

Week 6b Friday, May 8 Seminar Questions on Chomsky 2-4

Focus on the questions Q1-Q5 in small groups. We will discuss questions Q6 and Q7 and any questions generated by the small groups in the full seminar.

Q1 In Chapter 2, Chomsky traces aspects of the history of science relating to Galileo, Descartes and Newton. How was “mental nature” understood in the Galilean era (p. 49)? How does the Galilean perspective relate to Descartes’ dualism (p. 49-51)? According to Chomsky, how did Newton’s work prove Descartes wrong? (p. 53) He returns to the discussion of the “Galilean style” of science in Ch. 4 (p. 98). Given what has said in both chapters, what exactly is the “Galilean style” or what he class the “Galilean-Newtonia style” (p.104) and how does he seem to think it relates to his current work in linguistics. (p. 98-105)

Q2 What historical reasons does Chomsky cite (pp 59-60) to advocate a cautious approach to the view that consciousness should be treated as “the hard problem”? Given these examples, what might you imagine that a “solution” to the hard problem could look like?

Q3 Discuss the “ethological approach” to the study of animal communication, as represented by the four perspectives on p. 63 advocated by Hauser. Think of a concrete example of animal communication and try to figure out how each of the four perspectives would approach the study of that trait. Chomsky later summarizes ways in which the four perspectives might be brought to bear on this topic (pp 83-84). Which perspective(s) does he seem to find most promising?

Q4 The text starting on p. 98 leads into an explicit discussion of methodology on p. 102. What do you make of the fact that scientific fields tend not to have courses in methodology, while many other areas do? Have you taken a methodology class, and if so in what? Do the differences Chomsky mentions between different disciplines seem natural to you, or do you think these distinctions are arbitrary or artificial?

Q5 Chomsky expresses skepticism about “natural selection explanations” (p.138 ff), not in principle but in terms of what is actually known about the evolution of certain traits. He takes issue with Jacobs notion that biological systems are characterized by *bricolage*, tinkering. Discuss the examples of bats and piranhas on p. 140. How does he use zebras (p. 143) and giraffes (p. 149) as cautionary tales in this respect? How does this skeptical perspective relate to his views on language evolution in general and minimalism in particular?

Q6 On pp 74-79 we find a lengthy discussion of Hauser’s views on human language and animal communication, as found in his book *Evolution of Communication*. He comes back to Hauser again in Ch. 4, p. 138) As you know, Chomsky and Hauser ended up writing a paper together on these topics. Discuss both Chomsky’s criticisms of Hauser, and also the areas of common ground between them which might have led to their later collaborative work.

Q7 On p. 85-86, Chomsky briefly discusses the idea of a LAD, which he describes as controversial and indeed has been criticized by other authors we have read. In light of Chomsky’s comments on this page, do you think this comes down to a misunderstanding or a genuine disagreement?

Last small group task: the group as a whole should ultimately formulate a question for full seminar and write it on the board before the full group session.