

## SPECIAL SECTION

### **Philosophy in the Cognitive Science of Religion**

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Welcome to this special section of JCSR, which besides being a special topic is also in a special format. This issue offers a target article by Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler with peer commentaries and concluding remarks.

We are the privileged witnesses of an exponential growth in the cognitive science of religion. Although the accompanying figures are based on keyword searches, they nonetheless give us an indication of growth. The n-gram search from Google Books in Figure 1 indicates that the use of “cognitive science” seems to have reached a stable level around the middle 1990s, whereas Figure 2 indicates a dramatic increase in the “cognitive science of religion,” which, by the way, seems to have begun around the time that cognitive science reached its stable level. The chart fits what we know about the history of research in the cognitive science of religion. In the first issue of this journal, we published a graph indicating that this growth is exponential (Xygalatas and McKay 2013).

Figure 2 indicates that “philosophy and cognitive science” had a less dramatic growth, and it seems to have coincided with the leveling of cognitive science. In turning to the Scopus database that only contains scientific articles, illustrated in Figure 3, we find that “philosophy” occurs in titles, abstracts, or keywords about 16% of cognitive science articles whereas it occurs in 51% of cognitive science of religion articles. Thus, this suggests that philosophy has been an integral

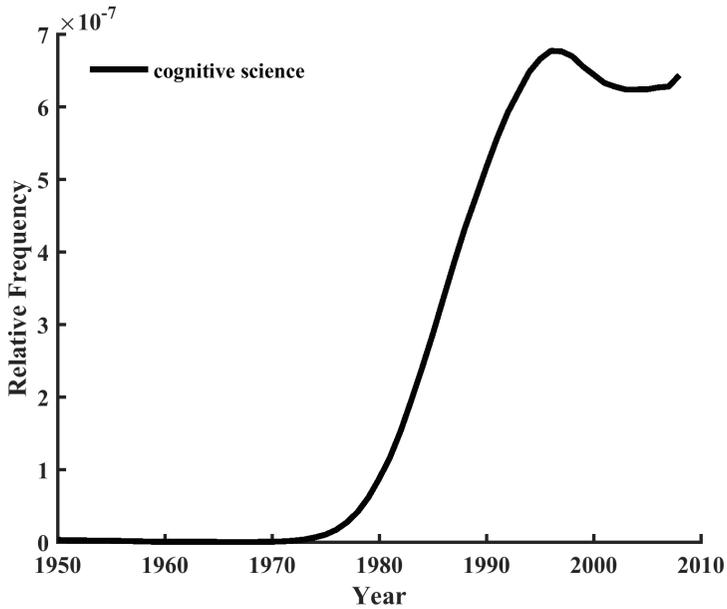


Figure 1. N-gram search in Google Books: “cognitive science.”

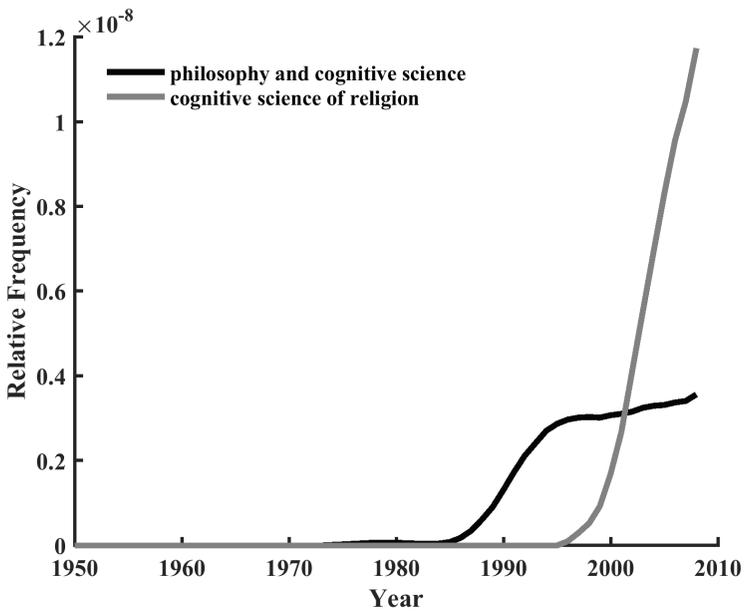


Figure 2. N-gram search in Google Books: “philosophy and cognitive science” and “cognitive science of religion”

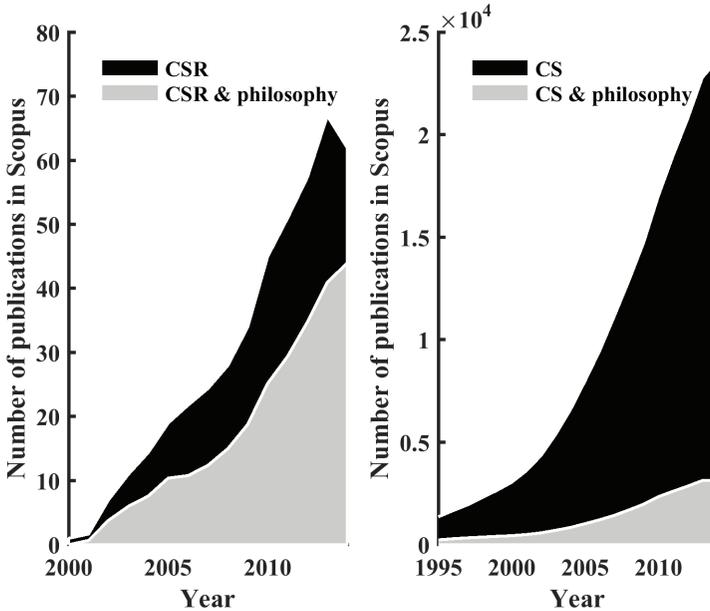


Figure 3. To the left: search in Scopus of the words “cognitive science of religion” and “cognitive science of religion & philosophy”. To the right: search in Scopus of the words “cognitive science” and “cognitive science and philosophy”.

part of the cognitive science of religion, and, relatively more than of cognitive science.<sup>1</sup>

In the early years of the cognitive science of religion, its pioneers raised issues in the philosophy of science. In their book *Rethinking Religion* (1990), E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley frame their strong hypotheses within a philosophy of science perspective as well as draw on inspiration from R. Chomsky in their analyses. Likewise, Pascal Boyer in his *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas* (1994) draws on the philosophy of F. C. Keil, among others. In 1996, McCauley published a collection of essays about and by Paul and Patricia Churchland, who made major contributions to neurocomputational philosophy. Some of the contributing authors are also well known philosophers such as Andy Clark, Jerry Fodor, William Bechtel and Patricia Kitcher. McCauley also published his earlier essays on the philosophical issues of science and religion in his *Why Religion is Natural and Science Is Not* (2011). It should be noted however that already during the 1980s, Finnish philosopher Matti Kamppinen

1. The figures are courtesy of Kristoffer Laigaard Nielbo, Digital Text Laboratory; Religion, Cognition and Culture Research Unit (RCC); and Interacting Minds Centre at the School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University. He has also kindly assisted me in interpreting the results.

was writing on cognitive systems and models of thought drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein (1986, 1987, 1988, 1989). In 2001, he published a study on Husserlian phenomenology and the cognitive science of religion.

One well-known philosopher, Paul Thagard, provided a useful and systematic introduction to the various approaches to the study of mind in his book *Mind* (1996). Many of the issues that he noted then are still current in cognitive science and philosophy. According to Richard Samuels, Eric Margolis and Stephen P. Stich in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Cognitive Science* (2012), the main issues concern the mind, meta-theoretical issues, conceptual issues, empirical issues and other traditional philosophical issues (Samuels *et al.* 2012, 4).

An important turn, which began already during the 1980s, concerns philosophy and neuroscience. The neurosciences have without doubt raised empirical, theoretical and philosophical challenges to all the other sciences, including the human and social sciences. Many of the practitioners of those sciences have either not taken notice of the challenges or rejected their relevance altogether. John Bickle, in his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Neuroscience* (2009), argues more optimistically that there is a growing interest on all sides to bring philosophical reflection and neuroscientific discoveries together. According to Bickle, the issues that are at stake are 1) explanation, reduction, and methodology in neuroscientific practice, 2) learning and memory, 3) sensation and perception, 4) neurocomputation and neuroanatomy, 5) neuroscience of motivation, decision making, and neuroethics, 6) neurophilosophy and psychiatry and 7) neurophilosophy (Bickle 2009, 5–10).

Turning now to the articles in this issue, Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler argue in their target article that cognitive science of religion scholars are committed to an externalist and holistic semantics, which, as a result, create tensions between explanations offered by CSR scholars and the actual beliefs and practices of religious people. Their proposed solution to the problem is that scholars should pay more attention to external factors, such as biology, culture and environment.

Six colleagues in philosophy and the study of religion have kindly responded to Gardiner and Engler's article. All six commentaries agree with the authors that these discussions are worthwhile and necessary for CSR. Four of the commentaries (by Albinus, Davis, Kamppinen, and Visala) are more sympathetic to their specific arguments, whereas two are more critical (by Blease and Jensen). C.R. Blease argues, as I have, that philosophy has played a role in cognitive science and in the cognitive science of religion from its inception. She claims that Gardiner and Engler have "misapprehended" this work and systematically provides the evidence for it. Jeppe Sinding Jensen agrees that CSR scholars are pro-

gressively incorporating the social and cultural aspects of human behavior and thought in their understanding of cognition. In fact, he argues that Gardiner and Engler are criticizing a model that CSR practitioners have moved beyond. But, he agrees that CSR scholars need to pay more attention to philosophical matters.

The other commentaries take issue with various aspects of Gardiner and Engler's article. Lars Albinus does not subscribe to semantic internalism and does not regard semantics as the privileged starting point. Endorsing a pragmatic view, Albinus argues that meaning is "enmeshed in the same overall game of language and practice that it is trying to get a grip on". In this sense, he claims, there is a need for dialectic between semantics and pragmatics which may be paralleled in cognitive science. Scott Davis is inspired by the same line of thinkers as Gardiner and Engler, and he agrees that we should be "suspicious of the claims of CSR". He argues specifically that we cannot understand religious discourse without rethinking the relationship between cognition and culture. For Davis, there is no cognition without culture.

Matti Kamppinen argues along similar lines that the philosophy of cognitive science has encouraged good and productive philosophy. While progress is being made in cognitive science, he notes, it has by no means made philosophy obsolete. On the contrary, both cognitive science and philosophy can nourish each other. Aku Visala also notes a growing consensus in cognitive science towards a "context sensitive, embodied and encultured model of cognition", and he encourages CSR scholars to do the same. He adds that current issues in philosophy may be of interest to CSR scholars, such as the issues of the concept of "innateness" in biology and psychology, the naturalistic stance in biology and psychology, and rationality and truth value of religious beliefs.

Gardner and Engler's response to the commentaries is both informative and illuminating. I invite our readers to delve into these lively and philosophical discussions and encourage you to reflect on your own take on these central issues.

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