

The “What is...?” Issue: Explaining Culture(s) through History and Science

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“One good question can give rise to several layers of answers, can inspire decades-long searches for solutions, can generate whole new fields of inquiry, and can prompt changes in entrenched thinking”.

Firenstein (2012: 11)

Cognitive historiography is a vast field, one that we tried to place within a broader context in our self-reflective editorial note following the reconstruction of our editorial board and the new path the journal took (Ambasciano and Roubekas 2017). With the current issue, we are pleased to host a number of excellent contributions that expand the networking project of cognitive historiography along different avenues. What all these contributions implicitly share is the mission to offer explanatory replies to research questions that are consistent with the interdisciplinary, pluralistic, and scientific principles of our journal’s core research areas.

Hence, Ambasciano’s article opens this issue with a decalogue on the question *What is Cognitive Historiography?*, offering a thought-provoking piece on the very nature of the discipline which doubles as a conceptual road map. However, we would like to make clear that the essay is not designed to supply some sort of manifesto but, rather, seeks to further engage our readership with this admittedly complex question, hoping for more scholarly voices to offer further comments, suggestions, and discussions in future volumes of the journal.

We are extremely happy and honoured to include, in three installments, an autobiographical report of Michael Ruse's 50-plus-year career in the history and philosophy of science. Through his engaging style and rich experiences, Ruse offers engaging reflections to the questions: *What is Darwinism, What is its role in the history and philosophy of science, and How can it possibly be related to existentialism?* via his personal and professional journey over the last half century. We are deeply committed to interdisciplinary dialogue (*repetita iuvant*), and we sincerely hope that this outstanding contribution might renew the critical conversation between historians, philosophers of science, cognitive scholars and any other researcher interested in such topics of paramount importance.

The second section of the issue at hand is concluded with Paul Robertson's article on shadows in the New Testament. Delving into the history of the earliest Christian period and using evolutionary-cognitive approaches, Robertson attempts to offer an answer to the question: *What is the role shadows play from a cognitive historiographical perspective in one of the pivotal texts of the classical Western canon?* He does so by employing a tripartite classification that touches on different types of shadows.

The third section of this issue, entitled *Précis*, is the first of its kind and one that we aspire to have as an occasional addition in future volumes. It is predicated on the idea that influential, ground-breaking, and appealing works deserve more than a review. Thus, we have invited two leading scholars, Patrick Nunn and Mathias Clasen, to present and further elaborate on their fascinating works *The Edge of Memory: Ancient Stories, Oral Tradition and the Post-Glacial World* (2018) and *Why Horror Seduces* (2017), respectively. Again, both authors tackle important questions from different scientific and interdisciplinary perspectives, and again, their answers provide unexpected and stimulating insights. Nunn, a world-renowned expert on the geography of the Pacific region, climate change, and geomorphology, asks: *What is the edge of collective memory in folk history and how does this relate to the anthropogenic, contemporary climate change crisis?* Clasen, a specialist in cutting-edge biocultural (or Darwinian) literary studies, asks *What is horror and how can cognitive and evolutionary sciences help explain its cross-cultural appeal?* We are confident that their contributions will not only further explicate their works and expand their argumentation, but also urge more scholars to jump into the discussion and offer rejoinders that may elevate the given arguments to new, intriguing levels.

The fourth section includes a thorough commentary by Anders Klostergaard Petersen on Jan Assmann's *Achsenzeit: Eine Archäologie der Moderne* (2018). One of the most appealing questions that has preoccupied numerous scholars in various disciplines at the crossroads between Social Sciences

and the Humanities is *What is the Axial Age and why does it matter (if it does...)?* Petersen brings Assmann's work on the origins and development of the Axial Age concept into a fast-paced dialogue with the post-2000 interdisciplinary debates on the topic, expanding the scope and reach of Assmann's book without renouncing the critical examination of its contents.

The issue at hand is concluded by a conspicuous number of book reviews, a section of the journal we care very much about. Unfortunately, a book review is not the most interesting scholarly contribution for most academics. However, we are always surprised by the willingness of people working in disparate fields but potentially interested in contributing to the advancement of a truly interdisciplinary cognitive historiographical environment, to make some space in their busy schedules and offer their valued opinion on new and interesting publications. There can be no doubt about it: any scholarly inquiry can only progress through vigorous debates, thoughtful evaluations, and continuous assessments, and reviews provide the cornerstone on which academic and scientific endeavours are built. This is why we hold reviewers in the highest esteem. Along with the anonymous reviewers who offered their time and specializations for ensuring the highest possible quality of the research articles that appear in *JCH*, we would like to thank our book reviewers for positively responding to our invitations and for their eagerness to offer their highly appreciated assessments.

Finally, we are pleased to announce that the the next double-issue (5.1-2) is following suit, hoping to reach your shelves before the end of the year. Given that our open call on "Toxic Traditions: Pathological and Maladaptive Beliefs, Biases, and Behaviours throughout Human History," available both in the previous *JCH* issue (4.1:124–27) and online (<https://journals.equinoxpub.com/JCH/announcement>), has attracted some very interesting papers, we urge you to contact us as soon as possible if you would like to offer a paper to the special issue currently at work.

Meanwhile, sit back, relax, and enjoy this new issue of the *JCH*.

References

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