NOTES ON THE ORIGINS OF FLECK’S CONCEPT OF “DENKSTIL”

Ludwik Fleck’s *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact (Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache)* is a work that resembles Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* in several crucial respects. For example, at the time of their appearance, which in Fleck’s case means with the publication of the English translation, both books were considered to be without predecessors.¹ Like the later Wittgenstein with the publication of the *Philosophical Investigations* in 1953, Fleck seemed to be an Athena emerging fully-grown from the head of Zeus when the book appeared in 1979. True, Polish philosophers were eager to claim him but they were not really able to illuminate anything about the origins of his *chef d’oeuvre* on the basis of their discussions of Polish analytical philosophy in the inter-war period.² Moreover, the works explicitly cited by Fleck were not sufficient, even taken together, to account for the radical departure from conventional thinking about the nature of scientific knowledge that his approach to epistemology represented.

The parallels to Wittgenstein can be extended even further. In Wittgenstein’s case it was becoming clear at the time of the rediscovery of Fleck that we found no predecessors because we did not know where to look. The assumption that Wittgenstein was an analytical philosopher prevented scholars (with a few notable exceptions) from posing fundamental questions about the origins of his views. In short, even if we looked to literary and religious precursors, we simply did not bother to look for philosophical predecessors elsewhere than in the traditions of analytical thought. The same has been true of Fleck. We have hardly looked beyond academic philosophy of science in our efforts to understand how he could have arrived at his radical, iconoclastic views about knowledge. Thus the conjecture that I want to advance here, namely that we should look to Spengler in search of a more profound understanding of Fleck, will surely seem shocking to many philosophers and historians of science. Just as we were shocked with the publication of *Culture and Value (Vermischte Bemerkungen)* in 1977 to discover that Wittgenstein considered himself to have been profoundly influenced by Oswald Spengler,³ the thought that a hard-nosed, no-nonsense practicing scientist like Fleck could have been influenced by a historicist metaphysician seems implausible or even outright absurd. However, just as subsequent research on the part of scholars like Rudolf Haller⁴ and Rafael Faber,⁵ to mention but two, has continually yielded insights into Wittgenstein’s development on the basis of a Spenglerian influence, the same could well be true of Fleck.

Indeed, in the course of my own researches into the connections between Wittgenstein and Spengler it occurred to me that there were certain parallels between Fleck’s intriguing notion of “thought style” and Spengler’s views about styles of knowing (der Stil des Erkennens, for example, the typical Baroque way of “looking at” and “seeing” pictures) that might cast light upon Fleck’s development (not to mention the numerous parallels to Wittgenstein’s mature philosophy that we find in Fleck). Again, nobody ever thought of looking for a precursor or even parallels to Fleck outside of the circles of positivist and post-positivist (Popper, Kuhn etc.) philosophy of science; yet the parallels are there. Although I am aware that there are both general problems with the notion of influence and with attributing an influence upon Fleck to Spengler (see below), which cannot be ignored, I think there is, nevertheless, something to be gained by doing so. In that spirit I propose to offer a brief account of Fleck’s notion of Denkstil, then to consider what he might have taken over from Spengler and finally to consider briefly one alternative to a Spenglerian account of the origins of the concept of thought style. The place to start is with a brief recapitulation of the main lines in Fleck’s characterization of thought style.

Fleck defines Denkstil as a readiness for directed perception of form that has been instilled into the practicing scientist in the course of his/her education to the point that the selective character of scientific observation cannot ever be explicitly recognized by the practicing scientist. More than any of his predecessors, Fleck emphasizes that the very precision, which scientific perception demands, requires that scientists be rigorously trained to see only certain complex aspects of what they observe while systematically ignoring others.

Fleck’s view of scientific perception as selective vision as well as his seemingly unorthodox position with regard to what we have been accustomed to regard as problems of verification (or falsification) it entails is, on his own account, determined by his perspective as an immunologist. Even more than biological science itself his relation to medical research dictates the perspective he brings to the philosophical consideration of scientific knowledge. Here he speaks best for himself:

A scientist looks for typical, normal phenomena, while a medical man studies precisely the atypical, abnormal, morbid phenomena. And it is evident that he finds on this road a great wealth and range of individuality of these phenomena which form a great number, without distinctly delimited units, abounding in transitional and limiting conditions. There exist no strict boundary between what is healthy and what is diseased, and one never finds exactly the same clinical picture again. But this extremely rich wealth of forever different variants is to be mastered [bezwungen] mentally, for such is the cognitive task of medicine.

No small part of the radicality of Fleck’s account of scientific knowledge thus turns upon his realization that perception in medicine is inextricably linked to an intricate process of forming judgments. Making this sort of discerning perception possible is the goal of medical education, which is here taken to be especially