

Reflections

Introduction

Noam Chomsky, now seventy years, is Institute Professor, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), in the United States of America. He has been a dominant intellectual in the world in the present latter half of our century and may, perhaps, remain so, for many centuries to come. He came to prominence in the USA as the foremost dissenter out of the academia against the war in Vietnam in late sixties. He is well known for his writings, both books and articles, on problems in different parts of the world, the latest being the island of East Timor. Chomsky is known for his own typical style of presentation which is informal, with profuse documentation, incisive dissection, at times ruthless, leading to inescapable conclusions. Underlying all his writings is his notion of the fundamental nature of a human being – creativity and freedom – presupposing the existence of a human mind. His views, in turn, originate from his thinking about the nature of language which has been exercising his mind from the late forties.

Chomsky's prominence as a socio-political thinker has completely overshadowed his professional status as a linguist for the general reader. His little book '*Syntactic Structures*' published in 1957 by a then not so well-known publisher (Mouton and Co.) in Holland ushered in what is now known as the *Chomskyan Revolution*, not only in linguistics but also in allied fields, splitting social scientists into two groups, Chomskyan and others. His 1965 monograph '*Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*' published by the MIT Press presenting his views on language, now known as 'Standard Theory', generated a tremendous amount of interdisciplinary debate among professionals which refuses to subside even to this day.

The following essay was presented in the context of the above controversial intellectual and political fervour as a lecture at Loyola University at Chicago, January 8–9, 1970 as part of the University Freedom and Human Sciences Symposium. This is one of the rare articles in which Chomsky relates his linguistic thinking on the nature of language to freedom.

Chomsky subscribes to what he calls 'libertarian socialism' which is a social form next in stage to the industrial society. It will be founded on freedom, of choice and action, guaranteeing individual rights. Chomsky traces the origin of such thinking, which had its sway for almost a hundred years until the emergence of materialist-empiricist-behavioural thinking towards the end of the 19th century, to philosophers like Schelling, Rousseau, Kant, Descartes and his follower Cordemoy, Wilhelm von Humboldt and others. The common essence of their thought was that the nature of man/human being consisted in having intellect/reason/mind and freedom, one subsisting on the other, one unable to function without the other. Humboldt, in addition, proposed the attribute of creativity based on his linguistic thinking. For Humboldt, human language is a process of free creation, has a fixed form – a generative process rooted in the nature of the human mind. For the human mind, learning is a kind of reminiscence. Stimulated by experience, it draws from its own internal resources and follows a path that it itself determines. Necessity and freedom, rule and choice,



built-in form/constraints and creativity are the same aspects of human nature. Language provides a specimen of rule governed behaviour and free creation, a typical aspect of human mental organization.

Chomsky feels that for knowledge systems to be based on this essence of human nature, it is necessary to break away from much of the present/modern social and behavioural science. He further hopes for the development of a social science based on empirically well-founded propositions concerning human nature, i.e. forms of artistic expression, scientific knowledge, language, range of ethical systems and social structures etc., conceivable and attainable by human beings.

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Language and Freedom¹

When I was invited to speak on the topic “Language and freedom”, I was puzzled and intrigued. Most of my professional life has been devoted to the study of language. There would be no great difficulty in finding a topic to discuss in that domain. And there is much to say about the problems of freedom and liberation as they pose themselves to us and to others in the mid-twentieth century. What is troublesome in the title of this lecture is the conjunction. In what way are language and freedom to be interconnected?

As a preliminary, let me say just a word about the contemporary study of language, as I see it. There are many aspects of language and language use that raise intriguing questions, but – in my judgement – only a few have so far led to productive theoretical work. In particular, our deepest insights are in the area of formal grammatical structure. A person who knows a language has acquired a system of rules and principles – a “generative grammar,” in technical terms – that associates sound and meaning in some specific fashion. There are many reasonably well-founded and, I think, rather enlightening hypotheses as to the character of such grammars, for quite a number of languages. Furthermore, there has been a renewal of interest in “universal grammar”, interpreted now as the theory that tries to specify the general properties of those languages that can be learned in the normal way by humans. Here, too, significant progress has been achieved.

¹ This essay was presented as a lecture at the University Freedom and the Human Sciences Symposium, Loyola University, Chicago, January 8–9, 1970. It is reproduced with permission from *The Chomsky Reader*, ed. James Peck, 1987.



The subject is of particular importance. It is appropriate to regard universal grammar as the study of one of the essential faculties of mind. It is, therefore, extremely interesting to discover, as I believe we do, that the principles of universal grammar are rich, abstract, and restrictive, and can be used to construct principled explanations for a variety of phenomena. At the present stage of our understanding, if language is to provide a springboard for the investigation of other problems of human nature, it is these aspects of language to which we will have to turn our attention, for the simple reason that it is only these aspects that are reasonably well understood. In another sense, the study of formal properties of language reveals something of the nature of humans in a negative way: it underscores, with great clarity, the limits of our understanding of those qualities of mind that are apparently unique to humans and that must enter into their cultural achievements in an intimate, if still quite obscure, manner.

In searching for a point of departure, one turns naturally to a period in the history of Western thought when it was possible to believe that “the thought of making freedom the sum and substance of philosophy has emancipated the human spirit in all its relationships, and . . . has given to science in all its parts a more powerful reorientation than any earlier revolution.” [1] The word “revolution” bears multiple association in this passage, for Schelling also proclaims that “man is born to act and not to speculate”; and when he writes that “the time has come to proclaim to a nobler humanity the freedom of the spirit, and no longer to have patience with men’s tearful regrets for their lost chains” we hear the echoes of the libertarian thought and revolutionary acts of the late eighteenth century. Schelling writes that “the beginning and end of all philosophy is – Freedom.” These words are invested with meaning and urgency at a time when people are struggling to cast off their chains, to resist authority that has lost its claim to legitimacy, to construct more humane and more democratic social institutions. It is at such a time that the philosopher may be driven to inquire into the nature of human freedom and its limits, and perhaps to conclude, with Schelling, that with respect to the human ego, “its essence is freedom”; and with respect to philosophy, “the highest dignity of Philosophy consists precisely therein, that it stakes all on human freedom.”

We are living, once again, at such a time. A revolutionary ferment is sweeping the so-called Third World, awakening enormous masses from torpor and acquiescence in traditional authority. There are those who feel that the industrial societies as well are ripe for revolutionary change – and I do not refer only to representatives of the New Left.



The threat of revolutionary change brings forth repression and reaction. Its signs are evident in varying forms, in France, in the Soviet Union, in the United States—not least, in the city where we are meeting. It is natural, then, that we should consider, abstractly, the problems of human freedom, and turn with interest and serious attention to the thinking of an earlier period when archaic social institutions were subjected to critical analysis and sustained attack. It is natural and appropriate, so long as we bear in mind Schellings’s admonition that man is born not merely to speculate but also to act.

One of the earliest and most remarkable of the eighteenth-century investigations of freedom and servitude is Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* (1755), in many ways a revolutionary tract. In it, he seeks to “set forth the origin and progress of inequality, the establishment and abuse of political societies, insofar as these things can be deduced from the nature of man by the light of reason alone.” His conclusions were sufficiently shocking that the judges of the prize competition of the Academy of Dijon, to whom the work was originally submitted, refused to hear the manuscript through. [2] In it, Rousseau challenges the legitimacy of virtually every social institution, as well as individual control of property and wealth. These are “usurpations . . . established only on a precarious and abusive right . . . having been acquired only by force, force could take them away without (the rich) having grounds for complaint.” Not even property acquired by personal industry is held “upon better titles”. Against such a claim, one might object: “Do you not know that a multitude of your brethren die or suffer from need of what you have in excess, and that you needed express and unanimous consent of the human race to appropriate for yourself anything from common subsistence that exceeded your own?” It is contrary to the law of nature that “a handful of men be glutted with superfluities while the starving multitude lacks necessities.”

Rousseau argues that civil society is hardly more than a conspiracy by the rich to guarantee their plunder. Hypocritically, the rich call upon their neighbors to “institute regulations of justice and peace to which all are obliged to conform, which make an exception of no one, and which compensate in some way for the caprices of fortune by equally subjecting the powerful and the weak to mutual duties”—those laws which, as Anatole France was to say, in their majesty deny to the rich and the poor equally the right to sleep under the bridge at night. By such arguments, the poor and weak were seduced: “All ran to meet their chains thinking they secured their freedom. . . .” Thus society and laws “gave new fetters to the weak and new forces to the rich, destroyed natural freedom for all time, established forever the law of property and inequality, changed a clever



usurpation into an irrevocable right, and for the profit of a few ambitious men henceforth subjected the whole human race to work, servitude and misery". Governments inevitably tend toward arbitrary power, as "their corruption and extreme limit". This power is "by its nature illegitimate," and new revolutions must

dissolve the government altogether or bring it closer to its legitimate institutions The uprising that ends by strangling or dethroning a sultan is as lawful an act as those by which he disposed, the day before, of the lives and goods of his subjects. Force alone maintained him, force alone overthrows him.

What is interesting, in the present connection, is the path that Rousseau follows to reach these conclusions "by the light of reason alone," beginning with his ideas about human nature. He wants to see man "as nature formed him". It is from human nature that the principles of natural right and the foundations of social existence must be deduced.

This same study of original man, of his true needs, and of the principles underlying his duties, is also the only good means one could use to remove those crowds of difficulties which present themselves concerning the origin of moral inequality, the true foundation of the body politic, the reciprocal rights of its members, and a thousand similar questions as important as they are ill explained.

To determine the nature of man, Rousseau proceeds to compare man and animal. Man is "intelligent, free . . . the sole animal endowed with reason." Animals are "devoid of intellect and freedom."

In every animal I see only an ingenious machine to which nature has given senses in order to revitalize itself and guarantee itself, to a certain point, from all that tends to destroy or upset it. I perceive precisely the same things in the human machine, with the difference that nature alone does everything in the operations of a beast, whereas man contributes to his operations by being a free agent. The former chooses or rejects by instinct and the latter by an act of freedom, so that a beast cannot deviate from the rule that is prescribed to it even when it would be advantageous for it do so, and a man deviates from it often to his detriment it is not so much understanding which constitutes the distinction of man among the animals as it is his being a free agent. Nature commands every animal, and the beast obeys. Man feels the same impetus, but he realizes that he is free to acquiesce or



resist; and it is above all in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is shown. For physics explains in some way the mechanism of the senses and the formation of ideas; but in the power of willing, or rather of choosing, and in the sentiment of this power are found only purely spiritual acts about which the laws of mechanics explain nothing.

Thus the essence of human nature is human freedom and the consciousness of this freedom. So Rousseau can say that “the jurists, who have gravely pronounced that the child of a slave would be born a slave, have decided in other terms that a man would not be born a man.”[3]

Sophistic politicians and intellectuals search for ways to obscure the fact that the essential and defining property of man is his freedom: “They attribute to men a natural inclination to servitude, without thinking that it is the same for freedom as for innocence and virtue – their value is felt only as long as one enjoys them oneself and the taste for them is lost as soon as one has lost them.” In contrast, Rousseau asks rhetorically “whether, freedom being the most noble of man’s faculties, it is not degrading one’s nature, putting oneself on the level of beasts enslaved by instinct, even offending the author on one’s being, to renounce without reservation the most precious of all his gifts and subject ourselves to committing all the crimes he forbids us in order to please a ferocious or insane master” – a question that has been asked, in similar terms, by many an American draft resister in the last few years, and by many others who are beginning to recover from the catastrophe of twentieth-century Western civilization, which has so tragically confirmed Rousseau’s judgement:

Hence arose the national wars, battles, murders, and reprisals which make nature tremble and shock reason, and all those horrible prejudices which rank the honour of shedding human blood among the virtues. The most decent men learned to consider it one of their duties to murder their fellowmen; at length men were seen to massacre each other by the thousands without knowing why; more murders were committed on a single day of fighting and more horrors in the capture of a single city than were committed in the state of nature during whole centuries over the entire face of the earth.

The proof of his doctrine that the struggle for freedom is an essential human attribute, that the value of freedom is felt only as long as one enjoys it, Rousseau sees in “the marvels done



by all free peoples to guard themselves from oppression.” True, those who have abandoned the life of a free man

do nothing but boast incessantly of the peace and repose they enjoy in their chains But when I see the others sacrifice pleasures, repose, wealth, power, and life itself for the preservation of this sole good which is so disdained by those who have lost it; when I see animals born free and despising captivity break their heads against the bars of their prison; when I see multitudes of entirely naked savages scorn European voluptuousness and endure hunger, fire, the sword, and death to preserve only their independence, I feel that it does not behoove slaves to reason about freedom.

Rather similar thoughts were expressed by Kant, forty years later. He cannot, he says, accept the proposition that certain people “are not ripe for freedom,” for example, the serfs of some landlord:

If one accepts this assumption, freedom will never be achieved; for one can not arrive at the maturity for freedom without having already acquired it; one must be free to learn how to make use of one’s powers freely and usefully. The first attempts will surely be brutal and will lead to a state of affairs more painful and dangerous than the former condition under the dominance but also the protection of an external authority. However, one can achieve reason only through one’s own experiences and one must be free to be able to undertake them. . . . To accept the principle that freedom is worthless for those under one’s control and that one has the right to refuse it to them forever, is an infringement on the rights of God himself, who has created man to be free. [4]

The remark is particularly interesting because of its context. Kant was defending the French Revolution, during the Terror, against those who claimed that it showed the masses to be unready for the privilege of freedom. Kant’s remarks have contemporary relevance. No rational person will approve of violence and terror. In particular, the terror of the postrevolutionary state, fallen into the hands of a grim autocracy, has more than once reached indescribable levels of savagery. Yet no person of understanding or humanity will too quickly condemn the violence that often occurs when long-subdued masses rise against their oppressors, or take their first steps toward liberty and social reconstruction.



Let me return now to Rousseau's argument against the legitimacy of established authority, whether that of political power or of wealth. It is striking that his argument, up to this point, follows a familiar Cartesian model. Man is uniquely beyond the bounds of physical explanation; the beast, on the other hand, is merely an ingenious machine, commanded by natural law. Man's freedom and his consciousness of this freedom distinguish him from the beast-machine. The principles of mechanical explanation are incapable of accounting for these human properties, though they can account for sensation and even the combination of ideas, in which regard "man differs from a beast only in degree."

To Descartes and his followers, such as Cordemoy, the only sure sign that another organism has a mind, and hence also lies beyond the bounds of mechanical explanation, is its use of language in the normal, creative human fashion, free from control by identifiable stimuli, novel and innovative, appropriate to situations, coherent, and engendering in our minds new thoughts and ideas. [5] To the Cartesians, it is obvious by introspection that each man possesses a mind, a substance whose essence is thought; his creative use of language reflects this freedom of thought and conception. When we have evidence that another organism, too, uses language in this free and creative fashion, we are led to attribute to it as well a mind like ours. From similar assumptions regarding the intrinsic limits of mechanical explanation, its inability to account for man's freedom and consciousness of his freedom, Rousseau proceeds to develop his critique of authoritarian institutions, which deny to man his essential attribute of freedom, in varying degree.

Were we to combine these speculations, we might develop an interesting connection between language and freedom. Language, in its essential properties and the manner of its use, provides the basic criterion for determining that another organism is a being with a human mind and the human capacity for free thought and self-expression, and with the essential human need for freedom from the external constraints of repressive authority. Furthermore, we might try to proceed from the detailed investigation of language and its use to a deeper and more specific understanding of the human mind. Proceeding on this model, we might further attempt to study other aspects of that human nature which, as Rousseau rightly observes, must be correctly conceived if we are to be able to develop, in theory, the foundations for a rational social order.

I will return to this problem, but first I would like to trace further Rousseau's thinking about the matter. Rousseau diverges from the Cartesian tradition in several respects. He



defines the “specific characteristic of the human species” as man’s “faculty of self-perfection,” which, “with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides among us as much in the species as in the individual.” The faculty of self-perfection and of perfection of the human species through cultural transmission is not, to my knowledge, discussed in any similar terms by the Cartesians. However, I think that Rousseau’s remarks might be interpreted as a development of the Cartesian tradition in an unexplored direction, rather than as a denial and rejection of it. There is no inconsistency in the notion that the restrictive attributes of mind underlie a historically evolving human nature that develops within the limits that they set; or that these attributes of mind provide the possibility of self-perfection; or that, by providing the consciousness of freedom, these essential attributes of human nature give man the opportunity to create social conditions and social forms to maximize the possibilities for freedom, diversity, and individual self-realization. To use an arithmetical analogy, the integers do not fail to be an infinite set merely because they do not exhaust the rational numbers. Analogously, it is no denial of man’s capacity for infinite “self-perfection” to hold that there are intrinsic properties of mind that constrain his development. I would like to argue that in a sense the opposite is true, that without a system of formal constraints there are no creative acts; specifically, in the absence of intrinsic and restrictive properties of mind, there can be only “shaping of behaviour” but no creative acts of self-perfection. Furthermore, Rousseau’s concern for the evolutionary character of self-perfection brings us back, from another point of view, to a concern for human language, which would appear to be a prerequisite for such evolution of society and culture, for Rousseau’s perfection of the species, beyond the most rudimentary forms.

Rousseau holds that “although the organ of speech is natural to man, speech itself is nonetheless not natural to him.” Again, I see no inconsistency between this observation and the typical Cartesian view that innate abilities are “dispositional,” faculties that lead us to produce ideas (specifically, innate ideas) in a particular manner under given conditions of external stimulation, but that also provide us with the ability to proceed in our thinking without such external factors. Language too, then, is natural to man only in a specific way. This is an important and, I believe, quite fundamental insight of the rationalist linguists that was disregarded, very largely, under the impact of empiricist psychology in the eighteenth century and since.[6]

Rousseau discusses the origin of language at some length, though he confesses himself to be unable to come to grips with the problem in a satisfactory way. Thus



if men needed speech in order to learn to think, they had even greater need of knowing how to think in order to discover the art of speech. . . . So that one can hardly form tenable conjectures about this art of communicating thoughts and establishing intercourse between minds; a sublime art which is now very far from its origin. . . .

He holds that “general ideas can come into the mind only with the aid of words, and the understanding grasps them only through propositions” – a fact which prevents animals, devoid of reason, from formulating such ideas or ever acquiring “the perfectibility which depends upon them.” Thus he cannot conceive of the means by which “our new grammarians began to extend their ideas and to generalize their words,” or to develop the means “to express all the thoughts of men”: “numbers, abstract words, aorists, and all the tenses of verbs, particles, syntax, the linking of propositions, reasoning, and the forming of all the logic of discourse.” He does speculate about later stages of the perfection of the species, “when the ideas of men began to spread and multiply, and when closer communication was established among them, [and] they sought more numerous signs and a more extensive language.” But he must, unhappily, abandon “the following difficult problem: which was most necessary, previously formed society for the institution of languages, or previously invented languages for the establishment of society?”

The Cartesians cut the Gordian knot by postulating the existence of a species-specific characteristic, a second substance that serves as what we might call a “creative principle” alongside the “mechanical principle” that determines totally the behaviour of animals. There was, for them, no need to explain the origin of language in the course of historical evolution. Rather, man’s nature is qualitatively distinct: there is no passage from body to mind. We might reinterpret this idea in more current terms by speculating the rather sudden and dramatic mutations might have led to qualities of intelligence that are, so far as we know, unique to humans, possession of language in the human sense being the most distinctive index of these qualities. [7] If this is correct, as at least a first approximation to the facts, the study of language might be expected to offer an entering wedge, or perhaps a model, for an investigation of human nature that would provide the grounding for a much broader theory of human nature.

To conclude these historical remarks, I would like to turn, as I have elsewhere, [8] to Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the most stimulating and intriguing thinkers of the



period. Humboldt was, on the one hand, one of the most profound theorists of general linguistics, and on the other, an early and forceful advocate of libertarian values. The basic concept of his philosophy is *Bildung*, by which, as J.W. Burrow expresses it, “he meant the fullest, richest, and most harmonious development of the potentialities of the individual, the community or the human race.” [9] His own thought might serve as an exemplary case. Though he does not, to my knowledge, explicitly relate his ideas about language to his libertarian social thought, there is quite clearly a common ground from which they develop, a concept of human nature that inspires each. Mill’s essay *On Liberty* takes as its epigraph Humboldt’s formulation of the “leading principle” of his thought: “the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity.” Humboldt concludes his critique of the authoritarian state by saying: “I have felt myself animated throughout with a sense of the deepest respect for the inherent dignity of human nature, and for freedom, which alone befits that dignity.” Briefly put, his concept of human nature is this:

The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the first and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presupposes; but there is besides another essential – intimately connected with freedom, it is true – a variety of situations. [10]

Like Rousseau and Kant, he holds that

nothing promotes this ripeness for freedom so much as freedom itself. This truth, perhaps, may not be acknowledged by those who have so often used this unripeness as an excuse for continuing repression. But it seems to me to follow unquestionably from the very nature of man. The incapacity for freedom can only arise from a want of moral and intellectual power; to heighten this power is the only way to supply this want; but to do this presupposes the exercise of the power, and this exercise presupposes the freedom which awakens spontaneous activity. Only it is clear we cannot call it giving freedom, when bonds are relaxed which are not felt as such by him who wears them. But of no man on earth – however neglected by nature, and however degraded by circumstances – is this true of all the bonds which oppress him. Let us undo them one by one, as the feeling of freedom awakens in men’s hearts, and we shall hasten progress at every step.



Those who do not comprehend this “may justly be suspected of misunderstanding human nature, and of wishing to make men into machines.”

Man is fundamentally a creative, searching, self-perfecting being: “To inquire and to create – these are the centres around which all human pursuits more or less directly revolve.” But freedom of thought and enlightenment are not only for the elite. Once again echoing Rousseau, Humboldt states, “There is something degrading to human nature in the idea of refusing to any man the right to be a man.” He is, then, optimistic about the effects on all of “the diffusion of scientific knowledge by freedom and enlightenment.” But “all moral culture springs solely and immediately from the inner life of the soul, and can only be stimulated in human nature, and never produced by external and artificial contrivances.” “The cultivation of the understanding, as of any of man’s other faculties, is generally achieved by his own activity, his own ingenuity, or his own methods of using the discoveries of others. . . .” Education, then, must provide the opportunities for self-fulfillment; it can at best provide a rich and challenging environment for the individual to explore, in his own way. Even a language cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, but only “awakened in the mind: one can only provide the thread along which it will develop of itself.” I think that Humboldt would have found congenial much of Dewey’s thinking about education. And he might also have appreciated the recent revolutionary extension of such ideas, for example, by the radical Catholics of Latin America who are concerned with the “awakening of consciousness,” referring to “the transformation of the passive exploited lower classes into conscious and critical masters of their own destinies” [11] much in the manner of Third World revolutionaries elsewhere. He would, I am sure, have approved of their criticism of schools that are

more preoccupied with the transmission of knowledge than with the creation, among other values, of a critical spirit. From the social point of view, the educational systems are oriented to maintaining the existing social and economic structures instead of transforming them.[12]

But Humboldt’s concern for spontaneity goes well beyond educational practice in the narrow sense. It touches also the question of labour and exploitation. The remarks, just quoted, about the cultivation of understanding through spontaneous action continue as follows:

. . . man never regards what he possesses as so much his own, as what he does; and



the labourer who tends a garden is perhaps in a true sense its owner, than the listless voluptuary who enjoys its fruits. . . . In view of this consideration, [13] it seems as if all peasants and craftsmen might be elevated into artists; that is, men who love their labour for its own sake, improve it by their own plastic genius and inventive skill, and thereby cultivate their intellect, ennoble their character, and exalt and refine their pleasures. And so humanity would be ennobled by the very things which now, thought beautiful in themselves, so often serve to degrade it. . . . But, still, freedom is undoubtedly the indispensable condition, without which even the pursuits most congenial to individual human nature, can never succeed in producing such salutary influences. Whatever does not spring from a man's free choice, or is only the result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being, but remains alien to his true nature; he does not perform it with truly human energies, but merely with mechanical exactness.

If a man acts in a purely mechanical way, reacting to external demands or instruction rather than in ways determined by his own interests and energies and power, "we may admire what he does, but we despise what he is." [14]

On such conceptions Humboldt grounds his ideas concerning the role of the state, which tends to "make man an instrument to serve its arbitrary ends, overlooking his individual purposes." His doctrine is classical liberal, strongly opposed to all but the most minimal forms of state intervention in personal or social life.

Writing in the 1790s, Humboldt had no conception of the forms that industrial capitalism would take. Hence he is not overly concerned with the dangers of private power.

But when we reflect (still keeping theory distinct from practice) that the influence of a private person is liable to diminution and decay, from competition, dissipation of fortune, even death; and that clearly none of these contingencies can be applied to the State; we are still left with the principle that the latter is not to meddle in anything which does not refer exclusively to security. . . .

He speaks of the essential equality of the condition of private citizens, and of course has no idea of the ways in which the notion "private person" would come to be reinterpreted in the era of corporate capitalism. He did not foresee that "Democracy with its motto of *equality of all citizens before the law* and Liberalism with its *right of man over his own person*



both [would be] wrecked on realities of capitalist economy.”¹⁵ He did not foresee that, in a predatory capitalist economy, state intervention would be an absolute necessity to preserve human existence and to prevent the destruction of the physical environment—I speak optimistically. As Karl Polanyi, for one, has pointed out, the self-adjusting market “could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness.” Humboldt did not foresee the consequences of the commodity character of labour, the doctrine (in Polanyi’s words) that “it is not for the commodity to decide where it should be offered for sale, to what purpose it should be used, at what price it should be allowed to change hands, and in what manner it should be consumed or destroyed.” But the commodity, in the case, is a human life, and social protection was therefore a minimal necessity to constrain the irrational and destructive workings of the classical free market. Nor did Humboldt understand that capitalist economic relations perpetuated a form of bondage which, as early as 1767, Simon Linguet had declared to be even worse than slavery.

It is the impossibility of living by any other means that compels our farm labourers to till the soil whose fruits they will not eat, and our masons to construct buildings in which they will not live. It is want that drags them to those markets where they await masters who will do them the kindness of buying them. It is want that compels them to go down on their knees to the rich man in order to get from him permission to enrich him. . . . What effective gain has the suppression of slavery brought him? . . . He is free, you say. Ah! That is his misfortune. The slave was precious to his master because of the money he had cost him. But the handicraftsmen cost nothing to the rich voluptuary who employs him. . . . These men, it is said, have no master—they have one, and the most terrible, the most imperious of masters, that is *need*. It is this that reduces them to the most cruel dependence. [17]

If there is something degrading to human nature in the idea of bondage, then a new emancipation must be awaited, Fourier’s “third and last emancipatory phase of history,” which will transform the proletariat to free men by eliminating the commodity character of labor, ending wage slavery, and bringing the commercial, industrial, and financial institutions under democratic control. [18]

Perhaps Humboldt might have accepted these conclusions. He does agree that state intervention in social life is legitimate if “freedom would destroy the very conditions



without which not only freedom but even existence itself would be inconceivable” – precisely the circumstances that arise in an unconstrained capitalist economy. In any event, his criticism of bureaucracy and the autocratic state stands as an eloquent forewarning of some of the most dismal aspects of modern history, and the basis of his critique is applicable to a broader range of coercive institutions than he imagined.

Though expressing a classical liberal doctrine, Humboldt is no primitive individualist in the style of Rousseau. Rousseau extols the savage who “lives within himself”; he has little use for “the sociable man, always outside of himself, [who] knows how to live only in the opinion of others . . . from [whose] judgement alone . . . he draws the sentiment of his own existence.”¹⁹ Humboldt’s vision is quite different:

. . . the whole tenor of the ideas and arguments unfolded in this essay might fairly be reduced to this, that while they would break all fetters in human society, they would attempt to find as many new social bonds as possible. The isolated man is no more able to develop than the one who is fettered.

Thus he looks forward to a community of free association without coercion by the state or other authoritarian institutions, in which free men can create and inquire, and achieve the highest development of their powers – far ahead of his time, he presents an anarchist vision that is appropriate, perhaps, to the next stage of industrial society. We can perhaps look forward to a day when these various strands will be brought together within the framework of libertarian socialism, a social form that barely exists today though its elements can be perceived: in the guarantee of individual rights that has achieved its highest form – though still tragically flawed – in the Western democracies; in the Israeli *kibbutzim*; in the experiments with workers’ councils in Yugoslavia; in the effort to awaken popular consciousness and create a new involvement in the social process which is a fundamental element in the Third World revolutions, coexisting uneasily with indefensible authoritarian practice.

A similar concept of human nature underlies Humboldt’s work on language. Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation. The normal use of language and the acquisition of language depend on what Humboldt calls the fixed form of language, a system of generative processes that is rooted in the nature of the human mind and



constrains but does not determine the free creations of normal intelligence or, at a higher and more original level, of the great writer or thinker. Humboldt is, on the one hand, a Platonist who insists that learning is a kind of reminiscence, in which the mind, stimulated by experience, draws from its own internal resources and follows a path that it itself determines; and he is also a romantic, attuned to cultural variety, and the endless possibilities for the spiritual contributions of the creative genius. There is no contradiction in this, any more than there is a contradiction in the insistence of aesthetic theory that individual works of genius are constrained by principle and rule. The normal, creative use of language, which to the Cartesian rationalist is the best index of the existence of another mind, presupposes a system of rules and generative principles of a sort that the rationalist grammarians attempted, with some success, to determine and make explicit.

The many modern critics who sense an inconsistency in the belief that free creation takes place within – presupposes, in fact – a system of constraints and governing principles are quite mistaken; unless, of course, they speak of “contradiction” in the loose and metaphoric sense of Schelling, when he writes that “without the contradiction of necessity and freedom not only philosophy but every nobler ambition of the spirit would sink to that death which is peculiar to those sciences in which that contradiction serves no function.” Without this tension between necessity and freedom, rule and choice, there can be no creativity, no communication, no meaningful acts at all.

I have discussed these traditional ideas at some length, not out of antiquarian interest, but because I think that they are valuable and essentially correct, and that they project a course we can follow with profit. Social action must be animated by a vision of a future society, and by explicit judgements of value concerning the character of this future society. These judgements must derive from some concept of human nature, and one may seek empirical foundations by investigating human nature as it is revealed by human behaviour and human creations, material, intellectual, and social. We have, perhaps, reached a point in history when it is possible to think seriously about a society in which freely constituted social bonds replace the fetters of autocratic institutions, rather in the sense conveyed by the remarks of Humboldt that I quoted, and elaborated more fully in the tradition of libertarian socialism in the years that followed.

Predatory capitalism created a complex industrial system and an advanced technology; it permitted a considerable extension of democratic practice and fostered certain liberal values, but within limits that are now being pressed and must be overcome. It is not a fit



system for the mid-twentieth century. It is incapable of meeting human needs that can be expressed only in collective terms, and its concept of competitive man who seeks only to maximize wealth and power, who subjects himself to market relationships, to exploitation and external authority, is antihuman and intolerable in the deepest sense. An autocratic state is no acceptable substitute; nor can the militarized state capitalism evolving in the United States or the bureaucratized, centralized welfare state be accepted as the goal of human existence. The only justification for repressive institutions is material and cultural deficit. But such institutions, at certain stages of history, perpetuate and produce such a deficit, and even threaten human survival. Modern science and technology can relieve people of the necessity for specialized, imbecile labour. They may, in principle, provide the basis for a rational social order based on free association and democratic control, if we have the will to create it.

A vision of a future social order is in turn based on a concept of human nature. If in fact humans are indefinitely malleable, completely plastic beings, with no innate structures of mind and no intrinsic needs of a cultural or social character, then they are fit subjects for the “shaping of behavior” by the state authority, the corporate manager, the technocrat, or the central committee. Those with some confidence in the human species will hope this is not so and will try to determine the intrinsic human characteristics that provide the framework for intellectual development, the growth of moral consciousness, cultural achievement, and participation in a free community. In a partly analogous way, a classical tradition spoke of artistic genius acting within and in some ways challenging a framework of rule. Here we touch on matters that are little understood. It seems to me that we must break away, sharply and radically, from much of modern social and behavioral science if we are to move toward a deeper understanding of these matters.

Here, too, I think that the tradition I have briefly reviewed has a contribution to offer. As I have already observed, those who were concerned with human distinctiveness and potential repeatedly were led to a consideration of the properties of language. I think that the study of language can provide some glimmerings of understanding of rule-governed behavior and the possibilities for free and creative action within the framework of a system of rules that in part, at least, reflect intrinsic properties of human mental organization. It seems to me fair to regard the contemporary study of language as in some ways a return to the Humboldtian concept of the form of language: a system of generative processes rooted in innate properties of mind but permitting, in Humboldt’s phrase, an infinite use of finite means. Language cannot be described as a system of organization of



behaviour. Rather, to understand how language is used, we must discover the abstract Humboldtian form of language – its generative grammar, in modern terms. To learn a language is to construct for oneself this abstract system, of course unconsciously. The linguist and psychologist can proceed to study the use and acquisition of language only insofar as they have some grasp of the properties of the system that has been mastered by the person who knows the language. Furthermore, it seems to me that a good case can be made in support of the empirical claim that such a system can be acquired, under the given conditions of time and access, only by a mind that is endowed with certain specific properties that we can now tentatively describe in some detail. As long as we restrict ourselves, conceptually, to the investigation of behavior, its organization, its development through interaction with the environment, we are bound to miss these characteristics of language and mind. Other aspects of human psychology and culture might, in principle, be studied in a similar way.

Conceivably, we might in this way develop a social science based on empirically well-founded propositions concerning human nature. Just as we study the range of humanly attainable languages, with some success, we might also try to study the forms of artistic expression or, for that matter, scientific knowledge that humans can conceive, and perhaps even the range of ethical systems and social structures in which humans can live and function, given their intrinsic capacities and needs. Perhaps one might go on to project a concept of social organization that would – under given conditions of material and spiritual culture – best encourage and accommodate the fundamental human need – if such it is – for spontaneous initiative, creative work, solidarity, pursuit of social justice.

I do not want to exaggerate, as I no doubt have, the role of investigation of language. Language is the product of human intelligence that is, for the moment, most accessible to study. A rich tradition held language to be a mirror of mind. To some extent, there is surely truth and useful insight in this idea.

I am no less puzzled by the topic “language and freedom” than when I began – and no less intrigued. In these speculative and sketchy remarks there are gaps so vast that one might question what would remain, when metaphor and unsubstantiated guess are removed. It is sobering to realize – as I believe we must – how little we have progressed in our knowledge of human beings and society, or even in formulating clearly the problems that might be seriously studied. But there are, I think, a few footholds that seem fairly firm. I like to believe that the intensive study of one aspect of human psychology – human



language – may contribute to a humanistic social science that will serve, as well, as an instrument for social action. It must, needless to say, be stressed that social action cannot await a firmly established theory of human nature and society, nor can the validity of the latter be determined by our hopes and moral judgements. The two – speculation and action – must progress as best they can, looking forward to the day when theoretical inquiry will provide a firm guide to the unending, often grim, but never hopeless struggle for freedom and social justice.

Suggested Reading

- [1] F W J Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, trans. and ed. James Gutmann (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1936).
- [2] R D Masters, introduction to his edition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *First and Second Discourses*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964).
- [3] Compare Proudhon, a century later: "No long discussion is necessary to demonstrate that the power of denying a man his thought, his will, his personality, is a power of life and death, and that to make a man a slave is to assassinate him."
- [4] Cited in A Lehning, ed., Bakunin, *Etatisme et anarchie* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967), editor's note 50, from P Schrecker, "Kant et la révolution française," *Revue philosophique*, September–December 1939.
- [5] I have discussed this matter in *Cartesian Linguistics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) and *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, extended ed., 1972).
- [6] See the references of note 5, and also my *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969), chap. 1, sec. 8.
- [7] I need hardly add that this is not the prevailing view. For discussion, see E.H. Lenneberg, *Biological Foundations of Language* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967); my *Language and Mind*; E.A. Drewe et al., "A Comparative Review of the Results of Behavioural Research on Man and Monkey," (London; Institute of Psychiatry, unpublished draft, 1969); P.H. Lieberman, D.H. Klatt, and W.H. Wilson, "Vocal Tract Limitations on the Vowel Repertoires of Rhesus Monkeys and other Nonhuman Primates," *Science*, June 6, 1969; and P.H. Lieberman, "Primate Vocalizations and Human Linguistic Ability," *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, vol. 44, no. 6 (1968).
- [8] In the books cited above, and in *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (New York: Humanities Press, 1964).
- [9] J W Burrow, introduction to his edition of Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), from which most of the following quotes are taken.
- [10] Compare the remarks of Kant, quoted above. Kant's essay appeared in 1793; Humboldt's was written in 1791–92. Parts appeared, but it did not appear in full during his lifetime. See Burrow, introduction to Humboldt, *Limits of State Action*.
- [11] Thomas G Sanders, "The Church in Latin America," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 48, no. 2 (1970).
- [12] *Ibid*, The source is said to be the ideas of Paulo Freire. Similar criticism is widespread in the student



movement in the West. See, for example, Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale, eds., *The New Student Left* rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), chap. 3.

[13]Namely, that a man “only attains the most matured and graceful consummation of his activity, when his way of life is harmoniously in keeping with his character”—that is, when his actions flow from inner impulse.

[14]The latter quote is from Humboldt’s comments on the French Constitution, 1791—parts translated in Marianne Cowan, ed., *Humanist Without Portfolio: An Anthology* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963).

[15]Rudolf Rocker, “Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism,” in Paul Eitzbacher, *Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1960). In his book *Nationalism and Culture* (London: Freedom Press, 1937), Rocker describes Humboldt as “the most prominent representative in Germany” of the doctrine of natural rights and of the opposition to the authoritarian state. Rousseau he regards as a precursor of authoritarian doctrine, but he considers only the *Social Contract*, not the far more libertarian *Discourse on Inequality*. Burrow observes that Humboldt’s essay anticipates “much nineteenth century political theory of a populist, anarchist and syndicalist kind” and notes the hints of the early Marx. See also my *Cartesian Linguistics*, n. 51, for some comments.

[16]Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

[17]Cited by Paul Mattick, “Workers’ Control,” in Priscilla Long, ed., *The New Left* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1969), p. 377.

[18]Cited in Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958). p. 19.

Resonance gratefully acknowledges Noam Chomsky for his permission to reproduce this article.

Errata

In *Resonance*, Vol.4, Number 1, January 1999, p.32, in the bio-sketch of the author G Kallianpur, the last sentence should read as follows:

Earlier, he was on the faculty of the University of Minnesota, and in the seventies, he served as the Director of the Indian Statistical Institute for several years.

(The last part of the above sentence was left out inadvertently at the time of printing.)

