

Abstract

Nabokov and Popper: Convergences and Divergences

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Nabokov and Popper overlapped for 75 years (1902-1977) but neither shows any awareness of the other. But their two rich, curious, polymathic, and fiercely individual minds raise interesting philosophical questions in their attitudes, at times strongly convergent, at times strongly divergent.

First, their instruments and their disciplines. Nabokov likes words and claims he dislikes ideas and generalizations; Popper likes ideas and powerful generalizations and dislikes focusing on words or definitions. Both liked translation: Nabokov wanted his to be literal, Popper preferred bold imaginative reinterpretation.

I could spend the whole time just on their contrasting attitudes to words and ideas. But their similarities are also striking.

Both emphasized human freedom and the openness of the future. Both believed in the endlessness of discovery, and both stressed the relationship between creativity and criticism in artistic and scientific discovery. For reasons related to these they were both lifelong critics of Marx and of Freud.

Nevertheless, they have at least three strong and central philosophical differences.

First, in their contrasting attitudes to the subjective and individual versus the objective and the social. Nabokov thinks individual consciousness primary. Popper emphasizes that human consciousness engages not only with the physical world but also with and through the world of objective products of the human mind, like language, ideas, and works of art. He does not minimize the subjective, as some think, but he thinks the objective products of the human mind offer a way for us to grasp the world, to criticize our grasp, to discover where we are inadequate, and where we need to learn more.

Second, Nabokov extols the irrational, the inexplicable, the trans-rational. Popper agrees that what is individual is irrational, and that only generalizations, which are products of the human mind, are rational. But he thinks that much of the power of the human mind lies in expanding the scope of the generalizable and rational—although he concedes that nothing is rational all the way down: that one has to make a leap of faith even to accept reason as a way of resolving dissension.

Both agree that human consciousness is limited, but their responses to this condition are poles apart. Nabokov suspects a different relation to time can somehow exist beyond human consciousness, and a different relation to existence and understanding lies beyond individual death. For Popper, individual death is final and not to be regretted; but as a species we can liberate ourselves, gradually, successively, from the limitations of our subjective perspectives.



Brian Boyd, University Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Auckland, has worked on Nabokov since 1970 (as annotator, archivist, bibliographer, biographer, critic, editor, and translator); on literature (and art more generally) and evolution, from the Paleolithic and Homer to the present, since 1995; and on Popper since 1996. His Popper biography has long been held back by his work in his other two areas but has for some years been again his central focus. He has written or edited over 20 books (including, on Nabokov: *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*; on literature/art and evolution: *On the Origin of Stories*; *Why Lyrics Last*; *On the Origin of Art*). His work has appeared in twenty languages.