

Weekly Writing Assignment #6: Relativism

-- Due in Section, week of 10/18 - 10/20 --

Studying the history of medicine and therapeutics poses many problems. One has been especially difficult. Physicians and historians have traditionally judged past therapeutic systems on the basis of what we know now, producing a large body of historical research that condemns past therapeutic knowledge as ignorant, superstitious, misguided, fraudulent, etc. Only recently have historians begun to move away from this judgmental history. Adopting a more relativistic approach, they have become curious about how past therapeutic systems functioned. That will be our focus in this part of the course.

To evaluate historical therapeutic systems fairly, you need to be able to do two things. First, you need to be sympathetic, curious, open-minded, etc., when you read about old treatments. Instead of dismissing them, try to imagine how or why they might have worked. Second, you need to be critical and skeptical about our modern therapeutic ideas. Do not assume that scientific medicine has progressed rationally and steadily. As you will see, there is much that is contingent and irrational in modern medicine. Therefore you must be open-minded about everything and you must take nothing for granted. This week's readings let you practice these skills.

Judgmental and narrow-minded assessments about past therapies are not a new phenomena. In his account of Indian healing, Heckewelder makes his own opinions exceedingly clear. While aspects of Indian healing systems were quite laudable (e.g. he recounts many patients who were cured by Indian healers), others were abominable, especially the religion and superstition. He implies two things: first, that you could always categorize a treatment as rational or superstitious; and second, that European and American medicine had left superstition behind and functioned solely on a rational basis.

Is Heckewelder being fair? Josselyn and Ulrich both provide detailed glimpses into the medical world of the British colonies and early United States. Imagine a debate between Heckewelder and an Indian shaman. Could Heckewelder argue that white medicine, unlike Indian medicine, was a wholly rational process? Could the shaman find evidence of superstition and magical thinking in the medical practices of colonists in Maine in the 17th and 18th centuries?

Keep your discussion brief (200 words), but be specific. Use specific treatments (and the theory behind them) to defend your position. Because therapeutic systems are always complex and heterogeneous, many different answers can be

defended. If you mention specific material from the text, or use quotations, please provide page numbers.