Introduction: Vitalism without Metaphysics? Medical Vitalism in the Enlightenment

Charles T. Wolfe

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, Tino 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” (Crick 1966, 99). 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.)” (Gilbert and Sarkar 2000, 1).

Conversely, holisms and non-traditional medical doctrines continue to appeal to a notion of “vitalism” as somehow free from any taint of the mechanistic, reductionist visions and practices we have inherited from the Scientific Revolution and its demystification of the physical universe. The present collection of essays does not seek to contribute to this kind of blanket, ahistorical rehabilitation of a vitalist concept, nor to paint a new portrait of the Enlightenment as uniquely vitalistic.² Even once

² As is the case in Reill 2005.
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 rather a “taxonomy” of Enlightenment vitalisms –
yet one that will provide clearer answers to our questions.

The present essays are not entirely restricted to the geographical area of France nor
even to Montpellier, despite its predominance in the contributions by Boury, Wolfe
and 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 and 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 and Terada); to psychiatry and the passions (Huneman);
and 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 from another standpoint than that of
the victors.

Acknowledgments

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

References

Champion.
Cimino, Guido and François Duchesneau, eds. 1997. Vitalisms From Haller to the Cell Theory. Florence:
Leo Olschki.


