Noam Chomsky is undoubtedly one of the brilliant polyglots produced in the last century, who continues to engage critically with various issues that bother us today. In the masterly foreword to this book Akeel Bilgrami, a thinker and linguist, explains that this book is ‘a lifetime of reflection by a scientist of language’ (vii). It is divided into four chapters, ‘What is Language?’, ‘What Can We Understand?’, ‘What is the Common Good?’, and ‘The Mysteries of Nature: How Deeply Hidden?’. Through these questions Chomsky intends to get a clarity about and hopes for the answer to the question that forms the name of this book: ‘What Kind of Creatures Are We?’.

These fundamental questions cover an impressive range of fields: theoretical linguistics, cognitive science, philosophy of science, history of science, evolutionary biology, metaphysics, the theory of knowledge, the philosophy of language and mind, moral and political philosophy, and, even briefly, the ideal of human education (ibid.).

A review of a book of this kind should necessarily be aphoristic, as the book itself is, since the sheer vastness of the ideas covered can only be called a unique kind of mind-map of a genius. As Bilgrami puts it: ‘To summarize a book whose intellectual complexity and power and whose breadth of knowledge and originality cannot possibly be captured in a summary—so, an exercise and duty that may not, in the end, aid the reader at all’ (xxiv).

Chomsky begins this book with a hope of finding some insights, new and possibly old, into the nature of human existence. He sets out in a search for insights that could ‘clear away some of the obstacles that hamper further inquiry’ (1). His questioning is specific: ‘What is language? What are the limits of human understanding (if any)? And what is the common good to which we should strive?’ (ibid.). Citing recent scientific research, Chomsky considers language to be the one aspect of human life that is crucial to ‘understanding our modern selves’ (3). This book is a summary of Chomsky’s research for half a century, primarily in the field of linguistics, of which he is almost the founder, at least of its modern avatar. The innocuous-sounding task of wading through this deceptively simple and short volume would itself require in-depth knowledge of numerous disciplines and this is where Chomsky scores admirably: He presents all this wisdom in a clear and succinct language so much so that the ordinary reader is encouraged to believe that understanding Chomsky is not so difficult after all—obviously a foolhardy conclusion.

This work is elemental; it touches and hints at some fundamental thoughts at the pivot of our existence and it invites the reader to pursue detailed studies of linguistics, hermeneutics, ethics, and metaphysics. Chomsky often speaks the mind of the readers. He questions the assumptions underlying the formation and development of a language and its structure. It is high time we turn to minimalist strategies for the development of a language. Talking about ethics or the common good, Chomsky in the third chapter of this book questions the intentions of the US constitution and affirms that ‘scholarship generally agrees that “the Constitution was intrinsically an aristocratic document designed to check the democratic tendencies of the period”’ (78). Chomsky’s anarchist leanings are clear when he says that ‘anarchism
is the inheritor of the classical liberal ideas that emerged from the Enlightenment’ (63).

The concept of a thing is a much discussed topic in linguistics. Chomsky points to a frequent lack of this concept. He explains this with the help of two nouns, ‘fly’ and ‘flaw’. This analysis of ‘thinghood’ brings to the reader Chomsky’s effortless way of presenting most complex ideas. This volume could on many counts be considered to be a history of ideas, at least in the disciplines of language, meaning, and philosophy. The timeline that Chomsky chooses to analyse is a momentous one and one can almost see the formation of Chomsky’s mind through these decades. Chomsky’s attempt to be inconclusive and yet leave pointers to various conclusions is hard to miss and it makes this book an inquiry in multiple layers that is in many ways, cyclical. To the question ‘What Kind of Creatures Are We?’, Chomsky does not have an answer; he does not want to have an answer, his aim seems to just raise the question and make it clear to the reader that in finding answers to this question, we are no better than our ancestors of several centuries ago. It is this candid humility that sets apart Chomsky in the galaxy of thinkers of the last and the present century and not his scholarly accomplishments alone. Expression, meaning, intent, and truth are what this book is all about and Chomsky artfully weaves a tapestry of these ideas, situates them in the human mind, and finally rejects the very need for that mind.

The striking feature of this book is Chomsky’s deliberations in the fourth chapter, where he reveals a metaphysical side to him. In a brief but sweeping survey of thought that tries to understand nature, Chomsky starts from Isaac Newton and analyses John Locke. He considers the mind-problem conundrum to be redundant and proposes instead the ‘knowledge intuition/argument’ problem as the focal question of the natural sciences (103). This Chomsky bases upon the disillusionment with classical approaches: ‘Classical interpretations having vanished, the notions of body, material, physical are hardly more than honorific designations for what is more or less understood at some particular moment in time, with flexible boundaries and no guarantee that there will not be radical revision ahead, even at its core’ (102). I would like to see this as a metaphysical approach because Chomsky prompts me to such thought: ‘Being reflective creatures, unlike others, we go on to seek to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena of experience. These exercises are called myth, or magic, or philosophy, or science’ (103). For someone who has practically scripted the modern discourse on language and meaning, Chomsky takes a radical turn in this chapter to intuition and the realm beyond thought. It could be the result of his octogenarian experience as he is intrigued that what he hears ‘as noise is perceived as music by’ his ‘teenage grandchildren’ (ibid.). Chomsky declares that ‘there is no objective science from a third-person perspective, just various first-person perspectives’ (104).

Chomsky also draws the attention of the reader to ‘lesser grades of mystery’ like the ‘evolution of ... cognitive capacities’ in humans (125). Further, he cites the evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin and concludes that it is almost impossible to learn about this evolution because of lack of evidence.

When the majority of the thinking world is toying with various and newer readings of quantum physics, Chomsky brings an interesting focus on Newtonian thought. He argues that a shift to Newton, at least in the paradigm of thought, would lead to a complete redundancy of the mind-body problem, though he is concerned with the objection that it invokes ‘an unacceptable form of “radical emergence”, unlike the emergence of liquids from molecules’ (115).

Part of the Columbia Themes in Philosophy series and adapted from the Dewey lectures that Chomsky delivered in the Columbia University in 2013, this book does raise some basic questions of philosophy. Chomsky questions the very process of understanding and points out that it might have limits and regrets that this fact ‘is sometimes thoughtlessly derided as “mysterianism”’ (104). A reference for all interested in Chomsky and a guidepost for thinkers, this volume should find a place in the bookshelf of anyone interested in human nature.

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