

# Intellectual tradition, rationality, and freedom

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"The mystical is not how the argument is, but that it is. (L. Wittgenstein: The mystical is not how the world is, but that it is)"

Aristotle's *Analytica Posteriora* starts with this argument: "ALL instruction given or received by way of argument proceeds from pre-existent knowledge."

It means that (pre-existing) knowledge is necessary for creating (new) knowledge. Questions regarding the substance of this "pre-existing" knowledge is inherited to Aristotle from Plato, his teacher, and after him there have been various attempts to answer these questions. This problem has been kept alive from Aristotle's own considerations to the present day debates. It would not be a mistake to make a connection between canonized ideas in the history of philosophy such as Kant's *a priori* and Wittgenstein's *Urbild* (initial form), on the one hand, and this question, on the other. Among all attempts to answer, certain conceptions that we are aware of from "historical turn in philosophy of science" and "historical epistemology" are particularly interesting. I would like to focus on one of them: Ludwig Fleck's idea of "thought collective." First, let me explain why I chose "thought collective" before I elaborate this idea.

The Azerbaijani society has formed a "transit" character due to its geography and historical conditions. Some trivialized phrases such as "the Country on the Silkroad," "Iran-Turan symbiosis," and "East-West hybrid" more or less express the vectors of the "transit," which also includes information flow, over this region. A wave of information (religion, teaching, sect, philosophy, ideology) has easily been replaced by another, and these waves are not embedded to cognitive

structures of the society. As a result, an amorphous intellectual tradition with unstable and changeable character has been shaped, and it has as much disadvantages as its advantages. One of these disadvantages is high cumulativeness (collecting) and less reflection. The mere existence of information does not automatically lead to reflection. In other words, information is gathered but is not analyzed. Or, we may say, it is not analyzed enough because processes are changing faster than it is required for this thinking tradition to be formed; therefore, as a response, one wave of information is easily replaced by another. A common feature for these waves is that they came abroad – most of them are not the products of this region. If we observe our society, we can see that it is open to many kinds of information; however, it is reluctant when it comes to thinking and analyzing. Learning its historical roots and its formation process requires separate and extensive researches. For the time being let us look at the current situation and try to analyze it. Thus, we will look into Ludwig Fleck's abovementioned "thought collective."

What is "thought collective"?

It is an idea conceptualized by Ludwig Fleck, a Polish-Israeli microbiologist, in his "Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact," published in 1935, with the aim of describing the historicity of scientific processes. Fleck argued that thinking, especially scientific thinking is a collective process. This means that our current thoughts entirely depend on what has been thought before and in parallel with us. Generally speaking, this may sound banal but if it is applied to more specific areas, radicalism of Fleck's idea becomes apparent. One of such areas is science. The field of research of science is the "objective reality" or "scientific facts," which are social constructions because according to Fleck, their discovery and definition depend on the thinking tradition, knowledge archive, mode and mood of communication of a particular scientific community – in short,

they depend on "thought collective." Fleck, of course, does not deny the existence of a reality, such as nature, to which the scientific mind is directed. And this reality is independent from the scientific mind. In general, the term "social construction" is not associated with such a claim. Fleck's "thought collective" relativizes the knowledge that science acquires about this reality rather than the existence of such reality that is independent from our cognitive subject. The "scientific fact" is not a truth, which, independent from us, is "out there." Instead, it is a piece of information, which we perceive as truth, about something "out there."

In this context, we can problematize epistemological radicalism, especially ontological relativity of scientific facts, of Fleck's "thought collective." However, this absolutely does not deny the fact that science is a social phenomenon, and the concept of "thought collective" is an appropriate idea to describe the dynamics of scientific processes. As we have noted at the beginning of the article, the pre-knowledge problem, which is a prerequisite for knowledge, is the starting point of Fleck's "thought collective" idea. The answer to "What can I know?" is related to the answers of "What had been known before me?" and "What do people around me know?" According to Fleck, cognition, especially scientific cognition, is a collective event:

"A truly isolated investigator is impossible (...). An isolated investigator without bias and tradition, without forces of mental society acting upon him, and without the effect of the evolution of that society, would be blind and thoughtless. Thinking is a collective activity (...). Its product is a certain picture, which is visible only to anybody who takes part in this social activity, or a thought which is also clear to the members of the collective only. What we do think and how we do see depends on the thought-collective to which we belong (1935b)."

Fleck defines "thought collective" as a group of individuals linked to one another in the exchange of ideas and intellectual communication.

This collective can include smaller and more specific working groups such as religion, art, politics, economics, science, and so on. In terms of the intensity of communication, collectives are divided into two broad categories: esoteric and exoteric. An esoteric collective consists of experts while an exoteric collective is a collective of non-experts who, to some extent, are interested in that particular field. Esoteric members of a scientific "thought collective" are scholars; however, its exoteric members are non-scholars such as school teachers and engineers who are, in some form, related to science.

In "thought collective," members of exoteric groups can only access to information through the members of esoteric groups. If we return to the example of science, for instance, those who are interested in science gain an access to scientific information by reading books of experts, that is, scholars and listening to their speeches. In this sense, the members of exoteric collectives depend on the members of esoteric collectives. The contrary is also true because public opinion is the factor that conditions the experts' works.

Fleck divides esoteric groups into three subgroups: a) scholars who are working on concrete problems – those who define alternative directions; b) the "official community;" and c) followers – supporters of this or that scholarly idea.

As mentioned above, we have legitimate reasons to refer to Fleck's concept of "thought collective." First, this concept not only demonstrates the historicity of intellectual behavior (i.e., it is determined by certain conditions of time and space), but also allows us to see that it is a universal mechanism for human societies. Under the given conditions, all "thought collectives" have the same behavior; in other words,

they reproduce (and refresh) their contexts. If the conditions are identical, the dynamics of collectives and their results will be similar too. As an example, we can point out to the "Western Science", which increasingly unites under the same "thought collective." Regardless of their geographical location, societies which are integrated into this collective function approximately with the same dynamics. With the same logic, we want to show that currently all problems of scientific field and the intellectual community in Azerbaijan are conditional and defined by the existing "historical" context. The fate of this field and community is dependent on the answer of one crucial question – what kind of "thought collective" will this conditions shape?

We will use the abovementioned "thought collective" scheme to describe the current state of academia in Azerbaijan by projecting the Fleck's scheme onto it. We will try to show this based on the details of the "thought collective."

The official representative of science in Azerbaijan is the academia, that is, the higher education institutions. Here the scientific activity mainly consists of a teaching activity. Standard types of activities, which is known under the name of science, almost do not exist in these institutions. Researches are not conducted, inventions are not made, and production mechanism does not function. Only "scientific" information is transmitted to students during the teaching process. This information, at best, appeals to the well-known and concrete issues in the field of international science, and, at worst, this information has not been updated since the collapse of the USSR. That is, the science per se does not exist as a process. Instead, information about the results of some processes, which exist in other countries (for example, in the United States, European, Far East) or which existed before (the history of science, remaining information from the Soviet times), are taught. If we want to bring this process into one "thought collective," we see that communication (or lack of communication) among the community members is alive in the

following groups: (1) the older generation, whose members were educated and started their academic career in the Soviet times; (2) the post-soviet generation, whose worldview was shaped at local educational institutions under the influence of the older generation; and (3) the young generation academics (those who are engaged in academic work regardless of their academic titles), who graduated from foreign, mostly European and American, universities.

These generations are formed in a very different “thought collectives,” and until recently, their communication was based on the denial of the former by the latter. Interestingly, this denial itself was not a denial of particular scientific contents (for example, any scientific theory). The older generation was(is) accused of “professional shortcomings” such as conservatism, backwardness, and ignorance. There was no common academic material for further communication (even if it was based on denial and quarrel), and this material has yet to exist although 27 years has passed since collapse of the Soviet Union.

This is a result of the lack of scientific activity. The active esoteric core of “thought collective” described by Fleck – experts – are themselves exposed to scientific passivity. This is clearly evident in the field of natural sciences. If highly qualified and well-educated academics, who studied abroad, want to engage in scientific activities in Azerbaijan, they simply have to limit it to the teaching activity in the form of “information transmissions” described above. For example, there is no lively scientific activity and a structure, which is required for working on any scientific problem. There is no productive science, simply replication and duplication of data. Instead of a “productive science,” there is only a reproduction and a repetition of information. Because there is no “scientific product,” communications can not go beyond ordinary issues. There is no fundamental scientific criticism (because there is no need for it), and the “thought collective” consists of only exoteric members.

“Thought collective” fails to produce its own esoteric nucleus – members of the esoteric community in Azerbaijan are academics who graduated abroad, and because of the current situation in the country, after a period of time these academics move to the passive “mood” and gradually become an exoteric mass.

As we have said, until recent years, a communication in the academic “thought collective” in Azerbaijan was mainly based on the denial of the old Soviet generation by the new pro-Western generation. Other than these two major “groups,” there is also a slightly different group of academics. The intellectual behavior of this group, of which early adulthood coincided with the last years of the USSR, is neither in accordance with traditions of the Soviet academy, nor that of the new pro-Westerns. What makes it different from both groups is its strong tendency to irrationality. One can find many different types of intellectual acrobatics in this group, which includes those who combine the theory of evolution with religion; those who want to apply mysticism to mathematics, Buddhism to Turkism, and biology to history; those who measure speed of angels and energy of “*pir*”s while seeking post-humans; futurists as well as seekers of the national version of artificial intelligence and so on. This group has both serious and frivolous members. However, they have a certain place in the “thought collective,” and they are able to make themselves heard. They criticize Soviet generation the pro-Western scholars on the grounds that they became the “slaves” of rationalism. They have a certain forms of communication: “saying” instead of “argument,” “talk” instead of “conversation,” and so on. As a result, this kind of criteria creates relevant behavior, which spreads becomes normal; it becomes the details of the “thought collective.”

These impulses may appear to be scattered and situative. But we are increasingly witnessing a persistent presentations of disfigured rationality in which mysticism is put against science or criticism is perceived as dangerous and

“disgraceful.” We have broadly described the intellectual passivity in our society in the context of Fleck’s “|thought collective.” Hadn’t anti-criticism tradition of the USSR and the current situation of institutional devastation been the case, abovementioned anti-rationality projects would have had little importance. In the present case, however, they legitimize already existing “collective” passivity by “forming” it in one way or another.

But why is passivity dangerous? Why is irrationality a problem?

For they are a fundamental threat to freedom.

In order to survive, humans create structures, which serve him, and live in them. Our whole civilization is built on a service to humanity (we put the question aside whether it is bad or good). Great institutions such as state, morality, science, art, and religion legitimate themselves with the purpose of serving to humans. Without humans they have no value and function because they are needed in the absence of humans. These designs, which were created by humans for self-service, are regulative, that is, they are closely related to restrictions. Liberty is the attitude towards these restrictions within the structures created by humans themselves. The prerequisite for liberty is to recognize these restrictions and their character, that is, the mechanisms and functions of the structure we live in. Hence, the first condition of liberty is knowledge. Knowledge is not just information, it is information about causal relationships. Understanding of causal relationships requires rationality. Thus, rational knowledge is a prerequisite of liberty. Liberty is dependent on specific constraints. Liberty exists because there are restrictions. We have always been free to or from something. For example, absolute freedom is not possible since absolute restriction is impossible. Absolute restriction means death; therefore, freedom becomes unnecessary. That is, survival requires liberty. More precisely, liberty is needed



to live in systems, which are created to serve humanity and are also restricted for this very purpose. To do this, you need to know causal relationships between regulatory restriction that the system has imposed on you and its human service function in order to control their human service performance in your example. That is, the rational knowledge is a prerequisite of being able to be free.