
Les recherches du Professeur Sterelny portent, depuis le début, sur l’interface entre la philosophie et les sciences de la nature, en particulier la linguistique et la psychologie cognitive. Depuis une dizaine d’années, son travail fait une part de plus en plus importante aux questions évolutionsaires.

Ouvrages de K. Sterelny


The Fate of the Third Chimpanzee

Conférence du 13 mai
Plasticity, Learnability, Differentiation : An Alternative Model of Evolutionary Psychology

The best known version of evolutionary psychology is inspired by Chomskian linguistics, and thus is built around a modular, nativist view of human minds; typically conjoined to some version of the social intelligence hypothesis. I agree with two of the fundamental diagnoses that lie behind this approach. First, many of the everyday problems that confront human agents have a high cognitive load. Humans respond appropriately to many ordinary challenges of life only because and to the extent that they can appreciate, access and use large amounts of information, much of which is cryptic. Nativist evolutionary psychologists argue that our capacity to do this requires special explanation, and I agree. Second: there is something distinctive in the human evolutionary trajectory: a trajectory that has taken us from being a minor element in the East African fauna to a cosmopolitan distribution and an unprecedented ecological footprint. Such a trajectory cannot be explained as a response to some external stimulus like climate change, for then we would expect to see broadly similar trajectories in other lineages. The unique features of hominin evolution seem to indicate a feedback-driven, internal dynamics. The usual suggestion is that the evolution of human intelligence was driven by the threat and opportunity posed by other humans; as we became more intelligent, our social environment became more complex, which selected for further growth in intelligence. I agree that to explain human evolution, we must explain how we have become able to solve high-load problems, and we must identify the feedback loops that drove our distinctive and unusual trajectory. But I have a different diagnosis of how these problems are to be solved. In sessions 3 and 4, I develop an alternative picture of the feedback loops which drove the evolution of our distinctive cognitive profile. In this first session I focus on the problem of cognitive load, illustrating and motivating an alternative solution. Cognitive competence can be enriched and stabilised two ways: generically, and by engineering the learning environment of plastic learners. In my view, both are important, but the role of developmental niche construction has been neglected. I propose to correct, perhaps over-correct, this neglect.

Conférence du 15 mai
The Model in Action : Against Moral Nativism

Language, complex tool-use, extensive co-operation between non-relatives, religion and ritual are all distinctive features of the human mind. They seem to be found in no other living primate, and they seem to be features of all human cultures and of most (perhaps all) their members. We are tool-using, talking, expanding, god-bothering apes. We are also moralising apes: arguably, making moral judgements is both typically human, and unique to humans. Recently, this has been most grist for the modular nativist mill; Marc Hauser and John Mikhail (most notably) have explicitly based their models of moral cognition on language. I draw on the model developed in session 1 to build both a sceptical response to this nativist picture and an alternative analysis of moral cognition. The positive view owes much to those descendents of Hume who see moral cognition as essentially a gloss on pre-existing social emotions, but it gives a much greater role to top-down (and hence cultural) inputs.

The Model in Action : Revisiting the Problem of Co-operation

Social learning is not unique to our species; we do not differ from other primates through being able to learn from our fellows. But social learning takes a unique form in our species: we can accumulate cognitive capital. Human groups (and perhaps individual humans) inherit informational resources from the previous generation, preserve those resources, sometimes add to them, and transmit them accurately to the next generation. This accumulation of cognitive resources is (i) unique; (ii) central to the explanation of the adaptation of individual and groups to their environment (as Pete Richerson and Bob Boyd have often stressed); (iii) central to the geographic, demographic and ecological expansion of our species; (iv) confronts human minds with novel problems of information management, both of bandwidth and of content. There has been a lively debate within the human evolution community on the paleoanthropological signature of this novel form of culture (“behavioral modernity”, as it is sometimes called) and about the specific key innovation that makes it possible. I defend the idea that the accumulation of cognitive capital is central to human evolution. But I draw upon the model developed in session 1 to argue against a “key adaptation” model of the establishment of this engine of accumulation. Instead, I argue that the origin of accumulation depended on the construction and stabilisation of social and learning environments of the right kind. Behavioral modernity depends on an innovation in epistemic engineering, not a genetic transformation.

The Model in Action : Against Moral Nativism
Cérence Jean-nicod de PhilosoPhié cognitive
Centre national de la recherche scientifique
(Département des Sciences Humaines et Sociales)

philosophie cognitive

2008

KI M S T E R L N Y

le destin du troisième chimpanzé
(The Fate of the Third Chimpanzee)

Kim Sterelny

Mardi 13 mai de 16h à 18h
Plasticity, Learnability, Differentiation : An Alternative Model of Evolutionary Psychology
Ecole Normale Supérieure, Salle des Actes
45, rue d’Ulm, 75005 Paris

Remise du prix Jean-Nicod et cocktail après la conférence.

Jeudi 15 mai de 14h à 16h
The Model in Action: Against Moral Nativism
Ecole Normale Supérieure, Salle des Actes
45, rue d’Ulm, 75005 Paris

Mardi 20 mai de 14h à 16h
The Model in Action: Social Learning and Its Transformation
Ecole Normale Supérieure, Salle des Actes
45, rue d’Ulm, 75005 Paris

Mercredi 21 mai de 14h à 16h
The Model in Action: Revisiting the Problem of Cooperation
Ecole Normale Supérieure, Salle des Actes
45, rue d’Ulm, 75005 Paris

Renseignements
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philosophie cognitive

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 consacrée 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 rassemble ensuite en un livre.

Comité Jean-Nicod

Conférenciers Jean-Nicod (1993-2007)

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