

Comment on Zoran Kuzmanovich's Comment on Boyd's "Nabokov and Popper"

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Popper would have been delighted at your opening sally, Zoran:

I am always initially horrified to have my repeated errors in the chemistry of perfumes pointed out, but time and further thought have always pushed me to recognize that I have learned less from my untested hypotheses and more from my falsified ones no matter how compelling I found my original imaginative insight.

Popper's friend the neuroscientist John Eccles was sure synaptic transmission must be electrical, not chemical. Popper convinced him to formulate his electrical hypothesis sharply enough to allow him to look for an experiment that would decide between the electrical or chemical hypotheses. Eccles took his advice, predicted what time range would indicate electrical transmission and what would indicate chemical transmission, ran the experiment, and found this electrical prediction falsified. This both dashed his first hopes and sent him off with renewed energy to elaborate the chemical transmission hypothesis—work which won him his Nobel Prize. (Later it was discovered that *some* nerve transmission is electrical.) Wait for your call from Stockholm.

I am impressed, Zoran, by the zeal with which you have followed up my Popperian proddings.

Just before your question 1, you write:

From your paper I assume that Popper's goal (in *Objective Knowledge*) is to replace "the bucket theory" of knowledge with "intersubjectively proposed, criticized, and superseded" knowledge. Presumably that kind of knowledge would be objective and thereby qualify for membership in his World 3.

I would say more generally that Popper's aim is (a) to reject the idea of knowledge as something filled up in us—demonstrably accumulated, as it were—by experience (the filling of the bucket), and (b) to replace it with the idea of knowledge, especially in its best form, scientific knowledge, as our groping attempts to fathom a complicated world, with always tentative results (not necessarily “superseded,” as you write, but certainly “supersedable”). We don't know what might sooner or later show our hunches—yours on the chemistry of perfumes, Eccles's on the electrical nature of synaptic transmission—to be wrong.

But Popper's World 3 includes *all* the products of the human mind, including written or spoken utterances, and, among much else, problems, *wrong ideas*, and, say, banknotes (in so far as they are understood in terms of their monetary value and not merely as seen, say, by members of a previously uncontacted tribe, as mere colored scraps of some kind of thin flat crinkly substance). To “qualify for membership in” World 3, as you write, doesn't mean to be valid, only to be somehow intersubjectively knowable (as the value of a banknote is recognized in a community that understands currency and the current purchasing power of a particular denomination, or the value of one of Mozart's “Haydn quartets” is appreciated in a community that understands the conventions of Western music, and, preferably, also those of string quartets, Haydn quartets, and early Mozart quartets).

You write, citing Popper:

“the World 3 object is a real ideal object which exists, but exists nowhere, and whose existence is somehow the potentiality of its being reinterpreted by human minds” (SB 450). How/Why “reinterpreted”?

Popper's example here is a symphony (but it could also be, say, *Lolita*, to take the focus of last night's Zoom seminar in St. Petersburg: a good week for Nabokov). The World 3 version of Beethoven's Fifth would not be the manuscript, or any particular edition or printing of the score, or any particular performance or recording of the symphony, which would all be World 1 phenomena; the World 3 version is the intellectual content of the symphony, if you like, which can be reinterpreted performatively by different orchestras, or analytically by

different music critics, or appreciatively by different listeners. (If listeners form an interpretation as they listen, but do not articulate it, this remains a World 2, a purely psychological, phenomenon; but if they put it into words they utter or write, then it becomes a World 3 phenomenon, intersubjectively available and up for discussion.) In the same way *Lolita* is neither the destroyed manuscript, nor any particular edition or printing or electronic file or physical book, nor any public reading (all World 1 phenomena, all particular physical instantiations, whether types or tokens, but not the novel itself) nor any private reading (a World 2 phenomenon), but the novel's intellectual content (the words in the right order, in whatever physical instantiation), as discussable and engageable with and reinterpretable by any and all readers.

2: I think it's a little precarious to conflate Popper's Worlds 1 to 3 with Nabokov's monism, since neither knew the other's terms.

Nabokov's mind-first or mind-only monism would imply that all is somehow World 2, a phenomenon of consciousness, even the material world. Frankly, I do not understand such a mind-only monism, unless it means something like the idea that what seems to us Matter (more or less World 1, for Popper) is actually, ultimately, the imagining of some ultimate Mind, God "dancing not-dancing," in Zen philosopher Alan Watts's terms (in, I think, *Beyond Theology: The Art of Godmanship*, 1964), and that what seems to us our consciousnesses (our individual Worlds 2) is, within the concrete imagining of the ultimate Mind, God dancing now not completely not-dancing, but dancing some partial dance of Mind—if you follow Watts's terms!

I agree that, despite Nabokov calling himself an indivisible Monist, he doesn't behave like one (thank goodness, if you ask me): he accepts the reality of things, including the details of a lily or a lepidopteron, even if such details are not humanly identified until discovered by the botanist or the entomologist. As a writer, he accepts the features of a Kansas landscape, say, but has to take them apart (to select, to analyse, to verbalize them) and to resynthesize them, as in a sentence like this, from *Lolita*: "Or again, it might be a stern El Greco horizon, pregnant with inky rain, and a passing glimpse of some mummy-necked farmer, and all around alternating strips of quick-silverish water and harsh green corn, the whole

arrangement opening like a fan, somewhere in Kansas” (152-53). Here he brings together Midwest weather, El Greco, pregnancy, ink, mummies, Kansas farmers, Kansas landscapes, mercury (quicksilver), a synesthetic color association (“harsh green”), visual kinesis and more, elements he has “dislocated from the given world” and re-created “through the connection of hitherto unconnected parts” into a sentence describing the impression of motoring through Kansas that long-time Kansan Stephen Jan Parker thought almost unbelievably perfect.

You write:

To the question “What surprises you?” Nabokov gave the answer: “the mind’s hopeless inability to cope with its own essence and sense.” How do you read that answer in light of VN’s adherence to monism?

I think it perfectly possible to be a monist—to imagine, say, that the cosmos is the imagining of some ultimate Mind that wants to give all the independence it can to the things it imagines and thereby creates—and to have a strong sense of not knowing how this works or manifests itself in any detail at all.

I can’t tell from Nabokov’s annotation to Fraser’s *Voices of Time* what he might have had in mind. I cannot figure out even some of my own marginal annotations when I see them years later, and Nabokov may have been the same (in Popperian terms: an unremembered and cryptic marginal annotation is a World 1 phenomenon that reflects World 2 processes whose intellectual content has been lost, because so incompletely worked out, and now hardly qualifies as part of World 3, as an objectively available idea). Nabokov may have meant that when we conceive of spatial simultaneity across an instant of time, it paralyzes the moment, or time, as it were, since it leaves out what in *Ada Van* thinks of as “pure time,” experienced time, which always has duration and change. Or that, as in Zeno’s paradoxes of movement, an ever-more-narrowly defined segment of the trajectory of an arrow or a tortoise makes it seem unmoving, paralyzed, at that locus. Hard to know. I don’t think I would connect it with *Speak, Memory* 301’s “a special Space, maybe” without more to link them.