The aim of this article is to contribute to an understanding of the genesis, significance and reception of Ludwik Fleck’s theory of thought-styles and thought-collectives (Fleck, 1935, 1935a, 1936) by considering its epistemological content in relation to the philosophy in Poland in the nineteen thirties.


The following features and claims seem to form the core of the epistemological content of L. Fleck’s theory of thought-styles and thought-collectives and of his epistemological programme:

(a) The rejection of the traditional empiricist and positivist view of scientific facts as ‘given’ in contradistinction to theory,

(b) The rejection of any a priori or speculative theory of knowledge including abstract models of science, e.g., in the form of logical reconstruction, as ‘epistemologia imaginabilis’,

(c) The requirement that epistemology should be empirical, based on the psychology, history and sociology of science, as well as on the assumption that all knowledge is socially determined,

(d) The claim that human knowledge is developed by groups of interacting individuals — thought-collectives (some momentary, others more stable) — which produce from earlier stocks of ideas (proto-ideas) mature, closed, belief-systems, possessing their own internal criteria of validity, with concepts at least partly ‘incongruent’ with the previous systems, and permeating — as thought-styles — the thinking of the individual members of the collectives. Such closed belief-systems are characterised by strong tenacity, supported whenever necessary by the ‘harmony of illusions’; an individual may belong to more than one thought-collective, but it is the latter that is the originator and carrier of knowledge, since knowledge is always social in its origin and
character. There are no absolute criteria of truth (truths are "the only style-compatible solutions of problems") and validity; epistemology should be a comparative study of thought-styles,

(e) In the content of a cognition one may distinguish active from passive connections or linkages (Koppelungen); the former are psychologically and historically explainable in terms of changeable psychological and historical factors, the latter are not and are in this sense more 'real' or objective; cognition, therefore, amounts to ascertaining those results which must follow, given certain preconditions (19: 56, 85); the preconditions are active linkages contributed by the collective; the results enforced by the preconditions are experienced as objective reality; the act of ascertaining is the contribution of the individual. Every proposition in science, especially every scientific law, can be analysed into its passive and active components. Experience is a complex process based on the interaction between the knower, that which he already knows and that which he is about to learn,

(f) Of the three factors of cognition — the individual, the collective and objective reality — one may eliminate at least one or even two; the collective is composed of individuals, objective reality can be resolved into historical sequences of ideas belonging to the collective; however, the individual's thinking cannot be at variance with the thought-style of the collective, in fact the individual is hardly ever aware of the prevailing thought-style; hence, one can dispense with the concept of a thought-collective in epistemology only by introducing either value judgements or dogmatic faith, which would not be desirable.

Apart from its epistemological content, briefly summarised here, Fleck's (1935, 1979;1980) book contains also a sociological analysis of the structure of a scientific group, its communication system etc.

Most readers who have recently become acquainted with Fleck's theory through the American (1979) translation or through the German (1980) reissue have probably asked themselves the following questions:

First, how — at the time when all European philosophy of science was dominated by logical empiricism (positivism) — the appearance of a philosophical book was possible which pictured science in a manner at variance with the dominant philosophy and advocated the replacement of traditional epistemology and of its logical-empiricist variant with comparative epistemology based on the history, psychology and sociology of science?

Second, why did the book with the theory and the epistemological programme presented in it remain practically unknown, not only before the last war and in the two decades immediately following the war, but also in the