

Russell Keat: Sampson v Chomsky on Liberty and Language

Radical Philosophy no 25, 1980, pp 35-39

Geoffrey Sampson, *Liberty and Language*, Oxford University Press, 1979, £5.75

Shortly after last year's General Election, Keith Joseph issued his senior civil servants with a reading list, including such golden oldies as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, and Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. He would do well to add this recent book by Geoffrey Sampson. For in it he will find an ingenious and lucidly argued rationale for his laissez-faire politics - explicitly endorsed by Sampson as a 'principled liberalism' (p39). According to this doctrine (which, for the rest of the review, will be what's meant by 'liberalism'),

... the production and distribution of goods should as far as possible be controlled exclusively by the impersonal mechanism of free competition between individuals in an open market. It should be open to any individual to produce goods by any method he wishes using whatever resources he owns or can buy or hire, and to sell the goods he produces, or his labour, for whatever price he can get. The proper task of government is to maintain the free market in being and to protect individuals in their enjoyment of the rewards they derive from participation in the market, and it should take on as few other tasks as possible. (p40)

And in this kind of free market, minimal state society, there is no room for any ideals of justice, especially socialist ones, to interfere in the resulting distribution of goods:

Nor should government use taxation to redistribute wealth or interfere with patterns of industry. For the liberal it is desirable that those individuals whose enterprise or labour commands relatively high prices should be rewarded proportionately (irrespective of the individual's moral worth, or the like); human beliefs as to what is just or appropriate should play no part in determining the distribution of goods.

(p41)

What is new in Sampson's book is not, of course, this political position, but the theoretical arguments he uses to support it. The central concept here is creativity. According to Sampson, the nature of human creativity (which all members of the species possess, and which is exemplified most clearly in language) is such that only liberalism can generate and sustain the kind of progress and development that humans are both capable of and desire. Any other political system, in which decisions about production and distribution are taken for individuals by some kind of central agency (Sampson calls such systems 'authoritarian') is bound in the long run to fail. Authoritarian systems stifle the only source of genuine innovation, namely individual creativity. They attempt to make predictions about developments which are inherently unpredictable, just because of this creativity; and they have no effective way of evaluating the benefits and costs of those innovations that do (unpredictably) occur.

For Sampson - recognizing that in practice there is a spectrum between liberal and authoritarian

extremes - the USA is the most liberal of present-day societies, and it's this which explains its economic success:

The reason why America is so much richer than most other nations is that she enjoys a near-monopoly of liberal government and, consequently a near-monopoly of economic innovation. (p97)

Further, America has 'rather consistently' attempted to end this near-monopoly by 'encouraging the growth of liberalism abroad' (p97), a policy which, though sometimes involving imperialism, Sampson tends to endorse. Indeed, he argues that, subject to certain qualifications,

... the liberal has no objection to imperialism, which may indeed in certain circumstances be a highly desirable world order. It would certainly be an excellent thing for the Vietnamese and for everyone else concerned if the USA were administering North and South Vietnam in place of the authoritarian government now in control there. (p165)

To talk both about linguistic creativity and about the USA's role in Vietnam is implicitly to talk about Noam Chomsky. And it's no accident that the former two items are linked in *Liberty and Language*, for Sampson's book is explicitly constructed as a critique of Chomsky's politics - or, more accurately, of what he takes to be Chomsky's attempts (in works such as *American Power and the New Mandarins*, *Problems of Freedom and Knowledge*, and *For Reasons of State*) to support his leftist politics by arguments based on the conception of human nature suggested by his theoretical position in linguistics. Now the concept of creativity is a central element in that position; but Sampson argues that Chomsky misunderstands the true character of linguistic/human creativity, and correspondingly adopts an erroneous political standpoint. Thus:

A consideration of the semantic side of language, in particular - of the ways in which utterances convey meaning - leads to a view of human nature which is sharply at variance with Chomsky's, and which suggests that political ideals very different from Chomsky's are the appropriate ones. Chomsky claims that syntax refutes liberalism, but the claim fails; Chomsky ignores semantics, and semantics strongly supports liberalism.

(p8, my *italics*)

This last sentence neatly encapsulates the central theoretical argument in *Liberty and Language*, which I will now outline.

II

According to Chomsky, the most striking feature of human linguistic competence is its creativity, the ability of the native speaker to produce and understand sentences that he or she has never heard or uttered before. He regards this fact, among others, as strong evidence against any empiricist account of language and its acquisition, and in favour of there being innate (though highly abstract) rules of syntax, shared by all members of the species, and

underlying the more 'superficial' grammatical rules which vary between different languages. (To a non-linguist, e.g. me, Sampson's accounts of these and related issues are extremely clear and informative.) A purely empiricist account would seem to require that present competence be explained in terms of past experience; but

The new utterances that are produced and interpreted in the daily use of language are 'similar' to those that constitute the past experience of speaker and hearer only in that they are determined, in their form and interpretation, by the same system of abstract underlying rules.

(J. Allen and P. van Buren (eds.), Chomsky: Selected Readings, OUP, 1971, p154; quoted by Sampson, p102)

Now Sampson accepts Chomsky's view of syntactic creativity, but argues that it provides by itself a grossly impoverished understanding of human creativity. He regards as central examples of this, phenomena such as the development of new scientific theories (containing concepts that had not previously 'existed'), the creation of new kinds of social institution, the invention of qualitatively different economic products, and the emergence of new schools or styles of artistic activity. All these go quite beyond Chomsky's conception of creativity, which involves 'only' the production of new instances within an already specifiable set of rules.

Sampson says:

To be creative is to produce something which falls outside the class implied by any set of principles that might have been proposed to account for previous examples.

(p105, my italics)

The form of creativity that Sampson concentrates upon is semantic innovation, i. e. (roughly) changes in the meanings of terms, or the introduction of new terms expressing previously non-existent concepts. Thus:

Locomotive, insurance, playgroup, Oedipus complex, gravity - these are not convenient short expressions for concepts which Chaucerian English could express only by cumbersome paraphrases, they are expressions for concepts which in Chaucer's day did not yet exist; and, according to the liberal, the potential existence of these particular concepts was in no sense implied by the stock of concepts which did exist in the fourteenth century.

(p120)

Sampson claims not merely that such innovations constantly occur (and he rightly emphasizes the importance of metaphor in these changes) but also that it is impossible to think of them as in any way predictable. This unpredictability is not due to the practical difficulties of gathering adequate information - as might be the case, say, in weather forecasting (my example, not his) - but is a matter of principle. For to predict the occurrence of a new concept would be to possess it already; and this is self-contradictory (pp45-46: here Sampson endorses Karl Popper's argument against the predictability of the growth of scientific knowledge, in the Preface to The Poverty of Historicism). Further this unpredictability means there are highly significant areas of human activity that are radically inaccessible to scientific study. Thus 'scientism' - 'the prejudice which holds that the scientific method applies to all possible subjects of human thought'

(p1) - is refuted, and with it, any possibility of success for a planned, authoritarian society in which the crucial decisions are taken 'scientifically'.

An important part of Sampson's argument about semantic creativity is his claim that it is impossible to specify a set of rules determining the 'sensicality' of possible sentences: viz. (roughly) whether the sentence is not only grammatical but meaningful. A sentence may shift from non-sensicality to sensicality due to semantic innovations: for instance, he says that 'Horseless carriages travel rapidly was nonsensical in 1700 but is a mere truism today', since at that time 'the idea of self-propelling machines had not yet occurred to anyone'(p119). And he suggests that:

To invent a novel scientific theory, mechanical device, social institution, or the like, is inter alia to render sensical some word-sequences which were previously grammatical but nonsensical'(p119).

In this way, Sampson links his theoretical argument for semantic innovation with his general claim about human creativity: each creative human achievement will be reflected in a semantic change that will also shift the application of the sensical-nonsensical division.

III

There are other pieces of theoretical equipment in Sampson's defence of liberalism, and some of them will be introduced in what follows, where I will pursue three lines of criticism. First, directly addressing the political position he defends, I will argue there are major gaps in his grounds for opposing principles of justice 'interfering' in the distribution of social goods. Second, I will suggest that some of the things Sampson says about creativity - and which I am inclined to accept - actually give grounds for doubting the virtues of liberalism, and are at least consistent with some forms of socialism. Third, I will claim that, in a sense of 'scientism' quite closely related to that employed by Sampson, his own standpoint involves a form of scientism - more specifically, a mistaken version of evolutionism that he shares with Popper.

IV

One might expect that someone relying on the fact of human creativity to support liberalism would argue along the following lines: for humans to be able to realize this capacity to the greatest extent, it's necessary that they should be as free as possible from potential sources of interference and control over what they want to do; and since governmental coercion in the control of the economy is a major potential area of such interference, it should be restricted to the minimum necessary.

But, although there are occasional hints of an argument like this (e.g. on p60, where he says that '(f)reedom from coercion is desirable in its own right...'), Sampson's main emphasis is very different. It is expressed in the following passage, where he replies to the possible charge of advocating a harshly inhumane and selfish doctrine which arbitrarily refuses to use governmental power to abolish the evils that afflict the poor. On the contrary, I am a liberal precisely because I wish to see poverty abolished.... I advocate liberalism and oppose authoritarianism, because liberalism leads to progress and author-

itarianism obstructs progress, and it is progress that abolishes poverty, in the sense of raising the standard of life of the poorer members of a society. The abolition of poverty in this absolute sense entails the retention of relative poverty - there must always be richer and poorer, if the poorer of tomorrow are to live like the richer of yesterday.

(p71, my italics)

The claim here is that liberalism maximizes economic progress, and, in doing so, improves the absolute position of the worst-off; and that this is why it should be chosen as the best political system. Indeed, Sampson later emphasizes how important this argument is, for him, by saying that if it could in fact be shown that an egalitarian distribution leads to a faster growth of total production, this 'might well be accepted by a liberal as a refutation of his political ideal'(p196).

But even if it were true that liberalism both maximizes total output and raises the standard of living of the worst-off, why should this count so strongly in its favour? At least two considerations go against this. First, if Sampson is primarily concerned about improving the position of the worst-off, he must show not merely that liberalism improves their position, but that it does so to a greater extent than any other system. Now such alternative systems need not be 'strict egalitarian' ones. Instead, they might involve attempts to 'balance' the ideals of equality and of maximizing growth of total output: that is, neither ideal is exclusively followed, but each is given some weight, in a 'trade-off' relation with the other. (See, for instance, Arthur Okun's Efficiency and Equality: The Big Trade-off.) In such systems, it is quite conceivable that, whilst total output would be somewhat lower than in liberalism, the position of the worst-off would be better.

Second, Sampson's argument depends upon paying attention only to the absolute, and not the relative position of the worst-off, as if the sources of human dissatisfaction did not legitimately include a sense of the inferiority of one's position in relation to others. Although he offers a number of arguments against strict egalitarianism, none of these go any way to provide a justification for this general assumption, which is clearly in need of one. After all, most proponents of (various forms of) social justice have regarded relative positions as intrinsically significant; and to defend liberalism as 'in the best interests of the poor', without looking beyond their absolute standard of living, seems quite inadequate.

Sampson, as I've said, does present arguments directly against egalitarianism. There is room here to comment on only one of these: that egalitarianism is an impossible ideal to realize, since it is only the existence of a free market (with its consequent inequalities) that provides an objective basis for determining the extent to which people are equal or unequal: that is, the price-system. This is ingenious, but unconvincing. Intuitively, it seems that in a society with a fairly homogeneous set of values about preferred forms of activity, one could get a rough but adequate sense of the extent of inequalities without a market-determined price-system. For instance, the differences between housing conditions experienced in the UK at present by typical members of the two groups, unskilled workers and professional/managerial staff, is detectable without knowledge of house prices.

Further - and this issue he ignores throughout - Sampson does not examine the viability of various forms of market socialism, in which there is no private ownership of the means of production, but a (modified) market system determines prices. (See, for instance, David Miller's 'Socialism and the Market', Political Theory, 1977).

V

By now considering why it is that Sampson believes that liberalism is in fact the system best able to 'deliver the goods' of economic progress I can move on to my second criticism - that creativity, far from supporting liberalism, may count against it.

Creativity makes progress possible, according to Sampson. And since the new ideas generated by this capacity cannot be predicted, no 'scientifically planned' society will be able to make use of it. But this potential can only be effectively realized if certain conditions are met. One of these is that People - the person who actually thinks up the new idea, and others who are in a position to try it out - must stand to gain if the idea is successful; which means that they must stand to lose, if it is not. In the economic sphere, progress can come about only from risk-taking free enterprise.

(p47)

So there must be incentives, which consist in receiving a large share of goods. Sampson notes that within the Marxist tradition, there has been considerable resistance to the claim that such a need for rewards reflects some 'law of human nature'; instead, it is often argued, this kind of psychological attitude is itself determined by the mode of economic production, and will thus change with changes in that mode. Sampson says that, on this alternative view

... when full socialism is attained, it may be that labour will not need to be motivated by incentives, and men will work selflessly on behalf of society in general...

(p86)

Unfortunately, his reply to this is too closely tied with an ad hominem argument against Chomsky for it to be entirely clear how he would deal directly with the traditional Marxist objection itself. But it seems that Sampson regards this particular psychological attitude as pretty much a given feature of human nature, commenting that 'We have no empirical evidence to suggest that degree of altruism is one of the more malleable of human characteristics....' (p87). Now I'm not at all sure I agree with this. But in any case, I think it's a mistake to see the issue as primarily concerned with degrees of altruism, and to characterise the socialist as necessarily believing in the possibility of working 'selflessly on behalf of society in general'.

For a start, it may be that only certain kinds of work require special incentives for people to be willing to perform them. Part of the socialist ideal has always been to change the character of the forms of labour dominant in capitalism, to make them more directly and intrinsically enjoyable. This clearly does not involve workers becoming more altruistic; rather, their legitimate self-concern can now be (partly) met in work. Further, it seems reasonable to suggest that the activities of creating new ideas and trying them out are central examples of the kind of work which does not necessarily require external incentives. Yet

this is just the area of activity which, according to Sampson, does require such incentives - at least in a market society. He makes it sound as if someone who denied this must believe that humans can be more altruistic than they are; but this would only be so if we thought of these activities as, in themselves, 'unrewarding' to those who engaged in them. This seems implausible.

I want now to pursue this question of the relations between liberalism, creativity and human nature a bit further. Sampson rightly insists that we should understand creativity in a broad sense, to include innovations in all areas of human activity - art, science, economic production, social institutions, and so on. He is well aware that the particular set of institutions he is concerned to advocate - those of liberalism - are the outcome of a specific period of historical development; indeed, he wants to celebrate these as, in a way, the species' greatest act of creativity. And along with these historically specific institutions come specific patterns of social behaviour: thus, for instance, Sampson endorses Adam Smith's view 'that the propensity of humans to "truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another" is probably not innate' (p94).

It seems to me that this whole emphasis upon the historically changing character of human activities militates strongly against believing that there is some single, historically specific set of institutions - those of liberalism - that are uniquely 'in tune' with a set of unchangeable and innate psychological attitudes, patterns of motivation, etc. That is, I think that if we accept Sampson's account of human creativity, we should be highly sceptical of the claims of liberalism to represent a uniquely successful attempt by humans to find a form of society that maximally realizes 'human nature'. And if there is such a 'thing' as human nature, its characteristics must surely be far more general than the highly specific and distinctive attitudes and motivations involved in a liberal market economy.

Further, I would argue against Sampson that liberalism tends to hinder and prevent the exercise of many possible products of human creativity. For instance, the discovery and practice of new forms of social relationships involving co-operative, collective work (whilst maintaining the values of individuality and self-concern) are pretty difficult to achieve in such a society. So too are certain forms of community - related to, but not identical with, those typical of many pre-capitalist societies. Sampson, indeed, replies explicitly to the charge that liberalism historically destroyed '... the bonds of affection, respect, compassion, and the like which link individuals occupying neighbouring positions in a social structure...' by saying that 'The operation of a free market does not destroy the bonds of affection between related individuals - nothing could, they are surely amongst the fixed elements of human nature...' (p94). But this seems unsatisfactory. For even if it is true that the development of some 'bonds of affection' is part of human nature, what specific form these may take is not; and what form is taken is influenced by various institutional structures. For instance, the character of family relationships is clearly influenced by that of economic institutions; so that, at any given time, it is likely that possible developments of a creative kind in the former will be limited and hindered by the nature of the latter. And I can see no reason why the institutions of liberalism should be exceptions to this.

VI

In his attempt to show why liberalism is the best system for achieving growth and progress, Sampson argues that a society needs not only to encourage innovation, but also to devise a mechanism by which beneficial innovations may be selected from non-beneficial ones. In his view, the competitive market is the ideal such mechanism. And at one point, he says this:

Only a liberal society, as I have defined it, is not authoritarian, in that economic conflicts in such a society are ultimately decided not by any human authority but by the neutral arbitration of Nature.

(p83, my *italics*)

Elsewhere, Sampson supports a strongly Popperian account of the growth of scientific knowledge, according to which this consists in a process of 'trial and error'. Hypotheses are put forward, tested, and rejected if found wanting; then new hypotheses are proposed. This account is used by Sampson to characterize all forms of innovatory progress.

Now, as Sampson notes, Popper himself has stressed the analogies between his account of scientific growth, and the Darwinian theory of evolution. It is presumably this evolutionary analogy that lies behind the italicized phrase in the passage just quoted, which, *prima facie*, makes a highly implausible claim: for surely what it is that determines which economic products 'survive' and which 'fail' is not Nature, but human decisions taken within the context of historically varying forms of social structures, embodying specific motivations, preferences, and values - one could scarcely conceive anything less 'natural' than these. My suggestion is that this curious passage indicates a pervasive evolutionism in Sampson's position, an evolutionism which is mistakenly 'scientistic'.

Amongst the several errors in Popper's own evolutionary analogy for the growth of knowledge, the most important for my purposes is this. In Darwinian evolution, 'selection' is purely a matter of differential rates of reproduction resulting from the differing degrees of adaptedness of organisms to their environment. By contrast, the 'selection' of scientific theories involves the conscious application to them of particular standards of acceptability adopted by the members of a scientific community. The appropriateness of these standards is itself partly determined by the acceptance of a particular aim, or aims, for scientific enquiry: in Popper's case, this aim is 'the truth', understood in a realist fashion, whereas other aims have been proposed and pursued, such as practical utility, or aesthetic beauty.

For Sampson to talk of economic conflicts being settled 'by the neutral arbitration of Nature' is to ignore the fact that in selecting innovations in human societies, there is a major question to be decided: what standards, in relation to which aims, should be adopted? This question seems not to get answered, but to be frequently avoided, as in the following passage:

'Progress' means not simply innovation but beneficial innovation; in a liberal society, however, it is not necessary to stress this distinction, since the only innovations that survive will be beneficial ones.

(p99, my *italics*)

The question is: 'beneficial' in terms of which human aims and values? And here we return to

some of the issues raised earlier, in section IV, concerning Sampson's discussion of egalitarianism and the growth of total output. Why should we decide to value exclusively the latter, and give no weight to the former? Why should 'freedom' (itself understood in a particular fashion) matter more than equality? And so on.

These, of course, are traditional questions of political philosophy. Although theories of a scientific character are relevant and important in answering them, I believe they cannot be answered solely by scientifically establishable claims. To think otherwise is to accept a form of scientism - 'the prejudice which holds that the scientific method applies to all possible subjects of human thought' (p1); and there seem to me strong elements of this in Sampson's defence of liberalism. For instance, in discussing why it is that, despite its demonstrable virtues, liberalism is at present often rejected in favour of socialism, he says this:

The liberal holds that anybody's beliefs may be mistaken, that nobody is infallible. It is perfectly possible for everyone to be mistaken on some particular issue, and in fact such situations are quite normal. There was a time, I believe, when everyone thought the earth stood still and the sun moved round it; no doubt there are many beliefs held by everyone today which are false and which, with luck, we shall eventually discover to be false. Political theory is not a specially privileged domain of enquiry in which the truth is somehow more obvious than in other areas.

(p199)

Here - as elsewhere - Sampson appears to assimilate the epistemological status of science and politics, with an undifferentiated conception of 'truth' and 'error' which, in practice, tends to transform political questions into scientifically decidable ones.

Historically, there have been many different versions of this attempted transformation. One of them, loosely describable as 'social Darwinism', involves the view that we could discover what are the best and most progressive types of social arrangement by seeing which actually survive in competition with others. The evolutionary slogan of 'the survival of the fittest' is thus used as a way of determining what is the 'fittest': since it has survived, it must be the most fit (cf. the passage from p99, quoted above). This view seems quite wrong. For (amongst other reasons), whereas in the biological theory of evolution, the concept of 'fitness' is a matter of adaptedness to a given environment, in political theory we are concerned with deciding what kind of 'environment' to construct, and thus with what kinds of social institutions, relationships, etc, will be 'fit' and hence 'survive'. We cannot talk of a struggle for survival between competing social entities, arbitrated by some ideologically neutral 'Nature', since what actually replaces 'Nature', in the sphere of human historical development, is itself open to deliberate intervention and control guided by particular political values.

That Sampson practises this evolutionist version of scientism is also indicated by his concern, towards the end of Liberty and Language, to answer the following objection to his arguments for liberalism:

... surely liberalism can itself be regarded as a novel social and economic arrangement in competition with various versions of authoritarianism and I have admitted that it is losing ground at present to its rivals: is it not convicted

by its own standards?

(p202)

In other words: if liberalism is so good, and 'good' means surviving in competition with others, why isn't it surviving? Sampson describes this as 'a very subtle objection', and tries to deal with it. I cannot go into his answer; but what matters is that, as far as I can see, he doesn't reject the basic assumption behind the objection, that, at least in the long run, what is 'good' will tend to survive - since survival is the criterion of goodness.

VII

Despite the length of this review, there are many major elements in this book that I have not even mentioned. The most important of these - and for many readers, perhaps, the most interesting part of the book - is Sampson's attempt to ground his defence of liberalism in the acceptance of an empiricist (or at least, Popperianly empiricist) theory of knowledge, and to oppose what he claims to be the rationalist basis of non-liberal political systems, especially the form of socialism defended by Chomsky. Other elements include: an attack (to me, quite convincing) on Chomsky's claim that empiricism is naturally associated with racism, together with a counter-claim that racism is more plausibly associated with Chomsky's nativist rationalism; a critical discussion of Chomsky's position on Vietnam, and a defence of Britain's 'Second' Empire of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In all these areas, Sampson believes both that there are political implications stemming from apparently very abstract and 'non-political' issues in linguistics and philosophy, and that it's important for academic specialists in the latter disciplines to think and write about these 'wider human implications' of their work. In these respects, he is in complete agreement with Chomsky, and for me, this is one of the book's several virtues. It is also written with clarity and vigour; its accounts of various theoretical issues in linguistics are lucid and informative; and it forces one to think hard about the complex relationships between political positions and the character of human knowledge.

Russell Keat

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