

## BOOK NOTES

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NOAM CHOMSKY, *What kind of creatures are we?* New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015. Pp. 200. Hb. \$19.95.

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*What Kind of Creatures Are We?* is a short summary of Noam Chomsky's major conclusions about language, cognition, the organization of human societies, and humanity's prospects for understanding the world we inhabit. A central theme of the book is *mysterianism*: the thesis that there are limits to what we can learn scientifically, imposed by the architecture of our minds. The book presents a critical review of this thesis and its history in the philosophy of science. Particular emphasis is placed on the attainability of scientific knowledge, and knowledge of cognition and consciousness specifically.

Chapter 1 illustrates the author's view of language and its place in human cognition. Stressing the importance of defining what language is, Chomsky defines his vision, covering i-language, e-languages, and Merge. He also sketches the theoretical relationships among these hypotheses. Chapters 2 and 4 deal with the limits of human cognition, and how these shape our capacity to unveil mysteries of the natural world through scientific investigation. The natural sciences should be thought of 'as a kind of chance convergence between our cognitive capacities and what is more or less true of the natural world. There is no reason to believe humans can solve every problem they pose or even that they can formulate the right questions; they may simply lack the conceptual tools, just as rats cannot deal with a prime number maze' (p. 105). The message that resounds throughout these chapters is that many of the most important questions about language – when and how it arose, how it is acquired, and its status as a cognitive ability – may be unanswerable for us in principle. While this conclusion is well-rehearsed elsewhere, its basis and generality are discussed in notable detail here. Together with chapter 1, these chapters show extremely clearly how the mysterianism at the center of the book follows directly from Chomsky's theory of language. Chapter 3 moves on to political and social issues. Here the author presents his view of the common good in society, and describes which mechanisms and incentive structures can promote it.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the book is to bring together the various subjects of Chomsky's expansive scholarship into one readable volume, and to demonstrate how they are related. The author's style is likely to divide readers: the prose is characteristically persuasive and engaging, but unmatched in

its reliance on rhetoric (terms like *truism*, or circumlocutions like “It is difficult to see how one can avoid the conclusion that...” often accompany very controversial claims, and authority and distinction are invoked repeatedly throughout). The book is short, totaling 127 pages excluding notes and foreword. It is loaded with information and intriguing references to a vast philosophical literature, though it should be noted that references to contemporary empirical literature are cherry-picked and sparing. It is unclear which audience this book addresses. In brief, this is a primer to Noam Chomsky for Chomskyans: not easily accessible to the uninitiated due to its rigorous academic style, while containing too little new material for those who already know the author’s work.

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SUZANNE OAKDALE and MAGNUS COURSE (eds.), *Fluent Selves: Autobiography, Person, and History in Lowland South America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

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*Fluent Selves: Autobiography, Person, and History in Lowland South America* provides a wide array of autobiographical and biographical narrative practices representing a sample of locales in lowland South America, including Ecuador, Brazil, Peru and Chile. Despite their diverse national and intellectual backgrounds, the contributors offer a coherent and convincing exploration into the narrative experiences of lowland South America. They jointly present a vivid picture of temporal conceptualization, modeling of personhood, the realization of interethnic social life, and the hybrid identity of local political figures in these communities.

In addition to an introduction which provides an illuminating overview of the topics to be covered, this edited collection comprises ten chapters organized into four parts. The first part ‘Neither Myth nor History’ tackles the classic issue of temporality, usually dichotomized as either ‘myth’ or ‘history’ in two extremes. Based on their in-depth studies of a variety of local biographies and autobiographies, the three chapters in this section present a reformulation of the central role of personal experiences regarding temporal engagement in local communities. Through various forms of self-presentation, the local people realize their unique conceptualization and expression of both past and future. The second part, ‘Persons within Persons’, is closely related to the notion of temporality. In a similar vein, this issue is also long