

Empathising into 'an otherwise' world: A Response to Professor Koyama

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I thank Prof. Koyama for his careful reading of my paper and for his suggested improvements. I also invite further communication. As with comments by Prof. Brian Boyd, Prof. Akiko Nakata, and Prof. Shoko Miura, I will respond to specific concerns I have isolated as “**Comment x.**” For easier referencing of the context, Prof. Koyama’s response is included. I also apologize for the delay in responding. Reading Chalmers on problems of consciousness required more time than I had at my disposal.

[**Comment #1**] “it seems to me, that the person simulated is a fictional character rather than the author. I would be grateful to Prof. Kuzmanovich for kindly correcting my misunderstandings, if any.” I regret not having been clearer on this point. Currie’s concept of the “hypothetical reader of fact” is almost 25 years old, and Currie has not used it much lately. But to my knowledge neither has he backed away from it. That concept has always struck me as more suitable for describing the activity of a movie-goer rather than of a reader, but that is a subject for a different occasion. I am not eager to correct your understanding, Prof. Koyama, but I am happy to explain how I arrived at my interpretation and use of Currie’s concept. In his most extensive treatment of the hypothetical reader of fact, “The Paradox of Caring” (1997) Currie both explicitly and implicitly makes it clear that the hypothetical reader of fact is not simulating characters but readers. Explicitly he states that “As a reader of fiction, I simulate . . . someone who is reading a factual account of whatever the work is about” (1997: 68). So hypothetical reader of fact treats the fiction as a report or factual account, not as a fictional story. To such a reader, fictional character is a kind of a prop, a set of instructions for carrying out the author’s vision of “whatever the work is about.” Implicitly, Currie connects such a reader to the author again when he says that the “moral experience of fiction is primarily the product of our accepting or rejecting the invitation to become a certain kind of person: the person the novel seems to be intended for.” Using C.P. Snow’s novel *The Masters* as an example, Currie concludes, that “the intended reader seems very much to be someone who shares Lewis’s outlook [the novel’s narrator, zk], an outlook close to that of the “implied” author, and, very probably to that of the real author, C. P. Snow himself”

(73). However nested such intent may be (through levels of characters, narrators, implied authors, real authors), in the end intent in novels is placed there by the author who collects the royalties. To me not merely the moral experience of fiction but every other experience fiction can generate has the author as the origin or as the final filter. Whether authors always succeed in carrying out the intentions they have for their works is a different question altogether, but Currie's notion of authorial intent suggests that authors hypothesize and to some degree create their readers.

[Comment #2] "I believe Currie would answer that the distinction between online and off-line is gradual. A mental state can get more off-line in various ways, such as by being simulated iteratively, or by difficulty in simulating the character. Perhaps readers' awareness of fiction has the same result because we can suppress our impulse to action. That may involve what Currie means by "the right kind of attention." That makes sense to me, and I would agree with you completely if reading of fictional narratives consisted only of the readers entertaining unasserted propositions and enacting hardwired simulations of the perceptual experience of a fictional character. But the moment the reader's memory or imagination that is not simulative (not imitative of a character's or an author's imagined perceptual experience) enters into the act of reading, or the reader becomes conscious of the act of reading and begins censoring her empathy and evaluating the mental states of the protagonist or the narrator, the reader becomes something between an onlooker and a participant/jury which to me seems a kind of simultaneous online and offline mental state. In fact, there are cases of narratives such as the "card shuffle novel" or "novel-in-a-box" where the reader is, in a sense, competing with the author to create a more engaging story. See, for example, B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), Robert Coover's *A Child Again*, and even Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2016; among other things, a contemporary rewriting of the most moving passages from Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allan Poe). So while I certainly accept the validity of the gradualness hypothesis, I suspect there may be a kind of a see-saw effect if iterations are involved. At least that is the pattern of response I encounter frequently when I teach a complex work like *Ulysses* or Nabokov's *The Gift*.

[Comment #3, Comment #5, Final question] "However, it seems to be the only apparatus in Currie's framework that can distinguish between aesthetic experiences

and other experiences. I speculate that, for Currie, what makes immersion in a fiction possible (and an experience truly aesthetic) is attention rather than empathy.” I am glad you asked this question twice, Professor Koyama, since the answer to it cuts to the heart of the contributions philosophy of art and literary criticism can make to each other. As you have already indicated, the answer to this central question again has to do with “the right kind of attention.” Had Currie explained which kinds of attention paid to the text by the hypothetical reader of fact he considers the right ones and what role empathy plays in such attention, I would not have felt the need to write the paper. It does not seem to me that by “the right kind of attention” Currie means the reader’s attention and responsiveness to the narrative’s style or other formal and aesthetic qualities, or even the ways in which its story and plot are constructed so as to invoke and transform a real-life events or another work of literary art. As in “Empathy for Objects,” he seems to go out of his way to argue that aesthetic experience ought not to be really separable from other experiences. Following Moran¹, he points out that there is a

class of cases where we respond with emotional feeling to situations that are not our own, current situation, such as when I recall an embarrassing moment or think about the **merely possible mishaps that confront my child** (1994). If our reactions to fictions are puzzling, these other reactions ought to seem puzzling for the same sorts of reasons. (64)

To me, the mishaps that may confront someone’s non-fictional child include that child’s death, a consideration which always takes that situation out of the realm of the merely possible and for reasons quite different from my fretting that Harry Potter will hurt himself during game of quidditch. I speculate that by using the phrase “merely possible” Currie, for the sake of his “off-line” argument, may wish to make the child’s death situation both non-fictional and non-actual. But therein lies the biggest difference between Nabokov’s and Currie’s aesthetics. Because for Nabokov death is the mother of beauty (and pity), death is never “off-line” in Nabokov’s work even though many of his narratives (including “Man and Things”) deceive us into thinking during the act of reading that we live in “a grief-proof sphere” (*Lolita*), that “there is nothing to fear” and that “death is but a question of style” (*Bend Sinister*). In

¹ Moran, Richard. 1994. "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination." *Philosophical Review* 103: 75-106.

Nabokov's work we never control the off-line/online switch, and our aesthetic (and sometimes moral) sense is the compensation for not having such control. The closest Currie seems to get to the idea of a narrative's aesthetic dimensions is his mentioning of the readers' "susceptibility to narratorial direction" and his description of C. P. Snow's *The Masters* as working "by persuading me to engage in a certain piece of imaginative role-play, not by getting me to have false beliefs." And "imaginative role play" seems to be confined to vicariously trying on "the views, values, and general outlook of others, to imitate, in a playful way, other perspectives on the world." Such play is "functional" since "To be critical of our own outlooks and to be willing to see the advantages in the outlooks of others is a useful thing" (73). Nabokov's aesthetics are a matter of coping with death; Currie's (at least in this essay) seem to be about advantage building. Playfulness and advantage seeking also separate Currie's notions of empathy from President Obama's, though I agree with Currie's notion that non-debilitating self-criticism is always a good idea.

[Comment 4]: I was perplexed, however, when Prof. Kuzmanovich described this as a matter of the ownership of reality.... But this is a matter of reality only when Nabokov's subjective idealism is assumed. (I take Nabokov's metaphysics to be a kind of subjective idealism, as suggested in Boyd (2021), the paper also presented at this symposium.) Currie would not see reality as Nabokov does.

I regret the perplexing, and I will not speak for Nabokov here. I was trying to point out that in even in neurophysiology, an evidentiary level of reality Currie seems to value over verbal reports of involuntary empathy, the pattern of neurons that "light up" during simulation studies is always someone's psychophysical pattern and thus still hopelessly subjective. I also mean my reply to this comment to help resolve the possible confusion I may have created with my paragraphs on **qualia**. I do not have your familiarity with either Kripke's conceivability argument or Chalmers' double aspect theory in part because I tend to do very poorly when imagining brains in a vat or zombies, but on the face of it Nabokov's hypothesis that reality is "unquenchable" infinite series of information layers where infinite consciousness and the finite brain can never be completely identical seems perfectly compatible with my admittedly very limited understanding of Chalmers' proposed relation between informational and phenomenal states, systems, and mechanisms. I would be happy to take our discussion of this point off-line and profit from your much greater familiarity with the

problems of consciousness. I am quite intrigued by Chalmers' so-far underspecified notion of "physically realized information" (285-86).

Q: Is empathy for objects the only way to realize the "otherwise" worlds?

Currie seems to think so:

By treating our responses to fictional characters and situations as a matter of off-line simulation, we can unify our response to fiction with our empathetic responses to the situations of others, our earlier selves, or people of our own imagining. Sorrowing for Jago, worrying about my child's future, and shuddering over the disaster that was my first date all get an explanation in terms of a single mental mechanism with respectable psychological credentials: simulation. ("The Paradox of Caring" 71)

I hope that Currie turns out to be wrong about this, in part because of your astute comment about the nature of scientific discoveries and because at some level our exchange here about Currie's theory is an effort to make our respective intellectual worlds open to others even if we accept the fact that we can never speak or write so as not be misunderstood. Such openness is what makes them "otherwise" worlds, and the hope is that our observations and interpretations produce the text of a reality with an ever smaller number of situations that perplex. I confess I do not feel the need to make memory, judgment, fantasy, imagination, desire, regret, and empathy into a "single mental mechanism" either on- or off-line. I do not think or feel that I live in a world that is permanently observable and thus objective and universally accepted. Perhaps that is why I am unable to explain why such totalizing seems to matter so much to Currie, but thanks to Popper, specifically Prof. Boyd's understanding of Popper, I now regard all single explanations as invitations to disagree.

Comment on
***“I am hopelessly in love with this porcelain pig”*: Nabokov and Currie on Empathy
for Objects**

Tora Koyama (Yamaguchi University)

Prof. Kuzmanovich criticizes philosopher Gregory Currie’s simulationist theory of empathy for objects comparing it to Vladimir Nabokov’s view. His argument covers a broad range of subfields in philosophy such as philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and aesthetics. Admittedly, I may fail to see some of his important points, but I hope he generously finds my comment worth considering.

In any case, as Prof. Kuzmanovich poses a series of questions to Currie, let me consider them in order.

Q1: How do we select between off-line and online beliefs and desires?

As Prof. Kuzmanovich summarizes, one problem with the simulationist theory of empathy is that, although readers of fiction empathetically simulate a fictional character and have simulated mental states, such as sharing the character’s beliefs, those states are not genuine, as they do not motivate the readers’ actions as the character’s mental states do in fiction. According to Currie, this problem can be solved as follows: Readers do not simulate a fictional character directly; rather a “hypothetical reader” simulates the character directly and has simulated mental states that motivate her actions as the character’s states do. A reader’s simulated mental states are generated through the hypothetical reader so that they do not motivate actions. The mental states of “hypothetical readers are “online” and those of (actual) readers are “off-line” in the sense that the latter do not motivate actions.

Prof. Kuzmanovich criticizes Currie’s view, as far as I can understand, for naïvely considering that readers share the experience of the author (or someone closer than us to the author) and also for conflicting with his other view. I am afraid that I failed to see his point, as Currie maintains, [Comment #1] it seems to me, that the person simulated is a fictional character rather than the author. I would be grateful to Prof. Kuzmanovich for kindly correcting my misunderstandings, if any.

By the way, the question posed here by Prof. Kuzmanovich here is interesting to me. Surely it must be explained how we select between online and

off-line versions of simulated mental states. **Comment #2 I believe Currie would answer that the distinction between online and off-line is gradual.** A mental state can get more off-line in various ways, such as by being simulated iteratively, or by difficulty in simulating the character. Perhaps readers' awareness of fiction has the same result because we can suppress our impulse to action. That may involve what Currie means by "the right kind of attention" (Currie 2011, as cited in Kuzmanovich 2021).

Q2: How do we choose the source of our empathy and yet experience immersion?

Another criticism that Prof. Kuzmanovich levels at Currie regards his lack of contextualization, which may imply, or be implied by, the fact that empathy for aesthetic objects does not differ from empathy for all other objects. Prof. Kuzmanovich finds this unsatisfactory, as immersion in a fiction would be left with no explanation. If we can be immersed in a fiction, it is presumably through empathy. I think his concern is appropriate. Currie has to explain how immersion in a fiction can be possible even though empathy for aesthetic objects is irrelevant to it.

Currie could reply to this criticism. I suspect that he believes he is prepared for such an objection. The key is the notion of "the right kind of attention." Granted, the meaning of this phrase is unclear, as Prof. Kuzmanovich points out. **[Comment #3] However, it seems to be the only apparatus in Currie's framework that can distinguish between aesthetic experiences and other experiences. I speculate that, for Currie, what makes immersion in a fiction possible (and an experience truly aesthetic) is attention rather than empathy.** This is consistent with his tendency to invoke neuroscientific findings, as attention is a hot topic in recent neuroscientific studies. I would like to hear what Prof. Kuzmanovich thinks of that.

Q3: Who owns reality?

Prof. Kuzmanovich also criticizes Currie for an inadequate inquiry into human psychology, citing Nabokov (2021)'s imagining various possible responses to a painting, including admiration, analysis, sensation, comparison, hallucination of a past event, and "future recollection" (Nabokov 1989, as cited in Kuzmanovich 2021). Prof. Kuzmanovich seems to find Currie's view narrow, focused on only specific kinds of responses.

[Comment 4]: I was perplexed, however, when Prof. Kuzmanovich described this as a matter of the ownership of reality. For Currie, there is no difference between empathy for aesthetic objects and empathy for other objects, so artworks give us

information about the world or reality just as ordinary objects do. Accordingly, Currie should consider the broader kinds of information that Nabokov enumerates. I agree. **But this is a matter of reality only when Nabokov's subjective idealism is assumed. (I take Nabokov's metaphysics to be a kind of subjective idealism, as suggested in Boyd (2021), the paper also presented at this symposium.) Currie would not see reality as Nabokov does.**

Moreover, even an objective idealist who agrees with the idealistic part of Nabokov's philosophy but does not agree with the subjective part would not think it is a matter of ownership. The 19th-century British idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley stated that "Reality is one" (Bradley 1893), so, for Bradley, there is no question of the ownership of reality. Admittedly, Bradley's philosophy sounds odd, but it is unlikely that Nabokov knew nothing about it, as, around the turn of the 20th-century, idealism was the standard view in British philosophy and Bradley was its central figure.

Q4: What's the time?

The discussion of time may be the highlight of this paper. Prof. Kuzmanovich seems quite right that Nabokov's examples of empathetic things, especially a porcelain pig, show the limits of Currie's theory. These things evoke memories and narratives, that is, things other than the bodily sensations that Currie's theory supposes to be involved in empathy. The empathy invoked by the porcelain pig is more subtle and complex than the simple bodily empathy that Currie assumes.

I am very curious about the nature of that kind of empathy. Perhaps it is a different kind of empathy that Currie has in mind. I suspect that the porcelain pig reveals a serious crack in the simulationist theory of empathy.

Q5: Why is the qualia problem a problem?

Subjectivity seems to be central in Prof. Kuzmanovich's criticism of Currie, which naturally leads to the qualia problem. However, I was perplexed when Prof. Kuzmanovich uses the qualia problem to justify the so-called first-person authority (see, e.g., Davidson 1984). Philosophers and neuroscientists of consciousness try to reveal the neural correlates of consciousness. Of course, they may simply be wrong; there may be no such correlates. However, the qualia problem itself does not entail their non-existence. According to the problem, the properties and activities of consciousness and the brain only *may* not parallel, as Prof. Kuzmanovich correctly puts it. If scientists reveal that they are parallel, fMRI scanning would be a powerful tool to explicate the subjectivity of delusion. For this reason, the problem of

correlation between consciousness and the brain is called *the easy problem of consciousness*, which opposes *the hard problem of consciousness*, the problem of identity or metaphysical necessity between consciousness and the brain (Chalmers 1996). Importantly, the latter problem also does not justify the first-person authority by itself, as utterance about one's own conscious states has contents other than qualia.

[Comment #5] Another perplexity I felt is that, although Prof. Kuzmanovich maintains that the difference in Nabokov's and Currie's approaches to art is made "the most obvious" through their answers to the question of why we simulate narratives at all, it seems to me that they are heading in the same direction. Currie's answer is to blur the distinction between healthy and unhealthy mental life. Even though narratives are an important part of our lives, a life pervasively experienced as narrative is an unhealthy one. Nabokov's answer is to blur the distinction between narrative and delusion, because what Prof. Kuzmanovich depicts recalls the young man of Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols."

Admittedly, there is a considerable difference between Nabokov's and Currie's answers. Nabokov sees the matter from a metaphysical point of view while Currie sees it from an epistemological/positivistic/realistic point of view. Perhaps that is what Prof. Kuzmanovich means. It seems to me, however, to be a rather surprising agreement between their different points of view.

Final Question: Can cognitive pornography teach grief?

The final objection Prof. Kuzmanovich poses to Currie is probably the most serious one. Citing Wittgenstein and ex-president Barack Obama, Prof. Kuzmanovich criticizes Currie's theory as being unable to explain the ordinary practice of the arts or the nature of aesthetic objects. According to Currie's theory of empathy, empathy for aesthetic objects does not teach us anything about how the world might be otherwise, which artworks are supposed to teach us, because there is no difference between empathy for aesthetic objects and empathy for ordinary objects that teaches us about the world as it is. Consequently, his theory ignores the significance of artworks.

Although I agree with Prof. Kuzmanovich in his criticism of Currie, I have one thing I would like to ask: Can only aesthetic objects help us to imagine such "otherwise" worlds? I suspect that scientific discoveries can also do the job. Surely, scientific discoveries reveal only how the world actually is, but that also is a beginning of questioning one's beliefs that the world cannot be otherwise. The history of science shows that scientific discoveries have repeatedly transformed our awareness of reality. Even the possible responses that Nabokov enumerates could be

provoked by scientific discoveries. There must be a difference between aesthetic objects and scientific discoveries, because empathy for scientific discoveries seems impossible.

Let me conclude my comment with the following question:

Q: Is empathy for objects the only way to realize the “otherwise” worlds?

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