

EDITORIAL

Myth and Science

Medicine, like other sciences, had a naturalistic approach in ancient Iran and its basic philosophy was developed and consolidated based on the laws of nature. This not only is stated in Avesta, but also is clearly observed in pahlavi texts and during the Sassanid dynasty, especially in Būdaheshn, literary means the base of exist or the foundation of life. In this book, the creation of man and his body was compared with nature and its behavior. If we look closely, we observe that the fundamental approach of science in ancient Iran is comparable to the principle approach of the empiricist view. On the other hand, in ancient Iran and Iranian myths, there have remained some works which cannot be considered scientific and hence be classified under scientific and empiricist categories. Their approach dates back to a more ancient era: the mythical one. Mythical thinking explains the principles of the universe based on the mythical world. The mythical thinking, based on illusions and imaginations, answers man's fundamental questions over the origin of life, the nature of the universe, the creation of man and the world. This is usually done within creative and artistic frameworks (structure). Nevertheless, despite vast literature dealing with myths and mythical thinking, the concept of myth, like art, cannot be precisely defined. In other words, it does not lend itself to one single definition. However, the definition given by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), the Romanian mythologist, is more acceptable: Myths are often stories of origins, how the world and everything in it came to be in illo tempore (In the holy time of the beginnings).¹

Just as art and science, fiction and history, and poetry and philosophy demand different criteria for being assessed and compared, myths or mythical worlds also enjoy various basic criteria and hence they cannot be used

Manizheh Abdollahi^{1*}
Ehya Amalsaleh²

1- Associate Prof. of Persian Literature and Language, Persian Dept., School of Paramedical Sciences, Shiraz university of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

2- Associate Prof. of English, English Dept., School of Paramedical Sciences, Shiraz university of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

Correspondence:

Manizheh Abdollahi
Associate Prof. of Persian Literature and Language, Persian Dept., School of Paramedical Sciences, Shiraz university of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran
manijeh.abdollahi@gmail.com

1- King, 1987.



to empirically or scientifically analyze or explore the world. And if, by accident, it happens that the criteria followed by science and myths find some trivial commonalities, this cannot be a departure point for analyzing scientific (here medical) issues. As one may write a historic novel or even assume some artistic structure for history (like what Beihaghi did), one may compose philosophic poems, or even write the Principles of philosophy in a poetic way. However, these just represent seemingly common points, in terms of some basic crude concepts, between the two. This is just like when diamond is used in making jewelry and at the same time it is used in industry. In other words, even when the ingredients of an idea is more or less the same, depending upon where it is employed, it may demand a different analytic tool. Thus, although art and science may at times discuss over one common issue, their approach, principle and nature differ fundamentally. So if research into ancient sources of knowledge finds some common borderline with mythology, or religion, these commonalities cannot lead one to classify the mythological text as a scientific one. That's why no historian has ever relied on Shahnameh (The Book of Kings) for writing the history of ancient Iran, neither has ancient Greek history developed based on the works of Homer. In a similar line, one cannot take Ramayana and Rama epics the basis of natural history or human history of India. The same is true if we use myth and ritual practices as the basis for the analysis of medical history. Although some of these rituals appear to be found in medical fields today, they cannot be used for analyzing medical texts or writing the medical history because these rituals and medicine fail to have basic common principles which are obligatory in every sound methodology. Aside from that, if such methods, such as deducing history from mythology, become popular, then, numerous contradictions, based on the same methods, will appear, harming not only the principles of the history of science in ancient Iran but also those of mythical-ritual. For instance, according to Zoroastrianism, killing and elimination of insects, whose scope encompasses snakes, rats, and the like, were considered socially, as well as religiously, acceptable practices. While if we consider this verifying the claim that the ancient Persians paid attention to health care, then, it would clearly contradict what today we take as the main principles of ecology. Since, insects are believed to be essential for sustaining life cycle. Or, taking another example, Avesta has divided the world into two categories: Good and Evil. According to this viewpoint, predatory animals such as lions, wolves, tigers and leopards are the evil creations and ancient Zoroastrian faith was to fight against these animals. And if this happens today, it will openly violate wildlife protection laws.

In sum, it is worth mentioning that the intellectuals of the ancient world from writers, drafters of Bundahshen and Dinkard to the compilers of Avesta, all were quite aware of the distinction between science and mythology or science and rituals. For instance, when Avesta discusses medicine, it presents it as an empirical scientific system, governed by objective material rules. That's why physicians, or body doctors, as referred to in Avesta, used to be selected from professional classes, i.e., farmers who were familiar with artisan process and industry. However, when clergymen entered the medical world, they could become psychiatrists. That is to say, medical laws of Avesta are fully compatible with human beings' legal, scientific and ethical principles and mythological and religious subjects have never entered this field. Hence, although we can find traces of science in an artistic work or a mythological text, we should not consider their borderline and take great care when moving from one field to another.

References

King WL. *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Mircea Eliade ed. Vol. 12. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.; 1987. Religion chapter; p. 282-292.