

Boyd on Kuzmanovich on Boyd on Nabokov and Currie

This discussion should not rebound endlessly, Zoran, but let me just pick up three points: one on Nabokov, one on Popper, since you generously include him in the discussion, and one on Currie.

First, Nabokov did not have only two uncles, but twelve by my count (several of his aunts remarried); but “uncle” can be a loose designation, and he may have called “uncle” Alexander Alexandrovitch Nabokov, the grandson of VN’s great-grandfather Nikolay’s brother Peter, who died in 1911. I doubt “Man and Things” was meant to be fictional: Nabokov read it as a talk among a group of friends, referring to an “I” he knew they knew, as he had in other nonfictional essays he read to them.

Second, Popper. You write “Popper’s way of thinking about knowledge requires that the purpose of intellectual engagement be refutation. . . . I prefer learning to knowledge, curiosity to certainty, and (these days) quest for survival to quest for truth.” No, for Popper the purpose of intellectual engagement is not refutation but learning or discovery (refutation is a way of discovering that what we thought we knew is wrong and we need to learn more). Describing his critical rationalism, he wrote that it depends on “an attitude of admitting that *‘I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer the truth’*” (*Open Society and its Enemies*, II, 225). He opposed the quest for certainty all his life, at least from the *Logic of Scientific Discovery* onwards (“The old scientific ideal of *epistēmē*—of absolutely certain, demonstrable knowledge—has proved to be an idol. The demand for scientific objectivity makes it inevitable that every scientific statement must remain *tentative for ever*,” *LScD* 280). And I do not see how the quest for survival and the quest for truth are at odds. For Popper, knowledge—tentative knowledge—starts with problems, problems of survival (which way should I move to eat? to avoid being eaten?). We cannot cope with climate change or a pandemic unless we find out what causes it and what will work to stop its advance.

Third, Currie. I did not know of Currie’s ambition to point out that “motoric responses” in the brain have been overlooked in responses to art, which, he says, is absurd as not noticing color as a feature of painting. But we do have well-known motoric responses to art, in dance, and in music (tribal dance and chant, Black American church singing, moshpits at rock concerts, swaying and clapping). Different arts appeal to different senses (and one, literature, not primarily to any sense): music, black-and-white drawing, photography, film and East Asian (but not Islamic or Christian) calligraphy not much to color; and literature, textile arts, pottery and much other visual art (most architecture, still-life, landscape and much abstract painting) not much to movement. Forcing movement, and especially motoric mirror-neuron simulation, on arts where it is not relevant is a puzzling overreach.