

Josef Šafařík

**Seven
Letters
to Melin**

Essays on the Soul,
Science,
Art and Mortality

SEVEN LETTERS TO MELIN

ESSAYS ON THE SOUL, SCIENCE, ART AND MORTALITY

Josef Šafařík

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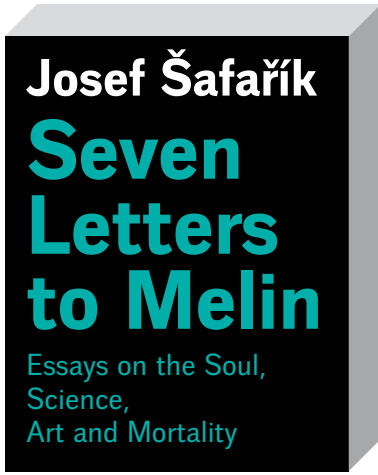
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1

SUICIDE

MY DEAR MELIN, – Well, well. Just look what has slipped off my pen! Melin, a name forgotten and left behind in some high school class, a nickname. God knows where it came from. I only know that you did not regard it as offensive; rather the opposite. You only used to frown when addressed in this way by someone from whom you would rather have kept as much distance as possible. This nickname was rather a sign of trust and intimacy, and it seems to me that it was exactly some such kind of feeling that guided my hand to write it and not cross it out.

Of course it is to you that I am indebted for this feeling. You would like us to discuss the case of Robert in the same unbiased and unconstrained frame of mind that, as young lads, we were once capable of talking about anything. You write that the more you think about the unfortunate end of our kinsman, the less certain you are about the ‘true causes’ of his ‘injudicious act’. Oh truly, these our certitudes! For everyone whom it concerned and did not concern, Robert’s death came as ‘logically’ and ‘inevitably’ as one and one equals two.

Our worthy aunt has decided that Robert was bound to come to such a bad end because he had forsaken God. Apparently Havlíček Borovský¹ also came to a bad end for the same reason. On the other hand, in the case of John of Nepomuk,² she claims that he came to a bad end because he did not forsake God. It was clear to our equally worthy uncle that Robert was spoiled by money. Indeed, money – the key to everything! As soon as money gets mixed up in human affairs, then all other reasons seem groundless and spurious alongside it. For you Robert was simply a creature without discipline and orderliness. ‘Asocial inclinations’ led him to run away from work in

1 Czech writer and journalist, important figure in the Czech National Revival, expelled from theology studies (1821–1856).

2 Also known as Jan Nepomuk, Czech saint (c. 1335–1393): according to some sources, drowned at the behest of Wenceslaus, King of Bohemia, for refusing to divulge secrets of confessional.

his father's factory – and in the end also from his home – to eke out a miserable existence as a vagabond.

However, Robert's deed has started to grow between us and has now even attracted your attention. You tell me that recently you have read a lot of specialist books and that as a result you are well on the way to understanding Robert not as a wicked person, but rather as a sick one. You divine 'demonic complexes' in his soul and restraints that human society placed on him. You want to rid yourself of all moral and conventional preconceptions and to examine his case as a scientist, unbiased by anything other than the will to understand and discover the truth. You admit that the term 'wicked' has no place in a scientist's terminology. But do you think that the term 'sick' has a place there? This is also something we will have to talk about.

And those demonic complexes! Society recognizes no other complexes than demonic ones. What is more disturbing is that neither does Freud recognize any others. At Calvary, society crucified three scoundrels. If you protest and claim that there were only two scoundrels and one saint, then you raise the question of what exactly a society is that does not distinguish between scoundrels and saints; that, among those who cannot get along with it, does not differentiate those who suffer demonic complexes from those who suffer angelic complexes. If it was difficult to answer this question truthfully in the past, then it is all the more difficult today, when society has become the ultimate authority and the final criterion not only in praxis, but also in theory. Nevertheless, in spite of this it will be necessary for us to reply to this question also.

There is one circumstance, I would say, that distorts your view of Robert and also of yourself. Your fortune, and also your misfortune, is that you are paid by society for your research activity regardless of whether you manage to find something out or not. I do not underestimate this material security, but neither do I overlook how, as over time your scepticism has been growing, you are becoming

accustomed to stabilize your life more from the outside than from the inside. Service stripes on your sleeve, social and professional position, material security, a wife, children, and so on: all these are keeping you above water more than you are willing to admit. But I have a question for you: The less your life is driven from within, are not the truths that you produce thereby the less worthy of attention? In this way, do you not scoop water more shallowly from the pool of life? If you use scaffolding from outside as a support for your life, you can then of course permit yourself a descent into the lowest depths of scepticism without harming yourself greatly. But where, then, is this dreadful reality that is reflected in your scepticism?

None of us is in any doubt what to think about, for instance, the ‘abysses of life and the rages of the soul’ in the verses of a teenager who lives in affluence at his mother’s, diligently attends the corso and visits the local cafe, and occasionally emboldened by alcohol sneaks through the red-light district. But what to think about this? Your searching and researching have led you to the conclusion that, for instance, ‘Life is nothing other than a whirl of electrons’ or that ‘Life is nothing other than mutual devouring and being devoured’. And I ask: What now? What follows from this? And you: nothing. Your conscience has not moved an inch to the right or to the left. Your morals have remained exactly the same. Your everyday routine has not changed in the slightest. And I ask in amazement: Where is the reality of these newly found and hard-won truths? How can one believe in them if their black hopelessness has neither crushed you nor galvanized you? Has neither frozen you into a sacrificial animal nor transformed you into a wild predator? In what way is your pessimism less merely formal than the pessimism of the teenage poet?

Where exactly is reality in the flood of what is spoken, lectured, written, and thought? Take, for example, books. A book that I have not yet read haunts me as a reproach of an unfulfilled duty. And when I get hold of it and read it, I close the book – even if the author has excellently answered all the questions that I posed to him – with

the feeling that the main thing, the final thing, the conclusive thing is still missing. This is not a rebuke to the author. It is a rebuke to books, to words, to ideas. An idea is evidently capable of accommodating more than it can bear, more than it is capable of delivering, of guaranteeing.

Professor Vladimír Úlehla³ contemptuously assigns the moniker of ‘Platonists’ to those who lament over the successes of reason, while for him those who rejoice in the success of reason are ‘Aristotelians’. If we call a success of reason the conclusion that life is nothing more than a conglomerate of physical-chemical reactions, then an Aristotelian has precisely as many reasons to rejoice over this as a Platonist. One thing is certain: if it was feeling or some other irrational thing that led me as a Platonist to this dismal conception of life and the world, then I would lament over this success of feeling in precisely the same way that I lament over this success of reason. As Pascal says: ‘Do they profess to have delighted us by telling us that they hold our soul to be only a little wind and smoke, especially by telling us this in a haughty and self-satisfied tone of voice? Is this a thing to say gaily? Is it not, on the contrary, a thing to say sadly, as the saddest thing in the world?’⁴

Rarely elsewhere than precisely here are we confronted more forcefully by the question of whether this victorious cry about truth, about a truth so saddening and mournful for human beings, does not have its origin somewhere other than in this truth. If a person exults and rejoices over the discovery of a truth which – if it were to penetrate his heart and really become a truth for him – would necessarily paralyse him and suffocate every spark of joy and appetite for living in him, this cannot, I think, be explained in any other way than that this process of searching for and discovering truth has

³ Czech botanist and ecologist (1888–1947).

⁴ Blaise Pascal, *The Thoughts of Blaise Pascal*, trans. by W. F. Trotter (New York: P. F. Collier 1910), para. 194.

some other sense than truth itself. We can observe how, while this new truth depresses us and fills us with hopelessness and emptiness, on the other hand it gives its discoverer a feeling of self-realization, a feeling that from someone anonymous, from a nobody, he has become someone. The discoverer of this devastating truth draws from it the precise opposite of what this truth contains and of what he announces to us, the others. It is worthy of note that a person can acquire significance by proclaiming human beings an insignificant occurrence of the universe. Preaching about the insignificance of a person in the universe evidently does not have the purpose of renouncing a significant social standing among people. We should keep this in mind during the following deliberations.

It is possible to ask whether a person does not renounce one existence (a metaphysical one, for instance) only on the condition that he receives full compensation in another existence (a social one, for example). Or, to put the question in another way: whether, if he becomes at home in one existence, he does not die away in another existence; and whether, if he lives one existence, then he does not experience the other one only abstractly, in mere thought. Then we would understand how he can very easily allow himself the darkest scepticism in that existence that he experiences merely as abstract thought, given that the existence that he actually lives remains untouched by this scepticism.

Have you never paused to think sometimes, my dear friend, that among scientists, even though they are today the main producers of scepticism and pessimism, suicide 'for scientific reasons' is an unknown phenomenon, while for instance among artists, where the combination of words 'creation and doubting' results in a complete contradiction in terms, suicide is, so to speak, the order of the day? Is this not because, while the scientist thinks in a world in which he does not live, the artist thinks in the same world in which he lives? And, while therefore the former can permit himself as much scepticism in his thoughts as he pleases, the latter cannot do so with impunity?

It might seem that by this I am intending to show the falseness of the path that you are taking. In no way am I doing so. I know it is precisely this path that you have marked out as the only true path – as the objective path, as you say. One of the main principles of the scientific search for truth is that we cut ourselves off from our entire lived experience and put our trust only in what we think and observe, or today even only in what we can measure and calculate. This maximum curtailment of the human being as a condition for finding truth will demand a lot of our attention here. For the moment let us merely affirm that the more ground is gained by this method of searching for truth, the more a person's internal and metaphysical existence is cut down to zero, and therefore a person tries all the more to catch hold of an external existence, a physical and social one. Internal props collapse; external props are sought. The emptiness that is left over after the disappearance of the soul is best suppressed when this emptiness puts on a uniform. A uniform is a magical means which compensates for the loss of internal reality with external reality. But one uniform alone is no uniform. A million uniforms increases the weight of each one of them tenfold compared to one hundred thousand uniforms. There is an instinctive enmity between a uniform and a personality. There is an essential dispute between convention and social morality on the one side, and a free and creative being on the other. Because – and let us make no mistake about it – freedom is merely another word for internal reality. We can observe the strange effort of modern science, which – while destroying our internal reality – proclaims the promise of freedom for us. It liberates us, but at what cost? Precisely at the cost of freedom.

In this bleak situation we place our hopes in the master builder's recipe: more shovels and less Latin! However, the question concerning whether there should be more shovels or more Latin entirely misses the point. The entire difficulty is concealed in the fact that it is only the attainment of freedom that leads most of us to

a realization of what exactly it is that cannot live without freedom. The master builder's recipe – this is the redemptive slogan of all those who have been liberated without having 'internal reasons' for freedom. We expected freedom to tell us who we are and what we want, but freedom lets us run back and forth from Latin to shovels and from shovels to Latin, and thus shows us that it is a matter of complete indifference whether we do the one or the other. We do not feel in ourselves any urge to do primarily one, and not the other, and therefore we have elevated to a morality of life the opinion that the purpose of doing anything is making money. Profession – that is our uniform. Being a slave to money – that is the sense of our liberated life. We have convinced ourselves that we carry the weight of the world on our shoulders and that freedom is something like a well-deserved paradise. But, when we have acquired this freedom, we quickly renounce it again because we feel that there has never been a heavier burden on our shoulders.

No one personifies this strange state of affairs better than the so-called 'practical' person – that is, a moneymaking person. Without difficulty you can see that this person, who is today imposed on you as a model and an example – even a moral one – is without any shadow of a doubt a liberated person. What is more doubtful, however, is whether this person is also a free person in the true sense of the word. The ease with which such a person succumbs to despotism of all kinds (or even positively solicits such despotism) and the fact that the very word 'practical' in many cases means precisely this moral submissiveness – all this indicates a being who, even though he is begot by freedom, does not himself beget this freedom.

We are witnesses of the strange phenomenon that in the 'age of freedom' a truly free soul must try to win its freedom in a period under a commando of money-earning people with no less effort and sacrifices than was the case under the rule of despots. Indeed, in many ways the position of a truly free soul is even more problematical. In a state of political or clerical serfdom it is not easy to deny

that a free soul beats for something 'higher' – the conscience of the serfs is on its side. What to say, however, about a person who ardently strives for freedom in the 'age of freedom'? This is precisely what is ridiculous and senseless: that so-called 'decent' and 'conscientious' people do not greatly differentiate individuals of the type like Robert from subversives, layabouts, and parasites; apart, of course, from those rare exceptions when the activity or works of such an individual become in good time a source of regular income. We see a source of anarchy and subversion in everyone who does not drag the burden of a profession, the horse-gin of regular working hours, on the back of his neck. Do whatever you like, but do it from eight until noon, and then again from two until six, except Sundays, and make sure you are paid for it. Because the circumstance that you earn money in some way assuages in us every concern about your activity. The revolutionary, the prophet, the reformer: each of these becomes harmless as soon as we award him a certification to carry on a trade. Today we would not regard it as necessary to crucify Christ. We would let him eke out a living as an 'officially authorized clairvoyant' at fairs and festivals. By this I mean to say that we would not deny him any of that indulgent respect that we show to this woe-ful but proper livelihood.

'The main thing is to make an honest living,' your servant was wont to say, as in the mornings she cleared away the used cups and test tubes with the same gestures and in the same state of mind as when she cleared away the plates and pans in the kitchen after lunch. At the time the theme of 'Robert' was a topic of daily discussion. According to this uniformed morality, it does not depend on what you do; it depends only on how much of it you do. It does not matter what you discover by your efforts, what growth you achieve, what development you undergo; it depends only on how much money you receive for this on Saturday or on the first day of the month. If you intend to protest, then they smash you down with a trump card: family, children!

Indeed, for the most part we marry in time for us, at an age when we can no longer pretend that life has not defeated us, to have something with which to reassure ourselves that life has not actually defeated us. Because a child is an acknowledged argument making sense of life. In addition, it is an animated and moving argument. In the warm glow of a family hearth and among the golden rays of children's smiles even an empty cellophane balloon shines like a mature and rich product. Robert could never understand why people who live only for their children are born as human beings, and not as rabbits or partridges.

Family and children do not support you in the slightest in your internal impulse to live and work as a researcher, and not for instance as a stockbroker, an advocate or a businessman. It can even be said that, although your feeling tells you that the activity that you pursue is 'more valuable' than other activities, morality tells you that, in the interest of your family and children, you should pursue something more lucrative. Family and children cannot serve you as a basis for evaluating what you do out of internal necessity, because their existence depends on your profession and not on your internal reasons. For your family, just as for your servant, the only important thing is that you are a state employee with a retirement pension; that you are a scientific researcher is a matter of complete indifference to them. Nevertheless, you find the entire value and worth of your life in the fact that you are a researcher, not in the fact that you are a wage earner. I am sure that, if it was to occur to the state, as the decision of some godlike or infernal conference, to pay a salary for instance to artists instead of scientists, then you would not veer from your path one iota, even if your researching was to bring you so little that you would have to live with the lot of – well, let us say Robert. However, even if this fate were a matter of indifference to you, it would not be a matter of indifference to your family, to your children, to your servants. And so, you see that family, children, and servants, and indeed all decent and proper people, do not deny respect to you

as a soulless robot, but they do deny you this respect as a free and creative being.

We live in an era in which every activity that is carried out for money, career, and social success is regarded as excellent and sensible, while every activity for which a person has his 'internal reasons' is regarded as incomprehensible and suspicious. To perform any kind of activity as a gainful means of employment – whether it be science, art, or philosophy, or whether it means collecting mushrooms or bird eggs, reading cards, or performing somersaults on the horizontal bar – all this seems appropriate and reasonable to the human mind. However, to be an engineer and to simultaneously cultivate chamber music, or to be an officer with the dragoons and also be incapable of living without philosophy – this provokes amazement, indignation, sympathy, laughter. People have arrived at the conviction that the only activities that make sense are those that you do for money. You are troubled by the mystery of perception and truth? So, go and become a professor and earn some money with this. Your heart yearns for God? Then, become a vicar and collect a tithe for that. You love books? Then set up a bookshop or become a librarian – with a state pension of course!

And thus, disconnecting truth from the way in which we live leads us to a strange piece of wisdom: that only a madman does something really and truly. If we wanted to augment the number of definitions of a human being as a creature distinct from animals, then we could say that a human being is a creature in need of salvation – whatever meaning each of us imbues this term with. Every one of us wants to be saved in his own way and according to his own taste, and all his efforts, desires, and thoughts are directed toward this end. Or rather – were directed towards it, until modern science opened up in front of him an abyss that earlier ages did not know to such an extent: an abyss between desire and thought, between salvation and truth. Neither antiquity, in which philosophy played the leading role, nor the medieval age, in which theology played this role, knew

such an abyss. A person of an earlier era believed that if he found the truth, he would save his soul; and a ‘naive’ person still believes this. However, a person, informed by modern science, who knows that life is nothing more than a ‘whirl of electrons’, nothing more than a ‘conglomerate of physical-chemical reactions’, nothing more than a ‘mechanism for the transformation of energy’, or simply and briefly a ‘false problem’ – this person knows that the cognizance of truth and the salvation of his soul are incompatible things.

Up until a certain time the church was the only institution of truth and also of salvation. However, the onset of modern science proceeded under the banner of truth, and the church, deprived of authority in matters of truth, also lost authority in matters of salvation. However, when it became apparent that modern science is indifferent and alien to human fate, human beings started on the one hand to flee to more tangible things, and on the other hand to turn back tentatively to the church, or in some cases to found new, more free-thinking ones. And so, on the whole, it can be said that we are in a situation in which we have a choice: either truth at the cost of salvation or salvation at the cost of truth. In spite of many attempts at reconciliation, what was written around half a century ago by free-thinking theologian Auguste Sabatier⁵ still applies: ‘The antithesis today is so acute that church theology, as it wanted to live in a certain arranged and interim peace with modern science, decided to ignore it, and modern science decided to ignore church theology.’

However, modern science and theology can succeed in living in arranged peace, when each cultivates its own world of ideas for itself. But how is peace possible between an intellect captivated by modern natural science and a heart rising upwards, when both – intellect and heart – have made up their minds to settle down in one body, in one being, and to struggle for dominion over this being?

5 French Protestant theologian (1839–1901).

I would say that it was precisely this impossibility of reconciliation between science and religion that contributed to a large extent to that fact that people started to grasp at more tangible things and to the fact that modern theories, which evaluate the world of the spirit as a mere ideological superstructure of material and economic reality, capture the state of affairs – even if not for the whole of human history, then certainly at least for the present. If such evident and irreconcilable opposites as science and religion are able to live side by side in peace, then I think that there is no better way to explain this than that they are conducting their real battle for existence and nonexistence on another field than the field of cognition and religious faith. For instance, you do not need to be endowed with any special power of sight to see that science and the church are actual powers precisely to the extent that they are material, technical, economic, and political powers. This strange human ability to think in one world and live in another world enables science and religion to live in mutual peace in the world of ideas, even though – and possibly precisely because – they are in conflict in the material world.

Humankind could not have produced the modern natural scientist as long as it both thought and lived in terms of religion. Therefore, when this scientist came on the scene, he gradually had more and more dealings with the church as a political and economic power than as a religious one. The victory of his science was more a question of conquering this material power of the church rather than its diminishing spiritual power. Until he had developed in technology an adequate weapon for this battle, he found himself more often in a real fire than in the fire of learned discussions. The behaviour of priests had no less influence on the creation of natural scientific methods than the behaviour of things did. Many scientific principles prescribe simply doing the exact opposite of what theologians do. Thus, for example, every orthodox scientist holds the conviction that ‘the exclusion of the transcendent is

a necessary negative requirement of any kind of scientific thinking’.

The necessity of the battle with the church gave rise to the fact that one of the leading principles of the scientific search for truth is defensive, negative: for science scientific truth cannot be in any way a revealed truth – that is, a truth spontaneously received from somewhere. This is the reason why, in the search for truth, science cannot share with anyone or anything; why in the search for truth it does not acknowledge a division of labour; why – for it – art, religion, philosophy cannot be regarded as knowledge; why science cannot recognize as true anything that makes a claim to truth until it has strained this claim through its test tubes; in short, why for the natural scientist there is no truth outside of natural science. Science cannot acknowledge as a reality anything for which internal affirmation, internal participation or faith are necessary; it cannot acknowledge anything that does not flourish under a sceptical approach. It has good reasons for this. It says: we are deceived by tricksters; we are deceived by our senses, by our own imagination and logic. However, all of these reasons are not enough to prove that it is not possible that there exists a certain reality that requires of us more faith than doubt.

To this day, many scientists in the course of their work do not neglect to refer to priests and the battle against them. American chemist Clifford C. Furnas in no way hides the source of his ‘Aristotelian’ joy over the success of reason. He writes: ‘If life, even the very simplest form, is ever synthesized it will be a sad day for the clergy, because the implication that man is nothing more than a complicated form of laboratory product would be a little too much for even the most liberal cleric.’⁶

I guess, my dear friend, that the opposition of many scientists, including you, against the so-called spiritualist direction in current

⁶ Clifford C. Furnas, *The Next Hundred Years: The Unfinished Business of Science* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1936), p. 141.

science has the same roots. In a review of one popular science book you wrote: 'It is necessary to reject absolutely every inclination toward spiritualist and anthropomorphic science, if we are not to fall back once again into mediaeval darkness, under the yoke of a new mysticism, a new theology, new priests.'

My dear friend, let us try to foresee how the magnificent adventure of modern science may end – whether in mysticism or in something else. However, it makes no great sense to speculate about whether the mediaeval age or anything else is 'dark' or 'light', until we have established, on the one hand the share of what someone lives and experiences in the reality of the world, and on the other hand the share of what a person thinks in this reality.

I know that you are quite dejected at the thought that life and the world could be something that it is impossible to show to people during the light of day, without hypnosis and suggestion, without theatrical illumination, by a simple appeal to human reason. However, I ask once again whether in the end your explanation of life and the world are not determined more by the nature of priests than the nature of things; and whether the extremity of religion is not driving you to an opposite extreme.

In order for religion to save mankind, it proclaims this world a delusion; science, aiming to save this world, proclaims mankind a delusion. But at the same time it annunciates the truth to mankind. To whom? To a delusion?

You reproach religion for having, against all truth, torn mankind out of nature, out of its natural rules and order. But what does natural science teach us? That the human soul in the world is something so heterogeneous and alien that a human being must shed its humanness in order to approach the order of nature even a little; that the natural order knows nothing of human beings ('a false problem') and that the world does not need humankind for its harmony. Does not natural science build a higher barrier between man and the world than any religion has ever done?

There is no doubt that, if natural scientists were to imitate the behaviour of priests and were to use their knowledge for mysterious ceremonies, then we would kneel in dread and admiration before scientists and would laugh at priests as at pitiable bunglers. However, in this way I ask myself how it can be that the same mistrust that I hold toward the view of the world induced during mysterious ceremonies in the gloom of candles and the mist of incense, I also entertain toward the sober, dry words put forward by an honest man who is trying to make life and the world comprehensible to me by expelling secrecy and ecstatic rapture from thought.

A human being is simply not capable of belief. He is not capable of being convinced of something, as long as his being remains divided in two. And today it is not merely divided in two; today it is split into many parts, of which each part makes a claim for everything, for the entire human being. This corresponds peculiarly to the process of splitting up that has occurred at the same time in the field of science itself and which has led to the formation of numerous specialized fields of science, each of which lives more or less independently within its demarcated section of phenomena, but from there tries to explain the entire world. In this way, it makes all other fields of science merely a part of itself, in precisely the same way that each splinter of a human being declares the entire remainder as a part of itself. Even within the limits of science itself the division of labour is a deception.

To the fundamental questions of life and the world, today a human being receives such strange replies as: I, as a theologian, cannot truthfully say anything other than ...; I, as a biologist, cannot truthfully say anything other than ...; I, as a chemist ...; I as a psychologist, economist, statistician, lawyer ...; and so on.

I ask what should a being do who is neither a priest of this church or another, nor a biologist, a sociologist, an economist, a member of guild X or Y, but who feels that primarily he is a mere human creature and that he needs to hear something like this: 'I, as a hu-

man creature, cannot truthfully say anything other than ...?' Oh yes, here is the stumbling block. A human creature who wants to live as though it has all its limbs in the right place, all directed toward one and the same purpose, all of a sudden feels like a monster, a freak, a conglomerate of separate pieces stuck together. A human creature who wants to believe that the elements of his soul were born and grew like the limbs of his body out of a natural need of cooperation, finds out all of a sudden that these elements of the soul and of the body became entangled with each other in order to mutually deceive each other, to fool each other, to throttle each other. He learns that, if he wants to attain the truth, then he must place on the throne of judgement his heart alone, his liver alone, his stomach alone, his sexual organs alone ... and everything else he must silence, anaesthetize, and obliterate from himself. Are we born as freaks, or is this entire dance of truths a colossal monstrosity? Is the form into which we are born monstrous, or are our truths monstrous? The chemist, for instance, demands that feeling has nothing to do with chemistry. Very well! What, however, does chemistry have to do with feelings? What is very strange is this: one organ silences the other organs and arrogates for itself the right to produce its own truth as the truth of all. And a being who feels a desperate need to remain a whole being, not crippled, not eviscerated, who does not want to be a mere brain, a mere stomach or sexual organ on the flagstaff, receives from the guilds and the social associations the mark on his forehead precisely of being crippled, restricted, immature, the mark of dilettantism.

Tell me, Melin, if you feel the necessity to argue using the phrases: I as a biologist, sociologist, economist, and so on, cannot truthfully say anything other than ... Do you not feel at the same time that in this way you are fleeing for help to a guild for it to give testimony about something on its responsibility, while within you yourself something categorically demands that you give a different testimony about this? – Is this not something like admitting: 'I do not entirely believe this, but I have given my word that I will not

say anything different'? – Is it not like admitting: 'I, as a biologist, physicist, economist, am saying something which I could not say as a person'? – Not to give answers about matters such as other people have agreed to give answers to them, but rather to convey only your own feelings, this would place you in the ranks of fantasists and perhaps even liars. To answer something other than what you feel, this does not exclude you from the ranks of scientists, the experts of truth. What, then, is truth? Is it a monster produced by us, or are we monsters begot by it?

If a biologist speaks as a human being, he speaks thus: 'From a value so supreme as is the love of two people among others becomes in Christianity fornication.' (Úlehla) If a biologist speaks as a biologist, he says: 'The young man in spring will never believe that love is only a matter of molecules.'⁷

These two statements open up before us the entire abyss between the human world as a matter of thought and the human world as experienced. Here we have in a nutshell the spiritual crisis of modern man, a crisis comprising an incomprehensible conflict between truth and salvation. However, it is precisely in the fact that this divergence of truth and salvation is felt as something unnatural, something against sense, that we can find comfort that a human being in this world is not a monster or something deformed, an alien and disparate element, that the fundamental conflict between the world and the human soul is an artificial conflict, a deception. A human being can only be saved by values, but science has nothing other to offer him than molecules. However, humankind does not trust salvation without truth, and cannot reconcile itself with a truth that does not bring it salvation. That is why we can also see that preachers of salvation also preach truth, and that preachers of truth also promise us salvation.

The truth of the preachers of salvation – that is, the truth of theologians and priests – has not fundamentally changed since the times

7 Ibid., p. 50.

of the ‘dark mediaeval era’. Accepting this truth entails dealing with science by simply turning one’s back on it. It still presents itself as a *teaching based on faith* (that is, something that you should believe) and not as a *branch of knowledge* (that is, something about which you can and should persuade yourself). And where teaching based on faith shrouds itself in the vestments of scientific truth, bountifully substantiated by scientific literature, we learn things such as this: ‘Against the direct creation of each human soul the objection arises that this requires from God constant miracles. A miracle is something outside of natural law. The creation of the soul is not anything outside of this natural law; on the contrary it completes the natural law. The Creator himself – the first cause – intervenes directly in a work that surpasses the forces of a secondary cause. The product of a birth is the body, as it is not possible to give birth to a spiritual soul. According to the natural law, which God himself established, at the moment when there is given a natural disposition and the conditions for giving life to the body, God creates the soul. In this way, *God acts in the physiological order, not the moral order, and so he acts in goodness according to the natural law even in cases when the begetting of people is against the moral law.*’⁸

Let us turn now to the salvation of the preachers of truth. We will leave to one side those who, in a similar way to Sir Oliver Lodge, attempt to reconcile science with religion and try to fool themselves and us into thinking that the truth of science does not contradict salvation through religion. About these people, Albína Dratvová⁹ says: ‘They devote the best energies of their youth only to their scientific research and turn to philosophy only in the period of their old age, of the deterioration of their powers. They often, then, view sceptically their own researches; they see the limits of knowledge and ex-

⁸ Metoděj Habáň, *Psychologie [Psychology]* (Brno: Edice Akordu, 1937), from the chapter ‘On the Creation of the Soul’. (author’s highlighting)

⁹ Czech philosopher of science (1892–1969).

press themselves pessimistically about the possibilities of the further progress of knowledge. And here in their senile weakness they seek peace for themselves in a faith in a higher being, in God. ... What they write about their world view is bland and jaded.’¹⁰

The remaining preachers of truth – that is, those scientists who promise salvation from science itself and not from religion – can be divided into spiritualists and materialists. The first group revive humankind’s hope by attempting to show that there is no difference between the human soul and the basis of the world. Sir James Jeans, for instance, writes: ‘If a certain kind of wave-motion seems capable of describing something in reality to a very high degree of probability, we may proceed to discuss the further question – “Waves of what?” Here, for the first time, we are confronted with difficulties, since the real essence of the “What” must necessarily remain unknown to us, unless it should prove to be of the same general nature as something already existent in our minds, such as a thought or mental concept, a wish or an emotion. ... We shall find later that the waves which are most important of all in physics can quite unexpectedly be interpreted as being of this type. They are waves of something which the scientist loosely describes as “probability”. ... Present-day science adds that, at the farthest point she has so far reached, much, and possibly all, that was not mental has disappeared, and nothing new has come in that is not mental.’¹¹ Similarly, Bernhard Bavink writes: ‘Matter will only be finally subjugated by mind when we are really able to understand it as the product of psychical powers. Merely to postulate this as a fact, which is all that spiritualism has hitherto done, is not of the slightest use; matter and its worshippers, the materialists, simply laugh us out of court saying: Here is a single atom, the simplest of all, the hydrogen atom. Show us what you can do! Show us how we are to understand it as the product of purely

10 *Český zápas*, vol. XXVII (official weekly of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church).

11 James Jeans, *The New Background of Science* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), pp. 62, 296.

psychical potencies – then we will believe you. Now it appears as if spiritualism today can actually pass this test. I will not maintain that it has already passed it, but I believe it to be undeniable that it is very close to doing so, and has every prospect of success.’¹²

Philipp Frank, who in his booklet *The Collapse of Mechanical Physics* cites this faith on the part of Bavink, adds sceptically: ‘Let us hope that there are still enough people to be found who will deny this.’ And in reality, we do not even need to be enemies of priests for us not to promise ourselves anything very encouraging from this test, which is supposed to discover the bridge from the soul to matter. Because if such a bridge from the soul to matter is demonstrated in a scientific laboratory, then all the reasons for jubilation will be on the side of the materialists. A bridge discovered in such a way will be evidence that the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘material’ occur on one level, and in every case that will then mean: *on the material level*. Because either there is no precisely ascertainable bridge between, for instance, love and the movement of molecules, or love is nothing other than the movement of molecules. The ‘physical’ level is immovable. Higher levels can only fall into it; however, no other level can lift this physical level up higher to its level. Just as the method of the spiritualist is the same as that of the materialist, so also is the currency of both the same. ‘We will not understand anything until we express everything in physical-chemical terms,’ says the materialist (C. Furnas). And the spiritualist: ‘We must admit that the souls of our greatest geniuses – Aristotle, Kant, Leonardo, Goethe or Beethoven, Dante or Shakespeare – even at the moments of their greatest flights of thought or during their deepest mental and intellectual work were conditioned by causality and were merely instruments in the hands of the all-powerful law ruling the world.’ (Max Planck)

¹² Bernhard Bavink, *Science and God*, trans. by H. Stafford Hatfield (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1933), pp. 94–95.

And which law that rules the world? The one to which exact natural science wields the keys in its hands.

However, even if it were not for the materialist requisites that spiritualist natural scientists use, there is something else here that makes us sceptical toward them: this is their attempt to present to us the real world as a world that is exclusively a product of thought, a world that can be entirely conceived in logical and mathematical terms. And we have precisely characterized the crisis of modern mankind as a conflict between his world as a matter of abstract thought and his world as actually experienced. If we designate the whole of reality to the first world, not only do we not reduce this conflict, but on the contrary we intensify this conflict to an extreme.

It remains for us to take a look at how materialist natural scientists hope to bring us salvation. Because indeed our salvation – this is apparently their affair, not ours. Even though, for instance, in one book by V. Úlehla (who regards himself as an agnostic) we read that the author disapproves of the Messianic idea – that is, the idea that some third person will bring people salvation and that it is enough for them to merely wait and make no efforts – in another of his books the same author advises us to bide our time until the biologist has progressed a bit further. Biology certainly has enough time, but we must do something with our lives; we must decide immediately, incessantly, from one minute to the next. And what is strange: we must decide in such a way as though we already knew; we can only set out as though we were already sure what is at the end of the path. Is this self-deception, the wrong path? Do you think, then, my dear friend, that the task of all this endless procession of people past, present, and future was, is, and will be to wait with their hands in their laps, until this or that researcher solves the riddle? Until it is discovered, with final validity, what is truth, what is error, and what is a lie? What is correct, what deception, and what bad? But if it is not our task to sit around and wait for this, then in the final instance

what substantial can we derive from the scientist's solution to this riddle after all?

So, it is not enough to give advice to wait. More is necessary; at least promises, and not any old promises. To promise more than religion promises is not possible. But people are far from giving preference to a person who promises less ahead of someone who promises more – even if 'less' means the truth and 'more' mere confusion and unclarity. From its very beginnings, science has not ceased to show that, even though it promises less than religion, in reality it gives more: that it gives reality instead of a phantom. And thanks to technology and its fantastic gifts, science is able to divert our attention to some extent from its gloomy conclusions. However, all the achievements of science, technology, and civilization take on the disturbing form of a phantom, as long as the unabating threat of death remains alongside them. Even you certainly see: as long as death is the unavoidable lot of humankind, consolation has more value than instruction, and religion is more essential for mankind than science. This is why all the magnificent gifts of technology are not sufficient; more than giving, science must also promise. And thus we see that the more popular that scientific treatises become – that is, written for a wider circle of people – the less sparing they are in making promises and offering rosy prospects. Here we hear from the mouths of scientists words such as these: 'For the meanwhile death appears to us as a necessary evil ... but it does not appear to us as fate. The laboratory of the biologist and the biochemist can and must go into battle with it.' – 'Biology today cannot avoid the question of immortality.' – 'In its essence life is of cosmic character.' – 'Why should it not be possible one day to ascertain and calculate this spirituality?' – 'It is a fundamental characteristic of life not to die.' – 'Neither old age nor death is a necessary and unavoidable characteristic of life.' – Unusual phrases are beginning to find their way into the speech of scientists: 'the law of the conservation of spirituality', 'spirituality as a free state in space', and so on.

However, as we have seen, while the church offers – at least on its noticeboards – to bring salvation to people by its values, natural science has nothing more at its disposal for this task than molecules. While for religion the salvation of a human being is a matter of his soul, for science it is a matter of his body. A perfect opposition of extremes also occurs here. A biologist leaves the phantom of ‘soul’ to charlatans and dilettantes; he believes that he alone will reach the root of matters by himself, if he concerns himself exclusively with the body. The means of salvation in its essence cannot be of a different character than the means against a headache or against constipation. Perhaps the surgeon will also have something yet to say on this subject.

Dear Melin, give some thought to your work, to the method of your research, your approach, testing, the very principle itself of your science, which you cannot violate if you wish to remain a scientist, and indicate to me – even if only in the most general and notional terms – how you envisage such a redemptive work.

Maybe, after a pyramid of experiments, you will succeed in fabricating artificial life, uncovering its secrets, and putting together a recipe for immortality? What will happen then? Will this be followed by a debate at the Academy of Science and a discussion in the specialist and popular press? Imagine this world-shattering ‘ultimate truth’: How are you going to find a measure of sufficient reason to test it? And, when finally – ‘even though relatively young’ – you make a breakthrough with your discovery, what will happen after that? Will biologists confer immortality with an injection? Or will pharmacists reproduce pills of ‘eternal life’ in crucibles, and a human soul will receive salvation if a person swallows a tablet and drinks it down with water? And this without examining one’s conscience, without repentance and confession, without self-flagellation? Or ... But no, my dear friend, I do not want to continue making facetious jokes at your expense. It is not a matter of jokes; in reality all these questions are posing you a serious question: Do you truly believe

that something so revolutionary and miraculous for the human soul, something liberating it for eternity, is going to be obtained so cheaply? As you can buy a chocolate bar for a sixpence? As you can catch a bus for a few pennies? And is it going to be available for anyone whatsoever? Wise and stupid, brave and cowardly, noble and base, industrious and lazy, believers and unbelievers – quite simply anyone who pays? Do you really believe that mankind can be saved by something that can be standardized and mass-produced like paper clips or lollipops? Does it not occur to you that, if you were right, then technology – that triumph of natural science – would already today offer humankind something entirely different from what it does in fact offer?

I recall that, when – while working as an engineer in the factory of our uncle – I built a tourist cable car to one difficult-to-reach summit, I had no doubt that by doing so I was contributing to the refinement and progress of mankind. Even though I know very well that, whenever I have honestly climbed up a hill somewhere, then the pleasure I got from reaching its summit – no! more than pleasure, something character forming, internally cleansing and uplifting – was directly proportionate to the effort that I expended in climbing up it.

Such, I think, is our problem: We have a mountain in front of us and we feel the need to climb it. Experience tells us that whoever reaches a higher point on its steep slope acquires more characteristics that make him ‘more perfect’ – as we say. And all of a sudden you have an idea: Why bother toiling to climb up it? We will build a cable car and everyone can reach the summit comfortably and without effort. As a scientist, you are convinced that the being whom you transport in comfort up to the summit by cable car will be the same being as if he had clambered up there himself. But, as a mere person drawing on your most elementary experience, you know that this is not true. Today I do not doubt that by my cable car I have not civilized any tourist; maybe myself a small jot. And

I think the same of you: even if you were to find the recipe for immortality in your test tubes, by this you will not save any souls – with the exception perhaps of your own. Precisely as you have not saved, or even civilized, humankind by the dynamo, elevators, aeroplanes, artificial silk, or aspirin.

Here you may perhaps object that this argument leaves the matter still far from resolved. It is not possible to give a serious reply to the question of the value of individual effort – and in essence this is what is at stake here – without at the same time dealing with the problem of development, heredity, and so on. We will really deal with this issue later, in its proper place. However, we can already say in advance that, for our task here – that is, for the question of human salvation or at least human perfection – eugenics is pretty much all that we gain from the field of development and heredity.

H. G. Wells's novel *Men Like Gods* describes a utopian society which owes its blissful existence to eugenics, conducted in an exemplary way for many ages. However, this is a fictional construction. Those who survived the Second World War are witnesses of the lamentable end of a society that wanted to make a eugenic utopia a reality. If we search for the causes of such deplorable ends, then this conclusion cannot escape us: before eugenics can really get started, it is necessary for some people to declare themselves as higher and more perfect than others, and by doing so to secure for themselves the prerequisite for denying others the right to life. In view of the fact that such self-preferment requires from people a quite specific nature and character, it seems almost impossible for a planned and munificent practice of eugenics to go down any other path than the appalling one that it has just recently gone down.

In the end, moreover, we can notice that the researcher's advice 'Wait until biology has progressed a bit further' can also have a different sense than the one that we gave it, and precisely the opposite sense: it can serve as an appeal to us, already born and living, not to wait for biology, because this 'further' does not concern us. Whom

it does then concern, C. Furnas reveals to us, when he predicts a day when life will be designed like a laboratory product. Furnas no longer has anything to say about what will follow from that, but it is described for us in a very lively and intense way by novelist Aldous Huxley, grandson and brother of biologists with the same surname. He cannot, therefore, be suspected of insufficient scientific training. His novel *Brave New World* shows a blissful world of laboratory products. There is no pity in this world, no suffering, pride, envy, greed, desire – in short, none of those miseries that annoy us in life. Everything is mixed and prepared so excellently according to scientific recipes that, for instance, a garbage man, who is ‘moulded’ in an artificial hatchery, is the happiest person in the world only when he is collecting his garbage, while if you were to make him, let us say, a millionaire, then he would hang himself out of grief. Or a typist knows no greater delight than tapping her delicate fingers on the keys of a typewriter and would become despondent if you were to arrange a role in a film for her. In this world, therefore, ‘climbing up mountains’ is no problem. Any kind of effort is superfluous, because the cable car runs reliably from the bottom up to the summit and conveys everyone according to his liking. The most burning questions of moral, social, economic, aesthetic, psychological, and metaphysical nature have been solved and resolved by a chemist in his test tube. Molecules are sufficient for everything.

The truth, however, is that not even for a chemist are molecules sufficient for everything. Let us hear what Clifford C. Furnas himself has to tell us about this: ‘True science shuts all doors against emotion from the very beginning. Usually there is a high wall with no door in it that rises between the emotional and technical fields of the scientist’s life. But do not get the idea that the scientist is the unemotional fish that the caricaturist would make him. Outside working hours, he is, on the average, just as full of loves, prejudices, superstitions, likes, and dislikes as anyone else with the same degree of education. You will find a godly proportion of them belonging

to orthodox churches; not only belonging but attending, but that does not prove a thing. It does not indicate that there is no combat between science and religion, it just shows that there are two compartments in these men's lives and that they are supernaturalists on Sunday and naturalists on Monday.¹³

We will not argue about who is a more appropriate object for a caricaturist: whether a person with one pigeonhole or with two. However, let us recall this: the end of ecclesiastical hegemony and mediaeval truth is posited in connection with the 'moral dissipation of the priesthood', with the fact that one day church dignitaries preach zealously against gluttony, fornication, and murder, and the next day themselves engage in fornication and robbery. 'Service to God' was an excellent wager for a priest who reckoned that the truths that he preached were guaranteed by God and a powerful church, and that he could therefore live in any way he pleased. Today it is possible to ask whether the scientist is not descending into the same mistake. Is he not shifting responsibility for the truth that he declares onto the 'all-powerful natural law' and science, while he reserves for himself the right to live in the way he pleases? Where is the guarantee that the reality of this law is composed of some other cloth than the reality of God once was?

The truths declared by the church collapsed as lies and deceptions, when it was shown that those who preach them do not live according to them. The truths declared by science vex us as mistakes and deceptions, when it is shown not only that scientists and scientifically educated people do not live according to these truths, but also that human life as such is absolutely not possible in accordance with them. 'The more and better I recognize the laws of the world, the less I have reason to live and act,' says Auguste Sabatier. And Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*: 'The organism, its decay, the indestructibility of matter, the law of the conservation of energy, evolution, were the

13 Furnas, *The Next Hundred Years*, p. 136.

words which usurped the place of his old belief. These words and the ideas associated with them were very useful for intellectual purposes. But for life they yielded nothing.’¹⁴

Quite simply, a scientist is a person who has on his side all the reasons for putting a noose around his own neck. But nevertheless, as far as I know, so far no person has ever ended their life ‘for scientific reasons’. And you say that I do not prove anything by this? I think that this proves this much: if findings such as ‘life is nothing more than a whirl of electrons’, ‘life is a false problem’, and similar reflect reality, then the only thing that must immediately follow from this reality would be extinction; at the moment when a person in accord with reality discovered that he is a mere delusion, he would breath his last. However, given that, even after this recognition, he continues to breathe and even goes forward with no less courage and no less effort, we can justifiably doubt that these findings capture reality.

Consider, my friend: If your reason comes to the conclusion that we are at the end, and despite this you do not throw in the towel, what do you prove by this? That inside us, inside our being, there is something that is very far from throwing in the towel when our reason comes to the conclusion that we are at the end; and that therefore in the final instance it is not reason that decides whether we are at the end, or we are not; and that therefore it is not a natural scientist who, with you as his mouthpiece, appeals to us not to lose hope. It is possible that physics and life mutually exclude each other, but everything in us revolts against acknowledging that life and truth exclude each other.

The question that caused the fall of theology was: Can we be saved by something that runs counter to the truth? The question on which natural science falters is: Can something which does not save us be

¹⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. by Constance Garnett (1901) (New York: Random House, 1965 – Modern Library edition, 1993), p. 888.

the truth? If mankind is not a freak in this world, then truth and life cannot be opposed to each other. Then reality is not merely a question of truth, but also a question of salvation. Then the nature of truth and the conditions of salvation are merely two different terms for the same thing.

The salvation declared by theology contradicts truth; the truth declared by natural science contradicts salvation. If a human being is not a monstrosity, then theology and natural science have deviated from reality to the same extent; then the nature of truth is deformed by natural science to the same extent as the conditions of salvation are deformed by theology.

My dear Melin, you are perhaps shaking your head at why I am writing all this to you? After all you wanted to hear about Robert. Therefore I hasten to assure that I am not writing about anything else than about Robert; more than that, my intention is nothing other than to let Robert himself speak. However, Robert's speech is not your speech; artistic speech is not scientific speech. Therefore it may seem that I am taking upon myself the role of an interpreter for you. Well yes, that is my intention, but I add immediately: this is an absurd task. Why, then, do I take it up? Precisely so that I can demonstrate to you its absurdity; and in order to demonstrate as absurd what you regard as possible and achievable, something that you also attempt as possible and achievable on a daily basis in your laboratory and that subsequently leads you to conclusions which are a source of misunderstanding, confusion, and iniquities, and possibly something even worse.