

Sigmund Freud (1932)

Lecture XXXV (1932)

A Philosophy of Life

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN - In the last lecture we were occupied with trivial everyday affairs, with putting, as it were, our modest house in order. We will now take a bold step, and risk an answer to a question which has repeatedly been raised in non-analytic quarters, namely, the question whether psychoanalysis leads to any particular *Weltanschauung*, and if so, to what.

'Weltanschauung' is, I am afraid, a specifically German notion, which it would be difficult to translate into a foreign language. If I attempt to give you a definition of the word, it can hardly fail to strike you as inept. By *Weltanschauung*, then, I mean an intellectual construction which gives a unified solution of all the problems of our existence in virtue of a comprehensive hypothesis, a construction, therefore, in which no question is left open and in which everything in which we are interested finds a place. It is easy to see that the possession of such a *Weltanschauung* is one of the ideal wishes of mankind. When one believes in such a thing, one feels secure in life, one knows what one ought to strive after, and how one ought to organise one's emotions and interests to the best purpose.

If that is what is meant by a *Weltanschauung*, then the question is an easy one for psychoanalysis to answer. As a specialised science, a branch of psychology - 'depth-psychology' or psychology of the unconscious - it is quite unsuited to form a *Weltanschauung* of its own; it must accept that of science in general. The scientific *Weltanschauung* is, however, markedly at variance with our definition. The *unified* nature of the explanation of the universe is, it is true, accepted by science, but only as a programme whose fulfilment is postponed to the future. Otherwise it is distinguished by negative characteristics, by a limitation to what is, at any given time, knowable, and a categorical rejection of certain elements which are alien to it. It asserts that there is no other source of knowledge of the universe but the intellectual manipulation of carefully verified observations, in fact, what is called research, and that no knowledge can be obtained from revelation, intuition or inspiration. It appears that this way of looking at things came very near to receiving general acceptance during the last century or two. It has been reserved for the present century to raise the objection that such a *Weltanschauung* is both empty and unsatisfying, that it overlooks all the spiritual demands of man, and all the needs of the human mind.

This objection cannot be too strongly repudiated. It cannot be supported for a moment, for the spirit and the mind are the subject of scientific investigation in exactly the same way as any non-human entities. Psycho-analysis has a peculiar right to speak on behalf of the scientific *Weltanschauung* in this connection, because it cannot be accused of neglecting the part occupied by the mind in the universe. The contribution of psychoanalysis to science consists precisely in having extended research to the region of the mind. Certainly without such a psychology science would be very incomplete. But if we add to science the investigation of the intellectual and emotional functions of men (and animals), we find that nothing has been altered as regards the

general position of science, that there are no new sources of knowledge or methods of research. Intuition and inspiration would be such, if they existed; but they can safely be counted as illusions, as fulfilments of wishes. It is easy to see, moreover, that the qualities which, as - we have shown, are expected of a *Weltanschauung* have a purely emotional basis. Science takes account of the fact that the mind of man creates such demands and is ready to trace their source, but it has not the slightest ground for thinking them justified. On the contrary, it does well to distinguish carefully between illusion (the results of emotional demands of that kind) and knowledge.

This does not at all imply that we need push these wishes contemptuously aside, or underestimate their value in the lives of human beings. We are prepared to take notice of the fulfilments they have achieved for themselves in the creations of art and in the systems of religion and philosophy; but we cannot overlook the fact that it would be wrong and highly inexpedient to allow such things to be carried over into the domain of knowledge. For in that way one would open the door which gives access to the region of the psychoses, whether individual or group psychoses, and one would drain off from these tendencies valuable energy which is directed towards reality and which seeks by means of reality to satisfy wishes and needs as far as this is possible.

From the point of view of science we must necessarily make use of our critical powers in this direction, and not be afraid to reject and deny. It is inadmissible to declare that science is one field of human intellectual activity, and that religion and philosophy are others, at least as valuable, and that science has no business to interfere with the other two, that they all have an equal claim to truth, and that everyone is free to choose whence he shall draw his convictions and in what he shall place his belief. Such an attitude is considered particularly respectable, tolerant, broad-minded and free from narrow prejudices. Unfortunately it is not tenable; it shares all the pernicious qualities of an entirely unscientific *Weltanschauung* and in practice comes to much the same thing. The bare fact is that truth cannot be tolerant and cannot admit compromise or limitations, that scientific research looks on the whole field of human activity as its own, and must adopt an uncompromisingly critical attitude towards any other power that seeks to usurp any part of its province.

Of the three forces which can dispute the position of science, religion alone is a really serious enemy. Art is almost always harmless and beneficent, it does not seek to be anything else but an illusion. Save in the case of a few people who are, one might say, obsessed by art, it never dares to make any attacks on the realm of reality. Philosophy is not opposed to science, it behaves itself as if it were a science, and to a certain extent it makes use of the same methods; but it parts company with science, in that it clings to the illusion that it can produce a complete and coherent picture of the universe, though in fact that picture must needs fall to pieces with every new advance in our knowledge. Its methodological error lies in the fact that it over-estimates the epistemological value of our logical operations, and to a certain extent admits the validity of other sources of knowledge, such as intuition. And often enough one feels that the poet Heine is not unjustified when he says of the philosopher:

'With his night-cap and his night-shirt tatters,
He botches up the loop-holes in the structure of the world.'

But philosophy has no immediate influence on the great majority of mankind; it interests only a small number even of the thin upper stratum of intellectuals, while all the rest find it beyond them. In contradistinction to philosophy, religion is a tremendous force, which exerts its power over the strongest emotions of human beings. As we know, at one time it included everything that played any part in the mental life of mankind, that it took the place of science, when as yet

science hardly existed, and that it built up a *Weltanschauung* of incomparable consistency and coherence which, although it has been severely shaken, has lasted to this day.

If one wishes to form a true estimate of the full grandeur of religion, one must keep in mind what it undertakes to do for men. It gives them information about the source and origin of the universe it assures them of protection and final happiness amid the changing vicissitudes of life, and it guides their thoughts and actions by means of precepts which are backed by the whole force of its authority. It fulfils, therefore, three functions. In the first place, it satisfies man's desire for knowledge; it is here doing the same thing that science attempts to accomplish by its own methods, and here, therefore, enters into rivalry with it. It is to the second function that it performs that religion no doubt owes the greater part of its influence. In so far as religion brushes away men's fear of the dangers and vicissitudes of life, in so far as it assures them of a happy ending, and comforts them in their misfortunes, science cannot compete with it. Science, it is true, teaches how one can avoid certain dangers and how one can combat many sufferings with success; it would be quite untrue to deny that science is a powerful aid to human beings, but in many cases it has to leave them to their suffering, and can only advise them to submit to the inevitable. In the performance of its third function, the provision of precepts, prohibitions and restrictions, religion is furthest removed from science. For science is content with discovering and stating the facts. It is true that from the applications of science rules and recommendations for behaviour may be deduced. In certain circumstances they may be the same as those which are laid down by religion, but even so the reasons for them will be different.

It is not quite clear why religion should combine these three functions. What has the explanation of the origin of the universe to do with the inculcation of certain ethical precepts? Its assurances of protection and happiness are more closely connected with these precepts. They are the reward for the fulfilment of the commands; only he who obeys them can count on receiving these benefits, while punishment awaits the disobedient. For the matter of that something of the same kind applies to science; for it declares that anyone who disregards its inferences is liable to suffer for it.

One can only understand this remarkable combination of teaching, consolation and precept in religion if one subjects it to genetic analysis. We may begin with the most remarkable item of the three, the teaching about the origin of the universe for why should a cosmogony be a regular element of religious systems? The doctrine is that the universe was created by a being similar to man, but greater in every respect, in power, wisdom and strength of passion, in fact by an idealised superman. Where you have animals as creators of the universe, you have indications of the influence of totemism, which I shall touch on later, at any rate with a brief remark. It is interesting to notice that this creator of the universe is always a single god, even when many gods are believed in. Equally interesting is the fact that the creator is nearly always a male, although there is no lack of indication of the existence of female deities, and many mythologies make the creation of the world begin precisely with a male god triumphing over a female goddess, who is degraded into a monster. This raises the most fascinating minor problems, but we must hurry on. The rest of our enquiry is made easy because this God-Creator is openly called Father. Psycho-analysis concludes that he really is the father, clothed in the grandeur in which he once appeared to the small child. The religious man's picture of the creation of the universe is the same as his picture of his own creation.

If this is so, then it is easy to understand how it is that the comforting promises of protection and the severe ethical commands are found together with the cosmogony. For the same individual to whom the child owes its own existence, the father (or, more correctly, the parental function which is composed of the father and the mother), has protected and watched over the weak and helpless child, exposed as it is to all the dangers which threaten in the external world; in its father's care it has felt itself safe. Even the grown man, though he may know that he possesses

greater strength, and though he has greater insight into the dangers of life, rightly feels that fundamentally he is just as helpless and unprotected as he was in childhood and that in relation to the external world he is still a child. Even now, therefore, he cannot give up the protection which he has enjoyed as a child. But he has long ago realised that his father is a being with strictly limited powers and by no means endowed with every desirable attribute. He therefore looks back to the memory-image of the overrated father of his childhood, exalts it into a Deity, and brings it into the present and into reality. The emotional strength of this memory-image and the lasting nature of his need for protection are the two supports of his belief in God.

The third main point of the religious programme, its ethical precepts, can also be related without any difficulty to the situation of childhood. In a famous passage, which I have already quoted in an earlier lecture, the philosopher Kant speaks of the starry heaven above us and the moral law within us as the strongest evidence for the greatness of God. However odd it may sound to put these two side by side - for what can the heavenly bodies have to do with the question whether one man loves another or kills him? - nevertheless it touches on a great psychological truth. The same father (the parental function) who gave the child his life, and preserved it from the dangers which that life involves, also taught it what it may or may not do, made it accept certain limitations of its instinctual wishes, and told it what consideration it would be expected to show towards its parents and brothers and sisters, if it wanted to be tolerated and liked as a member of the family circle, and later on of more extensive groups. The child is brought up to know its social duties by means of a system of love-rewards and punishments, and in this way it is taught that its security in life depends on its parents (and, subsequently, other people) loving it and being able to believe in its love for them. This whole state of affairs is carried over by the grown man unaltered into his religion. The prohibitions and commands of his parents live on in his breast as his moral conscience; God rules the world of men with the help of the same system of rewards and punishments, and the degree of protection and happiness which each individual enjoys depends on his fulfilment of the demands of morality; the feeling of security, with which he fortifies himself against the dangers both of the external world and of his human environment, is founded on his love of God and the consciousness of God's love for him. Finally, he has in prayer a direct influence on the divine will, and in - that way insures for himself a share in the divine omnipotence.

I am sure that while you have been listening to me a whole host of questions must have come into your minds which you would like to have answered. I cannot undertake to do so here and now, but I am perfectly certain that none of these questions of detail would shake our thesis that the religious *Weltanschauung* is determined by the situation that subsisted in our childhood. It is therefore all the more remarkable that, in spite of its infantile character, it nevertheless has a forerunner. There was, without doubt, a time when there was no religion and no gods. It is known as the age of animism. Even at that time the world was full of spirits in the semblance of men (demons, as we call them), and all the objects in the external world were their dwelling-place or perhaps identical with them; but there was no supreme power which had created them all which controlled them, and to which it was possible to turn for protection and aid. The demons of animism were usually hostile to man, but it seems as though man had more confidence in himself in those days than later on. He was no doubt in constant terror of these evil spirits, but he defended himself against them by means of certain actions to which he ascribed the power to drive them away. Nor did he think himself entirely powerless in other ways. If he wanted something from nature - rain, for instance - he did not direct a prayer to the Weather-god, but used a spell, by means of which he expected to exert a direct influence over nature; he himself made something which resembled rain. In his fight against the powers of the surrounding world his first weapon was magic, the first forerunner of our modern technology. We suppose that this confidence in magic is derived from the over-estimation of the individual's own intellectual operations, from the belief in the 'omnipotence of thoughts', which, incidentally, we come across again in our obsessional neurotics. We may imagine that the men of that time were

particularly proud of their acquisition of speech, which must have been accompanied by a great facilitation of thought. They attributed magic power to the spoken word. This feature was later on taken over by religion. 'And God said: Let there be light, and there was light.' But the fact of magic actions shows that animistic man did not rely entirely on the force of his own wishes. On the contrary, he depended for success upon the performance of an action which would cause Nature to imitate it. If he wanted it to rain, he himself poured out water; if he wanted to stimulate the soil to fertility, he offered it a performance of sexual intercourse in the fields.

You know how tenaciously anything that has once found psychological expression persists. You will therefore not be surprised to hear that a great many manifestations of animism have lasted up to the present day, mostly as what are called superstitions, side by side with and behind religion. But more than that, you can hardly avoid coming to the conclusion that our philosophy has preserved essential traits of animistic modes of thought such as the over-estimation of the magic of words and the belief that real processes in the external world follow the lines laid down by our thoughts. It is, to be sure, an animism without magical practices. On the other hand, we should expect to find that in the age of animism there must already have been some kind of morality, some rules governing the intercourse of men with one another. But there is no evidence that they were closely bound up with animistic beliefs. Probably they were the immediate expression of the distribution of power and of practical necessities.

It would be very interesting to know what determined the transition from animism to religion; but you may imagine in what darkness this earliest epoch in the evolution of the human mind is still shrouded. It seems to be a fact that the earliest form in which religion appeared was the remarkable one of totemism, the worship of animals, in the train of which followed the first ethical commands, the taboos. In a book called *Totem and Taboo*, I once worked out a suggestion in accordance with which this change is to be traced back to an upheaval in the relationships in the human family. The main achievement of religion, as compared with animism, lies in the psychic binding of - the fear of demons. Nevertheless, the evil spirit still has a place in the religious system as a relic of the previous age.

So much for the pre-history of the religious *Weltanschauung*. Let us now turn to consider what has happened since, and what is still going on under our own eyes. The scientific spirit, strengthened by the observation of natural processes, began in the course of time to treat religion as a human matter, and to subject it to a critical examination. This test it failed to pass. In the first place, the accounts of miracles roused a feeling of surprise and disbelief, since they contradicted everything that sober observation had taught, and betrayed all too clearly the influence of human imagination. In the next place, its account of the nature of the universe had to be rejected, because it showed evidence of a lack of knowledge which bore the stamp of earlier days, and because, owing to increasing familiarity with the laws of nature, it had lost its authority. The idea that the universe came into being through an act of generation or creation, analogous to that which produces an individual human being, no longer seemed to be the most obvious and self-evident hypothesis; for the distinction between living and sentient beings and inanimate nature had become apparent to the human mind, and had made it impossible to retain the original animistic theory. Besides this, one must not overlook the influence of the comparative study of different religious systems, and the impression they give of mutual exclusiveness and intolerance.

Fortified by these preliminary efforts, the scientific spirit at last summoned up courage to put to the test the most important and the most emotionally significant elements of the religious *Weltanschauung*. The truth could have been seen at any time, but it was long before anyone dared to say it aloud: the assertions made by religion that it could give protection and happiness to men, if they would only fulfil certain ethical obligations, were unworthy of belief. It seems not to be true that there is a power in the universe which watches over the well-being of every

individual with parental care and brings all his concerns to a happy ending. On the contrary, the destinies of man are incompatible with a universal principle of benevolence or with - what is to some degree contradictory - a universal principle of justice. Earthquakes, floods and fires do not differentiate between the good and devout man and the sinner and unbeliever. And, even if we leave inanimate nature out of account and consider the destinies of individual men in so far as they depend on their relations with others of their own kind, it is by no means the rule that virtue is rewarded and wickedness punished, but it happens often enough that the violent, the crafty and the unprincipled seize the desirable goods of the earth for themselves, while the pious go empty away. Dark, unfeeling and unloving powers determine human destiny; the system of rewards and punishments, which, according to religion, governs the world, seems to have no existence. This is another occasion for abandoning a portion of the animism which has found refuge in religion.

The last contribution to the criticism of the religious *Weltanschauung* has been made by psychoanalysis, which has traced the origin of religion to the helplessness of childhood, and its content to the persistence of the wishes and needs of childhood into maturity. This does not precisely imply a refutation of religion, but it is a necessary rounding off of our knowledge about it, and, at least on one point, it actually contradicts it, for religion lays claim to a divine origin. This claim, to be sure, is not false, if our interpretation of God is accepted.

The final judgment of science on the religious *Weltanschauung*, then, runs as follows. While the different religions wrangle with one another as to which of them is in possession of the truth, in our view the truth of religion may be altogether disregarded. Religion is an attempt to get control over the sensory world, in which we are placed, by means of the wish-world, which we have developed inside us as a result of biological and psychological necessities. But it cannot achieve its end. Its doctrines carry with them the stamp of the times in which they originated, the ignorant childhood days of the human race. Its consolations deserve no trust. Experience teaches us that the world is not a nursery. The ethical commands, to which religion seeks to lend its weight, require some other foundation instead, for human society cannot do without them, and it is dangerous to link up obedience to them with religious belief. If one attempts to assign to religion its place in man's evolution, it seems not so much to be a lasting acquisition as a parallel to the neurosis which the civilised individual must pass through on his way from childhood to maturity.

You are, of course, perfectly free to criticise this account of mine, and I am prepared to meet you half-way. What I have said about the gradual crumbling of the religious *Weltanschauung* was no doubt an incomplete abridgment of the whole story; the order of the separate events was not quite correctly given, and the co-operation of various forces towards the awakening of the scientific spirit was not traced. I have also left out of account the alterations which occurred in the religious *Weltanschauung* itself, both during the period of its unchallenged authority and afterwards under the influence of awakening criticism. Finally I have, strictly speaking, limited my remarks to one single form of religion, that of the Western peoples. I have, as it were, constructed a lay-figure for the purposes of a demonstration which I desired to be as rapid and as impressive as possible. Let us leave on one side the question of whether my knowledge would in any case have been sufficient to enable me to do it better or more completely. I am aware that you can find all that I have said elsewhere, and find it better said; none of it is new. But I am firmly convinced that the most careful elaboration of the material upon which the problems of religion are based would not shake these conclusions.

As you know, the struggle between the scientific spirit and the religious *Weltanschauung* is not yet at an end; it is still going on under our very eyes to-day. However little psychoanalysis may make use as a rule of polemical weapons, we will not deny ourselves the pleasure of looking into this conflict. Incidentally, we may perhaps arrive at a clearer understanding of our attitude

towards the *Weltanschauung*. You will see how easily some of the arguments which are brought forward by the supporters of religion can be disproved; though others may succeed in escaping refutation.

The first objection that one hears is to the effect that it is an impertinence on the part of science to take religion as a subject for its investigations, since religion is something supreme, something superior to the capacities of the human understanding, something which must not be approached with the sophistries of criticism. In other words, science is not competent to sit in judgment on religion. No doubt it is quite useful and valuable, so long as it is restricted to its own province; but religion does not lie in that province, and with religion it can have nothing to do. If we are not deterred by this brusque dismissal, but enquire on what grounds religion bases its claim to an exceptional position among human concerns, the answer we receive, if indeed we are honoured with an answer at all, is that religion cannot be measured by human standards, since it is of divine origin, and has been revealed to us by a spirit which the human mind cannot grasp. It might surely be thought that nothing could be more easily refuted than this argument; it is an obvious *petitio principii*, a 'begging of the question'. The point which is being called in question is whether there is a divine spirit and a revelation; and it surely cannot be a conclusive reply to say that the question be asked, because the Deity cannot be called in question. What is happening here is the same kind of thing as we meet with occasionally in our analytic work. If an otherwise intelligent patient denies a suggestion on particularly stupid grounds, his imperfect logic is evidence for the existence of a particularly strong motive for his making the denial, a motive which can only be of an affective nature and serve to bind an emotion.

Another sort of answer may be given, in which a motive of this kind is openly admitted. Religion must not be critically examined, because it is the highest, most precious and noblest thing that the mind of man has brought forth, because it gives expression to the deepest feelings, and is the only thing that makes the world bearable and life worthy of humanity. To this we need not reply by disputing this estimate of religion, but rather by drawing attention to another aspect of the matter. We should point out that it is not a question of the scientific spirit encroaching upon the sphere of religion, but of religion encroaching upon the sphere of scientific thought. Whatever value and importance religion may have, it has no right to set any limits to thought, and therefore has no right to except itself from the application of thought.

Scientific thought is, in its essence, no different from the normal process of thinking, which we all, believers and unbelievers alike, make use of when we are going about our business in everyday life. It has merely taken a special form in certain respects: it extends its interest to things which have no immediately obvious utility, it endeavours to eliminate personal factors and emotional influences, it carefully examines the trustworthiness of the sense perceptions on which it bases its conclusions, it provides itself with new perceptions which are not obtainable by everyday means, and isolates the determinants of these new experiences by purposely varied experimentation. Its aim is to arrive at correspondence with reality, that is to say with what exists outside us and independently of us, and, as experience has taught us, is decisive for the fulfilment or frustration of our desires. This correspondence with the real external world we call truth. It is the aim of scientific work, even when the practical value of that work does not interest us. When, therefore, religion claims that it can take the place of science and that, because it is beneficent and ennobling, it must therefore be true, that claim is, in fact, an encroachment, which, in the interests of everyone, should be resisted. It is asking a great deal of a man, who has learnt to regulate his everyday affairs in accordance with the rules of experience and with due regard to reality, that he should entrust precisely what affects him most nearly to the care of an authority which claims as its prerogative freedom from all the rules of rational thought. And as for the protection that religion promises its believers, I hardly think that any of us would be willing even to enter a motorcar if the driver informed us that he drove without allowing himself

to be distracted by traffic regulations, but in accordance with the impulses of an exalted imagination.

And indeed the ban which religion has imposed upon thought in the interests of its own preservation is by no means without danger both for the individual and for society. Analytic experience has taught us that such prohibitions, even though they were originally confined to some particular field, have a tendency to spread, and then become the cause of severe inhibitions in people's lives. In women a process of this sort can be observed to follow from the prohibition against their occupying themselves, even in thought, with the sexual side of their nature. The biographies of almost all the eminent people of past times show the disastrous results of the inhibition of thought by religion. Intellect, on the other hand, - or rather, to call it by a more familiar name, reason - is among the forces which may be expected to exert a unifying influence upon men - creatures who can be held together only with the greatest difficulty, and whom it is therefore scarcely possible to control. Think how impossible human society would be if everyone had his own particular multiplication table and his own private units of weight and length. Our best hope for the future is that the intellect - the scientific spirit, - reason - should in time establish a dictatorship over the human mind. The very nature of reason is a guarantee that it would not fail to concede to human emotions and to all that is determined by them the position to which they are entitled. But the common pressure exercised by such a domination of reason would prove to be the strongest unifying force among men, and would prepare the way for further unifications. Whatever, like the ban laid upon thought by religion, opposes such a development is a danger for the future of mankind.

The question may now be asked why religion does not put an end to this losing fight by openly declaring: 'It is a fact that I cannot give you what men commonly call truth; to obtain that, you must go to science. But what I have to give you is incomparably more beautiful, more comforting and more ennobling than anything that you could ever get from science. And I therefore say to you that it is true in a different and higher sense.' The answer is easy to find. Religion cannot make this admission, because if it did it would lose all influence over the mass of mankind. The ordinary man knows only one 'truth' - truth in the ordinary sense of the word. What may be meant by a higher, or a highest, truth, he cannot imagine. Truth seems to him as little capable of having degrees as death, and the necessary leap from the beautiful to the true is one that he cannot make. Perhaps you will agree with me in thinking that he is right in this.

The struggle, therefore, is not yet at an end. The followers of the religious *Weltanschauung* act in accordance with the old maxim: the best defence is attack. 'What', they ask, 'is this science that presumes to depreciate our religion, which has brought salvation and comfort to millions of men for many thousands of years? What has science for its part so far accomplished? What more can be expected of it? On its own admission, it is incapable of comforting or ennobling us. We will leave that on one side, therefore, though it is by no means easy to give up such benefits. But what of its teaching? Can it tell us how the world began, and what fate is in store for it? Can it even paint for us a coherent picture of the universe, and show us where the unexplained phenomena of life fit in, and how spiritual forces are able to operate on inert matter? If it could do that we should not refuse it our respect. But it has done nothing of the sort, not one single problem of this kind has it solved. It gives us fragments of alleged knowledge, which it cannot harmonise with one another, it collects observations of uniformities from the totality of events, and dignifies them with the name of laws and subjects them to its hazardous interpretations. And with what a small degree of certitude does it establish its conclusions! All that it teaches is only provisionally true; what is prized to-day as the highest wisdom is overthrown tomorrow and experimentally replaced by something else. The latest error is then given the name of truth. And to this truth we are asked to sacrifice our highest good!'

Ladies and Gentlemen - In so far as you yourselves are supporters of the scientific *Weltanschauung* I do not think you will be very profoundly shaken by this critic's attack. In Imperial Austria an anecdote was once current which I should like to call to mind in this connection. On one occasion the old Emperor was receiving a deputation from a political party which he disliked: 'This is no longer ordinary opposition', he burst out, 'this is factious opposition.' In just the same way you will find that the reproaches made against science for not having solved the riddle of the universe are unfairly and spitefully exaggerated. Science has had too little time for such a tremendous achievement. It is still very young, a recently developed human activity. Let us bear in mind, to mention only a few dates, that only about three hundred years have passed since Kepler discovered the laws of planetary movement; the life of Newton, who split up light into the colours of the spectrum, and put forward the theory of gravitation, came to an end in 1727, that is to say a little more than two hundred years ago; and Lavoisier discovered oxygen shortly before the French Revolution. I may be a very old man to-day, but the life of an individual man is very short in comparison with the duration of human development, and it is a fact that I was alive when Charles Darwin published his work on the origin of species. In the same year, 1859, Pierre Curie, the discoverer of radium, was born. And if you go back to the beginnings of exact natural science among the Greeks, to Archimedes, or to Aristarchus of Samos (*circa* 250 B.C.), the forerunner of Copernicus, or even to the tentative origins of astronomy among the Babylonians, you will only be covering a very small portion of the period which anthropology requires for the evolution of man from his original ape-like form, a period which certainly embraces more than a hundred thousand years. And it must not be forgotten that the last century has brought with it such a quantity of new discoveries and such a great acceleration of scientific progress that we have every reason to look forward with confidence to the future of science.

It has to be admitted that the other objections are valid within certain limits. Thus it is true that the path of science is slow, tentative and laborious. That cannot be denied or altered. No wonder that the gentlemen of the opposition are dissatisfied; they are spoilt, they have had an easier time of it with their revelation. Progress in scientific work is made in just the same way as in an analysis. The analyst brings expectations with him to his work, but he must keep them in the background. He discovers something new by observation, now here and now there, and at first the bits do not fit together. He puts forward suppositions, he brings up provisional constructions, and abandons them if they are not confirmed; he must have a great deal of patience, must be prepared for all possibilities, and must not jump at conclusions for fear of their leading him to overlook new and unexpected factors. And in the end the whole expenditure of effort is rewarded, the scattered discoveries fall into place and he obtains an understanding of a whole chain of mental events; he has finished one piece of work and is ready for the next. But the analyst is unlike other scientific workers in this one respect, that he has to do without the help which experiment can bring to research.

But the criticism of science which I have quoted also contains a great deal of exaggeration. It is not true to say that it swings blindly from one attempt to another, and exchanges one error for the next. As a rule the man of science works like a sculptor with a clay model, who persistently alters the first rough sketch, adds to it and takes away from it, until he has obtained a satisfactory degree of similarity to some object, whether seen or imagined. And, moreover, at least in the older and more mature sciences, there is already a solid foundation of knowledge, which is now only modified and elaborated and no longer demolished. The outlook, in fact, is not so bad in the world of science.

And finally, what is the purpose of all these passionate disparagements of science? In spite of its present incompleteness and its inherent difficulties, we could not do without it and could not put anything else in its place. There is no limit to the improvement of which it is capable, and this can certainly not be said of the religious *Weltanschauung*. The latter is complete in its essentials;

if it is an error, it must remain one for ever. No attempt to minimise the importance of science can alter the fact that it attempts to take into account our dependence on the real external world, while religion is illusion and derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires.

I must now go on to mention some other types of *Weltanschauung* which are in opposition to the scientific one; I do so, however, unwillingly, because I know that I am not competent to form a judgment upon them. I hope, therefore, that you will bear this confession in mind in listening to what I have to say, and that if your interest is aroused you will go elsewhere for more trustworthy information.

In the first place I ought at this point to name the various philosophical systems which have ventured to draw a picture of the world, as it is reflected in the minds of thinkers whose eyes are as a rule turned away from it. But I have already attempted to give a general characterisation of philosophy and its methods, and I believe I am more unfitted than almost anyone to pass the individual systems under review. I shall ask you, therefore, instead to turn your attention to two other phenomena which, particularly in these days, cannot be ignored.

The *Weltanschauung* to which I shall first refer is, as it were, a counterpart of political anarchism, and may perhaps have emanated from it. No doubt there have been intellectual nihilists of this kind before, but at the present day the theory of relativity of modern physics seems to have gone to their heads. It is true that they start out from science, but they succeed in forcing it to cut the ground from under its own feet, to commit suicide, as it were; they make it dispose of itself by getting it to refute its own premises. One often has an impression that this nihilism is only a temporary attitude, which will only be kept up until this task has been completed. When once science has been got rid of, some kind of mysticism, or, indeed, the old religious *Weltanschauung*, can spring up in the space that has been left vacant. According to this anarchistic doctrine, there is no such thing as truth, no assured knowledge of the external world. What we give out as scientific truth is only the product of our own needs and desires, as they are formulated under varying external conditions; that is to say, it is illusion once more. Ultimately we find only what we need to find, and see only what we desire to see. We can do nothing else. And since the criterion of truth, correspondence with an external world, disappears, it is absolutely immaterial what views we accept. All of them are equally true and false. And no one has a right to accuse anyone else of error.

For a mind which is interested in epistemology, it would be tempting to enquire into the contrivances and sophistries by means of which the anarchists manage to elicit a final product of this kind from science. One would no doubt be brought up against situations like the one involved in the familiar example of the Cretan who says that all Cretans are liars. But I am not desirous, nor am I capable, of going deeper into this. I will merely remark that the anarchistic theory only retains its remarkable air of superiority so long as it is concerned with opinions about abstract things; it breaks down the moment it comes in contact with practical life. Now the behaviour of men is guided by their opinions and knowledge, and the same scientific spirit which speculates about the structure of the atom or the origin of man is concerned in the building of a bridge that will bear its load. If it were really a matter of indifference what we believed, if there were no knowledge which was distinguished from among our opinions by the fact that it corresponds with reality, then we might just as well build our bridges of cardboard as of stone, or inject a tenth of a gram of morphia into a patient instead of a hundredth, or take tear-gas as a narcotic instead of ether. But the intellectual anarchists themselves would strongly repudiate such practical applications of their theory.

The other opposing *Weltanschauung* is to be taken far more seriously, and in this case I very deeply regret the insufficiency of my knowledge. I dare say that you know more about this subject than I do and that you have long ago taken up your position for or against Marxism. The investigations of Karl Marx into the economic structure of society and into the influence of various forms of economic organisation upon all departments of human life have in our day acquired an authority that cannot be denied. How far they are right or wrong in detail, I naturally do not know. I gather that it is not easy even for better informed people to decide. Some of the propositions in Marx's theory seem strange to me, such as that the evolution of forms of society is a process of natural history, or that the changes in social stratification proceed from one another in the manner of a dialectical process. I am by no means certain that I understand these statements rightly; moreover, they do not sound 'materialistic' but like traces of the obscure Hegelian philosophy under the influence of which Marx at one time passed. I do not know how I can throw off the view which I share with other laymen, who are inclined to trace back the formation of classes in society to the struggles which went on from the beginning of history between various human hordes. These hordes differed to a slight degree from one another; and it is my view that social differences go back to these original differences of tribe or race. Psychological factors, such as the amount of constitutional aggressiveness and also the degree of cohesion within the horde, and material factors, such as the possession of better weapons, decided the victory. When they came to live together in the same territory, the victors became the masters and the conquered the slaves. There is no sign in all this of natural laws or conceptual modifications; on the other hand, we cannot fail to recognise the influence which the progressive control over natural forces exerts on the social relationships between men, since men always place their newly won powers at the service of their aggressiveness, and use them against one another. The introduction of metals, of bronze and iron, put an end to whole cultural epochs and their social institutions. I really believe that gunpowder and fire-arms overthrew chivalry and the domination of the aristocracy, and that the Russian despotism was already doomed before the war was lost, since no amount of in-breeding among the ruling families of Europe could have produced a race of Tsars capable of withstanding the explosive force of dynamite.

It may be, indeed, that with the present economic crisis which followed upon the Great War we are merely paying the price of our latest triumph over Nature, the conquest of the air. This does not sound very convincing, but at least the first links in the chain of argument are clearly recognisable. The policy of England was based on the security guaranteed by the seas which encircle her coasts. The moment Blériot flew over the Channel in his aeroplane this protective isolation was broken through; and on the night on which, in a time of peace, a German Zeppelin made an experimental cruise over London, war against Germany became a certainty. Nor must the threat of submarines be forgotten in this connection.

I am almost ashamed of treating a theme of such importance and complexity in such a slight and inadequate manner, and I am also aware that I have not said anything that is new to you. I only wanted to call your attention to the fact that the factor of man's control over Nature, from which he obtains his weapons for his struggle with his fellow-men, must of necessity also affect his economic arrangements. We seem to have travelled a long way from the problems of a *Weltanschauung*, but we shall soon come back to the point. The strength of Marxism obviously does not lie in its view of history or in the prophecies about the future which it bases upon that view, but in its clear insight into the determining influence which is exerted by the economic conditions of man upon his intellectual, ethical and artistic reactions. A whole collection of correlations and causal sequences were thus discovered, which had hitherto been almost completely disregarded. But it cannot be assumed that economic motives are the only ones which determine the behaviour of men in society. The unquestionable fact that different

individuals, races and nations behave differently under the same economic conditions in itself proves that the economic factor cannot be the sole determinant. It is quite impossible to understand how psychological factors can be overlooked where the reactions of living human beings are involved; for not only were such factors already concerned in the establishment of these economic conditions but even in obeying these conditions, men can do no more than set their original instinctual impulses in motion - their self-preservative instinct, their love of aggression, their need for love and their impulse to attain pleasure and avoid pain. In an earlier lecture we have emphasised the importance of the part played by the super-ego, which represents tradition and the ideals of the past, and which will resist for some time the pressure exerted by new economic situations. And, finally, we must not forget that the mass of mankind, subjected though they are to economic necessities, are borne on by a process of cultural development - some call it civilisation - which is no doubt influenced by all the other factors, but is equally certainly independent of them in its origin; it is comparable to an organic process, and is quite capable of itself having an effect upon the other factors. It displaces the aims of the instincts, and causes men to rebel against what has hitherto been tolerable; and, moreover, the progressive strengthening of the scientific spirit seems to be an essential part of it. If anyone were in a position to show in detail how these different factors - the general human instinctual disposition, its racial variations and its cultural modifications - behave under the influence of varying social organisation, professional activities and methods of subsistence, how these factors inhibit or aid one another - if, I say, anyone could show this, then he would not only have improved Marxism but would have made it into a true social science. For sociology, which deals with the behaviour of man in society, can be nothing other than applied psychology. Strictly speaking, indeed, there are only two sciences - psychology, pure and applied, and natural science.

When at last the far-reaching importance of economic conditions began to be realised, the temptation arose to bring about an alteration in them by means of revolutionary interference, instead of leaving the change to the course of historical development. Theoretical Marxism, as put into effect in Russian Bolshevism, has acquired the energy, the comprehensiveness and the exclusiveness of a *Weltanschauung*, but at the same time it has acquired an almost uncanny resemblance to what it is opposing. Originally it was itself a part of science, and, in its realisation, was built up on science and technology, but it has nevertheless established a ban upon thought which is as inexorable as was formerly that of religion. All critical examination of the Marxist theory is forbidden, doubts of its validity are as vindictively punished as heresy once was by the Catholic Church. The works of Marx, as the source of revelation, have taken the place of the Bible and the Koran, although they are no freer from contradictions and obscurities than those earlier holy books.

And although practical Marxism has remorselessly swept away all idealistic systems and illusions, it has nevertheless developed illusions itself, which are no less dubious and unverifiable than their predecessors. It hopes, in the course of a few generations, so to alter men that they will be able to live together in the new order of society almost without friction, and that they will do their work voluntarily. In the meantime it moves elsewhere the instinctual barriers which are essential in any society, it directs outwards the aggressive tendencies which threaten every human community, and finds its support in the hostility of the poor against the rich, and of the hitherto powerless against the former holders of power. But such an alteration in human nature is very improbable. The enthusiasm with which the mob follow the Bolshevik lead at present, so long as the new order is incomplete and threatened from outside, gives no guarantee for the future, when it will be fully established and no longer in danger. In exactly the same way as religion, Bolshevism is obliged to compensate its believers for the sufferings and deprivations of the present life by promising them a better life hereafter, in which there will be no unsatisfied needs. It is true that this paradise is to be in this world; it will be established on earth, and will be inaugurated within a measurable time. But let us remember that the Jews, whose religion

knows nothing of a life beyond the grave, also expected the coming of the Messiah here on earth, and that the Christian Middle Ages constantly believed that the Kingdom of God was at hand.

There is no doubt what the answer of Bolshevism to these criticisms will be. 'Until men have changed their nature', it will say, 'one must employ the methods which are effective with them today. One cannot do without compulsion in their education or a ban upon thinking or the application of force, even the spilling of blood; and if one did not awake in them the illusions you speak of, one would not be able to bring them to submit to this compulsion.' And it might politely ask us to say how else it could be done. At this point we should be defeated. I should know of no advice to give. I should admit that the conditions of this experiment would have restrained me, and people like me, from undertaking it; but we are not the only ones concerned. There are also men of action, unshakeable in their convictions, impervious to doubt, and insensitive to the sufferings of anyone who stands between them and their goal. It is owing to such men that the tremendous attempt to institute a new order of society of this kind is actually being carried out in Russia now. At a time when great nations are declaring that they expect to find their salvation solely from a steadfast adherence to Christian piety, the upheaval in Russia - in spite of all its distressing features - seems to bring a promise of a better future. Unfortunately, neither our own misgivings nor the fanatical belief of the other side give us any hint of how the experiment will turn out. The future will teach us. Perhaps it will show that the attempt has been made prematurely and that a fundamental alteration of the social order will have little hope of success until new discoveries are made that will increase our control over the forces of Nature, and so make easier the satisfaction of our needs. It may be that only then will it be possible for a new order of society to emerge which will not only banish the material want of the masses, but at the same time meet the cultural requirements of individual men. But even so we shall still have to struggle for an indefinite length of time with the difficulties which the intractable nature of man puts in the way of every kind of social community.

Ladies and Gentlemen - Let me in conclusion sum up what I had to say about the relation of psychoanalysis to the question of a *Weltanschauung*. Psychoanalysis is not, in my opinion, in a position to create a *Weltanschauung* of its own. It has no need to do so, for it is a branch of science, and can subscribe to the scientific *Weltanschauung*. The latter, however, hardly merits such a high-sounding name, for it does not take everything into its scope, it is incomplete and it makes no claim to being comprehensive or to constituting a system. Scientific thought is still in its infancy; there are very many of the great problems with which it has as yet been unable to cope. A *Weltanschauung* based upon science has, apart from the emphasis it lays upon the real world, essentially negative characteristics, such as that it limits itself to truth and rejects illusions. Those of our fellowmen who are dissatisfied with this state of things and who desire something more for their momentary peace of mind may look for it where they can find it. We shall not blame them for doing so; but we cannot help them and cannot change our own way of thinking on their account.

Further Reading:

**[On Positivism \(above\)](#) [On Marxism \(above\)](#) [Biography](#) | [On the Unconscious](#) |
[Vygotsky on Freud](#) | [Marxist Psychology](#) | [Pavlov](#) | [Adler](#) | [Jung](#)
[Philosophy Archive @ marxists.org](#)**