

Helen Deutsch and Mary Terrall (eds.)

Vital Matters: Eighteenth-Century Views of Conception, Life, and Death.

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Vital Matters: Eighteenth-Century Views of Conception, Life, and Death is an eclectic and engaging collection of twelve essays on an array of topics concerning death, conception, life functions, anatomical dissection, and funeral and obituary practices in early modern European science, medicine, art, literature, philosophy, politics, and society.

The striking interdisciplinary nature of *Vital Matters* reflects its origins in an international and interdisciplinary series of conferences organized by Helen Deutsch and Mary Terrall—the book’s editors, two of its contributors, and professors of English and history respectively—on the themes of matter and materialism. With the goal of locating ‘the history of materialism within a larger history of ideas,’ Deutsch and Terrall invited participants ‘to investigate eighteenth-century attempts to portray, analyse, and speculate about life, living bodies, and organic matter’ (3). Notable with respect to the discipline of philosophy, not one of the essays was written by a member of a philosophy department. Nevertheless—and as testament to its success as a model of interdisciplinary work—the book does not exclude a philosophical audience and, in many ways, rewards one. It hits various familiar philosophical marks, especially in the area of the history of the philosophy of early modern life sciences, while simultaneously expanding and blurring the very idea of a delineated philosophical mark.

The predominant approach *Vital Matters’* essays take to the theme of materialism is provocatively two-handed: on one hand, materialism is a doctrine of tremendous historical and intellectual significance; on the other, it’s a doctrine riddled with mystery and paradox. As the book’s introduction states, the essays ‘complicate any simple opposition between the spiritual and the material, rewriting the historical shift during this period from mechanism to vitalism as itself ... a complex competition shaped by the social conditions within which they evolve’ (7). The particular complicated matter under examination throughout the essays is the human body: its conception, life, and death.

On the topic of materialist complications concerning conception, Terrall examines the challenge that the mind-matter relationship of physical and mental inheritance posed to mechanistic explanations of conception. Striking a nice balance of breadth and focus in her survey of theories of inheritance, Terrall demonstrates a tendency among early modern French doctors to react to that challenge by ascribing forces or active properties to matter—a tendency that, Terrall contends, traces back to Malebranche’s account of the maternal imagination’s role in the development of offspring traits and that ‘changed the meaning of mechanism, even when it did not replace it outright’ (109). Corrinne Harol continues with the theme of conception and its multifarious meanings and materialist complications in her examination of the Whig propaganda insisting on the illegitimacy of the Stuart heir born in 1688. Rather than testing the truth of the story—simply put, ‘historians deem it untrue’ (132)—Harol explores the story’s materialist undercurrent that emphasizes ‘feminine conception’ and cuts out ‘masculine conception’ and, along with it, ‘masculine intellectual primacy’ and the classical philosophical and theological views of the intellect properly ruling materiality (139, 140).

The sex divide in conception is also explored in Raymond Stephanson's short and lively but pleasingly dense analysis of early modern preformationist and epigenetic theories of embryology as applied to the themes of literal and figurative conception in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. On the literal side is the eponymous character's biological conception. On the metaphorical side is his conception as an author, which Stephanson accents with commentary on the reproduction and productions of the creative male mind. It is an engaging as well as an apt blend of literary analysis and natural philosophy, for Stephanson judiciously establishes Sterne's familiarity with the Haller-Wolf debate and the rise of materialism in the health sciences.

The reader unfamiliar with that rise may want to start in the middle of book with Minsoo Kang's rich survey of the mechanistic-vitalist debate over the living human body. With attention to detail (e.g., La Mettrie's 'complex significance' [153]), Kang skillfully traces the turn in the eighteenth century from the machine-model of mechanism to the organic-model of vitalism. Kang's main insight is in dividing the debate down two meanings of 'automaton', i.e. '[t]he paradox in the significance of the human-machine': one, the autonomous object of the machine-world view of classical Enlightenment; the other, the product of the late Enlightenment anti-mechanistic vitalists who used the image of humanity devoid of autonomy in their social and political criticisms (165).

Specific vitalist reactions to the mechanization of life functions are the topic of Elizabeth A. Williams's 'historiography' of digestion (204). With clarity, sharpness, and a keen eye on vitalist explanations of digestion by Montpellier physicians in general and the 'digestive force' and 'psychodigestive link' of Grimaud's account in particular (212, 213), Williams smartly uses digestive function to highlight and exemplify the anti-mechanist position of vitalism. Moreover, she pushes beyond the standard story of the mechanist-vitalist debate to a paradox with the vitalist position. In brief—and, indeed, an even longer analysis in the essay would be welcome—Williams argues that the mid-eighteenth century vitalist optimism with respect to curability contributed to a 'new medical gloom' with respect to the comprehensibility of disease (n.50, 220).

On the topic of death and the materiality of the body, Kevin Chua offers a captivating analysis of Girodet's 1793 painting *Sleep of Endymion*. Chua treats the painting as a 'dramatic interpretation of sleep as a kind of death' that invites philosophical questions about the nature and meaning of death (61)—questions that Chua pursues in his thoughtful and thought-provoking study of the secularization and demystification of death in the eighteenth century. Although the philosophical content of the essay is not groundbreaking, the essay offers insightful reflections on the status of death in the history of natural philosophy and an interesting perspective for the burgeoning field of the philosophy of death.

The concrete matter of anatomical dissection is addressed in Simon Chaplin's and Anita Guerrini's pair of essays. With a focus on anatomist John Hunter, Chaplin argues for the authority of anatomical dissection in the medical scene of late eighteenth-century London: 'a form of authority over the living gained through mastery of the dead' (223). According to Chaplin, this authority was aided by the presentation of anatomical preparations to a non-medical audience in Hunter's museum. However, as Anita Guerrini effectively illustrates through her historical recounting of the precise and gory details of the anatomy lectures by John Hunter's brother and fellow anatomist William, there are two edges of anatomy's sword: its authority and its secrecy.

Vital Matters' varied yet sustained discussion of materialism comes to a close with Lorna Clymer's observation that the word 'corpse' disappeared from British funeral invitations by the mid-

eighteenth century, ‘replaced by more decorous nouns ... such as “body” or “remains,”’ which were eventually replaced by the deceased’s name (267). On its own, this and the rest of Clymer’s essay could appear as a straightforward presentation of facts; however, in the context of the collection, it inspires probing questions about materialism, religion, and the individual. It is in this kind of expansion of ideas that the collection excels as an interdisciplinary work.

However, *Vital Matters* also has its shortcomings with respect to the interdisciplinary approach. Of particular philosophical significance are the cases when philosophical thought is used to explain but is not satisfyingly explained. The issue occurs when references to philosophers and their philosophies are mere appeals to authority. In that regard, Jonathan Kramnick’s use of Davidson’s 1970 essay “Mental Events” in order ‘to illustrate what was so special about [Lucretius’s] version of materialism for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ is questionable (19)—and all the more so in contrast with his great use of Locke as a counter-figure to Lucretius on personal identity and death. The issue can also be as benign as underdeveloped philosophical content (e.g., Deutsch’s nonetheless engaging use of Epicurean views on life and death in her examination of eighteenth-century epistolary poetry) or as needling as overlooked philosophical complications (e.g. the unnoted similarities and dissimilarities between Malebranche and Descartes on the physiology and causality of the imagination in Terrall’s essay). More problematic—especially given the breadth of the interdisciplinary audience to which the book aims—is the occasional impenetrability of the presentation of the philosophical content and its application, as in Helen Thompson’s use of Rousseau and Locke in her analysis of Sarah Fielding’s *The History of Ophelia* (though Thompson’s connection between Descartes’ ‘mechanical schematics of “growth”’ and Rousseau’s and Locke’s advice on clothing children is a great nugget [193]).

Overall, *Vital Matters* is an inspiring and accessible compilation of interdisciplinary early modern European studies on “matters” pertaining to the human body’s conception, life, and death. Among the wide potential of scholarly audiences to benefit from it, the philosophically-minded reader interested in creative and informative analyses of how philosophers created, contributed to, and responded to the paradoxes and mysteries that emerged from early modern materialism will find that *Vital Matters* has much to offer. In a twist, it provides philosophy with material objects from art, literature, and history, thereby making philosophical materialism less mysterious, but all the while it uses philosophical ideas to generate mysteries of matter. In sum, one cute—yet nonetheless accurate—way to describe the book is that its assortment of essays gives flesh to the bones of early modern materialism.

Susan Mills
MacEwan University