

## Comment on

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

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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, 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. 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. 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.

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.

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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