Whytt and the Idea of Power:
Physiological Evidence as a Challenge to the Eighteenth-
Century Criticism of the Notion of Power

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Abstract
In *An Essay on the Vital and Involuntary Motions of Animals*, Robert Whytt maintained that the muscular motions that perform the natural functions of the organism are caused by an immaterial power. Here we consider to what extent the philosophical criticism of power urged by Locke and Hume may jeopardize his thesis, how his response mobilizes the resources of the Scottish experimental theism and whether he makes an original use of such resources. First, we examine various pieces of experimental evidence from which Whytt infers the need to evoke this power, before showing how they prompt him to stand by the immaterial power in the face of the empiricist criticisms. Following this, we explore the link Whytt makes between power and agency, in particular comparing his thought with Locke’s. Lastly, we examine his work in the light of Hume’s criticism regarding the question of whether a power may be felt.

Keywords
active principles, agency, animism, William Cullen, experimental method, feeling, Albrecht von Haller, David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, John Locke, materialism, nerves, power, Thomas Reid, Scottish Enlightenment, soul, sympathy, Robert Whytt

Whytt’s Medical Project in the Essay
In 1744, dissatisfied with the widespread theories of cardiac motion and respiration, Robert Whytt began to write the *Essay on the Vital and other Involuntary Motions of Animals*.1 In the volume that he eventually pub-
lished in 1751, he used the hypothesis of the action of an immaterial power present in the nerves to explain the motions by which bodily functions are performed. He opposed the materialism and mechanism that, according to him, Albrecht von Haller’s conception of the fibre might entail. Julien Offray de la Mettrie had translated Haller’s annotation to Herman Boerhaave’s *Institutiones medicae* into French in 1743 and dedicated *L’homme machine* to the physician of Göttingen in 1748. In the *Essay*, Whytt alleges that the opinion that there is an inherent property of contraction in the muscular fibre paves the way for an unknown material and mechanistic cause of animal motion. He takes this opinion, defended by Haller, to be a “refuge of ignorance.” But couldn’t this accusation have been applied to Whytt himself: couldn’t the appeal to an immaterial power have been taken as a “refuge of ignorance” too? Intending to shed light on the anthropological implications of Whytt’s position, in addition to his contribution to the history of neurophysiology, scholars’ interest has focused on three main areas: his metaphysical presuppositions, the sociological background to the concept of *sensitivity* and *sympathy* and the coherence of his Newtonian approach.  

