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Vitalism without Metaphysics? Medical Vitalism in the Enlightenment

Introduction

Charles T. Wolfe

Unit for History and Philosophy of Science
University of Sydney

Despite the renewed attention paid in recent years to the doctrine or doctrines associated with the Faculty of Medicine of the Université de Montpellier in the second half of the eighteenth century, and known as ‘vitalism’ – chiefly Roselyne Rey’s 1987 *thèse d’État*, which only appeared in print in 2000, and works by François Duchesneau, Elizabeth Williams, Timo Kaitaro and Dominique Boury, some of whom have contributed to this volume¹ – the existence of a specifically medical vitalism in the eighteenth century still continues to pose a problem.

Commentators speaking in rather monolithic terms continue to describe vitalism in terms entirely derived from late nineteenth- or early-twentieth century ‘neo-vitalism’, that is, in the language of vital force, of supplemental, extra-causal agents powering the living body. Philosophers of biology and more surprisingly, historians of ideas tend to sound like the very confident Francis Crick, speaking like a prophet from a mountaintop to the entire scientific community: “To those of you who may be vitalists, I would make this prophecy: what everyone believed yesterday, and you believe today, only cranks will believe tomorrow.”² In less prophetic, but still very polarizing tones, a recent review discussion on biological development promotes ‘organicism’ as a scientifically viable view – one which the authors of the review quickly distinguish from the more metaphysically laden ‘vitalism’, according to which (they write), “living matter is ontologically greater than the sum of its parts because of some life force (“entelechy,” “*élan vital*,” “*vis essentialis*,” etc.).”³

Conversely, holisms and non-traditional medical doctrines continue to appeal to a notion of ‘vitalism’ as somehow free from any of the taint of the mechanistic, reductionist visions and practices we have inherited from the Scientific Revolution and its demystification of the physical

¹ Rey 1987/2000, Duchesneau 1982, Williams 1994, 2003, Kaitaro 1997, Cimino & Duchesneau 1997, Boury 2004.

² Crick 1966, 99.

³ Gilbert and Sarkar 2000, 1.

universe. The present collection of essays does not seek to contribute to this kind of blanket, a-historical rehabilitation of a vitalist *concept*, nor to paint a new portrait of the Enlightenment as uniquely vitalistic.⁴ Even once we restrict our focus to eighteenth-century medical vitalism (with a notable emphasis on the Montpellier School), it seems pointless to offer a definitive statement on the nature of vitalism, if the members of this school barely referred to themselves by this term, and figures as antithetical to each other as Albrecht von Haller and Georg-Ernest Stahl can also be termed vitalists of one sort or another. What we need, then, is not a rigorous, operative definition but instead a ‘taxonomy’ of Enlightenment vitalisms – yet one which will provide us with clearer answers to our questions.

The present essays are not entirely restricted to the geographical area of France or even Montpellier, despite its predominance in the contributions by Boury, Wolfe & Terada, Kaitaro, Williams, Huneman and Cheung. But to a great extent, even the treatment of ‘external figures’ such as Glisson, Haller, and Stahl – and in a different sense, Wolff – is still within the internal scope of our project of reassessing the status of vitalism in eighteenth-century science and society. Our goal is to successfully convey the paradox of medical vitalism as both *less monolithic*, less doctrinal and *doctrinaire* than the philosophers’ construct of the same name, and *more conceptually coherent* (albeit eclectic), in unexpected ways. We want to know who the vitalists were and what they stood for, specifically their relation to the development of mainstream medicine (in the articles by Giglioni, Boury, Cheung, and Williams); to materialism, mechanism and Newtonianism (Kaitaro, Wolfe & Terada); to psychiatry and the passions (Huneman); to theories of biological development (Witt).

It is hoped that this collection of essays will then modify the landscape of medical vitalism in the Enlightenment as we know it, producing a less metaphysical and more heuristically oriented vision, and of course, raising once again the Canguilhemian question of how to write the history of medicine otherwise than from the standpoint of the victors.⁵

⁴ As is the case in Reill 2005.

⁵ I gratefully acknowledge the intellectual, practical, and personal support of Alexandre Métraux, John Symons and Motoichi Terada in the long gestation process of first reflecting on vitalism as a theme, conceiving of this project, and bringing it to fruition; in the end Mariela Brozky was always there providing unstinting ‘vital nourishment’.

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