1. There is one thing that is certain: the ideas of Fleck, as fresh and original for his time as they were, were passed by unnoticed by Polish philosophy. The question asked here is: Why?

I have been reflecting on this question for some time. Polish philosophy in the twenties and thirties meant primarily the imposing Lwów-Warsaw school — a logical-philosophical school of international stature. There must have been something in Fleck’s thought which was somehow alien and alienating to this school. But what was it? My first answer was: his epistemological relativism! By this I mean the notion that no one style of thought could be designated as the correct one; they are all equally valuable, or at least — equally justified.

There are several circumstances which support this explanation of the cultural-historical phenomenon which I should like to call the ignoring of Fleck. Twardowski — the founder and head of the aforementioned school — spoke out explicitly against this kind of relativism (in the influential essay of 1900 ‘On So-called Relative Truths’). The same viewpoint was held by Kotarbinski, Twardowski’s successor as head of the school. And in the only essay in which any notice is taken of Fleck — i.e., in the 1927 essay by Twardowski’s pupil Isidora Damb ska ‘Is an Intersubjective Similarity of Sensations an Unavoidable Presupposition of the Natural Sciences?’ — precisely this relativism is held against him, and his entire theory is simply rejected as incorrect on that account.

But this obvious explanation of the ignoring of Fleck appears on closer examination not to be the correct one. Relativism was certainly one reason why Fleck was rejected, but it was not the reason and not even the major reason for this rejection. For Ajdukiewicz, one of the three or four major figures of the Lwów-Warsaw school, was also working in Lwów at the same time as Fleck, and he also held a kind of epistemological relativism, which he described as ‘radical conventionalism.’ In 1934 — thus almost simultaneously with Fleck’s book — Ajdukiewicz published his widely-read essay ‘World View and Conceptual Apparatus’ in Erkenntnis, the journal of the Vienna Circle. We read there: “the scientific world view is conventional down to every detail, and can be changed by an appropriate change in the conceptual
apparatus. . . . Each of these scientific world images can therefore with the same right demand to be recognized as true.” If we replace the words ‘conceptual apparatus’ in this statement by Ajdukiewicz with the term ‘thought-style’, it could just as well have been taken from Fleck’s book as from Ajdukiewicz. And yet Ajdukiewicz was not ignored; on the contrary!

2. The second explanation which I thought of for the puzzling phenomenon was not of an epistemological but of a social-political nature. The spirit of the Lwów-Warsaw school was thoroughly liberal. An essential part of the political liberalism was the firm belief in a fundamental human rationality. The world is no tower of Babel: in the final analysis, we can always come to an agreement with one another and solve problems together. And this is actually quite simple: we need only take each other into consideration and discuss things with one another patiently and rationally. Mutual understanding then arises automatically. (Or as J. M. Keynes said of Bertrand Russell, an idol of the school: Bertie entertains two ludicrously incompatible opinions. He believes, on the one hand, that the affairs of men are conducted in an utterly irrational way. And on the other he thinks there is a simple remedy for that: namely, to conduct them rationally!)

Now this liberal-rationalistic belief in a fundamental possibility of agreement is questioned by Fleck. There are various styles of thought, i.e., there are groups of people and areas (‘thought-collectives’) between which no possibility of agreement exists. Patience and discussion do not help here, for what they produce is at most an appearance of agreement, where the same words have a different meaning, and thus hide the opposition and slumbering animosity of the ways and styles of thought.

The liberal conscience refuses to recognize such a state of affairs. And since it cannot argue well against it, it represses it. The ignoring of Fleck could therefore be described as a case of social-psychological repression, and thus provide an excellent example for his own theory. That is to say: the styles of thought of Fleck and the Lwów-Warsaw school were simply different. And with reference to thought styles, ‘different’ means divorced from one another — by a break which can only be overcome by the spirit of the times which allows the genesis of a new, broader thought-collective.

3. The socio-psychologistic explanation for Fleck’s being ignored by Polish philosophy may sound very plausible. And yet it can hardly be satisfactory. For it gives a cause for this lack of attention, but no reason! Of course, if one first equates all styles of thought in a relativistic fashion, one can no longer ask for such a reason. Reasons would then be internal to the style, as it were: