

When are Philosophy Articles Cited?

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It's natural to believe that philosophy citations are typically to long ago pieces. We're still talking about philosophers from millenia ago. More strikingly, we're still talking about papers from half a century ago not as historical papers, but as part of the contemporary debate. But a systematic look at the citation data shows that these cases are outliers. Most citations are to recently published works. Surprisingly, this is less true in recent years than it used to be. The effect of electronic publishing and communication has been to make citations, on average, older. After we adjust for the typical age of philosophy citations, and this changing trend, it turns out that the 2000s were a particularly influential time in philosophy publishing. Articles published in that decade are cited more than earlier or later articles, once we adjust for the typical times articles are cited, and the changing patterns of citation. This is arguably related to broad changes in the interests of philosophers, towards social philosophy, and epistemology.

1 Introduction

This paper is about the patterns of citations of philosophy journal articles in philosophy journals. Obviously philosophy journals cite more things than philosophy journals, and just as obviously philosophy journal articles get cited in other places. But looking just at journal-to-journal citations allows us to get a citation set that is relatively complete, and hence make some systematic generalisations about the way articles are cited over time. It turns out some of these generalisations are surprising.

Before looking at the data, here are two things I believed about philosophy citations. First, philosophers tend to cite very old papers. We still regularly teach a number of papers over half a century old in introductory classes; e.g., Frankfurt (1969), Thomson (1971), Singer (1972), and Lewis (1973). These aren't taught as history papers, but as early entries into the contemporary philosophical debate. While

most papers aren't cited as much as these papers are, I thought the pattern that old papers keep being cited extended to their less famous counterparts. Second, the technological changes of the last quarter century meant that this practice was being slowly reversed. A series of technological innovations made it easier to cite newer and newer works. These innovations included the spread of email, the rise of preprint archives (e.g., arXiv, SSRN, PhilPapers), and eventually official preprints in things like EarlyView. So, I thought, citations should be getting younger, because the delay between publishing and getting widely known was removed.

Both of these thoughts were wrong.

On the first point, the generalisation I made from those famous papers was just wrong. Normal papers differ from famous papers not just in how often they are cited, but in the shape of their citations. The main evidence I'll use for this is something I'll call the *citation ratio*. The citation ratio of year o in year n is the mean number of citations, in year n , of articles published in year o , divided by the mean number of citations, in year n , of articles published in years $n-10$ to $n-3$. (I'll say much more about why I'm using this measure in what follows.) Figure 1 shows the average citation ratio for different *ages*, of citations, i.e., the number of years between o and n .¹

Each dot on that graph is a citation ratio for a particular pair of years; the line shows the average citation ratio for all pairs with the same age. The shape is unmistakable; articles get cited much much more when they are relatively young than when they are older.

The 'evidence' I gave for the opposite view in the introductory paragraph wasn't entirely wrong. If we redo Figure 1 just looking at articles which have 15 or more citations in philosophy journals. (This turns out to be a fairly small percentage of the sample.)

The numbers on the y-axis in Figure 2 are higher than in Figure 1. That's not surprising; it just means highly cited articles get cited more frequently. What is striking is the different shape of the graphs. Typical philosophy articles, if they get cited at all, get cited soon after publication and they fade into obscurity.

¹The graph also includes some 'jitter' to make the different points more easily visible. I've put each decade of original publication in a different colour; I'll break those out in Figure 3. The graph starts in 1975 because the data is much noisier before then, for reasons we'll get to below.

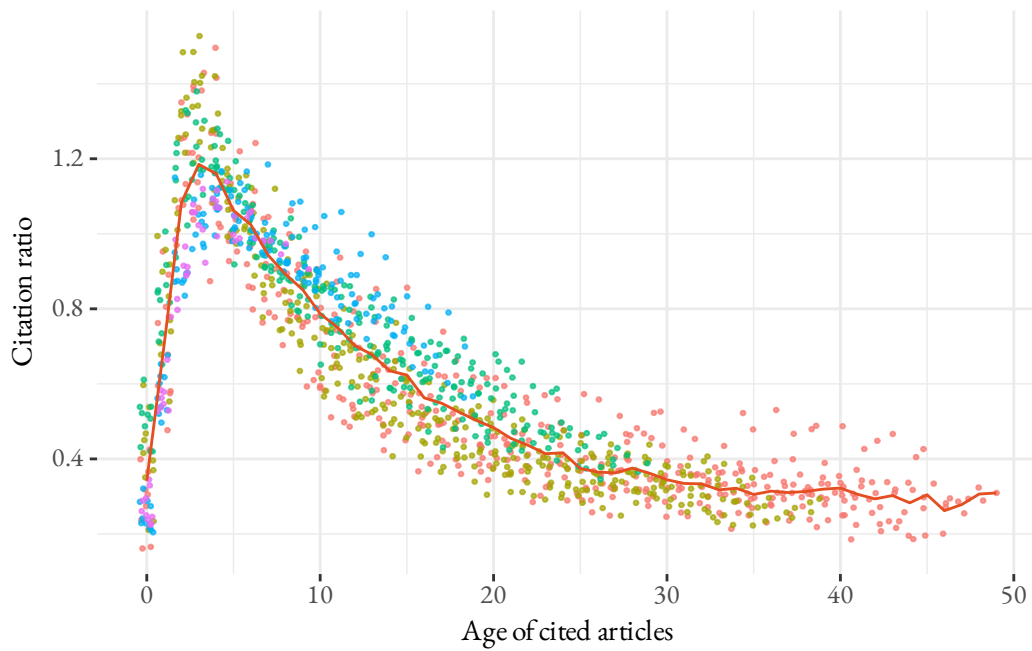


Figure 1: Age effects from 1975 onwards on a single graph, with the overall average shown.

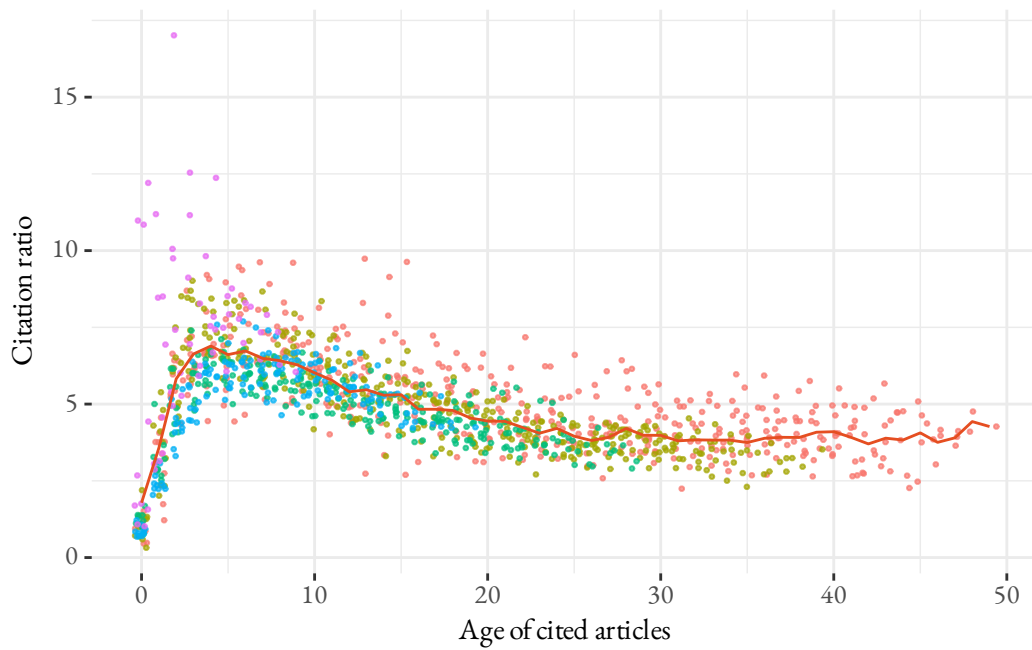


Figure 2: A version of Figure 1 just looking at highly cited articles

Highly cited articles keep getting cited decades after their publication.

These results aren't a priori obvious; things could have turned out otherwise. It could have been that there were a trove of articles which were ignored after publication and then accrued five to ten citations a couple of decades later. There are some articles that were very frequently cited soon after publication but which are now largely ignored. (This happens most frequently in philosophy of science and in philosophy of mind, I think for different reasons in the two cases.) But these cases are outliers. Most of the articles that were influential soon after publication stay that way.

For the second point, we can simply break up Figure 1 by ten year chunks. In Figure 3 I've taken the points by from Figure 1, and grouped them into 'decades'. Because I'm working here with 1975-2024 data, the decades are 1975-1984, 1985-1994 etc. To make it easier to compare decades, I've removed the last one, where there isn't enough data, and removed all points with an age over 20.

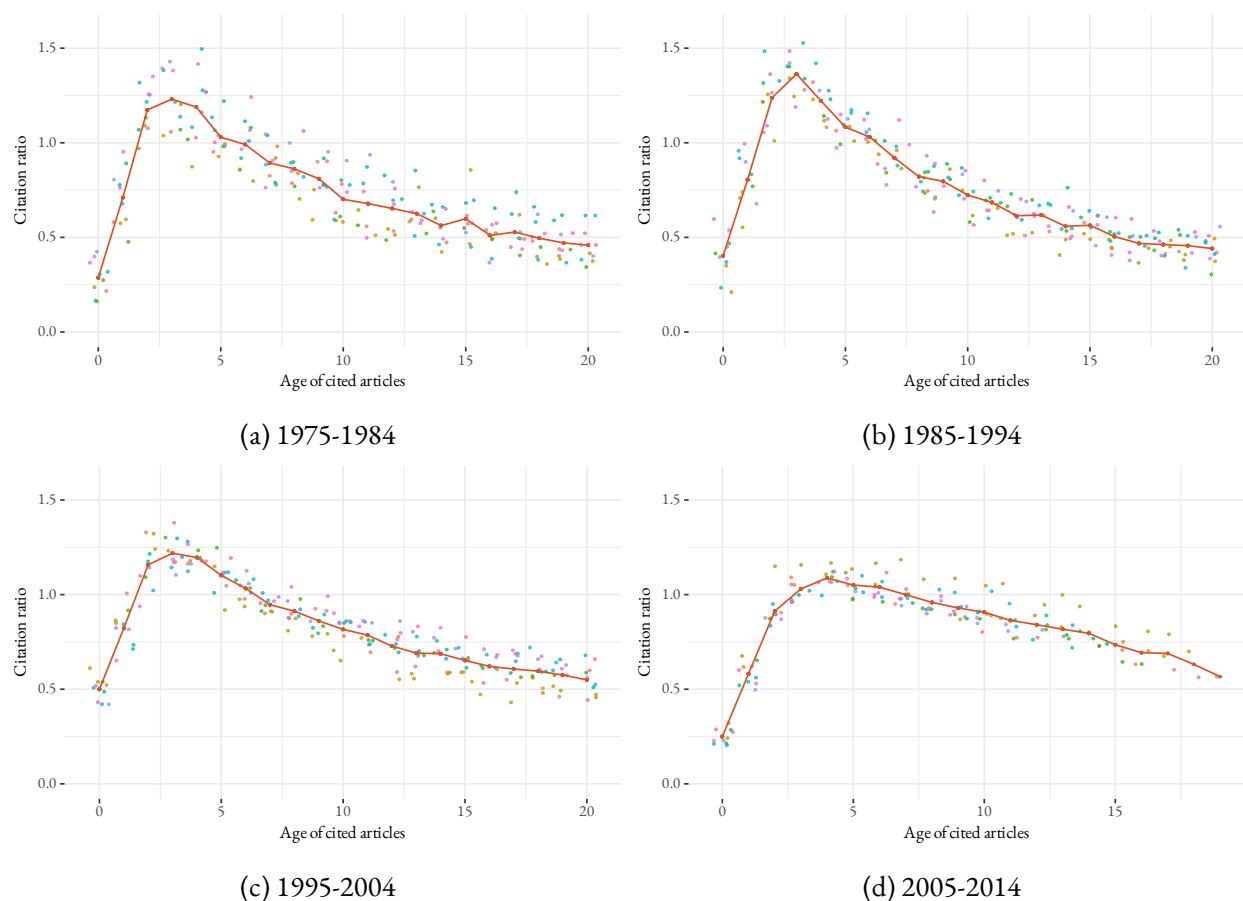


Figure 3: Citation ratio for different decades

- Frankfurt, Harry G. 1969. "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility." *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (23): 829–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2023833>.
- Lewis, David. 1973. "Causation." *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (17): 556–67.
- Singer, Peter. 1972. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (3): 229–43.
- Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 1971. "A Defense of Abortion." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1): 47–66.