"Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds: Yellow Fever and Common-Sense Natural Philosophy in the Early American Republic, 1793-1805"

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Creator:
Apel, Thomas

Advisor:
Rothman, Adam

Abstract:
From 1793 to 1805, yellow fever scourged the major port cities of the United States, devastating inhabitants in a series of terrifying epidemics. In this dissertation, I examine the efforts of a coterie of natural philosophers as they sought to determine the cause of yellow fever, the most pressing and contentious natural philosophical problem of early republican period. It centers on the controversy that developed between "contagionists"--those who believed that yellow fever was a contagious disease and that Americans imported it from the West Indies--and the "localists"--those who held that the disease arose from pestilential miasmas, situated within the afflicted cities. Rather than deterring inquiry, the debate about the cause of yellow fever, no less than the urgency of the disease itself, propelled research forward. Inquiries grew more sophisticated, as the students of the disease incorporated new methods and new knowledge into their studies.

Drawing from private correspondences, books, articles and essays, and above all dozens of cheaply-bound medical pamphlets that circulated through the fever-stricken cities, I reconstruct the ideas and arguments of the investigators. Four, thematically-organized chapters discuss the fever investigators' uses of "facts," history, chemistry, and natural theology as ways of making sense of yellow fever. As time wore on, localists steadily pushed the argument in their favor, winning more and more converts to their view, and the contagionists increasingly retired from the debate. I conclude the localist victory rested on defining features of their natural philosophical epistemology, especially the prominence of common-sense reasoning, a product of their deep Protestant pieties, which taught that human beings possessed innate, divinely-given mental capacities. Without proving that yellow fever arose from miasmas, they did make it appear much more plausible as an element in God's world.

The localist ascendancy came at a price, however. Years of bitter fighting left investigators divided into rival camps. The breakdown exposed the fragility of common-sense natural philosophy and opened the way for a new era of natural philosophy and medicine.

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From 1793 to 1805, yellow fever devastated U.S. port cities in a series of terrifying epidemics. The search for the cause and prevention of the disease involved many prominent American intellectuals, including Noah Webster and Benjamin Rush. Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds opens an important window onto the conduct of scientific inquiry in the early American republic. The debate between contagionists, who thought the disease was imported, and localists, who thought it came from domestic sources, reflected contemporary beliefs about God and creation, the capacities of the human mind, and even the appropriate direction of the new nation.