



# Existenz

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## Wilhelm Dilthey and Jaspers' *Psychology of Worldviews*

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**Abstract:** The essay focuses on Wilhelm Dilthey's role in the argumentation of Karl Jaspers' *Psychology of Worldviews*. The concept of "worldview" is viewed in the secondary literature primarily in connection with the concept of shell or objectivized cage (*Gehäuse*) Jaspers borrowed from Max Weber. I show that this evaluation is one-sided, for it underestimates Dilthey's impact on Jaspers. His conception of a psychology of worldviews unites motives both from Dilthey and Weber, constructing in this way a weberized Dilthey or diltheyen Weber.

**Keywords:** Dilthey, Wilhelm; Jaspers, Karl; Weber, Max; worldview; world-picture; *Verstehen*; *Gehäuse*.

As is widely acknowledged, Wilhelm Dilthey influenced Karl Jaspers' philosophical and also psychiatric beginnings to a great extent. The major impact was usually identified in Jaspers' concern for a non-objectifying psychology which he saw anticipated in Dilthey's idea of a descriptive psychology. Some motives of Max Weber are also built into Jaspers' theory, among others the concept of "objectivized cage" (*Gehäuse*) that Jaspers links to his conception of "worldview." This description underestimates Dilthey's specific contribution to Jaspers' position, since his psychology of worldviews unites motives both from Dilthey and Weber. Despite its disappearance in Jaspers' later work the concept of worldview survives in the requirement of openness which remains a basic idea in his entire oeuvre. In this sense, worldview remains one of the central categories of Jaspers' thought, even if it is being marginalized in his later work.

"Worldview" in ordinary usage refers to an overall view, a comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world, a picture of what there is and what of it is like. Horst Thomé points out that the second part

of the German word *Weltanschauung* is difficult to translate into other languages. In French, one can find the synonyms "vision du monde" or "image du monde," in English, "worldview" and, seldom, "world picture." In philosophy, the term appears in modern times, it occurs in Immanuel Kant's analysis of the sublime, although it is not implying the plurality of worldviews. The term gains some prominence in Johann Gottlieb Fichte and in German idealism in which the plurality of positions or viewpoints that should be integrated into a unified line of thought emerges as a task for philosophy, paradigmatically so in G. W. F. Hegel's phenomenology.<sup>1</sup>

Turning to Jaspers' thought, significance is given to the term "worldview" merely by the fact that it figures in the title of his first philosophical work in a narrower sense. The term unambiguously refers to philosophical discussions of the *fin de siècle*, and thus

<sup>1</sup> Horst Thomé, "Weltanschauung," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Volume 12, eds. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, and Gottfried Gabriel, Basel: CH, Schwabe Verlag 2005, pp. 453-60.

formulates a philosophical project, even if the other compound in the title, namely, "psychology" conveys some undecidedness. As far as the philosophical treatment of worldviews is concerned, the question was paradigmatically introduced by Dilthey through his treatise *Die Typen der Weltanschauung und ihre Ausbildung in den metaphysischen Systemen* (1911). It should be added that the beginning of the twentieth century abounded in literature concerning worldviews. Oliver Immel gives a comprehensive overview of this historical fact in his introduction to the *Gesamtausgabe* edition of Jaspers' book.<sup>2</sup>

Dilthey's concern for worldviews can be traced back to the early phases of his thinking, yet an explicit theory of the worldviews (*Weltanschauungslehre*) was only elaborated in his last period. In his latest works he attempted to develop a "philosophy of philosophy" – some would nowadays call it "metaphilosophy" – and concluded that there are in the last analysis worldviews that are irreducible to one another. The problem of how to treat the plurality of worldviews, the multitude of such final perspectives arises for Dilthey, since he sees it from a philosophical point of view unsatisfactory to be unable to mediate between them or to hierarchize them rationally. This relativistic conclusion was repeatedly criticized, not the least by Edmund Husserl in the name of philosophy as rigorous science and who rejected Dilthey's position as "*Weltanschauung* philosophy."<sup>3</sup>

In Dilthey's account, there are three basic types of worldviews: (1) a naturalistic worldview with the primacy of the theoretical moment; (2) an objective-idealistic worldview with the primacy of the emotional moment; (3) a freedom-centered worldview with the primacy of the voluntary moment. The resulting positions are, then, naturalism, the idealism of freedom, and objective idealism. These worldviews also serve as a basis for religion and literature. The relativistic flavor of the major argument remained no secret for Dilthey as it is clear from the following passage that is claiming that the struggle between the main types of worldviews remains irresolvable:

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Immel, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," in Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 2019, pp. vii-lxxviii, here pp ix-xv.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Husserl "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science," in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, transl. Quentin Lauer, New York, NY: Harper and Row 1965, pp. 71-147, here pp. 122-47.

Religion and philosophy seek stability, efficacy, control, universal validity. But humanity has not advanced a single step on this path. The struggle among worldviews has not been resolved on any core issue. History serves to select among them, but its great types uphold themselves alongside each other as autocratic, indemonstrable and indestructible.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the influence regarding the relativity of the worldviews, Dilthey's impact upon Jaspers can be clearly seen in the methodology of his approach to psychology and mental life. It is the holistic attitude implied in Dilthey's idea of descriptive psychology that deeply inspired Jaspers. This can be seen, for instance, in the following characteristic passage in Jaspers:

Regarding each type of mindset, we inquire about its "structure." We postulate to call types of mindsets solely such ostensive entities of worldviews that are of a homogeneous structure. More complex structures are characterological and sociological types that are not to be developed here. This homogeneous structure can often be apprehended in formulae, that one then can call the "*principle*" of the type. It can sometimes be designated with a keyword that represents the "*idea*" of the type. Each type as such is a boundless whole whose ostensive development never reaches an end.<sup>5</sup>

This structural and holistic approach is, beyond doubt, influenced by Dilthey's legacy, namely the idea of descriptive psychology (*beschreibende Psychologie*) as opposed to explanatory psychology.<sup>6</sup> Although Jaspers repeatedly refers to Husserl in methodological issues, the idea of a psychology that does not proceed within the framework of causal explanations goes back to Dilthey's *Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie* (1894). Furthermore, the key term "structure" in the passage just quoted above

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Types of World-View and Their Development in Metaphysical Systems (1911)," transl. James McMahan and Rudolf A. Makkreel, in *Ethical and World-View Philosophy, Selected Works, Volume VI*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2019, pp. 249-94, here p. 262.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 2019, p. 267. [Henceforth cited as *PW*. Translations by Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer]

<sup>6</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, "Ideas Concerning a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology (1894)," transl. Richard M. Zaner in *Descriptive Psychology and Historical Understanding*, The Hague, NL: Martinus Nijhoff 1977, pp. 21-120. [Henceforth cited as *DP*]

might also have been inspired by the central idea of Dilthey's conception that is based on the structural nexus (*Strukturzusammenhang*) of psychic life. Dilthey's systematic intention with his structural or descriptive psychology consisted in his life-long search for a proper understanding of the humanities, of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, a project in need of the development of a new kind of psychology that is not based on the methodology of natural sciences. The explanatory psychology arising in his time followed the explanatory methodology of natural sciences, and so tried to explain psychic phenomena in terms of

a system of causality [*Kausalzusammenhang*] by means of a limited number of well-determined elements (i.e., the components of the system). [DP 23]

In contrast to this approach, Dilthey attempted to elaborate a suitable psychology for grasping the elements of psychic life which are not isolated objects observed and described from an outside perspective but "are given originaliter from within as real and as a living continuum [*Zusammenhang*]" (DP 27).

This difference served as a basis for distinguishing explanation and understanding in terms of divergent ways of proceeding within the sciences of nature and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. The fundamental difference of the objects of these two groups of sciences were part of the most durable convictions of Dilthey whose project was from the very beginning to conceive of a philosophical foundation of the humanities, of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, in a historicist vein. One of the major merits of Dilthey's efforts is to pose the question of the peculiarity of the humanities. In doing so, his point of departure is the insight that the humanities cannot be treated in the same way as the natural sciences because of the specific nature of their objects. In the positivist conception prevailing in Dilthey's time, science was regarded as a search for general laws and regularities that can be justified by empirical observation. It has already been noticed before Dilthey, for example by the German historian Gustav Droysen, that historians do not seek to formulate universal rules concerning observable phenomena, rather they try to deepen our understanding of singular events and to grasp their uniqueness. Historical research does not want to find laws or tendencies in history, as Karl Popper suggests in his *The Poverty of Historicism*, but it strives for describing events in their particularity.

Sharing the dissatisfaction of the historians with the positivist interpretation of science, Dilthey, in turn,

is aware of the need for developing a philosophical foundation for the humanities. This foundation ought to show how it is possible and legitimate to talk of a kind of knowledge that is characteristic for the humanities, regardless of the fact that it cannot be conceived in terms of general laws that are being justified by means of empirical observation. Dilthey, thus, breaks with the assumption that all science has the same structure, and he attains a dualistic view of science that deeply influenced the discussion in the twentieth century. On a methodological level, he proposes the special operation called *Verstehen* (understanding) as opposed to *Erklären* (explanation):

there exists a system of nature for the physical and natural sciences only thanks to inferential arguments which supplement the data of experience by means of a combination of hypotheses. In the human studies, to the contrary, the nexus of psychic life constitutes originally a primitive and fundamental datum. We explain nature, we understand psychic life. For in inner experience [*innere Erfahrung*] the processes of one thing acting on another, and the connections of functions or individual members of psychic life into a whole are also given. The experienced [*erlebte*] whole [*Zusammenhang*] is primary here, the distinction among its members only comes afterwards. [DP 27-8]

It has to be remarked, however, that Dilthey had never reached a philosophical foundation of the *Geisteswissenschaften* he thought to be satisfactory, so that it remains an open question as to whether or not his project can be realized.

Turning back to Dilthey's influence on Jaspers' perspective, it should be highlighted that the latter's concern was not only the relativity of worldviews but also that he included aspects that are subordinated in Dilthey's account. There is no doubt that for Jaspers Weber has been more important than Dilthey, since the former embodied for him the philosopher par excellence and he was deeply impressed by Weber's conception of science (PW 23-4). Moreover, in his 1958 book on Weber, Jaspers characterizes Weber as being "the greatest German of our age."<sup>7</sup> The specific meaning of Jaspers' project of a psychology of worldviews, thus, cannot be traced back solely to Dilthey's inspiration. At this point, I do not want to follow every detail of Weber's inspiration for Jaspers; I reduce the focus to the topic of worldviews. Already

<sup>7</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Max Weber: Politiker, Forscher, Philosoph*. München, DE: Piper Verlag 1958, p. 7.

on the level of language use there are important impulses of Weber in Jaspers that can be shown by focusing on the concept of shell or objectivized cage (*Gehäuse*). Jaspers used the term to accentuate the function of worldviews to screen off what is not significant for life and action. His primary concern was the closeness of every worldview which enables one to act by excluding infinite many options. This interest might be regarded as an implicit continuation of Weber's question of *Lebensführung*, of the conduct of one's life that has been proposed by Wilhelm Hennis as being the center of Weber's huge *oeuvre*.<sup>8</sup>

The fundamental significance of the relevance of leading one's life in Weber can be illustrated by his analysis of science in his lecture "Science as Vocation." In Weber's view, scientific results, that are to be recognized by everyone, are opposed to the answers to existential questions that are obtained by decisions that are being made in support of basic convictions in one's life. According to his evaluation, modern science is not able to provide answers to the most fundamental ultimate questions concerning human life, and so these questions cannot be answered unless one is accepting decision that simply cannot be substantiated. In summing up the positive features of science, apart from a potential domination of nature and of the behavior of people by science, Weber mentions the development of methods of thought and the role of clarity (*Klarheit*) in making decisions and evaluating one's convictions concerning the fundamental questions of life.<sup>9</sup> Drawing this conclusion, however, has already been prepared by Leo Tolstoy. Weber writes:

Tolstoy gave the simplest answer to the only important question: "What should we do? How should we live?" The fact that science does not give us this answer is completely undeniable. The only question is in what sense does science give us "no" answer and whether or not it could perhaps be of use to somebody who poses the question properly. [SV 18]

This specific suggestion of meaninglessness of science for one's existence is even reinforced by Weber's

description of how scientific results become rapidly obsolete:

each of us scientists knows that what one has worked through will be out of date in ten, twenty, or fifty years. That is the fate of science; indeed, it is the true meaning of scientific work. [SV 12]

In other words, scientific results fit into the process of infinite progression made up of achievements of generations of scholars by their very becoming out of date.

For Jaspers, worldviews had the same systematic position as objectivized cages or shells (*Gehäuse*) that have the function of protecting the individual from the infinite possibilities (of evaluation and action). Jaspers' focus is directed on the closed form of such worldviews and their connection with living a human life and acting as an individual. He has not given a clear definition of "worldview"; the encompassing, total character of worldviews is emphasized in accordance with ordinary usage at the outset of *Psychology of Worldviews*. Worldview is contrasted with what is partial, be it knowledge or ethical conduct or other principles.

Later in the book, Jaspers introduces a distinction between world-picture (*Weltbild*) and attitudes. The former designates the object-side within the subject-object divide, while the latter refers to the subject-side. He writes:

Insofar as the mind exists in the subject-object split, the psychological point of view when coming from the subject side coincides with attitudes, and with world-pictures when coming from the object side. [PW 143]

A world-picture is the totality of one's object-side contents (*gegenständliche Inhalte*), and this conception leads Jaspers to the concept of the objectivated cage or shell:

Or we could call the world-picture *shell*, within which the psychological life is partially captured, and which can also be created from within itself and which renders possible its external manifestation.

We live constantly in such a shell. The most distant horizon of our world-picture unwittingly we deem to be absolute. Ultimately, somewhere and somehow our world-picture is to us always a given. [PW 143]

Here world-picture or worldview is regarded in terms of its evidential character, in terms of its unquestioned function of providing orientation to someone. It is unavoidable to hold a worldview for it is unavoidable to act and to react. This function

<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Webers Fragestellung: Studien zur Biographie des Werks*, Tübingen, DE: J. C. B. Mohr 1987, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation'*, transl. Michael John, eds. Peter Lassman, Irving Velody, and Herminio Martins, London, UK: Unwin Hyman 1989, pp. 3-31, here pp. 25-6. [Henceforth cited as SV]

might be one of the reasons why Jaspers, although motivated by Max Weber, does not follow the latter's entirely negative conception of worldviews. Yet in the development of his argument, Jaspers requires a principal openness with regard to the content of one's worldview. This requirement follows from his conviction that one's worldview or framework of orientation must be confronted, at least in principle, with experience. Jaspers claims that humans get motivated to question their worldviews since they get into conflict with reality so that finally what happens differs from what they had expected.

What actually prompts us to asking questions is the experience of fluctuation regarding one's own worldview. We have this experience due to the consequences that are stemming from our actions and thoughts, in conflicting with reality, which nearly always reveals itself as being different in the actual occurrences than what we had thought. [PW 28]

To be unable to make experiences in an emphatic sense means to become rigid within a framework of a worldview, in a *Gehäuse*. For Jaspers, the problematic aspect of this rigidity consists in creating a tendency of shielding one from boundary situations (*Grenzsituationen*). And this is a central aspect of the *Psychology of Worldviews*, namely, the distinction between persons who are living with a point of reference in infinity and persons who exist in rigid frameworks of orientation (*Gehäuse*).

Lastly, it should be noted that, despite Jaspers' assurance concerning the continuity of his later work with the *Psychology of Worldviews*, the concept of "worldview" scarcely occurs in his later writings. This could partly be explained by the fact that worldview

is connected to the individual, and from the thirties onward Jaspers had paid much less attention to the problems of the individual. However, the requirement of openness which has been shown to be an implication of the disquisition of worldviews is integrated into the later concept of existential communication.

To conclude, in this essay Dilthey's specific contribution to Jaspers' overall philosophy and especially to his *Psychology of Worldviews* has been addressed; first, by describing how and in what respect Dilthey's work inspired Jaspers' thought, and second, by examining in what way some motives of Weber are built into Jaspers' theory. Finally, I have commented on the seeming disappearance of the concept of worldview in his later work, arguing that it survives in the requirement of openness which remains a basic idea in Jaspers' entire *oeuvre*.

The first part argues that the presentation of Dilthey's descriptive psychology and his late philosophical project regarding worldviews turned out to be an important point of reference for Jaspers. A significant methodological aspect of this inspiration consists in the recognition of *Verstehen* as being a distinctive characteristic regarding the study of human beings. The second part argues how Jaspers took Weber's concept of objectivized cage (*Gehäuse*) seriously by using this term in order to highlight the closeness of worldviews. By being more interested than Weber in the existential meaning of overall worldviews, Jaspers emphasized the importance of keeping an open mind with regard to making new experiences in order to avoid being captured within the rigidity of one's worldview.