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Modernity's Alienation from Nature and Reason's Gnostic Temptation: Hans Jonas's Critique of Heidegger's Existentialism

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Hans Jonas's *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for a Technological Age* (1984) is the culmination of a career spent investigating the ontological implications of the distinction between animate and inanimate being and the ethical implications of this most basic ontological distinction. Delineating the unique features of our world-historical moment, Jonas offers a penetrating analysis of the significance of our tremendous technological power both to despoil the natural environment and to alter human nature through bioengineering. By illuminating the unprecedented existential challenges facing us as a species in our technological age, Jonas's work offers a timely diagnosis of our present apprehensions and a prescription for addressing the challenges of our age.

At first glance, Hans Jonas's early study of Gnosticism seems a world away from the contemporary concerns animating *The Imperative of Responsibility*. What relevance could the study of a Christian heresy have for understanding our current condition, for grappling with anxieties about our power to render the biosphere uninhabitable or to play God through genetic manipulation? According to Jonas, Gnosticism represents "one of the more radical answers of man to his predicament" and the very radicality of the

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philosophical position brings to light a fundamental feature of human nature, namely, the temptation to adopt a negative and critical posture toward the natural world—a spiritual comportment that insists on a sharp distinction between soul and body, spirit and nature, self and world, in which the former element is elevated at the expense of the latter element in each of these antitheses.[1] From the perspective of *Geistesgeschichte*, Gnosticism arises at a time when the spiritual verities of the past have lost their binding force; but Gnosticism is not merely a historically contingent byproduct of sociopolitical or economic forces.[2] Rather, Gnosticism is an expression of a perennial posture the rational animal might adopt, one in which the mind seizes on our experience of duality and offers a totalizing interpretation of our being in the world on the basis of a set of radical antitheses. Such a mode of spiritual comportment is an interpretation of our peculiarly human way of being in the world in light of the shadow cast over our lives by our awareness of our own mortality.

The perennial possibility of adopting the Gnostic position is evident in the surprising connection Jonas draws between Gnosticism and existentialism. In Gnosticism, Jonas espies a surprising forerunner to contemporary existentialism, especially as expressed in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, according to which there is no source of value outside of *Dasein*'s resolute confrontation with nothingness. In Jonas's words, it was his "extended discourse with ancient nihilism that proved . . . a help in discerning and placing the meaning of modern nihilism."[3] The similarity between Gnosticism and existentialism rests on a common judgment that a fundamental incongruity between man and nature precludes our being at home in the world and obviates the very possibility of uncovering a natural standard by which we might guide our conduct. When nature is hostile or merely indifferent to human purposes, human subjectivity must ground its own norms lest the human be wholly bereft of orientation.[4] For Jonas, existentialism is the destiny of the logic of modernity; for once teleology has been ejected "from the system of natural causes . . . values [are] unsupported, and the self is thrown back entirely upon itself in its quest

for meaning and value."[5] Thus, a Christian heresy from the Hellenistic age illuminates the logical endpoint of modernity as the metaphysical presuppositions of modern science leave man without guidance in an alien world.

While Jonas's engagement with his erstwhile teacher inflects all his work, his most explicit critique of Heidegger occurs in two essays: "Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism" and "Heidegger and Theology." Although originally discrete reflections on early and late Heidegger, Jonas retrospectively judged these two essays integral to understanding how "the philosophy of man" might fit within the broader framework of the philosophical biology he had developed in the 1940s and 1950s and that culminated in the publication of *The Phenomenon of Life* in 1966. The place of these essays in the overall argument of Jonas's first postwar monograph indicates (1) that Jonas's philosophical biology is the ground for confronting Heidegger and (2) that Heidegger represents the foremost challenge to an objective ethics grounded in a recovery of *phusis*. While the present article focuses primarily on the first of these two most explicit engagements with Heidegger's thought, I draw on the range of Jonas's published works to demonstrate the bearing that Jonas's confrontation with Heidegger has for his whole philosophic project.

At stake in Jonas's confrontation with Heidegger are the most profound and urgent of philosophical questions regarding the ontological priority of nature to history, the grounds of the world's intelligibility, the place of the human within the whole, the possibility of self-knowledge, and the prospects for an objective rationally justified ethics in the age of technology. Even to begin to address such questions, however, Jonas must undertake a propaedeutic work that is simultaneously diagnostic, critical, and reflexive in which the refutation of Heideggerian existentialism's own account of the grounds of late-modern nihilism serves to justify adopting a transhistorical perspective both on our historically conditioned experience of nihilism and on existentialism as the theoretical reflection that self-consciously purports to offer the definitive interpretation of this experience. To leap immediately to such a perspective—to assume the historically located individual thinker

is capable of the requisite noetic self-transcendence—would be, however, to beg the decisive question at stake in this confrontation. Hence, Jonas must first elaborate from within history a nonhistoricist history of the advent of nihilism. Such an account must uncover the origins of the seemingly unprecedented epoch-defining experience that the highest values have devalued themselves and of the widespread belief that such an experience calls into question the validity not merely of this or that philosophical doctrine but of the whole philosophic tradition from "Iona to Jena," from Plato to Hegel.[6] Second, Jonas must address the coherence, plausibility, and adequacy of the existentialist account of the human condition that not only was formulated in response to the intellectual and moral crisis of contemporary man but that also justifies the radical novelty of its account of the human being by appealing to the fact of such experience—which far from being idiosyncratic or of merely parochial significance is taken to disclose the truth of history and therewith the truth of the human condition. Third, Jonas must exhibit the logical and conceptual connection between existentialism's interpretation of the human condition and the ideas operative in a nonhistoricist history of modern nihilism in order to show how the central principles of existentialism that are intended to address the root cause of the experience of nihilism serve but to deepen the crisis of meaning. In sum, Jonas must expound an interpretation of modern nihilism that shows its roots to lie in a questionable theoretical innovation, the ultimate fruit of which is the spiritual destitution that existentialism seeks to confront and overcome but that it in fact only exacerbates because it unwittingly retains the key assumptions of the philosophical revolution that lies at the origin of modernity's winter of discontent.

Gnosticism proves to be integral to all three facets of this undertaking, providing at each stage of the argument the requisite dialectical foil for illuminating both the theory and the lived experience of humanity's relationship to nature from the origins of modernity to the end of the modern age, and thus enabling Jonas to exhibit the surprising metaphysical and moral continuity between the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and

the philosophic revolution propounded by existentialism in the twentieth. Jonas's discovery of the heuristic potential of interpreting modern nihilism in light of ancient nihilism and existentialism in light of Gnosticism opens up the possibility of expounding a nonhistoricist genealogy of modern nihilism and of attaining a transhistorical perspective from which to evaluate the ultimate validity of existentialism's account of the human condition. By taking his bearings from the ancient spiritual crisis in his confrontation with the modern crisis, Jonas reverses the hermeneutic priority granted to the present in historicist genealogies of modernity wherein, to quote Max Weber, our "cultural epoch" having "eaten of the tree of knowledge" enjoys an epistemically privileged status as the historical moment when we are fully cognizant of the essential historicity of our "highest ideals."[7] For Jonas, the source of our skepticism about the possibility of attaining knowledge of good and evil is not the discovery of the historical relativity of every *Weltanschauung* but our fundamental alienation from nature, which originates in the fateful transformation of our conception of nature effected by such trailblazing figures as Bacon, Copernicus, Galileo, and Descartes, whose work of instauration consists principally in establishing new methods of inquiry and thereby inaugurating a new epoch in man's relationship to nature.[8] Uncovering three basic facets of the alienation from nature wrought by the scientific revolution—the ejection of teleology from our understanding of the natural world, the displacement of the human mind to an Archimedean point outside of and beyond the world, and the ontological dualism of consciousness and world (as *res cogitans* and *res extensa*)—Jonas's genealogy of modern nihilism recounts the history of the compounding and cumulative effects of rejecting the premodern classical view of nature as an articulated taxis within which the human is located and with reference to which the rational animal is capable of attaining self-knowledge, understood as knowledge of human nature. Highlighting the Gnostic character of the conceptual antitheses that structure the "new science," Jonas shows how the philosophical anthropology that locates the distinctively human outside nature has its theological counterpart in a

deus absconditus: just as man can find no reflection of himself in nature, neither can he discern any sign of God's handiwork in the world of matter in motion depicted in Descartes's *Le Monde*. Yet if the truth of both man and God is to be found elsewhere than in nature, and nature thus no longer mediates between man and God, it is but a short step from God's absence to the "death of God," from the anguish of Pascal's longing to the atheism of Nietzsche's "will to power." Modern nihilism's assertion of man's unprecedented cosmic solitude is in truth but the logical consequence of the acosmism of modern natural science. Likewise, the ethical decisionism of existentialism is a moral response to our metaphysical homelessness analogous to the Enlightenment project to master nature; for just as in the absence of any discernible order in nature commensurate with human purposes and concerns man must impose order on an otherwise anarchic nature, so too in existentialism is man alone in an indifferent universe, bereft of rational support for his ideals, thrown back on himself and thus condemned to create meaning ex nihilo—to impose order on the chaos of his existence through the fiat of decision. Finally, by showing how the principal features of existentialism's analysis of the human are emblematic of Gnosticism—in the appeal to a basic psychic experience that reveals the abysmal ground (*abgrundige Grund*) of our existence, in its diagnosis of the human predicament as being thrown into a godforsaken world, and in its proposed prescription to confront our tragic fate with courageous resolve—Jonas suggests that the late-modern spiritual crisis is not a unique, epistemically privileged historical moment revealing the ultimate truth of our condition but an especially acute instance of a perennially possible interpretation of our condition in times of spiritual destitution.

Jonas's critique of existentialism proves thereby to be more than merely negative. Through a comparative analysis of the ostensibly historically unprecedented phenomenon of modern nihilism with its ancient forerunner that discloses several common structural features of Gnosticism, modern natural science, and existentialism, Jonas takes a decisive step toward demonstrating the ontological priority of nature to history that is the cornerstone of

his whole philosophical project. If the elaboration of an ethics of responsibility is the final aim of Jonas's philosophical project, its necessary beginning is the critique of Heideggerian existentialism.

The argument of this paper proceeds in four stages. I begin with reconstructing Jonas's understanding of the tremendous significance of Heidegger not only for our late-modern condition but also for philosophy as a whole. I then trace our nihilistic moment to our alienation from nature as a consequence of modern physical science originating in the seventeenth century. Next, I delineate the essential features of Gnosticism, highlighting those features most pertinent to Jonas's account of existentialism. Finally, I explore the connection between *Geworfenheit* and human historicity. In conclusion, I offer a summation of Jonas's critique of Heidegger and delineate the requirements of any positive philosophic teaching adequate to the vocation of philosophy Jonas envisions.

The Challenge of Heidegger

In a public lecture delivered in 1992 at the height of his fame, Jonas offered a personal yet sweeping account of the state of philosophy. Jonas's synoptic perspective on the history of philosophy is propounded for the sake of determining what philosophy's vocation ought to be in this distinct historical moment. The pivot of Jonas's lecture, "Philosophy at the End of the Century: Retrospect and Prospect," is a reflection on the meaning and significance of Heidegger—both the man's thought and the man himself.

As Jonas remarks in this retrospective consideration of the history and destiny of philosophy, "[W]hen the most profound thinker of my time fell into step with the thundering march of Hitler's brown battalions, it was not merely a bitter personal disappointment for me but in my eyes a debacle for philosophy. Philosophy itself, not only a man, had declared bankruptcy."[9] Heidegger's moral and political failure seemed to eclipse the very promise of philosophy; an honest reckoning with the conduct of the "most powerful intellect" that the interwar generation of students had known cast a retrospective pall over the whole tradition reaching back to its origins, eclipsing "the example of Socrates, which

[had] served as a beacon for philosophy since its beginnings, [and had] kept the belief in such an ennobling force from being extinguished."[10] What Jonas once thought was man's highest activity, the most noble and lofty ambition—the activity that suggests man is indeed in possession of some "spark of the divine"—seemed to have made a terrible Faustian bargain, leading Jonas to wonder, "Had its nimbus perhaps always been a false one? Would it ever be able to win back some of that splendor we had expected of it? The unique caliber of the philosopher in question made his fall from grace an historic event."[11] Yet amid this dark night, when there appeared no reason to believe in the redemptive power of philosophy for even the single individual, Jonas uncovered a powerful counterexample—his former teacher Julius Ebbinghaus, whom Jonas describes with an unadorned apposite formulation: "a strict and uncompromising Kantian, not to be compared with Heidegger in significance."[12] In contrast to Heidegger's shameful abdication of responsibility, Ebbinghaus rose above the clamor, the enthusiasm, and the temptation of the city's new *nomoi*, believing earnestly that in such a situation the Socratic dictum proved true: "it was better to suffer than commit injustice." When Jonas visited his old professor "to pay him my homage," Ebbinghaus replied simply but directly and "with that old fire of absolute conviction . . . said: 'But do you know what, Jonas? Without Kant I wouldn't have been able to do it.'" In that moment Jonas realized that in Ebbinghaus, "theory and life were one"—the man practiced what he preached, and his conduct was itself a testimony that the power of philosophy to guide one's conduct had not been wholly eclipsed. In the scales counterbalancing Heidegger's dereliction of duty to the idea of philosophy—what Jonas considered the highest activity of humanity and therefore the highest activity of the cosmos itself—was the simple scholar Ebbinghaus. Juxtaposed to Heidegger's brilliance was an example of the unity of theory and practice, the integrity of inquiry and morality. While still a soldier in the British army, having fulfilled his promise to return to Germany only as a member of a conquering army, Jonas found himself in Marburg in 1945, asking, "[W]ith which man, then, was philosophy in better hands? With the

creative genius whose profundity did not keep him from a breach of faith in the hour of decision *or* with his unoriginal but upright colleague, who remained pure? To this day I do not presume to have the answer to this question, but I believe it belongs—unanswered—in a retrospective look at philosophy in this century."[13]

Lying behind this question is the challenge not only of Heidegger the misguided actor, whose reprehensible conduct cast a shadow over philosophy, but also Heidegger the brilliant thinker whose diagnosis of our contemporary condition was so stark that "only a god could save us."[14] Thus, at stake are issues of freedom, responsibility, and agency, the capacity of reason to know the good, and the possibility of an objectively grounded ethics—in other words, the Kantian question of human reason's capacity to govern itself, to determine its actions, to limit its acquisitive appetites and competitive instincts, and to guide its strivings.[15] Despite Jonas's trenchant criticism of Heidegger, one should note at the outset several continuities between Jonas's philosophy of life and Heidegger's existentialism. Only in light of an adequate reckoning of his debt is the importance of Jonas's effort at criticism fully intelligible.[16] Of the various features of Jonas's work redolent of Heidegger, I wish to highlight five: (1) Heidegger's attempt to get behind modern dualisms, especially Cartesian subjectivity in all its various guises; (2) the problem of technology as not merely an incidental problem but as central to modernity and its preoccupations as well as its dehumanizing effect on us: we too become "standing reserve";[17] (3) the crisis of the West as a philosophical crisis, one that predates the sociopolitical crisis of World War I; (4) phenomenological existentialism, which constitutes a crucial step beyond Husserl's restriction of philosophy to the descriptive analysis of what is present in consciousness by rejecting the epoché of phenomenological reduction and making phenomenology the route into ontology;[18] and (5) three features of Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*: (a) the rejection of the spectator view of consciousness as something standing opposed to and apart from a world of objects, (b) the recovery of the ontological import of our practical and purposive orientation to beings, and (c) the insight that *Dasein*'s being-in-the world is one of care (*Sorge*).[19]

Jonas's critique of Heidegger is all the more serious and substantial for these important theoretical similarities and for Jonas's self-conscious debt to Heidegger, a debt he was forthright in acknowledging. As Jonas put it in a letter to his friend Gunter Anders upon learning of Heidegger's death, Heidegger "was the great teaching [*sic*] and philosophically driving force in my life . . . and also I believe a real event in the history of thought."[20] Thus, while Jonas judges Heidegger's existentialism harshly—as a theoretically inadequate account of the human being's way of being-in-the-world, on account of its disregard of nature, and as a practically baleful account of the elevation of resolution and resolve in the face of a purposeless world—it is not the judgment of an ungrateful student or a merely hostile critic who can see nothing of value in Heidegger's thought. Rather, Jonas believed Heidegger was the greatest mind he had known in his lifetime, and it was precisely because such a mind could make such a fateful decision as to see in National Socialism the salvation of his nation that Jonas sought to uncover the philosophical root of his moral and political failure. Jonas located the root of that failure in the Gnostic temptation. That such a mind could succumb to the Gnostic temptation testifies to the enduring importance for political science of understanding why Gnosticism is a perennial spiritual possibility.

The Origins of Nihilism and the Gnosticism of Modernity

Max Weber concludes his 1904–5 monumental study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* with the haunting description of Europe's fate as an iron cage. Modern man is destined to live in a world formed by instrumental rationality, bureaucratic organization, and technical control. Humanity is fated to understand itself in mechanistic, quantitative, and economic terms. Lacking religious conviction, moral enthusiasm, or ethical ideals, this last stage of cultural development appeared to be heading toward a world fit only for "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart."[21] The ascetic rationalism that Weber believed pervaded "not only the spirit of modern capitalism but all of modern culture" was the result of a long process of transforming original puritan ideals into an

increasingly worldly and economic form until "material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history."[22] The thoroughgoing materialism and wholesale displacement of the spiritual (*geistige*) dimension of modern European *Weltanschauung* is the culmination of a process of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*), whereby the world was first voided of gods and then voided of purposes and meaning.[23] To inhabit a world evacuated of final causality and dominated by instrumental rationality is to live in a world where we are confident in our knowledge of how things work but lack a touchstone in reality for our attempts to answer questions of the worth, value, and goodness of our aims and actions, our intentions and desires. The modern mind has demonstrated its power over the nature of things, but we despair of knowing why, to what end, or for what purpose. In the disenchanted world, more is possible than ever before, but we lack reasons for what we do and why we do it.

Jonas locates "the beginnings of our contemporary crisis" in the seventeenth century, "where the spiritual situation of modern man takes shape."[24] A characteristic feature of this situation is "man's loneliness in the physical universe of modern cosmology."[25] According to Jonas, Blaise Pascal is one of the first to recognize the spiritual consequences of the new cosmology: "cast into the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened."[26] The source of Pascal's profound unease is the incongruity between man and his purposes and the cosmos. When Pascal speaks of the infinite spaces disclosed by modern science, it is not merely the sheer immensity of the cosmos that is the source of the spiritual inquietude but the incommensurability of the human perspective with that presupposed and confirmed by modern scientific methods. The infinite is literally that which cannot be measured and so exceeds comprehension; and yet it is the new sciences that, while quantifying and measuring everything, operate with such infinites in mind. The peculiar situation of the human reflects the incongruity between these two modes or spiritual postures: the one that sees the human as dislocated and the other that is doing the dislocating. Man seems to run counter to

himself in his theoretical speculations, which remove and distance him from the world that is his local habitation. It is altogether fitting that it was one of the foremost practitioners of the new mathematical physics who first recognized the dire existential consequences of the transformation of the closed cosmos into an infinite universe.[27] For Pascal, it is the deafening "silence" of the cosmos that is so terrifying, for it is "the indifference of this universe to human aspirations—the not-knowing of things human on the part of that within which all things human have preposterously to be enacted—which constitutes the utter loneliness of man in the sum of things."[28]

Jonas's contemporary and friend Leo Strauss was fond of quoting Pascal's observation that "we know too little to be dogmatists and too much to be skeptics."[29] While Strauss intended this as a description of zetetic philosophy, a description that Jonas would agree with in some respects, the problem of nihilism is not skepticism; the problem is that the sort of knowledge we possess is antithetical to that which we most need. It is a knowledge of a world not only evacuated of God but devoid of man. Yet paradoxically, such knowledge is man's knowledge nonetheless, and thus Jonas interprets Pascal's famous description of man as a "thinking reed" to imply that the nobility of man appears to lie outside the account of the cosmos. In the "blind universe" of modern science, man's "existence is but a particular blind accident"; but as a thinking being, as the "thinking reed" of Pascal's evocative image, man stands outside the workings of this blind universe—a witness to its contingent but inexorable operations, including even his own destruction. The implication of the Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* is the alienation of the mind from the cosmos:

> [T]hat by which man is superior to all nature, his unique distinction, mind, no longer results in a higher integration of his being into the totality of being, but on the contrary marks the unbridgeable gulf between himself and the rest of existence. Estranged from the community of being in one whole, his consciousness only makes him a foreigner in the world, and in every act of true reflection tells of this stark foreignness.[30]

Mind has illumined a world that in principle has no place for mind. In contrast to either the ancient or the medieval orientation, both of which at their broadest sought to align human reason with the logos that animated, governed, and ordered the cosmos, modernity displaces the locus of mind outside the natural world that the mind's operations render intelligible. Descartes's *cogito sum* provides mathematical physics the Archimedean point from which to move the world, but at the price of reducing the thinking I to an acosmic fulcrum.[31] Pascal provides an exemplary instance of a soul wrestling with this perspective on the world and its accompanying "mood of homelessness, forlornness, and dread."[32] Pascal's *Pensées* exhibit all the hallmarks of existential experience, which became the common currency of what since Nietzsche has been recognized as the crisis of the West—a world in which the highest values have devalued themselves.

The displacement of mind is both the consequence and the condition of "the ejection of teleology from the system of natural causes."[33] Nature's indifference to man "means that nature has no reference to ends."[34] Our alienation from nature—our standing apart *from* rather than being a part *of* a larger whole—reflects the fact that the intelligibility of nature offered by modern science is predicated on rejecting the only explanatory principle that can render human activity intelligible. Nature, being wholly without purpose itself, thereby ceases "to provide any sanction to possible human purposes. A universe without an intrinsic hierarchy of being, as the Copernican universe is, leaves values ontologically unsupported, and the self is thrown back entirely on itself in its quest for meaning and value."[35] The mind ventures outward to what is other and discovers there the regular laws of nature, but it can find no comparable regularity or preestablished rules for the conduct of human affairs.[36] If the individual agent tries to understand herself in terms of the causal logic of the scientific worldview, she discovers only a reified entity—a description of herself as an object and her actions as events. The first-person intentionality of consciousness is nowhere to be found in the world so elegantly comprehended by Newtonian mechanics.[37] While Laplace might

be supremely confident in the new science's predictive powers, even if comprehensive knowledge of the relative position of all bodies in space were possible, it would only provide further confirmation that my sense of agency is illusory, as though I really did inhabit the world of Descartes's evil genius, save it was designed not to preclude theoretical knowledge but to delude me systematically about my moral freedom. Recoiling from such *horror vacui*, the individual has no choice but to turn inward to attempt to find a haven in the depths of her own interiority. For such a self, "meaning is no longer found but is 'conferred.' Values are no longer beheld in the vision of objective reality, but are posited as feats of valuation. As functions of the will, ends are solely my own creations. Will replaces vision; temporality of the act ousts the eternity of the 'good in itself.'"[38] While Jonas draws out the implications of this line of thought for the subsequent developments of the tradition, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the theological orientation Pascal adopts in such a situation. Pascal longs for a God that he cannot find in the natural world; the incongruity of man and nature exists in tandem with an incongruity between nature and God. Pascal's God is far more mysterious than that of the more orthodox Catholicism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the deity worshipped at Port Royal is, in Jonas's formulation, an *agnostos theos*, an unknown God.[39] Rather than finding in nature a reflection of our *imago Dei*, a confirmation of being created in the image of God, it is our isolation and the uncanny contingency of our being somewhere in particular amid the vast immensity of cosmic space that stirs heart and mind to reach for something outside the world that could make our condition coherent. God has become for Pascal the extramundane principle that lies beyond the edge of the horizon of intelligibility—for other than the immensity of the infinite, we observe no signs of his presence. Pascal's God is thus a *deus absconditus*, hiding behind nature's indifference. And yet because of nature's indifference, it is a God that man needs all the more if our life is to be meaningful.

Pascal's religious response to nature's indifference is far from the only alternative. Another possible response, one in evidence in

the world of the progenitor of mathematical physics—namely, Descartes—is to understand our situation as one in which a *deus absconditus*, attesting only to his power through the immensity of the existing world, leaves man in the existential condition where the only proper orientation to that world is one of power or mastery. As Descartes attests in the *Discourse on Method*, with the correct philosophical method we

> make ourselves like masters and possessors of nature. This is desirable not only for the invention of an infinity of artifices that would enable us to enjoy, without any pain, the fruits of the earth and all the goods to be found there, but also and principally for the conservation of health, which is without doubt the primary good and the foundation of all other goods of this life. . . . [W]e could be spared an infinity of diseases, of the body as well as of the mind, and even also perhaps the enfeeblement of old age, if we had enough knowledge of their causes.[40]

Jonas interprets the deep connection between the presuppositions and the aims of the new science—namely, that if nature is nothing but extension, then it can rightly be manipulated to our purposes—as the willful anthropological response to a willful God. The very fact that modern physics is guided by a practical end (in contrast to ancient *theoria*) is correlated to the new science's presuppositions about the nature of nature, which in turn reflect an ontotheological thesis about God as the ground of an indifferent nature.[41] The inscrutable willfulness of the unknown God demarcates a limit beyond which we cannot go in our search for meaning, in our attempts to answer the "Why?" of existence. Thus rather than seek to resolve such imponderable matters, we should, in Bacon's formulation, concern ourselves with the amelioration of our condition. But the technological improvement of our lot is undertaken without a positively determined end for that activity. We are thrown into the world and we flee the harsh reality of our physical limitations, most especially death. But in such flight, we merely

bracket ultimate questions of whither and wherefore, for "the 'Why?' of my existence is here just as unanswerable as the most atheistic existentialism can make it out to be."[42] The full significance of nature's indifference and the lack of objective grounding for values is the impossibility of attaining a form of self-knowledge that could inform my conduct and guide my actions. Thus, according to Jonas, the final consequence of "the *deus absconditus*, of whom nothing but will and power can be predicated," is "the *homo absconditus*, a concept of man characterized solely by will and power—the will for power, the will to will. For such a will even indifferent nature is more an occasion for its exercise than a true object."[43]

With the final departure of the *deus absconditus*, Jonas can move rapidly, even abruptly, from Pascal to Nietzsche. The connection between Pascal's loneliness and Nietzsche's atheism is far from fanciful. For the death of God follows from the leveling and homogenizing of being by natural science, and the will to power is the final attempt by the solitary subject to assert meaning in a world where the highest values have lost ontological support and so have devalued themselves. In a thoroughly disenchanted world, a world without a why, without a logos, the human's capacity to will is the only source of distinction in an otherwise homogenous infinite universe.

In this genealogy of modern nihilism, Jonas repeats features of Heidegger's account of the history of Being that sees Nietzsche's metaphysical doctrine of the will to power as the ultimate expression of Platonic ontology.[44] However, he breaks with Heidegger in highlighting the radically novel character of modernity. To state it coarsely but not altogether misleadingly, Jonas's first repost to Heidegger consists in his reading of modernity as Gnostic—with particular attention to the nominalism implicit in Cartesian dualism—insofar as the "new science" displaces God from the cosmos and thereby renders knowledge of God or ultimate Being essentially mysterious.[45] Moreover, although modern science's knowledge of nature is devoid of the purposes that render human life intelligible, the upshot of constructing its new knowledge of nature

on the grounds of nature's indifference is a power over nature—the power to remake nature according to human will. That is, our alienation is the condition of our power and yet our power has no other object than to overcome our alienation. The paradox of the modern predicament comes to light through Jonas's Gnostic analysis. Jonas agrees with Heidegger that the core of modernity is the will to power, but the advent of this prevailing mode of being is not the ultimate consequence of the Greek notion of being as *phusis*; rather, it is the rejection of the very idea of *phusis* as a source of guidance for human conduct. Modernity rests on the presupposition that in the decisive respect we are not natural beings.

Gnosticism's Twofold Flight from the World: Turning Inward and Leaping Beyond

As we have seen, Jonas believes he can provide a genealogy of modernity that illustrates how "a change in the vision of nature, that is, of the cosmic environment of man, is at the bottom of that metaphysical situation which has given rise to modern existentialism and to its nihilistic implications."[46] Accordingly, our reconstruction of Jonas's sketch of modernity has highlighted features of his account that provide the ontological background for existentialism and, following Jonas, has argued that existentialism is the logical outcome of the modern approach to nature which assumes that all qualitative and substantial change is epiphenomenal on locomotion, the only true kind of change. Although such assumptions guarantee the applicability of algebraic geometry to the natural world, and thereby the success of mathematical physics, natural science is no longer able to distinguish substantial differences, since from the perspective of mathematical physics all difference is difference of position. Hence, the success of mathematical physics comes at the expense of natural kinds and therefore of the investigation of the essence or quiddity of a being. The basic, simple doctrine of existentialism expressed clearly in Sartre's "Existentialism Is a Humanism"—namely, that existence precedes essence, and thus that man is condemned to be free, burdened with the unshirkable task of making himself ex nihilo, is but the logical consequence

of the scientific revolution that occurred three hundred years ago.[47] For, as Jonas states, "the essence of existentialism is a certain dualism, an estrangement between man and the world, with the loss of the idea of a kindred *cosmos*—in short, an anthropological acosmism."[48] This genealogy, while powerful and illuminating in its own right, serves as the backdrop for framing a question that proves decisive in Jonas's confrontation with Heidegger and that encapsulates the brilliance of Jonas's comparison of existentialism and Gnosticism. For it allows Jonas to then raise the question of whether it is necessarily the case that modern science is in fact the sole source of such a condition. Could there be other reasons to adopt "an anthropological acosmism"? To anticipate one conclusion from Jonas's comparative analysis, Heidegger's existentialism is also a thoroughgoing historicism, but if the essential features of existentialism have appeared before the fateful moment at the end of modernity, then *Dasein*'s being in the world is not determined primarily by the unique, contingent historical moment in which an individual finds him- or herself.

Jonas is well aware of the obstacles to such a comparison; "the strangeness of [Gnosticism's] symbols" as well as "the expansiveness of [Gnosticism's] metaphysical fancy seems ill to agree with the austere disillusionment of existentialism"—not to mention that Gnosticism's essentially religious character seems at first wholly opposed to "the atheistic, fundamentally 'post-Christian' essence by which Nietzsche identified modern nihilism."[49] Nonetheless, if Jonas is right that Gnosticism exhibits the same essential structure as existentialism, then Gnosticism and existentialism are responses to a similar problem. The comparison should thus shed light on the historical moment in which existentialism proved tremendously fascinating for the interwar generation that repudiated the tradition in search of something wholly novel.[50]

Gnosticism is characterized by a "radically dualistic mood" resting on "a passionately felt experience of self and world."[51] The self's existence is structured by two dualities: that "between man and the world, and concurrently between the world and God." The dualism is "not of supplementary but of contrary terms; and it is

one: for that between man and world mirrors on the plane of experience that between world and God, and derives from it as from its logical ground."[52] This doubly structuring dualism characterizes the situation of three terms: man, world, and God. Although man and God belong "essentially together" in opposition to the world, the world stands between and thwarts their union. In a modern idiom, although man and God ought to be united, the world's existence, its brute facticity, obviates such unity. Mundane existence, including the individual's embodiment, does not mediate the self's relation to God but stands as an obstacle to longed-for unification. Man, confined within a world that is what it is insofar as it is opposed to God, has his true source of being outside the world, beyond all natural experience. The self's incarnation is the source of the self's self-alienation.

The Gnostic claims to possess such knowledge on the basis of a prediscursive awareness or revelation and on such a basis develops a teleological story that moves from unity to division/alienation and back to unity, structured around four logical moments, each of which highlights an aspect of the spiritual narrative that plays out on both planes of existence, that of the "upper world" and that of creation: (1) theology, or "a *transcendental genesis*, narrating the spiritual history of creation," beginning with a divine drama out of which "the lower world originates"; (2) cosmology, which is the existing system of the universe as a power structure that determines the actual conditions of man; (3) anthropology, which posits that though as embodied, man inhabits the existing world, man's true nature is identified with the original divine origin or ultimate source; thus, although "composite and sunken here," his true home and destination lies in the other-worldly beyond; (4) eschatology, or salvation as "the return of all things to God," a return to undivided and originary unity with the divine.[53]

From an external perspective, one can see that "the feeling of an absolute rift between man and that in which he finds himself lodged" is primary and that the objective doctrine is the explication of "the projection of his basic experience."[54] The speculative theology and cosmological history is the interpretation of a subjective

certainty that knows the dislocation of the self as the primary feature of existence in need of explanation (because it itself has suffered the dislocation). The Gnostic doctrine rests on a principle of *pathē mathos*. The Gnostic doctrines then consist in the belief "that the Divine is alien to the world and has neither part nor concern in the physical universe; that the true God, strictly transmundane, is not revealed or even indicated by the world, and is therefore the Unknown, the totally Other, unknowable in terms of any worldly analogies."[55] The cosmological counterpart to this theological teaching concludes that since God cannot be responsible for creation—so utterly bereft of any trace of goodness is the natural world—the world must be "the creation not of God but of some inferior principle whose law it executes." Consequently, the Gnostic anthropology distinguishes between "man's inner self, the *pneuma* ('spirit' in contrast to 'soul' = *psyche*)" and the body (*soma*) in which it finds itself, which it understands to be a tomb (*sema*), a mere outward container for the true self that "is not part of the world, of nature's creation and domain, but is, within that world, as totally transcendent and as unknown by all worldly categories as is its transmundane counterpart, the unknown God without."[56]

In the Gnostic schema, since "that to which selfhood feels so utterly a stranger" cannot be the work of the truly divine with which man's spirit feels an essential kinship, nature is conceived of as the product of a demiurgic power that, lacking the Supreme God's "knowledge and benevolence," but retaining the creative power to act, "create[d] the world out of ignorance and passion."[57] Accordingly, the world is the very embodiment of mindless will; lacking all relation "to understanding and love," even its order reflects not divine wisdom but the rule of the very "negative of *knowledge*"—"mere self-assertive power." For the Gnostic, "*power* thus becomes the chief aspect of the cosmos, and its inner essence is ignorance (*agnosia*)." Since the essence of man is his capacity for knowledge "of self and of God," man is truly himself only to the extent that he exists in opposition to the essence of the cosmos. Man's vocation is therefore the struggle to free himself from his entanglement in the cosmos, pursuing knowledge amid unknowing

and light amid darkness. This oppositional relation is the ground "of his being alien, without companionship in the dark vastness of the universe."[58]

Devoid of mind and true divinity, such a universe not only "lacks the venerability of the Greek *cosmos*" but is an object of contempt. Yet since it remains the local dwelling of the embodied human, the Gnostic views the world with a compound "of fear and disrespect, of trembling and defiance." The incoherent posture of the Gnostic believer is born of the very orderliness that he observes but yet despises; for the world is not mere chaos and the Gnostic recognizes that the world, although alien, is nevertheless "still a system of law." But whereas even those philosophic creeds that believed nature and the gods indifferent to human purposes still saw in cosmic law "the expression of a reason with which man's reason can communicate in the act of cognition," the Gnostic sees only a "compulsion which thwarts man's freedom."[59] In place of the Stoic's cosmic *logos*, the Gnostic posits "*heimarmene*, oppressive cosmic fate."[60] The perpetual, circular, and regular motion of the planets is no longer a sign of the harmonious order governing the world but the very embodiment of that coercive, mindless, oppressive force that thwarts man's emancipation, his pursuit of self-knowledge, and his aspiration to unity with the truly divine. The world's order is predicated on power divorced from divine truth—the object of the Gnostic's knowing (*gnosis*)—which is incommensurable with that logos common to the rational animal. The lamentable condition of the estranged self is the experience of a being simultaneously exposed to the world and "subject to its power" and "yet superior to it by the nobility of his soul." The Gnostic knows himself not as a part of, "but unaccountably placed in and exposed to, the enveloping system."[61] This peculiar tension is the ground of the individual's "feeling of dread." "Dread as the soul's response to its being-in-the-world is a recurrent theme in the gnostic literature."[62]

Dread, unlike fear, lacks a determinate object. Rather, it is the mood accompanying the discovery of the self's situation as existing in a hostile and alien world—the self's "solitary otherness,

discovering itself in this forlornness, erupts in the feeling of dread." And it serves a truth-confirming function, for "it marks the awakening of the inner self from the slumber or intoxication of the world."[63] Dread is the appropriate response to our true existential condition. If one were not filled with dread, then one lacked *gnosis*.[64]

Given the profound self-estrangement of our condition, the Gnostic's salvific knowledge "cannot aim at integration into the cosmic whole and at compliance with its laws, as did Stoic wisdom, which sought freedom in the knowing consent to the meaningful necessity of the whole."[65] Rather, it strives to exacerbate and deepen this alienation from the world, for only thereby can the inner self extricate itself from the snares of this world and win itself. In the Gnostic imagination, freedom from the world requires that a power distinct from and yet rival to that which governs the world's order break in upon "its closed system from without" and bring to men a liberating knowledge by which the oppressive force of the cosmos is defeated and a path through the world's domination opened for the soul's assent to the divine—for the return of *pneuma* to its true *fons et origo*.[66] Although elaborated in very different symbolic and conceptual systems, the end result of both modern natural science and Gnosticism is a "catastrophic devaluation or spiritual denudation of the universe" and a transcendent "acosmic self" standing over and against a meaningless world.[67]

Human Historicity and the Eschatology of *Geworfenheit*

The relations of power, domination, and will that enframe the benighted world of the self and against which self-assertion, inner determination, and willful negation are the spiritual weapons required for liberation from a world conceived of as essentially other—so much so that the extent to which an individual is at home in the world is a measure of their having lost sight of their true interest, which always lies elsewhere—rest, as we have seen, on a quite different ontology than that of "modern man's power relation to world-causality."[68] Nevertheless, there is a fundamental ontological similarity in "the formal fact that the countering of power

with power is the sole relation to the totality of nature left for men in both cases."[69]

While responses of power to power vary according to the differing ontologies (granting that a similar devaluation of nature is at work in Gnosticism, Baconian science, and existentialism), the concrete similarity of the response by Gnosticism and existentialism is remarkably specific and reflects a very similar diagnosis of the essence of the human condition. The early modern response to the scientific conception of the world and man's place therein—evident, for example, in Hobbes, who pronounced that life is "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power which ceaseth only in death"—was the self-conscious construction of an artificial habitation that would be better than our natural state; such an effort assumed that despite nature's indifference, a worldly practical solution is possible to the human predicament.[70] In comparison to the Gnostic denunciation of the world or *Dasein*'s pursuit of authenticity, such a project seems positively optimistic. These more radical and more solitary responses rest on a more radical evaluation of our true condition and what is needed for the self's preservation if it is to avoid the snares of temptation during its worldly sojourn.[71]

To illustrate the remarkable conceptual proximity of these two forms of spiritual comportment, we will look more closely at the common theme of thrownness and its connection to historicity in ancient Gnosticism and in Heidegger's existential philosophy of *Being and Time*, taking as our point of departure a concise statement of the Gnostic position from the second century AD.[72]

Clemens of Alexandria offers an exemplary formulation of the kind of knowledge (*gnosis*) that Gnostic initiates claim to possess: "What makes us free is the knowledge who we were, what we have become; where we were, wherein we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what is birth and what rebirth."[73] Jonas calls our attention to the similarity between several features of this Gnostic eschatological wisdom and modern existentialism. The series of dualisms that demarcate the conceptual landscape comprises, on the one hand, a set of "antithetical pairs" that are categorically distinct through their opposition to

each other, thus presenting the truth of our experience of a variegated world as, in reality, a set of layered either/or disjunctions. Yet, on the other hand, concomitantly, the series of dualities is the expression of a teleological directionality and the tension between the concepts expresses an ontological commitment insofar as "happening" and "movement" are more fundamental than permanence or rest, implying that the change of becoming is more important than the identity of being, regardless of whether such permanence is evident in the natural order, cosmic lawfulness, or eidetic order. The epistemic counterpart to this ontological thesis is, accordingly, "the knowledge . . . of a history, in which it is itself a critical event."[74] Thus, at the heart of the Gnostic system is a self-validating theory of human historicity, which both undergirds the possibility of the revelatory moment and is confirmed by the revelatory moment. Although immune to objection once embraced by the individual, such circular self-confirmation is antipathetic to communicative rationality.[75] The Gnostic is thereby confirmed in the original hypothesis of the true self's alienation from the world, which is both the substance of the Gnostic revelation and the effectual truth of the revelation (i.e., the consequence of the hermitically self-referential theory). The content of the theory and the form of the theorizing are reciprocally reinforcing; the very inability to persuade another through discursive rationality of the truth that the Gnostic possesses serves as a confirmation of the Gnostic's presumed alienation from the world and from nature. The limits of conversation expose the radicality of the alienation insofar as the failure of every attempt at an adequate externalization of the Gnostic's interiority serves only to highlight the deficiency of the conventional categories and forms of discourse. There is insufficient continuity between "ordinary language" and the esoteric *gnosis* that is the initiate's most-prized possession: the "secret, revealed, and saving knowledge" that constitutes the core of the Gnostic's identity and self-understanding.[76]

While the Gnostic position has the self-verifying character described, the hermetically sealed character of the theory raises the question of how one comes to believe it in the first place.

On what basis does one adopt the *gnosis* position? The Gnostic would appeal to the epiphanic moment whereby the truth of reality is revealed; that is, the Gnostic has the first-person immediate certainty of knowledge of a truth that is wholly within the individual's grasp because it has no referent to anything beyond the confines of the individual's own interiority. The object of knowledge is not a state of affairs that could exist as a shared object of intentional consciousness by another individual in the common life-world (*Lebenswelt*). Rather, it is a claim about the totality of the *Lebenswelt* taken as a whole (including its conditions and ultimate grounds). The subjective certainty of the revelation is for the believer as inviolably true from the epistemic perspective as the quotidian claim that I am in pain—a proposition about which I cannot be in error.[77] Thus the revelation claimed by the Gnostics is the self-validating experience of a truth whereby confirmation of the truth value of the proposition is always already present in the primordial (*uranfängliche*) prediscursive experience.[78]

Highlighting the description of the self as "thrown into" the world, Jonas connects the Gnostic's self-description with Pascal's "cast into the infinite immensity of spaces" and Heidegger's notion of *Geworfenheit*, of "having been thrown," which according to Heidegger "is a fundamental character of the *Dasein*, of the self-experience of existence."[79] Jonas points out that the presence of such a formulation is quite common in Gnostic texts and is a repeated refrain in "Mandaean literature," which describes the dualities of existence as contingently connected through some external force or happening. "Life has been thrown in the world, light into darkness, the soul into the body." Each aspect of the world we experience is the result of an antagonistic composite that lacks intrinsic unity or wholeness; that is, in each case there is no reason for the former to be present in the latter. Thrownness expresses the lack of an adequate reason (sufficient cause) for our being-in-the-world. "It expresses the original violence done to me in making me be where I am and what I am, the passivity of my choiceless emergence into an existing world which I did not make and whose law is not mine." In being thrown, we are *ab initio* not

at home, and as "ejected into the world, life is a kind of trajectory projecting itself forward into the future."[80] In the perpetual onrush of what is to come, the present holds little sway, and the possibility of the transtemporal and eternal is likewise consumed in the evanescent present.[81] The only moment outside the transient experience of becoming is "the moment of *gnosis* itself"—the moment in which we behold the fundamental truth about our condition and thereby come into the possession of a stable truth that, standing outside the absurd spectacle of human life in an alien cosmos, serves to guide the self through its worldly sojourn. In Heidegger's terminology, the authentic present is the moment "when the projected 'future' reacts upon the given 'past'" and the dynamic conjunction discloses the moment (*Augenblick*) of the present that is without presence and only is as *this* present—the peculiar, particular instant of revelation for the authentically existing individual.[82] The present as product of dynamic self-projection means that *Dasein* is essentially restless, for there is no mode of temporality where it might abide. Existence leaps off from its past and projects itself into its future; if authentic, it there comes face to face with "its ultimate limit, death; [and] returns from this eschatological glimpse of nothingness to its sheer factness, the unalterable datum of its already having become this, there and then; and carries this forward with its death-begotten resolve, into which the past has now been gathered up."[83] The present is present only as "the moment of crisis between past and future," as the moment where the possibility of decision and need for resolve is disclosed—the moment where we take possession of ourselves by resolving to affirm our past by actively taking ownership of the arbitrary fateful dispensation that grounds our world and projecting a future for ourselves in full awareness of the contingency of existence and the arbitrary facticity of our being.[84]

The experience of *Geworfenheit* and the accompanying mood of dread is, however, the only validation of the claim that one is in fact thrown into the world. In prioritizing the bare existing individual to human nature or human essence, Heidegger's existentialism of *Being and Time* gives credence to the self-validating

truths of individual experience (*Erlebnis*). It is the uncanny (*unheimlich*) experience of homelessness (*Unheimlichkeit*) that grounds the existentialist theory, which then provides an interpretation of that experience as the pre-reflective awareness of the fundamental truth of the human condition. The implicit logical circularity that is so readily denounced by analytic critics of Heidegger as a vicious circularity is treated seriously by Jonas, for the question of the starting point or entrée into a philosophic system (where one begins and why one begins there) is far from straightforward.[85] Why not begin from personal experience? After all, where else could one begin? Indeed, such experience has the virtue of immediacy and subjective certainty; however, the drawback seems equally compelling: for whereas the mediation of all forms of communication has the common world as its referent and can be subject to intersubjective examination and confirmation, individual experience has nothing outside itself to serve as a touchstone for its validity.

Regardless of how Jonas adjudicates that question, he has already, simply by calling attention to the similarity of the experience of thrownness, countered one aspect of the existentialist historicist thesis insofar as he has shown that there is a common human experience evident across different historical epochs.[86] However, Jonas thereby raises the question of whether such an experience is reflective of the fundamental truth of the human condition or is a historically inflected expression of a possibility in human nature. An experience of thrownness that reveals the contingency of our being might reveal the permanent truth of the human condition, and so although humans vary ontically from epoch to epoch, the ontological features of our condition endure. In other words, is the Gnostic/existentialist position the truth of our condition, or is it a perennial temptation to which we are especially subject in spiritually desolate times? If the position rests on "an experience," is that experience the lens that discloses the ultimate ground of our being and the truth about our being-in-the-world, or is it indicative of a failure to inhabit the world and recognize our place within it? This question is decisive, for the experience is

either the courageous and resolute facing up to the nothingness or a flight from the serious work that confronts human beings always and everywhere in their effort to live serious lives according to nonarbitrary standards of the good, the just, and the noble.

When he first set out to explore Gnosticism for his doctoral dissertation, Jonas had thought that Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein* constituted a universal account of the human condition and for that reason unlocked the esoteric teaching of an ancient mystery cult.[87] As Christian Wiese observes,

> The categories derived from *Being and Time* (1927)—*Geworfenheit* ("thrownness") into the void of the world, *Verfallenheit* ("fallenness"), *Verlorensein* ("abandonment"), and *Grundbefindlichkeit der Angst* ("fundamental disposition to dread")—had helped [Jonas] to decode the gnostic myths and to grasp the singularity of the movement in comparison with other religions, which consisted first and foremost of its characteristic understanding of existence (*Dasein*).[88]

Yet after his disillusionment with Heidegger and in his effort to discover a new ontological grounding for an objective ethics in the phenomenon of life, he came to see that "Existentialism, which claims to be the explication of the fundamentals of human existence as such, is the philosophy of a particular, historically fated situation of human existence: and [that] an analogous . . . situation had given rise to an analogous response in the past."[89] Rather than presume the truth of Heidegger's teaching and find confirmation of its validity in its explanatory power when applied to Gnosticism, Jonas reversed the order of operations and asked whether instead of existentialism unlocking the peculiarities of ancient Gnostics, Gnosticism might unlock the truth of existentialism. In this metanoia, Jonas realized that he had hit upon two forms of nihilism in two remarkably different historical epochs, and thus he discovered a means of approaching "both contingency and necessity in the nihilistic experience."[90]

Conclusion: From Phenomenological Critique to Positive Philosophical Teaching

As Jonas emphasizes, this discovery does not diminish the force or "seriousness" of the nihilistic experience, but it serves to cast doubt on the radical particularity of the experience claimed by Heidegger and thereby to suggest that the world-historical moment Heidegger believed twentieth-century man fated to suffer through cannot possess the ontological significance that Heidegger ascribes to it. That is, the discovery of the structural similarity in the two forms of nihilism is already a repudiation of Heidegger's own diagnosis of the nihilistic situation of late-modern European man. The possibility of recurring modes of existence raises serious doubts about the ineliminable particularity of *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world that forms the basis of Heidegger's *Seinsgeschichte* and the corollary account of *Seinsvergessen* that together constitute his radical historicism.[91] Rather than a slow and fateful forgetting of the question of Being, there may be permanent possible postures that the mind might take with respect to the world. Jonas does not conclude from this that one should simply dismiss Heideggerian existentialism's insights tout court. As already noted, Jonas is indebted to Heidegger on a number of fronts. However, he suggests one is justified in concluding that the "validity of some of [existentialism's] insights is confined" to a particular "situation."[92] If existentialism lacks the universal applicability Jonas formerly presumed it to hold, then "a 'gnostic' reading of Existentialism" should serve a fourfold purpose: (1) to illuminate the character of this "situation"; (2) to show why the existentialist description of that situation is accurate within the confines of its presuppositions; (3) to point the way out of the nihilistic situation by exposing the limited validity of existentialism's presuppositions; and (4) by disclosing existentialism's true ground in a false presupposition of man's alienation from nature, to enable us to move beyond the nihilistic situation and point to the grounds on which we might nobly bear the burden of responsibility that is the condition of our privileged place in the cosmos.

In fulfilling this fourfold task, this paper is primarily an exercise in critique. But the largely negative results of the inquiry serve the

liberating purpose of preparing the way for an investigation of Jonas's positive philosophical teaching concerning our condition as natural beings. A final evaluation of Jonas's critical appropriation of and rejoinder to Heidegger would turn on a judgment about whether Jonas's own philosophical system has the conceptual resources for addressing three further problems in a sufficiently coherent and systematic fashion as to constitute a comprehensive alternative to Heidegger's philosophy. First, Jonas must illustrate how his biologically grounded philosophical anthropology would account for the Gnostic/existentialist position as a perennial possibility grounded in human nature that is likely to be realized under certain historical conditions. Second, his philosophical anthropology must provide, in contrast to the limited veracity of existentialism, a true account of the fundamental features of the distinctively human way of being-in-the-world. In particular, it must demonstrate the objective validity of ethical standards for human conduct, proving that the human condition is not nihilistic and that man is naturally endowed with the capacity for moral reasoning and ethical responsibility. Third, Jonas's philosophic system must, while remaining grounded in nature, exhibit sufficient plasticity to be capable of comprehending human historicity; for only on such a basis can Jonas's philosophy respond to historically unprecedented circumstances and specify the ethical demands imposed on humanity by the novel features of our contemporary historical epoch, one defined by humanity's immense technological power. If such conditions are met, then the courage to live in light of the imperative of responsibility supplants Heidegger's courageous resolve to confront the groundless grounds of our existence. For Jonas, to be authentically human requires submitting to the "ought" of a universal objective ethical standard.

Notes

1. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), xxxiv.
2. For the historical conditions in which Gnosticism arises, see Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 241–53.

3. "Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism" (hereafter *GEN*), in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001 [1966]), 212 (hereafter *PL*).
4. The centrality of teleology to Jonas's ethical teaching is encapsulated in his assertion that "we can regard the mere *capacity* to *have* any purposes at all as a good-in-itself, of which we grasp with intuitive certainty that it is infinitely superior to any purposelessness." *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 80 (hereafter *IR*).
5. Jonas, *GEN*, 214–15. Cf. Jonas, "Seventeenth Century and After: the Meaning of the Scientific and Technological Revolution," in *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* (New York: Atropos Press, 2010).
6. See Heidegger's programmatic statements regarding the continuity of the tradition of ontology from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel, together with the prevailing "conception of time" from Aristotle to Bergson, and the need to undertake "the destruction of the history of ontology" in *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquerrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), 22–23, 39–49, 213–214 (hereafter *BT*). Although Heidegger is the principal target of Jonas's analysis, not merely for personal, biographical reasons but because, as Leo Strauss argued, "existentialism owes its overriding significance to a single man: Heidegger"—see his "Existentialism," *Interpretation* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 304—there is nonetheless, as Hannah Arendt illustrates, sufficient family resemblance between thinkers as different as Nietzsche, Jaspers, Sartre, and others (including Arendt herself) to justify treating existentialism as a school of thought united by an antipathetic rejection of certain central theoretical principles common to the philosophical tradition as a whole. Arendt, "What Is Existential Philosophy?," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 163–87.
7. Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York: Routledge, 2011), 57.
8. Cf. Jonas, *IR*, 125–30, 140–44. For Jonas it is not our historical horizon that determines our relation to nature but our conception of nature that determines the status and significance of history. Accordingly, modernity's so-called historical consciousness is downstream from the mathematization of nature: in the final analysis, it is Cartesian rationalism that gives rise to historicism, not historicism that discovers the limits of Descartes. Cf. Carl Page, "From Rationalism to Historicism: The Devolution of Cartesian Subjectivity," *St. John's Review* 42, no. 2 (1994):

95–112. For this reason, "trailblazing" should be understood in the precise sense of marking out a new path (ὅδος) for one's anticipated epigones to follow and with the full signification Machiavelli gives the idea in *The Prince*, chaps. 6 and 15.

9. Hans Jonas, "Philosophy at the End of the Century" (hereafter *PEC*) in *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 49 (hereafter *MM*).
10. Jonas, *PEC*, 49.
11. Jonas, *PEC*, 49.
12. Jonas, *PEC*, 49.
13. Jonas, *PEC*, 49. Cf. Jonas's unpublished lecture "Husserl und Heidegger," Leo Baeck Institute Archives, New York, AR 2241/MS 75: "There was this prejudice, I would like to say from Plato to Husserl, that the taking up of residence in spirit, the struggle for truth, the discovery and turn to true being, that all this improves the soul, that it ennobles, holds humanity back from baseness and meanness. Heidegger furnishes the proof that had never before been produced in the history of philosophy, that something about that is not true, that one can be a thinker and at the same time a base person. How that is possible, this enigma I have not yet solved for myself, but it is one, and Heidegger leaves us with this terrible enigma." Qtd. in Christian Wiese, "'Revolt against Escapism': Hans Jonas's Philosophy of Life as a Response to Martin Heidegger's Existentialism," in *Heidegger's Jewish Followers: Essays on Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Hans Jonas, and Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Samuel Fleischacker (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008), 271n24.
14. Contrary to Arendt's exculpatory protestations, Jonas is explicit about his belief in the deep connection between "the magnificent thinker and teacher Heidegger and the chauvinist, who came out of his hiding place in 1933." Hans Jonas, "Heidegger's Resoluteness and Resolve," in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers*, ed. Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 200. On Jonas's judgment of Arendt's willingness to excuse Heidegger, see Jonas, *Memoirs*, ed. Christian Wiese, trans. Krishna Winston (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 63: "love can forgive a great deal."
15. For an account of the priority of the practical for Kant's philosophical system as a whole, see Richard Velkley, *Freedom and The End of Reason: On the Moral Foundations of Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

16. My study builds on the work of Lawrence Vogel, who highlights four shared premises: "(1) that the twentieth century presents a crisis for the West, not the victory of enlightenment; (2) that this crisis stems from the self-destructive nature of modern reason under the influence of modern natural science; (3) that philosophy has the task of showing the limits of modern natural sciences' conception of reality and reason; and (4) that these limits can be revealed by returning to ancient philosophy." "Overcoming Heidegger's Nihilism: Leo Strauss versus Hans Jonas," in *Heidegger's Jewish Followers*, 131.
17. Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology," in *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977), 3–35; but cf. Dieter Henrich, "The Basic Structure of Modern Philosophy," *Cultural Hermeneutics* 2, no. 1 (April 1974): 1–18. On the connection between the epistemic assumptions of modern philosophy—esp. the turn to subjectivity—and modern mathematical physics, see Heidegger, *The Question Concerning the Thing*, trans. James D. Reid and Benjamin D. Crowe (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 62–80.
18. See Heidegger, *BT*, 58–63; cf. Jonas, *PL*, 16–22.
19. Cf. Heidegger, *BT*, 71–74, 86–90, 95–148, 225–56, 363–70, with Jonas, *PL*, 26–33, 53–63, 80–86, 145–56.
20. Letter from Hans Jonas to Gunther Anders, May 29, 1976, qtd. in Christian Wiese, "'Revolt against Escapism,'" 151.
21. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2001), 122–25. In an astonishingly prescient moment, Weber imagines the possibility that "at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise" (ibid., 124)—a theme he returns to again in his 1917 and 1919 lectures "Science as a Vocation" and "Politics as a Vocation." According to Jonas, Heidegger himself appeared to be something like a prophet to the interwar generation of students enchanted by his teaching (Jonas, *Memoirs*, 59–60). Heidegger's own account of the need for new gods and the prophetic role of the "poetic-thinker" in "Origin of the Work of Art" provides some indication of his own self-understanding in the 1930s—see *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–56. This is so esp. when read in connection with Heidegger's discussion of the role played "by the creators, by the poets, thinkers, and statesmen" in the theological-ethical-political formation of a particular *Volk* in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 2nd ed., trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt

(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 68 (hereafter *IM*). Despite postwar modifications in Heidegger's account of the activity of "poetic-thinkers" (above all the introduction of the notion of *Gelassenheit*), the continuity of his conception of the highest vocation of the thinker as responding to the "call of Being," giving utterance to the mysterious dispensation of Being in a given epoch, and thereby performing a ministerial role in Being's revelatory self-disclosure is evident in the thematic continuity between his 1946 "Letter on Humanism," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239–74, and his 1964 lecture "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *Time and Being*, trans. J. Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 55–73. For Jonas's trenchant critique of this self-conception, see "Heidegger and Theology," in *PL*, 253–58.

22. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 122, 124.
23. While Jonas agrees to some extent with Weber's account of the Judeo-Christian roots of this process of disenchantment and the influence of religious convictions in determining the "Occidental" view of the relation between man and nature, he thinks the key break is a transformation of our understanding of nature and the denial of final cause in the seventeenth century. See "Jewish and Christian Elements in Philosophy: Their Share in the Emergence of a Modern Mind," in *Philosophical Essays*, 21–45; cf. Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology," in *PL*, 258–59; and "Tool, Image, and Grave," in *MM*, 82. See also Jonas's description of "Darwin's immanent explanation of man's origins according to purely biological rules" as the "last disenchantment, following all those having to do with the rest of the world, [which] appeared to undermine the very foundations of the previous image of man" as a unique being among the animals of creation ("Tool, Image, and Grave," in *MM*, 76).
24. Jonas, *GEN*, 213.
25. Jonas, *GEN*, 213.
26. *Pensées*, fr. 205, qtd. in Jonas, *GEN*, 213.
27. Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968).
28. Jonas, *GEN*, 213.
29. See Michael Davis, *Wonderlust* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2006), 138.
30. Jonas, *GEN*, 214.
31. The epistemic ground of mathematical physics is subject-object dualism: the condition of objective knowledge of the world is the displacement of

the knowing subject to a standpoint outside and beyond the world known by natural science (*PL*, 72–74).

32. Jonas, *GEN*, 214.
33. Jonas, *GEN*, 214. Only if mind is displaced from the cosmos as the "thinking thing" that lies beyond nature does nature appear as the "extended thing" devoid of purposes; conversely, when nature lacks any form of teleology, then the human is incapable of finding himself in nature.
34. Jonas, *GEN*, 214.
35. Jonas, *GEN*, 215.
36. The temporality of the causal logic governing the motion of bodies in space in scientific explanation is diametrically opposed to that of human intentionality. Whereas I know nature in the present as an outcome of the past and offer predictions by projecting that same causal chain into the future, human action begins with the future insofar as it begins with what the subject intends—namely, a telos, or in Heidegger's terminology, a project, something *Dasein* throws ahead of itself into the future. And it is on the basis of a desired outcome that one determines the connection between the present and the future, i.e., that one contrives a plan for realizing the future—a determinate course of action.
37. See Jonas, "Is God a Mathematician? The Meaning of Metabolism," in *PL*, 64–98.
38. Jonas, *GEN*, 215.
39. Jonas, *GEN*, 215.
40. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Richard Kennington, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Newbury, MA: Focus, 2007), 49. Contrast Descartes's hope for immortality with Jonas's apprehensions in "The Burden and Blessing of Mortality," in *MM*, 87–98.
41. See Jonas, "The Practical Uses of Theory," in *PL*, 188–210. Following Bacon's lead in the *New Organon*, which is intended to displace the Aristotelian framework along with the scholastic accretions built on that foundation for the sake of humanity recovering what Bacon believes to be "its rightful authority over the nature of things," Descartes likewise dismisses the ancient and Scholastic inheritance of learning, with its emphasis on form, substance, and telos, as being "barren of works" and therefore worthless—a conclusion that makes good sense if there really is no enduring eidetic order in nature to contemplate.
42. Jonas, *GEN*, 216.
43. Jonas, *GEN*, 216.
44. Heidegger, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God Is Dead,'" in *Off the Beaten Track*, 157–99.

45. Implicit in Jonas's argument, therefore, is the assertion that his teacher remains caught within the framework he is struggling to escape.
46. Jonas, *GEN*, 216.
47. Note esp. Sartre's understanding of "subjectivity" as the doctrine "that man first exists; that is, that man primarily exists—that man is, before all else, something that projects itself into a future, and is conscious of doing so. Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence. . . . Prior to that projection of the self, nothing exists, not even in divine intelligence, and man shall attain existence only when he is what he projects himself to be." *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, ed. John Kulka, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 23. Although Heidegger criticizes Sartre's position thoroughly in the "Letter on Humanism," Sartre's starting point is a faithful restatement of the first characteristic of *Dasein* enumerated by Heidegger in *Being and Time*—namely, that "the 'essence' of Dasein lies in its existence" or "the priority of *existentia* over *essentia* (der Vorrang der 'existentia' vor der essentia)" (*BT*, 67–68). As Jonas observes, Heidegger's fundamental ontology in *Being and Time* provides an account of "the modes in which the self 'exists,' that is, constitutes its own being in the act of existing, and with it originates, as the objective correlates thereof, the several meanings of Being in general" (Jonas, *GEN*, 229).
48. Jonas, *GEN*, 216.
49. Jonas, *GEN*, 217.
50. See Jonas's remarks about the Davos debate between Heidegger and Cassirer in "Heidegger's Resoluteness and Resolve," 202. Cf. Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 24–51.
51. Jonas, *GEN*, 217–18.
52. Jonas, *GEN*, 218.
53. Jonas, "The Gnostic Syndrome: Typology of Its Thought, Imagination, and Mood," in *Philosophical Essays*, 268–69.
54. Jonas, *GEN*, 218.
55. Jonas, *GEN*, 218.
56. Jonas, *GEN*, 218. Cf. Jonas's discussion of dualism in "Life, Death, and the Body in the Theory of Being," in *PL*, 13–17.
57. Jonas, *GEN*, 219.
58. Jonas, *GEN*, 219.
59. Jonas, *GEN*, 219–20. Cf. Thomas Prufer, "Notes on Nature," in *Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 22–26.

60. Jonas, *GEN*, 220.
61. Jonas, *GEN*, 220.
62. Jonas, *GEN*, 220.
63. Jonas, *GEN*, 220. Cf. Heidegger, *BT*, 228–35, 295–98, 342–43, 356, 393–95.
64. Cf. Jonas's description of *Dasein* in the context of contrasting Heidegger's teaching with Husserl's: whereas Husserl spoke of the pure self as essentially an "intellectual self . . . of the pure consciousness" that has "the world as its object and object [*Gegenstand*] means *standing opposite* [*gegenüberstehend*,] Heidegger's *Dasein* was experienced in an entirely different way: as interwoven with care into the world. . . . To say it perhaps very unphilosophically . . . it is a 'tormented self' and not a self that sovereignly sets itself opposite the world" (Jonas, "Heidegger's Resoluteness and Resolve," 199).
65. Jonas, *GEN*, 221.
66. Jonas, *GEN*, 221.
67. Jonas, *GEN*, 221. Jonas's emphasis on the centrality of modern natural science to his account of modern Gnosticism distinguishes his account from Eric Voeglin's phenomenological-hermeneutic deployment of Gnosticism as a lens for analyzing mass political movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See "Science, Politics, and Gnosticism," in *Modernity without Restraint*, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 245–313. While there is a great deal of overlap in their respective analyses of the structural features of what Voegelin calls the "ersatz religions" of the era, the reasons each author gives for their emergence and thus their respective genealogies of the origins of modern nihilism differ substantially.
68. Jonas, *GEN*, 221.
69. Jonas, *GEN*, 221.
70. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 11.2. Note that for Hobbes there is no good and evil independent of power relations, save the inescapable fact of our mortality, which we flee at all costs—that is, the one defining feature of the human Hobbes allows (i.e., the one feature of our existence that is good or evil by nature and not mere convention) is that which we are continually trying to avoid and which we so reliably try to avoid as to enable Hobbes to elaborate on the basis of that fact a formal mechanism by which humanity can reliably construct a new artificial habitation. Hobbes's nominalism is the obverse of a nature devoid of intrinsic meaning: we construct a world to inhabit in response to a naturally inhospitable condition through the domination of nature, most especially

the control of human nature through the control of the preeminent and inextirpable and therefore reliable human passion, the fear of death.

71. The radicality of the Gnostic and existentialist stance is encapsulated in the fact that the self in that framework is even more alone in the world than the antisocial atomistic man of Hobbes's imagination; for in Hobbes's schema, one may escape the state of nature and enjoy the benefits and blessings of civil society through worldly ingenuity (i.e., through the merely prudent, practical, and self-interested reasoning codified in the laws of nature).
72. As the example of Hobbes illustrates, one can consider nature "step-motherly" in her lack of provision for the human, believe our natural state to be one of unceasing strife, deny the classical teaching of substantial form, and reject final causality as an explanatory principle, all without believing history to be the decisive dimension of human reality.
73. Clemens Alex., *Exc. ex Theod.*, 78.2, qtd. in Jonas, GEN, 228.
74. Jonas, *GEN*, 229. Cf. Peter Trawny's description of Heidegger's "history of being" in contrast to "Dasein's historicity": "Heidegger did not envision the 'history of being' in an abstract way, as if it were the theory of a given understanding of history; rather, the 'history of being' is itself in direct contact with a history that happens factically. The notion of a 'history of being' is itself only possible at a given point in history when this very history gives rise to the knowledge of itself. The 'thinking of being' is itself a necessary element in the 'history of being.' The central concept that this movement of thought is supposed to articulate is the 'event of appropriation' (*Ereignis*)." *Heidegger: A Critical Introduction*, trans. Rodrigo Therezo (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019), 85.
75. Knowledge is presumed by figures as different as Aristotle and Kant to be communicable by definition. In the absence of such a presupposition there can be no dialectical ascent from opinion to knowledge, only a leap of faith or a leap into knowing. Cf. Heidegger, *IM*, 7–8, 14–15, 195–96.
76. Jonas, "The Gnostic Syndrome," 268.
77. My seeming to be in pain is for me always and necessarily equivalent to my being in pain.
78. Cf. Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," in *Pathmarks*, 91–92; n.b. the search for a more originary encounter with nothing than the negation of logic.
79. Jonas, *GEN*, 229. Cf. Heidegger, *BT*, 174–75, 219–24, 329–34.
80. Jonas, *GEN*, 229. Cf. Heidegger, *BT*, 370–80, 385–94.
81. Jonas provides a brief adumbration of Heidegger's delineation of the "existentials" of *Dasein*, which, "[u]nlike the objective 'categories' of

Kant, . . . articulate primarily structures not of reality but of realization, that is, not cognitive structures of a world of objects given, but functional structures of the active movement of inner time by which a 'world' is entertained and the self originated as a continuous event. The 'existentials' have, therefore, each and all, a profoundly temporal meaning. They are categories of internal or mental time, the true dimension of existence, and they articulate that dimension in its tenses." Accordingly, the existentials "must exhibit . . . the three horizons of time—past, present, and future" (*GEN*, 230). On closer inspection, such an analysis reveals the virtual vacuity of the present, which taken in itself "as an independent dimension in its own right" is largely devoid of "modes of 'genuine' or 'authentic' existence" (*GEN*, 230).

82. Jonas, *GEN*, 230.
83. Jonas, *GEN*, 231. Cf. Heidegger, *BT*, 279–311, 396–401, 416–18.
84. Jonas, *GEN*, 232.
85. Cf. Heidegger, *BT*, 24–28, 193–195, 200–202. See also Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," in *Pathmarks*, 82–89.
86. For Jonas's account of the similarity in historical epochs on the spiritual (theological and philosophical) and the political planes, see *GEN*, 217–18, 221–24.
87. "My work on gnosticism was . . . an application of Heidegger's philosophy, especially of existential analysis, with its particular interpretative methodology and its understanding of human existence, to a specific body of historical material, in this case gnosticism in late antiquity. . . . At the time, by the way, I saw gnosticism as an early equivalent of Heideggerian thought, but not the other way around. Only much later, when I'd weaned myself from Heidegger worship, did it occur to me that not only were some of Heidegger's views of existence anticipated by the gnostics but Heidegger's thinking itself also represented a sort of present-day gnostic phenomenon" (Jonas, *Memoirs*, 65–66).
88. Wiese, "'Revolt against Escapism,'" 164–65.
89. Jonas, *GEN*, 212.
90. Jonas, *GEN*, 212. Cf. Jonas, *Wissenschaft als persönliches Erlebnis* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 15–16.
91. Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" in *Pathmarks*, 239–76. See Trawny, *Heidegger*, 166n90.
92. Jonas, *GEN*, 213.