A major recurrent feature of the intellectual landscape in cognitive science is the appearance of a collection of essays by Noam Chomsky. These collections serve both to inform the wider cognitive science community about the latest developments in the approach to the study of language that Chomsky has advocated for almost fifty years now,¹ and to provide trenchant criticisms of what he takes to be mistaken philosophical objections to this approach. This new collection contains seven essays, the earliest of which were first published about ten years ago. So the linguistic work that is summarised is within the principles and parameters approach and some of the essays (particularly the first and last) provide an outline of the main ideas of the emerging minimalist programme.² But this is not primarily a book about the details of recent linguistic theory. Rather, in these essays Chomsky offers a wealth of critical commentary on some of the most influential arguments in the philosophy of mind and language that have appeared over the past two decades or so. Indeed, Chomsky discusses a vast range of philosophical topics and reaches some radical conclusions—that many influential philosophical discussions on language and mind are utterly misconceived and that, for example, the traditional mind-body problem cannot even be coherently stated.

¹Syntactic Structures was published in 1957. Material written rather earlier than that was published much later as Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory (1975). Indeed, Chomsky’s Masters thesis on Modern Hebrew (1951) was a development of his BA thesis of 1949. So fifty years may be an underestimate of the period of Chomsky’s advocacy of—and, of course, absolutely pivotal role in the development of—modern generative grammar. See Neil Smith’s Foreword to the volume under review.

The major point that Chomsky makes throughout this collection is that the approach to language (and mind) that he advocates is a natural scientific approach: ‘I would like to discuss an approach to the mind that considers language and similar phenomena to be elements of the natural world, to be studied by ordinary methods of empirical inquiry’ (p. 106). The main object of study in this approach is the language faculty, or language organ, its initial state, and the states that it later attains. The initial state of the language faculty, fixed by genetic endowment, can be thought of as a ‘language acquisition device’ (LAD), producing an attained language as output given experience as input. But the central piece of terminology that is adopted in these essays is that of ‘I-language’. An I-language is a generative procedure that determines a set of structural descriptions. It is an attained state of the brain, in particular of the language faculty, at a fairly high level of description. I-languages are appropriate objects for scientific study as are performance systems such as a parser, a mechanism that takes presented utterances as inputs and maps them to structural descriptions. An I-language might be described as an attained state of competence; and a performance system might be described as using that competence. But it does not follow that what we ordinarily call a person’s use of language—to communicate with another person, for example—is itself an appropriate object for scientific study or naturalistic enquiri. Indeed, Chomsky is quite explicit that naturalistic theories will fall short of providing a full account of human action such as the communicative use of language (p. 28).

Once the point about the naturalistic character of the approach is accepted, it should also be granted that the proper criteria for assessing the linguistic theories that are proposed from within the approach are the same criteria that apply to theories that issue from the scientific study of any other aspect of the natural world. But Chomsky argues that many philosophers of language and mind do not grant this. Rather than accepting the consequences of methodological naturalism, they are guilty of a methodological dualism that sets up additional hurdles that the study of language must overcome (p. 77):

Explanatory theories of mind have been proposed, notably in the study of language. They have been seriously challenged, not for violating the canons of methodological naturalism . . . but on other grounds: ‘philosophical grounds’. . . . I will suggest that such critiques are commonly a form of methodological dualism.

---

3 This is how the approach was developed in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965). The LAD was supposed to determine a set of rules in response to ‘primary linguistic data’. Chomsky provides a brief account of the way in which this development of the approach was superseded by the principles and parameters framework (pp. 7–8; and see further Chomsky, 1986, chapter 3).

4 ‘I’ stands for ‘internal’, ‘individual’, and ‘intensional’.
One particularly vivid expression of the claims of methodological dualism is ‘that we must abandon scientific rationality when we study humans “above
the neck” . . . becoming mystics in this unique domain, imposing arbitrary stipulations and a priori demands of a sort that would never be contemplated
in the sciences’ (p. 76).

It is important to note here that Chomsky is not denying that there are
significant differences between sciences and he is certainly not saying that
linguistics and psychology should be reducible to biology or physics. The brain
can be studied at many different levels and the naturalistic theories of language
that have been developed in linguistics belong at the ‘computational-represen-
tational’ level. In our present state of knowledge it is just an assumption that
‘there is some kind of description in terms of atoms and molecules’ and we
do not expect the ‘operative principles and structures of language and thought
to be discernible at these [lower] levels’ (p. 25). Throughout the book, Chom-
sky offers erudite discussions of the history of science and his reflections on
unification and on reduction are often striking. He stresses that ‘[l]arge-scale
reduction is not the usual pattern’. More often ‘the more “fundamental”
science has had to be revised, sometimes radically, for unification to proceed’
(p. 82; see also pp. 144–5 for examples where ‘unification was achieved . . . not
by reduction, but by quite different forms of accommodation’). So reduction is
not a reasonable aim for the methodological naturalist; and, while unification
remains a hope, in the case of linguistics and neuroscience ‘[w]e do not know
how eventual unification might proceed . . . or if we have hit upon the right
categories to seek to unify, or even if the question falls within our cognitive
reach’ (p. 107).

According to methodological naturalism, the entities and properties that are
required by the best current theories of language and mind should be accepted
just as the entities and properties that are required by the best current theories
of physics and chemistry are accepted. This is not because of a promise that
the entities and properties that figure in linguistics will one day be seen as
reducible to the entities and properties that figure in physics. There is no such
promise. Rather, it is because linguistics, psychology, biology, chemistry and
physics are all attempts to understand aspects of the natural world and they all
proceed on the basis of ‘best theory’ arguments (p. 142). The entities and
properties postulated by the best current naturalistic theories of language should
be accepted by philosophers, as by anyone else. But, Chomsky maintains, this
is not what actually happens. Philosophers object to linguistic theories, not on
the grounds that these theories fail to account adequately for the empirical
evidence, but because they fail in other ‘philosophical’ ways.

2. Naturalistic Theories and Everyday Concepts

What should we say about this basic argument in favour of methodological
naturalism in the study of language? What should we say about the complaint
that much of contemporary philosophy of language and mind is methodologically dualist, imposing arbitrary stipulations and unjustifiable demands?

Surely Chomsky is right to say that it is a primary virtue in a scientific theory that it should explain the empirical evidence. As between currently available theories, we do well to favour a theory if it accounts for the evidence better than do its rivals; and, in the end, we accept the theory that provides the best explanation. It is also, surely, beyond dispute that it is a vice in a scientific theory that it should deploy notions that are conceptually incoherent. The demand for conceptual coherence is not mystical or arbitrary and it does not go beyond the normal demands of science—conceptual coherence is part and parcel of accounting for the evidence. But it is plausibly described as an *a priori* demand, both because the demand for conceptual coherence can reasonably be imposed *a priori* and because the tasks of assessing a theory for conceptual coherence and revising a theory to remove patches of conceptual incoherence involve *a priori* reasoning. Furthermore, while issues about the conceptual foundations of a science are very much the business of the practitioners of the science, it may also be that the traditional philosophical methodology of conceptual analysis has something to contribute where questions about conceptual coherence are concerned. So, it would seem, philosophers can, quite consistently with methodological naturalism, engage in a kind of investigation that has the potential to yield critical assessments of the theories and practices of linguistics, as of any other science. And, it might be suggested, perhaps some of the philosophers who appear to Chomsky to be guilty of methodological dualism have been engaged, or have taken themselves to be engaged, in just this kind of investigation.

We can pursue this suggestion for a moment by considering a distinction that has been much discussed in the literature and that Chomsky discusses again in this collection; namely, Quine’s (1972) distinction between behaviour that is guided by a rule and behaviour that merely fits the rule. A subject can behave in a way that fits or conforms to a rule without using the rule to guide her behaviour since, as Quine uses the notion of guidance (1972, p. 442): ‘[T]he behavior is not *guided* by the rule unless the behaver knows the rule and can state it.’ The point of introducing the distinction was to help refine a worry about Chomsky’s notion of a tacitly known rule. For tacit knowledge requires more than mere conformity or fitting—a purely extensional notion—yet less than the conscious explicit knowledge that Quine takes to be characteristic of guidance; and the same goes for principles that figure in a speaker’s I-language. So Quine can be understood as raising a query about the conceptual coherence of the putative intermediate notion of implicit or unconscious guidance (1972, p. 444). Raising a query of this kind is, according to the

---

5 Strictly speaking, conformity to a rule is neither necessary nor sufficient for tacit knowledge of the rule.
suggestion that we are briefly pursuing, consistent with methodological naturalism.\textsuperscript{6}

It is, however, open to Chomsky to respond that this suggestion about a critical role for conceptual analysis, while correct as far as it goes, has very limited application. Conceptual coherence is indeed to be demanded. But a critical assessment of a naturalistic theory must focus on the concepts that the theory actually deploys. Naturalistic theories about language of the kind that Chomsky favours typically make use of a concept of rules that are inaccessible to consciousness. Some philosophers have criticised such theories on the grounds that they involve conceptual confusion or incoherence since the notion of a rule of language belongs with the idea of a normative practice in which people advert to rules to justify, criticise or excuse their actions.\textsuperscript{7} But the criticism misses its mark unless the concept of a rule that is deployed in the theories is intended to retain the connection with the notion of a normative practice and, of course, rules of language as Chomsky conceives them ‘are not normative in this sense’ (p. 98). The general point here is that, if a critical assessment of a naturalistic theory is to be based on a charge of conceptual incoherence, then it is vital that the critic should avoid loading onto the theory’s concepts features of concepts that have their home in a quite different discourse. Chomsky repeatedly argues in these essays that ‘[u]ncontroversially, science does not try to capture the content of ordinary discourse’ (p. 89). Indeed it is only if we take this idea with full seriousness that we shall be able fully to understand the radical nature of Chomsky’s approach to language.

Having a particular I-language is a matter of having one’s language faculty in a particular state. The concept of an I-language is not a concept that has its home in ordinary discourse although, as Chomsky says (p. 169): ‘The notion of I-language seems to be about as close as I-linguistics comes to the various common-sense notions of language.’ In ordinary usage, a person who has a language is described as ‘knowing’ the language and this fact ‘has led to attempts to impose various conceptions of the nature of knowledge, and to determine to what entity Peter stands in a cognitive relation when he has [a language] L’ (p. 170). Partly in order to avoid what he judged to be misconceived epistemological questions, such as whether tacit knowledge of rules really meets the requirements of knowledge, Chomsky (1976, 1980) introduced the neologism ‘cognize’ to describe the relationship between a speaker and (the rules of) his language. But to a philosophical critic who thinks that he has spotted some incoherence in the conceptual combination of knowledge and tacitness this terminological move might look like mere evasion. What these more recent essays make plain is that there is no hint of conceptual

\textsuperscript{6} Though, as Chomsky compellingly argues (p. 95), the particular way in which Quine developed his query into a challenge to the coherence of the notion of tacit knowledge certainly did lay him open to the charge of methodological dualism.

\textsuperscript{7} See e.g. Baker and Hacker, 1994.
incoherence here. Rather, Chomsky has radically re-conceptualised the way in which we should, for the purposes of naturalistic enquiry, think of the relation between a person and his or her language. The home of the concept of cognising or having rules, or principles, or a generative procedure, or an I-language lies wholly within linguistic theory. There is no theoretically substantive relation between a person and an I-language. Rather, naturalistic theorising about language proceeds on the assumption that there is a language faculty whose initial state is common to the species, and an I-language is defined within the theory as an attained state of the language faculty.

Philosophical constraints on the relationship between a person and what he or she knows may issue from the project of analytical epistemology. But, whatever may be the value of that project, such constraints are rendered otiose from the point of view of Chomsky’s naturalistic project. There is no answer proffered to questions about the epistemological nature of the relationship between a person and an I-language. In naturalistic theories about language there is no such question to be answered, just as there is no question to be answered in the theory of visual perception about the epistemological relationship between a person and the principles that capture the workings of the visual system.\(^8\) The situation is similar with regard to the initial state of the language faculty. Naturalistic linguistic enquiry seeks to discover the best theory of this initial state, perhaps conceived as a language acquisition device or as a collection of principles with parameters to be set. But there is no question to be answered about the epistemological relationship between the neonate and the initial state of the language faculty (p. 100).

The upshot is that there is no prospect of revealing a conceptual incoherence within linguistic theory by bringing to bear considerations about the ordinary or philosophical usage of terms such as ‘knowledge’, ‘tacit’, or ‘innate’. This remains true even if a naturalistic theory of language is formulated using the expression ‘tacitly know’ instead of ‘cognize’ or just ‘have’, and even if the theory uses the expression ‘innate knowledge’ instead of ‘innate endowment’. For the theorist can legitimately insist that the role of these expressions within the theory is not intended to reflect ordinary use. No one worries when physics, or chemistry, or biology uses expressions in ways that depart from ordinary discourse and we would be guilty of methodological dualism if we were to worry about these departures when naturalistic enquiry turns to the mental domain.

3. Philosophy of Language and Mind

We have described Chomsky’s naturalistic approach to the study of language and shown how that approach can allow a legitimate, but strictly limited, role

---

\(^8\) Indeed, just as there is no question to be answered in the theory of excretion about the epistemological relation between a person and the principles that capture the workings of the kidneys.
for a traditional style of philosophical investigation in the assessment of theories for conceptual coherence. But philosophers of language and mind do not confine themselves to this meta-theoretical role. So how does Chomsky view philosophical investigations of reference, of radical interpretation, of public language, or of the epistemology of meaning? How does he regard questions about the mind-body relation, about externalism in the theory of mental content, about intentionality as the mark of the mental, or about first-person authority?

The impression given by the essays in this collection is that Chomsky is deeply pessimistic about the value of philosophical explorations of language and mind. His critical commentary ranges very widely and his argument involves many strands. But one aspect of the negative assessment appears to be the idea that if philosophy were to have real value then this would have to be value for science, that is, for naturalistic enquiry. On one fairly traditional conception, the business of philosophy is to plot the contours of our conceptual scheme. If this is right, then philosophical investigation starts from our everyday concepts and conceptions and has no immediate relevance for science since ‘[t]he concepts of natural language, and common-sense generally, are not even candidates for naturalistic theories’ (p. 22). Nor, as we have seen, is the deployment of theoretical concepts in naturalistic enquiry answerable to ordinary usage. In so far as philosophy trades in ordinary notions it has no role as proto-science.

While philosophical investigation starts from our everyday concepts, it is not restricted to the ordinary. It moves on to analysis, precisification, and systematisation and attempts to construct theories of some depth in order to explicate and elucidate our everyday commerce with the world. Philosophical theories—like theories in science—are apt to introduce their own technical concepts, sometimes using familiar expressions but departing from ordinary usage. Thus, for example, a considerable body of work in contemporary philosophy of mind is concerned with the representational content of mental states, including the content of perceptual experiences, the content of beliefs, and the relationship between these. But Chomsky sees little value in this kind of philosophical work either (p. 23):

[I]t is no concern of the psychology-biology of organisms to deal with such technical notions of philosophical discourse as perceptual content, with its stipulated properties (sometimes dubiously attributed to ‘folk psychology’, a construct that appears to derive in part from parochial cultural conventions and traditions of academic discourse). Nor must these inquiries assign a special status to veridical perception under ‘normal’ conditions.

---

9 In his Foreword, Neil Smith praises the book for ‘clearing some of the underbrush of confusion and prejudice which has infected the philosophical study of language’ (p. vi).

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2002
There seem to be two points here. One is that the notions—even the theoretical notions—that are of interest to philosophers may not figure in naturalistic—that is, scientific—theories and, similarly, that the cases that are central for philosophical theory may have no special status for naturalistic theories. If this first point is right then philosophical investigations are unlikely to derive their value by making a contribution to naturalistic enquiry.¹⁰ But that still leaves it open that distinctively philosophical theorising may have a value of its own. The second point in the quoted passage is that philosophical judgements about everyday concepts and conceptions may be conditioned by conventions and traditions that are more parochial than the idea of ‘plotting the contours of our conceptual scheme’ might lead us to expect. This is, indeed, a possibility not to be overlooked by philosophical theorists just as, we suppose, the possibility of parochial influences on judgement, intuition, and theory preference should be a concern for theorists in other disciplines, whether naturalistic or not.

As we read Chomsky, his view is that the second point casts more doubt on the possibility left open by the first point; namely, the possibility that distinctively philosophical theorising may have a value of its own. But he does not proceed from this doubt to the claim that our ordinary concepts and conceptions contribute nothing to our understanding of the world. Rather, our judgements and the parochial influences on them are open to enquiry—naturalistic enquiry—by ethnoscience: ‘a branch of science that studies humans, seeking to understand their modes of interpretation of the world, the diversity of these systems, and their origins’ (p. 90).

These last few remarks may seem to suggest that, in Chomsky’s view, all interesting and important questions are scientific ones. But that would not be right (p. 77):

Plainly, a naturalistic approach does not exclude other ways of trying to comprehend the world. Someone committed to it can consistently believe (I do) that we learn much more of human interest about how people think and feel and act by reading novels or studying history or the activities of ordinary life than from all of naturalistic psychology, and perhaps always will; similarly, the arts may offer appreciation of the heavens to which astrophysics does not aspire.

Nor would it be correct to draw the conclusion that Chomsky’s reservations about the value of contemporary philosophy of language and mind are based solely on general considerations about the nature of philosophical projects. On the contrary, Chomsky considers an extraordinary range of philosophical topics

¹⁰ For what it is worth, our own experience is that it is not right that philosophical-theoretical notions such as that of perceptual content are of no concern to naturalistic theorists in cognitive psychology.
in detail and in depth. Here we give a very brief indication of just a few of these, beginning with philosophy of mind.

In several of the essays, Chomsky turns to the history of science and, in particular, to the way in which Newton overturned the ‘mechanical philosophy’. As Chomsky describes the situation (p. 84):

Newton eliminated the problem of ‘the ghost in the machine’ by exorcising the machine; the ghost was unaffected. . . . The mind-body problem disappeared, and can be resurrected, if at all, only by producing a new notion of body (material, physical, etc.) to replace the one that was abandoned.

As a result, the mind-body problem ‘had (and has) no coherent formulation’ (p. 86); ‘it was the theory of body that was refuted, leaving no intelligible mind-body problem’ (p. 103). It is true, of course, that the everyday notion of mind has no place in naturalistic theories of the material world. But it is no less true that the everyday notion of body has no place in those theories. So the first truth cannot by itself give rise to a mind-body problem unless there is also to be a body-body problem (p. 138).11

Chomsky returns repeatedly to the theme of internalism12 and rejects arguments for externalism in the theory of content that are based on Twin Earth thought experiments of the kind proposed by Hilary Putnam (1975) and Tyler Burge (1979). In both cases he argues in the same way, denying that there can be any firm conclusions drawn from the thought experiments.13 Thus, in response to the kinds of example developed by Putnam, he argues (p. 190):

If, for example, Mary believes that there is water on Mars, and something is discovered there that she regards as water although it has the internal constitution of heavy water or XYZ, there is no general answer as to whether her belief is right or wrong.

And in a discussion of the kinds of case that Burge considers, he suggests (p. 71): ‘Here intuitions differ, and it may be that evidence is too slim, for the moment, to settle the point satisfactorily.’14

---

11 See Crane, 2001, chapter 2, for a discussion of the way in which the mind-body problem is generated by particular assumptions about the physical.

12 See especially the last two essays, ‘Language from an internalist perspective’ and ‘Internalist explorations’.

13 ‘Forced intuitive judgments with ordinary expectations withdrawn [i.e. as in Twin Earth thought experiments] have to be considered with particular caution’ (p. 172).

14 Chomsky goes on to introduce a notion of I-belief in order to give an internalist and individualist account of the example that Burge uses to support social externalism; see again p. 72. Two other topics in philosophy of mind were mentioned at the beginning of this section. On ‘the mark of the mental’, see p. 106; and on first-person authority, see pp. 142–3.
The topics in philosophy of language that Chomsky discusses include, for example, the notion of reference and Donald Davidson’s work on interpretation.15 Chomsky’s starting point for a discussion of reference is that the notion is a technical one, introduced by philosophers.16 It cannot simply be assumed that the notion of reference as a relation between words and worldly items has any use within naturalistic theories of language and, in Chomsky’s view, the notion plays no role in theories of I-language.17 Linguistic generalisations about anaphora, for example, may very well apply to a class of terms only some of which could be plausibly assigned a worldly reference (‘the young man’, ‘John Doe’, ‘the average man’, ‘good health’) (p. 39).

It might be suggested that the notion of reference has its home, not in I-linguistics, but in commonsense. This cannot be right as it stands if the notion of a word-world relation is a purely technical one. But there is, as Chomsky points out, a notion of reference that does belong to commonsense; namely, the notion of a person referring to something by his or her use of an expression in particular circumstances (p. 150). For example (pp. 16–7):18

It makes little clear sense to ask to what thing the expression ‘Tolstoy’s War and Peace’ refers, when Peter and John take identical copies out of the library. The answer depends on how the semantic features are used when we think and talk, one way or another. In general, a word, even when of the simplest kind, does not pick out an entity of the world.

The study of how people use language to talk about things is not science (though the study of people’s own ideas about language use could be a part of ethnoscience). But philosophy of language can offer theories that provide insight of a non-naturalist (that is, non-scientific) variety into the conditions under which reference is possible—perhaps building on theories in philosophy of mind about how thought about worldly items is possible.

Chomsky’s comments on interpretation19 centre on two claims that David-

---

15 Two other topics in philosophy of language were mentioned at the beginning of this section. On the notion of a shared public language, see for example pp. 155–8; and on the epistemology of meaning, see pp. 140–1 for a discussion of Dummett’s ‘delivery problem’ (Dummett, 1991, p. 97).
16 ‘Frege had to provide a new technical meaning for “Bedeutung”, for example’ (p. 130; see also pp. 148, 188). Chomsky says that we can have no intuitions about this technical notion of reference and connects this point with his critique of Putnam’s Twin Earth thought experiment.
17 Within the study of I-language there are, however, ‘explanatory theories of considerable interest that are developed in terms of a relation R (read “refer”) that is postulated to hold between linguistic expressions and something else, entities drawn from some stipulated domain D’ (pp. 38–9).
18 The claim that Chomsky makes here can be thought of as radically extending a point that is familiar from discussions of demonstrative reference.
19 See especially ‘Language and interpretation’.
son makes in ‘A nice derangement of epitaphs’ (1986). There, Davidson dramatises the problem faced by an interpreter by asking how a hearer is able to understand a speaker who perpetrates a malapropism. We can redescribe the fact that understanding occurs by saying that speaker and hearer converge on a ‘passing theory’ at the point of the linguistic exchange. But when it comes to the question how this convergence is achieved, Davidson speaks of ‘the mysterious process by which a speaker or hearer uses what he knows in advance plus present data to produce a passing theory’ (1986, p. 445). The passing theory ‘is derived by wit, luck, and wisdom’ (ibid., p. 446).

Davidson draws two conclusions from his discussion. One is that (1986, p. 446):

[T]here is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with.

The other conclusion is that (ibid., p. 445):

We may say that linguistic ability is the ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time . . . [b]ut if we do say this, then we should realize that we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally.

Chomsky is sympathetic to the first of these claims to the extent that it says that the philosopher’s notion of a shared public language comes to nothing. Communication does not require that there should be shared public meanings any more than it requires that there should be shared public pronunciations (p. 30). But Chomsky is critical of the first claim to the extent that Davidson rejects the linguist’s notion of I-language (1986, p. 438):

To say that an explicit theory for interpreting a speaker is a model of the interpreter’s linguistic competence is not to suggest that the interpreter knows any such theory. . . . [Nor are claims about what would constitute a satisfactory theory] claims about the details of the inner workings of some part of the brain. . . . It does not add anything to this thesis to say that if the theory does correctly describe the competence of an interpreter, some mechanism in the interpreter must correspond to the theory.

As for the second claim, Chomsky does not accept the suggestion that there is no distinction to be drawn between the study of language and the study of everything. Rather, he proposes that I-language is an appropriate object for naturalistic enquiry and, indeed, that an I-language plays the role of the ‘prior theory’ from which an interpreter moves, by ‘a mysterious process’ to a passing
theory. In contrast, the means by which an interpreter derives a passing theory, or the process of communication, is not an appropriate object for naturalistic enquiry (p. 69): ‘The study of communication in the actual world of experience . . . is not a topic for empirical enquiry, for the usual reasons: there is no such topic as the study of everything’ (p. 69).

Chomsky and Davidson can agree that the study of communication is not a project for science. There is no science of wit, luck, and wisdom. But when Davidson reflects on interpretation and communication he is engaged in a philosophical, rather than a scientific, project. Given what is involved in communication, these reflections are bound to encompass much of human life. But this does not count against the project. For it is a traditional part of the philosopher’s brief to try to gain some kind of synoptic view of our ordinary conceptual commerce with the world. As Wilfrid Sellars (1963, p. 1) memorably said:

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.

4. Conclusion

We hope that we have, in this brief review, said enough to give the flavour of the rich and fascinating material that *New Horizons* contains for all those interested in the study of language and mind. There is ample evidence here to support Chomsky’s contention that the naturalistic and internalist approach to language continues to ask deep questions and provide novel—sometimes radical—and illuminating answers. The collection also confirms that there is much important research to be done in order to work out all the implications of Chomsky’s approach for the philosophy of language and mind.

These new essays provide a clearer idea than before of precisely how Chomsky’s responses to philosophical objections are meant to go. We agree that he can successfully respond to many—probably most—of these philosophical objections, especially where they presuppose that the discourse of science must cohere with ordinary thought and talk. But we remain more optimistic than Chomsky is about the prospects for non-naturalist philosophical approaches to language and mind, even though we acknowledge that he has raised serious challenges for some important recent philosophical proposals—challenges that need to be addressed in more detail than we have room for here.

---

20 For example, Chomsky points to the extraordinary range of semantic knowledge that every competent speaker of English has about lexical items such as ‘house’ or ‘city’.
In conclusion, we note that Chomsky seems to grant room for philosophical enquiry of a non-naturalist kind when he says (p. 38):

We have to distinguish between a hypothetical externalist naturalism . . . and nonnaturalist externalism that attempts to treat human action . . . in the context of communities, real or imagined things in the world, and so on. Such approaches are to be judged on their merits, as efforts to make some sense out of questions that fall beyond naturalistic enquiry.

Indeed so. Judged on their merits, not in accordance with the requirements of science.

References


