

From the Study of Gnosis to the Criticism of Nihilism

Avishag Zafrani

My purpose is to discuss dramaturgy in Jonas's work. This dramaturgy seems to be an important point, one which covers several dimensions. Indeed, it occupies the central place in the context of the Gnostic studies that Jonas undertook. These studies, as we know, led Jonas to identify a particular Gnostic syndrome, which is manifested in a form of nihilism, determined by an acosmic relation to the world. The world – or, more precisely, the creation of the world – is interpreted in a negative perspective in ancient Gnosticism, so that we witness simultaneously a profound devalorisation of the world and of man within it. In fact, man is at the centre of a conflict which sets him against a world created by inferior, hostile powers. The history of creation in Gnosticism is a history of degeneration, an irreducible situation of crisis. To put it briefly, in creating the world, God lost some of his power, and left the world to inferior, demiurgical powers. I shall come back to the context of this appraisal, but what matters here is this central idea of metaphysical drama. It is present in Gnosticism, admittedly, but it is interesting to understand the extent to which this drama is an illustration of another drama taking place in secular philosophy. This is the other dimension of Jonas's dramaturgy. It is possible to see a resurgence of Gnostic thinking in the nihilism of Heidegger's thought. I shall return in detail to Jonas's criticism of his teacher. But what exactly are we talking about here? What is the link with philosophy? To understand this we have to grasp the thread which runs throughout Jonas's thinking. In his collection *Philosophical Essays: from ancient creed to technological man*, Jonas himself felt obliged to make this link explicit, as in fact his own philosophy takes several different paths. Consequently we have to make the link between the critique of Gnostic nihilism, the critique of Heidegger's nihilism, and then the emergence of a philosophy of life and of human responsibility for destructive technological power. This philosophy attempts a re-foundation of ontology in order to unite the being with the ought-to-be. And that presupposes one thing: this link or union between being and ought-to-be is hindered by a particular conception of the world. And what is that conception? In what type of conception of the world do we find the idea of a separation? Dualism. This is the guiding thread of Jonas's thought: resolving the problem of dualism, inasmuch as it enables a separation between man and the world, or man and nature, or man and the cosmos he belongs to. True, dualism had a primordial interest: developing a sharp awareness of human subjectivity. But what interests Jonas is that the separation is not morally neutral. This disunion can lead to the idea of rejecting the world, or at least a feeling that the cosmos is something foreign. Man loses a feeling of belonging to the world; and either he is unable to grasp the meaning and justification of his existence here, or (what is worse) his existence itself loses some of its value. If we are no longer able to give an account of the value of existence, all moral imperatives become vain. Philosophy itself, for Jonas, is the rational possibility of carrying out axiological research that would make it possible to distinguish Good from Evil; in fact, the postulate is this: man is

endowed with reason, which makes it possible to choose between good and evil. This is why Jonas could never recover from what he called betrayal on the part of a thinker like Heidegger. For philosophy to become unable to distinguish good from evil is just not permitted, says Jonas in his memoirs. Now I am going to give an account of the consequences of this dualism, understood in its different perspectives.

One last point, though. Why is it necessary to undertake this reading of Jonas? I think it is important to be able, with Jonas, to locate the real place of this dramatic intensity with its important consequences for mankind. For, in fact, Jonas is often criticised for mistreating mankind, wanting to limit human actions – in short, his hermeneutic of fear is not very appealing. It seems to demand painful renunciations, or superficial precautions. Worse, Jonas appears to want to prevent scientific progress from going ahead freely. But, in fact, he wishes to maintain this freedom and make it permanent. The drama finds its origin in a conception or representation of the world, not *a posteriori* in a moral philosophy that attempts to readjust human action. Human action has been transformed since man stripped the living world of its dignity and took to exercising his power over nature without any restraints. Nevertheless, Jonas takes up Leonardo da Vinci's formula, "all science is the science of opposites" – it is capable of both good and evil, and the final drama is to see this particular human power transformed into a curse for mankind, as it says in the opening lines of *Prinzip Verantwortung*. The issue, precisely, is to be able to reassign ends to mankind who, in situations of metaphysical, existential and moral crisis, shows nihilistic, pessimistic, and fatalistic tendencies. The support for recognition of these ends is nature conceived as a dynamic living world – that is, as the locus of objective tendencies to persist in being.

From Gnosticism to Heidegger

Gnosticism is a type of dualist knowledge where the separation between man and his world is interpreted in the form of an opposition. Hence man, detached from the cosmos, no longer finds in it any reason for being. The meaning of existence is in crisis. This world becomes a terrifying world. And, I stress once again, this is the result of a dualist conception. An immanent conception does not lead to this result. For example, the infinity of the cosmos is a source of terror for an author like Pascal, whereas for Giordano Bruno it is the manifestation of divine superabundance. But let us return to Gnosticism. What conception of the world does it elaborate? It elaborates a conception of cosmic pessimism. I quote Jonas, from his text "The Gnostic Syndrome:" "To this world, as the nethermost boundary of being, there applies the verdict of cosmic pessimism. Pronounced by man, it means that the divided state is at the same time a mixed state of things in which he himself is profoundly displaced. With dualism we have touched upon a central theme in the symphony of Gnosticism" (*Philosophical Essays* 1974). The world of man is an inferior world, created by an impotent God, and for that reason despicable. (A small parenthesis here: for Jonas the Gnostic accusation against God is the sign of a violent rejection of the God of Judaism. One of the signs of the radical violence of Gnosticism is manifested in this metaphysical anti-Semitism, a term he borrowed from his friend Gershom Scholem. I point this out simply here, firstly because – despite his personal history – Jonas, unlike

Hannah Arendt for example, never devoted any of his work to anti-Semitism. The other reason for this parenthesis is that the nihilism described here also stands against traditional values. But it is not only a moral struggle; it is also a metaphysical struggle.)

Our world is not simply a copy, as in the Platonic or Neo-platonic dualism of Plotinus, it is really counterfeit: “In Gnosticism, on the contrary, the motif is turned into that of illicit imitation (counterfeiting) which is at once presumptuous and bungling. Homage is turned into opprobrium” (*Ibid.*). The nihilism which emerges here is not that of Dostoyevsky, “if God does not exist, everything is permitted”. It does not yet say what is permitted to the just. On the contrary, it can legitimately be wished that a despicable world, a false world, should disappear.

Here we need to remember the context in which ancient Gnosticism emerged. The period of ancient Gnosticism extends through the first four centuries of the Christian era, and is thus situated at the moment when a new faith was born. Its historical situation is one of transition. To spiritual and religious effervescence were also added political changes, which saw empires succeed one another and then decline, but which at the same time permitted what Jonas names the syncretism of Gnosticism, integrating several traditions: Roman, Persian, Hellenistic. For Jonas, we need to draw out features particular to the Gnostic current from this diversity of influences. In this respect Jonas underlines individual experience in this historical situation. He emphasises the situation of individuals who feel like atomic dust within the masses of empire. (“Gnosticism, Existentialism, and nihilism”, 1966)

According to Jonas this state radically changes the individual’s relation to the “cosmos.” This relation is what we could call an acosmic, or even anti-cosmic, relation. It is a type of relation that Jonas sees taking shape in the existentialism of *Sein und Zeit* – a work whose background is also a period of crisis for humanity, following the fall of empires, fragmentation, and the awakening of various forms of nationalism. In this tumultuous dispersion of the meaning of existence, marked by brutal secularisation, in a time when God is dead, the ambition of *Sein und Zeit* could appear salutary, since this work seeks to make up for a lack of ontological density, to approach or take *refuge* in Being, if we want to stay close to Jonas’s interpretation. Re-founding an authentic existence then necessarily means undertaking to rethink Being as it has never been, since for Heidegger the concept suffers from its false obviousness; it remains an obscure concept which requires new criteria of apprehension and knowledge. The existential analytic of the *Dasein*, the being-there, is then at the centre of a reflection that aims to conjure up forgetfulness of Being.

Here we must now make clear in what sense Jonas speaks of existentialism when describing Heidegger’s philosophy as it appears in *Sein und Zeit*. He compares it with what he calls Pascal’s existentialism, and quotes certain of the *Pensées* that are very significant, on the angst generated by the individual’s isolated situation. It is Pascal whom Jonas chooses to characterise what will become the lot of modern man. In fragment 205 in the Brunschwig edition, Pascal writes: “Cast into the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened.” Pascal’s feeling is a response to a particular cosmic situation, which follows the scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is to be distinguished, as already mentioned, from Bruno’s interpretation, which remains an isolated one. Jonas writes: “Bruno, lonely among men, welcomed cosmic infinitude as the revelation of a divine

superabundance of reality and something kindred to himself; Pascal shrank from it and felt the loneliness of mankind in an alien universe” (*Philosophical Essays*, 1974). What is called existentialism is in fact for Jonas a particular situation of modern man, a contingent existence, where he is prone to get lost or wander in a world which is no longer his home, to which he is not acclimatised, a situation therefore where he finds himself a foreigner, and even more of a foreigner in that the world is indifferent to him. But the main difference between the situation described by Pascal and the one which would be the object of reflections by the existentialist current is obviously that occupied by God, since the contingency of existence can find a solution or salvation in God. Contemporary man without God is left to such contingency that ontology alone cannot suffice to give him the comfort of a necessary meaning to his life. And this is for the simple reason, Jonas tells us, that this contingency removes teleology from the mechanism of natural causes. “With the ejection of teleology from the system of natural causes, nature, itself purposeless, ceased to provide any sanction to possible human purposes.” (“Gnosticism, Existentialism, and nihilism,” 1966) Deprived of meaning, the ego is thrown back on itself, and so has to go back from existence to its essence; it is *Dasein* that gives access to being. But then it may be condemned to an infinite nostalgia for being, losing awareness of present reality.

There is indeed a flaw in the temporality of Heidegger’s ontology that we must underline quickly before returning to the comparison with Gnosticism. But it is not unrelated, as it also leads to an antinomy that is proper to nihilism. Jonas writes, “Therefore the same cause which is at the root of nihilism is also at the root of the radical temporality of Heidegger’s scheme of existence, in which the present is nothing but the instant of crisis between past and future. If values are not beheld in vision as being (like the Good and the Beautiful in Plato) but are posited by the will as projects, then indeed existence is committed to constant futurity, with death as the goal; and a merely formal resolution to be, without a *nomos* for that resolution, becomes a project of Nothingness, into Nothingness” (*Ibid.*).

Jonas distinguishes five doctrines within ancient Gnosticism.

The first is of a theological order and is dualist. Man lives in a world, a *cosmos* separated from the divine realm. This cosmos represents the darkness, and is governed, not by God, but by *archontes*; inferior, ill-intentioned powers.

The second doctrine is cosmological, and defines the world as a vast prison where man is reduced to slavery, enduring many trials.

The third doctrine is anthropological, and despite a heart-rending duality, allows a fragment of the divine substance to appear in the human spirit. Human nature contains a divine spark. This spark is what has to be liberated through knowledge, i.e. *gnosis*. Here Jonas spells out the difference between knowledge, *theoria* in Greek, and *gnosis*. Theoretical activity informs thought, whereas *gnosis* aims at more than contemplation; it attempts a transformation of the human condition. The possibility of such a transformation, however, comes through revelation. Thus *gnosis* is a mystical initiation, and as Jonas writes, has objects of “faith rather than reason” (*The Gnostic Religion*, 1958).

The fourth doctrine is of an eschatological order; the pneumatic ego of man is delivered after death. The spirit liberated from the cosmological sphere – from darkness, therefore – reaches the world of light, or in other words, God. A process of assembling thus has to take place between

the spirits and God. This assembling, made possible by the mystical exercise of *gnosis*, brings about the world of God, and ends by driving back the darkness until the whole *cosmos* is annihilated. So this world is destined to disappear.

Lastly, the fifth and final doctrine is of a moral order. As the world is governed by inferior, evil forces, the consequence is hostility with regard to the world, a “contempt for all mundane ties” (*Ibid.*). There is, writes Jonas, an atmosphere of “cosmic tyranny” (*Ibid.*). Hence there are two possible attitudes: one ascetic, expressing a flight from the world; the other transgressive – as this world is worth nothing, everything is permitted, and in particular whatever can destroy it more quickly. Consequently we either have an eremitical tendency to flight from the world, or a tendency which is participative but destructive.

These five doctrines bring to light a precise symbolic language, which we also find in Heidegger’s existential analysis. The hostility described by Gnosticism implies a situation of foreignness for man, which was particularly fertile among the followers of Marcion. This situation can easily be transposed into Heidegger’s concept of *Unheimlichkeit*. The life of the individual is thus foreign to this world, and from this follows an isolation within which he cannot understand this world, and within which he is not understood, just as the foreigner does not understand the language of the country, and in return is not understood. This generates angst and homesickness, a feeling of being in danger and unprotected. Man has a feeling of alienation and therefore suffers constantly. And then the feeling of being in exile from one’s own origins maintains an angst-ridden atmosphere, amplified by the idea of an immeasurable cosmic duration which separates man from God. This permanent angst transforms the *cosmos* venerated in Greek philosophy into a prison, a “mortal house” where we sojourn as strangers (*Ibid.*). The term ‘prison’ is already present in Pascal, where the world is compared to a dungeon. Finally, the recurrence of the term ‘thrown’ completes the resemblance between Gnosticism and Heidegger’s ontology as presented in *Sein und Zeit*. In Gnosticism, ‘being thrown,’ which Jonas links to the term *Geworfenheit*, used by Heidegger to characterise *Dasein*, translates a brutal reality: the fact that the spirit is thrown into this body, and this body is thrown into the world (*Ibid.*). The violence of the situation leads to a profound feeling of desolation, abandonment and torpor.

Having established the resemblance, we can draw an obvious conclusion: the ontological foundation of *Dasein* described by Heidegger is not ahistorical; on the contrary it is attached to a particular situation and proceeds from a relation with the world which is equally particular. This is what Jonas wanted to put forward, and thanks to this representation of the historical situation of *Dasein* described as a ‘thrown’ being (already apprehended by Gnosticism in times which Jonas considers similar) he dismisses the ontological foundation of *Dasein*, reducing it to imagery symptomatic of a time of crisis. Jonas writes “...that Existentialism which claims to be the explication of the fundamentals of human existence as such, is the philosophy of a particular situation, historically fated situation of the human being” (“Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism,” 1966). The metaphysical situation of modern nihilism is thus also a form of radical dualism, of the sort we saw in Gnosticism. But the dualism of the Gnostics describes a hostile world; that is, in the end, a world in relation with man, with which man struggles; whereas modern nihilism describes a world which is not hostile, but indifferent. There is no longer any relation

between man and nature. Modern man is thrown into nature which is “indifferent” writes Jonas (*Ibid.*). The historical analysis of Gnosticism and the critique of Heidegger’s modern ontology seem to have enabled him to make something other than a simple critique, merely identifying a logical flaw in these types of thinking. This study enables Jonas to define nihilism, making a synthesis between ancient and modern nihilism. This is his definition of nihilism: “The disruption between man and total reality is at the bottom of nihilism” (*Ibid.*). The definition of nihilism may be the very origin of the foundation of his philosophy, marked by *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*. Jonas’s philosophy attempts to found ethics on ontology. From laws of nature he draws principles which are capable of limiting our power over nature. He is therefore at the opposite pole of modern nihilism, reuniting man and total reality, the part and the whole. He nonetheless grants Heidegger the relevance and importance of the place of concern. But concern, still in the same dynamic of reunifying total reality and man, must not be limited to *Dasein*. Jonas recognises the primacy of concern, which he extends into a solicitation of the whole of nature’s being.

The question of nihilism appeared in two forms in Jonas’s thinking throughout his research. It could indeed be problematised under the general aspect of a ‘rejection of the world’ on the basis of ancient Gnosticism, but the similarities Jonas demonstrated between the nihilism of ancient Gnosticism and Heidegger’s philosophy opened up a new way of studying the concept: that of understanding the opposition between being and non-being. A study – and then a re-foundation – of ontology then became the guiding thread of all Jonas’s works, although with a perspective which was not yet present during his initial work on ancient Gnosticism: that of providing norms for ontology.

This perspective was born from the critique of his teacher Heidegger, who promised to renew ontology but who, far from giving us a concrete definition of being (even if *Dasein* was supposed to take on the role of being the existential receptacle of Being’s concreteness), arrived instead at a dangerous ontological anonymity.

We must now make clearer what we mean by the study of the opposition between being and non-being. In the context of a definition of nihilism, this distinction is not neutral. As we have pointed out, nihilism for Jonas is the mark of a separation between man and nature. It is on the basis of this separation (expressed theoretically in dualism, for example) that there is to be a reversal within the ontological understanding of the human condition. But what does that mean? The distinction between being and non-being is always maintained by Jonas; at no point does he deny non-being. On the other hand, he does question the reception of this non-being on the basis of the human condition, meaning that the human condition has to deal directly with non-being because humans are mortal. So when we introduce the study of Jonas’s ontology by saying that the opposition between these two categories is not neutral, it is in order to begin by evoking the consideration of non-being in relation to the question of death. To continue in the same vein, note that Jonas distinguishes two domains of speculation, one inorganic, the other organic. The first combines two tendencies, order and chaos; the second combines two others which are proper to it: being and non-being. So non-being, nothingness, and finally nihilism, are only envisaged from the organic point of view: that of the living thing that is itself incomplete without the phenomenon of death that accompanies it.

II. Dualism in the scientific, physical and biological conception of the world.

Here we enter a second phase of Jonas's philosophy, one which is interested in epistemology. In fact, there are three phases to his philosophy: Gnostic and metaphysical, epistemological, and finally ethical. In these three phases we have to analyse the way dualism affects human existence, and in particular how Jonas extends his critique of nihilism in these forms of dualism.

The critique of Heidegger leads Jonas to rethink the relation between being and nothingness, or more precisely the relation of being and non-being, so as to understand the roots of the devalorisation of being. For this really is a question of valorisation of an existential type: how is it that being – which nonetheless manifests life – has been characterised more obviously by death? True, for Jonas death is a spur to awareness. But in his attempt at a philosophy of biology, what interests Jonas is to understand how death, more than being a mere spur, became the way we read the whole of existence, our relation with the world, and our relation with ourselves. Once again, this does not mean denying non-being, nothingness or death, but rather putting a stop to their normalisation. With Jonas, on the contrary, it is in an ontology founded on the dynamics of the living that we shall look for ethical norms. So we have to detach from what Jonas calls the ontology of death; to do that we first have to establish the evolution in representations of our relation with the world. This is an original move on Jonas's part, whose aim is to understand the way norms which are foreign to the dynamic of the living have been called upon to explain the living; in other words how the physicists' interpretation (of inert masses) has been applied and extended to the discipline of biology.

The shift from panvitalism to panmechanism

Jonas explores primitive questions about nature and the relation with the world on the basis of animism. Animism here means nothing other than seeing a principle of life in all things – a driving soul. Early human experience is thus marked by the evidence that life is omnipresent; life is manifested and expressed all around. Jonas explains that the concept of “brute matter” – that is, “dead matter” – only appeared much later with modern physics. Jonas speaks of primitive panpsychism, limited to the life of earthly experience. The later progress of the physical sciences marked a break from this limited horizon. The Copernican revolution and opening up to new cosmic dimensions changed these perspectives, which Jonas called panvitalist. So far, then, the emergence and manifestation of life have an obvious character; consequently it is death which appears as something profoundly incomprehensible, even incongruous, amid what is interpreted as generation and constant fecundity.

In such a world-view, the riddle confronting man is *death*: it is the contradiction to the one intelligible; self-explaining, natural condition which is the general life. To the extent that life is accepted as the primary state of things, death looms as the disturbing mystery. Hence the problem of death is probably the first to deserve that name in the history of thought. (“Life, Death, and the body in the theory of Being”, *The Phenomenon of life*, 1966).

Jonas reiterates the idea that the birth of metaphysics went with the enigma of death. Belief systems generated by the enigma of death allow not only for consolation, but above all for the perpetuation of life despite death; in other words, according to Jonas (but this point can also be

found in the writings of Lévi-Strauss) primitive beliefs made it possible to prolong the life of the dead in a supra-sensory horizon.¹ Funerary cults are a sign of this response to the question of death. But instead of demonstrating an acceptance of death, they are really much more a negation of it.

To seek for its meaning was to acknowledge its strangeness in the world; to understand it was – in this climate of a universal ontology of life – to negate it by mankind a transmutation of life itself. Such a negation is the belief in a survival after death which primeval burial customs express.” (*Ibid.*)

This is an important point, as it shows us that Jonas’s idea is certainly not a return to panvitalism. Panvitalism linked to the universal ontology of life differs from the panmechanism dominated by a universal ontology of death, and in this way it appears superior to panmechanism in interpretative terms. This is what we might think on the face of it if we relate Jonas’s interest in organic dynamism and his quest to valorise being above non-being. In reality, the fact that Jonas underlines that this is a negation of death shows clearly that panpsychism of an animist nature is not “complete”, to put it very simply, even if we are in danger of anachronism here. Awareness of death is a very important point for Jonas, and its negation would certainly hinder the idea of any responsibility for the future, faced with the threats which weigh on life. Nevertheless, there was a missing element, whether at the time of panvitalism or that of panmechanism. That element is the perishable nature of earthly life. The discovery of a limit to earth’s resources is fairly recent. Similarly, the possibility of humanity’s destruction by the atomic bomb dates from the twentieth century. The irreversible character of death now poses ethical problems in a different way. But above all, that irreversibility requires that death – the possibility of life ending – should not be the object of consolations, but on the contrary that this death, now foreseen in a radical manner, should be the object of a particular fear, linked to a new awareness animated by the will to maintain and perpetuate human existence on earth. But the fact of circumscribing a change of ontological paradigm allows us to grasp, on the one hand, the relativity of the model we are in, and on the other hand the ontological norms we have been dominated by since the Copernican revolution.

Panmechanism, like panvitalism, suffers from its reductive monism. Jonas writes: “Vitalistic monism is replaced by mechanistic monism, in whose rules evidence of the standard of life is exchanged for that of life” (*Ibid.*). Each monism denies either death or life. The naivety of the first monism is replaced by the gravity of the second, but this is a particular gravity, insoluble unless by the emergence of dualist thinking. Why is this a particular gravity? The now-enigmatic character of life orients us towards a feeling of foreignness towards it, but this feeling is not yet quite problematic, it is only symptomatic. The root of the problem is the contingency of life

¹ Cf in *La Pensée sauvage*, Paris, Plon, 1969, p. 45-46. In particular the question of human survival after death is understood as a form of consolation, for if “death is hard, grief is even harder.” In certain populations it gives rise to games where the living and the dead are in competition, and where the dead “win” so that they appear “more alive than the living” themselves. Here Lévi-Strauss writes that death is “usurped,” an echo of the negations of death achieved in funerary rites.

within a lifeless world. “To take life as a problem is here is to acknowledge its strangeness in the mechanical world which is *the* world; to explain it is – in this climate of universal ontology of death – to negate it by making it one of the possible variants of the lifeless” (*Ibid.*). Contingency is not given from the start with the idea of the appearance of life; this interpretation comes in the context of a world which already is not just interpreted, but *known*, as lifeless. Here the scientific character is predominant. Jonas underlines that the criterion of scientific knowledge of the world is measurement. We measure the physical world, which is thus apprehended as inert – i.e. dead – matter. It is simpler to measure inert, dead matter than dynamic, changing matter. Finally he adds “Only when a corpse is the body plainly intelligible” (*Ibid.*). Fundamentally, what Jonas shows is the methodological incompatibility between physics and biology. Measurement criteria from physics have been extended to the domain of biology and living things, so that the living has been confused with a form of inert matter, far from its essential dynamism. This is how the question of Being has got stuck in an ontology of death. For Jonas, the obstacles of both kinds of monism have to be overcome by a phenomenology of biology or the organism.

The first dualism Jonas opposes, in the order of his intellectual journey, is the dualism of Gnosticism which is found in a symptomatic form of contemporary existentialism. His opposition led Jonas to rethink ontology – that is, the science of being. Hence the second dualism studied by Jonas is that which prevails in the science of nature itself. It was to be resolved in the phenomenology of biology, which is not my subject here. But a few words must be said about it nonetheless. Jonas seeks a monism which is apt to resolve the two forms of dualism. He is not the only one to want to re-establish the unity of the world, man and the cosmos in a metaphysical perspective. Whitehead uses this metaphor when he transposes the idea to human beings: “the world is in us and we are in the world.” (*Modes of Thought*, 1938). In sum, the unity is perfect; it even establishes an identity between man and the rest of nature. This ultimate unity is debatable, and is at the heart of Jonas’s critique of Whitehead’s works. But it does have the merit of giving Jonas some clues for solving the problem of body-mind unity. Only on the basis of this unity can we envisage new ethical principles in the perspective Jonas desired. The ethical principles will have validity if, and only if, they can be founded on objective determinations which are found in nature and are not simply the product of the individual’s isolated consciousness. Co-belonging between man and the world, as it appears in Whitehead, is therefore beneficial; but the radical unity which results from it obscures the essential distinction which exists between man and the rest of the living world. True, Jonas’s consideration of being is envisaged by overcoming matter-mind dualism, but not solely with a view to a unitary reconciliation of being, or a fusion as Whitehead wants. Jonas’s goal is not simply to challenge positivism, materialism, or idealism. The fundamental issue is to go beyond nihilism. From the ontological point of view, nihilism first of all considers the question of non-being. For Jonas, being is nature; the reality of being is defined, precisely, in nature – living, organic nature. Jonas assimilates Whitehead’s philosophy with a new form of panvitalism. For Jonas, the specificity of living nature is given to us by the functioning of the organism, or the metabolism. This is not simply an indifferent dynamic. The life of being is constituted in its struggle against non-being. The unfolding of life acquires its emphatic value in a resistance against non-being, death, nothingness. Maintaining this life is a principle of liberty,

inherent in all metabolising beings. I must stress the notion of the maintenance of life. It is not simply the emergence of life which is enigmatic for Jonas, but its maintenance over a relatively long period. There is a note on this subject in the text “Matter, mind and creation:”

The chance of a life like the one we know is situated between freezing and boiling, among the millions of degrees of the temperature spectrum in which cosmic matter exists; and to enable the evolution of higher species these limits have to be ensured for billions of years; this is the case of the Earth with its oceans because of its exact distance from the sun. (*Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen*, 1992)

In this sense we can speak, with Jonas, of a teleological potential, and not merely of teleology. Jonas’s philosophy is regularly dismissed by those who only see his rehabilitation of teleology. But we have to understand that the idea of grasping ends and tendencies in the dynamic of being, which simply resists non-being, does not necessarily mean that those ends are achieved. It is a potential. And it is even by virtue of this potential, the fact that ends are not always necessarily achieved, that freedom exists.

This freedom, particularly for man, unfolds on three levels. First there is freedom of thought. The freedom of the mind, Jonas tells us, is that it can meditate on what it wants, seriously or playfully, even in a frivolous way. It is the result of the distance implied by the power of representation, which is proper to reflectivity. Secondly, there is the freedom to transform, which is the imaginative strength’s freedom of invention. In this freedom we also have the possibility of creating driving images, in other words horizons for our action. Finally there is the freedom to transgress. Because, Jonas writes, of “the capacity of language to take symbolic flight, we have the possibility of transgressing whatever is part of the given” (*Ibid.*). These three freedoms are also what he calls unique prerogatives of the mind. They are part of the domain of practical reason as spelled out by Kant. Indeed it is thanks to these freedoms that we can assign ends to our behaviour. But these freedoms lead to a fourth form of freedom: moral freedom. Jonas writes that it is “the most transcendental and the most dangerous, as it is also the freedom of self-denial, deliberate deafness, even the counter-option going as far as radical evil, which even as we have learnt can dress itself up as the supreme good.” (*Ibid.*) In sum, we also find Eros in Jonas, but an Eros unveiled by human freedom. It is an incentive surge, a driving force, but not as yet a constraint. By virtue of this transcendence we can understand Jonas’s metaphysics, just as the transcendence of the categorical imperative is the foundation of morals in Kant. It is thus on the basis of this theory that a theory of responsibility founded on fear will have to unfold.

Conclusion.

Nihilism is the direct consequence of a disruption, of existence or even of man split in two. For Hegel this split is the prelude to an unhappy consciousness. Beyond the state of consciousness, it is interesting to note the recurring notion of metaphysical drama in Jonas, which is the corollary of this nihilism. And what comes as a resolution of this dramatic conception for our author is, precisely, fear. This fear seems to me to be linked to the fear of seeing the meaning of existence disappear, as that meaning is what drives our actions. But of course existence has multiple meanings, not all of which share a morality of responsibility. The meaning of existence for Jonas

takes on a metaphysical tonality which he borrows from Jewish esotericism: the idea of restoration. A creation myth from the Qabalah shows how God, creating the world, rather than becoming impotent as in Gnosticism, left room for the power of man: man is in charge of the world and becomes solely responsible for preserving the human world, the world of possible freedom (*Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz. Eine Jüdische Stimme*, 1987). The philosophy of responsibility, seen from the angle of a critique of nihilist dualism, becomes a philosophy of restoration. This is a philosophical task which draws its inspiration from the science of nature: nature which has a tendency towards renewal, regeneration, dynamism – let us say an instinct of self-preservation. I shall conclude with some lines from the poet Schiller which Jonas quotes in this respect.

Einstweilenn, bis den Bau der Welt,
Philosophie zusammenhält,
Erhält sie, das Getriebe,
Durch Hunger und durch Liebe.

(Meanwhile, until philosophy conducts the worldly symphony, nature through hunger and through love ensures that all creation moves.) (*Philosophical Essays : From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, 1974).

These lines are quoted in a text devoted to the economic question. That might be surprising at first sight, but in reality what we have here is the same guiding thread. The economy today is also separated from its original reasons for existing. The economy is separated from its ends, which used to be guided by foresight and the reckoning of needs. Rediscovering those ends also supposes restoring a unity which has been lost or obscured, but is still present in nature.

Lastly it is a matter of transforming the contemporary drama of man, who has turned into an unbound Prometheus (as it says in the *Prinzip Verantwortung*) and whose unbridled impulses come from the economy. This Prometheus has to be made into a being who is conscious of his responsibility for, and belonging to, a human world. Such a reform of ethics is a philosophical, epistemological, and metaphysical task.

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