

Relativism or Relationism? A Mannheimian Interpretation of Fleck's Claims About Relativism

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Abstract The paper explores the defence by the early sociologist of science Ludwik Fleck against the charge of relativism. It is shown that there are crucial and hitherto unnoticed similarities between Fleck's strategy and the attempt by his contemporary Karl Mannheim to distinguish between an incoherent relativism and a consistent relationism. Both authors seek to revise epistemology fundamentally by reinterpreting the concept of objectivity in two ways: as inner- and inter-style objectivity. The argument for the latter concept shows the genuine political background and intent of Fleck's sociology of science and its ambition to relieve the cultural struggles of his time.

Keywords Karl Mannheim · Ludwik Fleck · Relationism · Relativism · Sociology of knowledge · Sociology of science

1 Relman and Absman

Here is what I take to be the typical structure of one of the oldest debates in philosophy: someone, let's call him "Relman", claims for example one or more of the following: "What exists is always dependent on who sees it.", "We should not say that truths are found, we should say that they are made",¹ "Truth is not absolute and thinkable in terms of corresponding to or mirroring the ready-made world.", "We make worlds by making versions of the world.",² "It is impossible to understand those who have radically different concepts and world-views.", "After a change of paradigm the scientist works in a different world."³ or

¹ See Rorty (1989, 21).

² See Goodman (1978, 94).

³ See Kuhn (1970, 121).

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something quite similar. Another person, lets call him “Absman”, retorts something like the following: “Relman’s relativistic position is self-refuting. Once Relman claimed, what he has claimed, he either has to believe in what he has claimed absolutely or only relatively. If he does so absolutely, he contradicts his own claim; and if he does so relatively, we do not need to bother at all.” Although Relman now has some more ways of retorting, it is not untypical that he will answer in the following way: “Absman is completely right to claim that relativism is self-refuting. But I am not a relativist at all. What I wanted to claim is that...”, and at least at this point—if not from the very beginning of this little over-simplified story—we get the impression that Absman and Relman are talking at cross-purposes.

Now, of course, in its brevity this story is not adequate and, of course, at probably every step of this purported dialogue Relman or Absman could have taken another route, but I think a fair case can be made that in the history of the debate about relativism, we will find authors whose names we can substitute for our impersonal Relman and Absman—just try “Richard Rorty” for “Relman” and “Thomas Nagel”⁴ for “Absman”.⁵

In any case, in this paper I am just interested in what Relman has to say and I will discuss two Relmen and their answer to the charge of relativism. My first Relman will be Ludwik Fleck, whose work was rediscovered in the 1970s and, so far, has been much discussed both as an important source of influence on Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and as a pioneer of relativist and constructivist ideas in the philosophy of science.⁶ My second Relman will be Karl Mannheim, one of the founders and leading figures of early sociology of knowledge. The question I will try to answer is: what does Ludwik Fleck mean when he insists that he is not a relativist? And my proposed answer will be: he meant almost the same as his contemporary Karl Mannheim in claiming that he is not a relativist but a relationist. The fact that I am just considering the position of my Relmen Fleck and Mannheim has the consequence that I will not try to assess in any way the coherence or tenability of such a relationist position. In fact, I would probably side with Absman. However, in this paper I will not argue for my own position but try to understand more fully the position of my Relmen Fleck and Mannheim. My modest aim is to clarify charitably what Fleck probably thought, not what he perhaps should have thought.

The idea of looking at Mannheim’s contributions to the sociology of knowledge in order to understand more fully what Fleck thought is not new. Concerning the similarities and the differences of the ideas of both thinkers usually the debate revolves around two issues: the concept of “thought-style (*Denkstil*)” and the treatment of the natural sciences. With respect to the first issue many authors take note of the fact that the word *Denkstil* was introduced by Mannheim in the year 1925⁷; the first use of the term by Fleck is to be found in his *Some Specific Features in the Medical Way of Thinking*⁸ that was published two years later.⁹ Since, however, Fleck never mentions Mannheim in any of his

⁴ See e.g. Nagel (1997, 15).

⁵ Toulmin (1972, 1.2) chooses Collingwood and Frege as representatives of relativism and absolutism; however, with an intention that differs from mine.

⁶ See especially Fleck (1979). See for a summary of the reception of Fleck: Graf and Mutter (2000).

⁷ See Mannheim (1952b). Here Mannheim sometimes uses “*Denkstil*” and sometimes *Denkstil*. See also: Egloff (2007, 88), Trenn (1979, xv). Pels claims that Mannheim used the term *Denkstil* already in the year 1921 (see Pels 1996, 37). Pels in this respect refers to Mannheim (1952d)—in this work Mannheim, however, just uses the term “style” as an example taken from aesthetics.

⁸ Fleck (1986f, 41).

⁹ In this respect Egloff is simply wrong in claiming that the first use of the term by Fleck was about one decade later than Mannheim’s first use (see Egloff 2007, 88). However, Egloff is right that Fleck’s first thorough explication of the term is to be found in Fleck (1979).

texts¹⁰ the question of whether Fleck knew Mannheim's work is open to debate: whereas Schütz thinks that "Fleck must have known at least one of Mannheim's publications"¹¹ and also Pels believes that "it is almost inconceivable that he could have missed Mannheim's contributions",¹² Schnelle more cautiously claims that Mannheim's works appear to have been unknown to Fleck.¹³ In what follows I will take stand neither in the debate about whether Fleck borrowed the term *Denkstil* knowingly from Mannheim's texts nor in the debate about the differences and similarities of what is meant by this term in the work of both thinkers.¹⁴ My analysis of the clear similarities in Fleck's and Mannheim's strategies to avoid the pitfalls of relativism, however, supports the conviction of Pels and Schütz: regarding these similarities it is in fact almost inconceivable that Fleck did not know Mannheim's works.

Concerning the question of Mannheim's treatment of the natural sciences it is often noted that Mannheim—in obvious contrast to Fleck—hesitates to examine the natural sciences and mathematics by sociological means.¹⁵ Especially the proponents of the so called "Strong Programme" in the sociology of scientific knowledge, notably David Bloor, emphasise what they call "Mannheim's failure of nerve" in the treatment of the knowledge of the natural sciences.¹⁶ Now although I think that Mannheim's treatment of the natural sciences is much more complicated than is often thought by the proponents of the "Strong Programme",¹⁷ I do not want to contest the claim that Mannheim excluded the natural sciences from his analysis in this paper¹⁸. What I want to do is to point out a third issue worthy of discussion in the debate about the similarities and differences between

¹⁰ Fleck, however, definitely knew the work of other early sociologists of knowledge. See Fleck (1979, 46–50), Fleck (1986b, 80).

¹¹ Schütz (2007, 139).

¹² Pels (1996, 37).

¹³ See Schnelle (1986, 7).

¹⁴ See e.g. the recent discussion in Jung (2007, 199–202). Additionally, in the following I am not discussing the differences and similarities of the terms 'Weltanschauung' and 'Denkstil' in the vocabulary of both thinkers. For the purpose of this paper possible differences and similarities are of ancillary importance.

¹⁵ In fact Fleck himself accuses those thinkers of the sociology of knowledge that he explicitly mentions to "exhibit an excessive respect, bordering on pious reverence, for scientific facts" (Fleck 1979, 47) and claims that "they think that our present-day scientific opinions are in complete contrast with all other ways of thinking" (Fleck 1979, 50). See also Fleck (1986b, 80).

¹⁶ See Bloor (1991, 11).

¹⁷ See in this respect for example Michael Mulkey's and Mary Hesse's oversimplified description of Mannheim's position (Mulkey 1979, 11; Hesse 1980, 31). First of all it has to be noted that Mannheim explicitly claims that there exists a certain *Weltanschauung* and a thought-style of the natural sciences and describes the social conditions of this thought-style (Mannheim 1946, 146–153). He maintains that "auch dieses Denken ist soziologisch gesehen nicht freischwebend, sind doch die Grundimpulse aus denen die exakte Forschung aufsteigt, ein bestimmtes Stadium der sozialen Entwicklung und an bestimmte Grundkonstellationen gebunden, und auch weiterhin ragt das Bedürfnis des sozialen Körpers in die Fragestellungen und in die Forschungsrichtung der naturwissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis hinein" (Mannheim 1984, 66). Once, however, and this is the true aspect of the supposed strong difference between the Mannheimian project and the "Strong Programme", the socially determined thought-style of the natural sciences is accepted, the *contents* of the natural sciences are not existentially determined (*seinsgebunden*). And secondly, Steve Fuller recently has argued that there was a development in Mannheim's position concerning the applicability of the sociology of knowledge to the natural sciences and that the later Mannheim did not see any reason to exclude the natural sciences in principle (Fuller 2000, 230f.). See for a critical examination of the Strong-Programme-interpretation of Mannheim and David Bloor's "Failure-of-Nerve-Thesis" (Bloor 1991, 11) also Kaiser (1998) and Pels (1996).

¹⁸ See my Seidel (in print) for further analysis.

Mannheim and Fleck: the issue of their very similar strategies to avoid the pitfalls of relativism.¹⁹

One implicit consequence of my analysis will be a critique of the recent, at least European, tendency to highlight Fleck's work on the question of relativism *and* to reject Mannheim's attempt to establish relationism: if my analysis of the crucial similarities is correct, the strategies of both thinkers will, at least in their essentials, succeed or fail together. In this sense, this paper can be read, against the "Strong Programme",²⁰ as a rehabilitation of Mannheim's account in the sociology of knowledge.²¹

2 Relationism: What I Am Not Going to Talk About

Before I start to investigate what Fleck and Mannheim have to say about relativism it is necessary to, at this point, make some terminological remarks about the term "relationism".

In the context of the philosophy of science this term—or the term "relationalism"—is usually used to denote a specific view concerning the ontological status of space and time—especially in connection with the positions of Leibniz, Reichenbach and Mach. A relationist in this sense claims that space and time must be thought of as a family of spatial and temporal relations holding among the material constituents of the universe and denies that we should consider "space itself" as an additional constituent over and above the world's material contents. Although I think that it would be a very interesting enterprise to investigate the similarities and differences between "relationism" in this sense and the use of the term coined by Karl Mannheim in the social sciences, relationism concerning space and time will play no role in this paper.²²

In the context of debates in sociology concerning the question of relativism, the term "relationism", though most often connected to the work of Mannheim, is also used by some authors to refer to the positions of Ernst Cassirer and Georg Simmel.²³ It is very likely that Mannheim's decision to use the term "relationism" is deeply influenced by the thoughts of these authors since he attended their seminars in Berlin during a two-year research trip as a student.²⁴ And in recent debates about epistemic relativism the label "epistemic relationism" is used by e.g. Paul Boghossian to denote a necessary, but not sufficient condition of the epistemic relativist's view.²⁵ However, I neither want to talk

¹⁹ In fact, as Peter Farago has recently argued, it is even more plausible to interpret David Bloor's explicit relativistic programme on the lines of a Mannheimian relationism. See Farago (2002).

²⁰ Bloor distinguishes between a 'Mannheimian' and a 'Wittgensteinian tradition' in the sociology of knowledge (Bloor 1973) and sees himself in the latter one. David Bloor also explicitly classes Fleck with the supposed 'Wittgensteinian tradition' (see Bloor 1986, 396 Fn. 29) and tries to interpret his comparative epistemology in terms of the Strong Programme's interest-model (see e.g. Bloor 1986, 393) and symmetry postulate (see Bloor 1986, 395 Fn. 22). The claim of this paper is that Fleck, at least with respect to the question of relativism, stands in Bloor's 'Mannheimian' tradition.

²¹ The phrase "in this sense" has to be emphasised in this context: this kind of rehabilitation is not a rehabilitation of relationism as an *adequate* position per se, but only a rehabilitation of Mannheim in the context of the recent interest in Fleck at some philosophy departments.

²² See on "relationism/relationalism" concerning space and time: Friedman (1983, 62, chap. VI).

²³ See Lindemann (1986). See on the connections of Mannheim's relationism to Cassirer and Simmel: Endreß (2000, 342), Jung (2007, 3.2).

²⁴ See Hofmann (1996, 224), Woldring (1987, 6).

²⁵ See Boghossian (2006, 73): "If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospects of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form 'E justifies belief B' as expressing the claim *E justifies*

about the possible genesis of the term “relationism” nor about its use in contemporary debates about relativism but try to understand more fully what Mannheim means by this term. I do so by looking into his *own* work in order to make a comparison with Fleck.

3 My Relmen: Mannheim and Fleck

In order to sustain my thesis about the astonishing similarities between Mannheim's and Fleck's treatment of the issue of relativism, it is first of all necessary to show that both authors fit into my oversimplified Relmanian schema of, on the one hand, claiming something that sounds very relativist and, on the other hand, denying to advocate relativism. Here are two quotes from Mannheim that clearly suggest a relativist reading of his position:

[T]he utopian pattern of correctness, the idea of truth, arises out of the concrete modes of obtaining knowledge prevailing at a given time. The concept of truth has not remained constant through all time, but has been involved in the process of historical change. [...] We see, therefore, [...] that the concept of truth itself is dependent on the already existing types of knowledge. (Mannheim 1946, 262).

If we examine the history of knowledge and thought with such questions in mind [...] then we shall find at each moment not only antagonistic groups combating each other, but at the same time a battle of opposed ‘world postulates’ (*Weltwollungen*). In the historical process, it is not only interests that combat interests, but ‘worlds’ fight against ‘worlds’. (Mannheim 1952b, 185; improved translation).

I think the claims about the concept of truth being dependent on existing types of knowledge and about the opposing ‘worlds’ of different groups—and there are many more of this kind in Mannheim's works²⁶—obviously indicate a relativist interpretation of Mannheim's thought. The same can be said about some of Fleck's claims:

Today we know that the real cause of difficulty here was the absolute meaning of the concepts ‘up’ and ‘down’ – a problem that dissolves under a relativist interpretation. The same difficulty arises even today if such concepts as existence, reality, and truth etc. are used in an absolute sense. (Fleck 1979, 28; improved translation).

The theory of knowledge which is the science of thought-styles, of their historic and sociological development considers that *truth is the up-to-date stage of changes of thought-style*. [...] The thought-style *creates* reality, not in a different way from other products of culture and, at the same time, itself undergoes certain harmonious changes. (Fleck 1986b, 111f.; improved translation).

Most probably it has been these claims—and many others more to be found in Fleck's writings²⁷—that lead to the prominent interpretation of Fleck proposing a relativist and

Footnote 25 continued

belief B but rather as expressing the claim: *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B*. (Epistemic relationism)”. The other parts of epistemic relativism are, according to Boghossian, epistemic non-absolutism and epistemic pluralism. Boghossian seems to be wholly unaware of the sociological discussion and the use of the term by Mannheim, Cassirer and Simmel.

²⁶ See e.g. Mannheim (1952a, 91, 117).

²⁷ See e.g. Fleck (1986a, 49): “Neither the ‘subject’ nor the ‘object’ receive a reality of their own; all existence is based on interaction and is relative.”, Fleck (1986a, 56), Fleck (1986b, 89).

social-constructivist theory of science.²⁸ This interpretation, however, is immediately confronted with a problem, because Fleck himself *explicitly* denies that he is a relativist. For example, in his *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* he maintains that

Truth is not ‘relative’ and certainly not ‘subjective’ in the popular sense of the word. (Fleck 1979, 100).

And in an answer to the polish logician Izydora Dambaska he—commenting on the content and value of his theory of thought-styles—claims that

These are neither sophisms nor relative truths. I am not claiming that the alchemistic gold was the real gold in our sense. (Fleck [1937] 2007, 471; my translation).

Finally in the rejoinder to the criticism of Tadeusz Bilikiewicz, Fleck clearly insists that

No cognitive relativism results from the theory of thought-styles. (Fleck 1990a, 268).

On the one hand, these comments on his own theory confirm my thesis that Fleck belongs to the Relmanian tradition concerning the question of relativism, which claims something that sounds very relativist and at the same time opposes a relativist interpretation of its own work. On the other hand, they surely call for an explanation. How is it possible to propose a relativist interpretation of truth²⁹ and to deny simultaneously that truth is relative—*without* holding a totally incoherent theory of knowledge and science? In what follows I will try to reconstruct a Fleckian answer to this problem from his own writings. Since in Fleck’s own work there are at best hints to such an answer, I will take a look at his contemporary Karl Mannheim who was confronted with the same problem as Fleck concerning the question of relativism. Mannheim tried to solve the lurking incoherence by distinguishing between a self-refuting relativism and his own position that he labelled “relationism”. It will turn out that Mannheim’s description of his purported relationist solution is not just similar to but in its basic idea nearly *the same* as Fleck’s treatment of the issue.

4 Relativism and Relationism I: The ‘Old, Static Epistemologies’ Versus a ‘New, Dynamic Epistemology’

From the very beginning of his examination of the so-called ‘existential determination of knowledge’ (*Seinsgebundenheit des Wissens*) Mannheim was aware that his theory will provoke the reproach to be relativist.³⁰ He was, however, sure that the necessity of a sociological treatment of the phenomenon of knowledge *itself* does not necessarily call for such a relativist interpretation.³¹ He writes:

Viewed from the angle of this second approach there are two separate and distinct solutions to the problem of what constitutes reliable knowledge – the one solution may be termed *relationism*, and the other *relativism*. Relativism is a product of the modern historical-sociological procedure which is based on the recognition that all historical thinking is bound up with the concrete position in life of the thinker

²⁸ See e.g. Freudenthal and Löwy (1988), Graf and Mutter (2000), Löwy (1990).

²⁹ See the first of the quotes from Fleck above.

³⁰ See e.g. his early description of the reproach of self-refutation in Mannheim (1953, 27).

³¹ See Mannheim (1952a, 104).

(*Standortgebundenheit des Denkens*). But relativism combines this historical-sociological insight with an older theory of knowledge which was as yet unaware of the interplay between conditions of existence and modes of thought, and which modelled its knowledge after static prototypes such as might be exemplified by the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$. [R]elativism, then, owes its existence to the discrepancy between this newly-won insight into the actual processes of thought and a theory of knowledge which had not yet taken account of this new insight. (Mannheim 1946, 70).

Mannheim's aim in this passage is to invalidate the absolutist's argument from self-refutation of relativism by following the general Relmanian strategy presented at the beginning of this paper: i.e. accepting that relativism is self-refuting but denying to propose a relativism of this kind. In the passage above Mannheim maintains that the difference between a self-refuting relativism and a purportedly acceptable relationism lies in what kind of epistemology you are going to choose.³² The sociological investigation of the existing dependencies between the social circumstances in which thinkers live and the thoughts of these thinkers only leads to relativism if we combine this investigation with an epistemology that still holds on to the ideal of absolute, unchanging truths and knowledge. Once, however, our sociological investigation has shattered this ideal and we have reached a radically new epistemology with historically and socially variable conceptions of truth and knowledge, the threat of relativism vanishes according to Mannheim into the acceptable idea of relationism.³³ Therefore the investigation of the 'existential determination' of knowledge "requires the revision of the epistemology belonging to it by setting up the thesis of the *inherently relational structure of human knowledge*".³⁴ The epistemology of relationism then accepts "that certain (qualitative) truths cannot even be grasped, or formulated, except as being existentially relative (*seinsrelativ*)".³⁵ To summarize the idea in Mannheim's words:

Relationism, as we use it, states that every assertion essentially can only be relationally formulated. It becomes relativism only when it is linked with the older static ideal of eternal, desubjectified unperspectivistic truths, and when it is judged by this alien ideal of absolute truth. (Mannheim 1946, 270; improved translation).³⁶

According to Mannheim, such a new, dynamic epistemology³⁷ does not result in abandoning objectivity; on the new conception, objectivity merely gets a new and different meaning. There are two things that can be meant by objectivity on the dynamic conception of truth and knowledge. At this point in my paper I will just refer to the first of these meanings and postpone my discussion of the second. According to Mannheim

³² The following interpretation of Mannheim's idea can also be found in Endreß (2000, 340f.), Farago (2002, 180f.), Remmling (1975, 60), Scott (1998), Shmueli (1979, 111).

³³ Baum interprets these connections in terms of two equations: "social dependency + static view of truth = relativism, social dependency + dynamic view of truth = relationism". See Baum (1977, 40). Interestingly, a very similar strategy against the argument from the self-refuting character of relativism can be found in Hesse (1980, 42) in defence of the Strong Programme.

³⁴ Mannheim (1946, 269); improved translation. See also Mannheim (1983 [1946]), Mannheim (1952a, 120).

³⁵ Mannheim (1952c, 194); improved translation. See also Mannheim (1946, 254). By "certain (qualitative) truths" Mannheim refers to beliefs in the *Geisteswissenschaften*.

³⁶ See also Mannheim (1952a, 93).

³⁷ See Mannheim (1952a).

there is first of all the fact that in so far as two people are immersed in the same system, in the same aspectual structure (*Aspektstruktur*), they can, on the basis of the identity of the given conceptual and categorical apparatus and through the possibility of an unequivocal discussion thereby created, arrive at clear results, and be in a position to eradicate as an error everything that deviates from these. (Mannheim 1946, 270; improved translation).

So *within* a certain system, in which the participants share the same *Aspektstruktur*—that, according to Mannheim, “signifies the manner in which one views an object, what one perceives in it, and how one construes it in his thinking”³⁸—and the same concepts, it is possible to distinguish clearly between truth and error. The consequence of the acceptance of the new, dynamic epistemology is that objectivity does not mean ‘absolute objectivity’ but ‘objectivity in a certain thought-style’.

Now let’s have a look at how Fleck argues against the charge that his theory of thought-styles leads to relativism. After denying that truth is ‘relative’ in his *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* he goes on by claiming that truth

is always, or almost always, completely determined within a thought style. One can never say that the same thought is true for A and false for B. If A and B belong to the same thought collective, the thought will be either true or false for both. But if they belong to different thought collectives, it will just *not* be *the same* thought! It either must be unclear to, or is understood differently by, one of them. Truth is not a convention, *but rather (1) in historical perspective, an event in the history of thought, (2) in its contemporary context, stylized thought constraint.* (Fleck 1979, 100; improved translation).³⁹

The idea in this passage—that is repeated almost literally in Fleck’s rejoinder to Bili-kiewicz⁴⁰—is nearly the same as Mannheim’s: *Within* a thought-style, in which we share the same concepts with the same meaning, it is possible to distinguish clearly between truth and error—viewed from the perspective of another thought-style however, it is possible that we do not even grasp such truths.⁴¹ It is the thought-constraint (*Denkzwang*) set by a thought-style that determines what is regarded as true within the respective thought-collective,⁴² in fact—as is clearly indicated by the quote from Fleck’s *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*—‘truth’ is *identified with* the thought-constraint generated by a certain thought-style.⁴³ ‘Truth’ in this sense gets a new meaning for Fleck in that it does not mean ‘absolute truth’ but ‘truth within a certain thought-style’.

³⁸ See Mannheim (1946, 244).

³⁹ It is exactly this argument that has recently been used by Wolfgang Welsch in his defence of relativism—*of course*, I am inclined to say, without any reference to Fleck or Mannheim. See Welsch (2000, 42f).

⁴⁰ See Fleck (1990a, 268).

⁴¹ See also Fleck (1986c, 123f.): “*Simplicius*. Do you want, following the example of the sophists, to convince me that there exists no difference between truth and illusion? *Sympathius*. No, my dear friend, I am not as naïve as that. What I want to do is to say that scientific results and views are basically determined exclusively as single historical events at successive development stages of the scientific thought-style which is the outcome of the specific structure of the scientific thinking collective.”

⁴² See Fleck (1979, 94f., 101).

⁴³ In fact, at this point Fleck even goes further than Mannheim in claiming that truth is *completely determined* within a thought-style whereas Mannheim just claims that one *can* arrive at clear results. Contrary to what is claimed by the “Strong Programme” it seems as if it is not Mannheim who still adheres to a ‘static, relatively straight-line development’-conception of truth (see Mulkay 1979, 11), but Ludwik Fleck, who seems to have a very static, deterministic conception of inner-thought-style-truth.

Of course, this argument for the possibility of inner-style truth hinges on and—at the same time—is an expression of Fleck's demand for a radically new theory of knowledge that recognises the social dependence and the historical development of thinking.⁴⁴ As can be seen in many places of his work, Fleck assumes that his new theory of knowledge stands in fundamental opposition to what he calls 'the classical theories of knowledge'⁴⁵ in that it uses different conceptions of 'truth', 'cognition', 'perception' and 'knowledge'.⁴⁶ Since the old, classical epistemologies with their *individualist* outlook cannot fully account for and in fact stand in opposition to the actual practice of scientists,⁴⁷ an adequate—i.e. a *sociological*⁴⁸—investigation of the phenomena of knowledge and thinking requires a revised theory of knowledge with more flexible, epistemological concepts.⁴⁹ From the standpoint of this new theory of knowledge

Scientific truth will turn out from something stiff and stationary into dynamic, developing, creative human truth. (Fleck 1986e, 157)

It is in this sense that the Mannheimian relationist strategy to avoid the pitfalls of relativism applies to the Fleckian argument for the non-relativity of truth. The idea of truth as a "*stylized thought constraint*"⁵⁰ is only acceptable if you have already adopted a non-classical theory of knowledge with dynamic epistemological concepts. If you adhere to—what Mannheim and Fleck call—a static conception of truth, the Fleckian argument will simply be a *restatement* of the relativity of truth and not an argument that is supposed to show that "no cognitive relativism results from the theory of thought-styles".⁵¹ However, with the background of an already dynamic concept of truth, such a dynamic objectivity and dynamic truth is fixed within a certain thought-style. It is exactly the establishment of such dynamic epistemological concepts that lies at the centre of Mannheim's relationist epistemology and also at the centre of Fleck's new epistemology of thought-styles.⁵²

5 Relativism and Relationism II: Absolute Versus Synthesised Truth and Objectivity

We have just seen that both Mannheim and Fleck want to emphasise that their regard for the social aspects of knowledge does not result in abandoning but in reinterpreting the concepts of truth and objectivity. Now besides Mannheim's attempt to understand

⁴⁴ See e.g. Fleck (1986b, 110f).

⁴⁵ See Fleck (1986b, 111).

⁴⁶ Just to give *some* examples: for 'truth' see: Fleck (1986b, 110); for 'cognition' see: Fleck (1979, 42f., 87, 1986e, 154); for 'perception' see: Fleck (1986d); for 'knowledge' see: Fleck (1979, 51).

⁴⁷ See Fleck (1986e, 153f).

⁴⁸ For Fleck's use of the words 'social' and 'sociological' see Egloff (2007).

⁴⁹ See the close connection to Mannheim (1946, 29): "We will not succeed in attaining an adequate [...] theory of knowledge as a whole as long as our epistemology fails, from the very beginning, to recognize the social character of knowing, and fails to regard individualized thinking only as an exceptional instance". See also Mannheim (1952b, 137 Fn. 1).

⁵⁰ Fleck (1979, 100).

⁵¹ Fleck (1990a, 268).

⁵² This dynamic, Fleckian reinterpretation of the concept of truth is probably also what Schütz means when he writes: "unter diesem Blickwinkel ist [...] bereits das Unterwegssein zur Wahrheit als Wahrheitsbezug verstehbar: wahr ist nun auch das, woraufhin die Bewegung der Wahrheitsuche sich richtet" (Schütz 2007, 155).

objectivity in terms of inner-style objectivity, he gives us a second explanation of what objectivity could mean in the context of his relationist epistemology:

[And] there is the fact that when two people stand in different aspectual structures (*Aspektstrukturen*), “objectivity” is attainable only in a more roundabout fashion. In such a case, what has been correctly but differently perceived in the two aspectual structures must be understood in the light of the differences in structure of these varied modes of perception. An effort must be made to find a formula for the translatability of the results of one into those of the other and for the convertibility (*Umrechenbarkeit*) of these varying perspectivistic views. Once such a formula for the control of conversion (*Umrechnungskontrolle*) has been worked out, it is easily possible to separate the necessary differences of the two views from the arbitrarily conceived and mistaken elements, which here too should be considered as errors. (Mannheim 1946, 270; improved translation)

According to Mannheim there is not only the possibility of attaining *inner-* but also *inter-style* objectivity. Such an inter-style objectivity will be possible if we can translate between the different thought-styles and *Weltanschauungen*.⁵³ Especially those who have grown up in multicultural contexts or switched from one social circumstance to another are said to have such a possibility of translating between the different thought-styles.⁵⁴ In this sense—although the results are still necessarily dependent on the respective thought-styles and therefore are not valid absolutely—we can arrive at an inter-style objectivity in the form of a synthesis of the truths of different thought-styles. It was Mannheim’s hope that by the acceptance of his new dynamic theory of knowledge and on the basis of this enabled sociological research of the phenomenon of knowledge, we could already be seen as on the way to a synthesis of the hitherto endlessly competing thought-styles.

The sociology of knowledge recognises the inevitable nature of the element of *Weltanschauung* as to a certain extent a structural determinant of a particular area of thought: so-called ‘existentially determined thinking’ (*seinsgebundenes Denken*). But the cautious character of this attitude even goes as far as to make an attempt at mastering this existentiality (*Seinsverbundenheit*) by taking it into consideration as a determinant stemming from irrationality and *Weltanschauung* and to raise it to consciousness in a specific act of knowing. [...] The dynamic relationism for which I stand has nothing whatever to do with nihilism. It has grown out of tendencies of seeking to overcome, as far as this is possible at all, the narrow-mindedness and encapsulation of standpoints. It is, in the first place, a method of seeking, which expressly does *not* despair of the solubility of the crisis of our existence and thought [...]. On the contrary, in the interest of the self-enlargement that today is already possible, it invites *every* position for once to call itself in question and to suspend the self-hypostatization that is a habit of thought self-evident to everybody. (Mannheim 1971, 266f.; improved translation)⁵⁵

⁵³ For a recent discussion of how Mannheim tried to develop a methodology to understand and interpret foreign thought-styles see Srubar (2007, 84–86).

⁵⁴ See Mannheim’s example of the “urbanized peasant boy” who has the possibility to describe both viewpoints as partial: “A fully developed sociology of knowledge follows the same approach which we have illustrated above in the case of the peasant boy, except that it follows a deliberate method” (Mannheim 1946, 255).

⁵⁵ See also Mannheim (1946, 271): “The impetus to research in the sociology of knowledge may be so guided that it will not absolutize the concept of “existentiality” (*Seinsverbundenheit*); rather, it may be

Mannheim's idea here is that once we are conscious of the essential social relatedness of thought and knowledge, we have taken the first step towards overcoming our social determination. However, this is only the first step to a synthesis of the truths of different thought-styles. The second step consists in a comparison of the different thought-styles that will be possible as soon as we have accepted the social relatedness of our thinking and as soon as we try to translate the socially determined results of another thought-style into our own.⁵⁶ What is needed, however, in order to carry out such a comparative project is, in Mannheim's words, "to find a point, so to speak, farther back".⁵⁷ And it is Mannheim's conviction that with his new sociology of knowledge we are on the best way to reach such a point. In fact for Mannheim

It seems [...] that the sociology of knowledge itself provides just such a viewpoint 'farther back' from which theoretical philosophical differences which cannot be reconciled on the level of manifest content, can be seen through in all their partiality and therewith made amenable to a synthesis. (Mannheim 1952c, 224)

In Mannheim's sense the sociology of knowledge itself will—by the acceptance of the essential social relatedness and particularity of thought and knowledge—create a special group that is the bearer of the envisaged synthesis: a group Mannheim calls "socially free-floating intellectuals (*sozial freischwebende Intelligenz*)".⁵⁸ These intellectuals are in Mannheim's words "a relatively classless stratum which is not too firmly situated in the social order".⁵⁹ Mannheim's own description of this stratum makes it possible to describe more fully his hoped-for 'viewpoint farther back' and the envisaged synthesis: the free-floating intellectuals do not stand *above* all classes but are an aggregation *between* them.⁶⁰ After reminding us that he never thought of the free-floating intellectuals as "an entirely unattached group free of class liaisons"⁶¹ he claims that

my claim was merely that certain types of intellectuals have a maximum opportunity to test and employ the socially available vistas and to experience their inconsistencies. (Mannheim 1956a, 106)

Footnote 55 continued

directed in such a fashion that precisely by discovering the element of existentiality in the views at hand, a first step will be taken towards the solution of the problem of existential determination (*Seinsgebundenheit*). As soon as I enclose a given angle of vision in a view which sets up itself as absolute, I neutralize its partial nature in a sense." (improved translation).

⁵⁶ It is this comparative aspect of Mannheim's relationism that was—according to Shmueli—mostly overlooked or underestimated. See Shmueli (1979, 115). See also the interpretation of Jung who extracts a reciprocal dependence of an agonal and a synthesising element in Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and sees this dependence as the condition of the possibility of a comparison of conflicting positions (Jung 2007, 303).

⁵⁷ Mannheim (1952c, 224).

⁵⁸ See Mannheim (1946, 137, 1956a, 106). Mannheim borrowed this term from Alfred Weber. A short note on the translation of the term 'sozial freischwebende Intelligenz': the translation "socially unattached intelligentsia" in the translation of *Ideologie und Utopie* by Wirth and Shils is misleading since it suggests—contrary to what Mannheim explicitly thought (see Mannheim 1956a, 105f.)—that the members of the *freischwebende Intelligenz* are an exemption of Mannheim's thesis of the essentially social determination of thought.

⁵⁹ Mannheim (1946, 137).

⁶⁰ See Mannheim (1956a, 104f). See also Hofmann (1996, 120).

⁶¹ Mannheim (1956a), 106.

It is in this sense that Mannheim might have tried to answer the charge of Ernest Nagel that by introducing formulas of translation and conversion, his hoped-for ‘viewpoint farther back’ and his concept of ‘relational objectivity’ Mannheim undermines his own thesis of the essential social relatedness of *every* standpoint.⁶² In Mannheim’s actually *reflexive*⁶³ view, the envisaged synthesis is not absolute since the free-floating intellectuals are still bound by their thought-styles. It is a *dynamic* synthesis that must be reformulated from time to time.⁶⁴ However, for Mannheim the synthesis is advantageous since it integrates the different, struggling and partial viewpoints by a comparative method that becomes possible by accepting the essentially social determination of every point of view. It is supposed to be a *real synthesis*.⁶⁵ That in turn means that within the group of free-floating intellectuals there must be a ‘genuine discussion’ in which “no argument from authority and no dogmatic assertion based upon mere intuition is admitted”.⁶⁶ This last point is crucial for Mannheim’s understanding of the role the free-floating intellectuals are supposed to play in society: it was Mannheim’s optimistic conviction that the free-floating intellectuals by their examination of the social determination and their achieving a synthesis of different thought-styles and *Weltanschauungen* would find a basis to end the political struggles that were prevalent at the time of his work in Germany before the Second World War. He explicitly speaks of the *mission* the free-floating intellectuals are supposed to fulfil.⁶⁷

From this it is clear that Mannheim argues for the acceptance of his new sociological theory of thought not just on epistemic but also on pragmatic, normative grounds. It is not just a question of the adequacy but also a question of the consequences of the adoption of an epistemology that in Mannheim’s view is decisive for its adoption. The normative and political goal of a sociology of knowledge that enables the intellectuals to find relational, inter-style objectivity in a synthesis is according to Mannheim to enhance tolerance, charity, sympathy and—possibly—mutual acceptance of the struggling different thought-styles and *Weltanschauungen*. The comparative method of the sociology of knowledge that is supposed to lead to a synthesis and to relational objectivity in this sense can be called a “democratic method”.⁶⁸

⁶² See Nagel (1961, 501f).

⁶³ See the obvious connection to the reflexivity-principle of the Strong Programme: “It [the sociology of scientific knowledge] would be reflexive. In principle its patterns of explanation would have to be applicable to sociology itself. [...] It is an obvious requirement of principle because otherwise sociology would be a standing refutation of its own thesis” (Bloor 1991, 7).

⁶⁴ See Mannheim (1946, 135). See also Scott (1998, 112).

⁶⁵ In Mannheim’s sense a *real synthesis* does not mean a ‘quantitative middle’ or ‘arithmetic average’ (Mannheim 1946, 137). It is Otto Neurath who caricatures Mannheim’s position in this way by claiming that a Mannheimian synthesis of e.g. the beliefs that $2 + 2 = 8$ and that $2 + 2 = 4$ would consist in the belief that $2 + 2 = 6$ (Neurath 1982 [1930], 587). See on this issue also Scott (1998, 112).

⁶⁶ Mannheim (1956b, 192). Scott emphasises the similarities of Mannheim’s work on the free-floating intellectuals to Habermas’ idea of the ‘ideal speech situation’ (Scott 1998, 117). Also Baum (1977, 43) sees connections to Habermas, but tries to weaken the importance of the free-floating-intellectuals for Mannheim’s thought (Baum 1977, 65f.). Baum, however, speaks also of the importance of “dialogue” in Mannheim’s idea of a ‘truth beyond relativism’ (Baum 1977, 69f.). In my interpretation of Mannheim’s free-floating-intellectuals, it simply is Mannheim’s name for every group of people that fulfils the following condition: within the group there is—at least—the enhanced possibility of genuine discussion and dialogue.

⁶⁷ Mannheim (1946, 140). See also Ettrich (2007, 275).

⁶⁸ Also Baum (1977, 43) emphasises the ‘political elan’ of Mannheim’s dynamic concept of truth. In Baum’s words: “Knowledge is true (in the dynamic sense defined by Mannheim) when it moves history closer to emancipation and solidarity” (Baum 1977, 74). See also Hofmann (1996, 120), Maasen (1999, 20).

Now, can we find such a Mannheimian inter-style, relational objectivity in Fleck's thought, too? Did Fleck believe in the possibility of attaining "objectivity in a more round-about fashion",⁶⁹ in the possibility of coming to a synthesis of different viewpoints by a comparative method provided by the sociology of knowledge and in the possibility of enhancing tolerance, charity and other democratic ideals by a sociological investigation? Although the emphasis in Fleck's work appears to lie on the insuperability of different points of view—based mainly on Fleck's strong thesis of the impossibility of translation and understanding between different thought-styles⁷⁰—my answer is: Yes.⁷¹

As we have seen Fleck as well as Mannheim argue for a *social* theory of knowledge that—by proposing different epistemological concepts—aims at accepting the essential social character of knowledge and thought. At many points of his work Fleck, however, also speaks of a *comparative* epistemology.⁷² In fact, this comparative aspect of his theory seems to be a very important one, since the original title of the manuscript of his *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* was *The analysis of a scientific fact. Attempt of a comparative epistemology (Die Analyse einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache. Versuch einer vergleichenden Erkenntnistheorie)*.⁷³ One of the most crucial effects of the comparative aspect in Fleck's epistemology is that according to Fleck his epistemology is no longer speculative or metaphysical, but *scientific*.⁷⁴ This becomes clear when we take into account the fact that Fleck—at least most of the time—no longer speaks of a *theory* of knowledge or thought when he describes his own epistemological approach but explicitly demands a

⁶⁹ Mannheim (1946, 270).

⁷⁰ See e.g. Fleck (1979, 36, 139, 1986b, Sec. II).

⁷¹ During the preparation of this paper I became aware of the argumentation of Zittel in (2007). Although I wholeheartedly embraced Zittel's analysis of Fleck's position, and my own argumentation concerning Fleck is very close to it, I want to emphasise two important differences: the first difference is obvious and consists in Zittel's unawareness of the Mannheimian argumentation. This is a stunning fact since Zittel himself uses the Mannheimian terminology to describe Fleck's position: he claims that Fleck is not a relativist but a relationist (see Zittel 2007, 452), but unfortunately seems to overlook the possible connection to Fleck's contemporary Mannheim at this point. The second difference concerns Fleck's own talk of a synthesis. Zittel sees in Fleck's work the vision of a 'higher standpoint' (*übergeordneter Standpunkt*) (see Zittel 2007, 441) and an 'olympic position' (Zittel 2007, 451) that conflicts with his own claims of semantic incommensurability (see Zittel 2007, 451). I fully agree that Fleck has a problem to reconcile his strong incommensurability claims with his hope for a synthesis (see Absman's question 4 at the end of this paper); this is, in fact, why—as I said at the beginning of my paper—I see myself more on the side of Absman and not on the side of Relman. In my opinion, Zittel's criticism in this respect is absolutely justified. I think, however, that an adequate *interpretation* of Fleck's talk of a synthesis would be on the Mannheimian lines I have outlined above: the synthesis in Fleck's sense is supposed to be not *higher than* or *above* the conflicting standpoints but *between* them. Contrary to what Zittel claims (see Zittel 2007, 451), for Fleck the standpoint from which a synthesis is supposed to be possible is *still* relative to the thought-styles of those who try to synthesise (see also my critic of Zittel's talk of 'Fleck's establishment of a universalistic science' in footnote 82). So, although I think the relationist is wrong in this respect, the correct interpretation of a *real* relationist cannot work with the opposition of an absolute and a relative synthesis, since his view does not admit for such an opposition.

⁷² See e.g. Fleck (1979, 21, 22, 28, 38, 39, 41, 51, 80, 101, 1986b, 98, 106, 1986c, 127, 1990a, 272), [1937] 2007, 471). Fleck's contemporary Kurt Lewin already proposed a *Vergleichende Wissenschaftslehre* (see e.g. Lewin ([1921] 1981). See for a recent discussion on Fleck and Lewin: Köchy (2010). Also Bloor (1986) clearly sees that Fleck wants to develop a social *and* comparative epistemology. However, Bloor does not notice that the comparative aspect of Fleck's epistemology is supposed to ground a *scientific* epistemology and, in turn, a *democratic* society. Especially the first unawareness is surprising since in Bloor's attempt to interpret Fleck's comparative epistemology in terms of the Strong Programme, Fleck's programme well matches the *scientism* of the Strong Programme (see e.g.: Barnes et al. 1996, viii).

⁷³ See Zittel (2007, 440 Fn. 3).

⁷⁴ For Fleck's strong opposition to metaphysics see Fleck (1990a, 267).

new *science* of knowledge or a *scientific* epistemology.⁷⁵ According to Fleck the tasks of such a comparative, science of knowledge are

to find out how conceptions and hazy ideas pass from one thought style to another, how they emerge as spontaneously generated pre-ideas, and how they are preserved as enduring, rigid structures owing to a kind of harmony of illusions. (Fleck 1979, 28).

Moreover it will

[compare] thought-styles, [study] their historical genesis, their development, the social forces which produce and maintain them, the methods of introducing them into the thought-collective (Fleck 1986b, 98; improved translation).

For Fleck therefore the comparative science of thought primarily is the sociology of thought and knowledge; in fact, he even demands that

the *first task is to study the sociology of thinking* (Fleck 1986b, 98) and that

sociology of thinking should be developed as a fundamental science equal in its value to mathematics (Fleck 1986e, 156).

Now can such a fundamental scientific, comparative sociology of thinking arrive at results that are ‘relationally’ objective in Mannheim’s sense? Does Fleck also hope that by the sociology of thinking we can come to synthesised truths? And are there any hints in his works that he regards the sociologists of knowledge as a kind of free-floating intellectuals with a mission to overcome the struggles of thought-styles and to enhance tolerance, charity and democracy?

Consider what Fleck has to say about a scientific, comparative sociology of thought: he explicitly believes in “independent laws of the sociology of knowledge”⁷⁶ and “general rules, common to all collectives”,⁷⁷ for example that “all stable thought-collectives, as carriers of organic thought-styles, possess an identical general inner structure, much as in its details this structure can assume various forms”.⁷⁸ And according to Fleck there are very general scientific rules that recommend—in fact require—the use of a comparative method in epistemology:

I consider the postulate “to maximize experience” the supreme law of scientific thinking. Thus, once the possibility of such comparative epistemology arises, it becomes a duty to carry it out (Fleck 1979, 51).

May not the time have come to take a less egocentric, more general point of view and to speak of comparative epistemology? A principle of thought that allows one to

⁷⁵ See e.g. Fleck (1979, 50, 76, 1986b, 81, 85, 89, 106, 107, 1990b, 253) (unfortunately this difference gets lost in the translation of Fleck (1986b), where at the crucial points the translation simply is ‘epistemology’). Fleck also speaks of a ‘science of thought-styles’ in these contexts (see Fleck 1986b, 98, 111). See in this context Mannheim’s starting question in Mannheim (1952d, 34): “Is it possible to determine the global outlook of an epoch in an objective, *scientific* manner?” [my italics]. See also Mannheim’s answer to the criticism of Michael Polanyi: Mannheim charges Polanyi of an *unscientific* criticism against his views (Mannheim 1987).

⁷⁶ Fleck (1990b, 253).

⁷⁷ Fleck (1986b, 102).

⁷⁸ Fleck (1986b, 101).

perceive more details and more compulsory connections, as the history of science teaches us, deserves to be preferred (Ibid., 22; improved translation).

Now Fleck believes that such a comparative epistemology that researches in accordance with such general scientific postulates notably can dissolve and overcome the thought-constraints of specific thought-styles. Whilst

the self-contained nature of the systems [...] preserves the harmony of illusions and in effect cannot be dissolved by any means within the sphere of a specific thought-style (Fleck 1979, 37),

what is possible, however, is that

compulsion becomes dissolved only by comparative epistemological considerations and is explained as an intrinsic constraint imposed by thought style (Ibid., 80).

In summary—and again in Fleck's own words –

The resistance [i.e. the fact] must be effective within the thought collective. It must be brought home to each member as both a thought constraint and a form to be directly experienced. In cognition this appears as the connection between phenomena which can never be dissolved within the collective. As 'truth' this linkage seems to be conditioned only by logic and content. Only an investigation in comparative epistemology, or a simple comparison after a change has occurred in the thought style, can make these inevitable connections accessible to scientific treatment (Fleck 1979, 101).

In Fleck's thought in order to overcome and dissolve the constraints of specific thought-styles we have to choose—in Mannheim's words this time—a more roundabout way⁷⁹: the dissolution is possible only by comparing different thought-styles. The sociology of thought as a scientific—and no longer speculative—epistemology can, according to Fleck, give us the means to transcend the constraints of thought-styles. The scientific character of the sociology of thought provides us—since as a *science* it has to follow the general postulates and principles of science like “maximizing experience”—with a viewpoint—to use Mannheim's words again—“farther back”.⁸⁰ This ‘viewpoint farther back’ *itself* is supposed not to be absolute or independent of the influence of thought-styles, since it is the viewpoint of a *scientific* sociological and comparative investigation. If the sociology of thought can be a science itself and if Fleck's analysis of scientific thinking is correct, then the results of the sociology of thought are—by means of reflexivity⁸¹—dependent on the respective thought-styles of the comparative sociologists, too.⁸² For Fleck, the results of a comparative science of thought therefore are not absolute, but *synthesised* truths. This

⁷⁹ See Mannheim (1946, 270).

⁸⁰ Mannheim (1952c, 224).

⁸¹ See Bloor (1991, 7) and footnote 63 above.

⁸² It seems to me that it is this idea of reflexivity that Zittel (2007, 450ff) forgets about when he speaks of Fleck's theory of thought-styles as an universalistic science. I think that Zittel's own very convincing interpretation of Fleck's attempt to establish a synthesis opens up the room for such a principle of reflexivity in Bloor's sense: in Fleck's terms a science is dependent on thought-styles. Fleck believes—possibly incoherent I would admit—in a synthesis from within the sociology of thought that—as a science—*itself* is bound on thought-styles. He does not think that an independent standpoint is needed in order to achieve such a synthesis.

interpretation fits perfectly well with a stunning passage in Fleck's reply to Izydora Dambaska:

It is impossible to examine views independently of the whole culture of a given society in a specific epoch. The starting point must be a community of people living together and such a method above all leads to a sociology of thinking that covers the most general opinions because it can be a comparative science. In the epoch we are approaching, the epoch of synthesis and of the vanishing of particularisms, it will be unavoidable. The specialisation and the differentiation within the society is growing and is going on to grow. It is out of question that the brutal attempts to bring the people into line cannot be lasting and permanent. Understanding is possible only on the basis of the comparative method: the common thought collective, free by criticism and general by tolerance, is created only in this way. (Fleck [1937] 2007, 471).⁸³

Fleck's argumentation here is obviously normative and political: the sociology of thought is preferable since by its comparative, scientific method it is possible to create a more tolerant, common thought collective. He believes that we are at the beginning of an epoch of synthesis and that the only way to face this epoch in order to create a more democratic and tolerant society is his comparative method. This is because the envisaged 'vanishing of particularisms' is ambivalent⁸⁴: the different viewpoints can vanish—though only for a certain period of time—in a brutal way by bringing the people into line *or*—and that is of course what Fleck hoped for—by a comparative, scientific method that by examining the different viewpoints can lead to mutual understanding and a *real* synthesis of the particularisms in a common thought collective. Although Fleck is overtly optimistic about the succeeding power of his comparative science of knowledge—in fact, sometimes he appears to believe that the success of it is a somehow historical necessity⁸⁵—in this respect exploiting the knowledge of the social conditioning of thought for vicious aims can result in devastating political consequences.⁸⁶ The avoidance of these consequences is—to use Mannheim's *and* most interestingly also Fleck's own terms here—the political and cultural *mission* of the sociology of thought as a comparative science.⁸⁷ Fleck hopes that comparative, sociological investigations will enhance "tolerance towards strange styles",⁸⁸ will overthrow "that evil doggedness with which fanatics of their own style fight the people of a different style"⁸⁹ and will "immunize us against an absolute submission to propaganda".⁹⁰ That cultural and political mission, in fact, is the reason why Fleck promotes his comparative epistemology to be a *science* of knowledge: Fleck is convinced that—at least—"the true, living natural science"⁹¹

⁸³ My translation is based on the German translation after consulting Claus Zittel and Sylwia Werner.

⁸⁴ See also Fleck (1990b, 250f).

⁸⁵ See Fleck (1986b, 112): "Once such a possibility has arisen, nothing and nobody will remove it for good". In Fleck (1979, 51) he seems to be more cautious: "Thus, once the possibility of such comparative epistemology arises, it becomes a *duty* to carry it out" [my italics]. It is however possible to interpret "duty" here not in a normative sense but in the sense of "cognitive necessity" (see Wasserloos, 418).

⁸⁶ This especially becomes clear in Fleck (1990b, 251).

⁸⁷ See Fleck (1986c, 153) (see also Wasserloos 2007, 425). In Fleck (1986b, 112) Fleck speaks—in a more secular terminology—of the "cultural role" of comparative epistemology.

⁸⁸ Fleck (1986c, 157).

⁸⁹ Fleck (1986b, 112).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Fleck (1986a, 54).

is thoroughly democratic and explicitly speaks of the “cultural mission” of science in general.⁹² In his most optimistic passages he even *identifies* natural science with

the art of shaping a democratic reality and being directed by it – thus being reshaped by it. It is an eternal, synthetic rather than analytic, never-ending labour – eternal because it resembles that of a river cutting down its own bed. (Fleck 1986a, 54).⁹³

As a *science* of thought-styles comparative epistemology for Fleck therefore is—in contrast to a speculative *theory* of knowledge—a never-ending endeavor to build a more democratic, tolerant society by synthesising different viewpoints and dissolve particularisms. He hoped that by the sociology of thought “we [would] avoid being pushed into dry ideological doctrine and [would] attain a science of cognition rich in details and capable of cultural growth”.⁹⁴ Fleck was convinced that his new science of knowledge can lead us to a mutual understanding and thereby to common, synthesised truths and objectivity. For Fleck this cultural role not only makes the comparative science of thought *advantageous* but even *true*:

The theory of thought styles liberates from many antiquated prejudices and unveils huge areas worth of investigation. It is in this significance for their liberating and heuristic role that it is, I believe, true. (Fleck [1937] 2007, 472; my translation).

To sum up: I think that many passages in Fleck's writings point to an interpretation along the lines of Mannheimian relational, inter-style objectivity and truth. Fleck's comparative method in the sociology of thought is supposed to provide us with truths in a more roundabout fashion. These truths are supposed to be not absolute but synthesised truths since the *scientific* character of Fleck's comparative epistemology requires synthetic investigations. The sociology of thought itself—in Mannheim's terms—provides us with a ‘viewpoint farther back’ and—in Fleck's terms—is true. Such a special status of the sociology of thought is justified not merely by epistemological considerations but mainly on the basis of normative and political consequences it is supposed to have. And the mission of the sociologist of knowledge is to dissolve the one-sidedness and the constraints of particular thought-styles and thereby to enhance tolerance, solidarity, charity, sympathy and mutual understanding by his comparative studies and a real, genuine discussion with other scientists. Such a ‘genuine discussion’ explicitly was the aim of Fleck's work:

What can be more enjoyable for a scientist than the discussion of things that are his concern? What can be more fruitful for science than the exposition of a problem in the light of different standpoints? [...] Perhaps other specialists, humanists, naturalists, and philosophers would also like to take part in this discussion. This way, the aim of my work will be attained. (Fleck 1990a, 267).

⁹² See Fleck (1986e, 153). This conviction in the affirmatory missionary character of natural science is a difference to Mannheim. First of all it has to be noted that Fleck as well as Mannheim have a very similar description of the goals of natural science: both claim that natural scientific thought aims at *general acceptance* (Fleck 1986b, 103; Mannheim 1984, 80). And Mannheim explicitly calls this goal “democratic” (Mannheim 1946, 149). However, whilst Fleck seems to embrace this goal throughout, Mannheim fears that this goal—set as absolute—has the tendency to lead to impersonal quantification and abstraction, and claims in a critical manner that “the same rationalism that results in the modern, exact sciences has its parallels in the new economic system” (Mannheim 1984, 81; my translation). Moreover, for Mannheim the goal of general validity consequently leads to an epistemology that aims at absolute validity (Mannheim 1946, 149).

⁹³ See also e.g. Fleck (1986a, 50).

⁹⁴ Fleck (1990b, 253).

6 Outlook on Absman's Reaction to Relationism

The question I tried to answer in this paper was: what does Fleck mean when he is claiming that he is not a relativist? And my answer to this question that I argued for by looking at Fleck's texts was: he means nearly the same as Mannheim in claiming that he is a relationist. An implicit consequence of this answer is a critique of attempts to see a *tout court* difference between a Mannheimian and a Fleckian answer to the absolutist: there are crucial differences between both authors, but the differences are minor with respect to the question of relativism.

The methodological consequence of asking this question and providing an answer to it in the way I did was that my task was mainly *interpretative*: I tried to spell out that the Relmanian strategy of Mannheim strongly resembles the Relmanian strategy of Fleck. At the end of this paper I would like to have a short look at the Absmanian reaction to the relationist strategy: I will do this by posing some questions Absman might ask. In fact many of these questions have already been asked by some of Mannheim's contemporaries. By posing them in this context I hope that those interested in Fleck and in the issue of relativism will become aware of a mostly forgotten debate. As Simonds says concerning the question of Mannheim's relationism: "The most important critiques were published in the early thirties by Ernst Grünwald and Alexander von Schelting. Since that time, one writer after another has been content to recapitulate their arguments, often without acknowledgement and typically without the subtlety of the original formulation."⁹⁵ These questions of course are not supposed to be the last words on the issue:

- (1) The first question is: Is there really any genuine difference between a self-refuting relativism and a supposedly coherent relationism if in relationism inner-style truth is always dependent on and relative to a specific thought-style? Isn't that just a new, fresh name for a very old idea?⁹⁶
- (2) The second question is: Is it really—as Mannheim and Fleck occasionally suggest—a *necessary* condition of firstly an adequate investigation of the social aspects of knowledge and secondly enhancing tolerance in a society, to change our *concepts* of truth and knowledge? Even if—for the sake of argument—we grant that it might be more likely to achieve these goals by such a change, why should it be *impossible* to achieve them on the basis of a supposed 'old, static epistemology'?
- (3) The third question is: What exactly are the consequences and the task of sociology and comparative investigations provided by it? Sometimes it seems as if Fleck and Mannheim merely think that comparative studies *could enhance* tolerance and other democratic features, sometimes it sounds as if they claim that those features will *follow somehow automatically* from comparative investigations. Unfortunately, Mannheim and Fleck hesitate to spell out exactly what the criteria for a 'genuine discussion' and 'the envisaged synthesis' are supposed to be and what role the sociology of knowledge can play in *concrete* situations of genuine conflict. Is it not more plausible to suppose that the primary task of sociology of knowledge is to provide us with some stunning and new findings, but that the question whether these findings will have normative consequences cannot be answered by providing these findings *alone*?

⁹⁵ Simonds (1978, 8f).

⁹⁶ See Grünwald (1982 [1934], 752).

- (4) The fourth question is: How is it possible to undertake the enterprise of comparing thought-styles if at the same time Mannheim and Fleck argue for a more or less strong thesis of the semantic incommensurability of thought-styles? As Mannheim makes clear we need “to find a formula for the translatability of the results of one into those of the other”⁹⁷ in order to come to the envisaged dynamic synthesis of thought-styles. Does that mean that we have to restrict Mannheim's and Fleck's thesis of the untranslatability of different thought-styles so that it will be possible to find such a formula in every case or does it mean that there will exist thought-styles that by the very fact of their untranslatability cannot become the object of comparative investigations?⁹⁸

I will not try to reconstruct possible answers to these questions here but simply want to point out that the problems implicit in these questions are still asked and still dwelling in the actual debate about relativism. A closer look at the Relmanian strategy of relationism in Mannheim and Fleck and on the Absmanian objections raised against it can therefore prove fruitful also in the actual debate. From the discussion in this paper, however, it is clear that it is not a good strategy to renounce Mannheim's *and* embrace Fleck's answer.

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⁹⁷ Mannheim (1946, 270; improved translation).

⁹⁸ See von Schelting (1982 [1934], 844). This, of course, basically is the same, well-known critique of the notion of incommensurability by Davidson (1984) and Putnam (1981, 113–119).

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