

ROBERT BOYLE AND LOCKE'S "MORBUS" ENTRY: A REPLY TO J.C. WALMSLEY

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1. Introduction

In one of Locke's commonplace books, British Library Add. MS 32554, there is a long and very interesting entry in Locke's hand under the title "Morbus." This entry has been discussed at length in a recent article in this journal by J. C. Walmsley, who dates it between September 1666 and April 1667. Walmsley claims that the content of the entry is "vociferous in its criticism of corpuscular theory" and asserts, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, that the author of the entry was John Locke.¹ The implications of these claims are striking and Walmsley is quick to draw them. First, he claims that in the mid-1660s when he claims that this entry was made, Locke was critical of Boyle's corpuscularianism and adopted instead a non-mechanical neo-Helmontian explanation of disease. This runs against the recent trend in Lockean interpretation which has emphasised the scope and importance of Locke's appropriation of Boyle's corpuscular philosophy. As Walmsley claims, "[a]s far as theoretical commitments were concerned, it is evident that this association [with Boyle] did not greatly influence Locke."² Second, it raises a new interpretative dilemma for Locke scholars. For, Locke's attitude to Boyle's natural philosophy, and in particular his corpuscularianism, now seems far less straightforward. If Walmsley's interpretation of the "Morbus" entry is correct, Locke's early and thorough reading of Boyle led him by the mid-1660s to be rather sceptical of the explanatory efficacy of the corpuscular philosophy. We need now therefore,

¹ J. C. Walmsley, "Morbus—Locke's Early Essay on Disease," *Early Science and Medicine* 5 (2000), 367-93, 389 and 390. The entry appears in Add. MS 32554 on pages 232-3, 237, 246 and 248-50 according to Locke's original pagination. Walmsley refers to the entry using the revised foliation, i.e. folios 118v, 119r, 121r, 126r, 127r, 127v and 128r. I will use the original pagination throughout followed by the revised foliation in brackets.

² Walmsley, "Locke's Early Essay on Disease," 389.

according to Walmsley, to determine whether this is right, and, if so, just when this attitude changed to the kind of guarded acceptance we find in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).

In this reply to Walmsley, I will argue that he has seriously misinterpreted Boyle's natural philosophy and that once Boyle's own views are understood, the purported tension between those views and the "Morbus" entry evaporates. Indeed, I will argue that the content of the "Morbus" entry is entirely consistent with Boyle's theory of seminal principles and that therefore there is no interpretative dilemma as to when and why Locke's attitude to corpuscularianism changed. Finally, I will turn to the question of authorship. I will argue that given the consistency of the contents of the "Morbus" entry with Boyle's views, the very close connections between the contents of the entry and Boyle's concerns in the mid-1660s and certain features of the entry itself, Walmsley is also wrong to presume Lockean authorship of the entry. Indeed the evidence that Boyle might in fact be the author of the entry and that Locke has merely copied part of an essay on disease by Boyle into his commonplace book needs seriously to be considered. The question of authorship is therefore an open one and the evidence needs to be assessed carefully in order to determine whether this entry really does contain Locke's early theory of disease.

2. Boyle's theory of seminal principles

Boyle wrote about seminal principles or seeds in numerous works. He refers to them in no less than 28 extant writings spanning some thirty years. He also wrote two treatises specifically on seeds which are no longer extant.³ He discussed seeds in relation to the creation of the world, the generation of plants, animals and minerals and spontaneous generation. Not surprisingly, his views underwent some marked changes and developments throughout his career as a natural philosopher, but he maintained a belief in them up into the last years of his life. Boyle was not unique or unusual in this. A belief in a role for seminal principles in the natural realm was almost ubiquitous in the mid-seventeenth century. It was not

³ For a list of Boyle's writings which refer to seminal principles see my "Boyle on Seminal Principles," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 33 (2002), 597-630. For references to the lost treatises see M. Hunter and L. M. Principe, "The Lost Papers of Robert Boyle," forthcoming in *Annals of Science*.