

One final diminishing rebound, Zoran. Popper does not “require that the purpose of intellectual engagement be refutation,” as you earlier wrote, but merely claims, in the passage you now quote (*Conjectures and Refutations* 192) and elsewhere, that the purpose of testing (only one of many possible kinds of intellectual engagement, after all) is testing. If a theory fails a test, we have learned we don’t know as much as we thought, and need to think again to find a better theory; if a theory survives a severe test, an attempted refutation, then the test corroborates the theory, which is good news, but still does not prove the theory: it could still fail later tests. This is a very modest attitude, as far as one could wish from the “snobby sense of certainty” you previously suspected in Popper.

Since you appreciate Popper’s imagery, as I do, may I offer one further example that puts the matter nicely:

science has thus nothing “absolute” about it. Science does not rest upon rock-bottom. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or “given” base; and when we cease our attempts to drive our piles into a deeper layer, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that they are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being. (*Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 11)

I too would have loved to have seen Nabokov’s “furious” refutations of natural selection on the basis of mimicry. But I doubt they would have stood up. Nabokov suffered from the limitations of his time when he assumed that “the noticing powers” of non-human animals were much less than those of humans. In many cases they have been shown to be better (dogs can be trained, after all, to sniff out cancer or Covid-19 in humans). And the rigorous experimental testing of mimicry over the last fifty years has repeatedly refuted, at least in all the cases so far examined, Nabokov’s claim that the sophistication of animals’ mimetic devices exceeds the noticing powers of the relevant predators.