Joseph Ulatowski
University of Waikato

TWARDOWSKI, RATIONALITY, AND POST-TRUTH

Kazimierz Twardowski and members of the Lvov-Warsaw School ("LWS") sought to modernise both rationalism and empiricism by integrating it with the best science of the day in ways that would resolve philosophical problems. Whereas empiricism has been understood to take all knowledge to originate in, and be justified by, sense experience and observation, rationalism takes at least some knowledge to be derived through reason alone or to be justified a priori. While this orthodox distinction between rationalism and empiricism was generally respected by members of the LWS, they framed the debate slightly differently. The epistemological rationalism that traditionally opposed empiricism was distinguished from the methodological rationalism that opposed what they called "irrationalism."

In his commemorative address before the 25th anniversary meeting of the Polish Philosophical Society, Twardowski proposed a tripartite distinction between rationalism, irrationalism, and non-rationalism. As he

understood these terms, rationalism celebrates those beliefs that have as their source or justificatory origin the natural and physical sciences. By contrast, irrationalism focuses on those beliefs that are founded in special intuition or mystical experience but which need not be discordant with science. Non-rationalist beliefs are those that do not accord with science. Twardowski's distinction inspired his students to develop these notions further.

Members of the LWS were amenable to claims like 'knowledge is a, or even the, central aim of science', or 'science aims at learning about the world in ways the generate knowledge of how it works'. Classically, knowledge is at least sufficiently justified true belief. Most philosophers accept some variant of it, presumably, or would accept a suitably adjusted successor. All that's needed is recognition that, for friends of the LWS, any serviceable conception of knowledge should provide for the entailment from knowledge to truth. Together, these last two thoughts give us two premises in a broader argument that puts pressure on the LWS's claims about the rationality of science:

1. Science is the search for knowledge.

2. Knowledge is at least true justified belief.

Rational cognition concerns the abstraction away from experience. In abstraction from an experience, rational cognition undergoes a kind of 'information leakage' much as what we have witnessed with misinformation in this post-truth era, where the detail involved in certain conceptualisations is omitted (e.g., *gobbled apfelstrudel* versus *ate dessert*). Anti-irrationalists, then, should be prepared to develop a conception of approximate truth suitable to their analysis of the nature of rational cognition.

A conception of approximate truth may seem like a welcome addition. Like methodological naturalists and rationalists, realists antecedently acknowledge that our current science is like the sciences of the past in that it can be improved upon; but such improvement requires acknowledging that our current science cannot also then be regarded as the 'final truth' about phenomena in their domain. So, again, a conception of approximate truth may seem like a welcome addition.

The problem, however, is that truth appears to be a cognitive ideal or regulatory norm over scientific progress,

which science both must aim at but cannot achieve. This generates a third premise,

3. Science never attains truth.

Some have attempted to block the concern over the failure of scientific practices to yield hard truths by suggesting other ways in which truth applies to theory. One challenge has recommended that we not apply Tarski's semantic conception of truth to scientific theories since we should apply the concept of partial or approximate truth. Half-truths or 'the nearly true' may be captured by a semantic property. Woleński has recommended, however, that the proper Tarskian analysis of semantics does not allow for such approximations. Propositions are either true or false under a given interpretation, and there are no partial truths. He supposes that to take up the notion of approximate truth, one must relinquish classical logic in favour of many-valued, fuzzy, probabilistic, or revisionary logic and metalogic. There is no need, according to Woleński, to revise Tarski's semantic definition of truth. Given that truth is necessary for knowledge on most views of (3), then, coupled with premises (1) and (2), it would seem to immediately follow that

∴ 4. Science never attains knowledge.

If science is the search for knowledge as in (1), then it seems that science is the search for something that it can never finally achieve. Hence,

∴ 5. Science is a futile search.

Obviously, the argument is not that scientists cannot discover any individual or local truths *p*, *q*, *r*, etc. Rather, the argument is aiming more at the kind of metaphysical realism of the sort decried by Rorty, Feyerabend, Goodman, and Putnam.

Finally, the larger problem is that, to (5), one might append the premise that it is irrational to engage in futile searches, and then validly derive the conclusion that science itself is irrational. What has been said here does not necessarily endorse this conclusion, which is also a conclusion that surely would have also been rejected by members of the LWS and the Vienna Circle. But it provides some pressure for exponents of these groups to develop the concept of rational cognition, and to do so in a way that addresses the problem of post-truth while making room to develop a proper conception of approximate truth.