

Silly questions and their interpretative consequences

Workshop: Silly Questions about Fiction (Tilburg)

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- Silly questions as a problem

- Fictional interpretation: a friendly guide

- Interpretative consequences

A silly case study

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- Nabokov's interpretation

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The “vagaries of generation”

► Def (Walton 1990: 176):

[Silly questions] are pointless, inappropriate, out of order. To pursue or dwell on them would be not only irrelevant to appreciation and criticism but also distracting and destructive. The paradoxes, anomalies, apparent contradictions they point to seem artificial, contrived, not to be taken seriously. We don't take them seriously. Ordinarily we don't even notice them.

► ex: Is Othello a poet without knowing it?

What are the *fictional reasons* for Jesus and the apostles to line up in a row on the same side of the table?

Do French people speak English in Dickens's novels?

► Why is it a problem?

► Silly questions breed embarrassing fictional truths for the waltonian theorist!¹

¹or maybe they are *fun* rather than embarrassing for the waltonian theorist?!

Technical problems

- ▶ Silly questions show that “Reality principle”² overgenerates...
 - ▶ ... so they call for a 2nd mechanism to counter the Reality principle.
 - ▶ disallowing?
 - ▶ deemphasising?

- ▶ Further problems:

- ▶ The “blocking problem” (Walton 1990: 181)

If the silliness of a question convinces us that the generation of otherwise unacceptable fictional truths should be blocked, it may be unclear where in a chain of implications the block should come.

- ▶ The “integration problem” (Walton 1990: 184)

A thorough examination of critics’ wrestling with complex representations, or their attempt not just to answer particular isolated questions of interpretation but to put together coherent and convincing readings of a work as a whole, would but deepen our appreciations of the vagaries of generation. I will not undertake any such examination.

²And/or the mutual belief principle.

General idea of a solution

- ▶ Suppose we have a disallowing/deemphasising mechanism to get rid of the embarrassing silly questions.
 - ▶ We still want to keep the non-embarrassing (i.e. not so silly) questions, for general interpretation purposes.³
- ▶ **Pb:** how do we decide which silly questions to filter out?
 - ▶ *Answer:* let us be *consequentialists*, i.e. keep the productive ones, and get rid of the stale silly questions.
- ▶ **Pb:** What does it mean for a question to be *productive* in the context of fictional interpretation?
 - ▶ *Answer:* All things being equal, a question leading to a new interpretation of a story is more productive than a question having no such interpretative consequences.
- ▶ **Pb:** What is all this talk about “interpretative consequences”?

³“There is a lot of variety here. Some silly questions are sillier than others.” (Walton 1990: 178)

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Three kinds of obligations

- ▶ (Walton 1990): P is fictional(ly true) iff there is a *prescription to imagine* P.
- ▶ Friend (2016) analyses this by distinguishing between three kinds of obligations:
 1. “a work *mandates* imagining that P if failure to imagine that P would mean falling below a minimum threshold for comprehension.”
 - ▶ *ex*: Gulliver washed up on Lilliput.
 2. “A work *prescribes* imagining that P if we should imagine that P to have a full appreciation of the story.”
 - ▶ *ex*: Gulliver is mistaken about himself.
 3. “a work *invites* imagining that P on the following condition: if the question arises and we must choose between imagining that P and imagining that not-P, we are required to imagine the former.”
 - ▶ *ex*: Gulliver has internal organs.

Three levels of interpretation

- ▶ In a companion piece, Friend (2017)⁴ distinguishes three dimensions of criticism:
 1. *Elucidation*: establishing "the facts" of relevant fictional world(s) going beyond what is explicitly stated.
 - ▶ *ex*: Gulliver washed up on Lilliput (with his internal organs) and is quite mistaken about his adventures there.
 2. *Explication*: aims to gloss particular words, phrases, sentences, and passages in context.
 - ▶ *ex*: By travelling to both Lilliput and Brobdingnag, Gulliver experiences being both super-powerful and super-weak in a society, while staying the same in actual strength.
 3. *Thematic interpretation*: identifying the themes and theses in the work as a whole.
 - ▶ *ex*: Swift intends to make a point about how contingent societies are and individuals therein, yielding a general satire of the human kind.

⁴Following Beardsley (1958).

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Consequentialist model made explicit

- ▶ Given that we “ordinarily, we don’t notice [silly questions]”...
 - ▶ ... it follows that (all) silly questions at best *invite* imaginings.
- ▶ Invitations to imagine take place at the *elucidation* level.
- ▶ Now, some elucidations make it to⁵ the explication and thematic interpretation level, some don’t.
 - ▶ This is the *consequentialist* hypothesis made explicit.
- ▶ *Def: Really* silly questions are silly questions which stay at the level of elucidation...
 - ▶ .. whereas *not so* silly questions are silly questions which make a difference for the explication and/or the thematic interpretation of the work.
- ▶ Let’s see how this works on the “great beetle debate” (Friend 2011) where Nabokov makes *a lot* out of a (not so) silly question.

⁵Or perhaps constrain? shape?

- └ A silly case study
- └ Gregor's ultimate nature

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Kafka's opening

- ▶ Here is the opening line of *The Metamorphosis*, and Joachim Neugroschel's translation in (Kafka 1915):

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

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

- ▶ Precisely what kind of *Ungeziefer* Gregor is is not explicitly said in *the Metamorphosis*:
 - ▶ Very plausibly a (giant) kind of *insect* given what it eats, and the fact that it can walk on walls;
 - ▶ at the end of the story, the maid calls Gregor a *Mistkäfer* (dung beetle), but the term in German is used as a pet-name in context so it should not be considered a relevant piece of information.

Kafka's intentions

- ▶ Moreover, Kafka's intentions do not help:
 - ▶ In a letter to his editor (April 2, 1913) after receiving the proofs of his story Kafka insisted: "the insect itself cannot be depicted"
 - ▶ In german: *das Insekt selbst kann nicht gezeichnet werden*.⁶
- ▶ So there is a *prima facie* case of *unknowability*.
 - ▶ Just like Gulliver's blood type.

⁶Barker (2021) comments on this use of *können*:

This is a telling comment, especially in an era which delighted in the detailed representation of biological minutiae (Haeckel's Welträtsel is typical). Kafka does not veto a representation of the creature (he would in that case have written "darf nicht gezeichnet werden"), but stresses rather how the "insect" of his imagination is incapable of being depicted ("kann nicht gezeichnet werden").

Gregor's world

- ▶ Now, of course, Gregor is *determinate* in his own world.
 - ▶ Just like Gulliver's blood type.
 - ▶ We are in the silly question area, where the Reality principle breeds embarrassing fictional truths.
- ▶ But there is more we can say: *the Metamorphosis* is arguably a *fantastic* story.

The fantastic is essentially a violation of the known order, an irruption of the inadmissible into the unalterable everyday legality. (Caillouis 1965)

 - ▶ A story is *fantastic* when something “uncanny” (apparently supernatural) happens in a world in which the “laws of reality” as we ordinarily experience them remain intact otherwise.⁷
- ▶ Hence, entomology should rule in Gregor's world, shouldn't it?

⁷This distinguishes the *fantastic* from neighbouring genres, esp. the marvelous and sci-fi. This is a necessary feature; two sufficient conditions are usually added: that characters (and readers) are puzzled by what happens (cf. Todorov (1970)'s *hesitation*), that the uncanny moment happens at a certain point in the narrative arc.

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hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, flimmered [*flicker + shimmer*] helplessly before his eyes.

"What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. . . .

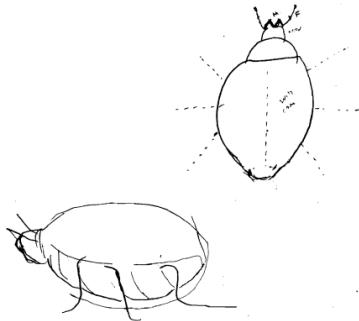
"Gregor's eyes turned next to the window—one could hear rain drops beating on the tin of the windowsill's outer edge and the dull weather made him quite melancholy. What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense, he thought, but it could not be done, for he was accustomed to sleep on his right side and in his present condition he could not turn himself over. However violently he tried to hurl himself on his right side he always swung back to the supine position. He tried it at least a hundred times, shutting his eyes* to keep from seeing his wriggly legs, and only desisted when he began to feel in his side a faint dull ache he had never experienced before.

"Ach Gott, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Traveling about day in, day out. Many more anxieties on the road than in the office, the plague of worrying about train connections, the bad and irregular meals, casual acquaintances never to be seen again, never to become intimate friends. The hell with it all! He felt a slight itching on the skin of his belly; slowly pushed himself on his back nearer the top of the bed so that he could lift his head more easily; identified the itching place which was covered with small white dots the nature of which he could not understand and tried to touch it with a leg, but drew the leg back immediately, for the contact made a cold shiver run through him."

Now what exactly is the "vermin" into which poor Gregor, the seedy commercial traveler, is so suddenly transformed? It obviously belongs to the branch of "jointed leggers" (*Arthropoda*), to which insects, and spiders, and centipedes, and crustaceans belong. If the "numerous little legs" mentioned in the beginning mean more than six legs, then Gregor would not be an insect from a zoological point of view. But I suggest that a man awakening on his back and finding he has as many as six legs vibrating in the air might feel that six was sufficient to be called numerous. We shall therefore assume that Gregor has six legs, that he is an insect.

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. Curiously enough, Gregor the beetle never found out that he had wings under the hard covering of his back. (This is a very nice observation on my part to be treasured all your lives. Some Gregors, some Joes and Janes, do not know that they have wings.) Further, he has strong mandibles. He uses these organs to turn the key in a lock while standing erect on his hind legs, on his third pair of legs (a strong little pair), and this gives us the length of his body, which is about three feet long. In the course of the story he gets gradually accustomed to using his new appendages—his feet, his feelers. This brown, convex, dog-sized beetle is very broad. I should imagine him to look like this:



*VN's note in his annotated copy: "A regular beetle has no eyelids and cannot close its eyes—a beetle with human eyes." About the passage in general he has the note: "In the original German there is a wonderful flowing rhythm here in this dreamy sequence of sentences. He is half-awake—he realizes his plight without surprise, with a childish acceptance of it, and at the same time he still clings to human memories, human experience. The metamorphosis is not quite complete as yet." Ed.

The “great beetle debate”

► Here is Nabokov (1980)'s interpretative strategy:

1. Rejection of the Freudian interpretation of *the Metamorphosis*:

The bug, they say, aptly characterizes his sense of worthlessness before his father. I am interested here in bugs, not in humbugs, and I reject this nonsense. (Nabokov 1980: 256)

2. *Elucidation level*: Gregor is a beetle (vs. a cockroach)

3. *Explication level*: positive connotation of the beetle (vs. cockroach)

4. *Thematic interpretation*: “The Samsa family around the fantastic insect is nothing else than mediocrity surrounding genius.” (Nabokov 1980: 260)

► Nabokov's method made explicit:⁸

- Go for a naturalistic reading (breeding silly questions);
- then, choose a silly question and track down the interpretative consequences, so as to find a point of controversy with other critics.
- In other words: he is *playing* silly.

⁸This text is taken from a lecture and starts with methodological observations, focusing on how to interpret the reality principle in the context of 3 fantastic stories: Gogol's “The Carrick”, Stevenson's “Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde”, and Kafka's “The Metamorphosis”.

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Analysis of Nabokov's elucidation

► Nabokov's argument:

1. *Fictionally*, Gregor has turned into a giant insect and he/it is stuck on its back when he wakes up.
2. *Really*, beetles (and not cockroaches) gets stuck on their back.
3. Therefore: *Fictionally*, Gregor is a beetle.

► It is an enthymeme, for it presupposes that *entomology* carries over to Gregor's world.

- This is the Reality principle...
- ... augmented with considerations about the fantastic.

► But how much of real-world entomology carries over to Gregor's world?

- In particular, is evolutionary zoology relevant?
 - It must be if entomology is...
- Evolutionary zoology has, *inter alia*, been interested to the laws governing the *size* of animals.

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An evolutionary perspective about size

- ▶ J.B.S. Haldane (1926) argues that “for every type of animal there is a most convenient size”.
- ▶ He opens his classic paper with the following (highly relevant) consideration:

[C]onsider a giant man sixty feet high - about the height of Giant Pope and Giant Pagan in the illustrated Pilgrim's Progress of my childhood. These monsters were not only ten times as high as Christian, but ten times as wide and ten times as thick, so that their total weight was a thousand times his, or about eighty to ninety tons. Unfortunately the cross sections of their bones were only a hundred times those of Christian, so that every square inch of giant bone had to support ten times the weight borne by a square inch of human bone. As the human thigh-bone breaks under about ten times the human weight, Pope and Pagan would have broken their thighs every time they took a step. This was doubtless why they were sitting down in the picture I remember. But it lessens one's respect for Christian and Jack the Giant Killer.

An evolutionary perspective on the size of insects

► What about insects? (few pages later:)

[W]hile vertebrates carry the oxygen from the gills or lungs all over the body in the blood, insects take air directly to every part of their body by tiny blind tubes called tracheae which open to the surface at many different points. Now, although their breathing movements can renew the air in the outer part of the tracheal system, the oxygen has to penetrate the finer branches by means of diffusion. Gases can diffuse easily through very small distances, not many times larger than the average length traveled by a gas molecule between collisions with other molecules. But when such vast journeys – from the point of view of a molecule – as a quarter of an inch have to be made, the process becomes slow. So the portions of an insect's body more than a quarter of an inch from the air would always be short of oxygen. In consequence hardly any insects are much more than half an inch thick.

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On being Gregor's size

- ▶ Now, given that fictionally Gregor is about the size of a dog, how does he/it breath?
 - ▶ This is a new silly question, based on Nabokov's answer to the previous silly question.
- ▶ It so happens that the Carboniferous (around –300M years) is well known for insect gigantism:
 - ▶ cf. fossils of the Meganeura (dragonfly-like insect up to 70cm wingspan); Arthropeura (a millipede-like arthropod up to 2.6-meter-long)...
 - ▶ *Main hypothesis*: there was more then twice as much oxygen in the atmosphere back then.
 - ▶ This is in keeping with Haldane (1926)'s theory;
 - ▶ See Harrison, Kaiser, and VandenBrooks (2010) for a (fairly recent) review of the literature on this.
- ▶ Nabokov's naturalistic reading would have it that Gregor's atmosphere is about 50% of oxygen.
 - ▶ *However*, oxygen in such proportion is toxic for human beings;
 - ▶ so Gregor's parents and sister would suffer severe dazzling and spasmodic vomiting;
 - ▶ this surely does not fit what fictionally happens...

Conclusion

- ▶ Of course, I was playing silly on Nabokov playing silly.
 - ▶ But Nabokov had an interpretative purpose...
 - ▶ ... and I do not have one.
- ▶ What are the interpretative consequences of disproving Nabokov's elucidation?
 - ▶ *Philosophical consequence*: case study for the theory of silly questions and Walton's "blocking problem".
 - ▶ Non-naturalistic block;
 - ▶ perhaps the being stuck on his/its back shows that Gregor was clumsy at first, not controlling well his new body...⁹
 - ▶ *Literary consequence*: opens up a plurality of "naturalistic" interpretations,¹⁰ to be developed.
 - ▶ Gregor as a bedbug?
 - ▶ Gregor as a woodlouse?¹¹

⁹Fits the *progressive* dehumanisation theme of the story.






¹⁰More precisely, interpretations which diverge from Nabokov but take Nabokov's point about asking what is the entomological nature of Gregor.

¹¹Not an insect: "Numerous legs"; undeserved negative connotation.







- ▶ Of course, non-naturalistic interpretations are still on the race, since purely naturalistic interpretations will not do.
 - ▶ There is always the possibility of an unreliable narration:
 - ▶ the metamorphosis is not a hard fact in the fictional world (Bermejo-Rubio 2012).
 - ▶ I think psychoanalytic interpretations are not trendy anymore; but there are other trends today:
 - ▶ *Queer* interpretation: apply “paranoid reading” (Sedgwick 2003) to Kafka’s story; e.g., Gregor was victim of surgery in the preceding night...¹²
 - ▶ *Feminist* interpretation: Gregor is pregnant; pregnancy is a metamorphosis.
- ▶ Kafka’s intentions, again:
 - ▶ It is pretty clear that Kafka *wanted* to be vague in his description.
 - ▶ Probably, he did not want to influence the reader’s imagination when it comes to Gregor’s appearance.
 - ▶ Maybe he was trying to make a point about visual imagination and literature...

¹²Actually, that would explain the “agitated dreams” which are probably due to the anaesthetic...

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