La Mettrie’s work, Kathleen Wellman clearly shows how La Mettrie defined a distinctive and deeply influential aspect of Enlightenment thought.

Wellman focuses on La Mettrie’s medical works—which make up more than half of his corpus—to demonstrate how La Mettrie’s medical concerns shaped his views on philosophy, morals, and social reform, and, conversely, how the emerging thought of the Enlightenment was reflected in his medical writings. She establishes the medical roots of La Mettrie’s philosophy by examining his training with the Dutch physician Hermann Boerhaave, his satires lampooning the ignorance and venality of the medical profession, and his medical treatises on subjects ranging from vertigo to venereal disease. Wellman shows how medicine encouraged La Mettrie to undertake an empiricist critique of the philosophical tradition and provided the foundation for a medical materialism that both shaped his understanding of the possibilities of moral and social reform and led him to espouse the cause of the philosophes.

La Mettrie emerges here as a crucial figure in connecting medicine to the Enlightenment. Elucidating the medical view of nature, human beings, and society that the Enlightenment and La Mettrie in particular bequeathed to the modern world, *La Mettrie* makes an important contribution to our understanding of both that period and our own.
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