

Boyd Comment on Koyama Comment on Boyd 2021

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My thanks to Professor Koyama for his clear and perceptive summary of my paper. Just a few responses:

I think Nabokov derived his subjective idealism not from Berkeley (or McTaggart) but from the idealism rife in the late nineteenth century in the arts, in the anti-positivist mode of the Symbolists (such as the poets Mallarmé and Blok, and perhaps also the philosophers Schopenhauer and Bergson, in both of whom Nabokov, like many artists, had an interest) and from his own radical individualism. But he does mention Berkeley approvingly in a 1970 reply to Jeffrey Leonard's essay on the *Texture of Time* excursus in *Ada*. After dismissing the connection Leonard makes between *The Texture of Time* and Proust, he adds "And finally I owe no debt whatsoever (as Mr. Leonard seems to think) to the famous Argentine essayist [Borges] and his rather confused compilation 'A New Refutation of Time.' Mr. Leonard would have lost less of it [time, that is] had he gone straight to Berkeley and Bergson" (*Strong Opinions*, 289-90). I discuss the contrast between McTaggart's and Nabokov's views of time in *Nabokov's Ada* (1985; 2001 rev. ed.), 325n11.

I would not say that Nabokov's valuing the irrational in art reflects his esteem for the critical mind; it has much more to do with the feeling of mystery, gratitude, and wonder an artist has at the sudden surprise of a flash of inspiration, and with a hunch that in intuiting something previously quite unforeseen the artist reaches somehow beyond the limits of the purely rational. Certainly both Popper and Nabokov have a deep awareness of the limits of

human knowledge, although their demarcations of those limits and their hopes for how they might be partially transcended are quite distinct. For Nabokov, the limits are those of individual human consciousness, in our confinement to the self, to the present moment of awareness, and to the terms of human understanding; for Popper, they are limits of human knowledge in the face of the infinity of a universe emergent in space and time. For Nabokov, the way beyond may involve some transformation of consciousness beyond death; for Popper, the way beyond our present ignorance will be collective scientific discovery, which can continue endlessly but which will still fall endlessly short of the vastness of the cosmos.

Professor Koyama suggests that “no doubt” I “could have offered some explanation of the source of their similarities and dissimilarities.” I do not think I can, really, since as both Nabokov and Popper are highly independent of most of the prevailing trends of their times, I could explain the similarities only in terms of a chance coincidence of very distinct personalities (but an appeal to chance is no explanation) or a shared if uncommon insight into the human predicament (for those who accept that their ideas do indeed involve uncommon insights, as I do, but others may not). Popper was anti-positivistic, like Nabokov, but also anti-subjectivistic, unlike Nabokov. Perhaps the most relevant part of their shared intellectual background is their recognition of the uncertainty of even the best of our knowledge, science, in the wake of the Darwinian, Einsteinian, and quantum revolutions, none of which either accepted as final.

Professor Koyama writes: “The traditional philosophical definition of knowledge is justified true belief.” Popper rejected each of these terms. As his student and closest collaborator, David Miller, argued with characteristic firmness, for Popper our best knowledge, science, is

neither justified, nor true, nor belief. Not justified, because a scientific hypothesis proposing a natural law must cover relevant future instances which it cannot possibly know, and which could contradict the proposed law. Not true, because although truth matters absolutely, we cannot be sure that we have attained it: we do not know what piece or class of evidence might sooner or later prove our explanation or description wrong. Not belief, because individual belief matters little in science, where it is the capacity of a hypothesis to withstand objectively all possible valid criticism, to survive public and objective testing, that can corroborate the hypothesis up to the present but cannot guarantee future validity.

I very much doubt that Nabokov was in any way influenced by the ideas of Reichenbach, even if both of them lived and worked in Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s. In those years Nabokov's reading was almost exclusively in literature (and Lepidoptera and chess), and in the Russian émigré press; he kept himself as hermetically sealed from German culture as he could. Popper was strongly opposed to the ideas of Reichenbach, especially to Reichenbach's search for a probabilistic justification of scientific results. And to judge by such evidence as we have, Nabokov had developed the major contours of his philosophy by 1918, before he left Russia.