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Ajdukiewicz's Anti-Irrationalism

ABSTRACT. There is a danger to Ajdukiewicz's martial metaphor for the role of anti-irrationalism. This danger may be rooted in the historical situation of the appearance of anti-irrationalism. "Logistic Anti-Irrationalism in Poland" was published in 1934, one year after the *Ermächtigungsgesetz* in Germany. Ajdukiewicz formulates anti-irrationalism in three forceful and different but perhaps inconsistent ways: (i) propositions can be "acknowledged" only if they are verifiable and are expressed with "linguistic precision"; (ii) the true method of philosophy is the scientific method; (iii) the true method of philosophy is the logistical one. Yet Ajdukiewicz's own defence of anti-irrationalism is a *pragmatic* one. Pragmatism has a normative and relativistic component, as Ajdukiewicz expressed it the aim of a "a modest and controlled society" that would exclude mystics and "people who have unusual experiences". Nevertheless, Ajdukiewicz's defence of anti-irrationalism implies incommensurability, as Giedymin's logical empiricism does not.

KEY WORDS: Ajdukiewicz, anti-irrationalism, pragmatism, mystics, Giedymin

I came to know and admire the philosopher Jerzy Giedymin, himself a student of Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, in 1975 or 1976 I think, when Giedymin was teaching at the University of Sussex. I remember that his office was in the School of Mathematical and Physical Sciences, across campus from all of the other philosophers in the Arts Building. Giedymin's office was quite cramped, but extremely neat. His course attracted three MA students, and one soon dropped out. I believe John Krige may have been the second remaining student. I seem to remember that the class was devoted to the topic of logical empiricism, but here again my memory may

be deceiving me. Giedymin insisted on referring to "logical empiricism", not to "logical positivism", and it took me a while to understand what this was all about. I had studied in a seminar at Harvard with A.J. Ayer some years earlier, but had not appreciated any difference between logical positivism and logical empiricism. At Sussex I connected the distinction for some odd and irrelevant reason with the reputed personal distance between Giedymin and the other Sussex philosophers. They said "logical positivism", he said "logical empiricism". I knew that, but I knew about this distance only through student hearsay. The hearsay was probably completely false, as Giedymin was merely a very private sort of man, in that way rather English.

That year I also attended the lectures of Paul Feyerabend, who was anything but a private man. The lectures were absolutely packed, taking up one of the largest lecture halls on campus. I knew little or nothing about Feyerabend except that he was an "epistemological anarchist", though I had no idea what that was. I wanted to find out. I found his lectures disorganized and dull, except for what he said about Bruno Snell and the Greeks. During the first lectures I took the opportunity to sleep, on the bench highest up, near the door, and furthest from the lecturer. At some point Feyerabend somehow noticed me, and in the middle of the lecture strode up the steps to me, with his uneven gait and his cane, demanding to know what on earth I thought I was doing. I sat up and cheekily replied that I was an epistemological anarchist, and I had adopted an epistemology of sleep, like Kekulé. In a fury he threw me out of the class. So all I got was Bruno Snell and the Greeks. I honestly didn't mind. I continued to attend Giedymin's classes.

After that eventful term was over I did not talk to Giedymin again, and saw him only once, at a distance, when he was chairing a Sussex University meeting of the British Society for the Philosophy of Science in the 1980s. I had nevertheless learned something about Polish philosophy through him, and I bought Ajdukiewicz's *Problems and Theories of Philosophy,* which had been published by the Cambridge University Press in English two years earlier (1973), in the translation of the 1949 Polish original by Henryk Skolimowski and Anthony Quinton.

I enjoyed reading Ajdukiewicz's book, perhaps because of what came across as a pleasant kind of courteous vagueness, unlike the more cut-throat and linguistically precise English philosophy that I was studying at the time. I also appreciated his reasonableness, his sensitivity to the reality of philosophical problems, and an obvious affection for these problems, even for the metaphysical ones, and his occasionally antique or scholastic or academicist or Kantian kind of terminology, for example the description of "one who denies that the subject is capable of going beyond its own immanent sphere in its cognitive acts" as "an *immanent epistemological idealist*" [Ajdukiewicz, 1973, p. 51] – why, though, I wondered, not just a *sceptic*?

How could Ajdukiewicz on the one hand follow the methods of anti-irrationalism, dedicated in part to wiping out metaphysics, and on the other respect and know the existing problems so well? I even secretly and with some measure of guilt actually liked the respect implicit in the various three-word philosophical positions, though for English reasons I disapproved of ism-ism in general. Here (I thought) with Giedymin we are in the calm and thoughtful world of the academic evaluation of theories and ideas, personified by Giedymin himself, in his tidy office, not in the intense and noisy political irrationalism of the campuses as it was in those days, during and following the Vietnam War, nor in the mysteriously cool and mystical negativity of linguistic philosophy.

I had no conscious awareness of Ajdukiewicz's *anti-irrationalism*, though I suppose it may have been a part of what Giedymin was teaching. If I heard it stated, or if I had noticed it in Ajdukiewicz's book, I would have felt very uneasy about the idea that rationally acceptable propositions must be intersubjectively communicable and testable. This sort of thesis cries out for a counterexample, even more than the even less plausible positivist version that demarcates propositions that have meaning, because they are verifiable, from those that do not, because they are unverifiable. I was not at all interested in rubber-stamping a list of propositions to be certified as "rationally acceptable". That would have struck my ear as containing plenty of cotton wool and more than a hint of a political agenda, even *Gleichschaltung*, a word that, though my German was only mildly functional, I had gleaned from J.L. Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*. I only

learned subsequently what a terrible punch Austin must have intended it to carry, in the period after the war when when he was giving his lectures, as he most certainly knew the word's political meaning and history. It is terrifying in part because an evil and complex thought had been created by making up a word. But obviously there is also the fact of all that took place after 1933, the date of the passing of the *Ermächtigungsgesetz* in Germany.

Even if rationally acceptable propositions must be intersubjectively verifiable, to whom are they to be "rationally acceptable"? Rational people? But even rational people do sometimes if not often find *irrational* propositions more than acceptable, even rationally acceptable. They are as fallible as anyone else. And besides, acceptable when, and for what purpose?

> The voice of the rationalist is a sound social reaction, it is an act of self-defence by society against the dangers of being dominated by uncontrollable forces among which may be both a saint proclaiming a revelation as well as a madman affirming the products of a sick imagination and finally a fraud who wants to convert others to his views for the sake of his egoistic and unworthy purposes. It is better to rely on the safe but modest nourishment of reason than, in fear of missing the voice of 'Truth', to let oneself be fed with all sorts of uncontrollable nourishment which may be more often poisonous than healthy and beneficial. [Ajdukiewicz, 1973, p. 49]

It is hard not to sympathize with the (one suspects) kindly meant picture of "the sound social reaction" and society's "self-defence" against madmen and frauds. But why the metaphor of attack and defence? Why the call to arms? It is I think equally hard not to see the danger of the transformation of such a picture into a doctrine advocating a healthy society against a sick or fraudulent one. The merits of this view are real enough, but the urge to express them as a doctrine to be promulgated in society is troubling. And the medical concept of the "sick imagination" is a striking one. Even more troubling, to me, is the view of the anti-irrationalist, as the defender of the faith and the rooter out of those with irrational and "unworthy" purposes. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*?

At the root of the trouble is the view that there should be something called *anti-irrationalism*, that it should counter irrationalism in all its forms, and that the principle of verification, or something like it, should be the demarcation between the sense of rationalism and the nonsense of irra-

tionalism. Why is such a doctrine called for? Why not just stay with the amiable rationalism? Adding the German historical context, one can imagine well enough, though this is pure speculation, why in 1934 Ajdukiewicz would have wished to publish "Logistic Anti-Irrationalism in Poland", which argues "that only such propositions can be acknowledged which are justified in a way that can be verified, and *linguistic precision*" [Ajdukiewicz, 1934, p. 241].

A little later in the same piece, however, Ajdukiewicz describes Brentano's anti-irrationalism as a commitment to the astonishing doctrine that the true method of philosophy is none other than the scientific one – astonishing because *experiment* is essential to the scientific method, but not to philosophy. At the end of the lecture, Ajdukiewicz also more or less equates anti-irrationalism with the "infus[ion] of logistics", i.e. the use of formal methods, or more narrowly the use of uninterpreted or partially interpreted calculi, which is surely something different again. So Ajdukiewicz gives us three different and inconsistent formulations of anti-irrationalism, at least inconsistent on the surface. Philosophical anti-irrationalism is: (i) precision and intersubjective verifiability; or (ii) the use of the scientific method; (iii) logistic methods. It would be a useful thing to work through these three accounts to see what at a deeper level they might have in common, if anything.

However this turns out, it is a very striking thing that Ajdukiewicz's defence of rationalism, as he understood it, or of his more assertive anti-irrationalism, at least as we find it in Chapter 3 of *Problems and Theories of Philosophy,* is a *pragmatic* one. It is dispiriting indeed to be invited to accept god-like rationality on giantific pragmatic grounds, and for the obvious reason: one can imagine circumstances in which practically any frightful thing can be justified pragmatically. And one man's meat is another man's poison, so the pragmatic aims themselves cannot be taken for granted. Perhaps you value security and sanity in society, and hard work, but I value art and experimentation and private experience, and indolence. You are a careful scientist, and I am a wild poet. From the point of view of logical empiricism itself, the worry is or should be that the content of what we believe on a scientific basis should not be determined by social or other

outside forces, including the results of pragmatic deliberations. Yet here at the heart of rationality is its military wing, anti-irrationalism, being promulgated on the basis of a desire for a "modest" and "controlled" society, to quote Ajdukiewicz, alarming ethical and political notions if ever there were any.

There is no argument in "Logistic Anti-Irrationalism in Poland" in defence of the doctrine. It is stated, certainly, although in the three ways described above, but what is described is the apolitical or mostly apolitical anti-irrationalist or "logistical" *tendency* in Polish philosophy between the wars, covering a multitude of philosophers and views. It is a brief *history* of analytic philosophy in Poland. Nevertheless, the fascinating account Ajdukiewicz gives of Polish philosophy in the two generations before 1934 surely does describe a movement of thought with something of a self-conscious mission. We know this if only because no less an authority that Ajdukiewicz himself felt justified in giving it one.

For him this mission was most certainly directed against "mystics of all kinds" and "people who have peculiar kinds of experience called mystical ecstasies" [Ajdukiewicz, 1973, p. 48].

> In these experiences they undergo revelations in which they gain (not by means of reasoning and scrupulous observation) subjective certainty, most often as to the existence of a deity, they experience its existence as if face to face, they receive direct instructions, admonitions and orders from it. People who undergo such experiences cannot be argued out of their conviction of the certainty of knowledge gained in states of ecstasy; and they are even less shaken by the judgments of rationalists about their faith.

There is a kind of incommensurability here, though a practical rather than a theoretical one. Ajdukiewicz is exaggerating for effect, however, and there are plenty of very thoughtful religious believers who are willing to entertain doubt and argument, sometimes or even often with disastrous effects for their faith. Such people are looking for a rational foundation for their faith, whether or not they find one. An obvious and interesting example is the "inner light which God himself kindles" ("On the True Theologica Mystica") of Leibniz, who was about as much of a rationalist

as one could be. It may be that in *Problems and Theories of Philosophy* Ajdukiewicz was arguing against his pre-1945 self, an Ajdukiewicz who was a linguistic relativist, even and perhaps especially because an example of the relativistic language was the language of science itself. Similarly, there are plenty of scientific people who gain their inspiration from what they regard as knowledge and insight given in a mystical or dreamlike state. Kekulé's "discovery", as he called it, while asleep, of the structure of the benzene ring is only a very well-known example. Another may be Leibniz's idea, in the *Theologica Mystica*, that *Selbstwesen* or being and *Unwesen* or nothingness must manifest themselves in numbers, and his subsequent creation of binary and therefore modular arithmetic from 1 (*Wesen*) and 0 (*Unwesen*). Could Ajdukiewicz to have avoided the issue altogether, and not to have characterized rationalism by tying it to a militant and schematic anti-irrationalism that would eliminate such discoveries? He might have been less liable to draw the caricature of the anti-irrationalist Scientist and the irrationalist Believer butting heads at the end of Chapter 3 of *Problems and Theories of Philosophy* if he had there attacked the question, on its merits, of the truth of linguistic or meaning relativism, or whatever other genuine philosophical question was for him at the center of the question of the truth of the Viennese verifiability principle and its Polish analogues.

Instead he indulges in sociological arguments against irrationalism, the standard of which would hardly have satisfied him in his own area of specialization, for example the following one.

> People usually accept religious beliefs under the influence of the environment in which they grow up: their faith usually has a traditional character, is 'the faith of their fathers' in which they are immersed from childhood without any effort on their part to examine their beliefs or opinions. Only a few individuals try to resolve by their own reflection the problems to which ready answers are given by the religious beliefs bequeathed by tradition. Now these attempts are usually considered to be a kind of philosophizing and they are usually included within the scope of metaphysics. In the practice of religious metaphysics some attempt to apply rational methods, some apply irrational ones. The latter are called mystics. [Ajdukiewicz, 1973, pp. 152–153]

No argument at all and no evidence is given about the extent to which 'people usually accept religious beliefs under the influence of the environment in which they grow up.' Neither the form of this "cognition" nor its content would survive the "sound social reaction" of the anti-irrationalist, and we can only accept it on faith. How much evidence is there that faith is "the faith of our fathers"? Do we actually have this evidence? Did Ajdukiewicz?

Here is an argument by counterexample.

> People usually accept scientific beliefs under the influence of the educational environment in which they grow up: their scientific faith usually has a traditional character, is "the science of their professors" in which they are immersed from childhood without any effort on their part to examine their beliefs or opinions. Only a few individuals try to resolve by their own reflection the problems to which ready answers are given by the scientific beliefs bequeathed by tradition. Now these attempts are usually considered to be a kind of philosophizing and they are usually included within the scope of metaphysics and philosophy of science. In the practice of scientific metaphysics some attempt to apply rational methods, some apply irrational ones. The latter are called mystics, for example, Einstein in his rejection of quantum mechanics.

I do not mean to suggest that science is irrational or that science is like religion in all respects or in any respect. The point is only that the form of Ajdukiewicz's argument allows the counterexample. I enjoyed cultivating the little garden of rational enquiries with Jerzy Giedymin in England when I knew him, and following his work on the mistakes of "irrationalist" philosophers of science like Feyerabend, in "Consolations for the Irrationalist?" [1971] and "The Paradox of Meaning Variance" [1970]. In the latter, for example, there is the careful and convincing derivation of the conditional that 'if the M-postulates and the E-postulates of a theory are in principle indistinguishable, then the problem of whether under certain changes in theories meanings of terms remain constant or not, is *insoluble*' [Giedymin, 1970, p. 261], an inspiring conclusion but one unacceptable to the irrationalist. Right here, I think, is where anti-irrationalism, or better its less heated rational source, rationalism itself, should begin.

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