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Book Review

WHAT KIND OF CREATURES ARE WE?

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What kind of creatures are we? by Noam Chomsky, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2018, pp.150, ₹447. ISBN 9788193732939.

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Distinguished as a foundational thinker–philosopher in Linguistics, Noam Chomsky has also been a prominent public intellectual for decades, inspiring resistance to coercive forms of power in the socio-political and economic domains. Few readers traverse this wide spectrum, and those who do, wonder how to cogently link the formal mathematical processes in Linguistics to the commentaries on modern exercises of power. This book offers an articulate insight into the philosophical underpinnings of this continuum, i.e. the nature of the biological mind. Core to his philosophical approach are arguments to establish that all humans are genetically endowed with the same cognitive/linguistic capabilities that allow them to acquire knowledge/language in the natural world. All forms of ‘political guardianship’ that afford special status to a privileged few, be it aristocrats, capitalists or progressive intellectuals, undermine this naturally endowed fundamental equality.

What Kind of Creatures Are We is a philosophical treatise that underlines Noam Chomsky’s conviction that such enquiries need to be ontologically grounded. For example, although language can be used in communicative contexts, a study of communicative contexts has a potential to answer the question, ‘what is language’, as much as the study of television programmes will reveal an answer to the question ‘what is vision’. All explorations into the cognitive faculties of human beings need to be grounded in the biological basis for these faculties. The persistent problem in doing so is that the tools available to neuroscience in our day and age do not suffice to transparently understand the biological basis for these.

Elaborating on his point, Chomsky says that contemporary ‘neuroscience and philosophy of mind’ might learn these lessons from the recent examples of chemical laws and Newtonian metaphysics. In 1927, when Bertrand Russell wrote about them, chemical laws ‘were not in fact reducible to physical laws as physics was then understood, though after physics underwent radical changes, with the quantum-theoretic revolution, it was unified with a virtually unchanged chemistry.’ Similarly, when Newton observed forces of attraction and repulsion between bodies that were not in contact, it was before these observations could be mathematically understood. In fact, his contemporaries like Leibnitz, committed to a completely mechanistic understanding of the world, felt Newton was weakening the scientific method by reverting to unexplained occult. In time, these observations were both validated and explained mathematically. Thus, Chomsky exhorts us to buttress our understanding of the human mind by observing phenomena and have faith that one day, neuroscience will catch up to explain its biological basis.

Language, in the sense Chomsky uses it, standing on the shoulders of enlightenment rationalists like Descartes, is a uniquely human characteristic and therefore central to our understanding of the kind of biological creatures we are. Communication, signalling and even referentiality are not uniquely human, and language in that sense is seen in various other biological organisms. However, none of them, not even our closest primate cousins, recursively combine abstract symbolic representations in extremely simple ways to generate

infinite thought that can be externalised and therefore communicated to other human beings. Chomsky refers to this as the Basic Property. The first chapter, ‘What is Language’, thus elaborates on some of the philosophical observations about I-language, where I stands for Internal, Individual and Intensional, which have been known as the *Strong Minimalist Hypotheses* in the last three decades.

Six decades ago, Noam Chomsky observed the phenomenon of displacement in language and in subsequent years strove to explain it. Displacement is a characteristic where words or phrases are not interpreted in the same linear position that they appear in a string. For example, in the sentence—*instinctively eagles that fly swim*—the adverb does not modify the verb linearly closest to it, but the one farther away. As per the meaning, *swim* and *instinctively* ought to make a constituent and do, but on the surface they are quite distant. In order to explain this, two separate systems are proposed within Language. The *conceptual-intellectual* system that computes simple mathematical functions like *Merge*, to form a hierarchy of unordered sets of meaningful constituents, and the *sensory-motor* or externalisation system that necessitates linearisation, order and other factors. The I-Language, which is common to all human beings, pertains to the conceptual-intellectual system and its computing mechanism. While some parts of this system are generalised mechanisms available to larger cognitive domains across organisms, a few of them are specific to the human mind/brain and enable us to compute meaning the way we do.

Language is thus an entrenched cognitive mechanism and not a tool that evolved out of the human need to communicate. It is optimally designed for computational efficiency and not communicative ease. Chomsky presents a number of illustrative examples including passivisation, garden path sentences, and island extraction condition to show that in all cases where communicative and computational efficiency are in conflict, the latter wins. To present one of the illustrative examples from the text, if passivisation is a tool to foreground information for communicative purposes, it should be possible to foreground any part of the sentence carrying information. However, that is not the case. The active sentence, ‘the boys took the books from the library’, can be passivised as ‘the books were taken by the boys from the library’, but not as ‘the library the books were taken from by the boys’. This is not possible on account of being ‘barred by language design’. In English, the particular information, ‘the library’, would have to be foregrounded in some other manner.

If the design of language was not fashioned by the external world, it would not be expected to evolve with time and the environment either. In fact, Chomsky reiterates this with the assertion that human language and thought have not evolved in their Basic Property since they emerged in the first humans of Africa. This is a surprising finding given that human civilisation and knowledge have been growing and gradually drawing the veil over erstwhile mysteries of nature. In the second chapter, framed around the question ‘what can we understand’, Chomsky sets out to frame the philosophical positions acknowledging the limits of human understanding. Over time, as we refine our tools of investigation, we unveil new knowledge that had erstwhile been hidden. However, acknowledging the biological basis of the human mind also behoves us to recognise its biological limits. This acknowledgement of the limits allows us to gain clarity over the scope of questions formulated and explored by the human mind. While there are hard problems of nature that human beings are able to decipher over time, there are many more that remain mysteries forever. Some of these mysteries might not even be conceivable by the human mind, and so cannot be formulated in questions at all.

The first two chapters thus locate the ontological enquiry into humans within the biological mind. This focus on cognitive aspects positions all humans as individuals who have the same genetic endowment for thought and language that, according to evolutionary scientist Ian Tattersall, developed somewhere with a very narrow window of 50,000 to 100,000 years ago and hasn't evolved since. Humans, however, are not just 'internal' individuals, but also 'external' beings inhabiting systems of inequality and disparities in the social world. In the third chapter, Chomsky reflects on the repercussions the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources have on the development of humans to their creative potential.

Structured around the question 'what is common good', the third chapter explores how human beings fare in the world of inequitable distribution of power and wealth. Referring to the moral principles and practices of enlightenment rationality as truisms, Chomsky asserts that they are both universally acclaimed as well as rejected in practice. For example, while equality and liberty are the enshrined moral ideals, in practice, democratic systems are designed to allow a select few to be the decision makers for the common 'masses'. They do so either as the benevolent wisdom holders who have the best interest of the ignorant masses, or as shrewd capitalists who need to secure their wealth from the talons of the masses. Both these circumstances erode the individuality of the common man by depriving one of opportunities to bloom into a creative, holistic human with agency and association. Given Chomsky's understanding of the human being as creatures that are genetically endowed with the ability to create thoughts, it is natural to expect his anarchic position in opposition to coercive power that denies freedom of thought and action to individuals.

Thus, Chomsky uses Rudolph Rocker to define anarchism as a system that 'seeks to free labour from economic exploitation and to free society from "ecclesiastical or political guardianship", thereby opening the way to 'an alliance of free groups of men and women based on cooperative labour and a planned administration of things in the interest of the community'. This vision aims to remove impediments in the path of a full development of human creativity. Note that this social order is devoid of grand narratives that seek to provide 'ultimate explanations' of the reality.

In the fourth and final chapter that revolves around the question, 'the mysteries of nature: how deeply hidden', Chomsky presents a nuanced discussion on some of the philosophical proposals pertaining to the limits of human cognitive capacity that he introduced in chapter 2. These limits mark a radical shift in the understanding of science as that which would make the world intelligible to one where we 'discover "manifest principles" that partially explain them [chemical, electrical or mental aspects of the world], though their causes remain disconnected from what we take to be more fundamental aspects of science'. This abandoning of the intelligibility condition of early scientific revolution allowed for the emergence of what Richard Popkin calls 'a constructive scepticism', where science proceeds by 'doubting our abilities to find grounds for our knowledge, while accepting and increasing the knowledge itself'. This necessitates the recognition that 'the secrets of nature of things in themselves are forever hidden from us'.

Since the 1970s, Chomsky has been known to have grappled with the idea that the mind, being an anatomical organ, there might be questions that it can think and articulate but not answer. Known as mysterianism, this position yields a centrality to the experiential first person perspectives, thus falling in with the post-Newtonian understanding that science cannot claim the aura of objective truth presented from a third part perspective. Rather, contemporary science is a consensus driven cooperative enquiry where various first person

perspectives strive to achieve a broad range of agreements. This outlook towards a democratisation of science parallels the arguments presented in chapter 3 concerning the democratisation of processes in deciding and delivering what is common good.

This book, in the process of revealing the intellectual ground beneath Chomsky's illustrious career, offers an exploration of a strand of Western philosophy that extends from Plato and Aristotle, through Descartes, Newton, Hume and Locke, to Humboldt, Marx and Russell, and finally encompasses his contemporaries like Strawson and Stoljar. While acknowledging the prominent criticisms of his philosophical positions over the last six decades, he uses this space to clarify and reinforce his arguments. What stands out for us is his reluctance to commit to a programmatic action towards achieving a truly democratic society (he has no hesitation in doing so when it comes to the study of human cognition and language), even as he acknowledges the ethical universality and universal rejection in practice truisms from Enlightenment.