On Terrorism
Noam Chomsky interviewed by John Bolender

Jump Arts Journal, January, 2004

Our correspondent in Ankara, John Bolender, holds a PhD. in, well, Philosophy, and currently teaches in the Department of Philosophy at Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. Bolender has been steadily interviewing the irascible philosopher and linguist Noam Chomsky in an ongoing online forum described below.

At the moment, this compiled interview finds a home at Jump Arts Journal, but it will be an ongoing matter at the for-fee section of Zmag.org. Many would-be champions of Chomsky find themselves of similar political outlook, but find the professor a wee on the didactic side, as well as a media machine unto himself. I am one of these, but don’t find this to be a necessarily bad thing, believe the discussion worthy and significant, and, as JAJ deals will all media, Chomsky’s DVD Distorted Morality (Epitaph Records) is floating around for less than the price of two GetHappy Meals. As I encourage you with our writing on the Arts, listen to everything, but make up you own mind; so do I implore you here regarding political issues. Feel free to respond in our own Jump Arts Journal Forum section.

I have strong beliefs about passive resistance, am in awe and admiration for the Vietnam-era monks who self-immolated to draw attention to the wrongs of that war, and detest any excuse for (which is different from explanation of) any kind of terrorism, which includes schoolyard bullies and economic abuse of our and other populations. The answer? That’s the difficult question, and so with a smile, and many grains of salts including aspirin, let the games begin.

Technical matters: Yes, they both actually do speak this way, but some of the writing (e.g.: i.e.) is due to the online nature of the original discussion. Footnotes are copiously offered at the foot of the interview. Please forgive our Tech Dept. until our server permits us to more easily post Turkish diacritical marks.

Steve Koenig, Editor

AN INTERVIEW WITH NOAM CHOMSKY

Noam Chomsky is Institute Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Since the 1950s, he has written a great number of enormously influential books and articles on language, mind, and politics. Some of his most recent books include Amerikan Müdahaleciligi, edited and translated by Taylan Dogan and Baris Zeren (Istanbul: Aram Yayincilik, 2002), On Nature and Language, edited by Adriana Belletti and Luigi Rizzi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003).

Questions and endnotes are by John Bolender. The questions and answers appeared from January through December 2003 in an internet forum on www.zmag.org, open to ZNet sustainers.
BOLENDER: On 2 Sept. 2003, the Christian Science Monitor ran an article called "Probing the roots of terror" by Mark Clayton in which he describes some recent work by economists trying to understand the root causes of terrorism. The economists describe what Clayton considers to be a surprising result, namely that most terrorists are middle class. I.e., "a fetid mix of poverty and lack of education" is generally not a factor. Here is a quote:

“Among Hamas and PIJ [Palestinian Islamic Jihad] members ... only 20 percent were poor - fewer than the 32 percent who qualified as poor among a similar slice of the general Palestinian population between ages 18 and 41. But among suicide bombers, the contrast was even more pronounced: Just 13 percent were from poor families. Educational backgrounds of people aligned with those groups showed similar results. Among suicide bombers, 36 percent had finished at least secondary school. Only 2 percent had not gone past primary school. It looked as if the pundits might be wrong: The suicide terrorists were fairly well educated and were far from being poor."

Clayton reports their conclusion: “The ‘findings’ provide no support for the view that those who live in poverty or have a low level of education are disproportionately drawn to participate in terrorist activities.”

CHOMSKY: I saw the article but it was not specific enough to be very helpful. The general conclusions reported are familiar. If you are interested, there is a careful discussion of these topics by Scott Atran in Science, March 7, 2003. Specifically on suicide bombers, but it generalizes.

BOLENDER: Given that you describe John Kennedy as a terrorist (1), I would not expect you to express the slightest surprise that terrorists need not be poor or uneducated. But Kennedy would be a special kind of terrorist, a head of state.

CHOMSKY: It's close to a historical universal that the term "terror" is used for their terror against us and our clients, not our terror against them. Heads of states can qualify as "terrorists," when they are official enemies.

BOLENDER: Is it surprising or hard to interpret the fact that so many non-state terrorists have middle class backgrounds?

CHOMSKY: Not particularly. People who are struggling to survive and can't think much beyond tomorrow's meal are unlikely to become politically active in any dimension.

BOLENDER: If it is literally impossible to theorize about human action (2), how useful are such generalizations (e.g., about the wealth of the typical terrorist) in understanding and predicting the course of human events? If they are useful, then why can't one speak of "theory"? Let me try to re-phrase that: If there are no theories of human action or choice, then why aren't the soft sciences essentially fraudulent? And if they are not fraudulent, then what sort of understanding does one get from them?

CHOMSKY: Generalizations, if carefully reached, can be quite useful. It's certainly not impossible to theorize about human action. We all do it all the time, informally and intuitively, and in the social sciences and psychology it's done more self-consciously. They're by no means fraudulent in general. The question that arises is whether they reach the
level of depth of explanation and understanding so as to merit honorific terms that are often thrown around loosely ("theory," "science," etc.).

BOLENDER: In January of 2001, the Foreign Relations of the United States put a myth-vs.-fact sheet on its website (www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/01fs/3935.htm). It contains a lot of corrections of misconceptions, or at least that was the stated purpose. It is largely about how the suffering of Iraqis cannot be blamed on sanctions but on Saddam Hussein alone. There are two "myths" and "facts" stated below. It would be interesting to hear your reaction to them.

“Myth: The Iraqi people do not have an adequate supply of medicine because of sanctions.

Fact: Sanctions have never prohibited or limited the import of medicine. In fact, the UN has urged the Iraqi regime to order more basic medicines, but Baghdad has refused. Saddam has been criticized by the UN for intentionally hoarding medicines in warehouses in government-controlled Iraq instead of distributing it to civilians.

Myth: Sanctions prohibit humanitarian contributions to Iraq.

Fact: Sanctions do not prohibit humanitarian contributions, Saddam does. Since June 1998, Saddam has publicly refused a number of humanitarian contributions while claiming that his people are suffering.”

CHOMSKY: These are familiar fabrications that have been refuted over and over by the officials responsible for administering the programs, notably Denis Halliday and Hans van Sponeck. A good scholarly review refuting these and many other fabrications is Eric Herring, "Between Iraq and a Hard Place," Review of International Studies 2002, 39-56. It’s a critique of the British government claims, which are about the same. It’s on the web (3). A site that lists plenty of documentation on this is: www.cam.ac.uk/societies/casi/info/themes.html#gwesi (4).

Note, incidentally, the logic of the argument. Suppose it were true that Saddam had been purposely making life harder for Iraqis. Then the US government logic is that we must therefore join him in making life even more impossible for Iraqi civilians by imposing extremely harsh sanctions -- and the lists of what the US has tried to block are really outrageous, and well-documented.

BOLENDER: Do you think that the sanctions imposed on Syria are a pretext for a future attack? Given the increasing unpopularity of the war in Iraq, one might doubt it.

CHOMSKY: I agree with you that the (rather surprising) difficulties faced by the occupation of Iraq, the chances for going on to the next target are reduced. In any event, I doubt that the administration would have attacked Syria, which is not defenseless and therefore not a proper target, though they might have "unleashed Israel," where the government might have its own reasons. Right now [December 2003], it doesn't look likely. Possible targets are not just in the Middle East: the Andean region is another.

BOLENDER: Could you say something more about the Andean region?

CHOMSKY: US intelligence projections regard the Andean region as crucial to US global power in the coming years, in
part because of its oil resources. But only in part. The region is in turmoil (meaning, not under stable US control), from Venezuela to Bolivia. The US has a substantial military presence right in the region, and a ring of military bases including Ecuador, El Salvador, and the Dutch islands. The US already backed the Venezuelan military coup, and was forced to back down when it was overturned at once by popular reaction and denounced throughout the hemisphere. More is not unlikely, though I presume that the unexpected (and to me at least rather surprising) failures of the military occupation in Iraq may reduce the likelihood of military action.

BOLENDER: L. Paul Bremer, top administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, has just announced that U.S. forces will probably stay in Iraq even after the interim government assumes power in June. "Our presence here will change from an occupation to an invited presence. I'm sure the Iraqi government is going to want to have coalition forces here for its own security for some time to come," the Financial Times quotes Bremer as saying (5). It's also my understanding that the U.S. will still control aid money to Iraq even after the new government appears in June.

I am wondering if the Bush administration means to install some sort of pseudo democracy in Iraq so that the Shi'ite majority doesn't have any real say. The whole situation might be roughly analogous -- I am speculating -- to the military shadow government in Turkey which regularly tells the elected government what it should and shouldn't do (6). The U.S. has supported this military shadow government because it is America's true ally in Turkey. When the Turkish parliament voted against letting Turkey be used as a military base in the Iraq invasion, Paul Wolfowitz, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, denounced the Turkish military for not stepping in to control its government, i.e. for not doing its duty (7). Do you think that the U.S. administration wants to create something similar now in Iraq but with the U.S. acting directly as the shadow government rather than relying on a local group to play that role?

CHOMSKY: For the record, it was also reported in the Boston Globe, Nov.18: Robert Schlesinger, "US expects March deal to keep troops in Iraq." I didn't see other mentions in the US, but didn't search. The closest analogy, I presume, is Central America and the Caribbean, where we have a century of experience to learn from. Democracy is fine, as long as the democratic government does what we say.

The British ran the Middle East pretty much the same way, with "independent governments" that the British internally described as an "Arab facade," administering their countries but with the British in effective control, and ready to "ruthlessly intervene" if anything threatens that arrangement, as Britain's foreign Secretary explained in internal discussion in 1958, when Britain was considering granting nominal independence to Kuwait to stem the nationalist pressures emanating from newly independent Iraq. That's in fact traditional imperialism, neo-colonialism, or other euphemisms. And Iraqis seem to understand it. That's presumably why, in polls after Bush's dramatic announcement that the US was "changing course" (once again - it happens every two-three years, to much acclaim) and promoting democracy, some Iraqis agreed that that was the US aim: 1%. After all, what would have been the point in invading if not to control Iraq? If those now running Washington were willing to see Iraq run by Iraqis, they wouldn't have supported Saddam Hussein through his worst crimes, authorized him to crush the uprising that might have overthrown him in 1991, and supported the sanctions regime that killed hundreds of thousands of people, forced the population to be dependent on the tyrant for survival, and probably saved him from the fate that befell other members of the remarkable rogues gallery that they supported: Ceaucescu, Suharto, and a long list of others, to whom they add new
representatives every day (8).

Wolfowitz's comments were not surprising in themselves. His record is one of very strong support for brutal tyrannies. What was intriguing, however, was the reaction of intellectual elites here: rapturous admiration for Wolfowitz as the "great visionary" who wants to bring democracy to the Middle East, and whose "heart bleeds" for the suffering of Arabs (9), accompanied by reports of the kind you cite, reflecting his visceral hatred of democracy, and complete silence about his intriguing record.

BOLENDER: In December 2002, Rumsfeld called religious leaders to the Pentagon to discuss "the religious and philosophical principles" of a "just war" (10). And that has underscored an anxiety of mine: If it is true that moral judgments are largely grounded in human nature, then what is moral philosophy for? Does it simply distract us from what would be our otherwise more automatic moral responses? Is it typically a kind of highfalutin’ way of making morally obscene judgments seem reasonable?

One reason why I ask this of you is that your political and moral commentaries are virtually always heavily data-driven, nothing but facts. You virtually never insert a comment such as "The government is here violating Rawls' difference principle" or anything like that (11). It’s as though you expect the moral judgments to flow from unconscious principles and don’t dare cloud the water with moral theory (12). ("Language and Freedom" might be an exception. It’s also not very recent, though. (13). Is your point that what divides people on moral issues is not different moral principles but unequal access to relevant information? And are philosophical discussions of ethics just new clothes for the Emperor?

CHOMSKY: Rawls’s "difference principle" is reasonable, but hardly a theory. Other moral principles are reasonable too: e.g., the principle of universality that underlies all of "just war theory": if something is right (or wrong) for us, it’s right (or wrong) for others. It follows that if it’s wrong for Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and a long list of others to bomb Washington and New York, then it’s wrong for Rumsfeld to bomb Afghanistan (on much flimsier pretexts), and he should be brought before war crimes trials. Again, the principle of universality is not a "theory." Just moral truism.

What’s the source of such moral truisms? We don’t know much more than David Hume did 250 years ago when he pointed out that our moral judgments are so rich and complex, and apply so readily to new cases, that they must derive from some fixed principles, and since we cannot acquire these from experience, they must be part of our nature (14). Rather like language. Or any other structure or capacity of an organism. To find out what these principles are, however, is a very hard task, and there has been very little progress, beyond rather elementary observations. That’s why I don’t cite moral theory. It is so lacking in depth or confirmation or argument that it doesn’t help very much, except in simple cases like the one I mentioned about bringing Rumsfeld to war crimes trials -- unless he and the deep thinkers he brought to Washington really do think that the countries I mentioned, and many others, ought to be bombing Washington and New York.

If we want to pursue the matter further, we have to consider the fact that even if the fundamental principles of human moral nature that Hume sought were known, there would still appear to be another question: are they right, in some other sense? That’s a hard question; arises elsewhere too, e.g., in epistemology. Worth thinking about, but we
should bear in mind that all of this is utterly remote from any application to human affairs. For that, elementary truisms carry us rather far, which is why they are almost always ignored, as in the single case I mentioned.

As to the function of the debate on "just war," I think you have the answer right before you. Can you find anything in the literature on this topic, now quite rich, that suggests that we should adhere to the most elementary principle of just war theory -- universality -- and apply it in the real world? I can't think of an example. If so, we conclude that it is all some kind of apologetics for atrocities. That seems to follow rather clearly, unless the issue is engaged -- and I think you'll find that it isn't.

BOLENDER: Some psychologists have argued that there are limits on human sympathy, a cognitive channel capacity for sympathy: roughly, that it is harder to feel deep concern for other people the larger the group one interacts with or belongs to. Since you worked with George Miller, I know that you are deeply familiar with the notion of a cognitive channel capacity (15).

CHOMSKY: It has been claimed, and since very little is known, one can claim about anything one likes. It's no secret that one is likely to have more concern for one's children than nephews, and more concern for them than people one doesn't know. And it's possible to develop some evolutionary scenarios for that (16). The problem is that the same scenarios show that everyone cares more about children dying from AIDS in Africa than for one's pet kitten, and no one should care at all about a dolphin stranded on the beach. Of course, one can revise the scenarios to accommodate this or just about anything else that's discovered.

BOLENDER: I think this can be related to an earlier post of yours in which you look into the question of whom or what to hold responsible for current atrocities: individuals or institutions? Here are some excerpts from what you wrote:

“When Klaus Barbie, ‘the Butcher of Lyons,’ was finally extradited by France from Bolivia (where the US had dispatched him, as it did others, when it became hard to keep Nazi war criminals at their old jobs in Europe after the war), I happened to hear an interview with his daughter on the radio. She described what a wonderful father he was, thoughtful, humane, really a nice guy. I have no reason to doubt that she was telling the truth. … The issues are institutional, not personal. That’s why the policies persist with little change, whoever is in office. Probably Carter was genuinely a born-again Christian, like he said. Reagan apparently hadn’t a clue what was going on. Bush and Clinton understood what they were doing, surely. But the policies remained essentially the same, reflecting the persistence of the institutional structures, the distribution of power and authority, within which they operated.” (17)

You talk about structure rather than size of the institutions or the number of people that a person is called upon to deal with. But mightn't the moral sense process information differently or even sometimes just turn off when faced with information about huge numbers of people? Mightn't there be a good cognitive science explanation for much of the suffering which you expose in your work?

CHOMSKY: In principle, there might some day be good cognitive science explanations. But that is very remote from the current state of understanding.

BOLENDER: I know that science is severely limited in the issues it can address: we can't study humans in groups the
way we study molecules. On the other hand, there are some interesting data found in Christian Buys that indicate tight constraints on sympathy (18). Here is a short version of my question: As William Godwin suggested, might true democracy and compassion only be possible in small groups? (19) Might many of our woes be the result, perhaps even an unavoidable result, of high population densities?

CHOMSKY: It's conceivable. So is the opposite. It's conceivable that the founder of what's now called “evolutionary psychology” (Peter Kropotkin) is right, and that there are evolutionary pressures leading to his version of communist anarchism (20). Or to Parecon (21). Or -- take your pick. These topics just are not understood. What is understood, pretty well, is how institutions function and set constraints on policy choices. And that tells us quite a lot about how the world works.

BOLENDER: I have one more question, and please don't get angry. It's a little trivial: Is "Noam" one syllable or two?

CHOMSKY: Two.

The End, for now.

FOOTNOTE:

1. In Propaganda and the Public Mind (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 189, Chomsky remarks that “In 1962, the Kennedy administration sent a team to Colombia headed by William Yarborough of Special Forces. He advised the Colombian military on how they should deal with their domestic problems. His recommendations, which were then implemented, with joint training and so on, were that the security forces were to be trained “as necessary to execute paramilitary, sabotage, and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents.” This means union leaders and peasant organizers, priests and teachers, and human rights activists. That’s understood. The Kennedy administration proposal, then implemented, was to use military and paramilitary terror against that sector of the population, and that led to a change in the violence. It got a lot worse, which is recognized by Colombian human rights activists.”


2. By “theory” Chomsky means an explanation with depth, e.g., Newtonian mechanics in which a small number of principles entails a wide range of phenomena with a high degree of exactitude, at least under controlled conditions. Theorizing in this sense requires a great deal of idealization. See Chomsky, Rules and Representations (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pages 9-10. Chomsky is skeptical that one can find much theory outside of certain specific branches of science, such as the core natural sciences and some areas of cognitive science. He makes this point colorfully in the following remark: “In fact, I'm personally disinclined to use the word ‘theory’ outside of rather narrow branches of the empirical sciences. When people speak of ‘Marxist theory’ or ‘literary theory,’ my flesh creeps; I think they are mostly deluding themselves” from “Chomsky on Mind Modules, Meaning, and Wittgenstein” an interview with Emilio Rivano,
appearing at www.udec.cl/~prodoci/Rivano/rlaart_99.htm. In his linguistic works, Chomsky expresses confidence that there has been, and continues to be, progress toward genuine theory in understanding the individual’s unconscious grammatical knowledge.

3. uk.geocities.com/dstokes14/Eric/HardPlace.pdf and also www.firethistime.org/herring.htm The sanctions regime included the denial of funds to Iraq and the freezing of all its assets abroad. According to the Committee of the Security Council, which oversaw the sanctions, supplies and payments meant strictly for “medical or humanitarian purposes and, in humanitarian circumstances, foodstuffs” were to be permitted. However, Iraq lacked the means to buy these things, since it could not raise funds. The practical effect was that the sanctions also applied to medical and humanitarian supplies.

As for Saddam Hussein “hoarding medicines in warehouses ... instead of distributing it to civilians,” the UN favored stockpiling medicines and the World Health Organization even argued for more stockpiling. The rationale was to have a buffer stock in case of emergencies. By 1999, the stockpiling had become extremely high, but this was due, as noted by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, to a number of conditions including incompetence, lack of transport, anticipation of emergency needs due to political tensions, delays in the arrival of complementary parts and technical staff, among others. The most suspicious condition Annan noted was “lack of motivation” by the distributors. Annan’s assessment is presumably what the Foreign Relations of the United States’ website meant by “UN criticism.”

As for Saddam Hussein refusing humanitarian contributions, this could not have been a sufficient condition for the suffering under sanctions and the bombings. Before the sanctions and the bombings, the Iraqi welfare state was one of the most generous in the Arab world. Nutrition, access to safe water, access to health care, and literacy were all high. Although Saddam Hussein was indeed slow to secure contracts for improved nutrition, the UN also noted that even if this had been corrected, the oil for food program would still have been inadequate.

John Mueller and Karl Mueller note that “economic sanctions have probably already taken the lives of more people in Iraq than have been killed by all weapons of mass destruction in history,” “Methodology of Mass Destruction” The Journal of Strategic Studies 23: 1 (2000), p. 164. As a result, Denis Halliday, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, and his successor Hans van Sponeck, each resigned in protest. (Except where otherwise noted, all information in this endnote is from Herring.

4. This site includes an article by Richard Garfield, titled “Morbidity and Mortality Among Iraqi Children from 1990 through 1998: Assessing the Impact of the Gulf War and Economic Sanctions” and appearing at www.casi.org.uk/info/garfield/dr-garfield.html. The following are quotes:

“A variety of methods were used [in this paper] to estimate the mortality rate that is predicted by these indicators [the indicators being child nutrition, water quality, and adult literacy, among others]. The most reliable estimates were derived from a logistic regression model using a multiple imputation procedure. The model successfully predicted both the mortality rate in 1990, under stable conditions, and in 1991, following the Gulf war. For 1996, after five years of sanctions and prior to receipt of humanitarian foods via the oil for food program, this model shows mortality among children under five to have reached a minimum of 80 per one thousand, a rate last experienced more than thirty years ago. This rise in the mortality rate accounted for between a minimum of 100,000 and a more likely
estimate of 227,000 excess deaths among young children from August 1991 through March 1998. About one-quarter of these deaths were mainly associated with the Gulf War; most were primarily associated with sanctions.

“...These child deaths far outnumber all deaths on all sides, among combatants and civilians, during the Gulf War. It exceeds the number of deaths known to result from any of the bombing raids in Iraq even on the days of the bombings. It exceeds each week the number of deaths that occurred in the tragic bombing of the Al Furdos bomb shelter during the Gulf War. That incident caused an international uproar, an apology from the Joint Military Command, and a revision in the procedures for selecting targets. Reaction to the much greater number of child deaths associated with sanctions has been far more muted.

“...Studies from 1996 onward suggest that there was little decline in mortality rates at that time. Since March 1998 the oil for food program has greatly increased access to essential supplies and the mortality rate has surely declined, but data are not yet available to estimate the magnitude of that decline. Indeed, the failure to institute stepped-up monitoring when sanctions were initiated in 1990 continues to limit the capacity to carry out timely and reliable assessments of humanitarian conditions in Iraq.”


6. On their web site, the University of Maryland’s Center for International Development and Conflict Management makes the point as follows:

While Turkey is a competitive multiparty democracy, nevertheless, the military continues to exercise substantial, albeit often indirect, influence over executive recruitment. The power of the military is reflected most recently by their successful efforts to force the resignation of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan (leader of the Islamic Refah Party) in 1997. Although military troops never actually left the barracks, this “virtual” or “postmodern” coup resulted in the collapse of a democratically elected government and its replacement by one more amenable to military goals and influence. The continued role of the military in “guiding,” although not directly controlling, the political system means that some of the most important functions of the executive branch, most specifically internal security, are held by non-elected officials. Under the authority of Article 118, the National Security Council (composed of military officers and sympathetic civilians) work as a kind of shadow government. The National Security Council makes “recommendations” to the government that, as the departure of Prime Minister Erbakan vividly illustrates, elected politicians ignore at their own peril.

See www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/polity/Tur1.htm.

7. The following is a quote from Chomsky’s Hegemony or Survival:

“The crucial point was expressed with unusual vulgarity by Pentagon planner Paul Wolfowitz. Like others across the spectrum, he berated the Turkish government for its misbehavior, but went on as well to condemn the military. Wolfowitz of course knows that the military is just behind the scenes in Turkish
democracy. But “for whatever reason, they did not play the strong leadership role that we would have expected,” Wolfowitz said, condemning the military for its weakness in permitting the government to honor near-unanimous public opinion. Turkey must therefore step up and say “We made a mistake. Let’s figure out how we can be as helpful as possible to the Americans,” thus demonstrating their understanding of democracy. Wolfowitz’s stand is particularly instructive because he is put forth as the leading visionary in the crusade to democratize the Middle East perhaps with some justice, given the operative conceptions of democracy as illustrated in practice over the past century of bringing democracy to Washington’s domains.” [See Marc Lacey “Turkey rejects criticism by U.S. official over Iraq,” New York Times, 8 May 2003].


10. The notion that war is governed by moral principles stretches back to time immemorial, but classic formulations of just war doctrine can be found in the writings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. The latter identifies three conditions for a war to be just: “The ruler under whom the war is to be fought must have authority to do so,” i.e., a private citizen cannot legitimately wage a war; “a just cause is required - so that those against whom the war is waged deserve such a response because of some offense on their part”; and “the third condition that is required on the part of those making the war is a right intention, to achieve some good or avoid some evil,” The Summa of Theology The Second Part of Part II, Question 40.


11. John Rawls’ difference principle, as explained in his book A Theory of Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), is a method for deciding among possible social arrangements. The point is to make the worst off group in society as well off as can be. What is striking, however, is that this does not guarantee that all groups will be equally well off. If the only way to maximize the well being for the worst off is an unequal distribution of shares, then that unequal distribution is the fairest alternative. Precise equality is entailed only if that is the condition which makes the worst off as well off as can be.

12. For a discussion of theory, see note (2).


14. In his Treatise of Human Nature Book III Part I Section II, David Hume writes
\begin{quote}
“It may now be ask'd in general, concerning this pain or pleasure, that distinguishes moral good and evil, From what principles is it derived, and whence does it arise in the human mind? To this I reply, first, that 'tis absurd to imagine, that in every particular instance, these sentiments are produc'd by an original quality and primary constitution. For as the number of our duties is, in a manner, infinite, 'tis impossible that our original instincts should extend to each of them, and from our very first infancy impress on the human mind all that multitude of precepts, which are contain'd in the completest system of ethics. Such a method of proceeding is not conformable to the usual maxims, by which nature is conducted, where a few principles produce all that variety we observe in the universe, and every thing is carry'd on in the easiest and most simple manner. 'Tis necessary, therefore, to abridge these primary impulses, and find some more general principles, upon which all our notions of morals are founded.”

In other words, the mind exhibits an in-principle unbounded capacity to form moral judgments in response to novel situations. The most elegant explanation of this is that the mind uses a small number of principles to generate this potential infinity.

For Hume, moral principles are not wholly the result of learning. Near the beginning of Section V of his Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, Hume writes:

“From the apparent usefulness of the social virtues, it has readily been inferred by skeptics, both ancient and modern, that all moral distinctions arise from education, by the art of politicians, in order to render men tractable, and subdue their natural ferocity and selfishness, which incapacitated them for society. This principle, indeed, of precept and education, must so far be owned to have a powerful influence, that it may frequently increase or diminish, beyond their natural standard, the sentiments of approbation or dislike; and may even, in particular instances, create, without any natural principle, a new sentiment of this kind; as is evident in all superstitious practices and observances: But that all moral affection or dislike arises from this origin, will never surely be allowed by any judicious enquirer. Had nature made no such distinction, founded on the original constitution of the mind, the words honourable, and shameful, lovely and odious, noble and despicable, had never had place in any language; nor could politicians, had they invented these terms, ever been able to render them intelligible, or make them convey any idea to the audience.”

Chomsky uses poverty-of-the-stimulus considerations to defend a conception of morality similar to Hume's, at least in respect to the points in Hume quoted above. According to these sorts of considerations, if the organism's knowledge exceeds its stimulus history in terms of richness, then some of that knowledge must be biologically innate. The earliest example of this sort of argument, although with a more religious conception of innateness, is found in Plato's Meno. Chomsky is most famous for applying poverty-of-the-stimulus considerations to human knowledge of syntax, but he has also applied such an argument, at least in rough outline, to moral knowledge, as in the following passage:

“[J]ust as people somehow construct an extraordinarily rich system of knowledge of language on the basis of rather limited and degenerate experience, similarly, people develop implicit systems of moral evaluation which are more or less uniform from person to person. There are differences, and the differences are interesting, but over quite a substantial range we tend to make comparable judgments, and we do it, it would appear, in quite intricate and delicate ways involving ... agreement about new cases, and so on, and we do this on the basis of a very limited environmental context available to us. ... [W]henever we see a very rich, intricate system developing in a more or less
uniform way on the basis of rather restricted stimulus conditions, we have to assume that there is a very powerful, very rich, highly structured innate component that is operating in such a way as to create that highly specific system on the basis of the limited data available to it.” (Language and Politics, Black Rose Books, 1988, pp. 240-41)

15. A channel capacity is the greatest amount of information a subject can give about a stimulus, e.g. the number of names one can memorize in a certain period of time. A classic discussion of channel capacities can be found in George Miller’s The Psychology of Communication (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin, 1967). Limits on the ability to feel sympathy can perhaps be construed as an emotional channel capacity, e.g. the number of people for whom one can feel deep concern. For evidence on the narrow limits of deep sympathy, see Christian J. Buys and Kenneth L. Larson, 1979, “Human Sympathy Groups” Psychological Reports Volume 45, pp. 547-53; and Buys, 1992, “Human Sympathy Groups: Cross-Cultural Data” Psychological Reports Volume 71, p. 786.

16. The reference here is to William Hamilton’s hypothesis that innate tendencies for morality are due to natural selection favoring individuals who behave generously toward their near kin, on the assumption that such individuals are helping to preserve copies of their own genes in doing so. On this view, the altruistic impulse should be stronger for near relatives than for distant ones, since near relatives share more copies of one’s genes. See Hamilton’s “The Genetical Theory of Social Behaviour” in Volume 7 (1964) of the Journal of Theoretical Biology.

17. The quote is from an earlier post by Chomsky in response to a question in the Znet forums.

18. For Buys, see note (15).

19. William Godwin (1756-1836) was an anarchist political philosopher who published Enquiry Concerning Political Justice.

20. Evolutionary psychology is the attempt to understand the mind as a set of cognitive adaptations to Darwinian selection pressures. Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) argued that the role of competition in the process of evolution by natural selection had been overemphasized, and that cooperation plays a crucial role in a population’s survival. Being naturally social, humans do not need religion or government in order to be moral and cooperative; in fact, government creates the very inequalities which breed crime and hatred.

21. “Parecon” is short for participatory economics, Michael Albert’s alternative to capitalism, rejecting markets in favor of remuneration according to effort and sacrifice with no central planning. See www.parecon.org.