

## The Humanity of Mythology

AP Seminar

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## **Introduction**

The stark contrasts introduced by the analysis of art, morals, and meaning within the mythology of today versus that of the ancients introduces the question of why. Why, after all this time, do humans continue to cling to and create mythologies? Is there a reason that can link the abstractions of our ancestors to our modern-day mythological habits? Through the lens of our contemporary understanding of neuroscience and psychology, can we explain humanity's tendency toward the creation of mythology? The following is a review of our contemporary understanding of three prominent investigations in neuroscience brought into fruitful conversation with one another when applied to mythology.

## **Point/Counterpoint**

The question of “why” in this case refers to an evolutionary function attempting to be unveiled. Author and historian Yuval Noah Harari would argue that mythology or, more specifically, religions throughout history have served to shape and grow human civilization for the better- allowing for the establishment of governments, nations, economics, and more. This is opposed to evolutionary biologist and philosopher Richard Dawkins' idea of religion as a disease as he illustrates in his essay “Viruses of the mind” (Dawkins, 1991). Despite these opposing viewpoints and the modern trend towards a secular culture, the science of the brain can be applied to detail the function of mythology in the brain and body as well as humanities apparent instinctive inclination to it in doing so, allowing for a better understanding of the manifestation of mythology in modern society.

## **Fiction/Storytelling**

In order to answer and bring relevancy to these questions, it's helpful to define some terms. Mythologies are essentially narrative, but connote being passed down among a people and typically teaching lessons/forming beliefs about natural, inexplicable phenomena. Mythology, narrative, and fiction can be used interchangeably when speaking generally about neurological effects, united conceptually by their shared use of metaphor, symbolism, character, and theme. With this understanding, the neuroscience of semantics becomes relevant in examining the role of myth in the brain. Semantic processing in neuroscience refers to the transition of accumulated knowledge into the acquisition of concise concepts and symbols which can then be used as a sort of "lens" to comprehend information (Binder, 2011). In this case, mythological stories and the themes that they produce are processed as semantic symbols or concepts for comprehending the phenomena of the natural world with the same effectiveness as linguistic or mathematical symbols. This allows for powerful and concise storytelling that is easily adopted and applicable to the many domains of life.

## **The Embodiment Problem**

The literature points to a telling feature of our cognitive processing known as "embodiment" which proves fruitful when studied on the basis of metaphor and adds further depth to the semantic processing of mythology. The concept of embodiment, founded first by philosophers, describes how we comprehend abstract concepts as informed, in part, by physical, sensory experience. With this theory, abstract concepts are far from hypothetical in our understanding of them, inherently attaching a sort of application and body to them; not to mention a personal connection. In the paper titled "Metaphor: Bridging embodiment to abstraction" authors Anja Jamrozik et al detail how metaphor serves as a guide allowing the brain

to apply this embodiment to highly abstract cognitive processes such as those proposed in mythological stories (Jamrozik, 2016). This can be extended to explain the apparent experience with mythological characters seeming to have an internal representation of their fictional symbol. Not only does this embodiment allow us to understand the world around us, but also allows us to better understand ourselves through the byproduct of internal narrative.

### **Internal Narrative**

When fiction and symbolism are comprehended through embodied cognition and adopted habitually in the way that an accepted cultural mythology provides, a potent internal narrative is created as a result, yielding not only a tale to understanding ourselves, but giving us a model to act by as well. Aside from “literally move[ing] the heart” (Beans, 2022), fables and mythologies often depict an ideal or moral story by which people are supposed to act. The practice of positive internal narrative is shown to be strongly supported by Thomas, Roikjær, and others throughout the psychological literature to be highly beneficial in regards to mental and physical well-being (Laskow, 2019).

### **Synthesis**

Synthesizing, there is a plethora of therapeutic practices in clinical psychology that involve a combination of these three facets of our biology, leveraging the power of these features of storytelling, imaginative embodiment, and internal narratives for treatments overcoming traumas and mental illnesses- features that are intrinsic to the way our brain functions, yet contain the potential for being highly adaptive and beneficial when brought in practice and conjunction with one another in the way that a widely adopted mythology creates. Research done by Stanford graduates Paul Conti, David Spiegel, and Andrew Huberman, detail practices in talk

therapy, hypnosis, and neuroscience that are in conversation with our understanding of these big three issues and prove to be extremely fruitful in achieving a beneficial state of neuroplasticity brought into fruition by mirroring mythological functions (Huberman, 2022).

### **For Example**

In a mythological context, it is helpful to see these processes underway by example of the classical hero story. Superheroes and their stories- as is described by Rubin C. Lawrence's work in counseling and play therapy- are fruitful examples of the type of mythology that serves to beneficially shape the individual's mind for reasons that are made clear by the supporting scientific literature (Lawrence, 2006). Stories such as these are made into succinct semantic symbols of heroes, are then embodied in our understanding of them, and then create a positive internal narrative in those who practice it. From Buddha and Jesus to Luke Skywalker and Harry Potter, the hero story is as old as time and has served as a model for human thought and understanding of the world since the ancients.

### **Conclusion**

The examination of these three problems aims to illustrate a picture of mythology as not just powerful and entertaining, but highly functional for creating an integrated, adaptive, and evolving society. By investigations in semantic processing, embodied cognition, and internal narrative, our current understanding characterizes a brain that is hardwired for the evolutionarily beneficial potential of mythological ideas. Research points to practices that mirror the function of mythology- such as storytelling and its byproducts as we have described them- as an evolutionarily advantageous aspect of the way the human mind comprehends its surrounding world. As it seems, modern science appears to illuminate a story about our biology that can

answer some of the why of humanity's interconnectedness with mythology throughout time; creating a thread connecting our ancient traditions to our modern-day habits.

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