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NEUROLOGICAL STAMP

Jean Baptiste van Helmont (1577–1644)

In the June issue of the Journal this stamp was inadvertently published with the wrong vignette. Here it appears again with the correct one.

Jean Baptiste van Helmont was the founder of the iatrochemical School, which looked to chemical explanations of vital phenomena. He was a man of great intellectual curiosity, who studied philosophy at Louvain. Disappointed with the content of the study he turned to law and after further disappointment decided to study medicine.

Van Helmont's teaching revolved around two words, "Blas" and "Gas". He was much influenced by the doctrines of Paracelsus and, like Paracelsus, thought that each material process of the body was presided over by a special spirit. This he called Blas. Physiological processes were themselves chemical, being activated by a special ferment (Gas) and were also presided over by a special spirit. This spirit was supposedly governed by a sensory-motor sensitive soul, the very principle of life, situated in the folds of the stomach, especially its orifice. It was thought that here the duumvirate of stomach and spleen regulated the functions of life and here epilepsy was engendered. When the duumvirate "withdraws its government" epilepsies or other diseases resulted. Van Helmont conceded that the "occasional nest" of epilepsy could be in the head or feet. Although in his opinion the disease originated in the stomach he considered that it could be provoked by strong emotions affecting the sensitive soul.

There was another disease which van Helmont thought related to epilepsy. This was asthma. It had its original seat in the duumvirate. It affected and shook the whole body, but then concentrated on the lungs—whereas epilepsy made itself felt in the head. Van Helmont was so impressed by the apparent analogy between the two diseases that he stated: "We may lawfully, therefore, by a Philosophical Liberty name an asthma the falling sickness of the lungs".

Van Helmont believed in Paracelsus' weapon salve, which healed by anointing the weapon instead of the wound and he became involved in a controversy regarding the weapon salve and magnetic and sympathetic healing. In 1624 the Inquisition denounced his views and declared him suspect of heresy. His chief work, *Ortus Medicinae*, was published in 1648, after his death. Van Helmont was honoured philatelically on a Belgium stamp issued in 1942 (Stanley Gibbons 989, Scott B322)

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