

Introduction

Cinzia Arruzza, Christoph Horn, Dmitri Nikulin, Emidio Spinelli

Hans Jonas may be one of the most interesting and important yet still not fully appreciated thinkers of his age. A student of Heidegger and Bultmann, he had to leave his native Germany in the wake of Nazism, and only much later could he resume his academic career, first in Canada at Carleton University, and then in New York at the New School for Social Research, which he joined in 1955 and where he taught until his retirement. Of the philosophical works published during his lifetime, three books stand out, having become much debated milestones in the domains of ancient philosophy (*Gnostic Religion* [1958] originally published in German in 1954; the additional volume appeared in German in 1993), philosophical biology (*The Phenomenon of Life* [1966]), and ethics (*The Imperative of Responsibility* [1984], originally published in German in 1979). *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas's magnum opus, had been published when he was already seventy six and retired, and immediately made him into a kind of philosophical star and public intellectual in Europe, especially in Germany. The younger generation was avidly reading his book as a call to ecological arms in the hope of establishing an ethics for the future and avoiding the looming global catastrophe. A careful and subtle thinker, well-versed in the tradition, Jonas remains a treasure-trove of philosophical conversation and argument to be discovered and engaged with. Hopefully, the ongoing publication of his *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* under the auspices of Hans Jonas-Zentrum in Berlin will lead to a new appraisal and critical evaluation of Jonas's work and thought. (The *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* is clearly described here in the *Appendix* by Michael Bongardt, who also insists on Jonas's most important insights toward three main areas of contemporary research and debates: religious studies and theological topics, discussions of determinism and freedom/matter and mind, and questions about the debate on climate change and ecological disaster. See Bongardt's essay, 'Der „ganze“ Jonas. Einführung in die kritische Gesamtausgabe'.) This collection of essays, originally presented at the conference "Hans Jonas und die klassische Philosophie," which took place in Jonas's native city Mönchengladbach in December 2014, intends to contribute to this new appraisal.

Several of the essays collected here examine an array of texts, in particular the lectures on ancient philosophy and on ontological and scientific revolutions, which have been recently published in the critical edition. The collection addresses the theme of Jonas's relationship to the philosophical tradition, from antiquity to modernity¹. The articles are organized into three main thematic areas. The first, *Jonas and the Ancients*, focuses on Jonas's engagement with Greco-Roman history, philosophy, and religious thought, and particularly with the period between Hellenism and late antiquity. The second, *Between the Classical and the Modern Depiction of the World*, addresses Jonas's

¹ We are grateful to Joseph Lemelin, Andrew Osborne, and Joshua Nicholas Pineda for editing some of the papers collected in this issue.

reflection on the radical difference between the modern and the ancient conception of nature, on the significance and nature of scientific revolutions, and on their limitations in contrast to some key categories characterizing the classical depiction of the natural world. The third, *Jonas and Modern Philosophy*, focuses on Jonas's engagement with key modern philosophers.

Jonas and the Ancients

Emidio Spinelli's paper, 'Die Rolle der *Tyche*: die kynische Provokation bei Hans Jonas', focuses on *Problems of Freedom*, a collection of lectures given by Hans Jonas at the New School for Social Research in New York City. In these lectures, Jonas reflects on the anthropological transformation caused by the shift from the polis to the *kosmopolis*, that is, by the crisis of the classical city and the beginning of the Hellenistic period. It is at this moment that, according to Jonas, the idea of private individual is 'invented' and the notion of *tyche* becomes central as a form of reaction to the crisis of the polis. Spinelli emphasizes how, rather than simply focusing on the notion of *tyche*, in his lectures, Jonas attributes a specific and alternative role to Hellenistic philosophy *vis à vis* the crisis of the classical city, paying particular attention to the Cynics' conscious opposition to *tyche*. Indeed, in Spinelli's reconstruction, the characteristic aspect of Jonas's interpretation of the significance of Cynic philosophy lies in his reading of their search for independence from the external world and from the moods of *tyche* as grounded on the centrality of the notion of private individual or of the *self*. In this way, Cynic philosophy becomes the same as life or *bios*, without any theoretical or intellectual dimension in the foreground, while it reinforces a polemical and unconventional behavior against rules, norms, and everyday attitudes of the 'normal' polis.

Both Christoph Horn and Avishag Zafrani address Jonas's reading of Gnosticism, but from two different angles. While Zafrani's article, 'From the Study of Gnosis to the Criticism of Nihilism', focuses on the reasons why Jonas establishes a fundamental analogy between Gnosticism and Heidegger's philosophy, Horn's paper, 'Hans Jonas über Plotin und den Neuplatonismus', addresses the limitations and weaknesses of Jonas's interpretation of Gnosticism and of its relationship to Neoplatonism, and to Plotinus in particular. According to Horn, these weaknesses lie in the method of philosophical interpretation of the history of philosophy that Jonas borrows from Heidegger, and in their shared attempt at an *Existenzanalytik*. Indeed, while addressing what he takes to be the similarities between Gnosticism and Plotinus's philosophy, Jonas is not so much interested in a possible Gnostic influence on Plotinus, and rather takes both to be the expression of a common intellectual climate. As Horn stresses, Jonas reaches this conclusion not on the basis of a historical inquiry into common sources, but on the basis of the observation of what he takes to be parallelisms immanent to the text. This, however, leads him to some crucial misunderstandings of Plotinus' philosophy, for example of Plotinus' doctrine of the descent of the soul into bodies—in his 1971 article 'The Soul in Gnosticism and Plotinus'—, which, contrary to what Jonas argues, entails a radical opposition to the Gnostic account of the soul's descent and its relationship to the embodied world. Moreover, according to Horn, insofar as Jonas himself recognizes that Plotinus is not a dualist thinker, his grounds for positing a key similarity between his philosophy and Gnosticism appear to be rather thin and, in the last instance, the posited analogy seems only to rely on his peculiar method of interpreting the history of philosophy.

Contrary to Horn, Zafrani does not discuss the historical philosophical validity of Jonas's interpretation of Gnosticism and of Heidegger's philosophy, but rather reconstructs the main reasons why Jonas establishes an analogy between Gnostic nihilism and existentialism, and the nihilism and existentialism he ascribes to the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*. Indeed, it is in the direction of a nihilistic and existentialistic philosophy that Jonas interprets Heidegger's notions of *Unheimlichkeit* and *Geworfenheit*, which he sees as akin to the Gnostic idea of being foreigner to a hostile world in which the pneumatic man has been thrown. Jonas's explanation for what he takes to be key similarities lies in the relationship between Gnosticism and Heidegger's philosophy, on the one hand, and their respective historical epoch, on the other: both Gnosticism and Heideggerian philosophy are a reflection of a historical period of transition and crisis. According to Zafrani, Jonas tries to find an answer and an alternative to both by overcoming ontological and biological dualism, in the direction of an ethics of responsibility.

Between the Classical and the Modern Depiction of the World

Gerald Hartung's paper, 'Organism und Freiheit – Jonas' Philosophie der Biologie im Kontext neu-aristotelischer Philosophie' focuses on the relationship between Jonas's philosophical biology and the German neo-Aristotelian philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and argues that significant neo-Aristotelian influences can be retraced with regard to three main themes addressed by Jonas. The first can be summarized as the thesis of the continuity of life, underpinned by a theory of ontological levels or of the stratification of reality for which, according to Hartung, Jonas is significantly indebted to Nicolai Hartmann's work. Contrary to Hartmann, however, Jonas acknowledges only one ontological caesura, that between inorganic and organic reality, rejecting the notion of a radical discontinuity between organic and psychic world. This difference with Hartmann is key to Jonas's project of providing a natural philosophical grounding for ethics. This leads us to the second theme identified by Hartung, namely that of the vital unity between organism and environment (*Umwelt*), of the formative role played by the *Umwelt* toward the organism, and of the interplay of freedom and dependence. With regard to this theme, Hartung suggests that, in spite of not being explicitly quoted by Jonas, Max Scheler is an important interlocutor, especially for his insight that both organism and environment are dependent variables of the process of life. Finally, Hartung identifies neo-Aristotelian influences for Jonas' advocacy of a teleological interpretation of nature, in particular the work of Friedrich A. Trendelenburg.

The themes of teleology and of the connection between spirit and nature are further analyzed in Piotr Rosól's article, 'Hans Jonas' Sehnsüchte', which employs the notion of 'yearning' to describe both Jonas' reflection on the caesura caused by the modern ontological and scientific revolutions and his attitude toward the classical depiction of the world. According to Rosól, indeed, the notion of yearning should help clarify the *vexata quaestio* of Jonas's main sources and of his relationship to Aristotelianism. Rosól identifies three main kinds of yearning in Jonas's thought: a yearning for nature, as clearly distinct from culture; a yearning for teleology; and a yearning for a pre-dualistic form of thought. All of these elements characterize the classical depiction of the world. Faced with the neutralization of the natural world and with the dismissal of teleological thought caused by modern natural sciences and their underlying metaphysics, Jonas strives for a form of thought able

to combine the methods of modern natural sciences, which proved to be effective in describing the material aspects of reality, with the benefits of pre-modern categories.

Jonas's conceptualization of the radical caesura between the classical and the modern depiction of the world is further analyzed by Dmitri Nikulin's article, 'Hans Jonas, the Thinker of Ontological and Scientific Revolutions' and by Agnes Heller's paper, 'The Origins of Modernity and the Situation of the Present'. Nikulin focuses on two main aspects of the scientific revolutions addressed by Jonas in his 1967 New School lectures: the new philosophical ontology and the role of mathematics in new science. Jonas argues that this new ontology is best exemplified in Descartes, who presupposes a split between two substances of thought and matter, which in their simplicity and conceptual clarity become fundamental for the new type of knowledge, mathematically expressible science. In Nikulin's reconstruction, this ontological revolution leads to the separation of the subject and the world that is established by this very subject, who in this way posits itself as autonomous. This results in a number of dualisms, such as those between mind and body, thought and thinking, the internal and the external, the science of mind and the science of nature. The second aspect stressed by Jonas is that of the mathematization of the world, understood as the idea that the transformations and changes in and of the natural world can be described by mathematical means. This idea entails a shift from geometry to algebra and functional analysis, which reflects the shift of philosophical focus from substance to relation. In his critical analysis of Jonas's conceptualization of the new role of mathematics and of its relationship to the new ontology, Nikulin shows that Jonas, while rejecting a constructivist explanation of the mathematization of the world, does not provide a feasible alternative explanation. Contra Jonas, Nikulin argues that the expulsion of any mediation between the two substances of thought and matter makes it impossible to explain the status of mathematical entities and to locate them univocally in either the physical or the mental. For this reason, the Cartesian approach fails to provide an account of the mathematization of the world in terms of non-theological realism and to further explain why in the last instance we are able to study and describe the world as mathematical. Like Nikulin, Agnes Heller emphasizes the significance of the ontological revolution in Jonas's conceptualization of modernity. As Heller stresses, Jonas sees in Descartes the philosopher who provided modern science with a solid ontological foundation, characterized by dualism. But two other innovations can be ascribed to Descartes: the primacy of the method, which opened a new path in the philosophical tradition, and the centrality of subjectivity, or of the epistemological subject, which established the priority of epistemology over ontology. Within this context, Heller stresses how, according to Jonas, the principle of *clare et distincte* actually served the purpose of establishing the fact of human reason, by making distinctiveness and clarity into the last court of appeal.

Jonas and Modern Philosophy

In his article, 'Ist die Welt sinnlos? – Leibniz und Jonas', Hiroshi Abe analyzes the two different answers offered by Leibniz and Jonas to the same question: Why is there something instead of nothing? While Leibniz famously grounds the existence of the world in its goodness and perfection, so that the possibility of such a world also requires its existence, Jonas treats the

question why there is something at all as a question concerning the passage from the 'is' to the 'ought'. Jonas's answer, in *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, is, then, that the world exists because each single being strives for its own being: this capacity to have ends grounds a claim to reality. In the conclusion of his paper, Abe notes that both answers lead us to the question of whether the world has any meaning. Leibniz's answer to the question of existence, indeed, finds a reason that is not immanent to the world but is rather grounded in God's nature. Jonas's answer, on the other hand, draws on what he takes to be the teleology immanent in organic life, which strives for its own being because constantly confronted with death, that is, with non-being. This answer, however, seems to rely, according to Abe, on a humanization of organic nature, which leads us back to the problem that without such humanization the world or nature have no meaning on their own.

Eric Pommier's article, 'Life and Anthropology: A Discussion between Kantian Criticism and Jonasian Ontology', addresses Jonas's critique of Kant's conception of causality in *The Phenomenon of Life* and *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*. While both Kant and Jonas share a common concern for human finitude, Jonas criticizes Kant, according to Pommier, for not seeing the roots of this finitude in the finitude of life. Jonas's criticism of Kant has a theoretical and a practical aspect. On a theoretical level, Jonas accuses Kant of being blind to our bodily activity and of conceiving perception as passive: this Kantian failure, however, derives from the very structure of our bodily subjectivity in that our senses tend to suppress both the causality between the subject and the object, and that between objects. On a practical level, Jonas criticizes the anthropocentric character of Kant's morality and its inability to take the future and the consequences of our actions into account, which equates to not taking into real account the true human finitude. Finally, a further element of criticism lies in Kant's inability to justify his own moral principles, for which, according to Jonas, an ontological foundation is needed. However, Pommier's thesis is that Jonas's philosophical biology actually provides a foundation for Kant's ethics of dignity and respect: the recognition of an embodied subject by another embodied subject is made possible through the shared experience of the value of life and of the struggle against death.

Jonas's criticism of Kant's moral doctrine is one of the themes addressed by Dietrich Böhler, in his essay 'Hans Jonas und die Aufhebung der klassische Philosophie. Ethikbegründung zwischen Metaphysik, Phänomenologie und transzendentaler Reflexion'. Böhler contextualizes Jonas's critique of Kant within his more encompassing critique of the whole ethical tradition, which, being focused on individual behavior and actions and having an anthropocentric character, is incapable of dealing with the problem of human collective responsibility *vis à vis* technological Prometheanism and the ecological crisis. The Kantian principle of avoiding logical self-contradiction, entailed in the method of universalization, is not adequate to put in question the representation of the extinction of humanity: with Kant it is impossible to ground that humanity *must* exist and must exist *permanently*. At the same time, Böhler notes that, in spite of his skepticism toward transcendental philosophy, Jonas grounds his principle of responsibility through a communicative transformation of Kant and of his principle of universalization, overcoming the solipsism of the transcendental subject. This quasi-Kantian and quasi-transcendental foundational strategy, however, is coupled with other strategies, which rather draw on natural philosophy or

intuitionism, and which coexist in Jonas's work, at times in connection with each other, while being at other times merely juxtaposed.