

Book Reviews

with fixed alkali” (p. 95). In this book the philosophical question of scientific creativity recurrently gets in the way of a very fine piece of historical work. Surely it is the historian’s job not so much to judge what is a moment of insight but to show us how moments, ideas, thoughts, practices, are *made* historically into breakthroughs, insights, backslidings, etc. Or indeed, to regress further, to show us why we deal in a concept of scientific creativity at all. As long as historians continue to treat as unproblematical the sort of historically loaded terms in which philosophers trade, then the ghost of Voltaire will not be laid. History will still be philosophy teaching by example.

Christopher Lawrence
Wellcome Institute

ELIZABETH HAIGH, *Xavier Bichat and the medical theory of the eighteenth century*, (*Medical History*, supplement no. 4), London, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1984, 8vo, pp. 146, UK £11.00/overseas £15.00.

There has long been a need for a good introductory treatment in English of the work of Xavier Bichat; and the present volume, despite some weaknesses, goes a long way toward answering that need. In its exegesis of Bichat’s writings and its survey of the wide range of predecessors and contemporaries on whose work Bichat drew, the book is clear and informative. One might only fault the title for being somewhat misleading: first, for referring to *the* medical theory of the eighteenth century, when so many discrepant doctrines are surveyed; and second, for referring to *medical* theory, when the great majority of what is discussed is specifically physiological. In fact, the book covers much the same ground as François Duchesneau’s *La physiologie des lumières* (1982) but without the deeper epistemological concerns that permeate Duchesneau’s work. Haigh’s book is consequently less profound but by the same token more readily accessible to students.

After an introductory chapter on the life of Bichat, Haigh outlines the intellectual context of his work in three chapters on the development of animism and vitalism, especially at Montpellier; of irritability and sensibility as explanatory concepts in physiology; and of sensationalist epistemology and methodology. This material is then followed by three chapters describing the essential features of Bichat’s work and a brief concluding chapter on physiology after Bichat. The descriptive chapters highlight repeatedly the dependence of Bichat on the sources identified in the previous three contextual chapters, leading Haigh into a rather ambiguous position when it comes to evaluating Bichat’s contribution.

On the one hand, the more successful Haigh is in identifying the intellectual sources of each element in Bichat’s work, the less original and impressive that work must appear. On the other hand, Haigh is loath to see Bichat reduced to a mere borrower or skilful plagiarist. The way out of this bind is to assert that “in spite of its borrowed elements . . . the complete work is greater than the sum of its parts” (p. 101). Unfortunately, however, the nature of this greatness is never made explicit; it is simply inferred from the reception of Bichat’s physiology: “The success of Bichat’s published writings and the considerable reputation he achieved in a short time attest to the fact that his synthesis and application of physiological theory were unique” (p. 101). But to argue from the success of Bichat’s theoretical work to the intellectual value of that work is only possible if one assumes that theoretical success depends predominantly upon the intellectual qualities of the theory involved. And this assumption is one which, to say the least, is increasingly open to challenge.

As a description of the transmission and appropriation of concepts, then, Haigh’s *Xavier Bichat* offers a thorough treatment of its subject. As an explanatory study, however, it must be considered defective. Students should be referred to this work for its clear exposition, but cautioned against its attempts at evaluation.

W. R. Albury
University of New South Wales