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Nancy J. Nersessian: Philosophy and Cognitive Science

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Preface: Philosophy and Cognitive Science

Cognitive science has deep roots in philosophy. As an interdisciplinary field, cognitive science comprises researchers from psychology, philosophy, computer science (artificial intelligence, robotics, human-centered computing), linguistics, neuroscience, anthropology, and sociology. Although philosophy is but one of its fields, the sciences of cognition address problems with a long history in epistemology and metaphysics, such as the nature and origins of knowledge and of human conscious experience, through empirical research, and, in the process, transform the ways in which the problems are formulated. Empirical research alone, however, cannot suffice to develop comprehensive theories of cognition. Substantive conceptual and methodological issues ensure the continued centrality of philosophy to the study of cognition. Cognitive science is also transforming philosophy, especially in the areas of epistemology, philosophy of science, and philosophy of mind. Increasingly, philosophers are recognizing the need to inform and constrain their analyses of philosophical problems with data and interpretations stemming from cognitive science.

The primary areas of cognitive science research within philosophy are foundations of mind, foundations of cognitive science, and philosophy of science. All of these areas of philosophical research are well-represented in this book. Research within foundations of mind addresses fundamental epistemological and metaphysical problems having to do with, among other things, the nature of mental representation, mental processes, intentionality, and consciousness. Foundations of cognitive science deals with conceptual and methodological issues pertaining to research in cognitive science as a whole, or to research in a sub-discipline. These issues range from experimental methodologies in neuroscience to the postulation of “theory of mind” mechanisms in cognitive development. Cognitive science research within the philosophy of science is a rapidly developing area. Research in this area is addressing long-standing problems such as the underdetermination of theory by evidence, the nature and processes of conceptual change, and the nature of scientific reasoning, in light of salient empirical investi-

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gations and interpretations in other areas of cognitive science. Much of the research in this area of philosophy of science employs a 'cognitive-historical' method, which makes use of the customary range of historical records, as well as studies of contemporary science, to discern the nature and origins of representational, methodological, and reasoning practices employed by scientists. Thus, real practices, rather than a priori speculation about these, are the focus of cognitive accounts within the philosophy of science. Cognitive science research within all areas of philosophy not only contributes to furthering philosophical analysis, but also enriches fundamental understanding of cognition.

Finally, this volume and the conference from which the papers are drawn bring together for the first time significant numbers of philosophers within the cognitive science community in China and those in the international community. The results bode well for this to be the beginning of a long and fruitful interchange.


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