

In the Past, when many Physical Phenomena were not well understood or when Histories were not Recorded, Myths Often Arose to Provide Etiologies.

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Editorial note

The word is commonly used in medicine (pertaining to causes of disease) and in philosophy, but also in physics, psychology, government, geography, spatial analysis, theology, and biology, in reference to the causes or origins of various phenomena. In the past, when many physical phenomena were not well understood or when histories were not recorded, myths often arose to provide etiologies. Thus, an etiological myth, or origin myth, is a myth that has arisen, been told over time or written to explain the origins of various social or natural phenomena. For example, Virgil's Aeneid is a national myth written to explain and glorify the origins of the Roman Empire. In theology, many religions have creation myths explaining the origins of the world or its relationship to believers. In medicine, the etiology of an illness or condition refers to the frequent studies to determine one or more factors that come together to cause the illness. Relatedly, when disease is widespread, epidemiological studies investigate what associated factors, such as location, sex, exposure to chemicals, and many others, make a population more or less likely to have an illness, condition, or disease, thus helping determine its etiology. Sometimes determining etiology is an imprecise process. In the past, the etiology of a common sailor's disease, scurvy, was long unknown. When large, ocean-going ships were built, sailors began to put to sea for long periods of time, and often lacked fresh fruit and vegetables. Without knowing the precise cause, Captain James Cook suspected scurvy was caused by the lack of vegetables in the diet. Based on his suspicion, he forced his crew to eat sauerkraut, a cabbage preparation, every day, and based upon the positive outcomes, he inferred that it prevented scurvy, even though he did not know precisely why. It took about another two hundred years to discover the precise etiology: the lack of vitamin C in a sailor's diet.

An etiological myth, or origin myth, is a myth intended to explain the origins of cult practices, natural phenomena, proper names and the like. For example, the name Delphi and its associated deity, Apollon Delphinios, are explained in the Homeric Hymn which tells of how Apollo, in the shape of a dolphin (delphis), propelled Cretans over the seas to make them his priests. While Delphi is actually related to the word delphus ("womb"), many etiological myths are similarly based on folk etymology (the term "Amazon",

for example). In the Aeneid (published circa 17 BC), Virgil claims the descent of Augustus Caesar's Julian clan from the hero Aeneas through his son Ascanius, also called Iulus. The story of Prometheus' sacrifice trick at Mecone in Hesiod's Theogony relates how Prometheus tricked Zeus into choosing the bones and fat of the first sacrificial animal rather than the meat to justify why, after a sacrifice, the Greeks offered the bones wrapped in fat to the gods while keeping the meat for themselves. In Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe, the origin of the color of mulberries is explained, as the white berries become stained red from the blood gushing forth from their double suicide.

Chain of causation and correlation

Further thinking in epidemiology was required to distinguish causation from association or statistical correlation. Events may occur together simply due to chance, bias or confounding, instead of one event being caused by the other. It is also important to know which event is the cause. Careful sampling and measurement are more important than sophisticated statistical analysis to determine causation. Experimental evidence involving interventions (providing or removing the supposed cause) gives the most compelling evidence of etiology. Related to this, sometimes several symptoms always appear together, or more often than what could be expected, though it is known that one cannot cause the other. These situations are called syndromes, and normally it is assumed that an underlying condition must exist that explains all the symptoms.

Other times there is not a single cause for a disease, but instead a chain of causation from an initial trigger to the development of the clinical disease. An etiological agent of disease may require an independent co-factor, and be subject to a promoter (increases expression) to cause disease. An example of all the above, which was recognized late, is that peptic ulcer disease may be induced by stress, requires the presence of acid secretion in the stomach, and has primary etiology in *Helicobacter pylori* infection. Many chronic diseases of unknown cause may be studied in this framework to explain multiple epidemiological associations or risk factors which may or may not be causally related, and to seek the actual etiology.

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