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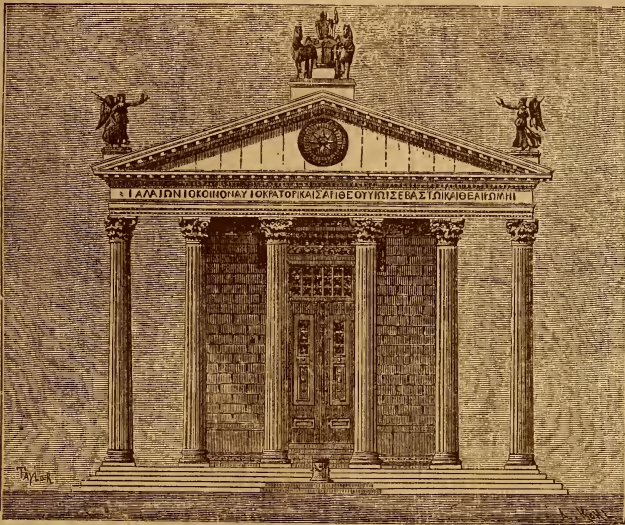
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# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER



TEMPLE OF AUGUSTUS RESTORED.  
(See page 735.)

**The Open Court Publishing Company**  
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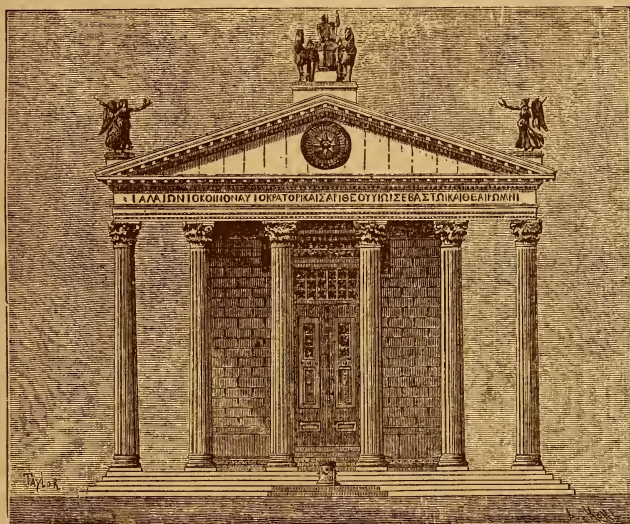
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THE ROUND TABLE OF FREDERIC THE GREAT.

From a painting of Adolf Menzel.

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## FREDERIC THE GREAT'S BIOGRAPHY OF JULIEN OFFRAY DE LA METTRIE.

TRANSLATED BY GERTRUDE CARMAN BUSSEY.

[The University of Berlin was anticipated by Frederic the Great in a Royal Academy of Science which he had founded and in the transactions of which he took a personal interest. One of his contributions was a eulogy on La Mettrie, a French physician and philosopher who on account of his book *L'homme machine* had been banished from Holland and was received with honor at the Prussian court. The eulogy written by Frederic the Great was read by his secretary Darget at a public meeting of the Academy of Berlin, to which on Frederic's initiative La Mettrie had been admitted. So far as we know this eulogy has never been translated into English and even the French original is almost inaccessible. Under these circumstances we deem it desirable to bring it before the English speaking public. Adolf Menzel has portrayed the royal philosopher surrounded by a circle of savants in his castle at Sans Souci. La Mettrie is seated at the extreme right hand of the picture, a reproduction of which serves as a frontispiece to the present number.]

JULIEN Offray de la Mettrie was born in Saint Malo, on the twenty-fifth of December, 1709, to Julien Offray de la Mettrie and Marie Gaudron, who were living by a trade which was large enough to procure a good education for their son. They sent him to the college of Coutances to study the humanities; he went from there to Paris, to the college of Plessis; he studied his rhetoric at Caen, and since he had much genius and imagination, he won all the prizes for eloquence. He was a born orator, and was passionately fond of poetry and *belles-lettres*, but his father thought that he would earn more as an ecclesiastic than as a poet, and destined him for the church. He sent him, the following year, to the college of Plessis where he studied logic under M. Cordier, who was more a Jansenist than a logician.

It is characteristic of an ardent imagination to seize forcefully the objects presented to it, as it is characteristic of youth to be prejudiced in favor of the first opinions that are inculcated. Any other scholar would have adopted the opinions of his teacher but that was not enough for young La Mettrie; he became a Jansenist, and wrote a work which had great vogue in that party.

In 1725, he studied natural philosophy at the college of Harcourt, and made great progress there. On his return to his country, M. Hunault, a doctor of Saint Malo, advised him to adopt the medical profession. They persuaded his father, assuring him that the remedies of a mediocre physician would pay better than the absolutions of a good priest. At first young La Mettrie applied himself to the study of anatomy: he dissected for two years. After this, in 1725, he took the degree of doctor at Rheims, and was there received as a physician.

In 1733, he went to Leyden to study under the famous Boerhaave. The master was worthy of the scholar and the scholar soon became worthy of the master. M. La Mettrie devoted all the acuteness of his mind to the knowledge and to the healing of human infirmities; and he soon became a great physician.

In the year 1734, during his leisure moments, he translated the treatise of the late M. Boerhaave, his *Aphrodisiacus*, and joined to it a dissertation on the venereal maladies, of which he himself was the author. The old physicians in France rose up against a scholar who committed the affront of knowing as much as they. One of the most celebrated doctors of Paris did him the honor of criticizing his work (a sure proof that it was good). La Mettrie replied; and, to confound his adversary still more, he composed in 1736, a treatise on vertigo, esteemed by all impartial physicians.

By an unfortunate effect of human imperfection a certain base jealousy has become one of the characteristics of men of letters. It inflames the mind of those who have reputations, against the progress of budding geniuses. This blight often fastens on talents without destroying them, but it sometimes injures them. M. La Mettrie, who was advancing in the career of science at a giant's pace, suffered from this jealousy, and his quick temper made him too susceptible to it.

In Saint Malo, he translated the "Aphorisms" of Boerhaave, the "Materia Medica," the "Chemical Proceedings," the "Chemical Theory," and the "Institutions," by this same author. About the same time, he published an abstract of Sydenham. The young doctor had learned by premature experience, that if he wished to live



in peace, it was better to translate than to compose; but it is characteristic of genius to escape from reflection. Counting on himself



JULIEN OFFRAY DE LA METTRIE.

alone, if I may speak thus, and filled with the knowledge he had gained from researches into nature, he wished to communicate to the public the useful discoveries which he had made. He wrote

his treatise on smallpox, his "Practical Medicine," and six volumes of commentary on the physiology of Boerhaave. All these works appeared at Paris, although the author had written them at Saint Malo. He joined to the theory of his art an always successful practice, which is no small recommendation for a physician.

In 1742, La Mettrie came to Paris, led there by the death of M. Hunault, his old teacher. Morand and Sidobre introduced him to the Duke of Gramont, and a few days after, this lord obtained for him the commission of physician of the guards. He accompanied the Duke to war, and was with him at the battle of Dettingen, at the siege of Freiburg, and at the battle of Fontenoi, where he lost his patron, who was killed by a cannon shot.

La Mettrie felt this loss all the more keenly, because it was at the same time the reef on which his fortune was wrecked. This is what took place. During the campaign of Freiburg, La Mettrie had an attack of violent fever. For a philosopher an illness is a school of physiology; he thought that he perceived that thought is but a consequence of the organization of the machine, and that the disturbance of the springs has considerable influence on that part of us which the metaphysicians call soul. Filled with these ideas during his convalescence, he boldly bore the torch of experience into the night of metaphysics; he tried to explain by the aid of anatomy the thin texture of understanding, and he found only mechanism where others had supposed an essence superior to matter. He had his philosophic conjectures printed under the title of "The Natural History of the Soul." The chaplain of the regiment sounded the tocsin against him, and at first sight all the devotees cried out against him.

The common ecclesiastic is like Don Quixote, who found marvelous adventures in commonplace events, or like the famous soldier, so engrossed with his system that he found columns in all the books that he read. The majority of priests examine all works of literature as if they were treatises on theology, and filled with this one aim, they discover heresies everywhere. To this fact are due so many false judgments, so many accusations, formed, for the most part, in an ill timed manner against the authors. A book of natural philosophy should be read in the spirit of a physician; nature, the truth, is its sole judge, and should absolve or condemn it. A book of astronomy should be read in the same manner. If a poor physician proves that the blow of a stick smartly rapped on the skull disturbs the mind, or that at a certain degree of heat, reason wanders, one must either prove the contrary or keep quiet. If a skilful

astronomer proves, in spite of Joshua, that the earth and all the celestial globes revolve around the sun, one must either calculate better than he, or admit that the earth revolves.

But the theologians, who might make the weak believe, by their continual apprehension, that their cause is bad, are not troubled by such a small matter. They insisted on finding seeds of heresy in a work dealing with physic. The author underwent a frightful persecution, and the priests claimed that a doctor accused of heresy could not cure the French guards.

To the hatred of the devotees was joined that of his rivals for glory. This was rekindled by a work of La Mettrie's entitled "The Politics of Physicians." A man full of cunning, and carried away by ambition, aspired to the place, then vacant, of first physician to the king of France. He thought that he could gain it by throwing ridicule upon those of his contemporaries who might lay claim to this position. He wrote a libel against them, and abusing the easy friendship of La Mettrie, he enticed him to lend him the volubility of his pen, and the richness of his imagination. Nothing was needed to complete the downfall of a man little known, against whom were all appearances, and whose only protection was his merit.

La Mettrie, having been too sincere as a philosopher and too obliging as a friend, was compelled to leave his country. The Duke of Duras and the Viscount of Chaila advised him to flee from the hatred of the priests and the revenge of the physicians. Therefore, in 1746, he left the hospitals of the army where he had been placed by M. Sechelles, and came to Leyden to philosophize in peace. He there composed his "Penelope," a polemical work, in which, after the fashion of Democritus, he made fun of the vanity of the physicians, whose quackery was painted in true colors. The curious result was that they themselves could not help laughing when they read it, and that is a sure sign that they found more wit than malice in it.

M. La Mettrie having lost sight of his hospitals and his patients, gave himself up completely to speculative philosophy; he wrote his "Man as Machine" or rather he put on paper some fine thoughts about materialism, which he doubtless planned to rewrite. This work, which was bound to displease men who by their estate were declared enemies of human reason, roused all the priests of Leyden against its author. Calvinists, Catholics and Lutherans forgot for the time that consubstantiation, free will, mass for the dead, and the infallibility of the pope divided them: they all united

again to persecute a philosopher who was moreover unfortunate enough to be French, at a time when that monarchy was waging a successful war against their High Powers.

That he was a philosopher and at the same time unfortunate was enough to procure for La Mettrie a refuge in Prussia with a pension from the king. He came to Berlin in the month of February in the year 1748; he was there received and made a member of the Royal Academy of Science. Medicine reclaimed him from metaphysics, and he wrote a treatise on dysentery, another on asthma, the best that had then been written on these cruel diseases. He sketched works on a variety of philosophical subjects which he had proposed to look into. By a sequence of accidents which befel him these works were stolen, but he demanded their suppression as soon as they appeared.

La Mettrie died in the house of Milord Tirconnel, minister plenipotentiary of France, whose life he had saved. It seems that the disease, knowing with whom it had to deal, was clever enough to attack his brain first, so that it would more surely confound him. He had a burning fever, and was violently delirious. The invalid was obliged to have recourse to the science of his colleagues, and he did not find there the resources which he had so often found in his own, both for himself and for the public.

He died on the eleventh of November, 1751, at the age of forty-three years. He had married Louise Charlotte Dré Anna, by whom he left only a daughter, five years and a few months old.

La Mettrie was born with a fund of natural and inexhaustible gaiety, he had a quick mind, and such a fertile imagination that it made flowers grow in the arid field of medicine. Nature had made him an orator and a philosopher; but a yet more precious gift which he received from her, was a pure soul and an obliging heart. All those who are not imposed upon by the pious insults of the theologians mourn in La Mettrie a good man and a wise physician.