### Conférences Jean Nicod 2009

#### Elizabeth S. Spelke

**Sources of Human Knowledge**

**Conférence du 9 juin**

**Toward a Cognitive Science of Human Thinking: Why so Slow?**

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Since Plato's time, scientists have revolutionized our understanding of physical and biological phenomena, as well as our understanding of human perception and action. In contrast, our understanding of higher human cognition has advanced so slowly that current investigators cannot compare sources with a straight face. In this lecture, I consider why the most important aspects of the human mind have been so resistant to scientific analysis, and I describe a strategy for overcoming this resistance. The strategy centers on two proposals. First, human cognition builds on a small set of core knowledge systems: systems that are as amenable to study as our systems for perceiving depth or reaching for objects. Second, new cognitive capacities and systems of knowledge develop through the productive combination of these core systems: a combinatorial process that depends on humans' species-specific faculty for natural language. I illustrate the strategy by describing research on two core systems for representing inanimate, manipulable objects and animate, goal-directed actions. Moreover, I consider one uniquely human capacity that arises when these systems are combined: the capacity to represent artifacts as structured objects with dedicated functions.

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**Conférence du 10 juin**

**Natural Number**

Humans are primates, whose perceptual and action systems strikingly resemble those of other animals, but humans alone develop new systems of knowledge that solve problems unlike any faced by our ancestors. What innate differences between humans and other animals account for the flexibility and productivity of human cognition? According to a recent proposal by Tomasello, the primary characteristic that sets humans on a distinctive developmental path is not cognitive but motivational: humans have an innate propensity to share information, tasks, goals, and emotional states. All humans’ cognitive accomplishments, including the acquisition of natural language, develop from this propensity. I consider Tomasello’s proposal in relation to a rival proposal that inverts it. Like natural number and natural geometry, I suggest, shared intentionality builds on core systems shared by diverse animals: in this case, two distinct systems for representing goal-directed actors and social partners. Uniquely human forms of communication and cooperation arise from our unique capacity to combine these core representations productively. Language, once again, may be the source of this capacity.
L'esprit humain, son organisation, sa nature, ses relations avec le corps et avec le monde sont depuis toujours parmi les thèmes centraux de la philosophie. La psychologie contemporaine elle-même a pris naissance au sein de la philosophie. Elle s’est émancipée, mais l’émergence des sciences cognitives consacre d’une certaine façon le retour de la philosophie dans ce champ de recherche. Les développements de l’informatique et des neurosciences, en jetant une nouvelle lumière sur les phénomènes mentaux, ont eu pour effet de relancer le débat philosophique. La « philosophie de l’esprit » est ainsi plus florissante que jamais. Ce retour n’a rien d’une régression, car la philosophie dont il est question est en phase avec la recherche scientifique, informée par elle et en constante interaction avec elle.

Les Conférences Jean-Nicod visent à promouvoir les recherches philosophiques se rapportant à la cognition et à faire connaître en France les travaux réalisés à l’étranger dans ce domaine. Le conférencier, sélectionné par le comité Jean-Nicod, présente ses recherches au cours d’un cycle de conférences qu’il assemble ensuite en un livre.