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Evolution and the meaning of being: Heidegger, Jonas and Nihilism

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Abstract Hans Jonas accuses Heidegger of "never bring[ing] his question about Being into correlation with the testimony of our physical and biological evolution." Neither the early nor later Heidegger has a "philosophy of nature," Jonas charges, because *Naturphilosophie* demands a new concept of matter, a monistic account of cosmogony and evolution, and the grounding of ethical responsibility for future generations in an ontological "first principle." Jonas's ontological rethinking of Darwinism allows him to overcome the nihilism that a mechanistic interpretation of evolution forces upon us: a nihilism allegedly shared by Heidegger. I imagine a Heideggerian response to Jonas, and ask whether the dream of recovering a synthesis between cosmogony and moral insight has been irrecoverably shattered by modern natural science.

Keywords Heidegger · Hans Jonas · Evolution · Ontology

Darwin's theory of evolution plays a pivotal, but equivocal role in Hans Jonas' philosophy of nature. On the one hand, Jonas presents Darwinism as an extension of the mechanistic thrust of modern physical science. Its first principles—random mutation and natural selection—reinforce "nihilism" rooted in "the spiritual denudation of nature" at the hands of science since the Copernican Revolution.[1] On the other hand, Jonas makes the provocative claim that the "the triumph which materialism achieved in Darwinism contains the germ of its own overcoming," for

[1] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 232.

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it undermines Cartesian dualism by requiring matter to account for the origin of mind.[2]

Jonas accepts evolution as a fact. But orthodox Darwinism, he holds, forecloses metaphysical options that are compatible with the biological facts. Jonas defends teleology *in* life, for all organisms are goal-oriented, and a teleology *of* life, for "the organic even in its lowest form prefigures mind" and hence there is "progress in the evolution of life."[3] In his last writings, he advances the hypothesis that primeval matter harbors a "cosmogonic eros": "striving" to organize itself for life.[4] Defying modern warnings about "the naturalistic fallacy," Jonas revives the ancient grounding of ethics in ontology, capped off by an argument for the Good-in-itself of life, and most of all responsible life, in Being. As he puts it: "Being, in the testimony it gives of itself, informs us not only of what it is but also what we owe to it."[5] On the basis of his speculative interpretation of the genesis of matter over cosmic time, Jonas accuses Heidegger of "never bring[ing] his question about Being into correlation with the testimony of our physical and biological evolution."[6]

Jonas's charge invites the question: What does evolution have to do with "the meaning of Being?" If, as Heidegger proposes, "onto-theology" is the cause of our "forgetting the meaning of Being," then isn't Jonas's metaphysics of nature a symptom of such forgetting, and so evidence of his inability to escape nihilism after all? Does Jonas's philosophy betray nostalgia for a harmonious cosmos: a position incompatible with the gap that modern physical science seems to have established between our life-world on earth and our vast, old universe?

1 Emergent monism: Jonas's speculative account of evolution

Jonas paid close attention to the sciences, especially biology, and he believed that philosophy must embrace proven scientific knowledge. He accepts evolution and the occurrence of mutations as "facts," and natural selection as "a logical deduction from the two premises of competition and differences among the competitors, which are [also] established facts."[7] But he acknowledges the troubling existential consequences of Darwin's explanation of man's origins:

> The last earthly home of all previously believed-in transcendence was destroyed by the almighty monism of purposeless, mechanical nature. The way man had become what he is, defined what he had become. This last disenchantment, following [Copernicus's displacement of the earth from its

[2] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 53.

[3] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 1 and 81.

[4] Hans Jonas, Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 173.

[5] Jonas, Mortality and Morality (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 101.

[6] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 48.

[7] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 44–45.

> central position in a closed cosmos], appeared to undermine the very foundations of the previous image of man.[8]

Darwinism's elimination of teleology and essences from the earthly life-world completes the "nihilism" that began with emptying the heavenly realm of meaning. No longer believing that humanity belongs to a sacred order of creation or "an objective order of essences in the totality of nature," moderns, Jonas laments, have lost not only the grounds for cosmic piety, but also a stable image of human nature, even the conviction that we have a nature. In the early 1950s, alluding to Heidegger's Being and Time, Jonas writes:

> That nature does not care one way or the other is the true abyss. That only man cares, in his finitude facing nothing but death, alone with his contingency and the objective meaninglessness of his projecting meanings, is a truly unprecedented situation… As the product of the indifferent, his being, too, must be indifferent… *There is no point in caring for what has no sanction behind it in any creative intention.* [Emphasis mine.][9]

The mechanistic interpretation of evolution precludes speaking of nature as harboring a *telos* inscribed in the heart of Being or a creative intention for humankind.[10] Fortunately, as Jonas tells us in a metaphor pregnant with irony, "the triumph which materialism achieved in Darwinism contains the germ of its own overcoming."[11] The success of Jonas's project hinges on this proposition, for it opens up the possibility that one can *both* respect evolutionary science *and* still believe that the history of life is directional (though not "a guaranteed success-story"), that we humans have special pride of place in nature's adventure, even a right to see ourselves as the summit of life's purposiveness, and, finally, that this

[8] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 76.

[9] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 233-4.

[10] With characteristic panache, Stephen Jay Gould tells us that Darwinism destroys "the false hopes" of traditional metaphysics by subjecting them to "a cold bath":

> Darwin's mechanism – natural selection – can only generate local adaptation to environments that change in a directionless way through time, thus imparting no goal or progressive victor to life's history. (In Darwin's system, an internal parasite, so anatomically degenerate that it has become little more than a bag of ingestive and reproductive tissue within the body of its host, may be just as well adapted and may enjoy just as much prospect of future success, as the most complex mammalian carnivore - wily, fleet, and adept - living free on the savannas.) Moreover, although organisms may be well designed, and ecosystems harmonious, these broader features of life arise only as consequences of the unconscious struggles of individual organisms for personal reproductive success, and not as direct results of any natural principle operating overtly for such "higher" goods… By taking the Darwinian 'cold bath' and staring reality in the face, we can finally abandon the cardinal false hope of the ages – that factual nature can specify the meaning of our life by validating our inherent superiority, or by proving that evolution exists to generate us as the summit of life's purpose. In principle, the factual state of the universe cannot teach us how we should live or what our lives should mean – for these ethical questions of value and meaning belong to such different realms of human life as religion, philosophy and humanistic study.

(Gould's Introduction to Carl Zimmer, Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001) xxxv–xxxvi.)

[11] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 53.

nobility brings with it a special obligation—"an objective assignment" issued by Being—to safeguard the life-world to which we belong but whose integrity our knowledge and power enable us to jeopardize more than any other species.[12] The question we cannot avoid wrestling with is this: Is Jonas's metaphysically thick interpretation of evolution credible today?

Just what does he mean by the pregnant phrase: Darwinism contains "the germ of its own overcoming?" Evolution "implicitly transcended the terms of materialism," he tells us, by placing upon matter "the full weight of a burden from which dualism had kept it free: that of having to account for the origin of mind, in addition to the physical organizations themselves."[13] The ascent to mind cannot be explained mechanistically, however, because mindful organisms are not machines, but manifest "something more": namely, "the dimension of the subjective—inwardness—which no material evidence by itself allows us to surmise, of whose actual presence no physical model contains the slightest hint."[14] Though mental phenomena are not available to a science that restricts itself to "the external facts" or to "the Divine Mathematician" who would grasp nature wholly through its "primary qualities," we know about the life of the mind through our own inner experience. Only an embodied, living being can have the insider's perspective it takes to know what it's like to be an organism.

If our minds are continuous with the pre-human history of life, Jonas holds, then we are justified in locating the beginning of subjectivity at the beginning of life itself. Jonas provides "an existential interpretation of biological facts" that lets us see, in the spirit of Aristotle's psychology, how not only humans, but also animals and even plants, have "concern for their own being," and hence possess an "inwardness" that a mechanistic interpretation of life, framed in external terms alone, cannot account for.[15]

Organisms display an "ascending" scale of goal-oriented functions and capabilities. Plants are driven by their metabolic needs, and stand in an immediate relationship to their environment. Because animals maintain a gap between immediate concern and mediate satisfaction, they have a richer spatio-temporal world than plants, for "motility guided by perception turns 'there' into 'here' and 'not yet' into 'now.'"[16] Finally, in humans, full-fledged "mind" blossoms in our capacities for imagination, thinking and moral responsibility: enabling us to act from a sense of our place in the world as a whole. Our widened horizon of self-transcendence, however, brings in its wake perils peculiar to human existence: experiences like anxiety, guilt and despair elicited by our eccentric ability to become questions to ourselves and to seek answers in the framework of the totality of Being. "Physics, art and metaphysics, adumbrated in primitive times by tool, image and grave, are original dimensions of the human relationship to the world," Jonas writes, comprising a surplus that is "beyond the animal in man."[17]

[12] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 283.

[13] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 53.

[14] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 169.

[15] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 62–63.

[16] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 102.

[17] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 85.

The measure of evolution, he insists, is qualitative, not quantitative: a question not of duration, but "duration *of what*?"[18] Jonas looks at the undeveloped from the perspective of what it develops into, and finds the germ of what is higher in the lower. Because life-forms display increasing degrees of scope and distinctness of experience and freedom of action, Jonas reads evolution as a story of progress.[19]

Furthermore, evolution, existentially interpreted, invites a metaphysical position we might call "emergent monism."

> Opposing every form of dualism is the monistic testimony of evolution… Natural scientists need to be deaf to the language of subjectivity, or, if they do hear it, to accuse it of lying, for it speaks of goals and purposes. But this enigma must give no rest to philosophy, which has to listen to both languages, that of the external and internal worlds, uniting them in one statement about Being that does justice to the psychophysical totality of reality.[20]

The teleological unity of nature links not only life and mind in evolution, but also matter and life in cosmogony. Jonas refuses to believe that "caring is a product of the uncaring," that "teleological nature is begotten unteleologically."[21]

> No materialism as formulated by physics can comprehend how the same primeval substance present throughout the universe in galaxies, suns and planets, has also brought forth life, pleasure and pain, desire and fear, seeing and feeling, love and hatred.[22]

If, as Jonas asserts, "reality or nature is one, and testifies to itself in what it allows to come forth from it," then this "requires an ontological revision and replenishing of the concept of 'matter' beyond the external qualities abstracted from it and measured by physics, and this means, therefore, a meta-physics of the material substance of the world."[23]

Life, Jonas speculates, is "a secretly longed-for goal" in matter to actualize a potentiality in the depths of being.[24] He acknowledges his proximity to the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead for whom even the most elementary entities are instances of feeling and so qualify as organic. Jonas rejects panpsychism, however, as "an overreaching of speculation"; the organic, he insists, remains different than the inorganic. Nonetheless, he conjectures, matter is disposed to "shoot into [that rare] opening and go the way of life."[25] This readiness in physis for subjectivity cannot be described within the confines of science.

To summarize, Jonas's "emergent monism" involves two conjectures that cannot be proven but are consistent with the biological facts, existentially interpreted: (1)

[18] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 73.

[19] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 2.

[20] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 52.

[21] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 233.

[22] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 52.

[23] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 171.

[24] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 173.

[25] Scodel, Harvey. "An Interview with Hans Jonas." Social Research 70, 2 (2003), 356.

That there is "progress in the evolution of life" for organic matter possesses a tendency to generate "ascending modes of freedom," and ultimately the human mind, within the life-world[26] and (2) Primeval matter harbors a "cosmogonic eros"—a "striving" or "yearning" to organize itself for life and hence for subjectivity.[27]

The extension of psyche or self-concern to all organisms invites the ethical stage of Jonas's thought. He worries that a "nihilist" may acknowledge the distribution of subjective value throughout the life-world, yet doubt "whether the whole toilsome and terrible drama is worth the trouble," for the entire show might be "sound and fury signifying nothing."[28] What must be established, he claims, is the objective reality of value—a Good-in-itself—because only from it can we derive a binding duty to guard life: the gift of Being. On the basis of "intuitive certainty," Jonas derives "the ontological axiom" that the goodness of life is not relative to already existing purposes, for "the very capacity to have purposes at all is a good-in-itself." Through life, Being says "Yes" to itself. Only humans, however, are able to discern the ontological truth: That the presence of life in Being is "absolutely and infinitely" better than its absence.[29]

The ethical consequence of this axiom is that we have an obligation to protect the life-world, for we are "executor[s] of a trust which only [w]e can see, but didn't create."[30] Insofar as we are able to understand and feel our obligation towards the whole of which we are a part, we have the right to speculate that we are "an event for Being" or, to use Hegelian language, "a 'coming to itself' of original substance."[31] The primary object of our responsibility is our own vulnerable place at the summit of what used to be called "the Great Chain of Being." Jonas states:

> Since in [man] the principle of purposiveness has reached its highest and most dangerous peak through the freedom to set himself ends and the power to carry them out, he himself becomes the first object of his duty not to ruin, as he well can do, what nature has achieved in him by the way of his using it.[32]

This precautionary principle is no anthropocentric conceit, according to Jonas, but "an objective assignment by the nature of things": To ensure the quality of life for future generations, to "never make the existence or essence of man as a whole a stake in the hazards of action."[33]

We can now see how Jonas's ontological rethinking of Darwinism—spawned by the germ of monism within Darwinism itself—allows him to overcome the nihilism that the mechanistic interpretation of evolution forces upon us. On admittedly speculative grounds, rooted in the existentially known fact that nature includes

[26] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 81.

[27] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 173.

[28] Hans Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 50.

[29] Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility, 80.

[30] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 283.

[31] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 284.

[32] Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility, 130.

[33] Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility, 37.

layers of subjectivity unavailable to science's focus on the external evidence, Jonas argues that there is a pro-life and pro-mind disposition, or "creative intention," within matter, that the evolution of human mind on Earth comprises an event "of cosmic importance": a climax of nature's purposiveness. The emergence of responsible (i.e., human) life comprises "a qualitative intensification of the valuableness of Being as a whole" and so we rightly regard humanity as the ultimate object of our responsibility."[34] Because "Being, in the testimony it gives of itself, informs us not only of what it is but also of what we owe to it,"[35] we are able to see ourselves as duty-bound to a sanction or "objective assignment" whose authority emanates from "Being as a whole in its integrity."[36]

Despite his revival of ancient motifs, Jonas remains a modern in that he cannot rely on the vertical orientation of Platonic ontology that found the eternal beyond the transient: pure Being apart from becoming. Today, Jonas reminds us, it must be becoming rather than abiding nature that holds out the promise of a reunion between ontology and ethics. Unlike the permanent and indestructible first-principle of Platonic ontology, the Good-in-itself of living nature, and especially of thoughtful, imaginative, and responsible life within it, is at the mercy of our actions.

2 Jonas versus Heidegger: the "turn" towards being

By first extending existential interpretation to all organisms and then grounding an imperative of responsibility in the Good-in-itself of life in Being, Jonas makes the turn towards Being that Heidegger could not achieve so long as he confined existential categories to Dasein. In Being and Time Heidegger sees nature as a mode of being within our world, and so accords no ontological importance to evolution. Against the meaningless background of Darwinian mechanism, laments Jonas, authentic Dasein is a "freely projecting existence" who must create values on the basis of nothing but the shifting soil of history. "Will replaces vision; temporality of the act ousts the eternity of the 'Good-in-itself'."[37]

But wait: Didn't the so-called *later* Heidegger reject existentialism as all too "humanistic" and make his own "turn towards Being" beyond the limits of his earlier fundamental ontology? To protect "the mystery of Being" and dwell poetically, we must, the later Heidegger tells us, remain mindful of the priority of thrownness over projection, earth over world, untruth over truth. Our "ethical" task is to nurture our awareness of "the clearing" (Lichtung) and to safeguard "the Fourfold." As the shepherd of Being, not the master of beings, our dignity consists in being called by Being to preserve its truth: to let beings be and protect our ethos, threatened as it is by "the Enframing" or technology as a way of revealing.

In his famous 1964 speech, "Heidegger and Theology," Jonas remarked that if the earlier Heidegger was too "decisionistic," the later Heidegger is too oracular:

[34] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 106.

[35] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 101.

[36] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 102.

[37] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 215.

ceding authority to the heteronomous "call of Being." Heidegger's "turn" personifies Being as an agent that reveals itself to properly attuned thinkers who are thereby able to become "ventriloquists of Being."[38] In Heidegger's "primal thinking," Jonas writes, thought is the event of the self-clearing of Being, not man's own erring bid for truth. And man is called to be "the shepherd of Being, not of beings." Jonas replies:

> Apart from the blasphemous ring which this use of the hallowed title must have to Jewish and Christian ears: it is hard to hear man hailed as the shepherd of Being when he has just so dismally failed to be his brother's keeper. The latter he is meant to be in the Bible. But the terrible anonymity of Heidegger's Being, illicitly decked out with personal characteristics, blocks out the personal call. Not by the being of another person am I grasped, but just by Being! And my responsive thought is Being's own event…[39]

Jonas worries about "the specter of arbitrariness and anarchy" that appears when philosophers are tempted to jettison conceptual and argumentative rigor for the "haunting language" of poetry, for "the only criterion that remains is authenticity of language." And we have no "yardstick" for assessing those whose words most authentically channel the voice of Being. Jonas's own version of "the turn" aims at supplying a rational argument for such a "yardstick."[40]

In 1992 at the age of 89, in his last major essay, "Philosophy at the End of the Century: Retrospect and Prospect," Jonas deepens his critique by tying the failure of Heidegger's "turn" to his disregard for the significance of the evolution of life:

> *Dasein*… emerged from the supposedly neutral "present-at-handness" (*Vorhandenheit*) of the external world that science reveals to us—emerged in the first place in the evolution of the species and then repeatedly in every case of conception and birth. That must say something about objective nature which causes this and us to occur. Nature must be questioned, so to speak, about its intentions concerning us. Heidegger himself, after writing *Being and Time*, deemed necessary such a reversal of the question of Being and called it "the turn." The question is no longer what does "world" mean for *Dasein*, which finds itself in it, but what does *Dasein*, i.e., the human being, mean for the world that contains it—that contains you and me. In one case it is the human being, in the other, Being, which is the focus of the relationship. But Heidegger never brings this question about Being—how it is, namely, that Being contains and maintains the human and what it thereby reveals about itself—into correlation with the testimony of our physical and biological evolution. Instead of taking into account this massively material basis that after all propounds the riddle, he invokes as our underlying determinant a highly spiritual entity that he calls "*das Seyn*" [the German work for "Being" in an archaic spelling]. Here again, as previously in the case of his overlooking

[38] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 257.

[39] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 258.

[40] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 256.

> the body, this means simply that the question of Being was spared the impact of considering the reciprocal relationship between human beings and nature—a relationship which at that very moment was entering a new and critical phase, although this was still unrecognized at the time.[41]

With Jonas's reference to "objective nature's intentions concerning us," we have come *full circle*, back to his earliest pronouncement of the crisis facing philosophy today: "There is no point in caring for what has no sanction behind it in any creative intention."[42] To be sure, the later Heidegger tries to overcome the nihilism of Being and Time by transferring authority from authentic *Da-sein* to *Sein* itself. But, according to Jonas, the earlier dualism between man and nature is repeated in Heidegger's turn towards "a spiritual entity"—"das Seyn"—that still implies our "cosmic solitude": our alienation from our bodies, the life-world and its material basis in the universe as a whole. Neither the early nor later Heidegger has a "philosophy of nature" at all, Jonas avers, because Naturphilosophie demands a new concept of matter, a monistic account of cosmogony and evolution, and the grounding of ethical responsibility for future generations in an ontological "first principle."[43] Jonas sets himself up as the Hegel of our time, who blends ancient and modern elements to spell out a new self-consciousness of "the Whole" that was not available to previous generations—because they couldn't foresee the crisis into which technology has thrown us and didn't have recourse to the revolutionary implications of Darwinism.

From Jonas's perspective, philosophy under the spell of Nietzsche and Heidegger has prematurely abandoned its legitimate metaphysical vocation. Philosophy's task expresses what Jonas, following Kant, regards as "the need of Reason" to provide intellectual satisfaction by giving "a coherent account of the whole"[44]: showing how we are, despite all appearances, at home in the universe. His expansion of "the ontological locus of purpose from what is apparent at the subjective peak to what is hidden in the breadth of being" permits him to see Being as an ordered whole that reveals itself to Reason *if* we revise our concept of matter and see "mind" as an emergent part of a psychophysical totality.[45] Jonas develops a bold combination of Lebensphilosophie and rationalism. A split between our ethical lives on earth and what happens in the widest reaches of the universe comprises a form of dualism that fails to answer "the need of Reason."[46]

But can Reason deliver on this demand? Jonas's answer betrays the tension of his dual debt to Athens and Jerusalem. On the one hand, his ontology does not depend on theology, for the goodness of the life-world speaks for itself and the imperative

[41] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 48–49.

[42] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 234.

[43] Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life, 253.

[44] Scodel, "Interview," 345.

[45] Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility, 71.

[46] "The need of Reason," echoing Kant's insistence on the unavoidability of metaphysical speculation, is the term I heard Jonas use in 1991 at a conference in his honor at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

of responsibility makes its command on the basis of our Reason alone.[47] On the other hand, the argument depends on teleological premises about nature that are not easy to detach from theological commitment. Although "cosmogonic *eros*" is the still "the voice of immanence" in nature—attesting to matter's "yearning" to organize itself for life and hence for subjectivity—Jonas is not satisfied that primeval matter can give rise to the reasoning mind unless there is a transcendent "first cause": a creative source outside of nature that wills life as "a cradle for the mind."[48] Because he rejects the Biblical premises of the special creation of the human species and of God's intervention in history, Jonas speculates that "mind asleep" must have been implanted in lifeless matter as a potentiality to develop into "mind awake" over aeons of time.[49] So ethics depends on a supernatural "first cause" after all: Not because the content of the imperative of responsibility is heteronomous, but because a Creator provides the best explanation for the existence of rational mind in nature.

Jonas states, however, that his imperative of responsibility does not depend on theological premises.[50] The evolution of mind in nature is perhaps no more mysterious than the emergence of life and hence subjectivity. If the pro-life tendency in matter is immanent, then perhaps the pro-mind tendency in living matter is no less immanent. Already in life the effect exceeds the cause. Still, it is hard to avoid the ambiguity in Jonas's persistence use of the term "creative intention" or "objective nature's intentions concerning us" or the idea that Being is "not indifferent" to the arisal of mind and responsibility in its midst. These terms seem to refer to *someone* who has intentions or who cares about how cosmic history unfolds. And so Jonas's rationalism seems, at the very least, *crypto-theological*. It is hard to fathom how "cosmogonic *eros*" alone could possess a creative intention at the root of a sanction to safeguard the life-world—or how can it matter *to matter* that it actualize its potentiality for life and mind if it lacks both to begin with. Jonas seems torn here between his Greek and Judaic sources. For those of us ill-disposed to theism, Jonas challenges us with the thought that "cosmogonic *eros*" and creative intention be ascribed not to "someone"—a separate being "behind" the process of nature—but to a source that is immanent in what it sources.[51]

And a further problem rears its head. Even without its theological supplement, is Jonas's philosophy of nature compatible with evolutionary biology today? Jonas worries that the attempt to replace scientific objectivity with philosophy (that is, phenomenology-plus-metaphysics) will miss the truths that the natural sciences have managed to find precisely by their insistence on methodological "rigor." Though science denudes nature of 'inwardness' and 'purpose' and so distorts its object, such distortion seems demanded by the commitment to objectivity that science cannot surrender. So the question is: how should psychophysical monism, with its ontological revision of the concept of 'matter,' bear on science, which,

[47] Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility, 48.

[48] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 190.

[49] Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 181.

[50] Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility, 48.

[51] I owe this formulation to my beloved teacher, Mitchell Miller, formerly of Vassar College.

according to Jonas, must remain "independent" of "the ontological word" spoken by "the phenomenological testimony of life"? Should scientists themselves embrace Jonas's hypotheses about the relation between life and "cosmic being"—in order to be *good scientists* who purport to be getting at the truth about the material substance of the world?

Perhaps it is enough to say that science gets at what "matter" *really* is, but misses what the material world *means* to us. Let us be clear: Jonas *rejects* this compromise, believing we must go further. Scientific objectivity cannot offer us access to the phenomenon of life—and, beyond that, misleads us regarding the very nature of "matter." In other words, for all the "truth" that science, under the aegis of "objectivity," affords us, it must remain blind to the "inwardness" characteristic of all organisms, and so to something about matter itself that invites this potentiality. Though Jonas tells us that his metaphysics isn't meant to replace science or to enter into individual scientific explanations, he does believe that his speculations open us up to what the material world *really* is, not just to what it means to us. In this sense, it helps us capture science's "object"—nature (physis)—better than a science that is limited by its method to the external facts. Perhaps the most Jonas can hope for is that scientists admit the limits of their own unavoidably "objective" approach to nature.

3 Heidegger *Redux*

It may have occurred to you that Jonas got off too easily by pitting his own view against a *caricature* of the later Heidegger. A more accurate account of Heidegger's "turn" may paint a brighter picture of the ethical resources of post-metaphysical thinking. For my purposes, I am less interested in a chapter-and-verse exegesis of Heidegger than in a fair rendering of a "Heideggerian" position. Such a position holds that there is no need to appeal to a "philosophy of nature" in Jonas's sense as an alternative to pernicious humanism, so long as our place within what Heidegger calls "the Fourfold"—in our world, on the earth, under the sky, with our fellow mortals, in the presence of divinities—is already a site of meaning, even if a precarious one. Heidegger offers us a position that Yale philosopher Karsten Harries calls "existential geocentrism," based on our power to articulate our place poetically—even if we are "lost in space" understood scientifically.[52] Cosmogony—genesis—is *irrelevant* to how things and our lives should matter to us now that we happen to be here. Heidegger accepts the brokenness of Being. The light of "the clearing" bursts forth against a background of darkness or nothingness. But this may only deepen our gratitude for the contingent "gift of Being." There is

[52] For the clearest explanation of Heidegger's idea of "the Fourfold" that I have read, see Chapter 10, "Building and Dwelling" in Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997). For Harries' own account of the nihilism of modern science and how a Heideggerian perspective answers it, see Chapters 16 and 17 in *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). For a succinct overview of Harries' position, see "Space, Place, and Ethos: Reflections on the Ethical Function of Architecture," artibus et historiae, no. 8, Harries 1984, pp. 159–165.

no need to ground our earthly ethos in a "creative intention" at the heart of the universe as a psychophysical totality.

Jonas feels called as a philosopher to prove that life is a "Good-in-itself" because, without such a foundation, the "nihilist" apparently has no good reason to prefer cherishing and protecting life over despair or destruction. We may worry, however, that by betting the bank on metaphysics, Jonas runs the risk that if the argument isn't persuasive, then nihilism prevails. By Heidegger's lights, Jonas's attempt to make Being-as-a-whole accessible to Reason is itself an expression of nihilism, for the metaphysical quest for an absolute, unconditioned Good-in-itself assumes that our relational, conditioned lives on earth are deficient in meaning or value. Heidegger might allege that Jonas's "foundationalism" robs Being of its mystery and reduces Being to "humanism" by way of a teleology that makes it seem like "it's all about us." By Heidegger's lights, there is no need to locate purpose in the material substance of the universe in order to secure such meaning as there is in our little hideout. Our home on the earth is not the *cosmos* and the best we can hope for—and this is no small hope in our technological age—is that "poetically man dwells."[53]

Even if we don't *need* to ground ethics in cosmogony, however, Jonas might *reply* that his philosophy of nature does not run afoul of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics. Jonas does not 'leap over" the finite, relative, historical conditions within which anything meaningful can appear and arrive at an absolute, unconditioned and ahistorical "ground" of beings. His Good-in-itself is not transcendent in this way, for it comes into being with the advent of life and the emergence of subjectivity. And it wouldn't actualize itself without the evolution of responsible minds for whom it can become the basis of a duty; the Good wouldn't be "in itself" without a "for us" whom it commands. Also, access to the Good requires an insider's perspective on life, not that of a disembodied reasoner who occupies the Divine Mathematician's "view from nowhere." Finally, the Good is

[53] For Heidegger's elaboration upon this line from a late Holderlin poem, see the essays in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

Joseph Fell speaks of our earthly home as a "groundless ground" in his excellent book, *Heidegger and Sartre: An Essay on Being and Place* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

> Heidegger calls attention to the familiar world as 'wondrous' and 'holy' when it is no longer devalued by reference to a transcendent ground or quest for such. This, to be sure, has to be accomplished by pointing to another ground that has been hidden; but this 'groundless ground' is nothing other than the event and place of disclosure of phenomena themselves, i.e., the familiar world… The later Heidegger seeks to free philosophy and culture from its [traditional] metaphysical and teleological quest, which cannot affirm the phenomenal world in and for itself but only insofar as it subserves human ends [by way of a supposedly absolute ground]… (404–405)

Later in the text, Fell explains why Heidegger's awakening us to this "groundless ground" amounts to "a fundamental ethics":

> The history of metaphysics terminates in nihilism… The quest for absolute, nonrelative, unconditioned value, like the quest for absolute truth, is displacement from the conditions under which there is and can be value. Value resides neither primarily in man nor primarily in nature, but in their precedent union… What has primary value is the intelligible world itself: the ungroundable 'gift' of an illuminated region or 'clearing' standing out from a surrounding darkness… [Authentic] love is love of mortal fate, love of the earth." (423)

vulnerable, for should responsible life become extinct, Being itself would become deeply impoverished. Perhaps Jonas would have been better off speaking of Becoming (or process), not Being as such. If, as I suggested earlier, cosmogonic eros and creative intention are not ascribed to "someone"—a separate being—but to a source that is immanent in what it sources, then Jonas can avoid the impression that he relies on "two-world metaphysics" to which Heidegger, following Nietzsche, most objects.

Jonas is looking for a way of holding onto something analogous to two traditional ideas: The Judaic idea that we are equally God's children with a special role to play in history and the Greek idea that we as a species are at the top of the Chain of Being. But he does not want these ideas to lead to the hubristic consequence that we regard ourselves as the "masters and possessors of nature." Our "nobility," such as it is, must remain humble in the face of our dependence and vulnerability.

Even if Jonas's philosophy of nature cannot be dismissed as a symptom of "the metaphysics of presence," we may still remain unpersuaded—and agree with Remi Brague that we can no longer believe in "cosmonomy" ("the wisdom of the world") because the fantasy of recovering a synthesis between scientific explanation and moral insight," has been "irrecoverably shattered by modern natural science." As Brague puts it:

> For us, there is no longer any connection between cosmology and ethics, no longer any relationship between what we know of the structure of the physical universe and the way man thinks about himself and feels about what he is and what he ought to be… So that morality can be detached from "cosmo-nomy" and begin to be conceived exclusively as an expression of human "auto-nomy," the *cosmos* must already have lost its constitutive function with regard to the human subject.[54]

If the grand synthesis of cosmology and ethics has broken apart, however, this need not leave us with an image of ourselves as projecting value on otherwise valueless nature. As Charles Taylor, glossing Heidegger, puts it:

> We don't need to consider ourselves as set in a universe that simply [serves as] a source of raw materials for our projects. We may still need to see ourselves as part of a larger order that can make claims on us. [Nature that surrounds us may still be] the locus of human meanings that are "objective," in the sense that they are "not just arbitrarily projected through choice or contingent desire."[55]

The articulation of these meanings, however, must be registered today in neo-Romantic "languages of personal resonance," according to Taylor, because our identity can no longer be rooted in the publicly accessible order of meanings provided by the pre-eighteenth century Great Chain of Being. By Taylor's

[54] Remi Brague, The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 216.

[55] Charles Taylor, "Disenchantment-Reenchantment," Ch. 12 in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 294.

standards, Jonas's philosophy seeks to prop up a version of an anachronistic *ordo creationis*. We needn't worry, however, for "languages of personal resonance" are sufficient to give voice to what Taylor calls "nature as an intrinsic source": the idea that "a current of nature coursing through our lives" connects with and responds to "a larger current of life or being."[56]

> The Romantic order was not organized on principles that could be grasped by disengaged reason. Its principle of order was not exoterically available. Rather it was an enigma, and one could only understand it fully by participating in it. The love is such that one has to be initiated into it to see it. The old idea of a rationally evident harmony of natures gives way to anew one of a current of love or life, which is both close to us and baffles our understanding.[57]

The depths of Being are a mystery, but this should not take away from our awe and wonder. These moods, Taylor contends, are not "just feelings," but are "strong evaluations" that we experience as "tracking some reality."

> We live in a nature of deep time and unfathomable spaces, from which we emerged: a universe in many ways strange and alien. The sense that our thinking, feeling life plunges its roots into a system of such unimaginable depths, that consciousness can emerge from this, should fill us with awe… But this awe is modulated, and intensified, by a sense of kinship, of belonging integrally to these depths. We belong to the earth; it is our home. This sensibility is a powerful source of ecological consciousness.[58]

That art, not disengaged reason, is the medium that taps into the feelings that course through our lives does not imply that thought must be replaced by "pure feeling." The question here has to do with the proper relation between art and what Heidegger calls "meditative thinking" or "releasement towards things": the promise of an "autochthony" or rootedness that nonetheless remains "open to the mystery." Heidegger's neo-Romanticism must stand opposed to Jonas's metaphysical "theorizing," for the latter is motivated by the "need" to defeat nihilism by grounding our responsibility in "objective nature's intentions concerning us."[59]

Jonas and Heidegger compete to find "the golden mean" between the anthropocentrism that modern physical science calls into question and the inhuman universe it projects. There is, to be sure, an affinity between Heidegger and Jonas in their shared concern about the dangers posed by technology and our need to "turn" towards Being. Each offers a kind of "thinking" that recognizes it belongs and responds to what it thinks. But the big difference is that for Jonas, metaphysics is the answer, a life-centered humanism is nothing to be ashamed of, and anything short of a full-fledged philosophy of nature collapses into dualism and so nihilism. For

[56] Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 377.

[57] Ibid., p. 380.

[58] Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 347.

[59] For a down-to-earth articulation of these concepts, see Heidegger's "Memorial Address" in Discourse on Thinking (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

Heidegger, on the other hand, metaphysics is the root of the problem, because its theorizing is "technological" and all-too-humanistic right from the start. Art is Heidegger's answer, for great works reveal our finite, earthly, embodied, culturally inflected, precarious place.

I do not pretend to have settled their disagreement, but I hope I have sharpened our sense of the alternatives. Jonas's Good-in-itself yields "an objective assignment"—his "imperative of responsibility"—that bears echoes of ancient metaphysics: both Greek and Judaic. Even if it's not clear that we *need* to appeal to an ontological "first principle" to justify our responsibility for future generations, we cannot discount the possibility that Jonas is correct simply by accusing him of "the metaphysics of presence." He challenges us to question the assumption that we live—and can afford to live—after "the end of metaphysics."

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