

A Belated response to Brian Boyd's "Nabokov and Popper: Convergences and Divergences"

by

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Brian, your lucidity about complex matters continues to impress me after 35 years of reading your work. I read your paper as a discussion of criteria necessary for a piece of writing to make it into Popper's World 3. My knowledge of Popper is very slight, but what I know I like: I share Popper's (and Nabokov's) opinion that belief in, and striving for scientific certainty without some professional self-reflection about the necessity of fallibility is erroneous. 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. That is in part why I am enjoying this symposium.

The organization of your paper (intro to the potential embrace in the realm of ideas, similarities, differences, apparent differences, irreconcilable differences, moment of required self-reflection by you, and final observations on the "embrace") for some reason made it seem very easy to imagine that it was the right time for me to begin correcting my knowledge deficit regarding Popper.

And that is where the trouble (and the delays) began.. My self-corrections so far have kept me spinning my thought wheels in Popper's World 3 and generating more questions than answers about Popper's real ideal objects and Nabokov's conceptions of language, thought, and time. Of Popper's two solutions to the lack of success I am experiencing (develop new organs, find the "feedback mechanism"), I am going to go with the second and pass those questions on to you for feedback, fully understanding that you will answer only those of interest to you. Or none at all.

My first step was to read "Epistemology Without a Knowing Subject" (to see why you find that "Popper has the better epistemological position" in relation to Nabokov). I then moved on to "On the Theory of the Objective Mind" to learn Popper's basis for seeing monism of the sort Nabokov used in self-description as "subjectivist blunder."

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criticized, and superseded” knowledge.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.

1. When Popper says that in acquiring knowledge “the conscious problem need not be the objective problem,” where do we locate the unconscious version of that problem? World 2 where the unconscious presumably operates? Or some Platonic world of ideas in which Kepler, Schrodinger, and Einstein solved the problems they actually set out to solve? Or is the Borges’ Library of Babel version of World 3 where all formulable knowledge exist in a state of being potentially discoverable through inspiration or through error and conjectural intersubjective correction? I am not trying to be funny here. I am asking the question seriously in light of failing to understand this passage from *The Self and its Brain*: “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”?
2. Similar question: Nabokov says several times that he thinks in images. At one point, he suggests that images come to him in a “shapeless flash.” Sometimes he speaks of words dissolving into images and sometimes he speaks of the problem of converting inspirational images to words. But in all cases the creative process is one necessary for the “dislocation of the given world and then re-creation of it through the connection of hitherto unconnected parts.” (*Think, Speak, Write*). When an indivisible monist says this, it seems as if it is World 1 that is being “dislocated” which really cannot be because in such a case monism become dualism. Or is it just World 2 that is “given” to the monist? If it’s World 2, by whom/what is it given within the subject’s state of mind? Why is it given with parts that need reconnecting? Or is it given by cultural heritage of World 3? Or is it World 3 that has to be dislocated? If either World 2 or World 3 are “given” or “dislocated,” then Nabokov cannot be an entirely happy monist. You quote Van’s metaphor of the “boxed brain.” In the expanded version of that image, Nabokov says: “The human mind is a box with no tangible lid, sides or bottom, and still it is a box, and there is no earthly method of getting out of it and remaining in it at the same time.” While there may be some “unearthly” way of unboxing, Nabokov does not give us much to work with. 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?
3. In discussing Nabokov’s difference from Popper regarding “another dimension” beyond death you suggest that for Nabokov “thought signposts the way.” As you rightly point out, Nabokov was reluctant to

talk at length about this topic. Or he may hedged his bets with statements like this one: “thought itself, as it shines its beam on the story of a man’s life, cannot avoid deforming it. Thus, what our mind perceives turns out to seem true, but not to be true.” Another ambiguous signpost worth visiting on this topic is in the margins of Nabokov’s copy of the book *The Voices of Time*. In responding to Friedrich Kummel’s essay “Time as Succession and the Problem of Duration,” Nabokov annotated the phrase “the circular relation of past and future” with the following: “Pure time, time free from all content, tangible time Space paralyzes time.” In light of your magisterial annotations to *Ada*, is there any reason (from psychology or from physics) to connect “Space paralyzes time” with “A special space, maybe”? How exactly does such paralysis happen?