

The Gospel of Chomsky
A Comparison of Dr. Noam Chomsky's Worldview and Advaita Vedanta
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I knew very little about Professor Noam Chomsky before I happened to watch a DVD documentary about him and his book *Manufacturing Consent*. It overwhelmed me and got me to think critically about politics, business, the world, and my personal life. I was mostly struck by the deep similarities between Chomsky's world view and that of Vedanta.

I wrote this paper for two very different and distinct audiences: those who know of Chomsky, the linguist, political scientist, and social activist but know nothing of the religious tenets of Vedanta, and those who know of Vedanta but know nothing about Chomsky. The point is to introduce both audiences to the striking similarities and convergence of ideas that originate from these two seemingly opposite sources. The challenge will be to cover the basic doctrines of each subject without becoming tedious, or presumptuous. So please, dear reader, bear with me if I review material that you already know. I will be quoting from Chomsky (and his sources), Vedanta scriptures, and also the 19th century scientist Thomas Henry Huxley, 1825-1895. I include Huxley because he stands as a pivotal figure between science and religion. He was a major advocate of the scientific method and an early supporter of Darwin's theory of Natural Selection. He also coined the word "*agnostic*" (meaning someone who finds no evidence for the existence of God, but neither does he find evidence that disproves the existence of God – and therefore keeps an open mind on the subject). Huxley staunchly supported the idea that science and religion need to be held equally in high regard and that there should not be a conflict. In a lecture Huxley gave in 1859 entitled *Science and Religion* he discusses the problem, which is still relevant today:

"...of all the miserable superstitions which have ever tended to vex and enslave mankind, this notion of the antagonism of science and religion is the most mischievous."

"True science and true religion are twin-sisters, and the separation of either from the other is sure to prove the death of both. Science prospers exactly in proportion as it is religious; and religion flourishes in exact proportion to the scientific depth and firmness of its basis."

Many people would say that any kind of open-minded communication between the fields of science and religion is virtually non-existent today; and where communication does exist, it is mostly expressed as fruitless rants whose dogmas prevent any real discussion of the issues. The guiding principles of both fields should be, as René Descartes believed (as paraphrased by Huxley): "Learn what is true in order to do what is right." The worst kind of blind science dogmatically pursues ends without considering the effects on the world we all share. The worst of blind religion dogmatically traps minds in an unreflective, unthinking, set of rules that seeks to keep out all contradictory facts. There's no need to describe the possible motives for science and religion to take these positions, as it hardly matters.

Science without a value dimension is useless and potentially destructive; religion without self-verification is meaningless and can be equally destructive. Both science and religion ought to seek truth in the following manner: cast all dogma and assumptions aside, and drive to the core of the subject, until a universal principle or truth can be found. Huxley says it clearly, "Sit down before fact like a little child, and be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abyss Nature leads, or you shall learn nothing." This is what I feel both Chomsky and the Advaita Vedantist each practice and advocate.

Vedanta takes its name from the most ancient Hindu scriptures, the Vedas. While there are specific, historic, written Vedic texts, they are also considered to be without beginning and

without end. They are the accumulated treasury of verifiable spiritual truths discovered by different mystics, saints, sages, and incarnations of God throughout the ages. Vedanta also holds that all the major religions are true, just as many different paths lead to the same mountaintop. This is not to say that religions are all the same, but rather that they share a common moral framework and all effectively lead to the same place. The analogy is given by Dr. Huston Smith, a leading scholar of the world's religions and former colleague of Chomsky at MIT: that a pair of pants is plural at the bottom, but singular at the top. The various religions start from different positions in time, culture, and methods – but lead to the same goal: spiritual transformation, God realization, and liberation.

Noam Chomsky first came to public attention for his radical theories of linguistics and later for his equally radical political and social views. In a biography, *A Life of Dissent*, he is described as having become interested in the study of language without the benefit of a theoretical background; but he was equipped with a feeling for, and interest in, historical processes, which led him to seek explanations rather than formulate descriptions. In 1955 he was given a position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to work on the problem of machine translation of languages, which he felt was an impractical, and probably impossible, endeavor. Instead, he focused on philosophy, language, and human cognition. Over time, his linguistics theories became both accepted and lauded by some and detested by others in the field. By the mid-sixties he became identified with the anti-Vietnam War movement, and his was a leading voice of dissent against the policies of the US government. For the past 40 years he has given an incredible amount of his time and energy to the causes of the oppressed and disenfranchised – working for equality and justice for people around the world. His body of work, in both linguistics and politics, is as voluminous as it is significant, and includes *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, *Language and Responsibility*, *Reflections on Language*, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, *Syntactic Structures*, and *Language and Politics* - to name only a few. An often used quote from *The New York Times* calls him, "arguably the most important intellectual alive".

In reading material written about and by Chomsky, you don't get an indication that he has any religious beliefs; in fact, he seems to be the perfect agnostic. As far as I can tell, he is not an atheist. Chomsky's main objection to religion seems to be that he thinks it requires irrational beliefs; he also has doubts about the purpose and utility of organized religion. However, I've found Chomsky's linguistics research and his political worldview to have strong parallels to the Jnana Yoga path of Advaita Vedanta (knowledge of the supreme reality, or Brahman, arrived at through reasoning and discrimination). They are too similar to be mere coincidence.

In an email, I asked Chomsky (who describes himself as an anarcho-syndicalist) about a comment he made in the film, *Manufacturing Consent*, "...you mentioned the idea of a spiritual transformation, what did you mean by that?"

To my great surprise and delight, he wrote back, "I don't recall the reference to 'spiritual transformation' but I'm sure it had no religious connotations. Rather, must have had to do with significant change of consciousness, values, perceptions, etc., possibly even a reference to comments of Rosa Luxembourg..."

I researched Rosa Luxembourg and found many references in her writing that could (with a little editing) be religious essays, which talk about personal liberation, freedom, rebirth, and spiritual transformation. Of course, her references were all political – dealing with early socialism in Russia. Only the vocabulary is the same. Or is there a deeper connection?

I got more clues into Chomsky's religious outlook from an interview I found online:

"Do I believe in God? Can't answer, I'm afraid. I'm not being flippant, but I don't understand the question. What is it that I am supposed to believe or not believe in? Are you asking whether I believe there is something not in the universe (or the universes, if there are [maybe infinitely] many of them), and that somehow stands above them? I've never heard of any reason for believing that. Something else? What? There are many concepts of spirituality, among them, various notions of divinity developed in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic religions. Within these, the concepts vary greatly. St. Augustine and others, for example, argued that one should not take seriously the Biblical account of God as an exaggerated human, and other Biblical accounts, because they were crafted so as to make the intended message intelligible to humans -- and on such grounds, he argued, organized religion ought to accept persuasive conclusions of science, a conception that Galileo appealed to (in vain) when he faced Papal censure."

"Anyway, without clarification of a kind I have never seen, I don't know whether I believe or don't believe in whatever a questioner has in mind."

In my research on Chomsky, I've discovered, among other things, that he has a multitude of very vocal critics, in both politics and linguistics. In a particularly vicious article on a right-wing, neo-conservative website there was a good encapsulation of Chomsky's theory of grammar (if you ignore the childish sarcasm), together with an analogy of its extension to religion that happens to be one of the very points I want to make:

"Prior to Chomsky, linguists engaged in a lot of data collection to understand the diversity of human language."

"However, Chomsky rejected this approach. He wanted to look into something 'deeper' (academese for 'pretentious and nonexistent'). So he invented something called 'universal grammar' which is somehow programmed into us at birth. Now it is obvious to anyone who's studied a foreign language that there is no such thing as 'universal grammar': there are a lot of differences between any two languages' structures. How does Chomsky account for these differences? He claims that we formulate 'deep structures' in our heads using 'universal grammar'. Then we use 'transformations' to change these (invisible, nonexistent) 'deep structures' into 'surface structures' (which are what we actually say and write). There are innumerable problems with this."

"Imagine if some professor said that there was a 'universal religion' programmed into us at birth. What if this person were, say, Buddhist? How would he explain the diversity of faiths around the world? He would say that all deities are 'transformations' of the 'underlying Buddha', all religious codes (e.g., the Ten Commandments, Sharia) are 'transformations' of the 'underlying dharma (Buddhist law)', etc. But, you then ask, how could a Muslim knowing nothing of Buddhism be an 'underlying Buddhist'? The professor would answer: 'Underlying religion' just IS."

Chomsky discovered universal grammar by diving deep into the idea of language, not just the particular use of a particular language. Not content to simply compile lists of language attributes, he wanted to know the underlying principles of human language. He holds that if beings from another planet came to Earth, they would conclude that we all spoke dialects of the same language – they're that similar.

Similarly, Vedanta holds that if one dives deep into religion, not any particular religion, but the very idea of religion, one can find the underlying universal principles that support all the world's faiths. To someone fixated on surface reality, living only in the realm of appearances, names, and forms everything is diversity, but one who penetrates the surface finds unity. That is Vedanta.

That is what a few enlightened teachers have learned, practiced, and taught. It's more than just a moral code to live by or a set of beliefs. It's a structured approach to live an intentional life with the goal of achieving a spiritual transformation, God realization, and personal liberation.

It is not remarkable that true science and true religion happen to share a common and effective research method. Both Jnana Yoga and science teaches that with dogma and pre-conceptions cast aside, with a clear mind, through pure reasoning, discrimination, and experimentation a person can discover the true nature of the thing being studied – in any field.

What is truly remarkable to me is the extension of this inquiry by Chomsky into the very nature of our society, and how that worldview parallels Vedanta. I'm specifically referring to the Vedic idea of Maya, which can be loosely translated as "illusion". It refers to the deceptive nature of the temporal world. Vedanta holds that we are victims of Maya when we regard the objects and impressions of our perception as having an independent existence. They are illusions and only God has an absolute existence. He is called Brahman, Jehovah, Allah – different names for the same absolute, transcendental ground of all existence.

The Vedantic view of this world describes human experience as a movie projected onto a screen. We normally are only aware of the movie, but there is an underlying reality onto which the movie is projected. Maya is described as the force of nature that holds people's attention on this illusion. What gives that force its power is the desire people have for things – be it personal power, sensual pleasures, good health, or possessions. People crave things because they think things will make them content with their lives. All too often, the objects of desire only bring the desire for more things, and ultimately disappointment (all people, no matter how healthy or wealthy, eventually die, all power is illusory, and, of course, you can't take it with you).

Chomsky's view of Western society is that there is an underlying power structure that seeks to perpetuate itself by distracting people from the real issues that affect their lives. This is achieved through consumerism, nationalism, and preoccupation with useless activities, such as spectator sports. He sees the entire US political spectrum, from Democrats to Republicans, liberals to conservatives, as part of that same power structure which controls the news and events, all of which have a profound impact on people's lives.

That is not to say that there are not practical choices to be made, where possible, in both politics and religion. Some major political movements will have a less detrimental effect on populations and the environment than others. This is comparable to the Vedantic idea that there is both Vidyamaya and Advidyamaya – that is Maya that helps lead to liberation and Maya that tends to keep you bound to the illusion.

While on the face of it, it would seem that the political power structure is not necessarily malevolent; Chomsky makes the point that the underlying greed, consumerism, mixed with an oil-based economy inherently pits the "haves" against the "have nots". The ecology, native populations, and the poor are the inevitable victims of that power structure. This is richly described in *Manufacturing Consent*.

I'm not suggesting that there is a direct link between Chomsky's linguistics studies and his view of the world, except to this extent; like the Jnana Yogi, he used his considerable powers of honest intellectual inquiry to study the world, he has seen something true about how the world works, which happens to be in close accord with Vedanta's view of Maya.

Chomsky (paraphrasing his comments on Saul Kripke, a professor of philosophy at Princeton) acknowledges that reality is only apparent: Being a table seems to be an essential property of a table. But, suppose we discover that the designer of this particular object had intended it to be a

hard bed and that it is so used. Surely we would then say that the thing is not a table but a hard bed that looks like a table. But the thing is what it is.

Vedanta also holds that there is an essence of things beyond name and form. Say you walk into a darkened room and see a snake on the floor; you will experience fear, anxiety, and want to run away. But, with the light turned on you see that it is just a piece of rope, which you mistakenly perceived as a snake. The true nature of things can be known, through the light of reason. The world that we perceive with our normal senses is not reality, but is a projection onto Reality – which can be rightly perceived through a spiritual transformation. In the Chandogya Upanishad there is a discussion of knowledge of the true nature of things:

“...as by knowing one lump of clay, all things made of clay are known, the difference being only in name and arising from speech, and the truth being that all are clay; as by knowing one nugget of gold, all things made of gold are known, the difference being only in name and arising from speech, and the truth being that all are gold – exactly so is that knowledge, by knowing which we know all.”

This is just one example of the Vedantic Universal Principle of human life and existence. Don't be content with knowing the names and forms of the things around you; seek to know your own true nature.

The terms Chomsky, and the people who influenced him, use to describe a more practical and humane society are often found in religious writings: liberation, spiritual transformation, freedom, etc. It's perhaps the method of arriving at these goals where Chomsky and Vedanta differ. Chomsky seeks a transformation of society, through political change, brought about by groups of like-minded people. Vedanta holds that society (this whole world as described as Maya) will not change its core nature, but it is the individual who can break free of its grip, experience a spiritual transformation, and become liberated. Only when individuals become free, are they in a position to influence others in society by their example.

As mentioned earlier, many of Chomsky's sources and statements can be, with just a few changes, perfectly in line with Vedanta. Here is an example from *Manufacturing Consent*:

Chomsky is asked, “How far does the success of Libertarianism, Socialism, or Anarchism really depend on a fundamental change in the nature of man and his motivation, his altruism, and also in his knowledge and sophistication?”

He answers, “I think it not only depends on it, but in fact, the whole purpose of Libertarianism and Socialism is that it will contribute to it. It will contribute to a spiritual transformation. Precisely that kind of great transformation in the way humans conceive of themselves, and their ability to act, to decide, to create, to produce, to inquire. Precisely that spiritual transformation that social thinkers from the left-Marxist tradition, from Luxemburg on over through anarchist-syndicalist have always emphasized. So, on the one hand, it requires that spiritual transformation, on the other hand, its purpose is to create institutions which will contribute to that transformation.

And now, with just a few changes:

Vedanta is asked, “How far does the success of Religion really depend on a fundamental change in the nature of man and his motivation, his altruism, and also in his knowledge and sophistication?”

Vedanta answers: It not only depends on it, but in fact, the whole purpose of Religion is that it will contribute to it. It will contribute to a spiritual transformation. Precisely that kind of great transformation in the way humans conceive of themselves, and their ability to act, to decide, to create, to produce, to inquire. Precisely that spiritual transformation that religious thinkers from the Early Christian fathers, Buddhist scriptures, Vedic tradition, from the Baal Shem Tov through the Sufi mystics have always emphasized. So, on the one hand, it requires that spiritual transformation, on the other hand, its purpose is to create institutions which will contribute to that transformation.

Just as the laws of physics existed and were true before their discovery, and would still be true even if all humanity forgot them, so it is with the truths that lie at the core of human existence. Religion, in its highest expression, embraces those truths, and Chomsky seems to have discovered them without a religious context, just as the ancient Rishis discovered them without a scientific context.

Where Vedanta and Chomsky may differ most is that Vedanta scriptures also seek to explain the original cause of our state of existence. Chomsky, like many scientists, may believe that this is unknowable, and therefore not legitimately discussed. Again from the Chandogya Upanishad:

“In the beginning there was Existence, one only, without a second. Some say that in the beginning there was nonexistence only, and that out of that the universe was born. But how could such a thing be? How could existence be born of nonexistence? No, my son, in the beginning there was Existence alone – one only, without a second. He, the one, thought to himself: Let me be many, let me grow forth.”

“Thus out of himself he projected the universe; and having projected out of himself the universe, he entered into every being and every thing. All that is, has its self in him alone. He is the truth. He is the subtle essence of all. He is the Self. And that, my son, That art Thou.”

In Advaita Vedanta, it is not necessary to believe all this. What does matter is to seek the eternal truth of existence and lead an intentional life. Chomsky has shown that he has, in my opinion, “learned what is true, in order to do what is good” – living his life this way, by example, is in the Vedantic sense, a religious life. And need not be so in name.