

Comment on *Nabokov and Popper: Convergences and Divergences*

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Prof. Brian Boyd basically discusses the similarity and dissimilarity between Vladimir Nabokov and Karl Popper, a famed philosopher of science. For instance, both of them are polymathic and highly renowned in their fields. Nabokov is playful, while Popper is serious; Nabokov likes words, while Popper hates focusing on words, unlike orthodox analytic philosophers.

More importantly, both of them praise human freedom and the endless discovery by the human mind, according to Prof. Boyd. Creativity and criticism are also important to both. Their dissimilarities seems to me rather philosophical. For Nabokov, individual consciousness is everything: “Reality is a very subjective affair” (Nabokov 1973, 10, as cited in Boyd 2021) Prof. Boyd depicts Nabokov as a subjective idealist George Berkeley, the 18th-century Irish philosopher, or John M. E. McTaggart, the neo-Hegelian idealist philosopher at Trinity College, Cambridge University, who taught Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, two founders of analytic philosophy.

For Popper, in contrast, objectivity through language and theories is what is to be pursued and acquired. Popper’s “World 3” is neither physical (“World 1”) nor psychological (“World 2”) but an objective product of the human mind. Presumably, Popper would have rejected Nabokov’s view on the ground that the activities and the products of the human mind should be distinguished and the latter is not purely individual but social at least to some extent. Prof. Boyd sees Popper’s view as better than Nabokov’s.

Prof. Boyd finds another dissimilarity between Nabokov and Popper in (ir)rationality. Popper is a rationalist – he is known to advance critical rationalism, while Nabokov praises irrationality for creativity as a writer. Despite such an apparent opposition, however, given that Nabokov’s appraisal of irrationality is for criticism (because creativity and criticism are closely related), this dissimilarity implies another similarity: acknowledgment of the limit of human knowledge. Because human knowledge is limited, for Popper, the scientific discovery is endless; because human knowledge is limited, for Nabokov, creative ideas come from somewhere unknowable and irrational. It is remarkable how Prof. Boyd explicates that their dissimilarity implies their similarity. Surely it cannot be denied that “their very substantial similarity is surprising” (Boyd 2021).

The surprising similarity between Nabokov and Popper leads us to ponder what could cause this commonality. But Prof. Boyd gives us no clear answer to this or to related questions. Rather he asks us just before concluding what could be accomplished by comparing these two great figures. No doubt he could have offered some explanation of the source of their similarities and dissimilarities. He suggests, it seems to me, that it is important to think about why we compare them,

what is accomplished by the comparison, or what the comparison means.

I would like to think about these questions here. I think they are philosophically significant. We cannot escape from these issues as researchers who are required to produce results, preferably results that are easily understandable to stakeholders. This requirement appears to be reasonable because research is the task of rendering unknowns known. The traditional definition of knowledge in philosophy is justified true belief; after all, we have to justify our findings. However, I believe we should not try to justify them fully. I agree with Popper and also Nabokov in that scientific discovery is endless and open to criticism. Justification may be a necessary part of scientific discovery, but it is only part of it. What is more important is room for human creativity. The similarities and dissimilarities between Nabokov and Popper as indicated by Prof. Boyd will stimulate our creativity, or perhaps “inspiration.”

Admittedly, this is just what I thought. I would love to hear what Prof. Boyd thinks about it.

Let me show an inspiration. Is there a relevant connection between Nabokov and Popper? Here is my speculation or imagination. Nabokov lived in Berlin from the 1920s to the 1930s. At that time Berlin was the center of the philosophy of science in Germany. There was a group of scientific philosophers led by Hans Reichenbach, who is a renowned philosopher of science. Reichenbach's group and the Vienna Circle organized international conferences on philosophy of science, participants of which came from various countries such as France, Italy, Poland, Denmark, let alone the US and the UK. Popper attended some of these conferences in the 1930s, after his studies at the University of Vienna in the 1920s. Although no conference was held at Berlin, supposedly Berlin intellectuals easily could learn of Reichenbach's group and their activities. For the group held regular meetings at Berlin and invited notable scientists as lecturers such as Einstein, who worked at Berlin University and supported Reichenbach's activity.

Interestingly, there are similarities and dissimilarities among Popper, Reichenbach, and the Vienna Circle, which presumably developed through their interactions. For instance, both Popper and Reichenbach worked on probability, though it is known that they had opposed each other personally (see, e.g. Milkov 2012, n. 9). Popper advanced fallibilism, opposing the verificationism of the Vienna Circle. Despite the fact that Reichenbach and the Vienna philosophers worked together, Reichenbach distances himself from the anti-metaphysical view of the Vienna Circle (Reichenbach 1936).

It may well be highly unlikely that Nabokov knew well these philosophers in Berlin. Still, it seems to me possible that he could have heard about them and become interested in their thoughts and activities. If so, probably he would have hated it and developed his own philosophy. All that I said may sound silly. In that case, I would say it stems from my respect for irrationality, and I would like to welcome criticism.

References

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