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Axel Hägerström, Uppsala School, and the Rise of Swedish Analytical Philosophy

ABSTRACT

While in Norway or Finland the analytical tradition is usually regarded as having its roots in Vienna,¹ in Sweden it is generally associated with the choice of Axel Hägerström (1868–1939) for a professor of practical philosophy at the University of Uppsala. It was Hägerström who broke with Boström's idealism, which dominated Swedish philosophy since the mid-19th century, replacing it with a new school called *Uppsalafilosofin*, and adopting conceptual analysis as the central method of modern philosophy. Teaching from 1893 until his retirement in 1933, Hägerström attacked the philosophical idealism of the followers of Christopher Jacob Boström (1797–1866), going down in history as the founder of (quasi-)positivist school of philosophy in Uppsala – the Swedish equivalent of Anglo-American analytical philosophy and logical positivism of the Vienna Circle. Under the influence of neo-Kantianism, he called for the final rejection of metaphysics, assuming the motto: “Praeterea censeo metaphysicam esse delendam” (eng. “I also think that metaphysics should be destroyed.”) The aim of this paper is to present the philosophical figure of Axel Hägerström and the Uppsala School created by him. Then, analyzing the assumptions and fundamental postulates, we will discuss their impact on the development and shape of analytical thought in modern Sweden.

KEYWORDS

Uppsala School, Axel Hägerström, logical positivism, analytical philosophy

¹ See: S. Nygård, J. Strang, *Mellan idealism och analytisk filosofi. Den moderna filosofin i Finland och Sverige 1880–1950*, Stockholm 2006.

Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century, the split within the philosophy of the Western world became an undeniable fact. In Great Britain, George Edward Moore assumed the first attack on idealism, publishing *The Refutation of Idealism* in 1903. As a result of breaking with the British idealism, strongly influenced by the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel (“There is no and cannot be any reality,”) the Anglo-Saxon world was slowly taken over by the analytical tradition, and trends such as existentialism, phenomenology or hermeneutics were polarized and cumulatively united under the common name of continental philosophy. At the same time, initiated by scholars centered around Moritz Schlick at the University of Vienna, there emerged a new movement stemming from the positivist trend introduced by August Comte in the 19th century. The group bearing the name of the Vienna Circle subjected the entire idealistic philosophy to radical criticism, classifying it as metaphysics and depriving it of the “truth-bearing” status of science. Even Sweden has finally succumbed to the crude charm of Anglo-American analytical philosophy and the ideas of logical positivism. Many researchers emphasize the presence of native roots in the analytical tradition², most often in the person of the philosopher Axel Hägerström (1868–1939), who, thanks to his charisma and intellectual dynamics, managed to influence whole generations of Swedish intellectuals. A Swedish poet and writer studying in Uppsala, Karin Boye, will later write that “even his appearance inspired curiosity; he looked just like a philosopher should. Moreover he seemed to be present in a strange way, not only in the discussions in the student rooms, but in the very air.”³

But the history of Hägerström and his legacy is not devoid of problematic moments. Terms such as “analytical” and “positivistic”, classifying his philosophy in the eyes of the next generation, may today seem anachronistic and somewhat misleading. Philosophers are not living in an “academic vacuum” – the roots and history of analytical philosophy in Sweden are closely related to the movement which shifted the cultural center of the Western world from Germany towards Great Britain and the United States. While Hägerström lived and created within the German intellectual tradition inherited after Boström (1797–1866), his legacy was managed by philosophers whose plans

² Zob. G. Frost-Arnold, “The Rise of ‘Analytic Philosophy’: When and How Did People Begin Calling Themselves ‘Analytical Philosophers?’”, [in:] *Innovations in the History of Analytical Philosophy*, eds. S. Lapointe, Ch. Pincock, Palgrave Macmillan 2017; P. Mindus, *A Real Mind: The Life and Work of Axel Hägerström*, Springer 2009; S. Nordin, *Från Hägerström till Hedenius. Den moderna svenska filosofin*, Lund 1983.

³ P. Mindus, *A Real Mind: The Life and Work of Axel Hägerström*, Springer 2009, p. 2.

and ambitions guided them towards the Anglo-Saxon world. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to disprove Hägerström's position as the founder of the analytical tradition in Sweden, but rather to investigate how did he gain such reputation.

1. An outline of Axel Hägerström's philosophy

While in Norway or Finland the analytical tradition is usually regarded as having its roots in Vienna and logical positivism, in Sweden it is generally associated with the choice of Axel Hägerström (1868–1939) for a professor of practical philosophy at the University of Uppsala. It was Hägerström who broke with Boström's idealism, which dominated Swedish philosophy since the mid-19th century, replacing it with a new school called *Uppsalafilosofin*, and adopting conceptual analysis as its central method. Teaching from 1893 until his retirement in 1933, Hägerström attacked the philosophical idealism of Christopher Jacob Boström's followers, going down in history as the founder of (quasi-)positivist philosophical school in Uppsala. In recent years, the interest in his heritage has radically increased as a result of unearthing new – forgotten or suppressed – aspects of his philosophical development and influence. He broke with Boströmianism but the philosophy he defended had little to do with the post-war analytical philosophy in the Anglo-Saxon spirit that we know today. As in the case of Finland and Eino Kaila (1890–1958), it was only the generation after Hägerström, and people like Ingemar Hedenius and Ernst Cassirer, that created his image as the founder of the national analytical tradition.

Johan Strang, researcher of the history and heritage of the Uppsala School, notes that Hägerström was extremely autonomous when it came to shaping his philosophical path. "It seems," he wrote, "as if [Hägerström] consciously sought the reputation of a self-educated prophet."⁴ In 1929 he presented a study of his intellectual development in the German series *Die Philosophie der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen* (eng. *The philosophy of the present in self-portrayals*), claiming that "he has never been particularly influenced by contemporary philosophy, due to [...] its lack of criticism at its very foundations."⁵ However, he managed to find inspiration among historical philosophers. Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason* opened a "new world" before him on first acquaintance with the work in 1887, but this "new world," symbolizing the final break with Swedish idealism and the transcendental

⁴ S. Nygård, J. Strang, op. cit., p. 257 [Author's translation].

⁵ Ibidem, p. 258 [Author's translation].

philosophical tradition inherited after Boström, was presented by Hägerström not before 1908, in *Das Prinzip der Wissenschaft* (eng. *The principle of science*). Hägerström's mission was to return to Kant and discover the sources of error for all subsequent transcendental philosophy.

Although Kant (1724–1804) succeeded to restore objective reality, he was unable to establish its epistemological accessibility in anything but the transcendental consciousness of a thinking and perceiving Self. This way, accepting the primacy of all-encompassing consciousness, he ultimately led to the disintegration of his own metaphysical system into the form of German philosophical idealism. In the 20th century, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and his supporters managed to overcome the limitations of kantianism, combining external (objective) reality with the productive activity of self-awareness, shifting the focus from the transcendental to the idealistic and metaphysical concept of the Self. Hägerström, however, was neither a continuator nor a commentator of the already existing ideas. He was an original thinker: he took up the problem of consciousness where Kant left it (after Descartes' dualistic division into *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, with his eyes on overcoming Hume's subjectivism and skeptical empiricism), seeking a solution in a monistic, realistic concept of reality.

Similarly to the positivists, the greatest affliction was for Hägerström the synthetic, transcendental metaphysics. The epigraph he chose to head his contribution to *Die Philosophie der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen* was uncompromising: "Praeterea censeo metaphysicam esse delendam."⁶ Hägerström understood by metaphysics the idea of the absolute, "as truth in itself and the basis of all relative reality." His criticism of metaphysics was closely related to the criticism of subjectivism, the belief that there exists "a consciousness, directly accessible and thus constituting the ultimate basis of knowledge, as assumed by Descartes, Hume and Kant."⁷ In Hägerström's eyes, both idealism and realism (with which he associated empiricism) fell under the weight of subjectivism: the idealist wrongly assumes that knowledge is rooted in the mind of a cognitively active subject and not in material reality; the realist, on the other hand, assumes the difference between the subject's subjective perception and the object itself. Hägerström's solution was to abandon the view of perception and cognition as creating a certain image of the world. He claimed that our cognition and perception is always of some-

⁶ "Besides, I think that metaphysics should be destroyed" is an analogy to Kato Elder and his "Besides, I think that Carthage should be destroyed".

⁷ A. Hägerström, "Framställning av den egna filosofin", [in:] *Filosofi och vetenskap*, Stockholm 1957, pp. 111, 120 [Author's translation].

thing as real as the elements of space-time itself, thus overcoming Kant's transcendentalism.

The realistic philosophy of the early 20th century played a precursory role in the emergence of logical empiricism. Hägerström's realism did not have a direct impact on shaping the doctrine, but one could say some of the epistemological theses developed in Uppsala strictly correspond to the ideas that immediately precede the positivistic philosophy of Vienna and Berlin. Other theses coined and developed in Uppsala in the field of, for example, metaethics, turned out to be the nucleus of what will later be a crucial part of Anglo-Saxon analytical thought (represented by, among others, Georg Edward Moore).

Of great importance was also Hägerström's – later referred to as nihilistic – theory of morality, which played a crucial role in shaping the cultural and social debate in Sweden, as well as laid the foundation for Scandinavian legal realism.⁸ In his speech inaugurating the academic year in 1911, *Om moraliska föreställningars sanning* (eng. *On the Truth of Moral Ideas*), Hägerström presented the idea that moral sentences / judgments do not possess a logical value (they cannot be true nor false), because they do not contain any information or extend our knowledge. Therefore, they can only be understood as mere expressions of feelings or emotions; they are simply mental episodes with certain causal preconditions.⁹ Hägerström criticized not only ethical objectivism (assuming the existence of objective truth of moral judgments), but also ethical relativism (subjectivism), which at that time was strongly associated with the views of Finnish philosopher Edvard Westermarck and his work from 1906, *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*. According to Hägerström, the Westermarck's error originated from blurring of the difference between moral *value* and moral *valuation*. According to Hägerström, even if all intelligent beings have agreed on the valuation of a certain sentence about morality, it would not tell us anything about their objectivity or about the existence of somehow related moral values.¹⁰

Hägerström's supposed axiological nihilism was widely discussed in the cultural circles of interwar Sweden. Many feared that nihilism in the sphere of values could weaken the morale in the society. These fears were additionally fueled by Hägerström's well-known social-democratic sympathies – in his works he used to refer to Marx quite positively, even though he always kept

⁸ J. Oniszczyk, *Filozofia i teoria prawa*, C.H. Beck 2008; K. Eliaz, *Realistyczna koncepcja prawa Alfa Rossa*, Wolters Kluwer 2016.

⁹ E. Cassirer, *Axel Hägerström: Eine Studie zur Schwedischen Philosophie der Gegenwart*, Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift 45, Göteborg 1939.

¹⁰ S. Nygård, J. Strang, op. cit., pp. 258–260.

a healthy distance, criticizing the theological and metaphysical elements of his theory. Hägerström and his nihilistic value theory was later associated with a progressive political movement, often provoking very violent reactions from conservative circles.

2. The Game of the Uppsala Throne

In many respects, Hägerström and his school played a similar role in Sweden as the Vienna Circle played in Austria. The burning need of a philosophical equivalent for the modernist, cleansed from the avant-garde, intellectual movement, finally caused the philosophers to begin to exchange views with like-minded lawyers, economists and politicians. Also in the matter of their philosophical manifestos, both trends had much in common. They both criticized the objectivist theories of values and preached the superiority of philosophical conceptual analysis, which made up the “scientific” and “anti-metaphysical” part of their research practice. Both the adepts of the Uppsala School and the thinkers associated in the Vienna Circle were convinced that they were perpetrators and witnesses of the contemporary intellectual revolution.

However, these similarities turned out to be rather general and superficial in nature. Numerous hot spots in which the assumptions of both trends clashed with each other, were uncovered especially during debate between two philosophers of Uppsala (Gunnar Oxenstierna, Einar Tegen) and a logical empiricist, Philipp Frank. This lively discussion, exposed on the pages of the Swedish magazine *Theoria* in the late 1930s, was thoroughly reconstructed by Strang in his essays: *Theoria and Logical Empiricism On the tensions between the National and the International in Philosophy and Positivism in the Northern Peripheries*. Among the Uppsalists’ arguments he sharply distinguished the plea against subjectivism of methods used by the members of the Vienna Circle – in this respect, logical empiricism seemed to them no different from other, more classical, views of empiricism. On the other hand, according to Frank speaking on behalf of the Viennese, the strict formal and logical method used in conceptual analysis by the Uppsala philosophers seemed to be – due to the extreme nominalism inscribed in it – an idea too far from reality. Frank postulated that conceptual analysis should carry “true meaning” and reveal the proper sense of expressions.¹¹ Differences of opinions

¹¹ J. Strang, “Positivism in the Northern Peripheries: Generations of Positivist Philosophers in Sweden and Its Neighboring Countries”, [in:] *The Worlds of Positivism: A Global Intellectual History 1770–1930*, eds. J. Feichtinger, F. L. Fillafer, J. Surman, Cham 2018, pp. 295–320.

between schools could also be spotted in their attitude towards modern natural sciences. While logical empiricists wanted to modify the philosophical assumptions based on the latest achievements of empirical sciences, Hägerström and Uppsalians sought the necessary corrections within the natural sciences, starting from their own philosophical assumptions (criticizing therefore the emerging theory of relativity.)¹² Finally, the differences between the Vienna Circle and the Uppsala School concerned also their attitude to other philosophical trends, and thus – to each other. While Hägerström and his students seemed not to be too interested in making any international connections, the Vienna Circle functioned as a platform for understanding and exchanging views of scientists and thinkers of many nationalities and professions. Interestingly, the Vienna Circle itself treated the Uppsala School as an allied group.¹³

In the end, Uppsala School and logical positivism were – at least in the years of their prosperity – two different currents of thought. The vision of the Uppsala School as closely related to the positivist view was shaped only during the war period, when a large group of students, including Gunnar Oxenstierna, Einar Tegen, Ingemar Hedenius, Konrad Marc-Wogau and Anders Wedberg, began to promote, next to Hägerström, professor Adolph Phalén (1884–1931), whose activity has so far been suppressed by the “orthodox hägerströmists.” According to the author of the book *A Real Mind: The Life and Work of Axel Hägerström*, Patricia Mindus, the conflict concerned, above all, the origins of particular aspects of the Uppsala School’s philosophy, such as the use of conceptual analysis or criticism of subjectivism. The atmosphere around the academic circle deteriorated with each passing year and eventually evolved into a battle for the Uppsala School’s heritage – a battle that Phalén’s supporters managed to “win,” finally marrying the Uppsala tradition with the international trend of analytical philosophy and its logico-empirical roots.

¹² J. Strang, “Theoria and Logical Empiricism On the tensions between the National and the International in Philosophy”, [in:] *The Vienna Circle in the Nordic Countries: Networks and Transformations of Logical Empiricis*, eds. J. Manninen, F. Stadler, Vienna 2010, pp. 69–89.

¹³ The best-known example of a thinker who was regarded by the Vienna Circle as an ally, recognizing himself as their greatest critic and adversary, was Karl Popper. In regard to Scandinavia, one can point out in this context the person of Arne Næss, who was very surprised by the reaction to his published text *Wie fördert man heute die empirische Bewegung. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Otto Neurath und Rudolph Carnap*. The article was thought to be a direct attack on the fundamental theses of the Vienna Circle but Otto Neurath accepted it very warmly as a suggestion for improvements to the positivist program.

3. Uppsala School and the analytical tradition – the final union

Józef Maria Bocheński, a representative of the Kraków branch of the analytical school, distinguished four elements defining this way of practicing philosophy: analysis, language, logic and subject. The basis of the analysis was to reject the “global” synthesis – the tendency to create complex, comprehensive metaphysical systems. “For us, analysts, philosophers who fabricate great, all-encompassing syntheses are superstitious philosophers, they want to do things that are impossible to do [...]. A normal analytical philosopher considers modern times, from Descartes to the mid-19th century, as dark centuries, in which philosophers instead of conducting analyzes mostly fabricated worldviews [...],”¹⁴ writes the representative of the Krakow Circle. The main field of the philosopher’s work became language and conceptual analysis, which constituted, as Bocheński used to say, “the basic condition of every decent philosophical work”¹⁵ – there is no other access to concepts than through words. In the reconstruction and analysis of philosophical problems, logical tools were to be helpful. Their value was strongly emphasized, among others, by Jerzy Perzanowski. “If the philosophical concept is actually deep, then after accurate formalization we see it clearly and fully. Formalization does not harm the deepness but the turbidity,”¹⁶ says Perzanowski in answer to the question “How to philosophize?” The analytical philosophy had to be, similarly to science, intersubjectively-oriented, criticizing the search for confirmation of its theses in the internal states of the subject (eg. feelings, intuition). “Analysts reject all subjectivisms and, at the same time, all gibberish. Gibberish is the perfect tool to express feelings, but not to communicate objective reality,”¹⁷ writes Bocheński in his essay *Analytical Philosophy*.

The first step towards the unification of these still separate currents of thought was made in 1937, on the pages of the volume *Adolf Phalén in memoriam. Philosophical Essays*, edited by Hedenius and Marc-Wogau in memory of their master. According to the researchers of the Uppsala School’s tradition,¹⁸ the memorial volume did not achieve the desired goal. Despite attempts to present Phalén as a central figure in the Uppsala School, in the eyes of the public Hägerström was still an undisputed leader and founder of the

¹⁴ J. M. Bocheński, “Filozofia analityczna”, [in:] idem, *Sens życia i inne eseje*, Kraków 1993, p. 139 [Author’s translation].

¹⁵ Ibidem, pp. 140–141 [Author’s translation].

¹⁶ J. Perzanowski, *Jak filozofować?*, Warszawa 1989, p. 7 [Author’s translation].

¹⁷ J. M. Bocheński, op. cit., p. 145 [Author’s translation].

¹⁸ See: P. Mindus, *A Real Mind: The Life and Work of Axel Hägerström*; S. Nordin, *Från Hägerström till Hedenius. Den moderna svenska filosofin*; S. Nygård, J. Strang, op. cit.

movement. In those circumstances, Hedenius' 1941 dissertation *Om rätt och moral* (eng. *About truth and morals*) turned out to be a brilliant strategic move. Defending Hägerström's widely discussed nihilistic theory of morality, Hedenius followed in the footsteps of the great Uppsala tradition... Yet, while Hägerström's "nihilistic" roots were to be found in Brentano and Meinong's "psychology of values" and the analysis of psychological, epistemological and ontological status of moral judgments, in Hedenius' approach the issue has been shifted to the philosophy (semantics) of language in Carnap and Ayer's spirit.¹⁹ He claimed that even if the statements about values can be neither true nor false, they can be translated into emotive expressions such as "oh" or "hurray." According to various researchers (i.a. Nordin, Strang), it was Hedenius who first introduced analytical philosophy to Sweden, anchoring it in national philosophy. He worked through the legacy left by Hägerström, presenting the Uppsala School as parallel to the Vienna Circle or the Cambridge School – as an expression of the general trend of building philosophical alliances.

When at the end of the 1940s Hedenius and Marc-Wogau received promotions for professorial positions in Uppsala, the struggle against the orthodox hägerströmism was over, and the transition from the "old" to "new" Uppsala School in the analytical, Anglo-Saxon spirit became a fact. It should not go unnoticed that they received a huge support from their logico-empirical colleagues from border countries, such as Kaila in Finland, who openly put forward Hedenius and Marc-Wogau over Hägerström's supporter Martin Fries, saying that they are representatives of the kind of Uppsala philosophy that "with good winds will soon become a part of a more developed logico-empirical platform."²⁰ The newly elected professors did not fail to mention the importance of the relationship with logical empiricism in their inaugural speeches. Both of them clearly indicated that their mission is to maintain the continuity of Uppsala thought, not to break with it. Marc-Wogau concluded his speech *Uppsalafilosofin och den logiska empirismen* (eng. *Uppsala School and the logical empirism*) with a thought that both schools created a "common front against a whole host of different currents in modern philosophy."²¹ The previous differences in attitudes towards the role of natural sciences and the use of formal logic, which until now have been points of contention between the old Uppsala School and logical empiricism, were to be blurred.

¹⁹ S. Nygård, J. Strang, op. cit., pp. 260–261 [Author's translation].

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 262 [Author's translation].

²¹ K. Marc-Wogau, *Uppsalafilosofin och den logiska empirismen, Studier till Axel Hägerströms filosofi*, Stockholm 1968, p. 49 [Author's translation].

Hedenius' speech only reinforced this vision, calling logic "the backbone of philosophy and its most promising tool."²²

Hedenius and Marc-Wogau managed to create and maintain the image of Hägerström and the Uppsala School that was widely accepted for a long time. It was only after their deaths when Swedish historians and philosophers took up the mission of re-interpreting Hägerström's image as the father of Swedish analytical thought. Jan Bengtsson emphasized the importance of Hägerström's and Phalén's inspiration in phenomenology, while Hans Ruin referred to Nietzsche's significance for Hägerström's nihilistic theory of values. The one-sided image of Uppsala philosophy as a movement parallel to the Vienna Circle or the Cambridge School gave way to a more complex picture, according to which Hägerström and the Uppsala School acted in a much more complicated philosophical context than the next generation wanted to see. However, this story is not unique in this respect. In fact, there are many similarities between the changes that the Uppsala philosophy underwent under the supervision of Hedenius and Marc-Wogau, and the development of logical positivism itself in connection to the migration to the Anglo-Saxon world. Like the philosophers of Uppsala, logical positivists have found many inspirations both in neo-Kantianism and in the phenomenological movement. The analytical philosophy itself, despite the fact that it was established around World War II, has sowed its seeds in philosophical minds long before then. In this context, Hägerström and the Uppsala School played the same role in Sweden as Kaila and logical positivism in Finland, and the Vienna Circle, the Cambridge School and pragmatism in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Final remarks

In many ways, the Vienna Circle and the Uppsala School were closely related. One can notice, however, that the Uppsals surpassed the Viennese in creating an intellectual movement that affected not only various fields of science (eg law, social sciences) but also cultural life and political debate. Hägerström is often considered as a representative of the intellectual "rebirth" in Sweden and a philosophical revolutionary. Although he himself probably would not feel comfortable with terms such as "analytical" or "positivistic", this is precisely the image of Hägerström as the founder of the national analytic tradition that was coined by his successors. One might be tempted to say that Hedenius and Marc-Wogau created a legend that suited their own vision of the school.

²² I. Hedenius, "Om praktisk filosofi", [in:] *Om människans moraliska villkor*, Stockholm 1972, p. 19 [Author's translation].

It is important to distinguish between those who create, describe and act within the analytical movement, from those who, as a result of these activities, were recognized as the tradition's historic fathers. Hägerström's history shows above all that philosophical tradition can be created in many ways, but also emphasizes the importance of chance in the history of philosophy. "It is not inconceivable that the history of [...] Hägerström's life and work would differ from the history of the emergence of the analytic tradition in Sweden", writes Strang...

"If only someone else wrote it"²³, he adds.

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²³ S. Nygård, J. Strang, op. cit., p. 266 [Author's translation].

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