

University research Proposal

Project: Various receptions of the 18th century French physician and materialist philosopher
Julien Jean Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751)

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DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

My research will address the receptions and various translations of the French Enlightenment and materialist philosopher Julien Jean Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751), best known for his two essays *Man the Machine* (*L'Homme machine*, 1747) and *Man the Plant* (*L'homme plante*, 1748). This philosopher can be categorized as part of the younger generation of Enlightenment thinkers. But his works, which are characterized by their unique spirit, radical theories, and even innovative theory of evolution, are largely overlooked nowadays. When I first began to research this topic in 2021, I was surprised how much this contemporary of Voltaire was widely forgotten. I began to ask myself why this was the case and whether this oblivion had occurred during La Mettrie's own lifetime or afterwards.. So far, I have focused only on his work, given that the correspondence is largely unpreserved. Through a study of an extensive reception, I would like to find out to what level was La Mettrie perceived by his contemporaries and important personalities of his time. How was he perceived as a personality and how was his work perceived, and to what extent was it translated into world languages? Was he reviewed in the British and central Europe contemporary press of the 18th century? I would like to provide an answer to these previously disregarded questions through an analysis of sources in contemporary prints, research into La Mettrie's work and his prefaces and editors. I believe that my stay in Paris and the expert guidance of PhDr. Jan Zdichynec Ph.D. from Charles University and Professor Jean Francois Dunyach from Sorbonne University will help me to advance my research.

At this point, I would like to outline some of the working methods I will be employing throughout this research. As I have already mentioned, my focus will consist primarily of the reception of La Mettrie as an important figure of his time. Can we categorize La Mettrie as an enlightened man of the "second genre"? Why are his work and personality so often overlooked today? Based on a textual analysis of the prefaces to his works, I strive to capture La Mettrie's social circle. To depict the reception of La Mettrie as a personality, I will benefit from a comparison of La Mettrie's ideas and tendencies with some of his contemporaries, such

as Pierre Louis Maupertuis (1698–1795), based on the perception of these figures in the letters of contemporaries, their representation in the period printed media, and their perceptions in the public as well as in the professional academic field. Furthermore, I will also consider comparisons with some of the figures of the Enlightenment in the Czech lands, such as František Martin Pelcl (1734–1801), for his radical views on the Catholic Church. Regarding his work, there are several questions I would like to address. Who sponsored the edition of his works in Prussia and Britain? What impact did La Mettrie eventually had on his contemporaries? Through textual analysis of the prefaces to his writings and a detailed examination of his reception with an attention to the methods of social and cultural transference, I aim to deepen the current knowledge and understanding of La Mettrie's life and works.