

ON CHOMSKY: BEYOND GENERIC HUMAN BEINGS

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Noam Chomsky's contribution to our understanding of theoretical cognitive modeling has been monumental, as has been his searing critique of the social power elite. Although he claims little connection between his linguistics and his political/media critique, the two are tied, in his mind, by the necessity of approaching both with a reasonable if not scientific perspective—and a *universal* perspective concerning not only how human nature has evolved, but also how we can progress as a humane society that un-hypocritically applies its principles to itself in a universally consistent manner.

As with the other philosophers covered in this book, this chapter will outline the general conceptual structure of Chomsky's insights into the workings of mind and language while excluding, for the most part, how he came to these views, and avoiding in depth critique. I will also briefly cover his political thought, as it will become relevant to the social implications of technology and artificial intelligence to be discussed in the second part of this work.

INNATE CREATIVE ABILITIES

Although Descartes clearly was interested in a mechanics of mind, it was Chomsky who championed the new "cognitive science" and led the charge in the 20th century against "observational" approaches to language, such as Behaviorism's knee-jerk stimulus response theories, or the hierarchical

taxonomies of structural linguistics. Again, as with the rationalist Descartes, and as we have seen, in a similar way, with Plato's theory of "recollection" and Kant's bifurcation of Understanding (where both the explicitly known and the potentially known—foreknowledge— are found in the self-same mind), Chomsky has studied how certain aspects of the mind, specifically aspects of language, are *innate*—and for Chomsky this means aspects of language, especially syntax abilities, are biologically hard-wired in the brain.

The core language abilities a human is born with might be identified by aspects of language common to all languages—if not a deep structure, then at least some inbuilt syntactic abilities or a Universal Grammar—and this focus on *grammar*, or *syntax* may come from a focus on the *formal* aspect of language, rather than the informational *content*—since Chomsky is more concerned with the formal functionality of language—an explanation of *how* it works rather than *what* it says, in general and hopefully elegant theories. Of course, and a little ironically, this is not all arm-chair theorizing, as much as theory informs the *data* aimed at, for *observation* has demonstrated that children acquire language despite a "poverty of stimulus"—they pick up a fairly complex amount of *ability* to *use* language despite their being exposed to few occurrences of certain linguistic phenomena. And of course, language acquisition is much more complicated than monkey-see, monkey-do; as language abilities are generalize-able, not specific to just one circumstance, and can be used in novel, creative ways.

Foucault could have hinted in his debate with Chomsky that, existentially following Sartre, we ought to be free to determine our human nature; that existence precedes essence—and although such a notion forms a backdrop to his thinking, Foucault, ever cognoscente of the archeology, genealogy, and history of inter-human power relations, relates "human nature" as another aspect of the *socially constructed* modes of human being:

“In the history of knowledge, the role of human nature seems to me mainly to have played the role of an epistemological indicator to designate certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to theology or biology or history. I would find it difficult to see in this a scientific concept” (*The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on Human Nature*, p. 7).

Although “human nature” could be seen as too broad or vague of a concept (and Foucault may have thought that since what is often discussed as human nature is a culturally contingent “construct”—it *could* be different), biologically there seems to be at least some human nature (e.g. the natural property of walking on two legs, being featherless, etc.)—but even then, Chomsky’s claim that human nature is to be “creative” could also be in line with the self-creation and self-determination advocated in existentialist philosophy.

I think there would be no mistake in connecting Chomsky’s claim that being *creative* is a part of human nature with Universal Grammar as a *Generative Grammar*: articulating thought has an indefinite potential for variation; especially given the infinite use of discrete elements with potentially endless recursive constructions. We are creative beings, and that is reflected in our language: again, as against behaviorist views that we are trained to respond in accordance with experienced rewards and punishments—almost “brainwashed by experiences” (experiences that can be humanly manipulated, as with advertising)—creativity ties in with spontaneous freedom and intent. But like artistic creativity, we need something to work with: techniques and mediums—and in this case, the techniques and medium may be given by the structure of our brains, as they have evolved over millions of years. Again, rather than a focus on language as an *object* to be dissected, we must look at it as an *ability* of the brain (which is much in line with Wittgenstein’s shift from searching for the core logic in language in his *Tractatus*, to an examination of how we *use* language in his later philosophy).

THE CONTEXT-FREE LANGUAGE ORGAN(S)

To say that language is “hard-wired” in the brain, at least as far as generative grammar is involved, means that the brain is not 100% plastic at birth... not the blank slate as the Empiricist Locke would have it—and although many *parts* of the brain may be incorporated in a linguistic act (as noted with brain imaging that reveals specific areas of brain activation for certain types of mental activity), the very notion of “parts” suggests that the brain’s functions are divided: there could be a modularity of mind, where specific sections of the brain are like organs in the body—different organs work together, but they each have separate (sometimes overlapping) functions. Dissecting a human brain indeed demonstrates that different parts are at least visually distinguishable; and even those parts not distinguishable by the naked eye (e.g. globs of neurons) have been demonstrated to be connected to different functions through evidence of many people having lost certain abilities in conjunction with damage or aphasias to similar regions in the brain. This can get specific, as with the loss of coherent semantic content with damage to Wernicke’s region, or loss of grammatical ability with damage to Broca’s region in the brain. Indeed, these two areas (Broca’s and Wernicke’s) would be prime candidates as language organs, and would demonstrate that the “language organ” is itself subdivided into smaller sub-organs.

(I)NTERNAL AND (E)XTERNAL LANGUAGES

It is with this notion of an innate, inborn ability to use an internal language based in brain sub-organs, that we can see Chomsky’s aversion to theories of a social construction of external languages, as with, for example, “memes.” Memes are purported to be social customs and practices that pass through humans as carriers—one can think of how linguistic fads, which like the hula-hoop, take off from an original spark, and spread like a fire—linguistically, one might think of catch-phrases, like “where’s the beef?” promoted once by a hamburger franchise.

Of course, there would be interactivity between human biology and cultural customs; but these memes can seemingly take on a life of their own.

Where I believe Chomsky is coming from, in rejecting the likes of Memes, is a failure to see how they could originate outside brains—and to know *where* exactly these “things” exist. I think it could be argued that they do originate in brains, and that they exist in brains as subtle modifications of brain-memory/structure. They exist socially as a sort of statistical “hologram”—many people carry memes as similar modifications of memory and/or learned abilities—just as learning to drive a car is an acquired ability that is passed on from some people to others. Yes, one can’t point to the “car-driving-ability” in some sort of abstract/real existence, but that ability does exist, in particular people, not all people, and is largely a cultural phenomenon. I think that Chomsky would agree that at least some aspects of language are cultural—such as the content of the advertising slogan mentioned above. To say that a linguistic hula-hoop is innate seems absurd to me; it is one of those infinite variations that the creative mind came come up with—given the biological limitations of a Universal Grammar, or hips that are able to swivel.

But it would be difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate that memes could account for all language abilities. We must have some innate abilities to work with, or else, to really put the metaphor to the test, simply putting a mirror or real blank slate in the world would create a knowledgeable being. We need faculties of the mind, as Kant outlined at length (for the ability to make logical judgments)—there must be some functioning of a certain degree of complication or else there would be no ability to acquire additional abilities. To what extent these fundamental abilities are “context-free,” and how flexible they are, is a matter for debate and observational inquiry. Steven Pinker, who wrote a book called, and refuting, *The Blank Slate*, also studied the limits of innate *semantics*, staking a moderate position where he:

“proposed that the human mind contains representations of the meanings of words which are composed of more basic concepts like ‘cause,’ ‘means,’ ‘event,’ and ‘place,’” and dismisses “the crazy idea that the concept of ‘carburetor’ is somehow coded in to our DNA.” (*The Stuff of Thought – Language as a Window into Human Nature*, pp. 90-91).

As Chomsky’s work has focused mostly on language and grammar—areas critical to what makes us human, and our ability to think, and much of what we consider part of our “souls” and personality—his insights into language should reveal much about any nature we might have as humans.

PRUNING THE UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR TREE

I will not go into the complexities of the evolution of Chomsky’s view on the structure of our grammatical abilities. Suffice it to note that his views have changed: from noting how deep structures of thought could be transformed into surface structures of linguistic utterances via various specific rules, rules that could become untenably complex to the point of varying from language to language and from situation to situation (and hence not be Universal); to the more recent *minimalist program* arising from intermediate theories: general *principles* (such as the mobility of terms from one place to another in a proposition [move] and the combination of parts to make larger wholes as with morphemes, phrases, etc. [merge]) limited by *parameters* (optional aspects of grammar that get locked in by habit—e.g. imagine a language like Latin, where the verb might always *move* to the end of a sentence after both subject and object (SOV), contrasted with English where the verb usually follows a subject, but precedes an object (SVO) and will *move* inbetween).

Such a transition from a more traditional and specific examination of grammar to a more flexible, general, and hence universal, understanding of grammar might redraw the lines

between those abilities that are biologically innate, and those that are culturally contingent; albeit that to a certain extent the culturally contingent aspects may be available to the Universal Grammar: the Universal Grammar has possibilities that are pruned. In this case, exceptions do not prove the universal rule, but suggest where the universal shades into the contingent.

A question arises with the division between intent and articulation. Chomsky's earlier views on Transformational Grammar, despite such claims that "linguistic and mental processes are virtually identical" (*Cartesian Linguistics - A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, p.78), suggest that what we have to work with is a semi-linguistic intent that must be transformed into a coherent grammatical utterance:

"Language has an inner and an outer aspect. A sentence can be studied from the point of view of how it expresses a thought or from the point of view of its physical shape, that is, from the point of view of either semantic interpretation or phonetic interpretation" (*Cartesian Linguistics*, p. 79).

Thus intent would be part of the deep-logical-semantic-structure, and the utterance would be the surface phonetic structure in accordance with grammatical rules. Such is an overly static and spatial view; as it seems that with spontaneous thought and speech (and writing) one does not always know where one will end up when one starts. We may have a fuzzy notion of what we want to say, but do not fully realize that until we've at least partially said it. There is more interaction between utterance and intention than the earlier Chomsky could account for with his mapping out of grammar trees. We need a more temporal theory of grammar... one that can account for the unfolding and development of intent. Again, the earlier Chomsky seems to assume that we know what we're going to say, or more importantly, verbally think, before we say or think it. Not so, in actual practice.

The minimalist program may be more flexible in this regard—given that the rules of transformation are thrown out in favor of general principles and parameters: such could be more easily “animated.” The verbal thought process is no doubt tied to other cognitive processes (we can talk about rotating an image in our mind; give verbal instructions about how to steer a car, etc.)—these cognitive processes are tied up with our senses, and how we reason *through* our sense organs (figuring things out visually, or with auditory or olfactory thinking strategies, etc.) – and in a way, these non-verbal cognitive processes could be seen as tying in with pre-verbal intent. Even these ways of thinking might unfold temporally as well though... and we must keep in mind that these various modules of the mind are in a near constant interaction—verbal cues can cause one to focus on and highlight certain visual aspects of perception, and vice-versa.

To diverge from Chomsky for a moment... by letting go of very specific *transformational* rules of grammar—the minimalist program might be said to get closer to what goes on with “verbal intent” as it unfolds. Such would mesh with the notion of a *short-term memory* able to hold on to one idea while exploring a few others: the *principle* of term mobility requires short-term memory; and the *parameter* set by tuning into one option or another, would be an innate habit, albeit a habit carved out of other possibilities.

“Verbal intent” may be shaped by further limitations of the brain. Why is your average sentence only so long (say, seven words), and not much longer (like 100 words). Obviously, long books suggest that ideas can take more than 100 words to express—so it wouldn’t necessarily be the “nature of the world” that limits average sentence length. No, this seems more like a cognitive limitation: short-term memory can only hold so much at a time. But, of course, one short sentence leads to another, and our much more complex long-term memory may feed through short-term memory, as we develop our immediate

thoughts via our accumulated (and innate) knowledge and beliefs.

Our “language” organs may be limited, as is our short-term memory. Diverging even further from Chomsky, there may be a grammar “look-ahead”—a grammatical predisposition to use, e.g. “Subject Verb Object,” (or Subject Object Verb, if our parameter selection was different) that interacts with the semantic content of what we start to express—although the flash of a thought “I want...” may invoke a verb-phrase “to eat ice cream” or a noun-phrase “some ice cream,” we often do have idiomatic grammar habits, that most likely don’t have a grammatical “look-ahead” beyond your average sentence length. Such habits though, when the grammatical rubber hits the road, often follow very specific and what seem non-universal grammatical rules, but rather, culturally arbitrary habits—turns of phrase, or idioms. Again, there is the issue of determining where biological Universal Grammar (of the Minimalist Program) stops, and the more idiosyncratic, albeit habitually idiomatic, specific language grammars begin. Idiosyncratic idioms aside, Chomsky might suggest that, like a tree that fans out to very fine branches, the Universal Grammar is refined by “pruning” parameters where principles like *move* and *merge* can only be expressed in a finite number of ways given our biological (and possibly to some extent, cultural) limitations, perhaps being refined to even the most specific of grammatical practices.

The difference between early Transformational Grammar and the Minimalist Program, as pertains to verbal intent and verbal articulation might be summed as thus: the first assumes that we have a *complete* intent that must be translated from one sphere to the next—from intent to articulation; whereas the Minimalist Program allows for us to follow a biologically hard-wired yet culturally switched on habit as the intent unfolds, dancing on the edge of the most specific of parameters (those available habits that were not pruned away in childhood)—intent and articulation need not be divided. We may actually think through

a grammar as it has been developed (through pruning various possible parameters). The building blocks of general principles like *move* and *merge* are limited by the parameter selection determined by cultural “switching”—much like pruned tree branches that eliminate some potential syntactical “habits” and reinforce others.

NEWTON, NATURAL SELECTION, AND CONSCIOUS INTENT

The coincidence of mental intent and physical articulation—the way we feel out what we are saying, brings to my mind *consciousness*. Like gravity, or force, subjective *feeling* is not a mechanical process. One can imagine mechanics taking place in a four-dimensional space bent by a displacing matter—where trajectories change due to curves in space: such might seem a way of accounting for gravity in a spatial-mechanical way; but that just defers the question of how matter curves space. Chomsky’s reminder that Newton saw beyond mechanism and hence saw beyond the engineer-ably understandable—is a great confession that one cannot know everything (at least as mechanical constructions):

“Newton established, to his great dismay, that not only does mind escape the reach of mechanical philosophy, but so does everything else in nature, even the simplest terrestrial and planetary motion” (from “Language and the Brain” in *On Nature and Language*, p. 67).

Such means that there could be more to intent than biologically determined (and possibly unconscious “Freudian”) desires. Consider: natural selection suggests that something survives in a possibly changing environment: that there is a statistical similarity between an entity and its possibly deviant copy (or progeny). Living creatures reproduce, and divergent DNA can help them to better survive, or die off more quickly. In any case, thriving survival of a *species* means that statistically similar plants or creatures sustain or multiply in number, and survive possibly changing environments (including other

plants/creatures). (*Conservation* is usually aimed at conserving life as we know it now; often in order to preserve the human species). There seems to be a tie between a desire for reproduction (e.g. the sex-drive) and population growth (obviously!) A fundamental life-force seems aimed at the success of one's own species: love itself could be the subjective manifestation of life as shaped by natural selection (and this natural selection extends to the mental realm, where we look for theories that survive in varying contexts: theories that are reproducible and context-invariant—the philosophical school of Pragmatism interlocks with natural selection).

But human desires, as much as they may be rooted in life itself, come in many refined and complex varieties. The specifics of a contingent conversation may limn the edge of a bio-mechanical brain, as one expresses what one intends or desires, and one is not an operation of the brain: the brain and body are used by us as much as they determine us as free agents. Conscious intent would simply be beyond the mechanics of the brain, albeit shaped by that very bodily organ.

POLITICAL ECONOMIES: UNIVERSAL EQUALITY AND DISSENT

In addressing Noam Chomsky as a philosophical thinker, it would be unjust to simply outline his contributions to psycholinguistics, as he has also been a monumental force with his searing socio-political critique of US foreign policy and mass media bias. There are a few parallels between his linguistic studies and his political critiques: both are studied in a “scientific” manner—beholden to the facts, moving beyond anecdotal evidence to the statistical; both evidence appreciation for action over mere observation (i.e. a focus on generative grammar over behavior observation and taxonomies in linguistics, and an emphasis on activist dissent over passive consumerism in a social context); and both are concerned with the “Universal”—as with a Universal Grammar, and his political critique of hypocritical foreign policies that don't apply principles universally (—esp. to oneself).

We closed this chapter's discussion of linguistics with some comments on natural selection—and I think natural selection is applicable to Chomsky's political critique as well. Chomsky could be accurately described as a progressive—and like divergent DNA being necessary for evolution, Chomsky demonstrates dissent from the status quo; questioning deep societal assumptions—dissent that is necessary to improve upon our social situation. But Chomsky is also against a sort of social Darwinism where, like a particular species succeeding in multiplying, a particular type of people (the power elite) gather more concentration of power in ever fewer hands. That is, just as one *species* may spread over an environment, there is also a tendency for one group of people to spread their influence over a social-political-economic domain. Chomsky does not discuss this phenomenon in these terms, but suffice it to say that he advocates a democratic decentralization of power with his critique of concentrations of power: radical biodiversity rather than the success of a few species.

So Chomsky's targets, in an effort to move beyond all sorts of enslavement and exploitation, are the "masters" of society, private tyrannies, the power elite—and in many ways, the capitalist bourgeois owners of... not only the means of production, but the means of public information dissemination. In his essay, "Democracy and Markets in the New World Order"—Chomsky notes:

"The history of business and political economy yields many examples of the subordination of narrow gain to the broader interest of the opulent minority, which is usually class conscious in a business-run society like the United States. Illustrations include central features of the modern world: the creation and sustenance of the Pentagon system of corporate welfare despite its well-known inefficiencies; the openly proclaimed strategy of diversion of soaring profits to creation of excess capacity abroad as a weapon against the domestic working class; the design of automation within the state

system to enhance managerial control and de-skill workers even at the cost of efficiency and profitability; and many other examples including a large part of the foreign policy” (*Powers and Prospects*, p. 130).

Indeed, the minority most often protected by the state supposedly run through a democracy representing the majority, are the power elite... the “opulent minority.” It would be safe to say that Chomsky seriously questions capitalism, albeit he might point out that we in the US do not have a pure capitalistic economic system, but a business world that has a symbiotic relationship with the government (e.g. “state-capitalism” as with “corporate welfare” where externalities are cleaned up by the state, where the state funds research that is in turn exploited for profit, and where the government intervenes to “bail out” firms that are deemed too large to fail, etc).

PROPAGANDA, INDOCTRINATION, EDUTAINMENT

Along with Edward S. Herman, Noam Chomsky worked out a study of propaganda in their work, *Manufacturing Consent – The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. In the introduction, they claim:

“The media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them. The representatives of these interests have important agendas and principles that they want to advance, and they are well positioned to shape and constrain media policy. This is normally not accomplished by crude intervention, but by the election of right-thinking personnel and by the editors’ and working journalists’ internalization of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution’s policy” (*Manufacturing Consent*, p. xi).

To examine this, Chomsky and Herman developed a propaganda model that described five stages of filtering of any

news before it reaches the public at large. All five stages are intimately intertwined with the semi-capitalistic system that we have in the US.

First, the media are *owned* by the power elite who want to expand their power through profit:

“[T]he dominant media firms are quite large businesses; they are controlled by the very wealthy people or by managers who are subject to sharp constraints by owners and other market-profit-oriented forces; and they are closely interlocked, and have important common interests, with other major corporations, banks, and government” (*Manufacturing Consent*, p. 14).

Second, the media must attract *advertisers*, who aim to promote passive consumerism:

“Advertisers will want, more generally, to avoid programs with serious complexities and disturbing controversies that interfere with the ‘buying mood.’ They seek programs that will lightly entertain and thus fit in with the spirit of the primary purchases—the dissemination of a selling message” (*Manufacturing Consent*, pp. 17-18).

In her book, *No Logo*, Naomi Klein explored the ubiquity of advertising, and how it has put a positive veneer on an ugly reality of outsourcing jobs to foreign countries where it is easier to exploit labor. This, combined with the Chomsky-Herman insight into the second media filter, suggests the untenable aim of advertisers to move the US populace as a group to be passive consumers that don’t actively produce anything—the US population itself as a sort of power elite living off the labor of poorer countries (untenable, as *this* power-elite does not have the seemingly endless resources of the “*real*” power elite). Yet it should be noted that advertising can also be seen as adding

aesthetic value to products—there is a continuum between product design and product promotion—and an informed public may want their products to be designed and advertised as ecologically and sociologically sustainable.

The third filter: the *sources* of information are the powers that be—those who have been legitimized simply by virtue of their being integral parts of the present social system. Reporters can't search out news everywhere, and hence often rely on corporate PR representatives, and government press-conferences to set the agenda, if not the actual content, of what is deemed newsworthy.

Fourth, it can take a considerable amount of resources, and established connections, to create *flack*. Yes, there are real grass-roots organizations that create protests and political movements; but too often we have “fake grass-root” organizations, sometimes labeled as “Astroturf” organizations, that use power already gained, in order to maintain and expand that same power.

Fifth, Chomsky and Herman claim “Anticommunism” as a “control mechanism”—an ideology that “helps mobilize the populace against an enemy” (*Manufacturing Consent*, p. 29). In the contemporary era, that may be seen with the “war on terror”—where a new enemy is developed, or becomes a focus that is used to create a “team” atmosphere of “us against them.” This serves to get people on-board, and to facilitate the ostracizing of people questioning the status quo as assisting “the enemy,” and gives members of a country unifying common cause—hence curtailing dissent.

Again, these five stages of news filtering are a result of the type of political economy we have—the people with power are aimed at maintaining a status quo...of maintaining and expanding the power they already have—and the “Us vs. Them” mentality just mentioned integrates well with Chomsky's critique of US foreign policy.

Yet, there are mitigating “counter-filters” as well. Consider the quote often attributed to Abraham Lincoln: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.” This stands to reason, as there are competing ideologies and sources of information in a robustly cross-referencing and media rich world. It could also be that many people often buy into the status quo, knowing full well its ramifications and alternatives. Moreover, many different agendas that have money behind them are at odds (e.g. lawyer groups vs. insurance agencies)—which suggests we should take up causes we believe in that are not already well-financed. Furthermore, the media industries first allegiance must be to their audience, or they will have no audience to sell to their advertisers. How do we explain phenomena such as the success of television shows such as “The Daily Show,” and “The Colbert Report” which provide a bit of “edutainment?” True, these shows are often “level-headedly moderate” thus enforcing an “Overton window” of what is deemed acceptable discourse—they comically savage the extremes of right and left—and thus center political debate. But they also raise consciousness and teach critical thinking, even about their own relation to advertising (as with Stephen Colbert’s run for president being sponsored by Doritos). It is true that these shows rarely if ever incite anti-capitalist rebellion; but again—do democratic polls really suggest that people are against capitalism per se; or that they are against specific aspects of it?

ALTERNATIVES TO HYPOCRISY

Getting into the details of Chomsky’s varied and specific foreign policy critiques is beyond the scope of this chapter, and would derail the focus of this book. But it should be noted that time and again, Chomsky exposes the hypocrisy of US foreign policy—the “Us vs. Them” attitude that helps unify and mobilize a domestic population that becomes blind to the “others” who are vilified, or simply not cared for as full human beings, because they are not part of “our” group:

“People can believe that when we use force against Iraq and Kuwait it’s because we really observe the principle that illegal occupation and human rights abuses should be met by force. They don’t see what it would mean if those principles were applied to U.S. behavior. That’s a success of propaganda of quite a spectacular type” (*Media Control*, p. 53).

Time and again, Chomsky finds the U.S. as the egregious aggressor on the international scene—often itself a terrorist state breaking international law with impunity. And time and again, those across the political spectrums share underlying assumptions... biases (e.g. that our political-economic system is better than any other)—and are willing to use force, not only to defend that political-economic status quo... but to spread it globally as well.

Again, much of Chomsky’s political-economic critique boils down to those in power trying to maintain and expand that power by spreading ideals of passive consumerism, and an Us vs. Them mentality to keep group cohesion and mobilize forces against any external threats to the status-quo of, yet again, maintaining and expanding the power of the elite.

Although citing the anticommunism prevalent in 20th century media and state policy bias, Chomsky has not advocated communism as much as he has claimed appreciation for Libertarian-Socialism or Anarcho-Syndicalism. A commitment to autonomy against dominating powers, while supporting the idea of community cooperation. This ties in with the participatory economic or “Parecon” system advocated by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel. Albert and Hahnel have argued that communism has its own power elite, with a “coordinator class” that deal themselves all the empowering jobs. What we should strive for, rather, is a system that truly decentralizes the decision making processes that affect each and every one of our lives. Such might politicize the entire economic apparatus—whether this would liberate us from tyrannies at

every level of social order, or bog us down in endless debates is something we should seek to test, if we want to resist concentrations of power in the hands of an elite few. I say “test,” though, and not revolt for—as reform through avenues that have been experimented with successfully (as with employee owned businesses), are a safer bet for social advance than a scorched earth revolution that starts largely from scratch. The system we have may not be as good as it could be, but others built from the ground up could be worse.

CHOMSKY AS “DIALECTICAL” THINKER?

Many thinkers use binary oppositions in their thought... from Plato’s Eternal (real forms) vs. the Temporal (illusory world), to Nietzsche’s plastic Apollo vs. dynamic Dionysius. Whether by design or by accident, Chomsky too has a binary pair—not as a conceptual opposition to explore, but as a dichotomy in his actual intellectual orientation. Roughly, that split between linguistics and politics could be seen to correspond between a study of the individual and the social. Seeing that Chomsky has looked to move from mere observational descriptions to explanations of action—he has demonstrated this as well with the dichotomy at the heart of his intellectual endeavors: he doesn’t just talk about the (invariant) brain/ (pliable) politics split in itself—he has oriented his own “philosophical career” to explore these realms and to *achieve* advances in both—as a scientist and activist. Although his achievement in each field is considerable—to put both together has demonstrated yet another monumental advance in thinking, and places Chomsky as a major western philosopher in our lineage dating back to Plato and Anaximander. It is true that in the contemporary era, individual achievement is all the more situated in a social context (advances are as much social as they are individual)—but Chomsky has taken a leadership role in his chosen fields, and represents a cutting edge of thinking in his era. And despite the possibly universal aspects of human nature—what one might call the generic aspects of humanity— through his dissent

and his own creativity, he has demonstrated how to move beyond being a generic human being.