

What can fictional disagreements tell us about fictional truth?

Louis Rouillé
Institut Jean Nicod
louis.rouille@ens.fr

Sept. 17, 2018

1 The great beetle debate

References:

- Friend 2011
- Nabokov 1980
- Kafka 1915

Here is the opening line of *the Metamorphosis*:

One morning, upon awakening from agitated dreams, Gregor Samsa found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin.¹

1.1 Reading test

(Q1) What kind of *vermin* has Gregor turned into?

(A1) An insect.

(Q2) What kind of *insect* has Gregor turned into?

(A2a) **Smith:** A cockroach.

(A2b) **Nabokov:** Not a cockroach, but a beetle.

¹Translation by Joachim Neugroschel 1993, from the Kafka's German:

Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt.

1.2 Justify your answers

- (A1) is not trivial. Here are some “objectively” *mistaken* reading:
 - Gregor has turned into a monstrous *prime number*.
 - Gregor has turned into a monstrous *rodent*.
 - Gregor has turned into a monstrous *cyborg-pest*.
- (A2a) is an intuitively correct answer:
 - Cockroaches are the “stereotypical” insect-vermin for an occidental mind.²
 - Some translations (e.g. Michael Hofmann’s, Penguin Modern Classics) even use the word “cockroach”!
- (A2b) can be argued for:
 - **Fact 1:** Cockroaches do not typically get stuck on their back (they are thin back and belly and have long legs).
 - **Fact 2:** Beetles do typically get stuck on their back (they are round back and belly and have short legs).
 - Gregor gets stuck on his back in the first scene.
 - So Gregor cannot be a cockroach: he must be a beetle.³
- This argument in favor of (A2b) can be resisted in several ways:
 - (i) Gregor is a cockroach, only he is an *obese cockroach*.
 - (ii) Gregor has turned into a *yet unknown cockroach-like* creature with rounder back and belly and shorter legs.⁴
 - (iii) Gregor has turned into a cockroach but he does not have all the reflexes of cockroaches yet: he is a *clumsy cockroach*.⁵
- These can be argued against...

But: Wait a minute, how far is this supposed to go? Is it even rational to go that far, once we all agree that ... Gregor does not exist!

²One beautiful illustration of this is to be found in *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

³Here is Nabokov’s argument, with his inimitable tone:

Next question: what insect? Commentators say cockroach, which of course does not make sense. A cockroach is an insect that is flat in shape with large legs, and Gregor is anything but flat: he is convex on both sides, belly and back, and his legs are small. He approaches a cockroach in only one respect: his coloration is brown. That is all. Apart from this he has a tremendous convex belly divided into segments and a hard rounded back suggestive of wing cases. In beetles these cases conceal flimsy little wings that can be expanded and then may carry the beetle for miles and miles in a blundering flight ... He is merely a big beetle.

⁴Thanks to Paul Égré for suggesting this interpretation.

⁵Thanks to Markus Gabriel for suggesting this interpretation.

Pb: What kind of a disagreement is the great beetle debate? (and other similar *fictional* disagreements)

2 Simple solution, hard problems

Thesis: Nabokov and Smith are not *really* disagreeing.

- **Notion:** Faultless disagreement.
 - **Ref:** Kölbel 2004, Stojanovic 2016...
 - **Def:** (Kölbel) Two people *faultlessly disagree* “when [they] disagree on a non-objective matter of opinion and neither of them has made a mistake or is at fault. It is possible that even though they disagree, giving up the belief in question would be an improvement for neither of them.”
 - **Ex:** “Ryan Gosling is handsome”; “No, he is not.”
- **Proposal:** the great beetle debate is a *faultless disagreement*.
- Here is a dilemma for this proposal:
 - **Either** the name “Gregor” is *directly referential* (within the fiction):
 - * So either Nabokov or Smith is wrong.
 - * Hence, at least one of them is *at fault*. (even if we cannot tell which!)
 - * *Contra* assumption
 - **Or** “Gregor” is a *descriptive* name (within the fiction):
 - * Then Nabokov’s “Gregor” and Smith’s “Gregor” do not refer (within the fiction) to the same individual;
 - * Hence, there are at least two incompatible Gregors;
 - These Gregors cannot be part of the same fictional world (can they?);
 - So, Nabokov and Smith are not, strictly speaking, reading the same story.
 - * This is deeply counter-intuitive (and it can get worse).

Desperate (but interesting) attempt: Gregor is *indeterminate*, as far as insecthood is concerned.

- **Distinction:** Underdeterminate *vs* indeterminate:
 - Gregor is trivially *underdeterminate*: we have a finite amount of information about him;
 - But it is not trivial to say that he is *indeterminate*.
- *In general:* a vague description does not imply a vague object.
- But *in fiction*: it is possible that a character be ontologically vague.
- So, if Gregor is not vague, then it has to be for some other reason...

3 On the reality of a Reality Principle

Thesis: Nabokov and Smith are not disagreeing *about Gregor*.

- The great beetle debate can be seen as an instance of the problem of “truth in fiction”.
 - What is *fictional* in F?
 - How do we know that?
- The “Reality Principle”:
 - Lewis 1978, Walton 1990, Friend 2016 (the “Reality Assumption”)
 - This is why Gregor is not indeterminate, or “unfinished”.
- How does the “Reality Principle” apply to the great beetle debate?
 - Nabokov’s argument needs a hidden premise (in order to carry over Fact 1 and 2 into the world of Gregor)
 - Something like: “Entomology is relevant to investigate Gregor’s world”
- Justification of Nabokov’s hidden premise:
 - **Definition of the *fantastic*:** a story in which something “uncanny”, apparently supernatural happens in a world in which the “laws of reality” remain intact otherwise.⁶
 - *By contrast with:* the marvelous, some science-fiction, ...
- But: is *the Metamorphosis* a fantastic story?
 - ...

Conclusion:

- Nabokov and Smith are *apparently* disagreeing over the ultimate nature of Gregor’s insecthood;
- But, *really*, they are disagreeing on the literary *genre* of the story.

⁶Adapted from Todorov 1970 *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, translated into English in 1973 *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*:

Ainsi se trouve-t-on amené au coeur du fantastique. Dans un monde qui est bien le nôtre, celui que nous connaissons, sans diables, sylphides, ni vampires, se produit un événement singulier qui ne peut s’expliquer par les lois de ce même monde familier.

4 Nabokov's perspective as a case of imaginative resistance?

- Imaginative resistance is a well known phenomena in the philosophy of fiction. (Walton 1994, Liao and Gendler 2016) One should distinguish between:
 - *Evaluative cases*:
 - * Walton 1994, Weatherson 2004, ...
 - * **Ex**: Giselda's story
 - *Descriptive cases*:
 - * Yablo 2002
 - * **Ex**: The "Maple leaf story"
- *Now that you know enough of entomology*: couldn't we (with Nabokov) read the great beetle debate as a case of "descriptive imaginative resistance"?

Thesis: Imaginative resistance as narrator's accommodation (Altshuler and Maier 2018)

- **Pb**: In this case, there is no *narrator* to accomodate.
- Rather, we can infer (with Nabokov) that Smith does not know much about entomology.
- Can we extend Altshuler and Maier's thesis to cover cases of other reader's accomodation?
- *Tentative observations*:
 - The filling out the details of a fiction is giving some personal information about the reader themselves.
 - e.g. Their prior knowledge in entomology.
 - Maybe also their background beliefs, their evaluative scales, etc.
 - **Note**: This result is achieved without any mention of a "Mutual Belief Principle"...

References:

- Altshuler and Maier 2018 “Death on the Freeway: Imaginative Resistance as Narrator Accommodation”
- Friend 2011 “The Great Beetle Debate: a Study in Imagining with Names”
- Friend 2016 “The Real Foundation of Fictional Worlds”
- Kafka 1915 *Die Verwandlung* – Translation by Joachim Neugroschel 1993 (Scribner Paperback Fiction)
- Kölbel 2004 “Faultless Disagreement”
- Lewis 1978 “Truth in Fiction”
- Liao and Gendler 2016 “The Problem of Imaginative Resistance”
- Nabokov 1980 *Lectures on Literature*, vol. 1
- Stojanovic 2017 “Context and Disagreement”
- Walton 1990 *Mimesis as Make-Believe*
- Walton 1994 “Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality”
- Weatherson 2004 “Morality, Fiction, and Possibility”
- Yablo 2002 “Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda”