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From La Mettrie's voluptuous machine man to the perverse core of psychology

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# From La Mettrie's Voluptuous Man Machine to The Perverse Core of Psychology

## *Abstract*

Julien Offray La Mettrie (1709-1751) solved the problem of Cartesian dualism by denying the *res cogitans* any substance as such. He thus provided science with a basic paradigm which is still respected today. For La Mettrie, all aspects of the soul have to be considered as aspects of the *res extensa*: man is a machine. However, the emptying of the *res cogito* is not without a remainder. A zero level of subjectivity is left behind. This paper argues that it is through this remainder that modern subjectivity is structurally linked to the academic and, moreover, psychological gaze. It is further argued that the paradoxes of this modern stance are what prompt La Mettrie to put forward his voluptuous subject, his attempt to escape the abyss of the zero-level of subjectivity. In this way, La Mettrie's naturalized and scientific hedonism contains the germs of Marquis de Sade's appropriation of the Enlightenment project. Hence this paper attempts to explore the extent to which La Mettrie's *L'homme machine*, a key text in 18th century materialism, has led to a perverse disposition in the modern psy-sciences.

## *Introduction*

18<sup>th</sup> century materialism has had decisive bearings on today's human sciences, albeit if only in Julien Offray de La Mettrie's idea of ascribing societal authority to scientists. For La Mettrie it was, for example, preferable if only the top physicians were eligible to become judges.<sup>1</sup> We can see a more recent example of the idea that science should bypass the law and politics in an official APA-article entitled "Wanted: politics-free, science-

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<sup>1</sup> J. O. La Mettrie, *Machine man and other writings*, trans. A. Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1747]).

based education.”<sup>2</sup> Murray advances the idea that politically motivated, fad-of-the-month educational practices should be replaced by educational techniques grounded in solid scientific evidence. It is a plea to keep the politicians out of what should be understood as the proper domain of the psy-experts. There appears to be an assumption here that psy-experts have some sort of privileged knowledge concerning how we should be educated, an assumption which effectively suggests that, like Plato’s philosopher kings, the psy-experts know what *the good life* would be and how to attain it. Following this Platonic reasoning, it is easy to imagine a state wherein each science would claim jurisdiction over its specific terrain, leaving no proper place for the political as such. Such a movement is then effectively the replacement of democracy with an oligarchy of supposed experts.

How should we understand this suggestion that knowledge of the good life has migrated from religious and ethical discourses and found a new haven in the psy-sciences?<sup>3</sup> Mainstream psychology in particular plays a leading role in this; remember George Miller’s well known presidential address to the American Psychological Association on “psychology as a means of promoting human welfare.”<sup>4</sup> This position is enforced even more today as psychology increasingly assumes the task of translating and implementing knowledge from the *hard sciences* concerning our neuro-biochemical determinations. It is interesting to turn to pop-psychology as the place where the fundamental paradoxes of the psy-sciences’ ambition to promote human welfare is often laid bare. In pop-psychology the expert tells you what makes you tick and gives you tips and tricks to help you to manage and to overcome these neuro-biochemical determinations (or at least the translations psychology has given to them). In this way, pop-psychology places the so called layman in a position outside and beyond everything that makes him tick: “Change your nature. Build courage, passion, joy and optimism”, thus reads the March/April, 2008 cover of *Psychology Today*. Is the position induced not similar to some paranormal out-of-body-experience: step outside yourself and have a look at yourself through the gaze of psychology? “With a little experimentation,” Kathleen McGowan writes in *Psychology Today*, “the ornery and bleak can reshape their temperaments and inject pluck and passion into their lives.”<sup>5</sup> The layman is thus prompted to take the posi-

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<sup>2</sup> B. Murray, "Wanted: politics-free, science-based education," *Monitor on psychology* 33, no. 8 (2002).

<sup>3</sup> By the psy-sciences I mean those sciences which form the backbone of what the so called psy-complex (D. Ingleby, "The ambivalence of psychoanalysis.") a concept which according to Nikolas Rose should be understood in a Foucauldian way: it is not the state which exercises power over the population and subjectivity, rather, "state" power becomes diffused through the population and has to be seen as a complex network of strategies (N. Rose, *The psychological complex: Psychology, politics and society in England, 1869-1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> G. A. Miller, "Psychology as a means of promoting human welfare," *American psychologist* 24, no. 12 (1969).

<sup>5</sup> K. McGowan, "Second Nature.," *Psychology Today Magazine*, Mar/Apr 2008.

tion of the scientist, the objective and neutral position from which things can be assessed as they are, independent of our consciousness. But one should not move too rapidly to dismiss pop-psychology as having nothing to do with genuine, academic psychology, as if the psychologization processes would be the mere effect of the unfortunate popularization of psychology. One should, rather, ask if the phenomenon of psychologization does not point to something fundamental and structural, not only in psychology, but in the whole domain of the sciences. The question thus is: what kind of subjectivity does our thoroughly *scientified* world entail? Is the adoption of the psychological gaze, which transcends one's presupposed embedded position, not the very trademark of Western modernity as a whole?

Take for example G. K. Chesterton who defined the trick of Christianity in this way: "you want to enjoy the pagan dream of pleasurable life without paying the price of melancholic sadness for it? Choose Christianity!"<sup>6</sup> This is clearly a modern meta-discourse on Christianity. Considering it a trick to regain the pagan pleasurable life, Chesterton actually closes down the path of a "natural," direct belief and sketches a pragmatic and calculated, always aware of itself, modern belief. Does this "perverse" trick, as Žižek calls it, not return today in the call to "choose science, choose psychology!"? In today's psychologized culture, the assumption is that science can provide knowledge of the good and pleasurable life: psychology depicts the *pre-modern* psychological man that you are (driven by selfish genes, tribal-like attachments, and learned cognitive patterns) so that you, as a modern, scientifically informed, *meta-psychological* man, can deal with that. The fundamental problem however is that this academic meta-gaze cannot simply be switched off while we re-enter life itself. Furthermore, isn't the claim of knowledge of the good life—knowledge of *jouissance* in Lacanian terms—not the stance of the pervert? The pervert is he who knows how to enjoy and, reducing himself to an instrument of that knowledge, claims to be in the position to let others access that special enjoyment. As such, psychology's stance of assuming it can open up the path to happiness disavows a kind of ethical zero-level which comes to light with Chesterton. For the modern subject, paganism and a non-reflexive Christianity are both historical, closed-down paths, wherein the subject finds itself in some kind of no-man's land. Modernity concerns a point *beyond* the pagan melancholic sadness and *beyond* any naïve and direct Christian bargaining with it. It leads to a kind of zero-level of subjectivity, the de-subjectivization of man, looking upon himself, trying to assume this knowledge which reveals him as he really is. And that knowledge is uncanny and horrifying, to paraphrase

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in S. Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 48.

Žižek, it dispossesses the subject and reduces her or him to a puppet-like level beyond dignity and freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Isn't this exactly the deadlock pop-psychology tries to bypass by choosing the Chestertonian solution? The psy-expert knows how things work and, therefore, knows the tricks necessary to attain a pleasurable life? Think for example about the idea of using "positive reinforcement" to enhance the children's self-image; praise positive behaviour and ignore negative behaviour, that will do the trick. Some versions of psychoanalysis have fallen into the same trap; commenting on today's loss of paternal authority, I once heard an (atheist) psychoanalyst argue that we should educate our children in a Christian framework in order to re-introduce a Supreme Father Being into the psychic imagery. Both stances amount to the suggestion that you can use tricks, that you can lure yourself and others, or in Lacanian terms, that you can fool and dupe the Big Other.

If, in Lacanian theory, this attempt to fool the Other distinguishes the position of the pervert, then the question becomes whether or not this perverse position runs through the history of the sciences and, in particular, the psy-sciences? In this paper, I will attempt to trace this back to Julien D'Offray De La Mettrie. His *L'homme machine* (Man Machine; of 1747, a key text in 18<sup>th</sup> century materialism, can be said to carry the germs of the perverse disposition of the modern psy-sciences. In short, La Mettrie solved the problem of Cartesian dualism by denying the *res cogitans* any substance as such. He thus provided science with a basic paradigm which is still respected today.<sup>8</sup> For La Mettrie, all aspects of the soul have to be considered as aspects of the *res extensa*. Man is a machine; thinking, willing, and feeling are but bodily reactions and functions. What we call the soul is actually material and thus observable in the nerves and brain. La Mettrie grounded his argument in an appeal to future research. He considered it but a matter of time before our knowledge and technical abilities would be refined enough to prove scientifically that the soul is but a function of the body. A very modern academic stance indeed, one we might compare to the history of a construct like ADHD. Where the cluster of phenomena now described as ADHD was originally seen as being caused by Minimal Brain Damage, it was then located as Minimal Brain Dysfunction because no lesions were found and then, finally, it was located as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a firmly behavioral description but one which still promises the location of an organic etiology. ADHD and other similar constructs such as CFS (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) or Tourette Syndrome thus are in line with the La Mettrian stance of asserting man as exclusively *res extensa* and postponing the proof of this in some indefinite future.

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<sup>7</sup> S. Žižek, *The plague of fantasies*: 8.

<sup>8</sup> M. De Kesel, "There is no ethics of the real," in *International Conference Rhetoric, Politics, Ethics* (Ghent University 2005).

La Mettrie provided a decisive redefinition of modern subjectivity and his notion of the Man Machine still haunts us today. We can see this, for example, in the way that pop-psychology, which we might understand as the breach and overflow of academic psychology, confronts us with a strange automaton, a homunculus which we are both supposed to be and with whom we are supposed to deal and bargain. In this paper I will show that the psy-sciences, while denying the paradoxes inherent in this imagery, are always, structurally, at risk of sliding into the discourse of the pervert insofar as they still, implicitly endorse the very position they deny. First I will argue that La Mettrie's attempt to deal with the paradoxes of the emerging modern subjectivity pushes him to put forward a *voluptuous subject*. Then I will explore how his naturalized and scientifically informed Epicureanism is to be regarded in relation to Marquis de Sade's appropriation of the Enlightenment project. Finally, I will question the extent to which La Mettrie's *L'homme machine* has led to a perverse disposition of the modern psy-sciences.

#### *La Mettrie's Solution to Cartesian Dualism: Voluptuousness*

It is perhaps useful to start with a question. Who are we that we need so much psychology? Jacques Claes argues that psychology emerged because there was a need to reconnect man with a *receding world*.<sup>9</sup> Before the Enlightenment, man lived in a world where God was present in every thing, whether living or not. This *emanation*, God as the common denominator, mediated man's presence, his being in the world. When, in the Renaissance, the word psychology was coined—traditionally attributed to Rudolf Goclenius (1547-1628)—something must have changed. As Claes puts it; through a gradual process of secularisation man became more and more disentangled from the world, and it is there that psychology emerged as the mediator, the means to position man once again in a meaningful relation with the world.<sup>10</sup> Can we not understand Descartes' *cogito* in the same way, as an attempt to redefine man against the background of a progressive objectification of both man and his world by the emerging sciences? Descartes accepted that God was completely cut loose from the world, but he still needed Him as the keystone for his new, modern conceptualisation of the subject. God guaranteed the link between man (*res cogito*) and the world (*res extensa*). La Mettrie pushes this further by denying the *res cogito* any substance in itself. Modern man had to acknowledge that even his doubt-

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<sup>9</sup> J. Claes, *Psychologie, een dubbele geboorte. 1590 en 1850: bakens voor modern bewustzijn*. (Antwerpen/Amsterdam: De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1982), 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

ing and thinking were but aspects of the material, secularized world. Here God loses his function.

The paradox, already present in La Mettrie, is that drawing the *cogito* into the *res extensa* cannot be achieved without a remainder. As Marc De Kesel argues, La Mettrie's operation (and with it, the whole of modern science) of stripping the subject of all of its contents, leaves behind an emptied, non-substantial space where once the subject was. This zero level is precisely the neutral and objective point outside the subject which objective science presupposes when engaging in scientific research.<sup>11</sup> This objective gaze, which has become the norm for science, is the result of La Mettrie's operation which, as De Kesel writes, is the result of trying to purify the scientific point of view of its subjective enmeshments.<sup>12</sup> It is this point that pop-psychology appeals to and it is this that leads to a kind of redoubling of the subject. The advent of modernity runs parallel with the advent of psychology and, with it, the need for the psychological gaze in order to see oneself. And this psychologization posits the modern subject as an academic subject. Psychologization illustrates how La Mettrie's reduction cannot but reaffirm the Cartesian *cogito*, albeit it as an empty point, the zero level of subjectivity from which man looks upon himself.

Jacques Lacan affirms La Mettrie's stance of understanding man as a machine. For Lacan, La Mettrie was one of the first to understand that with the emergence of science we also see the emergence of the symbolic, mathematized body.<sup>13</sup> Since the Enlightenment, the language of science and mathematics has become the symbolic framework for modern man. La Mettrie's *Machine Man* is precisely an attempt to grasp this fact. It is a tenacious mistake to understand La Mettrie as an exponent of mechanistic materialism.<sup>14</sup> La Mettrie is not the supreme materialist he is often taken to be.<sup>15</sup> Reading *Machine Man*, it rapidly becomes clear that what we are being presented with is not a classical mechanistic reduction but, rather, an attempt to theorise how man relates to his body and the outside world as these are both objectified by the sciences. There is no doubt that for La Mettrie this is a mediated relation. For example, he writes how words and figures form in the brain all the marks by which we distinguish and recall objects:

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<sup>11</sup> M. De Kesel, "Emocratie als symptoom: een cartesiaanse causerie," in *Ratio in een emotionele samenleving*, ed. S. Hertmans (Gent: Hogeschool Gent, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> J. Lacan, *Le séminaire II: The ego in Freud's theory in the technique of psychoanalysis 1954-1955*: 31.

<sup>14</sup> C. T. Wolfe, "A happiness fit for organic bodies: La Mettrie's medical Epicureanism," in *Epicureanism in the Enlightenment*, ed. N. Leddy and A. Lifschitz (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation (forthcoming), 2009).

<sup>15</sup> C. U. M. Smith, "Synapses, Quantum Theory and Panpsychism," *NeuroQuantology* 6, no. 6 (2008).

These words and the figures they represent are so closely linked in the brain that it is quite rare for us to imagine an object without the name or sign attached to it.<sup>16</sup>

La Mettrie's reduction of man to the realm of the material is almost a theory of language; man as a symbolic machine. La Mettrie's key concept here is "imagination," which he effectively equates with the soul. It is the imagination which represents, to itself, all the objects along with their names and symbols.

It reasons, judges, penetrates, compares, and analyzes. Could it feel so well the beauty of the pictures that are drawn for it without understanding their relationships? No. In the same way as it cannot fall back on the pleasures of the senses without appreciating all their perfection or sensuality [volupté]<sup>17</sup>, so it cannot reflect on what it has conceived mechanically without constituting judgement itself.<sup>18</sup>

It is in this way that Lacan valued La Mettrie's idea that man, compared to the animals, is a machine. The symbolic, mediated, mathematized body is what, for Lacan, allows us, even as "something decomposed," to possess greater freedom.<sup>19</sup> As the quote from La Mettrie shows, this entails the adoption of the scientific gaze; man's presence with himself and the world is a business of analyzing, comparing, and investigating. But the objectification of the body is not unproblematic. As Hub Zwart puts it, scientific research leads to a loss of any sense of meaningful unity or Gestalt. In contrast to this systematic disclosure of bodily life, phenomenological understandings in the human sciences have tried to rescue and rehabilitate a more immediate and intimate experience of the body in the "life world."<sup>20</sup> But, isn't this what La Mettrie is already engaging with? Indeed, *Machine Man* seems to be one of the first important attempts to realize a phenomenological idealization of the body. This idealization is centred around La Mettrie's idea of *voluptuousness*.<sup>21</sup> In the previous quotation it is clear that *imagination* leads to a sensual being in the world. La Mettrie's voluptuousness is an attempt to give the decomposed subject of science back his wholeness, an attempt to realize that greater freedom of which Lacan spoke.

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<sup>16</sup> J. O. La Mettrie, *Machine man and other writings*: 14.

<sup>17</sup> It is to be noted that Ann Thomson in her translation of La Mettrie seems inclined to soften "la volupté" in translating it almost always as "sensuality."

<sup>18</sup> J. O. La Mettrie, *Machine man and other writings*: 15.

<sup>19</sup> J. Lacan, *Le séminaire II: The ego in Freud's theory in the technique of psychoanalysis 1954-1955*: 31.

<sup>20</sup> H. Zwart, "Medicine, symbolization and the "real" body—Lacan's understanding of medical science," *Medicine, health care, and philosophy* 1, no. 2 (1998): 107.

<sup>21</sup> "La Volupté" moreover is the title of another of La Mettrie's major works published in 1746.



Natania Meeker seems to be in accordance with this idea when she considers Machine Man as a *pure figure*; the constitution of the machine-man is fundamentally and formally as a trope.<sup>22</sup> According to Meeker, La Mettrie is suggesting that, in order to understand our experience as fully materializable, we must begin by thinking figurally. Meeker thus considers the literary text as the site where La Mettrian machinic constraint dissolves into “a series of contingent pleasures, producing a subject that is at once textual, substantial, and autonomous.”<sup>23</sup> Meeker holds that, particularly in his later writings, La Mettrie bears witness to a gradual movement away from natural philosophy and toward literature as the practical embodiment of his materialism.<sup>24</sup> Meeker’s central idea is that the conception of matter as capable of reflexivity leads to the possibility of a textual, substantial, and autonomous subject, but this does not take into account that La Mettrie actually tried to get rid of the paradoxical Cartesian notion of reflexivity. As C.U.M. Smith puts it, *Machine Man* was a critique of the “to know that one knows” of Descartes’ *cogito*.<sup>25</sup> For Lacan too, thinking is not, as such, reflexive. The existence of a thought does not presuppose that one thinks about the thought.<sup>26</sup> The problem of the reflexive “to know that one knows” is that it presupposes that the primal *knowing* makes sense on its own, while the whole point of reflexivity is that this primal *knowing* is but a mythical, logical construction. There is no unmediated or natural way of knowing prior to reflexive knowing. Reflexivity is essentially circular. And is this circular reflexivity not brought into the open in modernity? Before the Enlightenment, God made man’s reflexive being in the world possible; with your name on his palm God knew your thoughts. In modernity, however, man himself had to carry the full weight of mediation. Initially, with the Cartesian *cogito* God still had a function. The *cogito*, as the agent outside of *res extensa*, still needed an ultimate reference point. God, although himself no longer part of the world, grounded this modern reflexivity which would otherwise continue in *reductio ad infinitum* (to know that one knows, that one knows, that one...). La Mettrie, however, did away both with Cartesian dualism and with the reference to God. With La Mettrie, the soul is integrated into the *res extensa* and God is replaced by a new Big Other in the form of Science; now it is Science which knows your thoughts. La Mettrie dismissed the Cartesian “to know that one knows” by positioning one undivided subject, grounded this time

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<sup>22</sup> N. Meeker, “‘Flowers Strewn on the Way to Volupté’: The Materialist Tropes of La Mettrie,” *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 48, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>25</sup> C. U. M. Smith, “Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1709-1751),” *Journal of the history of the neurosciences* 11, no. 2 (2002): 120.

<sup>26</sup> J. Lacan, “Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IX: L’identification, 1961-1962,” (1962).

in a (scientific informed) theory on voluptuousness; man is only driven by a pleasure principle, man has a sensual principle as his guide.

Contrary to Meeker's narrowing of La Mettrie to aesthetics and literature, it is clear that La Mettrie's endeavour to grasp modern man as "machine man" is inscribed in science. In *Machine Man* he constantly draws upon science to argue that the *cogito* is part of *res extensa*, that man is a machine. His voluptuousness, his attempt to ground man's presence in the world, is, in turn, also informed by science. His hedonism is a medical, scientific hedonism. It is exactly this, as I will argue in the next section, which allows us to see La Mettrie's position as one close to perversion. Several authors have pointed out the connection between La Mettrie and Freud<sup>27</sup> and, indeed, his conception of man as a *pleasure automaton*, seems very proto-Freudian. But it is also clear that La Mettrie is not able to surpass the paradoxes and the deadlocks of his voluptuous machine man. Maintaining and promoting the un-problematic relation of man and his pleasure seeking body, engaging in a sort of scientific aesthetization, La Mettrie stops short of what Freud later called the "beyond the pleasure principle" and what Lacan reworked as the fundamental decentring effect of *jouissance*. For La Mettrie, man is striving for "organic, automatic or natural happiness"; natural because "our soul has nothing to do with it,"<sup>28</sup> organic because it "flows from our organisation."<sup>29</sup> Here La Mettrie comes close to Lacan's conceptualisation of *jouissance* as something with which the subject has nothing to do, and in which thus resides the ultimate automaton dimension. But La Mettrie's struggle with and his denial of the zero-level of subjectivity, which his solution of Cartesian dualism entailed, led him to an attempt to devise a hedonism departing from a naturalized scientific discourse, and this means that, rather than prefiguring Freud or Lacan, it would be more accurate to see him as prefiguring the Marquis de Sade.

### *The Pornographic Imagery of La Mettrie's Medical Epicureanism*

La Mettrie does not side with Nature as such. His voluptuous machine man is surely not a man-animal. If there were an animal which would die of hunger in the middle of a riv-

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<sup>27</sup> J. Domenech, *L'éthique des Lumières: les fondements de la morale dans la philosophie française du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1989); J. Falvey, ed. *Julien Offray De La Mettrie. Discours sur le bonheur*, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 134 (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, 1975); A. Vartanian, *Science and Humanism in the French Enlightenment* (Charlottesville, Va.: Rookwood Press, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> J. O. La Mettrie, *Machine man and other writings*: 244.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

er of milk, La Mettrie writes, it would be man.<sup>30</sup> La Mettrie acknowledges man's fundamental maladjustment to the natural environment; "put [man] with an animal on the edge of a cliff; only he will fall. He will drown while the other will swim away."<sup>31</sup> So, in contradiction with his claim for man's pursuit of "organic, automatic and natural happiness," La Mettrie's machine man has to be taken literally; man is an automaton, man is an "artificial intelligence," robotically bumping into obstacles, responding awkwardly to subtle, natural cues. Is not this maladjustment, not only to nature but also to the human and social environment, an essential characteristic of modern man? Modern man is a Frankenstein monster who has to be taught how to be human. He needs to follow parenting courses, personality development, and stress coaching. His assessment of real life is something he gets from "reality TV." We should not react with indignation or shock to claims such as "man is a computer," for of course man resembles the computer, he devised it. The question is rather how we, as the parents of the machine, as Lacan puts it,<sup>32</sup> came to build such an artefact resembling ourselves, which is to say, resembling our own zero-level of subjectivity?

It is here, where La Mettrie argues that the human being differs fundamentally from the animal, that he comes up with his manifold examples from the sphere of sexuality.

At the age of fourteen or fifteen he hardly glimpses the great pleasures that await him in the reproduction of his species; he is already an adolescent, but he does not know what to do in a game that nature teaches animals so quickly; he hides as if ashamed of feeling pleasure and of being created in order to be happy.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, psychoanalytically, La Mettrie is absolutely right in positing the difference between animal and man in sexual terms. Man, indeed, is not adapted to sexuality, but, in contrast to psychoanalytic views, La Mettrie believes that this maladjustment is not problematic, arguing that it can be surpassed by turning to a new kind of hedonism. Moreover, there is something to be said about the specific style of La Mettrie's examples. They are not to be reduced to the advice of the *bon vivant* to let go of one's shame and enjoy the pleasures of nature, rather La Mettrie makes his illustrations as lively and tangible as possible and relates them to sexuality wherever he can. It is here that the dimension of *surplus jouissance* comes in; the *jouissance* entailed in writing these examples and the *jouissance* they appear to aim to evoke in the readers. As Meeker claims, La Mettrie often deliberately evokes sexual desire and curiosity.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, almost as though

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>32</sup> J. Lacan, *Le séminaire II: The ego in Freud's theory in the technique of psychoanalysis 1954-1955*: 31.

<sup>33</sup> J. O. La Mettrie, *Machine man and other writings*: 18.

<sup>34</sup> N. Meeker, "'Flowers Strewn on the Way to Volupté': The Materialist Tropes of La Mettrie," 252.

he has Tourette Syndrome, La Mettrie throws around sexual and obscene examples. For example, when he writes that it is impossible for an idea to emerge without passing through the senses, suddenly, out of the blue, he tells the story of a woman who had no vulva:

It is as impossible to give a single idea to a man deprived of all the senses as to give a child to a woman in whom nature was absent-minded enough to forget to make a vulva, as I have seen in one who had neither opening nor vagina nor womb, as whose marriage was annulled for that reason after ten years.<sup>35</sup>

Is La Mettrie not betting on the reaction; *how did they do it for these ten years?* In another example, mocking the idea of the sovereign soul, he writes:

With such a despotic mistress, in whose hands lay, so to speak, the heartbeat and the laws of circulation, there is doubtless no fever, no pain, no repining and no shameful impotence or embarrassing uncontrollable erections.<sup>36</sup>

Sure, the penis provides a valuable critique of the sovereign soul, but, as *Machine Man* abounds with these sexual examples, La Mettrie begins to appear like an exhibitionist, flashing his raincoat whenever he can. Is La Mettrie not deliberately evoking our arousal, embarrassment, or shame in order to convince us of his idea of the unified voluptuous man? This is the stance of the pervert. In Lacanian terms, the exhibitionist seeks the reactions he gets because they are needed to prove to him that what he is displaying is in fact an object of *jouissance*. Of course, La Mettrie assumes the position of a man of science who puts aside his reservations, having the scientific duty to enlighten the people, but do the manifold voluptuous examples not indicate that we have to understand this duty as having the structure of a perversion? Reducing oneself to an instrument of science is strictly homologous to the position of the pervert. As Lacan states, the pervert occupies the place of the object for the benefit of another “for whose *jouissance* he exercises his action as sadistic pervert.”<sup>37</sup> It is as if La Mettrie is saying, it is not my desire to voice all these obscenities, I am merely an instrument of science. Charles T. Wolfe thus rightly calls La Mettrie’s reworking of Epicureanism a “medical Epicureanism,” bringing its hedonistic and materialistic overtones to the fore.<sup>38</sup> La Mettrie’s materialism is not a materialism *simpliciter*, but rather a materialism of living matter “bolstered by a medical standpoint in which the ethical returns as ‘organic, automatic happiness.’”<sup>39</sup> In

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<sup>35</sup> J. O. La Mettrie, *Machine man and other writings*: 16.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>37</sup> J. Lacan, *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 135.

<sup>38</sup> C. T. Wolfe, “A happiness fit for organic bodies: La Mettrie’s medical Epicureanism.”

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

this way it is not La Mettrie himself but science, specifically medical science, which is the enunciator of the Epicurean advice and indictments.

Do La Mettrie's elegies on Nature ("nature has created us all solely to be happy") thus not lead to what in psychoanalysis is called the obscene superego command to enjoy, the imperative which really came to prominence with 20<sup>th</sup> century consumerism? Todd McGowan writes that, where former societies required subjects to renounce their private enjoyment, today the only duty consists of enjoying oneself as much as possible.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, this duty to enjoy seems to be at the core of today's psy-sciences, the true heirs of La Mettrie's medical Epicureanism. Dauntton and Hilton write, "it is now something of a duty to explore personal identity through consumption."<sup>41</sup> Nike's "Just Do It!", which compels the subject, as Renata Salecl writes, to believe in itself as "free in the sense of being a non-believer in authority and a person capable of changing his/her identity at will,"<sup>42</sup> could also be an assertiveness training course slogan.

To be clear, La Mettrie was right in asserting something maladjusted or unnatural in man's dealing with *jouissance*. His conception of man as a machine is actually very close to the psychoanalytical notion of the *jouissance*-seeking *drive* as something machine-like. The drive, in Lacanian theory, is concerned with a "fetishization of a partial moment into an autonomous goal: the elevation of pleasure into *jouissance*."<sup>43</sup> Humans are not simply alive but are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess. This, for Žižek, shows that man is not reflexive, that the human stance is not a further "mediation" of animal activity but, on the contrary, that man perceives as a direct goal what for an animal has no intrinsic value.<sup>44</sup> Is this not the fundamental non-reflexivity which La Mettrie appears to stumble across? The paradox of La Mettrie is that it is exactly here that he introduces his medical Epicureanism and thus re-establishes reflexivity by imposing the scientific gaze. This is the paradox of, *look at you, you're nothing but a non-reflexive machine man*. La Mettrie's endeavour to establish a scientifically informed solution to man's fundamental maladjustment thus cannot but bounce back. If man is urged by a medical Epicureanism to enjoy being a machine-animal, then he can only do so in a perverted manner, he can only mimic or play at being the animal-machine driven by nature. The Marquis de Sade, in citing La Mettrie saying "Wallow in filth like pigs and

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<sup>40</sup> T. McGowan, *The end of dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the emerging society of enjoyment* (Albany: Suny Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>41</sup> M. J. Dauntton and M. Hilton, eds., *The politics of consumption: material culture and citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001), 31.

<sup>42</sup> R. Salecl, *On Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 2004), 50.

<sup>43</sup> S. Žižek, *Organs without bodies* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 143.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-44.

you will be happy like pigs”<sup>45</sup> reveals something of the perverse disposition of La Mettrie-an Epicureanism. In the next section, I’ll explore this Sadean connection.

#### *From La Mettrie to Sade via Kant*

It is well known that Sade, in his writing, makes ample use of Enlightenment philosophers. The question of whether “l’aimable La Mettrie,” as Sade called him,<sup>46</sup> was the direct inspiration for Sade’s infamous writings has been taken up by various commentators and most commonly answered in the negative. Ann Thomson, for example, concludes that Sade transformed into injunctions what La Mettrie only clinically observed.<sup>47</sup> She goes on to argue that, where La Mettrie valued the rights of society to punish the antisocial individual, Sade entirely dismisses such rights. Thomson describes La Mettrie’s position as a medical scientist assessing man’s destructive passions, passions which the rational citizen would condemn.<sup>48</sup> But what is the position from which La Mettrie views both man in the spell of his passions and man as the rational citizen representing the rights of society? The neutrality of La Mettrie’s clinical gaze is of course based on the supposition that Nature itself is neutral and amoral, this is what the neutral scientist identifies with. But at a given moment La Mettrie admits his suspicion of a *vicious nature* “more at ease hobbling with pleasure, as if it would be violent to her or painful to walk straight.”<sup>49</sup> Is there thus not something truly Sadean that becomes visible through the cracks of La Mettrie’s clinical descriptions? For it was along very similar lines that Sade wrote that plagues, famines, and murders are not accidents but necessities of Nature’s laws<sup>50</sup> and that destruction is one of the chief laws of Nature.<sup>51</sup> Sade lays bare the fact that La Mettrie’s scientific aim to naturalize the machine-man presupposes some absolute, immoral agency of infinite Evil.

Sade’s appropriation of La Mettrie cannot, however, be properly understood without passing through Kant. In contrast to La Mettrie’s recourse to Epicureanism, Immanuel Kant’s endeavour was to ground ethics in a formal approach. He redefined the moral

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<sup>45</sup> M. D. A. F. De Sade, *Juliette* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 709.

<sup>46</sup> M. Brix, “Sade est-il un philosophe des Lumières?,” *Trans/Form/Ação* 30, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>47</sup> A. Thomson, “L’art de jouir de La Mettrie à Sade,” in *Aimer en France 1760-1860. Actes du Colloque International de Clermont-Ferrand 1977*, ed. P. Viallaneix and J. Ehrard (Clermont-Ferrand: 1980).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>49</sup> As cited in: *ibid.*, 317, my translation.

<sup>50</sup> M. D. A. F. De Sade, *Justine, philosophy in the bedroom, and other writings* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 231.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

Law taking as his departure point a zero-level of subjectivity, what Žižek calls the “substanceless void of the self-rotating abyssal vortex called ‘transcendental apperception.’”<sup>52</sup> For, in order to be able to view rationality as absolutely free in the field of morality, Kant cut morality loose from the human passions, from any “pathological object,” from any particular “good.” The full weight of the moral Law lies with reason and not with “das Ding an sich.”<sup>53</sup> In this anti-essentialist view where the Good is no longer a real and ontological reality which grounds morality, the Good can only be the *effect* of the moral law.<sup>54</sup> Kant thus wanted to ground ethics not in the individual, pathological justifications of the good, but in the Law itself. For Kant, one should not act out of inclination, but only out of duty. The task of philosophy then is to look, through a rational reflection on our freedom, at what obliges each of us to adopt a single principle of mutual respect. As John Rajchman puts it, Kant surrenders egoism to natural psychology and thus frees morality. In this way morality can be separated from the field of empirical or technical knowledge.<sup>55</sup>

And here we must take a bold step. It was exactly here that modern psychology came to light in the residue of the Kantian operation. In leaving morality and ethics to the Kantians, a pure empirical, technical, or natural psychology was believed to be possible. But this then necessarily raises the question of whether one can make a claim for a natural psychology which would be independent from or unaffected by the Kantian Law and, more exactly, by the Kantian zero-level of subjectivity? It is exactly this that psychoanalysis has always refuted. As Žižek writes:

what Lacan does is to read the Freudian reference to the Copernican turn in the original Kantian sense, as asserting not the simple displacement of the centre from the ego to the id or the unconscious as the “true” substantial focus of the human psyche, but the transformation of the subject itself from the self-identical substantial ego, the psychological subject full of emotions, instincts, dispositions, etc., to what Lacan called the “barred subject (\$),” the vortex of the self-relating negativity of desire. In this precise sense, the subject of the unconscious is none other than the Cartesian *cogito*.<sup>56</sup>

Another way of phrasing this might be to say that the subject of psychoanalysis is the zero level of subjectivity. Psychoanalysis is not about replacing a natural psychology by a psychology of the unconscious. Rather psychoanalysis, at least in its Lacanian form,

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<sup>52</sup> S. Žižek, *On belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 135.

<sup>53</sup> M. De Kesel, *Eros & Ethiek* (Leuven: Acco, 2002), 132.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>55</sup> J. Rajchman, “Lacan and the Ethics of Modernity,” *Representations* 15, no. 1 (1986): 50.

<sup>56</sup> S. Žižek, *On belief*: 135.

entails the de-centering of the very possibility of any (natural) psychology. A radical, non-psychological, zero-level thus thwarts the domain of so called natural psychology. This problematic is all the more visible with the empirical and technical approaches to psychology, which effectively amount to a de-psychologization. Contemporary psychology often appears to be about genes, neurotransmitters, and cognitive and evolutionary mechanisms; essentially an evacuation of the psychic factor. As Nikolas Rose remarks, we have moved with ease from a psychological and humanistic ideal of self-fulfilment to a "somatic ethics."<sup>57</sup> Phrased otherwise, the denial of the radical non-psychological vortex of modern subjectivity leads to the technical and empirical de-psychologized individual of mainstream psychology.

As, contra this shift, Lacanian psychoanalysis acknowledges and values the Kantian operation, it also questions the consequences and the paradoxes of thinking the moral Law from a zero-level of subjectivity. Where Kant posits a radical freedom emerging from rational thinking, psychoanalysis sees some other ghastly figures appearing. Is not one of the names for the domain of the zero-level of subjectivity, for example, the Freudian "death drive"? The death drive does not concern a Nirvana-like longing for self-annihilation. Rather, as Žižek points out, it stands for the opposite: "the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, for an "undead" urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption."<sup>58</sup>

We should recall here the recurrent theme in Sade's writings of the ethereal quasi-immortal body of the victim which can be tortured indefinitely but nonetheless magically retains its beauty. For Žižek, Kant's "immortality of the soul" is effectively the immortality of Sade's "undead" body.<sup>59</sup> Thus we can see how the very domain in which Kant purports to ground his moral Law appears to be haunted by something which transcends the pathological Good and thus comes closer to ultimate Evil. Sade allows us to appreciate that the Kantian Law is grounded in something real; the real of a de-subjectivizing jouissance. This is why Lacan saw Sade as the ultimate Kantian. As J. A. Miller puts it, Kant's "demands of duty" do not arise from nowhere, they are not nobody's voice, they are the voice of the drives, that is, the voice of the sadistic superego.<sup>60</sup> So, while for Kant there is no "subject of the enunciation" of the moral Law (the moral Law is an impersonal command to do your duty), Sade renders the moral Law's enunciator visible in the figure of the "sadist," the executioner-torturer, the agent who finds

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<sup>57</sup> N. Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power & Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>58</sup> S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*: 62.

<sup>59</sup> S. Žižek, "Kant And Sade: The Ideal Couple," *Lacanian Ink* 13, no. Fall (1998).

<sup>60</sup> J. A. Miller, "A Discussion of Lacan's "Kant with Sade", " 222.



pleasure in our (the moral subject's) pain and humiliation.<sup>61</sup> Sade shows that the ultimate potential of the Enlightenment lies in the realm of perversion and the infinite Evil. It is precisely this that is pre-figured in La Mettrie, but, while La Mettrie still sides with a classic epicurean and hedonistic understanding of the Good, it is only with Sade's version of Kant's grounding of the Good in the Law that the full meaning of the modern bursts open. Kant's Moral Law was, in a way, an answer to La Mettrian materialism and its attempt to reinvent Epicureanism. Kant boldly formulated a modern transcendental solution to the question of the moral Law, an answer which, however, failed at a particular point. This is the breach that Sade tore open. In the following section we will turn to the question of whether all this does not, given the La Mettrian legacy, remain imprinted on the general theories and the praxes of the human sciences right up to today.<sup>62</sup>

### *The Perverse Core of Psychology*

As a starting point, it is useful to acknowledge that mainstream psychology always carries some La Mettrian injunction to be happy and to enjoy life. Whether in a blunt or in more sophisticated form, the academic view on life is always either imposed or generated, from “*science knows what is good for you*” to “*become your own psychologist and find it out yourself!*” Paul Verhaeghe suggests in *On Being Normal and Other Disorders*,<sup>63</sup> that psychology haunts us with the image of “normal man,” but perhaps what we are haunted by foremost is Psychological Man, with all his pathological peculiarities and motivations charted by the psy-sciences. Our fear is not so much, am I normal enough? But, more than this, do I have all these peculiar characteristics and desires? Modern man is thus always prompted to measure the extent to which he fits these patho-psychological constructs of the psy-sciences. And does this not lay bare the non-psychological core of subjectivity? Because the position from which the questions are asked inevitably escapes psychology, it is there that modern man experiences his being reduced to the pure gaze. But (pop)psychology, in disregarding the non-psychological core of subjectivity, is merciless in its message; this is what you are, this is what you can be, here are the scripts for living. Positive thinking, for example—again, in its popular but also in its more sophisti-

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<sup>61</sup> S. Žižek, “Kant And Sade: The Ideal Couple.”

<sup>62</sup> It is, as such, worth noting that *Le Philosophie du boudoir* was already written in the style of a “treatise on the education of girls” (J. Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), 787.). Sade was already parodying and revealing something of the truth of these moralising pedagogical books which are the precursors of today's psychologizing literature.

<sup>63</sup> P. Verhaeghe, *On being normal and other disorders* (New York: Other Press, 2004).

cated academic forms—boils down to *you can fool yourself, you can fool nature*. This is the Chestertonian solution of duping the Other, albeit using the prescriptions of psychology. One of the most distinctive examples of this mechanism concerns sex education at puberty, often our first encounter with psy-theory. In what we might understand as a truly late-modern *rite of passage*, the adolescents are scientifically initiated in the theories of how puberty will affect their emotions, thoughts, and behaviour.<sup>64</sup> This process of instructing the youth on youth has its illustrious predecessors. Frank Vande Veire writes that German fascism systematically tried to “intimidate the youth with (the belief in) the Youth,” precisely by naturalizing youth and sexuality.<sup>65</sup> If, however, adolescence is also the place where these naturalized forces seem to run amok—in, for example, meaningless violence, incomprehensible suicides—are we not here receiving back the truth of the very scripts we have bombarded them with, as if, in a Sadean way, we have pushed the youth into a passivity which they can only escape in violent ways, a passivity which is, ultimately, our own.

Another very strictly scripted discourse with well-defined roles is that of our contemporary victim-culture.<sup>66</sup> Is the central discursive scheme here not that of the “expert victim”? The subject is confined in a passive position through the precise manner in which his or her being subjected to the events of life is redefined by the psy-disciplines into a strict script of victimhood. A way to escape this blockage of the subjective space is exactly to become the expert of one’s own status as victim. This is one way we might understand the cases of people who seem to define the very essence of their being through the diagnosis of, for example, ADHD, Asperger’s or the like. This can be understood in line with Adorno’s idea of mimicry; the victim identifies with the aggressor. The “expert victim” presents himself as the ultimate embodiment of psychological theory by taking on the role of the proto-psychologist. Intimidation leads to self-intimidation. Through mimicry, the terrorised subject chooses self-discipline, as Vande Veire puts it, reducing himself to an instrument of an order which supersedes him.<sup>67</sup> Through an incorporation of and into the always ready-to-hand psychological discourse, the subject assumes what psychoanalysis would understand as the position of the pervert.

And are not the psychologist and psychotherapist also marked by the perverse core of psychology? Think, for example, of the psy-practitioner, who considers pain, on their own side or that of the patient, as the marker of therapeutic progress. Furthermore, this

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<sup>64</sup> In many countries, this theoretical instruction in the psychology of puberty forms part of the official curriculum for the 12 to 14 year old.

<sup>65</sup> F. Vande Veire, *Neem en eet, dit is je lichaam* (Amsterdam: Sun, 2005), 95-100.

<sup>66</sup> See for example F. Furedi, *Culture of fear: risk-taking and the morality of low expectation* (London: Cassell, 1997).

<sup>67</sup> F. Vande Veire, *Neem en eet, dit is je lichaam*: 48.

should remind us of how for Kant the ethical experience is fundamentally linked to pain, because of man's hurt pride vis-à-vis the injunction of the moral Law.<sup>68</sup> Is the therapist not then someone who loves the bitterness of this duty which lifts him high above any vulgar self-interest? This is, of course, the classic definition of the sadist-torturer as revealed in Hannah Arendt's work.<sup>69</sup> Or perhaps this image of the therapist is outdated. Today, therapy has become more of a scientific and empirical practice. The therapist does not have to pay with his own person, rather, he uses scientifically validated methods which he applies as a scientist, probing and analysing the whole process. Which is to say that we are back with the sadistic position: the enjoyment of being a mere instrument of a higher order. The psy-practitioner simply follows the manual, minimizing his or her personal involvement, in a manner not dissimilar to fascist torturers in Pasolini's *Salo* who live by forcing the others to stage life.

Are not, however, the academic and more theoretical approaches to psychology far removed from this picture? That is to say, can one really speak of such of a strong heritage of 18<sup>th</sup> century materialism? For Sam Whimster it is clear that cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, behaviour ecology, and evolutionary game theory all follow the La Mettrian stance in assuming that individuals and social outcomes are shaped by material causes beyond our immediate direct control.<sup>70</sup> Also Churchland and Churchland locate La Mettrie in the row between Darwin, Helmholtz, and Hebb, a row which can be seen as constituting the tradition which is still the guiding framework for most neuroscientists and physiological psychologists.<sup>71</sup> Of course, today's materialism is not, as Mathieu Aury and Charles Wolfe argue, the straightforward, direct heir of the materialism of La Mettrie and others. Where 18<sup>th</sup> century materialism was metaphysical, today's materialism renounces every speculation on the origin of matter. And if early materialism could be seen as a reductionism to what later came to be called biology, contemporary materialism departs from the reduction to physics.<sup>72</sup> These restrictions aside, Aury and Wolfe conclude that today's materialism, insofar as it assumes as already established a clear ontology and thus a causal closure of the spatial-temporal world (for example, in the case of brain-imaging), does rest on the shoulders of the materialistic philosophers of the Enlightenment. Sympathetic to today's neuro-cognitivist approaches, Aury and Wolfe dismiss the accusation of "vulgar materialism," traditionally

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<sup>68</sup> S. Žižek, "Kant And Sade: The Ideal Couple."

<sup>69</sup> See S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*: 67.

<sup>70</sup> S. Whimster, "The Human Sciences," *Theory, culture & society* 23, no. 2/3 (2006).

<sup>71</sup> P. S. Churchland and P. M. Churchland, "Stalking the Wild Epistemic Engine," *Noûs* 17, no. 1 (1983).

<sup>72</sup> M. Aury and C. T. Wolfe, "Sommes-nous les héritiers des Lumières matérialistes?," *Phares* 8(2008). As Aury & Wolfe remark, this also leads to a sort of dematerialised materialism, since materialism in its contemporary physicalistic form departs from quantum and energetic principles.

associated with Carl Vogt (who proclaimed that thought is the secretion of the brain just as the liver secretes bile). In contrast, they promote an “intelligent materialism” which would recognize that the brain is also the secretion of thought. Here Aury and Wolfe refer to Gilles Châtelet for whom symbolic practices are not a cultural environment into which the brain is immersed, but rather, he considered the plasticity proper to symbolic practices as something which can be articulated via the plasticity of the brain. Is this not, once again, an instance of the La Mettrian stance? That is, is it not another instance of a relentless and structurally endless attempt to draw everything from the *cogito* into the *rex extensa*, denying, in the process, the problematic foundation of a zero-level of subjectivity? Could we not understand Châtelet as saying that the contingency of symbolic practices can be reduced to contingent brain-processes, or, if we do not quite understand the impact of symbolic practices, let us nevertheless presuppose their organic base and reduce them to brain-processes which we equally do not yet fully understand.

Today’s materialistic discourses seem to be very effective in establishing hegemonic explanatory schemes which are so powerful that it is difficult to bring their paradoxes to light. Aury and Wolfe briefly assess these power effects—albeit without really questioning them—as they remark on how science has evolved from the domain of “contra-power” to the domain of power. That is to say, while science first ran counter to the dominant religious discourse, it consequently became itself the dominant perspective: what was forbidden became mainstream. For Aury and Wolfe this is not problematic, as they write:

This does not mean that the reductionist explanations which are at the heart of materialism should today be refused because they would be politically suspect, nor that one should naively oppose the “alienated” universe of science with a supposedly more authentic universe. It simply means that materialism does not have any foundations [le matérialisme est sans fondements].<sup>73</sup>

But, are Aury and Wolfe not too optimistic? Perhaps the central question here is that of whether today’s psy-sciences are up to the task to realise this *materialism without foundations*, a materialism which also then renounces any final cause? Of course, today’s scientism should not be contested from a starting point of any conception of authenticity. Authenticity is what leads directly to a *Blut und Boden* ideology and it is, furthermore, always stated from a perspective which rests on a (para)theoretical conceptualization of “real and natural man/society.” Is not, however, one of the dangers in advanced and sophisticated neuropsychological research that it itself assumes a (para)theoretical view on man or society? The neuro-imaging of aggression, for example, cannot but lean on

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., para. 9, my translation.

(psychological) theories or essentialist and naturalized views of what aggression is and where it comes from. That is to say, the triggers used in so-called *event-related fMRI* (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging<sup>74</sup>) are never theoretically neutral. If one wants to register and compare neural responses to stories, photographs, or video-fragments, these prompts cannot but be in some way informed by an explicit or implicit psychological theory on what one wants to research. In brain imaging the tautological circle of neurology-psychology-neurology always lurks. It is, therefore, up to the neurosciences to realize a true materialism without foundations, which would mean acknowledging a zero-level of authenticity, acknowledging the pure void of being which has been left behind as the Cartesian cogito was drawn into La Mettrian materialism.

We should, furthermore, not be blinded by the academic dismissal of direct ontological questions or statements. Turning to *real existing Academia*, it is clear that in large institutional practices within the psy-sciences fundamental pre-Kantian assumptions structure everyday praxis. Take for example the whole ADHD issue, where, as exemplified in the “European clinical guidelines for hyperkinetic disorder,”<sup>75</sup> the true nature of behaviour is considered to be synaptical and biochemical. But does this influential article not reveal something essential in its shameless and misleading use of the word European? The signifier “European” gives the article the aura of an official document whose implementation is mandatory, while it should be clear, European here stands for *European Network for Hyperkinetic Disorders* and not for some official organ of the European Community! Does it not become patently visible here how certain academic practices position themselves as discourses of power? If there is any heritage of La Mettrie here, it is in the discipline’s claim that it is science, not the law or politics, which should provide the binding guidelines. Maybe the “vulgar” in today’s vulgar materialism is the unconditional belief that science is the discourse which engenders an anonymous “subject supposed to know” with the mandate to bypass democracy and politics.

## Conclusions

Is the La Mettrian-Sadean heritage then inescapable? Is Sade nothing more than the truth of Kant? As Žižek puts it, maybe Sade is not the entire truth of Kantian ethics, but

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<sup>74</sup> See for example J. L. Bufkin and V. R. Luttrell, "Neuroimaging Studies of Aggressive and Violent Behavior: Current Findings and Implications for Criminology and Criminal Justice," *Trauma Violence Abuse* 6, no. 2 (2005).

<sup>75</sup> E. Taylor et al., "European clinical guidelines for hyperkinetic disorder—first upgrade," *European child & adolescent psychiatry* 13, no. s1 (2004).

more a form of its perverted realization. If the moral law can simply be translated into the Freudian superego, then Kant effectively equals Sade. But if, as Lacan shows, the *moral law* is equivalent to *desire*, then Sade articulates what happens when the subject betrays the true stringency of Kantian ethics. The superego feeds on the subject's compromising on his desire. Žižek understands this point politically:

“Sade as the truth of Kant” would mean that Kantian ethics effectively harbors totalitarian potentials; however, insofar as we conceive of Kantian ethics as precisely prohibiting the subject to assume the position of the object-instrument of Other's *jouissance*, i.e. to calling on him to assume full responsibility for what he proclaims his Duty, then Kant is the antitotalitarian par excellence.<sup>76</sup>

In attempting to conceive this responsibility, Žižek describes two traps. The first is Sartre's *mauvaise foi*, (bad faith), which renders the Sartrean subject responsible for his existential project and, as such, burdens him with the ontological guilt inherent in human existence.<sup>77</sup> The second trap is shifting the blame onto the Other; e.g., it is my unconscious, not me.<sup>78</sup> The latter trap is, of course, that of the La Mettrian naturalization-psychologization which today most often appears in the form, *it is my genes, not me*, a move which produces that mysterious *me* every positive characteristic of which can, again, be naturalized and drawn into the *res extensa*. For Žižek, Kant's duty “beyond the good” offers a way out because the Kantian moral law does not say what I have to do, only that I have to do my duty. It is the responsibility of the subject itself to translate this abstract injunction. Thus, central to Kantian ethics is the prohibition against adopting the position of the pure instrument of the big Other's Will, while, at the same time, this is exactly what generates the obscene *jouissance* of conceiving of oneself as exculpated for what one is doing.<sup>79</sup> The equivalence of the Kantian Law and Lacan's *desire* also means that the latter is inextricably linked to the zero-level of subjectivity which was brought to us with Cartesian modernity. Lacanian desire is thus not on the side of what Kant calls the pathological and egoistic aspirations of the subject. Desire is not something psychological, as it is essentially not a relation to an object but rather a relation to

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<sup>76</sup> S. Žižek, "Kant And Sade: The Ideal Couple."

<sup>77</sup> Žižek somewhat rapidly dismisses Sartre's notion of *bad faith* despite the fact that it is, as Kirsten Hyldgaard contends, quite close to the Lacanian notion of misrecognition (K. Hyldgaard, "The Cause of the Subject as an Ill-timed Accident: Lacan, Sartre and Aristotle," in *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. S. Žižek (New York: Routledge, 2002), 231.). That said, when Lacan rewrites Sartre's *manque d'être* (lack of being) as *manqué-à-être* (with the double sense of lack of being and want of being)) he opens up the entire field of desire and radically shifts the perspective (see for the double sense: J. A. Miller, "An introduction to Seminars I and II. Lacan's orientation prior to 1953 (III)," 27.)

<sup>78</sup> S. Žižek, "Kant And Sade: The Ideal Couple."

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

a pure lack in Being. Desire, thus, is another name for the way subjectivity is generated from a zero-level. Žižek calls this Lacan's *critique of pure desire*. If, for Kant, desire is pathological, since there is no *a priori* link between an empirical object and the pleasure it generates for the subject, then Lacan claims that desire does have a non-pathological, *a priori* object, namely *objet petit a*.<sup>80</sup> *Objet a* is the Lacanian notation of the object-cause of desire, in the sense that *objet a* is not the object towards which desire tends, but rather the cause of desire. In this way it functions as an embodiment of lack, a positivised loss, and is something detached from the La Mettrian body-machine. In Lacanian terms, it is its *bodily remainder*.

Thus, desire, as it arises from its zero level *objet a*, is the result of the Cartesian *cogito* being drawn into the *res extensa*. In this way it is clear that *objet a*, situated as it is at the zero-level of subjectivity, stands for that which thwarts the whole stance of science. In other words, the problem of subjectivity is situated at the structural and problematic border of science. It is there that psychology tries to play the role of the keystone of Academia, trying to get a grip on subjectivity. But is the problem not then that mainstream psychology, instead of positioning itself exactly on the border or the breach of science, rather aspires to be an integral part of science? And it is here that it goes astray. In repeating the La Mettrian stance of reducing everything to the *res extensa* and denying the non-psychological zero level of subjectivity thus created, psychology results in a de-psychologizing and de-subjectivizing stance. This is where mainstream psychology threatens to engage in practices which must be understood as belonging to a perverse structure. Modern science, as such, is not structurally perverse. It is at its border, with the problem of subjectivity, that a perverse position is realized. Today, it seems that the very name for that realization is psychology.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.