Radical/Radiculopathy

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Radiculopathy applies to any disorder of the nerve roots. It has its origins in the Latin *radicula*, the diminutive of *radix* ('a root'). For a word whose beginnings are lodged in antiquity it was used in Medicine surprisingly late.

Historically, (like neuropathy) the word *radiculitis* (like neuritis) is still often applied indiscriminately, in the absence of evidence of inflammation. Radiculitis appears, according to the OED, in the October 5th 1907 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, as a heading, although the adjective *radicular* was mentioned in 1878 to signify an affection or attacking of the roots of a tooth, nerve, etc., and was seen in anatomy texts from 1897. As a botanical word *radicle* is first used in 1671 as the primary root or rootlets of a plant. *Radicle* was also used anatomically from 1830 by Robert Knox in P.A. Béclard's *Elements of General Anatomy* (in translation). *Radicular* also appears in 1830, in John Lindley's *An Introduction to the Natural System of Botany*, and the botanical *radicle* appears in 1836. *Radicle* has been preferred to *radical* by some authorities.

Originally, *radical* meant humidity, humour, moisture, or sap. In mediæval philosophy, the humour or moisture naturally inherent in all plants and animals was a necessary condition of their vitality. The OED cites: 1398 John de Trevisa Barth.¹ *De proprietatibus rerum* transl. 1398. XVII. xlii. 'Radical humouris isente into the herbe'.

But the word *radical* literally means forming the root, basis, or foundation; original, primary. Whence it found much wider application and usage in philosophy: hence radical empiricist, one who adopts this position, and radical pluralism. In politics, *radical* implies advanced views of political reform on democratic lines, and in mathematics – pertaining to, or forming the root of a number or quantity.

¹ The original Latin volumes, *De proprietatibus rerum* (On the properties of things), were the encyclopaedic work of the Friar Bartholomaeus Anglicus probably written between 1240 and 1250. In 1398/9, John Trevisa (approx. 1340–1402) translated the book into English, and *A Critical Text*, edited by M.C. Seymour et al., was published [Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, 2 vols. (of 3)].