
The Planetary Moralist

Memoirs: Hans Jonas

edited by Christian Wiese

translated by Krishna Winston

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314 pages.

**The Life and Thought of Hans
Jonas: Jewish Dimensions**

by Christian Wiese

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The remarkable life and work of German-Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas have remained largely unknown in the English-speaking

world. To the extent that he is noticed at all, it is by students of theology and ancient Christianity, for whom his 1958 study of Gnosticism, *The Gnostic Religion*, remains an important text. The relative indifference to Jonas's later work is both unfortunate and surprising, considering the influence he has had on one of the most widely discussed political movements today: environmentalism. Published in German in 1979, Jonas's book *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* became a European best seller and helped galvanize the continent's nascent green movement. In Germany, his words have been echoed by politicians and intellectuals alike, and the German Green Party, founded in 1980, eventually rose to become

the most successful organization dedicated to the environment in the world, sitting in the German federal government from 1995 to 2001. For environmentalists in Europe, and for many global activists, Jonas's "ecological imperative," which he articulated as "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life," has become something of an article of faith.

In his native Europe, Jonas has long been recognized as an important and influential thinker. In 1987, he received both the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade and the Federal Republic of Germany's Medal of Honor. Shortly before his death in 1993, he was awarded the prestigious Italian Premio Nonino. The Berlin-based Hans Jonas Center continues to research and discuss his work in relation to such questions as climate change, globalization, and theology. Elsewhere, however, Jonas remains somewhat obscure, something which the two books here under review attempt to rectify.

The first, *Memoirs: Hans Jonas*, was not, in fact, written by Jonas. It was compiled from the transcriptions of a series of conversations with Jonas about his life and work, held in Munich over two weeks in 1989, and taped by admirers Stephen Sattler and Rachel Salamander. These

conversations have been ably edited and annotated by the historian Christian Wiese, who has thankfully added such previously unpublished material as Jonas's intellectually penetrating and noble appeal, "Our Part in this War: A Word to Jewish Men," written in Jerusalem in September 1939, and his philosophical letters to his wife, Lore Jonas, sent to her in 1944-1945 while Jonas was serving with the Jewish Brigade Group in Italy.

Wiese is the author of the second book, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions*, in which he takes up the complex question of the extent to which Jonas's intense moral and ethical struggle with the questions of human well-being, the effects of modern technology, and even the persistence of life itself was a consequence of the "Jewish dimensions" of his life and thought. It is to be hoped that, thanks at least in part to these two volumes, the thinker who grappled with these complex questions will not remain obscure much longer.

M*emoirs: Hans Jonas* is divided into two sections. The first retells the turbulent first half of Jonas's remarkable life, beginning with his childhood in a well-to-do liberal Jewish home in western Germany and concluding with his years in New York City, where, at the age of fifty-two, he became a professor at

the New School for Social Research. Born in 1903, Jonas became a Zionist at the age of fifteen over the objections of his father and underwent agricultural training in preparation for *aliya*. Nor was this his only form of Jewish involvement. He studied for a time at Berlin's famous Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Higher Institute for Jewish Studies). Eventually, he attended the Universities of Freiburg and Heidelberg, where he studied philosophy and theology with such luminaries as Edmund Husserl, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Jaspers, Karl Mannheim, and, most notably, Martin Heidegger. By the time Jonas encountered Heidegger, the latter was already a legend surrounded by a circle of admirers whom Jonas refers to as the "Heidegger cult," which he describes as being possessed of a "bigoted arrogance... almost going so far as to claim a monopoly on divine truth." They were, he says, "more like a sect, almost a new religion." Jonas officially wrote his dissertation under Heidegger, but it was largely under Bultmann's direction that he penned what would eventually become a classic analysis of Gnosticism, published two decades later in English as *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (1958).

During this time, Jonas formed lifelong friendships with many of those who would come to define the German-Jewish intellectual contribution to twentieth-century thought, such as Karl Löwith, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt. In 1933, like so many others, Jonas left Nazi Germany and eventually settled in Jerusalem. His life in Palestine, however, was soon swept up in the whirlwind of history. He joined the Hagana in 1936, the British Army in 1940 as a member of the First Palestine Anti-Aircraft Battery, and the newly formed IDF in 1948, serving in the battle for Jerusalem itself.

When the dust finally settled in 1949, Jonas was forty-six years old with a wife and infant daughter to support, and he lacked a regular academic appointment at the Hebrew University. He turned to Leo Strauss for help. The result was a fellowship in Canada that took Jonas away from Israel—permanently, as it turned out. Several years later, he received his appointment at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Jonas would remain in the United States for the rest of his life, until he passed away at the age of ninety.

Jonas's postwar life was largely dedicated to scholarship, and the second part of *Memoirs* deals

with his reflections on this large and diverse body of work. It can be roughly divided into three periods: The first is Jonas's study of Gnosticism, which was begun in the 1930s but not fully completed and published until after the war. He then turned to the development of a philosophy of biological phenomena, which eventually resulted in the 1966 collection of essays entitled *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*. Finally, in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, he attempted to formulate an ethical system based on that philosophy. Jonas thought that *The Phenomenon of Life* was his "most important philosophical work, because it contains the elements of a new ontology," or theory of existence, in which the "essence of reality... harbors something more than the silent being of matter."

As Jonas put it in a 1990 interview, this new theory of the "essence of reality," holds that lifeless matter "must be given the credit it deserves for letting arise or making arise beings endowed with a sense of interest.... And if you credit matter with this, you have said something about hidden properties of matter at which you can only guess." But Jonas's new ontology was, in a sense, a very old ontology—that of Aristotle, adapted to the modern theory of evolution.

Like Aristotle, Jonas believed that nature has a potential that is directed toward a final goal or purpose—*telos* in Greek. This purpose, he thought, manifests itself in the fact that evolution leads to an ever-increasing level of what he called "interest" or "inwardness," which ultimately results in the creation of an organism whose "supreme concern" is "its own being and continuation of being." Manifestations of this concern range up the evolutionary scale from the primitive reaction to stimuli exhibited by the lowest forms of organic life to the diverse range of responses made possible by the existence of mind. For Jonas, any philosophy of biological phenomena must "follow the unfolding of this germinal freedom in the ascending levels of organic evolution."

One consequence of Jonas's recognition of this externally directed inwardness, coextensive with life through increasingly complex levels of nature, was a reevaluation of the implications of the theory of evolution. The "hue and cry over the indignity done to man's metaphysical status in the doctrine of his animal descent," he wrote, "[has] overlooked that by the same token some dignity [had] been restored to the realm of life as a whole." By "dignity" Jonas meant not only that nature should

be credited with a positive potentiality of developing inwardness, but also that the description of life as a mechanism cannot adequately account for the subjective aspect of this phenomenon. For example, one cannot describe one's fear of death in quantifiable terms. In other words, Jonas argued that the natural sciences rested upon the fiction of investigating life on the molecular level by denying or disregarding the fact that organisms have a whole and higher aspect, concerned with "inwardness" or "awareness" of various kinds. Of course, Jonas in no way doubted the methodological utility of this fiction, and he was certainly never opposed to science and its methods. Nonetheless, he argued that, from a philosophical perspective, when the scientist ignores the entirety of the higher organism, and in particular the human mind, he also ignores the fact that awareness, subjectivity, interest—i.e., mind—is an efficacious principle within nature, as exemplified by the scientific method itself.

It appears, then, that while Jonas rejected a dualist view of matter and mind by locating purpose and inwardness within nature, he nonetheless elevated this inwardness, and thus humanity, as the measure of all things. This is evident in his belief that his new ontology had to begin with the recognition of the "possibility of there

being responsibility in the world, [the biological recognition of] which is bound to the existence of men." In other words, it must recognize that while nature itself is indifferent, it has created beings that are not. As Jonas put it in his early essay "Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism," nature "contains in its midst that to which its own being does make a difference," a "conscious, caring, knowing self—has been 'thrown up' by nature." Thus, one has in Jonas's philosophy of biology a paradoxical synthesis of an Aristotelian ontology adapted to Darwinian evolution, leading to the assertion that nature, which has no purpose, has created a being with purpose and must therefore have the potential for purpose. It must be, as he called it, "a teleological nature begotten unteleologically."

Jonas grappled with the ethical implications of this philosophy in his European best seller, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1979). Beginning with the "possibility of there being responsibility in the world," Jonas argued that the first of these responsibilities is the preservation of that possibility. He believed that this was of the utmost importance in the modern, industrial, technological age. According to Jonas, our era is unlike any other in human history because, for the first time, the power of humanity far outstrips its knowledge.

As a result, the mores and traditions we have received from the past are dangerously outmoded. “The magnitude and novelty of [humanity’s] works,” he wrote, “and their impact on man’s global future raises moral issues for which past ethics, geared to the direct dealings of man with his fellow men within narrow horizons of space and time, has left us unprepared.” In other words, the power that technology has given us to transform our own environment demands that we formulate new ethical principles for an age in which the immutability of nature can no longer be taken for granted.

Jonas’s primary fear, however, was not the sudden apocalyptic destruction of humanity or the planet through nuclear war. That danger, he thought, while real enough, was at least acknowledged by humanity as a threat. Much more insidious was the threat presented by the “nature of unintended dynamics of technical civilization as such, inherent in its structure, whereto it drifts willy-nilly and with exponential acceleration: the apocalypse of the ‘too much,’ with exhaustion, pollution, desolation of the planet.” This concept, which has become the *sine qua non* of the global environmental movement, is based on a dread of the unintended degradation of what it means to be human as a result of the

technological and scientific progress of modern society. This includes such phenomena as unsustainable economies, industrial pollution, the overuse of natural resources to provide for an exponentially growing world population, biotechnology, and even medical advances like psychotropic drugs and genetic engineering.

Clearly, Jonas believed that the technological power achieved by modern humanity was not an unequivocal cause for celebration. Rather, what is ethically required is a “heuristics of fear” based on the idea that there are certain risks that humanity is not responsibly allowed to take, because the very “image of man” is now endangered by the actions of humanity. In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas explained this explicitly anti-utopian ethic by stating that a prophecy of doom must be given priority over a prophecy of bliss, because our newly acquired technological capacity is capable of destroying what evolution has made possible, and it has also exceeded our ability to rationally predict its outcome. As a result, a “new kind of humility” is required on the part of humanity. Caution must become the basis of our actions so that we do not compromise our own survival. Or, as Jonas famously put it, “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life.”

There is no question that Jonas's philosophy of biology and his ethics of responsibility are deeply compelling. Indeed, for many thinkers on medical, bio-, and environmental ethics he has become something of an intellectual guiding light. Nonetheless, several reservations, or perhaps qualifications, should be raised. First, despite Jonas's insistence that inanimate matter is indifferent to any purpose, he also pointed to the existence of hidden potentialities within matter which result in the evolution of life with increasing degrees of inwardness. One can be content with simply accepting Jonas's formulation as fact, because, after all, living beings with consciousness exist. One gets the sense, however, that it is also Jonas's answer to Heidegger's revival of Leibniz's question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" If so, then a benign view of nature appears to be implicit in Jonas's philosophy of biological phenomena. Indeed, he himself wrote of the "world's continued hospitability to life."

This point of view is certainly attractive, but it does not seem to accord with what we know of nature and the physical universe. A less romantic view would have to take into consideration the mass extinctions that have occurred throughout the history of our planet, the

ever-present possibility of natural disaster that hangs over us, and the fact that billions of years from now our sun will be extinguished and life on earth will no longer be possible. In short, if nature strives to create life, it also seems to strive no less vigorously to destroy it. From this perspective, it seems that the ethics of responsibility proposed by Jonas, which takes as its basic principle the need to maintain our habitat to the extent that our actions "leave no trace," is ultimately self-defeating. If the purpose of this ethics is the preservation of life and its potential for intelligence and self-awareness, it would seem to be more appropriate to develop technologies that will allow us to survive the inevitable catastrophe rather than attempt to sustain a habitat that is, in the end, unsustainable. It appears then, that while Jonas's heuristics of fear may be advisable in relation to short-term problems such as pollution, it ultimately contradicts his own assertion that "the permanence of genuine human life" must stand as the highest ethical value.

A second reservation has to do with the character and development of knowledge. Jonas observed that "the one paradoxical certainty is that of uncertainty" and thus rightly rejected utopian thought. In the face of unavoidable uncertainty, he sought to limit our actions by

appealing to an ethics grounded not in the autonomy of the self or the needs of the community, since these cannot avoid falling victim to relativism, but rather in a “principle discoverable in the nature of things.” Since, according to Jonas, nature has allowed living things capable of responsibility to emerge, our responsibility to nature requires us to preserve life and the “image of man.” Our technological prowess must not vitiate this responsibility. Be that as it may, problems having to do with the ethical consequences of the uncertainty of knowledge and resulting courses of action still remain.

What if, as is evidently the case, a great deal of our understanding emerges in unanticipated ways, in response to new problems? During the late 1960s and early 1970s, for instance, dire warnings were raised by, for example, the Club of Rome’s *The Limits to Growth*, about the danger of overpopulation. It was argued that, unchecked, it would soon lead to mass starvation on a global scale. The same apocalyptic warning was raised by Jonas:

Biological success... threatens mankind and nature with an acute catastrophe of enormous proportions.... Imagination recoils from the prospect of mass dying and mass killing.... The equilibrium laws of ecology, for so long held off by art,

which in their natural state prevent the overgrowth of any one species, will assert their right all the more terribly the more they have been bullied to the extreme of their tolerance. How after this a remnant of mankind will start afresh on a ravaged earth defies all speculation.

Forty years later, however, three billion more individuals inhabit our planet with a standard of living never before achieved, as humanity developed new forms of energy and agriculture to meet new needs. The issue here is not merely the inaccuracy of our presumed knowledge about what the planet could bear forty years ago, although it does reveal an assumed certainty when uncertainty should have prevailed. The concern, rather, is the programmatic implications of the “heuristics of fear” when enacted in order to maintain what is understood as the natural state of things. Take, for example, reducing the population by means of birth control. If one is forbidden to have children, what then becomes of the “image of man”? Moreover, the exponential growth of the global population has also been the result of new medical technologies that allow us to prolong our lives in a manner that, with the assumption of a given natural state, can only strain the biosphere. To respond to this technological success by placing artificial limits

on the human lifespan—a prospect that Jonas would surely have found horrific—would seem to vitiate our understanding of the “image of man.” Are we not, in fact, profoundly grateful for this successful prolongation of life, which is based upon what Jonas, following the Heidegger school, denounced in an all-too-facile manner as the “Baconian program of power over nature through scientific technology”? One can readily grant the merits of Jonas’s fear of a technology that knows no limits to its pursuits. Technological advance should not proceed willy-nilly, and the numerous ethical quandaries that arise from it require the most sober discussion. The difficulty—in fact, the objection—to Jonas’s ethics arises over the certainty of knowledge that is presumed to be based in the natural order of things.

Jonas’s misconception of the relationship between knowledge and uncertainty was, unfortunately, not the only example of the influence of one school of post-World War I European, and especially German thought, on his work. He also harbored a deep suspicion of representative government and the tradition of debate—often uncertain in both aim and outcome—that it rests upon. His ethic of responsibility, he said, casts “doubt on the capacity of representative government, operating by its normal principles and procedures, to

meet the new demands.” Ultimately, he thought that “only an elite can assume, ethically and intellectually, the kind of responsibility for the future which we have postulated.” Jonas did not shy away from the implications of his views regarding what would be politically required in order to meet the ethical challenge of our apocalyptic times.

Perhaps this dangerous game of mass deception (Plato’s “noble lie”) is all that politics will eventually have to offer: to give effect to the principle of fear under the mask of the principle of hope.... A new Machiavelli might be called for in that field [of political science]—who would, however, have to propound his teaching in strict esotericism.

Here, once again, one finds oneself having to pose the question to Jonas: “But then, what of the ‘image of man?’” Does not this phrase, so pregnant with moral significance, include freely given consent as opposed to manipulation? This dilemma reminds us once again that, while there is much in Jonas’s work that is compelling, much of it also ought to give us pause.

While developing his philosophy of biology and its ethical implications, Jonas also wrote on issues of theology and religion, including essays on myth and mysticism,

Gnosticism in the New Testament, Origen, and Plotinus. In 1964, he delivered the lecture "Heidegger and Theology," which was subsequently published in Germany and, according to Wiese, "created a furor." Jonas publicly condemned Heidegger's thought as "profoundly pagan" and repudiated its "fundamental failure to provide moral categories to resist the murderous consequences of nihilism."

Indeed, despite the wide range of Jonas's interests, an opposition to nihilism runs throughout his work. In his early study of Gnosticism, for instance, he drew attention to the Gnostic dualism between matter and spirit, which views the former as evil. To the Gnostics, matter was, at best, alien to life, and the world was nothing but a tomb imprisoning the spirit. Thus, they stripped nature of all value. Jonas argued that modern existentialists have continued the Gnostic tradition insofar as they posit a dualistic relationship between humanity and a meaningless nature. As we have seen, however, Jonas believed that modern nihilism was confronted by the paradox arising from a Darwinian understanding of biology. Contrary to the nihilists' valueless world, an "indifferent nature... contains in its midst that to which its own being does make a difference." As Wiese puts it, "Jonas proceeds from the premise of an inner teleology of evo-

lution that imposes irrefutable values on any moral being."

While Jonas went to great lengths to develop a philosophy and an ethics that would clarify those values but would not be derived from religion, he nonetheless quite often resorted to religious vocabulary and symbolism. For example, the "image of man" is clearly dependent upon the biblical idea of the image of God (*pace* Genesis 1:27, 9:6). In one of his essays, "Immortality and the Modern Temper," he writes: "The image of God is in danger as never before.... We literally hold in our faltering hands the future of the divine adventure and must not fail him, even if we would fail ourselves." Here, he presents a theological concept of *deus absconditus* dependent upon human responsibility. The question is how we should evaluate Jonas's repeated recourse to religious symbolism. Was it merely a device to engage the reader by appealing to the familiar biblical tradition, or might it reveal something else about Jonas's thought?

Wiese notes that, at several times during his life, Jonas admitted that he believed in God. Of course, a belief in God can take many forms, especially when one is dealing with a philosopher's belief in God. It seems to me, however, that once one recognizes how porous the line that separates religion from metaphysics actually is,

one rightly can and should view Jonas as a religious and Jewish thinker of a certain kind. When Jonas asserted the existence of hidden properties within matter or “the superiority of purpose as such over purposelessness,” he was making, as he acknowledged, a “metaphysical choice.” Such a choice should be more accurately viewed as laying out one’s religious understanding of humanity’s place in the universe. Perhaps Jonas admitted as much in a private letter to his friend Ernst Simon:

That I, for my part, am a believer, may explain this inclination [to use religious language], but cannot philosophically justify it, since philosophy—precisely as I understand it—must proceed on the basis of disbelief. However, it is itself a philosophical insight that no “secularization” may go so far that we forfeit the awareness or intuitions of transcendence which religion has made accessible.

That these “intuitions of transcendence” were, for Jonas, very much akin to Judaism seems to be borne out in his own work. Wiese cites this excerpt from Jonas’s lecture “Science and Ethics” as a case in point:

How do we know that man is created in the image of God? The answer is *we do not know, we believe*. Why is there any reason for us to believe something we do not know? For two reasons. One is that what we know is

a small part of that which is.... The other reason for accepting the biblical statement about creation and man being beholden to something more than his own natural condition is that we have reason to be modest... and it is here that Judaism should help us to restore a proper relationship to tradition. Not in the sense that anything said by tradition must be accepted as absolutely binding, but in general just as Judaism can help us restore a sense of reverence and awe towards nature, and a sense of reverence and awe towards the ultimate essence of ourselves, so it can help us restore a sense of reverence and humility towards tradition. It is only man isolated from the tradition through which the voice of God speaks who is in the nihilistic situation, man who thinks he knows everything and needs not listen anymore to the long dialogue in which man and God came to a mutual communication called the covenant. When it comes to wielding the power of modern technology, I think Judaism can tell us one thing. Don’t be too sure, don’t be too modern. [Emphasis in original.]

As with this text, we observe throughout Jonas’s work the following propositions: 1) nature is purposeful; 2) purpose as such is superior to purposelessness; 3) life is sacred; 4) our existence is a mystery, before which we should be modest; 5) this modesty, in turn, requires reverence. It can be argued, as Wiese does, that these propositions are also present in the Jewish tradition, even if Jonas’s

motivation for any one of them is ostensibly based upon rationalism derived from a naturalistic view of biology and ethics. I think that the qualification “ostensibly” is indeed necessary, because, as we have seen, Jonas’s naturalistic view rests upon assumptions. Perhaps assumptions are unavoidable, but, once again, Jonas avoided the problem of directly addressing why this may be so: namely, the problem of knowledge and its relation to uncertainty, or the unavoidable incompleteness of our understanding. Had Jonas confronted this problem head on, he might have achieved a richer understanding of religion and, above all, its necessity.

Perhaps Jonas’s most provocative attempt to grapple with theological questions was his lecture “The Concept of God After Auschwitz,” in which he tried to answer the most persistent objection to the idea of a monotheistic God and a moral universe: the problem of evil. Like so many Jewish thinkers before and after him, he was compelled to put his discussion in the context of the Holocaust and to answer the question “What God could let it happen?” Tellingly, Jonas refused to forgo the challenge, saying, “One who will not thereupon just give up the concept of God altogether—and even the philosopher has a right to such an unwillingness—must rethink it so

that it still remains thinkable.” Jonas’s “rethinking” was of a decidedly unorthodox variety, proposing that “In the beginning, for unknowable reasons, the ground of being, or the Divine, chose to give itself over to the chance and risk and the endless variety of becoming.... In order that the world might be, and be for itself, God renounced his being.” This God, whom Jonas described as “suffering,” “becoming,” “caring,” and “an endangered God, a God who runs a risk,” differs from the God of traditional Judaism in that he is not omnipotent. After Auschwitz, claimed Jonas, “an omnipotent deity would have to be either not good or... totally unintelligible,” which he could not accept. His God, then, was a God who “has divested himself of any power to interfere with the physical course of things; and who responds... with the mutely insistent appeal of his unfulfilled goal.”

Despite its similarities to Gnostic and Christian concepts of the divine, Jonas insisted that this portrayal of God was well within the bounds of Judaism. In particular, he pointed out the similarity between his idea of an act of “divine self-restriction,” and the Kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum*. There can be no doubt that, while Jonas’s God was not the product of Orthodox Jewish tradition, it was unquestionably a product of the Jewish

experience; of the attempt to grasp the magnitude of the catastrophe of the twentieth century as it was suffered by the Jewish people.

In his willingness to confront these issues head-on, and his refusal to do so from anything but the particular perspective of himself and his people, Jonas was very much a Jewish thinker. Still, the category “Jewish thinker,” let alone “Jewish philosopher,” is an ambiguous one. There is certainly nothing of the *halachic* tradition to be found in Jonas’s work. Nonetheless, Wiese’s insistence on the Jewish dimensions of Jonas’s thought has merit.

On a personal level, it is also certain that Jonas never questioned his Jewishness and remained concerned throughout his life with the traditions, the traumas, and even, one might say, the national honor of his people, especially in regard to Israel and Zionism. This is particularly prominent in his relationship with Hannah Arendt, whom he befriended in 1924 while they were both students at Marburg, a friendship they renewed when they were both living in New York after the war. Jonas, whose mother was murdered in Auschwitz, had a violent falling out with Arendt over the articles that would eventually become *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. He was “shocked” by his friend’s controversial account of

the Eichmann trial, particularly by its “anti-Zionist tenor” and Arendt’s “ignorance when it came to things Jewish.” This ignorance extended, according to Jonas, to the Torah itself, “which she didn’t know and probably hadn’t even read.” In a previously unpublished letter to Arendt from 1963, Jonas wrote that he read the book “with horror,” finding it “reprehensible” and replete with “snotty journalese.” Their break was not permanent, however, and Jonas reestablished their relationship two years later at the urging of his wife.

The depth of this commitment to Zionism and to the Jewish nation as a whole is beautifully illustrated in *Memoirs*, thanks to Wiese’s decision to augment Jonas’s own recollections of the war years with previously unpublished materials that shed a great deal of light on his passionate feelings about the events unfolding before him in Europe and Israel. “Our Part in this War: A Word to Jewish Men,” which called for a Jewish legion on the western front, is particularly striking in its intensity and moral fervor.

This is our hour, tis is our war....
We must wage it in our name, as
Jews, for the outcome must restore
our name.... We are the Nazis’
metaphysical enemy, their designated
victim from the very first days, and
we shall know no peace until either
that [Nazi] principle or our own
people is no more.... This war is also

in a figurative sense the first war of religion in modern times. This spiritual aspect transcends all political calculations... and originates in the very definition of the two sides.... This constitutes a clash between two principles, one of which, in the form of Christian-Western humanism, also represents the heritage of Israel, the other of which represents the cult of power that mocks human values, the absolute negation of that heritage.

Hans Jonas has long been the forgotten man of a generation of German-Jewish intellectuals that produced the likes of Leo Strauss, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Gershom Scholem, and many others. For most of these thinkers, Judaism was a constant reference point, even if they themselves were often

unaware of it. From this perspective, the relative lack of attention paid to Jonas's work by scholars of philosophy and Jewish thought is especially unfortunate, and in some ways inexplicable, considering his unique combination of Judaism and his own ambitious philosophy. Clearly, a reassessment of Jonas and his work, from both philosophical and Jewish perspectives, is long overdue. Hopefully, these two excellent books will help to spark such a reassessment and secure him the place he deserves in the history of twentieth-century Jewish thought.

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