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Origin-Narratives: Fins, Feet & Foibles.

An *origin-narrative* seeks to provide a sequence of events leading to some important, putatively-unique phenomenon. They explain how we got from a world without said phenomenon, to one with it. Science, particularly historical science, is replete with examples of origin-narratives: the evolution of our own species, the rise of various cultural institutions, the birth of the universe. Another concerns the origin of the foot. It was the foot that enabled tetrapod vertebrate lineages’ adapting to terrestrial life; having feet enabled extraordinary radiations. To explain the foot, we must understand the morphological and ecological factors that underpinned its evolution. To understand this, we need to understand fins. After all, pectoral fins are a precursor to, a step on the way, to evolving feet. So, a critical part of the origin-narrative of the tetrapod foot is the pectoral fin.

There is nothing wrong in principle with origin-narratives, but in practice there are several closely-knit foibles associated with them. First, *linearity*. The structure of a story often takes on the form of a series of steps and choice-points which take us from, in this instance, a footless world to one replete with them. But, we might worry, history is often complex, too complex for a simple linear narrative. Second, *direction*: the linearity of an origin-narrative often frames the steps taken *as* steps towards the outcome. There is a tendency to see earlier steps as forerunners to later steps. But history is sometimes too contingent to support such directionality. Third, *narrative-significance*: what is significant about those steps and choice-points—phenomena unto themselves—is their being part of the narrative towards the origin of the thing we’re interested in. Understanding pectoral fins is necessary for understanding feet; their being interesting is derivative. Fourth, *change-bias*, origin-narratives are fundamentally about change, about explaining how things were one way, and became another. But it is also important to understand continuity and stasis.

Particularly when origin-narratives are employed to structure investigations, these foibles can loom large. But these foibles are neither essential or necessary: narratives can accommodate contingency and non-linearity, and we need not think that the sum entirety of what matters is change and narrative significance. Critically, the investigative strategies historical scientists take towards constructing and testing origin-narratives can lead us from simple, linear stories to complex, integrated and open-ended investigations. I’ll explain some of these strategies and show how they mitigate the foibles of origin-narratives.