

**830:401 Advanced Topics in Human Cognition
Mind, Science, and Superstition
Professor Julien Musolino
ARC 206, MW1(8:40-10:00am)**

Prerequisites: 830:305 (Cognition)

In 1748, a century before the publication of Darwin's ideas, Julien Offray de La Mettrie, a French physician and philosopher, published a treatise entitled *L'Homme Machine* (Man a machine) in which he extended to human beings Descartes' argument that animals are automata (or machines), thereby denying the existence of the soul as a substance separate from matter. So appalling to his contemporaries were De La Mettrie's ideas that he had to leave France, and then the Netherlands, to find refuge in Prussia. In 1999, at the dawn of the 21st century, the fear and indignation expressed by de La Mettrie's contemporaries was echoed in a controversial manifesto that surfaced on the internet. According to the Wedge document, issued by the Discovery Institute, the goal of a new generation of cultural warriors in America was to "defeat scientific materialism and its destructive moral, cultural and political legacies" and to "replace materialistic explanations with the theistic understanding that nature and human beings are created by God". A message, incidentally, that is consonant with what the overwhelming majority of the population in the United States believes today, according to numerous polls.

If feelings and opinions regarding human nature have not changed much across the centuries, at least among the general public, the views of Descartes and de La Mettrie's intellectual descendants certainly have. Indeed, materialism is now widely accepted as being true within scientific circles. According to biologists, psychologists, and neuroscientists, we have indeed lost our souls. However, while the material basis of mind is now taken for granted by virtually all scientists, what it really means for our dualistic beliefs is rarely, if ever, discussed publicly. And yet, the demise of dualism has far ranging implications for issues of critical social, moral, and political importance. In this course, we will tackle these fascinating issues head on, including the question of morality and free will, the existence of disembodied spirits (e.g., Gods, souls), our criminal justice system and our notion of moral responsibility, and other hot button issues such as abortion, stem cell research and the afterlife. More generally, we'll ask whether there is anything to gain or lose, morally, spiritually, and aesthetically, by embracing the current scientific consensus.