

Chomsky's Cartesian Speciesism

Descartes was by no means the fanatical rationalist he is often caricatured as. In fact he was quite wary of those "who take no account of experience and think that truth will spring from their brains like Minerva from the head of Jupiter" (CSM I, p. 21).¹

There are many critiques of Chomsky's linguistics that clearly have a political motivation. This is not one of those. I have generally agreed with many of Chomsky's political ideas for years. But there is a consensus of doubt and disapproval of Chomsky's linguistics that has been growing into a chorus. I am joining this chorus of skepticism and doubt in this essay. Here are my reasons.

Over a number of recent years, I have been thinking about Chomsky views on nature and the subject of animals in his work. I was willing to extend Chomsky a great deal of leeway on what first appears to be a kind of speciesism. In a long, sporadic correspondence with him over several years, I discussed my doubts and concerns. I began to see that a

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http://metapsychology.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=book&id=5110&cn=39

generous willingness to grant him the benefit of the doubt was misplaced. My original doubts about him were unfortunately confirmed.²

It is obvious, now that so many species are disappearing or under the threat of extinction that rights for animals must be part of an ongoing liberation of beings. Centuries ago “women, slaves, and chattels” were grouped as one category under rich men who alone had rights. Institutional slavery is largely gone in Europe and America and women have gained more rights relative to men, while animals and nature still lag far behind. Only animals and nature itself remain without effective rights, except in certain countries and in some cases.³ Chomsky resists rights for nature and animals and he claims such rights are “incommensurate” with human rights.⁴ He makes these backward claims based on the archaic views of Cartesian philosophy. He says elsewhere that human concerns are alone worth pursuing, and he thinks

² Somewhere around the year 2000 I became aware that he did not have a high opinion of animals from an essay the late Val Plumwood wrote about Chomsky. I corresponded with Plumwood, for these reasons. She was a very interesting Australian philosopher and the polar opposite of Chomsky. She actually knows a lot about nature and animals, unlike most philosophers. But she dislikes rationalism, and this is problematic, for reasons I can't go into here. See Plumwood, Val, “Noam Chomsky and Liberation Politics”

³ I am very glad to see Bolivia under Evo Morales has made efforts to apply the idea of rights for nature, calling it the “Law of Mother Earth”. I just call it Nature's Rights. I discussed it with Chomsky who laughed at the idea. Rocks have no rights he said. (Should humans be allowed to blow up the Himalayas for minerals, the mountains of west Virginia or the coal tar sands of Canada?) Living and non-living things, obviously related, need to start being accorded rights as the earth and beings on earth, obviously interrelated, are increasingly under attack. Among these rights are:

- the right to life and to exist;
- the right to continue vital cycles and processes free from human alteration;
- the right to pure water and clean air;
- the right to balance;
- the right not to be polluted;
- the right to not be affected by mega-infrastructure and development projects that affect the balance of ecosystems and the local inhabitant communities;
- the right to not have cellular structure modified or genetically altered (this one is more complicated than the others)

⁴ Letter to the author

animals and nature are more or less irrelevant.

As I questioned him and analyzed his responses it became clear he had no rational defense of his position. His views on animals are inextricably connected with his career as a linguist and derive from Descartes and others. His human centered and reactionary point of view contradicts his otherwise enlightened political attitudes and should be resisted and questioned. I began to see that his ideas about language are entwined with his ideas Descartes and animals, and these ideas should be questioned as well. I will outline these questions here....

When I read Chomsky's 2002 essay on "Biolinguistics", I first thought Chomsky had softened his earlier, rather speciesist views of animals as lesser beings. He had long held to a rationalistic "Cartesian" philosophy which he held onto as a sort of personal identity or 'brand' for his linguistic philosophy. He is something of a historian of the scientific philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries, though I have doubts about the conclusions he draws from this history. ⁵ He argues Descartes is the

⁵ Though a lot of his conclusions about science in the 17th century seem questionable. He says for instance that gravity is a huge mystery and that "scientists abandoned the animating idea of the early scientific revolution: that the world will be intelligible to us". No, no one abandoned that, they merely conceded that not everything was clear as yet, which should not have surprised anyone. Actually, gravity is increasingly well known and is a part of the physical world and thus of causation, as is proven by the fact that human bone and muscle loss accelerate quickly in outer space, doing physical harm to astronauts that stay more than six months. To say that gravity is action at a distance and this fact defeats mechanism and proves that "all is mind" is hugely overstated and probably erroneous. He claims only the "ghost" is left in the analogy of the ghost in the machine. The analogy of the ghost in the machine is not an accurate analogy to begin with. Chomsky seems to be indulging in a mystagogy of sorts. He suggests an analogy between gravity and "power of moving our body by our thoughts", in Newton's words. Both gravity and thought are areas of science not well understood, but so what? That does not imply any analogy, There are many things not yet understood by science. In "Turing on the "Imitation Game" Chomsky states that "thinking is a property of organized matter, alongside of other mysterious properties like attraction and repulsion." What they have in common, Chomsky imagines, is that they "transcend the limits of mechanism", His understanding of the limits of mechanism are too narrow. This is an unwarranted surmise on Chomsky's part that has no evidence at all in its favor. Chomsky is almost in the realm of science fiction here, or religion. It is very unlikely that either gravity or the

model we should have followed. He tried, at least in his early career to be true to the Cartesian tradition. Descartes is one of the first philosophers to begin to escape middle age dogmas and scholastic denial of experience and empirical observation. He had some good ideas. Foremost among them was his effort to create science as reductionist materialism. His ideas in this direction still have some useful and attractive features.

But many things Descartes thought or said, particularly about animals, are archaic and medieval, inherited from archaic and backward Christian and Greek speciesism. There appears to be a psychological element of cruelty in Descartes too, which was evidently passed to his followers. Chomsky has endorsed efforts by his own followers to dismiss the facts about Descartes' cruelty. But before I explain that I need to back up a little.

I had come across a quote from Chomsky made in an interview in which he said that the followers of Descartes had horrible relations with animals. He writes:

“In Cartesian philosophy, for example, where it was assumed ... the Cartesians thought they had proven that humans had minds and everything else in the world was a machine. So there's no difference between a cat and a watch, let's say. It's just the cat's a little more complicated. You go back to the court in the seventeenth century, and big smart guys who studied all that stuff and thought they understood it would as a sport take Lady So-and-So's favorite dog and kick it and beat it to death and so on and laugh, saying, this silly lady doesn't understand the latest philosophy, which was that it was just like dropping a rock on the

brain transcend causality or “mechanism”, Indeed, it appears that both gravity and the brain act in fairly well known ways and we now more about them all the time.

floor. That's gratuitous torture of animals. It was regarded as if we would ask a question about the torturing of a rock. You can't do it. There's no way to torture a rock. The moral sphere has certainly changed in that respect. Gratuitous torture of animals is no longer considered quite legitimate."

Naively, I took this to be a rare willingness on Chomsky's part to question Descartes himself, who does indeed deserve to be questioned on this subject. I loved this comment by Chomsky and thought, wrongly, that it indicated a change in Chomsky from his more hard-headed early days where Descartes seemingly could do no wrong. Had Chomsky opened his mind to ideas outside his rather narrow and archaic Cartesian rationalism? I was warming to the belief that he is a man who can change his views and wrote him to thank him and celebrate this.

To my great disappointment, I was mistaken to think Chomsky had changed and now cared about animals and nature. In my letter I praised Chomsky for this comment, glad he rejects cruelty that was inherent in the Cartesian view. He wrote me back and insisted he has not changed. He went further and stated, falsely as it turns out, that Descartes had been slandered and only Chomsky's followers had been cruel to animals.

He tried to maintain, wrongly, that Descartes had nothing to do with cruelty at all. To prove this he sent me an essay by a follower of his, Justin Leiber, purporting to prove Descartes innocent of such a "myth". Leiber's essay is full of easily disproved errors. Leiber mistakenly claims that "There is simply not a line in Descartes to suggest that he thought we are free to smash animals at will or free to do so because their behavior can be explained mechanically." But Leiber's essay is utterly false and badly researched. Descartes said quite a bit about cruelty to animals and indulged in it himself. The incontestable truth is Descartes was a cruel man who thought that animals deprived of language cannot

think and, therefore, are nothing but well-constructed, complex, unfeeling machines. Descartes proposed a dualistic division between the outside objective world and the inner subjective world. These are partly what Chomsky thinks, too.

Descartes himself wrote

“if you cut off the end of the heart of a living dog, and through the incision, put your finger into one of the concavities, you will clearly feel, every time, the heart shortens, if you press your finger and it stops pressing, every time, it lengthens”⁶

Also in a letter to Mersenne of November 18, 1630 Descartes says that if ‘you whip a dog six or eight times, to the sound of a violin, the dog will whimper and tremble if it hears to sound again’.

Chomsky wrote back with no apology for using Leiber’s paper as the truth when it was clearly false. He did not thank me for the corrections of his and Leiber’s obvious errors about Descartes either.⁷ He said that practices in animal experimentation were different in those days. So Descartes is somehow excused. I rejoined that in no age is whipping a

⁶ see Richard Watson Cogito Ergo Sum: the Life of Rene Descartes pg. 167-168, see letters of Descartes too

⁷ Stephen Pinker is a critic of Chomsky’s linguistics. He said of Chomsky that he is a ‘daunting opponent and not much inclined to give quarter to his critics. This has led to some fierce fallings-out. "He implies that people who disagree with him are stupid and ignorant. He is a brilliant debater and an out-and-out bully," said his MIT colleague Steven Pinker in a 1995 profile in the Boston Globe newspaper. In another interview with Cosmopetica, Pinker states that Chomsky can “can wow sycophants, blow off critics as stupid or evil, explain away embarrassing data, and rationalize mistakes at will.” Yes, Chomsky does do this. But far worse than his need to personally attack people is his denial of direct evidence. That is a different order of infraction entirely as it sometimes puts Chomsky outside science into the realm of cult and dogma.

dog while playing it violin anything but monstrous. Playing violin to the victims at Auschwitz was also a horrible act. Indeed, Descartes desensitization towards the pain of others is an early example of alienated and horrible killings through out the modern period. Da Vinci lived a hundred years before Descartes and let birds go from cages because he saw it as cruel. Like Darwin, Da Vinci was concerned with animal's rights. He was also a vegetarian and he was a far better experimentalist and scientist than Descartes ever was. Claiming Descartes was cruel because he was merely a child of his times is specious argument that seeks to excuse him. As I will show in a minute, Chomsky is also wrong to excuse Descartes for being an innocent child of his times. It is right to admire Descartes for formalizing aspects of the scientific method and a few minor discoveries, but trying to hide Descartes cruelty to protect your own linguistic theories is something else entirely.

It was becoming clear to me that Chomsky would stoop quite far to try to excuse the hero of his linguistic theories. It was personal for him. He would deny direct evidence that contradicted his false claims about Descartes. Suddenly, and distressingly, my belief that Chomsky is a scientist was brought into question. I learned what I did not want to learn: he doesn't care about evidence. He cares about being right, his career, and a dogmatism that is born of rationality. At least when it comes to his Linguistics career, Chomsky seems to be one of those who "who take no account of experience and think that truth will spring from their brains like Minerva from the head of Jupiter". I say this reluctantly as one who has admired Chomsky's politics for many years, and what I thought was his science too. He maybe be indeed the narrow minded speciesist that I feared he was years ago.

Chomsky wrote me again and tried to say that Leiber's essay still stands because Descartes clearly assumed that animals could feel pain.

Actually this is wrong too. I sent him this quote where Descartes clearly denies that animals feel pain.

In a letter to Mersenne, on 11 June 1640, Descartes wrote

"I do not explain the feeling of pain without reference to the soul. For in my view pain exists only in the understanding. What I do explain is all the external movements which accompany this feeling in us; in animals it is these movements alone which occur, and not pain in the strict sense ...".

Obviously, Descartes believed only humans and not animals have understanding, and only humans not animals have a soul, and therefore animals do not feel pain. He thought there was no connection between their sensations and their understanding and thus they could be tortured with impunity. Though animals can feel the "sensation" of joy, pains and other emotions they might mechanically respond by dancing about, appearing happy, or the like, even though the "animal machines", as Descartes calls them, would not *consciously* feel anything.

Chomsky responded to this obvious claim of Descartes that animals do not feel pain in a strange of Orwellian way. He told me that when Descartes says they don't feel pain "in the strict sense" he is saying that of course they feel pain. Yeah right, and war is peace and innocence is guilt and Animal Farm was written by Genghis Khan.

Chomsky was trying to bully me. But the evidence is very clear and I did not give in. Descartes clearly says that animals cannot feel pain because "pain only exists in the understanding" not in mere sensation and animals are incapable of understanding. He says that animals "have no [reason] at all." ⁸ So animals who sense pain do not actually feel it.

⁸ Chapter 5 Discourse on Method

For Descartes, animals might squeal in of pain, but this is only a mechanical reactions to external stimuli. In other words, hitting a dog with a stick, for example, is a kind of input and the squeal that follows would be merely output, but the dog did not feel anything at all and could not feel pain unless it was endowed with a mind and reason, which Descartes claims animals do not have. So Descartes followers, following their master, whacked away at little dogs and were oblivious to the screams.

Descartes lived for a time on a street of butchers and watched animal killing often. He brags in a letter in 1639, "I have spent much time on dissection during the last eleven years, and I doubt whether there is a doctor who has made more detailed observations than I." Since we know he liked to do live dissections many of these dissections were no doubt live tortures.

In summation, Leiber tries to prove that Descartes was maligned by history and animal rights activists. Leiber claim is false. Descartes thought animals can be tortured with impunity because they feel no pain. Chomsky was therefore mistaken to use Leiber in an effort to excuse Descartes for the moral culpability of "gratuitous torture" of animals. Leiber was trying to whitewash Descartes in order to make Chomsky's "Cartesian linguistics" look more palatable. He was trying to hide or erase the implicit speciesism in both Chomsky and Descartes. Most of Leiber's essay was an attack on Peter Singer the animals rights activist. As it turns out Leiber was mistaken to attack Singer in this way.⁹ Singer's opinion that Descartes had an influence on subsequent indifference to animal abuse, is largely correct.

⁹ Peter Singer writes, correctly, that Descartes believed that animals feel no pain "when cut with a knife" or "hot iron" and that Descartes theory "allowed the experimenter to dismiss any qualm they might feel" about torturing animals. See Singer [Animal Liberation](#) -. 118-120, Singer is quite correct about this, but the

Further proof is not needed--- *but there is further proof*. Descartes was himself aware that he was trying to vindicate animal torturers and creating an excuse for butchers, meat eaters, and animal abusers to enjoy themselves with impunity. Descartes writes in a 1649 Letter to Henry More:

“For Brevities sake I omit here my other reasons for denying thought to animals. *Please note that I am speaking of thought, and not of life or sensation*. I do not deny life to animals, since I regard it as consisting simply in the heat of the heart; and I do not even deny sensation, in so far as it depends upon a bodily organ. Thus my opinion is not so much cruel to animals as indulgent to human beings—at least to those who are not given to the superstitions of Pythagoras—since it absolves them from the suspicion of crime when they eat or kill animals” 3:366—AT 5:278-9

So here is Descartes admitting both his twisted and irrational logic and that he rather despises vegetarians. He is admitting he is well aware of vegetarians and thus of animals rights, and is saying he really cares to justify killers of animals. His theory is deliberately means to excuse cruelty. So much for Descartes age being ignorant of the issue, as Chomsky implied. The Pythagoreans he mentions, who were certainly superstitious, were also vegetarians and Descartes is here taking a swipe at them for their vegetarian interests. Chomsky imitates Descartes quite closely, and thinks “thought” is what language is about and since

proof of this is not so much in Singer’s sources for this information but in Descartes writings. Leiber attacks Singers sources but neglected to look it up in Descartes own work where there is plenty of evidence of his speciesist and cruel attitudes toward animals.

animals have no language, they have no thought. Darwin denies this directly of course, and insists, rightly, that animals are capable of advanced thought in many cases. For Descartes sensations did not mean awareness or understanding. He also denies animals have consciousness, or reason and thus they did not feel the pain they felt as sensations. He claimed they feel no pain when they are hurt, they merely react as machines who act as if they had pain. He is saying that his theory of animals as machines who feel no pain liberates animal killers of all kinds and vindicates those who hate vegetarians. This is rank speciesism.

Also in my discussion with Chomsky I quoted Michael Albert's autobiography in which he says "I see no comparison in importance between seeking to eliminate the roots and branches of sexism, and seeking to eliminate the roots and branches of violence against animals." For Albert, its good to be nice to women but violence against animals is OK. He needs his huge beefsteak slapped on a plate. Chomsky says he basically agrees with this human centered prejudice and monstrous endorsement of cruelty. That is what Descartes would think too. Racism, sexism and how animals and nature are treated are "incommensurate", Chomsky claims, invoking Cartesian speciesism. The speciesism of Albert and Chomsky creates substantial outclass of living beings, not just animals, but nature in general. This surprised me as much as his attempt to whitewash Descartes.

But what really shocked me about this discussion with Chomsky was his willingness to deny direct evidence against his claims, and to try to brow beat me into submitting to his outrageous denials of the evidence. I had written Chomsky in an effort to investigate his science because I was writing about his science positively in a poem. My discovery was unwelcome and more or less destroyed the poem I was trying to write.

But the truth matters more than a poem. I could still write a poem and tell the truth about what I learned. I had made similar investigations to write about Darwin¹⁰, Newton or Hawking. To my deep dismay I came away from Chomsky doubting he is a scientist at all. The poem could be an example of the misuse of science. Yes, I do believe that Chomsky did valuable work in claiming that the capacity for language is genetic. But he appears to have failed to have proven his main thesis that grammar is innate. His willingness to deny direct evidence makes me question Chomsky embrace of rationalism. His rationalism was showing clear irrational features. Chomsky used rationalism to flout direct evidence and erect any arbitrary rule he wished to, regardless of the reality of the matter. If you question him too closely he accuses you of having an inflated self image or of being insane or somehow mentally deficient.

What I learned was that his willingness to deny evidence suggests a dogmatic refusal of the scientific attitude. This disturbed me so much I started doing research on Chomsky's science. He has many enemies and most of them can be dismissed as right wingers who are politically motivated. They misrepresent and distort what he has been trying to do out of hate or prejudice. I do not hate Chomsky or need to misrepresent him. As it turns out, there are serious claims by people such as Daniel Dennett, Steven Pinker and John Searle, all of them well known philosophers more or less of Chomsky's generation or a little younger. These men doubt that what Chomsky is doing is valid science. I think they may be right, Chomsky 'second cognitive revolution' may be a failure, as John Searle says.

¹⁰ Reading about Darwin really enlightened me. The more I found out about him the more I liked him. He was very interested in animal rights and both he and she wife worked on animals behalf, He also was against slavery. Adrian Desmond admirably shows in his [Darwin's Sacred Cause, How a Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin's Views on Human Evolution](#), Darwin was not just against slavery but saw him science work as a major contribution to ending both slavery and race and religious prejudice.

Descartes theories about animals not feeling pain, even if they have sensations is ridiculous, of course. Descartes argument about animals not having minds also is an argument that denigrates animals in order to claim that only humans have language and that we are fundamentally separated from animals in our ability to use words. This side of the argument is fundamental to Chomsky's theory of language. It is here that Descartes speciesist attitudes toward animals implicate Chomsky's theory of language.

Descartes imagines humans are the only "thinking things", he was able to devalue everything that was taken to be outside thought. Anything that does not think or speak is of lesser value to Descartes. Peter Singer is right to implicate Descartes in justifying animals abuse for some centuries after him. Descartes speciesism depends upon and 'internalist' notion of language where language is equated with thought. Chomsky also equates language with thought. For Descartes and Chomsky language could not be about communication primarily because that puts it into the realm of the 'lesser' reality of animals. Chomsky is even "hostile", Pinker says, to the idea that language is about communication. ¹¹He follows Descartes to the letter and claims "the form of language ...is largely determined by internal factors." (CL. 64). Both Darwin, Pinker and many others dispute this. It amazes me that Chomsky accepted this side of Descartes argument, when the most simple empirical observations of animals and humans shows language is

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piGbuSTckr8&NR=1>

Pinker compares Chomsky to the romantics Rousseau and Marx, rightly I think, and should have added that Cartesian notions of privacy also lead in Chomsky's thought. Like Samuel Beckett, Chomsky thinks language is mostly solipsistic monologue. Pinker notes the formalistic beauty of Chomsky's writing on language, as in his Sound Pattern of English, (1967). But this formal beauty is an effect of his anti-empirical rationalism, and one finds a similar beauty in Beckett, where language takes off on its own into the Cartesian void of doubt and subjectivism. Is this science? No. In Beckett it is art of a despairing kind, in Chomsky it is reason and speech trying to recreate itself as universal relevance, and failing, due to a lack of ground in empirical and Darwinian facts. "Fail better", Beckett stubbornly concluded. Noam will never admit he failed.

mostly about communication. Certainly, the origin of this capacity is in the brain in both humans and animals. But there is no evidence that I can find that there is a locus of grammar originated in the brain as Chomsky originally postulated.

John Searle referred to Chomsky notions of innate grammar as a “stunning mistake”. This seems to be an accurate assessment.¹² Dennett complains that Chomsky’s linguistics appears to be based on a denial of Darwinian evolution. This also appears to be accurate, though Chomsky hedges on this subject quite a bit in his own defense. Following Descartes, Chomsky claims that language is unique to humans and animal have no language. “language appears to be a unique phenomenon, without significant analogue in the animal world”, he writes.¹³ He quotes Descartes that animals are very stupid compared to humans

"[I]t is a very remarkable fact that there are none so depraved and stupid, without even excepting idiots, that they cannot arrange different words together, forming of them a statement by which they make known their thoughts; while, on the other hand, there is no animal, however perfect and fortunately circumstanced it may be, which can do the same" (*Cartesian Linguistics* 116 17).

¹² In *The Rediscovery of the Mind* Searle writes: ‘Chomsky claims that innate, unconscious rules cause verbal behaviour. In other words, there is a cause/effect relationship between ‘rule’ and language. But studies of neuro-physiology indicate that language is caused not by ‘deep unconscious rules’ but by neuro-physiological structures that have no resemblance to the patterns of language at all. The brain’s hardware produces patterns, but these patterns are not causally related to language produced by humans: they merely delineate the possible forms that human languages can take.’

Quoted in this essay http://www.developingteachers.com/articles_tchtraining/grainnatepf_mark.htm

¹³ Language and mind 1968

Descartes said elsewhere that “But the greatest of all the prejudices we have retained from infancy is that of believing that brutes think.” Actually it is the opposite that is true, animals do think and it is a prejudice to imagine they don’t. They don’t think exactly as humans do on all occasions, often to their credit. Anyone who has spent much time with dogs, crows, ravens, dolphins, parrots, otters, green herons or thousands of other species knows that animals have intelligence and can reason and use strategy, plans, elementary logic or avoidance. Animals think, communicate and act on their thoughts both on their own and in concert with one another. As Katy Payne has shown Elephants have elaborate communication skills.¹⁴ Parrots and dolphins demonstrate behavior that is as sophisticated as lower-level building blocks of verbal phenomena in humans. Following Descartes, Chomsky denigrate animal abilities to do complex and recursive language skills. He subjectivizes language¹⁵ and overly exalts grammar and humans.

Descartes speciesism wrongly assumes animals are stupid and therefore it is OK to torture them with impunity. From this erroneous premise he derives his notion that language is somehow unique to humans. This is also false, if language is understood as communication, as it should be, humans merely have a more sophisticated form or

¹⁴ <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/episodes/my-life-as-a-turkey/full-episode/7378/>

Joe Hutto’s study of Turkeys is exceedingly interesting. There are moral questions that can be asked about why he did this and it does result in the birds being harmed later in their lives. But the experiment was extremely interesting as to the complexity of Turkey vocalizations and “language”. The birds were able to refer not just to snakes as a category but to individual species of snakes. As Darwin notes, the ability to share with others via vocalizations the presence of a danger is already the beginning of language. Darwin writes “ (Descent of Man, chapter 3

“may not some unusually wise apelike animal have imitated the growl of a beast of prey, and thus told his fellow-monkeys the nature of the expected danger? This would have been a first step in the formation of a language.”

¹⁵ He writes in “Biolinguistics and Human Capacity” 2004 that “the most elementary concepts of human language do not relate to mind-independent objects by means of some reference-like relation between symbols and identifiable physical features of the external world, as seems to be universal in animal communication systems”

communication than other species, just as ducks have a sophisticated mode of flying or otters of swimming. Language is part of evolution. Chomsky wildly claims that “Language and languages are not only extra-human” organisms but are outside the biological world altogether,”¹⁶ but this is ridiculous. There is nothing outside biology as regards living organisms. Darwin writes that Language is always changing and evolving just as species change and evolve, in direct opposition to Chomsky’s fantasy of a Platonistic universal grammar. Darwin writes:

“The same language never has two birth-places. Distinct languages may be crossed or blended together.*(2) We see variability in every tongue, and new words are continually cropping up; but as there is a limit to the powers of the memory, single words, like whole languages, gradually become extinct. As Max Muller*(3) has well remarked:- "A struggle for life is constantly going on amongst the words and grammatical forms in each language. The better, the shorter, the easier forms are constantly gaining the upper hand, and they owe their success to their own inherent virtue."

Darwin says that language and its relation to Natural Selection is “a marvelous problem.”, as indeed it is. He says in a letter to Asa Gray that saying that “I wish some one would keep a lot of the most noisy monkeys, half free, & study their means of communication!” . Unlike Chomsky Darwin sees human and animal communications as part of the same continuum, as it necessarily has to be. Notice too that Darwin wasn’t so stupid as to study animals that are free, or half free, and not lab animals.

¹⁶ Linguistics and Brain Science <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/2000----.pdf>



Darwin would take a dim view of Chomsky's unwarranted speculations. In Descent of Man Darwin he ridiculed those like Descartes and Chomsky who

“have insisted that man is divided by an insuperable barrier from all the lower animals in in his mental faculties. I formerly made a collection of above a score of such aphorisms, but they are almost worthless, as their wide difference and number prove the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of the attempt.” (Descent of Man, Chapter 3)

Chomsky imitates Descartes and ignores Darwin. Descartes views on animals are rank speciesism, and lack any real evidence, but are assumed by Chomsky as fact. In order to assert human centered speciesism Chomsky must both deny Darwin and make language not primarily about communication but rather about inner life. Since the inner life of animals is hard to access, Chomsky is safe among those who know little about animals in asserting this rather counter-intuitive thesis that animals have no inner life. But anyone who has spent a good deal of time with animals outside of laboratories will tell you otherwise. Chomsky chose the discredited animal researcher Mark Hauser as his associate in recent work. A bad choice both in the fact that Hauser is in trouble for poorly done research and because Hauser appears to have studied animals mostly in labs, which tells one little about actual animal behavior.¹⁷ This combined with Chomsky's choice of Stephan Jay Gould as a model of evolutionary theory, when Gould's theory of spandrels has been largely discredited, further brings into question Chomsky's linguistic theories.

Darwin denied Language was innate in Chomsky's sense. He writes that

“language certainly is not a true instinct, for every language has to be learnt. It differs, however, widely from all ordinary arts, for man has an instinctive tendency to speak, as we see in the babble of our young children; whilst no child has an instinctive tendency to brew, bake, or write. Moreover, no philologist now supposes that any language has been deliberately invented; it has been slowly and unconsciously developed by many steps.”

¹⁷ This lamentable dearth of understanding of animals in the wild is evident in his book [Animal Minds](#).

Chomsky claims that in human language we “we find no striking similarity to animal communication systems”¹⁸ This is not true. He is overlooking the obvious. Crows do elaborate communications to warn each other about hawks and also mourn the death of loved ones, as do elephants. A wolf packs has an amazingly diverse and varied array of expressions of emotional states, calls indicating whereabouts and many others feeling states indicated by different sounds. They employ complex strategies to bring down prey which indicates some measure of “reason” and even “creativity”, which is Chomsky’s primary claim for human language uniqueness. Bower birds make something very much like human art out of colored object and female bower birds judge the results of these nests.¹⁹ This is very like human communications in love. Darwin observes that language is laboriously learned, like an art and humans have a tendency to want speak at birth but must learn it form parents and foster parents. He compares this learning process to that of birds....

“The slight natural differences of song in the same species inhabiting different districts may be appositely compared, as Barrington remarks, "to provincial dialects"; and the songs of allied, though distinct species may be compared with the languages of distinct races of man. I have given the foregoing details to shew that an instinctive tendency to acquire an art is not peculiar to man.

Darwin’s Descent of Man, chapter 3 of Descent of Man puts Chomsky’s work as a linguist in question and I think defeats many of its

¹⁸ <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/chomsky.htm>

¹⁹ For a very interesting essay on the subject of art and its biological origins see The Art Instinct by Dennis Dutton. Dutton also rejects Stephen Jay Gould’s non-adaptationism. He is closer to Steven Pinker, who also dissents form Chomsky’s views for Darwinian reasons.

main postulates. I would go further and say that Chomsky's understanding of language is still behind what Darwin understood 140 years ago. Darwin says that language is learned by many small steps and this is accurate. He supplies endless examples of his points from experience and reality. This is very refreshing compared to Chomsky who has little understanding of other species or even domestic species. Many animals and birds create complex structures for habitation, and very likely humans derived their buildings types partly from animals structures such as beaver lodges and dams or termite nests. Humans warn each other just as animals do, announce the proximity of food, exclaim in pain or pleasure, deceive others with feigned imitations²⁰ and many other similarities. Chomsky is mistaken that animals have no creative use in communication. Consider the many complex birds songs, the amazingly varied utterances of the Starling or Robin, to cite two common birds or Mannikin mating dances, or Lyrebird imitations of other birds or Elephant and Giraffe infra-sound and whale singing. Bees appear to have complex communications. Chomsky denies animals have "language" after he sets up rather narrow and exclusive, elitist and speciesist notions of what human language is supposed to be. Darwin is much more open to actual experience and has a detailed and amazing knowledge of actual animals. Chomsky's cramped computational view of language is all dusty blackboard and university office. Chomsky writes:

the fact that human language, being free from control of identifiable external stimuli or internal *physiological* [emphasis added] states, can serve as a general instrument of thought and self-expression rather than merely as a communicative device of report, request, or command (CL, 11-12).

[human language] is not restricted to any practical communicative

²⁰ Blue Jays do a perfect imitation of red tailed hawks which they use to scare other birds and humans too.

function, in contrast, for example, to the pseudo-language of animals (CL, 29).

[Cartesians want to account for intelligent behavior] in the face of their inability to provide an explanation in mechanical terms (CL. 12).

While it is true that no other species has language in quite the way the way humans do, it is obvious that Darwinian evolution developed human speech out of antecedents in our animals ancestors. No other species has communication skills in the ways dolphins or elephants do either. The notion that one is superior to the other is just speciesist prejudice. Human communication privileges humans in their own eyes, but it also makes them think other species are worthless and deserve extinction, which hardly suggests humans are as great as they imagine they are. There is nothing “pseudo” about elephant or whale communication as Katy Payne has shown. So this basic premise of the Chomskian system is Descartes’ speciesist and prejudicial thesis restated. Darwin is a wonderful antidote to this.

Chomsky’s linguistic theory is suspect and lacking empirical evidence. At end the of his paper “A Minimalist Program for Linguistic Theory” (1995) Chomsky even notes himself the failure of his linguistic theory to achieve status as “science”. The notion of “deep structure” failed. He is theorizing and guessing in a rationalist way, with little or no dependence on empirical testing. This is a mistake and a mistake that Chomsky has been loathe for too long to admit or give up.+ It appears that Chomsky’s main impetus in rejecting aspects of Darwinian theory come from Stephen Jay Gould, whose idea of “spandrels” appears to be the source of Chomsky’s odd ideas about language being somehow independent of Darwinian adaptation. Chomsky’s insistence on language

having primarily to do with thought rather than communication is part of this rejection. It appears likely that he is mistaken in this. Darwin, once again, was right that language is primarily about communication and derives ultimately from primate ancestors.

Darwin's argument, stated in the Descent of Man, is that language might have some of its origins deriving ultimately from singing in primates. He uses the example of Gibbons calls. He implies also that language may have been encouraged by sexual selection. This is a very amazing and pregnant passage, still largely overlooked in Darwin's work which ought to be much more deeply studied:

“I cannot doubt that language owes its origin to the imitation and modification of various natural sounds, the voices of other animals, and man's own instinctive cries, aided by signs and gestures. When we treat of sexual selection we shall see that primeval man, or rather some early progenitor of man, probably first used his voice in producing true musical cadences, that is in singing, as do some of the gibbon-apes at the present day; and we may conclude from a widely-spread analogy, that this power would have been especially exerted during the courtship of the sexes,- would have expressed various emotions, such as love, jealousy, triumph,- and would have served as a challenge to rivals. It is, therefore, probable that the imitation of musical cries by articulate sounds may have given rise to words expressive of various complex emotions. The strong tendency in our nearest allies, the monkeys, in microcephalous idiots,*⁽²⁾ and in the barbarous races of mankind, to imitate whatever they hear deserves notice, as bearing on the subject of imitation. Since monkeys certainly understand much that is said to them by man, and when wild, utter signal-cries of danger to their fellows;*⁽³⁾ and since fowls give distinct warnings for danger on the ground, or in the sky from hawks

(both, as well as a third cry, intelligible to dogs),*(4) may not some unusually wise apelike animal have imitated the growl of a beast of prey, and thus told his fellow-monkeys the nature of the expected danger? This would have been a first step in the formation of a language.

As the voice was used more and more, the vocal organs would have been strengthened and perfected through the principle of the inherited effects of use; and this would have reacted on the power of speech. But the relation between the continued use of language and the development of the brain, has no doubt been far more important. The mental powers in some early progenitor of man must have been more highly developed than in any existing ape, before even the most imperfect form of speech could have come into use; but we may confidently believe that the continued use and advancement of this power would have reacted on the mind itself, by enabling and encouraging it to carry on long trains of thought. A complex train of thought can no more be carried on without the aid of words, whether spoken or silent, than a long calculation without the use of figures or algebra. It appears, also, that even an ordinary train of thought almost requires, or is greatly facilitated by some form of language, for the dumb, deaf, and blind girl, Laura Bridgman, was observed to use her fingers whilst dreaming.* Nevertheless, a long succession of vivid and connected ideas may pass through the mind without the aid of any form of language, as we may infer from the movements of dogs during their dreams. We have, also, seen that animals are able to reason to a certain extent, manifestly without the aid of language. The intimate connection between the brain, as it is now developed in us, and the faculty of speech, is well shewn by those curious cases of brain-disease in which speech is specially affected, as when the power to remember substantives is lost,

whilst other words can be correctly used, or where substantives of a certain class, or all except the initial letters of substantives and proper names are forgotten.*(2)”

These gems of insight are far in advance of anything written by Chomsky about language, communication, animals and humans. These gems of insight, which suffuse all of Chapter 3 of Descent of Man and other works of Darwin, should have been developed by Chomsky but were not. Chomsky ignores Darwin and imagines, falsely, I think, that Descartes is wiser and truer on language. Descartes’ theory of language is self involved and anti-natural. It is paltry and appears to be born of prejudice and should be abandoned as should many aspect of Chomsky’s theory. It would be nice to see Chomsky himself abandon this, though that is unlikely. He does not seem to want to follow the normal route of science that a theory must be tested and submitted to review.

John Searle notes regarding Chomsky’s early work up till the 70’s or 80’s that “the original paradigm had failed “. ²¹ Indeed, while Chomsky politics is interesting, most of Chomsky’s claims for linguistics appear to be on very shaky ground. While he is certainly right that language has a genetic component, little is known about it. In brain injuries the locus of apparent language activity can even be rerouted to other parts of the brain, that in itself suggests that a language “organ” is not the right way to speak of how the language works in the brain.. Moreover, language appears to be a cultural phenomena as much as a genetic one. It appears to be brought about more by social conditioning or learning than by genetics. The ideology of innate grammar may be invalid, because there is no evidence that can either verify or falsify it. In his *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Karl Popper proposed a generally accepted variant of

²¹ <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2002/jul/18/chomskys-revolution-an-exchange/>

this doctrine: a hypothesis is valid if and only if it can in principle be falsified by empirical evidence. Chomsky has little evidence to support most of his ideas

Chomsky's claim that language is mostly about solipsistic thinking appears to be overstated as does his claim that it is not primarily about communication. Clearly animals do have a kind of language and do communicate in a great variety of ways. Darwinism suggests that human language is one of these ways, more complex than the others, but there is no need to demean or denigrate what animals can do.. Bats can echolocate and human have only learned to do this recently and only with elaborate and expensive technology. If one must compare bats and humans on a scale of values that has flying while vocalizing as it main term, bats are far superior to humans. No human can swim as well as a dolphin or fly as well as a Tern or a Nighthawk. Language is as clearly a 'unique property of evolution" as other capacities by other animals are also unique, which really means that uniqueness is a normative fact of evolution, hierarchy is an illusion and evolution being a bottom up process of incremental development, species by species. The notion that one species is superior to others is false; each is unique and has its own capacities and traits. Many species have faculties or capacities that humans cannot touch. Octopuses can change skin color at will. Terns can fly 15,000 miles on their own energy. Camels can go long periods without water. Elephants make the strongest human seem a puny weakling. Humans have language, that is our special ability, but that hardly invalidates the superiority of other species to humans in endless other ways

In order to explain Chomsky's rather strangely Platonic notions of "deep structure" and "universal grammar"²² he cannot rely on Darwinian

²² Chomsky wrote that Universal Grammar implied the possibility that all human languages are already in the human brain before birth. This is a Platonic idea and seems untenable and

evidence because there isn't any, so he resorts to cosmic and rather occult theories, Chomsky claims that the:

" language faculty appears to be biologically isolated in a curious and unexpected sense....To tell a fairy story about it, it is almost as if there was some higher primate wandering around a long time ago and some random mutation took place - maybe after some strange cosmic ray shower - and it reorganized the brain, implanting a language organ in an otherwise primate brain."²³

It is hard to imagine this sort of idea coming from someone who claims to be a scientist, but that is just the problem I am getting at here. He would rather invent romantic fictions like this that do the hard work of finding Darwinian evidence for his theories, in brain science or in nature and other animals. It could be as some have suggested that language is primarily about communication after all, and evolved because of ordinary natural selection and sexual selection as well as cultural factors.

Chomsky is evoking the rationalist Plato and the archetypes which he transmogrifies via Descartes and Humboldt into "innate grammars",

unworkable as are Platonic concepts in general. Evidently Chomsky later dropped this idea , which was central to this theory. He also justifies some of his ideas by reference to Alexander Koyre, a rather reactionary Platonist. He quotes Koyre's anti materialistic notions lifted from Newton that "a purely materialistic or mechanistic physics . . . is impossible". This is really a misunderstanding of physics, I think. Koyre is a favorite of science bashers. Chomsky also uses Goethe as an example, another Platonist. Another Platonist that influenced Chomsky was Julius Moravcsik, a philosopher. Chomsky does not call himself a Platonist as far as I am aware. He would probably deny he is one. But the concept of "Universal Grammar" UG, a virtually Platonist concept, is an idealization along the lines of Platonic "Archetypes"--- "eidos". The actual mechanism of language in the brain appears to be quite different than Chomsky idealized notion of grammar. Chomsky is guilty of what A.N. Whitehead called the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness', making UG into a factual entity, when really it is just an idealist postulate. Plato's archetypes are also guilty of this. In the end the postulate failed

²³ Chomsky *The architecture of language* Oxford 2000, p4

which have never been proven to exist. Chomsky's Platonistic claim that people are born with innate knowledge of grammar is postulated but unproven after 50 years of Chomsky's research. Language has naturalistic or realist explanations that are cultural, Darwinian and empirical, and Chomsky largely ignores these. His influence by Descartes and Humboldt does not make much sense unless he is trying to create a self-sustaining faith or dogma that is rational and non-empirical, but in that case we are not dealing with science so much as sort of Cartesian dogma, a Cartesian Church as it were, with Chomsky as its priest. An example of his Platonist theory²⁴ of Language is his explanation of language unfolding in children in a quasi-automatic way. I have small children and it is not automatic, but halting and difficult with constant

²⁴ Chomsky's rather neo-Platonist views are evident here: the puzzle as to how a child can master a grammar is, for Chomsky, an instance of 'Plato's problem' - "the problem of explaining how we can know so much, given that we have such limited evidence"... "Plato's answer," says Chomsky, "was that the knowledge is 'remembered' from an earlier existence. The answer calls for a mechanism: perhaps the immortal soul. That may strike us as not very satisfactory, but it is worth bearing in mind that it is a more reasonable answer than those assumed as doctrine during the dark ages of Anglo-American empiricism and behavioral science - to put the matter tentatively, but accurately."... Chomsky forgets to add that Plato's theory of the Eidos is thoroughly discredited. "So we should not associate the doctrine of the soul with the dark ages: on the contrary, it is the opponents of Plato's theory who are in the dark ages. But there is a problem: talk of man's 'immortal soul' sounds like antiquated *language*. For the doctrine to appear more acceptable, it needs to be rephrased:..."Pursuing this course, and rephrasing Plato's answer in terms more congenial to us today, we will say that the basic properties of cognitive systems are innate to the mind, part of human biological endowment" ... So UG is really a template of the Platonic soul... language is a sort of meta-Platonic template in the brain deposited there at birth and this does not appear to be the case. (see N Chomsky, 'Linguistics and adjacent fields: a personal view' in A Kasher (ed) *The Chomskyan turn* Oxford 1991, p15. and also see N Chomsky, 'Linguistics and cognitive science: problems and mysteries' in A Kasher (ed) *The Chomskyan turn* Oxford 1991, pp26-53; p50.).

corrections and amendments from parents and peers, exactly as Darwin says. Learning English or any other language is no small matter but takes years to accomplish. Chomsky underrated the vast influence of natural selection and parents and teachers.

Chomsky appears to leave out Darwin and the obvious idea that language is logical phenomena, born of out genetic inheritance and commonality with other animals.. He expresses the unlikely hope physics will explain language. He claims Newton's frustrated mystical idea about gravity implies mechanism is fiction and all is the ghostly mind. He does not understand that Newton probably misunderstood gravity. Rather than pursue the hard evolutionary science that needs to be done Chomsky allies himself with the romantics rather than with biology.²⁵ Chomsky writes, talking about his own formative influences, that

“This Platonistic element in Humboldt's thought is a pervasive one; for Humboldt, it was as natural to propose an essentially Platonistic theory of “learning” as it was for Rousseau to found his critique of repressive social institutions on a conception of human freedom that derives from strictly Cartesian assumptions regarding the limitations of mechanical explanation. And in general it seems

²⁵ Chomsky proneness to mystagogy and mysticism is evident in the following quote----.He attacks Darwin obliquely on the basis that “ one element of a famous disagreement between the two founders of the theory of evolution, with Wallace holding, contrary to Darwin, that evolution of these faculties cannot be accounted for in terms of variation and natural selection alone, but requires “some other influence, law, or agency,” some principle of nature alongside gravitation, cohesion, and other forces without which the material universe could not exist.” Wallace's pursuit of spiritual “agency” forced him to become embarrassingly religious in later years, a fact Chomsky fails to note. Darwin was right in this argument against Wallace's irrational religiosity, as many have noted, (see David Quammen *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution* on Wallace and Darwin) Chomsky effort to spiritualize the language faculty with a mystagogy surrounding gravity and thought, is unique, but very eccentric and probably wrong. The abstract and internal character of a language is one of its worst properties, as it tends to divorce humans from nature and creates a sort of doubling whereby religion and other abstract alienation becomes possible. Chomsky, like Wallace tries to make a virtue of this failing in human language, when really it is one of the most unfortunate of illusions.

appropriate to construe both the psychology and the linguistics of the romantic period as in large part a natural outgrowth of rationalist conceptions.²⁶

It would be far simpler at this point to admit the romantic fiction of innate grammars has failed and that that these suppositions were really moonshine, a dead end. Language grows out of our brains, but does so because of the evolutionary development of communication skills and cultural conditions and this is something that evolved over time, through genetics, and the development of the brain and culture. Chomsky's innate Platonism is a life long illusion of his, which derives from Descartes. He is fixed on this idea irrationally, as John Searle suggest in his excellent "The End of the Revolution" which is about the failure of Chomsky's linguistic theories to bear real fruit.²⁷

I hasten to add that Chomsky insistence on the genetic origin of language is partly correct in that there is a genetic component that provides the capacity for language, as is shown in brain studies on Broca's and Wierneke's areas and other areas of the brain as well, most of which involve communication or understanding of communication, both meaning and expression.²⁸ But the fact that the areas of the brain that are concerned with language are about communication and meaning, already suggests that Chomsky's grammatical, "Cartesian" and functional linguistics might be beside the point. Grammar appears to be a minor development of meaning and expression through communication

²⁶ From one of Chomsky's lecture in Language and Mind reproduced here <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/chomsky.htm>

²⁷ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/47780900/John-Searle-End-of-the-Revolution>

²⁸ Much has been learned about language from the complex reactions to various kinds of aphasia. Darwin already understood this. In some aphasias patients can hear but not understand words, in other aphasia patient cannot speak but can understand language. In other cases, patients with damage to these areas of the brain can relearn language in other areas of the brain not usually used for language, suggesting again that language is not just in one area but is occurs in various areas of the brain.

needs, not the archetypal or “universal” center of all languages as Chomsky contends.. Grammar is a by product, not a cause, in other words.

There are areas of the brain that appear to have to do with meanings, such as an area for animals or famous people, and even cerebellum or motor areas appear to be involved in language in complex ways. But though the exact process remains obscure, much more is known about it now than was the case even 20 years ago. What is known about it appears to contradict Chomsky’s claims. The brain/language connection is Darwinian and adaptationist, not Chomskian. There is no language “organ” per se, but rather an adaptation of the various parts of the brain to language that probably grew up by the usual Darwinian processes.²⁹ It is of course very sad that Chomsky turned out to be wrong in so many ways. But as John Searle notes that

“ It is often tempting in the human sciences to aspire to being a natural science; and there is indeed a natural science, about which we know very little, of the foundations of language in the neurobiology of the human brain. But the idea that linguistics itself might be a natural science rests on doubtful assumptions. “³⁰

I suspect Seale is right. Searle’s claims that ‘there is no universal grammar common to all languages; there is no Language Acquisition Device in the brain; grammar is not innate but mastered through experience of language and life; there are no deep structures in the brain; language has many functions other than describing things’. It is time to

²⁹ Dennett appear to be correct that Chomsky was lead astray by Stephen Jay Gould who tired to minimize the importance of direct adaptation. See Dennett book Darwin’s Dangerous Idea, that has a whole chapter on both Chomsky and Gould.

³⁰ <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2002/jul/18/chomskys-revolution-an-exchange/?page=2>

more seriously doubt Chomsky's linguistics, both its sources and its final goals.

What would be really grand, even stupendous, would be if Chomsky himself admitted that some of his critics might be right, not just recently but over many years. I do not mean his political critics. I am not talking about his politics here. To admit that his critics are right and the basic trajectory of his linguistic theory is mistaken would be a good thing. It would liberate the next generation of scientists to do better and newer work on language along Darwinian lines. This is already ongoing, in fact. Chomsky's repressive hold on the study of linguistics has held linguistics back for long enough. This would be the right scientific stance for him to take, rather than his usual dogmatic stand, denying direct evidence. He would then reveal himself to be actually willing to question himself and that would be grand. He would regain my respect if he did that.

Searle notes in his essay that Chomsky's "work in linguistics is at the highest intellectual level." I agree with that, but that does not mean he is right or immune to going off the deep end in his understanding of language. Everyone makes mistakes.

Certainly in respect of Descartes, Chomsky has taken his ideas uncritically and refuses direct evidence that questions his embrace of the prototype of his theories. This is not healthy or conducive to the long term viability of his work. Descartes was important in creating the impetus behind early science, but his science itself has little value. Chomsky made a huge mistake trying to adapt the Cartesian program into linguistics. He should have abandoned that decades ago. A romantic strain or irrational rationalism that has anti-Darwinian features led him astray.

That is my conclusion, but a few other tangential details need to be discussed. I cannot find the quote at the moment but somewhere Chomsky says that over population of the America is not a problem there is lots of open space. This is nonsense and shows again a lamentable lack of understanding about nature, and the hug pressure animals and plants suffer due to overpopulation. Chomsky is a city person and knows little about nature. He also states somewhere that we should not bother about animals and nature because humans are such a threat to their own survival that we should concern ourselves only with human things. This also is merely a mask for speciesism. Obviously, concern with other species is part of concern for our own species and care of one does not exclude care of the other. Indeed, care of nature and animals is essential to the care of ourselves.

In recent years Chomsky has been comparing himself to Socrates and the Biblical Prophets.³¹ This is another indication of his romantic and idealized –nearly mystical, Platonism. I could understand if he compared himself to Tom Paine or Voltaire, or better yet, Bertrand Russell, whose political incisiveness Chomsky echoes in various ways. But Socrates was opposed to democracy and was defending the reactionary proto-Nazi state outlined by Plato in the Republic. The Biblical Prophets were certainly fictional characters who are part of a very toxic system of reactionary religion and dogma, handing down edicts and demands from a fictional god. Chomsky's claim that they were doing "geopolitical analysis" is a projection on them that does not hold up to the facts. The prophets were

³¹ Chomsky says "Prophet just means intellectual. They were people giving geopolitical analysis, moral lessons, that sort of thing. We call them intellectuals today. There were the people we honor as prophets, there were the people we condemn as false prophets. But if you look at the biblical record, at the time, it was the other way around. The flatterers of the Court of King Ahab were the ones who were honored. The ones we call prophets were driven into the desert and imprisoned. (Interview by Harry Kreisler, March 22, 2002) Chomsky talks about this a lot, and brings it up on many occasions, for instance he mentions the biblical chapter in Kings 1, in which King Ahab condemns Elijah. Chomsky identifies himself as the misunderstood or outcast prophet. And he says he began to do so when he was still a child. (see <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/50346/the-lefty-lion/>)

fundamentally conservative and defending a status quo as part of a fictional projection and make believe that is the biblical religion. Perhaps Chomsky's latent Platonism and tacit religiosity drives him to make these objectionable comparisons.

He also recently came out objecting to the marvelous work done by Dawkins, Harris, Dennett and Hitchens questioning religion. This is another mistake. The devotion of Chomsky's followers is summarized by radio producer David Barsamian, who describes the master's resplendence when he wrote in openly religious terms about Chomsky that: "he is for many of us our rabbi, our preacher, our rinpoche, our sensei." I have liked Chomsky's politics for many years now, but he is not my guru or my cult leader. I find his need to compare himself to fictional prophets and tendency to mysticism and cultish leadership objectionable. I would like to see Chomsky formally renounce his canonization which he has himself encouraged. He needs to come back to the fold of science and falsifiability. Evidence must be sought in service of reason,. Reason should not fly forth on its own, "like Minerva from the head of Jupiter" detached from empirical evidence, into irrational grandiosity and self inflation.