

The Life and Thought *of* HANS JONAS

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The Life and Thought of
HANS JONAS
Jewish Dimensions

CHRISTIAN WIESE

Translated by Jeffrey Grossman and Christian Wiese

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For Lore Jonas, with infinite gratitude and admiration.



Hans Jonas, 1988. *Courtesy of Mrs. Lore Jonas.*

*When we met we had fled the German night
Which denied us life, liberty, worth, and right.
Life and limb we had saved from the monstrous rape—
My soul pined impatient for more than escape.*

*I had left with a vow and that vow I kept:
To return to my birthland never, except
As warrior of a conquering host
So that crime be avenged and not honor be lost.*

*I wagered my life in the bloody contest
And lived to see my foe in the dust,
His cities flattened—O victory won
With taste most bitter, for save could I none.*

*My mother murdered! An angel she'd be
If there were God's heaven for saints as she.
There isn't. There's ashes and windblow stench,
No consoling even of "Mine is revenge."*

*O powerless God! It is our soiled hands
That must rescue thy course and work for amends.
The furies join in—do not blame exultation
At vengeance half-sated by dire desolation.*

*That wild moment passed. The grief still sears,
Unhealing wound through all my years.
You have seen it break open at touch so slight
In tempests of sobbing—our children's fright.*

*Yes, children! To beget from your waiting womb
Was my vow, homeward bound from our people's tomb.
New life with its loudly shouted Yes—
The truest reply to the killer's craze.*

(From the poem "Vows," dedicated to his wife
by Hans Jonas in February 1988, in anticipation
of his eighty-fifth birthday)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first encounter with Hans Jonas took place while I was studying in Tübingen. When listening to his lecture on “The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice” in 1984 on the occasion of his receiving the Leopold-Lucas Prize, I was immediately fascinated by the profundity of his thought and the intensity of his personality. I remember long days of discussion with friends on his thought-provoking ideas on a post-Holocaust theology. Later on, when reading his *The Imperative of Responsibility*, I began to discover completely different, tremendously challenging and inspiring dimensions of his philosophical and ethical thinking. When I was offered an opportunity in 1998 to translate and edit Jonas’s book *The Gnostic Religion* into German, I was even more intrigued by the many facets of his work, and I started to think about the inner links that existed between the diverse aspects of his intellectual world. Therefore, when Lore Jonas asked me in 2002 whether I could imagine editing her husband’s memoirs, which had been recorded in German on thirty-six tapes during a conversation with Rachel Salamander in Munich in 1989, I was immediately enthusiastic about the opportunity to listen to his authentic voice and to learn more about the biographical context of his philosophy. While thoroughly editing the memoirs and transforming Jonas’s representation of his life and thought into a coherent narrative, his *Erinnerungen*, I became aware of the enormous significance that his experiences as a German Jew, a Zionist, and an émigré intellectual in Jerusalem, Montreal, and New York had for him. I began visiting archives and collecting material that would allow me to understand what increasingly appeared to me as a hitherto unexplored Jewish dimension of his biography and his philosophy that should be analyzed in more detail and in a comparative perspective to other Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century.

The origin of this first, tentative attempt to address the questions involved is owing to the support of many people to whom I would like to express my deepest appreciation. First, to Hans-Joachim Simm of the Insel Verlag, who suggested that I elaborate upon certain issues discussed only briefly in my epilogue to Jonas’s memoirs, and to Nadine Meyer who to my great pleasure spontaneously invited me to submit a manuscript for the Jüdische Verlag in 2003. Since then, many friends and colleagues suggested that this small book, even though it is still not

the comprehensive work on Jonas that I am planning, should be translated into English together with the memoirs in order to make the new material and the new approach to Jonas accessible to an international readership. I was especially interested in this, since Hans Jonas, while being well known in Germany, has not yet received the attention he deserves in the Anglophone world. I am especially indebted to Lawrence Vogel, Robert Seltzer, Steven Wasserstrom, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, Elliot R. Wolfson, and David N. Myers, who kept encouraging me to look for a publisher, and above all to Eugene Sheppard who, during a conference on Hans Jonas in Phoenix in November 2005, suggested that I approach Brandeis University Press. From this moment on, everything went very quickly, and I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Sylvia Fuks-Fried and Phyllis Deutsch for the extremely professional way in which they decided to take this book and Jonas's memoirs under contract and the kindness and patience with which they accompanied the process of revising and re-writing them. In the meantime, Jeffrey Grossman had undergone the quite difficult task of translating the German version, and I would like to thank him for his efforts to produce a readable text, despite my own long German sentences and the even more complex German language of Hans Jonas in his private letters. While refining the translation, I started to rethink many passages and some of my views—a process that resulted into an expanded and thoroughly revised version of the German original. I also took the opportunity to include interesting new material that is now available in the Jonas papers at Konstanz University, and I would like to thank the archivist, Brigitte Parakenings, for her kind support.

I owe special thanks to my wife Angela, not only because she—as always—patiently bore the intensity and crises of the writing process, but also for the many evenings that she spent listening to my excursions on and about Hans Jonas, while also challenging me to more precise formulations of my ideas. To our son Johannes I am thankful for the tolerance with which he accepted how, during a vacation together in San Francisco, I—contrary to my promise—devoted several evenings meant for him to some last revisions of the German book. The dedication to Lore Jonas is a sign of my honestly felt personal admiration and my appreciation for the great kindness and trust she showed me when offering me the opportunity to edit her late husband's memoirs. I hope and trust that I did not disappoint her expectations. It is a special pleasure to thank her for a great many things, not least for her willingness during my several visits to her in New Rochelle over the past years to

answer patiently the many questions I had, and for graciously providing me access to several precious letters and unpublished texts. It is an expression of her generosity and her interest in her husband's legacy that she donated the funds for the translation. And, finally, I will never forget a reading tour undertaken together with her and Rachel Salamander in Germany in May 2003, particularly our conversations during a train ride from Berlin to Weimar and Erfurt.

The poetic verses that open this book, which stem from a poem entitled "Vows," written by Hans Jonas on the occasion of his 85th birthday, full of personal memories of a rich, long life, are a beautiful expression of his own self-understanding. I chose to cite the verses devoted to his existential experiences during the dark years of the twentieth century, including those reflecting the hope that he put into his family—a living protest against the Nazi's murderous intentions. Lore Jonas knows, however, that this poem that was dedicated to her includes a few more opening verses devoted to their long love story—a dimension of his life, untold in this book, that is at least as important as the other biographical and intellectual aspects.

INTRODUCTION

“Philosopher and Jew”

In his *Erinnerungen*, his memoirs, which appeared in 2003, Hans Jonas tells of the deep sense of tension his friend Leo Strauss felt, in the 1930s, between his Jewishness and the practice of philosophy. Coming from an Orthodox family situated among rural Hessian Jews, it cost Strauss “great anguish” in his student days to tear himself away from the traditional education of his youth. Nor did it “come easily” to him “to turn philosophy into his guiding principle,” and to liberate himself from religious premises regarding the ultimate questions of God, the world, and existence:

This freedom, which is necessary to do philosophy and incompatible with belief in any specific religion or revelation, or in any God at all, this intellectual necessity to become an atheist in order to be capable of being a philosopher, tormented him for his entire life. It is true that this was the decision he made, but he could never free himself from the feeling that, in making it, he had committed an act whose correctness could never be definitively proved. That feeling plunged him time and again into a certain fundamental doubt as to whether the path to rational enlightenment, which is implied when negating firm principles of belief, corresponds to the truth and is beneficial for any human being. He suffered, as it were, from the necessity of being an atheist. This became visible for me through an experience I had during emigration. When I arrived in England in 1933, he was also there, and we subsequently saw each other often . . . On one autumn day—it must have been 1934—we went for a walk in Hyde Park. We walked side by side in silence for a while. Suddenly he turned to me and said: “I feel awful.” I said: “Me, too.” And why was this? It was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and we both weren’t in synagogue, but were taking a walk in Hyde Park. That was quite revealing—much more about him than about me, for in my case departure from my original belief had been much easier since my parents had actually already carried it out, and I had grown up in a climate where one thought freely about such matters. But in his case, it was something that tormented him. “I have committed something akin to a murder or broken an oath of loyalty or sinned against something.” This “I feel awful” came so clearly from the depths of his soul.¹

This passage is of some significance for the present book, which seeks to explore the Jewish dimensions of Hans Jonas's life and philosophy. Mirrored in the narrative of Leo Strauss, the passage gives a glimpse of Jonas's own philosophical self-understanding, which relies pointedly on the assumption that, for the sake of the freedom of rational thinking, a philosopher must not allow himself to be defined by his religious orientation or affiliations, but must, as a methodological principle, systematically leave them aside. Leo Strauss has generally been viewed primarily as a political philosopher, whereas his import as a Jewish thinker became known only relatively late—following above all the publication of his writings on Jewish philosophy and the crisis of modernity.² Unlike Hans Jonas, however, Strauss devoted a broad range of writings to Jewish religious philosophy and sought above all to allow the search for answers to modern Judaism's "theological-political crisis" to benefit from the thought of Maimonides, Spinoza, and Hermann Cohen. The assigning of part of his work to the field of "Jewish philosophy" or to the more diffuse area of "Jewish thought" derives particularly from the fact that Strauss, in his reflections on the relationship between Judaism and Western philosophy—in comparison to Jonas and many other contemporary Jewish intellectuals—focused with much stronger intensity on the Jewish religious sources, especially the Hebrew Bible, confronting these sources with modern historical experience and the legacy of philosophy. The fact that he was originally far more deeply rooted in Jewish religious tradition than Jonas might have played an important role here. Whether one wants to call Strauss a "Jewish philosopher" depends above all on where one stands on the controversial question, much discussed since the nineteenth century, of whether there is such a thing as "Jewish philosophy" at all, and how one would define it: Is it a specific academic discipline within the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Science of Judaism)? A special form of philosophizing within the sphere of Jewish tradition? Or the expression of religious-cultural identity of a philosopher adhering to Judaism?³

How difficult it is to answer this question even when considering intellectuals who have focused explicitly on "Jewish themes" in their thought is shown in the controversial judgment of the position taken by Emmanuel Lévinas, who himself sought to make a clear and consistent distinction, or even separation, between the "Jewish" and "universal" portions of his work. The philosophical texts are meant to stand wholly on their own: They should be comprehensible even to those with no familiarity with the Jewish tradition and do not derive from a Jewish-

religious world view. In that way, Lévinas guarded himself against the suggestion that, in referring to the Torah or the Talmud, he was practicing “theology,” while insisting that he remained committed to the demand of philosophy to work in terms of universals, and that his thought thus should be universally accessible and comprehensible. While Lévinas did not deny that there was a relationship between Judaism and philosophy, he characterized his Jewishness as the “preceding element” or “Other” of his philosophical thought. Recent discussions thus seek to grasp the Jewish dimension in his thought in differentiated terms, rather than merely to exclude it.⁴

To give another example of the problems involved in assessing the relation between Judaism and general philosophy in the work of “Jewish thinkers,” there is the case of Franz Rosenzweig. Widely regarded, by virtue of his monumental *The Star of Redemption*, as a Jewish religious philosopher *par excellence*, Rosenzweig is no less complicated a figure than either Strauss or Lévinas. Peter E. Gordon, for instance, rightly has emphasized that Rosenzweig can be ranged only with difficulty within the category of Jewish thought, since he himself “famously insisted that his philosophy was only incidentally Jewish.” He was “serious about his dedication to Judaism, but he was equally serious about his dedication to modern philosophy, and integrity forbade him from violating the imperatives of either commitment for the sake of the other.”⁵ From Gordon’s point of view, Rosenzweig’s philosophy, not only deeply rooted in Hegel, but strongly related to Heidegger, was far from being “a belated expression of Judaism’s essence . . . nor was it part of the ongoing process by which Judaism repeatedly intrudes upon new historical contexts; rather it was something imagined as Jewish, but by an imagination that was itself found in the matrix of German philosophy.”⁶

These few examples sufficiently suggest the tensions and complexities involved when approaching the work of modern philosophers of a Jewish descent or thinkers personally affiliated with Judaism, or even those who in their philosophies focused on the interpretation of Jewish tradition. It is particularly necessary to be aware of the “delicate negotiations between Judaism and modern European thought” in their work and to be constantly aware of the dangers inherent in any inclination to conceive Jewish intellectuals “as if they belonged to a distinctive canon.”⁷ We will see that Hans Jonas, the philosopher to whom this study is devoted, feared exactly this tendency and vigorously rejected any attempt to reduce his work to such a “particularistic” perspective. In any case, rather than focusing on narrow definitions of a “Jewish philosophy” and

the identification of “Jewish philosophers,” it would seem more productive to explore the traces of Jewish thought in the philosophical concepts of the twentieth century or to turn to the “current philosophical relevance” of Jewish traditions, as one finds in more recent publications.⁸ In a secular age that has given rise to completely different concepts of Jewish identity—religious and non-religious—it is difficult and daring enough to attempt to determine just what “Jewish thought” is or ought to be.

Regardless of how one views the relationship between Judaism and philosophy in the case of Leo Strauss, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Franz Rosenzweig, or how one chooses to define what “Jewish philosophy” or “Jewish thought” might be, Hans Jonas’s philosophical works and his self-understanding, which must be taken seriously when defining his relation to Judaism, speak a distinct language. His broad-ranging work is dedicated neither to the religious-philosophical interpretation of Judaism as a religious entity in general nor determined by Jewish themes and motifs with the same intensity that one finds in the work of other intellectuals mentioned here. It is thus hardly possible to distinguish in the work of Jonas between a general philosophical portion of his writings and an equally relevant “Jewish” portion. In Europe and the United States as well as in many other parts of the world, including Asia, he is known above all for his groundbreaking book, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (1984; the original German version was published in 1979 under the title *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Technik für die technologische Zivilisation*). The fact that parts of this book were written in Israel and in the German language, at a time when Jonas had long chosen to live in the United States and to write in English, points less to any Jewish accent in this ethical approach than to the ironies and paradoxical circumstances in the life of a German-Jewish émigré scholar.⁹ His other monographs and essays deal with general religious-historical, philosophical, and ethical questions, whereas texts explicitly addressing themes of Jewish history, tradition, or religious philosophy are rather marginal in his published works—the one exception being his 1968 essay “The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice” (first published in German in 1984 under the title “Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz: Eine jüdische Stimme”), including the protracted process through which it emerged. Jonas rightly would have denied being a “Jewish philosopher,” and, admittedly, not only because he feared—like Lévinas—that such a label would situate his philosophy and the

ethics he formulated for a global technological civilization in a particularistic Jewish canon, thus limiting its persuasive power as a universal philosophical approach. Rather, his philosophical ethos demanded that reason take unconditional precedence over any kind of personal religious ties. He was wholly convinced that, in an age divested of theology and religious belief, his most important concern—promoting the necessity of humankind’s collective responsibility for the future of endangered life on this planet—be founded in compelling and universal terms, without reference to religious or theological categories, lest it appeared as dogmatic or irrelevant.

How Jonas defined the relationship between religion and philosophy can be seen in his essay on “Jewish and Christian Elements in Philosophy: Their Share in the Emergence of the Modern Mind,” where he wrestles with the question to what degree the Jewish-Christian lore can be considered a part of the philosophical tradition. The Jewish and Christian traditions (both separately and in the hyphenated form that is mainly Christian in outlook but deeply informed by Jewish elements) are “on their own testimony . . . based on revelation, while philosophy is based on reason.” If that is the case, “can religion enter philosophy without disrupting it or forsaking itself?” What is exciting here is that while Jonas indeed concludes that “Christian philosophy” or “Jewish philosophy” must stand conceptually opposed to rational philosophy, because of the distinction between revealed truth and rational knowledge, he nonetheless proceeds by assuming a dialectical interaction between the two that cannot be reduced to an illegitimate interference of religion with philosophy:

Since philosophy is the work of living men, the humanity of the philosopher, insofar as it partakes in a common heritage of faith, asserts itself in his philosophizing; as a result, certain ideas, motifs, and choices of revealed religion pass over, open or concealed, into the patrimony of philosophy itself and—eventually dissociated from their origin in revelation and its authority—become genuine parts of the modified philosophical landscape . . . What I am speaking of is not the insinuation of extraneous ideas into philosophy through the all-too-human psychology of the philosopher. I am speaking of the legitimate continuation, in the medium of philosophy, of existential insights and emphases whose original locus was the world of faith, but whose validity and vitality extend beyond the reaches of faith. Some basic concept of man and world speaks through the Word of God and hence informs the understanding of man as a general premise that will underly even his worldly philosophizing.

And it will be at home there, by rights and not by stealth; it may even come fully into its own there . . . In this sense of an assimilation which may be transforming enough to make us speak of a secularization of originally religious thought, one can meaningfully look for Jewish or Christian elements in a philosophy that need not therefore be a Jewish or a Christian philosophy, or indeed a religious philosophy at all.¹⁰

It is thus legitimate from this point of view to search for underlying Jewish elements within a philosophical scheme, without reducing it to a “Jewish philosophy” or insinuating its religious character. This book, too, is based on that premise. As clearly as Jonas’s statements are relying on the assumption of the autonomy of philosophy, they also unambiguously show that he granted the Jewish tradition (and, mediated through it, the Christian tradition as well) great importance for the legacy of modern Western thought and envisioned a fruitful encounter between “Athens and Jerusalem” that was not merely of historical value. To what degree this admission, specified by the concept of a secularization of the religious elements involved, informed specifically the reception of certain aspects of Jewish tradition in Jonas’s work will be discussed, particularly with respect to his philosophical ethics. What in any event emerges from his reflections on the relationship of Judaism, Christianity, and philosophy is that, in principle—and here he follows the arguments of Jewish intellectuals since the Enlightenment and Haskalah—he viewed Jewish expressions of faith as far more compatible with reason than those of Christianity. According to Jonas, it is true that Jewish teachings entered the sphere of Western philosophy “in the Christian embrace”; but, from his point of view, precisely their most important philosophical legacy—the idea of creation and the notion that man was created in God’s image (the “Jewish half” of Christianity)—occupy a position much closer to reason than, for instance, the Christian dogma of incarnation. The esoteric character of specifically Christian doctrines has led to a greater tension between reason and faith than the “Jewish half” of revelation had called for—and Jonas emphasizes “the seemingly paradoxical finding that in a Christian intellectual universe it was the Jewish component which had the major philosophical impact.”¹¹ It will be shown in this book that the concept of creation, with its anthropological implications, indeed represents in Jonas’s work the vanishing point at which the lines of his Jewish religious convictions and his philosophical arguments come into contact.

Beyond specific Jewish teachings, important questions are to what degree Jonas's own Jewishness, his experience as a German-Jewish emigrant in the twentieth century, and his conception of Judaism played any role in his philosophical thinking. These are difficult questions, given the complex definitions of Judaism and Jewishness in modernity, where emancipation, acculturation, secularization, and the emergence of Zionism have produced a variety of Jewish "identities"—religious, cultural, ethnic—that cannot be easily ascribed. We will see that in terms of Jonas's biography, the Jewish dimension is quite clear: He appears as a post-assimilated Zionist, deeply committed to Jewish physical, spiritual, and cultural survival, and profoundly scarred and haunted by the Holocaust. No biographical approach can ignore the fact that he spoke of himself as "one who had gone through the horrors of the thirties and forties and had to live the rest of his days under the shadow of Auschwitz," and each analysis of his intellectual path has to do justice to the impact of this biographical experience on his philosophy.¹² In terms of the Jewish dimension of his thought, however, things are more complex. While Jonas, to a certain extent, can be counted—as Richard Wolin has done—among the "non-Jewish Jews who thought of themselves as proverbial 'Germans of Jewish origin'" like Hannah Arendt and so many others, this book will try to give this characterization an even more paradoxical turn, describing him as a "profoundly Jewish non-Jewish Jew."¹³ His intellectual path under the impact of the events of his time has been interpreted as his "exodus from German Existentialism to Post-Holocaust Theology," and we will see, while following this path, that there is much truth in this description, despite all the complex elements not mentioned in it.¹⁴

But how did Jonas himself define his relation to Judaism? It was in a conversation with Herlinde Koelbl, whose questions inspired his deeply revealing reflections on his German-Jewish biography and his rootedness in Judaism, that Jonas described most impressively the intense, ambiguous interaction between Jewish identity and his search for universal validity as a historian of religion and philosopher. In this interview, Jonas explained—in a language recalling liberal interpretations of the "essence" of Judaism as formulated at the beginning of the twentieth century, for instance, by Leo Baeck or Hermann Cohen, for example—that, despite a certain distance from traditional forms of Jewish identity, he had "maintained an affirmative relationship . . . to the essential content of Jewish tradition" and felt himself especially drawn to the "biblical word." "The one God, the chosenness of Israel, the ethos of

the prophets: Yes! But of course no Orthodox rabbi can view this ‘yes’ as sufficiently Jewish.” Even if he “had ultimately adopted a philosophical position of atheism,” which he denied, Jonas understood the legacy of Judaism, which had for “thousands of years” been “handed down from generation to generation with so much tenacity and suffering,” as personally and intellectually binding:

That is a community of fate, an affiliation which cannot be arbitrarily dissolved. One may not allow the chains to be torn off. There is indeed something special about the Jews. It is surely a puzzling phenomenon that we exist and introduced monotheism into the world, that we were its witnesses and its bearers and have continued to work at it—our significant minds and also the insignificant ones. No single generation has the right to simply allow such a chain to be torn off. No, not a one.¹⁵

To assess the meaning that Jonas’s confession of loyalty “to this ancient community with its great and terrible history and its intellectual legacy” has for his ethical philosophy—a confession in which echoes of his lifelong engagement with the traumatic experience of the Holocaust can be heard—one must attend to his concurrent assertion that, according to his deepest conviction, “something” remained “in permanent tension with all of that”—“and that is philosophy.”¹⁶

The philosopher must perform his actual task, that of thinking, wholly independent of such ties and inherited assumptions. He is obligated solely to thinking. In terms of method, philosophy must be “atheistic.” That does not mean dogmatically asserting “there is no God.” But it means not allowing one’s views to be dictated by matters of faith. To be a philosopher and Jew at one and the same time—this implies a certain tension. There is no question about that. Now, my chosen profession really was philosophical reflection, which means that one cannot permit anything to stand which is not validated by the means of knowledge provided by philosophy itself.¹⁷

This clear distinction between Jewish identity and philosophical work certainly must be taken seriously—the accent is clearly on *Athens* and not Jerusalem. The confession of a “methodological atheism,” by which Jonas sought to counter the suspicion that he permitted his philosophical inclination “to a metaphysics with rather theistic assumptions” to be “furtively informed” by his “Jewish presuppositions,” seems at first glance to confirm Vittorio Hösle’s view that Jonas only “appended” a

(Jewish-) theological dimension to his ethical theory of responsibility in a later phase of his work.¹⁸ In this case it would be worth asking how this “appending” came about, what motivated it, and what function and meaning it has for Jonas’s entire oeuvre. The philosopher’s own testimony, however, seems to point to a far more complex relationship between the philosophical and the Jewish component in Hans Jonas’s thought, one that cannot simply be defined chronologically in terms of a succession of subsequent phases of his work, but which rather overdetermines his entire work. It is more than revealing that Jonas speaks of an apparently constant “tension” between the two dimensions without dissolving it, simply embracing a philosophy of reason and hence wholly denying the relevance of his being Jewish. Precisely the idea of a “tension” that points to different poles of his identity and thought, and the phrase “philosopher and Jew *at one and the same time*” (*zusammen Philosoph und Jude*), which suggests precisely not a dichotomy, but rather a differentiated interplay between both poles, offers a point of entry for my attempt to trace the Jewish dimension in his life and his work without thereby classifying him as a “Jewish philosopher.” The latter certainly would force him into a trajectory that he would not have recognized as his own, but ignoring the strong impact of the Jewish dimension would be equally inappropriate. It seems, best, therefore, to speak of a *polarity* of both elements, even if Jonas undoubtedly laid different emphasis on each pole and—as implied by the order “philosopher and Jew at one and the same time”—gave precedence to philosophy.¹⁹

Acknowledging these limitations, the argument of this book is that one cannot ignore the Jewish “dimension” without missing a significant share of Jonas’s own biographical experience and philosophical intentions. This book will first explore, on the basis of new and for the most part unknown materials, some of the exciting facets of Hans Jonas’s life, such as his affirmation in youth of Zionism, his decision to emigrate to Palestine, and his enlistment as a soldier in the British army’s Jewish Brigade to join the fight against Nazi Germany. Jonas himself stressed how tightly “woven” the personal and the philosophical dimensions were in his life.²⁰ The development and intellectual aims of his philosophy, with its breaks and yet distinct continuity (which can be seen in the central motif of human responsibility for the shaping and preservation of a world understood as “creation”), cannot, in essence, be understood without considering the German-Jewish background of Jonas’s life, his emigration, his experience during the war as well as his lifelong engagement with the “breach of civilization” marked by

the Holocaust. In order to identify and evaluate the Jewish dimension of his thought and the influence of contemporary history on his philosophy, we must first give a precise account of his youth and his student days during the Weimar Republic as well as his experience of the Nazi regime and the Second World War. It is undoubtedly here that we will find the decisive roots of the multifaceted oeuvre that made Hans Jonas one of the outstanding thinkers of the past century—and I should add—one of its important “Jewish” intellectuals. Pierre Bouretz, in his recent book, *Témoins du future*, rightly counts Jonas among such diverse (in terms of their philosophy as well as their relation to Judaism) figures as Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, Ernst Bloch, Leo Strauss, and Emmanuel Lévinas.²¹

Additionally, this essay seeks to shed light on Jonas’s friendships and debates with Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt. It is precisely these passionate debates that informed Jonas’s relationship to these two intellectuals of German-Jewish descent—debates that endured over decades, spanning the sharp breaks in his life that led Jonas from Germany via Palestine to Canada and finally to the New School for Social Research in New York—that reveal how intensively he reflected, even in the American Diaspora, on his “Jewish existence” and on contemporary social, political, and religious questions related to his Jewishness after the catastrophe of the Nazi genocide. The intense debates that Jonas conducted with his friends touched from time to time on questions of Jewish history and the study of the Jewish past and present, but above all they were marked by such sensitive subjects as the interpretation of Zionism and the memory of the Holocaust. In each case, the issues concerned the central challenges confronting Jewish existence in the twentieth century. It is neither possible to sever these issues from Jonas’s work nor to postulate an immediate influence of Jonas’s Jewish biography on his philosophy. The biographical dimension can serve only as an illuminating context for his philosophical ideas; this, however, will depend ultimately on whether the material presented here will succeed in showing that existential experiences relating to his fate as a Jew indeed led Jonas to adopt a specific position toward philosophical questions. Or, to put it differently: can it be shown that these experiences inspired themes that occupied him throughout his life, placing them in a clear, if not always explicit, relationship to the biographical sphere?

Thus in terms of the scholarship on Jonas, the newness of my ap-

proach is not limited to presenting aspects of Jonas's life rarely addressed up to now. Rather, it consists in the way those aspects of his life are interpreted in terms of their intellectual influence, and still further, in the attempt to define their relationship to the overtly recognizable influences of Jewish tradition in his religious-historical and philosophical work. The way Jonas understood the relation between Judaism, ancient Gnosticism, and modern existentialism plays an eminent role in this context, as does the influence of biblical ideas of creation and elements of Jewish mysticism on his thought. With regard to the philosophical impact of such religious elements, we must constantly bear in mind that Jonas, in keeping with his definition of rational philosophy, viewed theological speculation as a "luxury of reason": It will be shown that such speculations, along with the mythical language they involved, enabled him to formulate questions that reason finds necessary to ask, but ultimately can answer only with "conjectures" (*Vermutungen*), hoping in the best case that the insights they expressed about the dimension of the transcendent were compatible with that which also could be recognized, by pure reason, on the basis of the immanent evidence of nature.

However, as we shall see, Jonas did not refrain from making use of this "luxury" to express aspects of his philosophy and ethics, which were less visible and explicit elsewhere in his work. The path of his thought led him from the history of religion in antiquity and German existentialist philosophy through an anti-existentialist ontology of the organic to the ethics of ecological responsibility in the age of technology, and eventually to an interpretation of the *conditio humana*, and even the *conditio divina* after Auschwitz. A deeply influential, sometimes more and sometimes less subterranean theme running through all stages of Jonas's work, this book argues, is his unrelenting intellectual struggle with the question of what constitutes the essence of human and natural existence in a world conceived of as "creation" and as the object of human responsibility—a responsibility demanded by the "sanctity of life," regardless of whether one understands it in a religious or secularized sense. This fundamental aspect of his philosophy then ultimately raises the question of God. The question of God, however, must, for Jonas, be accounted for in the face of the modern undermining of all metaphysics and in the face of Auschwitz, which seems to relegate all reflection on the divine to the realm of the ineffable and the inconceivable. It is true that Jonas did with some justification emphasize the ruptures between his activity as an historian of religion and his philosophy

after 1945.²² However, this does not preclude us from emphasizing to a degree greater than has been done previously on the role that his early studies of the Gnostic views of existence, the world, and God play in the development of his later work. What emerges as one of the *leitmotifs* of his philosophy is his turn against all nihilistic negation of the world, all escapism. This *leitmotif* comes together with his intellectual struggle to “oppose Gnostic thought as the fundamental signature of the era.”²³ The claim, made in the third chapter of this book, that one can find a deep inner coherence in Jonas’s thought between his interpretation of Gnosticism, his philosophy of life, his ethos of responsibility, and his search for a spiritually and rationally acceptable concept of God after Auschwitz rests on the assumption that more than anything else, it was the traumatic experiences of the twentieth century that left their mark on Jonas. They instilled in him the imperative to present as a diagnosis the radical endangerment of life in the earth’s ecosystem and to propose and philosophically ground a new, universally plausible system of ethics as the answer to the unprecedented challenges of the present. The language of religion (and the language of Judaism) that Jonas drew upon in his theologically inspired writings, and that provided the metaphors by which he invested his ethical philosophy with utmost urgency did not appear only late in life. On the contrary, they constitute an underlying element of his “secular” philosophical arguments, while nonetheless remaining deeply informed by his rational ethos. Such images, myths, and religious concepts, it will be shown, are indebted to that pole of his thought whose significance—in varying degrees of intensity—rested upon Jonas’s continual bond with Judaism and with the ethical substance of the Jewish tradition, which had an authority for him that transcends simple notions of secularization.

This book, which arose as part of my work on the edition of Jonas’s intriguing memoirs (which constitute, by the way, a wonderful example of *Exilliteratur*), cannot claim to be more than a tentative essay, albeit one that is extensive in its elaboration. It seeks justification from Theodor W. Adorno’s definition of the essay as a genre intrinsically characterized as an experimental fragment alluding to the absent “totality” of the intended comprehensive interpretation, but admittedly remains something less than a full-fledged study on all the questions involved.²⁴ As commentary on Jonas’s memoirs, one based on a wealth of previously unknown sources, this biographical-philosophical essay does not endeavor to provide a comprehensive interpretation of all the facets of his work. Nor is it the intellectual biography of Hans Jonas

in the context of twentieth-century Jewish thought that the author intends to write in the future. It is, as it were, a first approach, a modest attempt to sift through the evidence in order to gain an impression of the questions that still need to be answered, to establish the contextualization necessary to understand the significance of his work for contemporary Jewish thought and to analyze critically his philosophy from the perspective of the larger discourse on the kinds of existential questions with which Jonas struggled. The book is necessarily fragmentary, sometimes impressionistic, but, it is hoped, never superficial. Despite its requisite modesty, this book aims at changing the way that Jonas has been understood thus far by placing him within a broader context of Jewish thought, pursuing previously unexplored dimensions of his wide-ranging, interdisciplinary philosophy, tracing unknown and initiating fictitious dialogues between Jonas and other Jewish intellectuals of his time. Following Jonas's own reflections on the polarity in his thought between philosophical ethos on the one hand and Jewish identity on the other, this essay hopes to add a new perspective to what has become a very diverse, multidimensional history of Jonas's reception. Fully cognizant of the different ways in which Jonas's philosophy can be interpreted, this book, written by a scholar of Judaism, chooses a one-sided, experimental approach with the aim of unearthing and illuminating a generally overlooked—and I would claim crucial—dimension to his thought.

revoking Messianism, by postponing that entire redemption into the afterlife. And about that nothing can be said.⁶¹

Jonas's antimessianic and anti-utopian attitude hinges above all on his strong emphasis on the idea of a value inherent in life itself—in religious-philosophical terms: the goodness of the creation. This value motivates the “ought-to-be” of *Dasein*, the categorical imperative for preserving life, and it replaces the hope for a divine intervention, the utopian striving for an overcoming of the present imperfection of life with the sober, realistic affirmation of the present. This accent on the fundamental “goodness” of life, despite its radical mortality and constant endangerment, weaves a constant thread through all of Jonas's essays. Upon receiving the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 1987, he confronted his audience in his lecture, “Technik, Freiheit und Pflicht” (“Technology, Freedom, and Duty”), with the question of why there should be life on earth and why humankind should exist. In his attempt at an answer, Jonas asserted—“against Schopenhauer, Buddha, Gnostics, and nihilists”—that “the diversity of life that emerged in the infinite effort of becoming [*Werdemühe*] is to be seen as a good thing or a ‘value in itself’ and that the freedom of Man ultimately arising from that [effort] is the pinnacle of this risk for value [*Wertwagnis*].”⁶²

This strong accent on the preservation of the threatened project of life on earth seems to leave little space for messianic perfection or for that significant element of Jewish tradition that emphasizes “suffering from the unredeemed state of the world”; the accent is not on the act of redemption, but on that of creation, and instead of participating in the disastrous “euphoria of the Faustian dream,” Jonas argued, humanity should awaken “into the cold light of day of fear.”⁶³ In the context of Jewish thought, it might be asked whether Jonas's anxiety about the conditions of a future humanity might lead to a tendency to neglect “our ethical relationship with our contemporaries,” and whether Bloch's “melody of hope” or Lévinas's concern with the suffering of the specific individual could not be woven into his thought.⁶⁴

Apart from Jonas's accent on the preservation of life versus messianic-utopian dreams, another dimension turns out to be of crucial importance for the relationship between philosophy and Judaism in his work. In his *Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas raised the question of the “ethical vacuum” produced by modern science and the way it neutralized the value of life, to the extent that now “we shiver in the nakedness of a nihilism in which near-omnipotence is paired with near-emptiness.”

In this context, he indicated that it appeared to him to be questionable, “whether, without restoring the category of the sacred, the category most thoroughly destroyed by the scientific enlightenment, we can have an ethics able to cope with the extreme powers which we possess today.” On the other hand, he consciously sought to justify his ethics of the future without recourse to any theological argumentation, since he was aware of the fact that increasing secularism would undermine seriously any ethical approach based on religious categories. “However, religion in eclipse cannot relieve ethics of its task; and while of faith it can be said that as a moving force it either is there or is not, of ethics it is true to say that it must be there.”⁶⁵ There is much to support the idea that in the *Imperative of Responsibility* Jonas endeavored to develop a universally plausible ethics for a global secular society and to produce a rational “ultimate justification” of the obligation to responsibility—especially since he was acutely aware of the dwindling trust in the twentieth century in self-evidence and ethical relevance of religion. He wanted to avoid the risk of his project being branded a “Jewish ethics” and thus having its breadth of influence impaired. At the same time, it was also part of his philosophical ethos not to withdraw to a position that would adopt the cloak of unassailability, since the position was indebted to a religious commitment. Further, Jonas’s approach to ethics appears to be part of his struggle against the temptation of nihilism: If he denied the existence of a benevolent God whose creatures human beings are, the nihilist could observe the self-destruction of the human species with indifference or fatalism. In an unpublished lecture on the subject, “How can we justify our duty to posterity and the Earth independently of belief,” Jonas outlines how this position becomes conceivable:

But someone can come along and say that man, this creature with such a dubious track record, which now even endangers everything else [that exists], is not worth preserving. Meanwhile the rest of Nature, which until now has brought forth its bounty without regard to choice or value and has repeatedly left vast swathes of it to fall by the wayside in order to make way for new forms, will outlive humans, too, along with the devastation they have wreaked, and in its own time (of which it has a great deal) it shall fill in the gaps with new creatures who are just as blind and indifferent.⁶⁶

However, Jonas disputed the idea that only the belief that nature and humanity had been created by God and that man had been appointed

the guardian and custodian of creation could justify the imperative of responsibility. For him, it is possible to separate “the question of the ought-to-be [*Seinsollen*] of a world”

from any hypothesis about its authorship, with the assumption that even for a divine creator, such an ought-to-be was, according to the concept of the Good, the reason for his creating: he wanted it because he thought that it should be. Yes, it can be asserted that the perception of value in the world is one of the motives for concluding that there was a divine author and not, conversely, that the anticipation of the author is the reason to assign value to his creation. Our argument is thus not that metaphysics had to take on a role only with the dwindling of belief, but that this duty always belonged to it, and it alone—under the conditions of belief as well as of unbelief, whose alternative does not affect the *nature* of the task at all.⁶⁷

From Jonas’s point of view, the existence of God is thus not decisive for ethics, since a “commanding will” emanates also “from the immanent claim that there is something good-in-itself to its reality.”⁶⁸ Thus the ontology of nature and the commandment that follows from it—that is, that humans limit themselves—can be justified alone on the basis of reason and insight into the inherent value of life. Against this background, Jonas hoped to establish a nonreligious foundation for the “sanctity of life,” which would be convincing for the secular world, so that in his reflections on the risks of biogenetics, he calls for human-kind to learn once more “fear and trembling . . . and, even without God, awe in the face of the sacred.”⁶⁹

However, in spite of this secularization of the concept of the “sanctity of life,” there is much evidence that the question of God and the anthropological and ethical issues which that question gives rise to concerned the philosopher intensively at least from the 1960s on. Even before his public expressions on the religious implications of the Holocaust, Jonas developed perspectives of his ethical thinking with recourse to elements of Jewish tradition. The motif of the “createdness” (*Geschöpflichkeit*) of all life, which holds within it the call to respect the integrity, freedom, and dignity of all life, played a decisive role here. The theological reference to the creation and the “sanctity of life” does not represent an afterthought that appears only at a later stage in his work, but was present from the beginning. However, Jonas evidently de-emphasized this theological component in the course of presenting his model of an autonomous ethics for the future, in order not to en-

danger its universal plausibility. To put it another way: Jonas’s metaphysics offers a nontheological interpretation—based on the premise of an inner teleology of evolution—of the idea of creation in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In secularizing the concept of creation, Jonas proceeds from the premise of an inner teleology of evolution that imposes irrefutable values on any moral being. If this assumption is correct, then we are justified in offering an interpretation that give more weight to both the religious dimension and the role of Jewish tradition in Jonas’s ethical thinking than has been done thus far.⁷⁰

The correspondence, however aporetic, between rational philosophy and Jewish elements in Jonas’s ethics can be seen most distinctively in his use of the concept of man as created in the “image of God.” In a response to *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas’s Jerusalem friend Ernst Simon, who considered it a “superbly written” book, wondered about Jonas’s “untroubled use of many religious formulations, e.g. divine image [*göttliches Ebenbild*],” which, Simon felt, contradicted his programmatic nonreligious approach.⁷¹ In his response, Jonas conceded that a certain tension was inherent in his “symbolic” use of religious terms in his ethics, but pleaded for preserving the relevant philosophical meaning of the legacy of religious language while secularizing such concepts:

Finally, regarding your question about the use of religious formulations, e.g., “image.” That I, for my part, am a believer, may explain this inclination, 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 and from which an inalienable content can be salvaged into the post-religious perspective. For these, the biblical forms or images, provided they are still familiar, can serve as symbolic shorthand, and *imago Dei* is such a symbol. I can, of course, be reproached from both sides—*that I want to have the best of both worlds* [English and emphasis in the original, C.W.] and that I avoid the Either/Or [problem]. Be that as it may. As an anti-radical, I don’t believe in the Either/Or anyway.⁷²

By confessing, in this private letter, to be a “believer” with a personal inclination to use theological language, and at the same time attributing to philosophy the role of “secularizing” that language for the sake of intellectual honesty, Jonas clearly expresses the characteristic polarity of Athens and Jerusalem in his thinking: While the accent is on the

“post-religious perspective” that alone, in his eyes, guarantees philosophical plausibility, the potential loss of the language of religious tradition in a secular world seems to signify not merely an unfortunate but a dramatic development with fateful consequences for human self-understanding in modern society. Insisting on the necessity of embracing “the best of both worlds,” Jonas situates his own ethical approach within the forcefield of an ongoing debate about strongly contested fundamental questions in moral philosophy and Jewish as well as Christian thought.⁷³ Can or should contemporary discourse on ethical values be dissociated completely from religion? Does the abandonment of the principle of heteronomy to the transcendent, of obedience to something outside of oneself, inevitably lead to an ethical vacuum? Or is it possible—and necessary—for modern ethics to be secular, immanent, and autonomous? As we have seen, Jonas affirms the latter, without being willing to dismiss the “inalienable content” of religious metaphors. Instead, he seeks to rescue these metaphors, employing them as a “symbolic shorthand” for the existence of a “sacred” dimension of life, which can make a compelling case for an ethics of responsibility even without anchoring it in the notion of transcendence or in any “positive religion,” that is, Judaism or Christianity.⁷⁴ As in the case of Lévinas, there is a conspicuous tension between the desire, on the one hand, to thoroughly secularize ethics and the employment, on the other, of a highly charged religious language—a simultaneous saying and unsaying of the religious.⁷⁵ The question is whether this procedure is, in Jonas’s case, just a rhetorical figure, a symbolical use of religious metaphors aiming at enacting the secularization, while limiting the loss that secularization entails (this is how it appears so far), or whether still another layer is concealed, as it were, behind the “methodological atheism” implied in this metaphorical use of language, a layer that would suggest a stronger impact of the Jewish tradition on Jonas’s thought.

In this respect, the best way to illuminate the dialectical manner in which Jonas attempted to combine “the best of both worlds” is to analyze those texts in which he addressed specifically Jewish audiences and to ask both for the image of Judaism they convey and for the role that Jonas ascribes to Jewish tradition. The basis for this analysis is provided by his essay on “Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective,” published in 1968, as well as Jonas’s lecture on “Science and Ethics,” delivered on 30 April 1967 at the Free Synagogue of Mount Vernon, New York.⁷⁶ Jonas sets out from a fundamental critique of “belief” in a pseudo-scientific picture of the world and of man, based on a denial

of the idea of the createdness of the world. With the disenchantment of the world produced by modern science that leaves no room for awe before the cosmic mystery, and by a philosophy devoid of the insight into the inherent value of life (as expressed in the biblical “And God saw everything which He made, and, behold, it was very good”), a metaphysical vacuum has arisen—a vacuum against which modern philosophical ethics—particularly that of Heidegger—has nothing to offer. In the modern era, the position once occupied by the Torah’s teaching of a transcendent cause of the world—teachings that called on humankind to assume responsibility—has now been usurped by ethical relativism and indifference.

Above all, the denial of the divine origin of man, as expressed in the notion of his being created in the “image of God,” including the ethical obligation it implies—“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2)—leads, in Jonas’s view, to the situation where modern man, divested of his transcendent dignity, is torn between grandeur and misery, hopelessly at the mercy of the tension between the unrestrained power of his forces and a fundamental lack of ethical orientation. At the same time, man finds himself exposed to an unprotected existence in a morally indifferent cosmos, caught, as it were, in a radicalized Gnostic-nihilistic despair about the world. The intrinsic connection between the wretchedness of a humankind that has lost all traces of awe before nature and a technological power that gives humans the sense of walking in God’s footsteps, represents the most important philosophical challenge of the present day, and Judaism, Jonas maintains, cannot afford to remain silent in the face of it: “Surely, Judaism must take a stand here, and in taking it must not be afraid to challenge some of the cherished beliefs of modernity.” Even if the psychological atmosphere created by modern science is peculiarly unfavorable to the transcendent dimension expressed in the language of Jewish traditions and religious images, “some equivalent of their meaning, however remote from the literalness of their statement, must be preserved if we are still to be Jews and, beyond that special concern of ours, if there is still to be an answer to the moral quest of man.”

This is, as Jonas emphasizes, no plea for the truth of Judaism or specific elements of its tradition. “Rather, *if* we are Jews—and a corresponding question Muslims and Christians must ask themselves—what counsel can we take from the perennial Jewish stance in the pressing dilemma of our time?”⁷⁷ The main role that Jonas assigns to Judaism is that of objecting to the “arrogance which blinds to past wisdom,” of

embracing instead an attitude of humility that would temper modern humankind's presumptuousness and "make us go slow on discarding old taboos, on brushing aside in our projects the sacrosanctity of certain domains hitherto surrounded by a sense of mystery, awe and shame."⁷⁸ It was legitimate, not to say necessary, from his point of view, for Jews to turn to their own religious inheritance, contradict purely scientific explanations of the world, and self-confidently affirm the mythical concept according to which the imperfect, mortal human being was created "in God's image" and nature was not simply the object of his will.

When reading this text, one gains the impression that Jonas, very much in accord with his theoretical reflections on the foundations of his ethics of responsibility, is engaged in a symbolic use of Jewish language, trying to convince his Jewish audience of the moral relevance of parts of the Jewish tradition. Apart from focusing entirely on the concept of creation and its anthropological implications ("image of God"), Jonas even seems, at the first glance, to reduce Judaism's role here to that of a wisdom of modesty, humility, self-restraint, and awe (a crucial piece of wisdom, however, for the survival of life on Earth), reducing it as well to a metaphorical reminder of or supporting argument for an important insight provided by his own philosophy, that is, by pure reason. Yet there seems to be a surplus in the way that Jonas addresses his audience that is not yet fully grasped by such an interpretation—a surplus revealing a more profound feeling of being bound by Jewish tradition as well as a sense of transcendence. It is more than human wisdom in the guise of religious symbols that Jonas perceives in Judaism; rather, he also reflects upon aspects of faith, authority, and covenantal responsibility: "Attention to our tradition," he points out, "is a Jewish prescription, directing us, not only to the human wisdom we can pick up there, but also to the voice of revelation we may hear through it."⁷⁹ This is no contradiction to Jonas's emphasis on reason, since for him, as we will see when discussing his "theological" writings, the human organ for revelation is reason. What is truly very interesting, though, is that Jonas points to a dimension of Judaism, rooted in a covenantal communication, however vague, with God that clearly transcends the pure aspect of reason, reaching beyond to that of belief. In explaining the relevance of the concept of the "image of God," Jonas says in his unpublished talk in Mount Vernon:

It is here that Judaism retains its authority. 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. It is obvious to any thoughtful observer of the scientific truths that they can give us only a segment, a part, a certain aspect of reality, and if we define knowledge according to the scientific criteria, then indeed in those terms there is no knowledge of God, there is no knowledge of the very fact of duty or obligation, etc. But this is a concept of knowledge that fits the particular purposes of science and is not the kind of knowledge of God of which the Bible speaks, one in which the inner voice of man, the self-evidence of man and the voice that reaches him is listened to, and gives a different but compelling kind of testimony. 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. You see, one characteristic of the modern spirit and one of the factors operative in the ethical predicament of modern man is the extreme cockiness of those who think that with science they not only now know everything that is to be known or at least are in a good way of getting to know everything they need to know, but this goes together with another self-confidence, namely [that] we are cleverer than our forebears. . . . We are surely more informed than our forebears who stood helpless before many of the problems of nature which we now are easily able to deal with. But as regards to wisdom which asks what use we make of these powers, . . . in regard to that we are by no means superior to our forbears. Again not because they were by nature or in their own natural endowment superior to us, but because they listened to something else; 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 sense of reverence and awe towards the ultimate essence of ourselves, so it can help us to 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 any more 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.⁸⁰

It might not be a coincidence that it is here, in the context of a lecture given to a Jewish audience, apparently to a Reform congregation, that Jonas explicitly refers to the relevance and authority of that “long dialogue” between two partners of a covenant, invoking a personal God

whose “voice” speaks through tradition. This is more than just rhetoric, even more than a metaphorical use of language—rather, it reveals a personal “confession,” otherwise absent in his philosophical work, to a dimension of Judaism that cannot be interpreted simply as a “symbolic shorthand” for a secular ethics of reverence for life. In any case, this singular reference to divine authority lends a strong sense of urgency to the practical consequences that Jonas derives from it for an area of modern technology that troubled him most during these years—namely genetic engineering, which, from his point of view, threatened to change irreversibly the “face or image of creation itself, including the image of man”:

The older and comforting belief that human nature remains the same and that the image of God in it will assert itself against all defacements by man-made conditions, becomes untrue if we “engineer” this nature genetically and be the sorcerers (or sorcerer’s apprentices) who produce the future race of Golems. . . . We have not been authorized, so Jewish piety would say, to be makers of a new image, nor can we claim the wisdom and knowledge to arrogate that role. If there is any truth in man’s being created in the image of God, the awe and reverence and, yes, utter fear, an ultimate metaphysical shudder, ought to prevent us from meddling with the profound secret of what is man.⁸¹

At that time, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jonas was a lonely voice when it came to the discourse on bioethics within Judaism as well as in general society. His studies on the moral implications of technology and medical practice (eugenics, prenatal selection, organ transplant after determination of brain death, deferral of death, and every limitation of the right to die), including the important ethical guidelines that Jonas formulated, continue to be of principal relevance for the present. While assuming the basic rights and benefits deriving from the progress of research, these studies seek at the same time to draw distinct boundaries for its application. In contrast to that period, there is today a very diverse, differentiated, and controversial moral debate on bioethical questions, particularly on genetic engineering, cloning, and stem cell research.⁸² His ethical position with regard to these topics was based on the insight into the dignity of man, whose likeness to God, in his view, was not as a perfect, immortal being, untouched by suffering, but lay precisely in his vulnerability and mortality. For this, Jonas referred to the ancient Jewish wisdom expressed in the biblical relation to death:

So let us be Jews also in this. With young life pressing after us, we can grow old and, sated with days, resign ourselves to death—giving youth and therewith life a new chance. In acknowledging his finitude under God, a Jew, if he is still a Jew, must be able to say with the Psalmist: ‘We bring our years to an end as a tale that is told. The days of our years are threescore years and ten, Or even by reason of strength fourscore years . . . So teach us to number our days, That we may get us a heart of wisdom (Ps. 90:10–12).’⁸³

This affirmation, in philosophical terms, of the frailty and mortality of life appears at numerous points in Jonas’s work. Together with his belief in the createdness of man, it defines the limits that are to be set for the all-too-intrusive manipulations aiming at infinitely prolonging human life, for the arrogant utopian fantasies of immortality and the dangerous dream of a “perfection” of humankind by means of genetic engineering. The rejection of the medical dream—be it only partial—of conquering death is the ethical equivalent for a view of life that claims its “perishability” and resists “forego[ing] the pang and poignancy of finitude,” but which, as Jonas had stressed in an earlier essay, insists on “facing nothingness and on having the strength to live with it.”⁸⁴

In an essay composed two years before his death, “The Burden and Blessing of Mortality,” Jonas interpreted the bitter burden of the inescapability of death as the essential characteristic of organic life, namely as the price that such life has to pay for its freedom, its ability of sensory perception, and its ongoing renewal—qualities that distinguish it from the absence of feeling of the inorganic. As a necessary element of evolution, death creates space so that life constantly can renew itself and develop. With regard to human society, this is an essential necessity that guarantees what Hannah Arendt called the “natality” of life that, as Jonas formulates it, “ensures that there will always be such who see the world for the first time, see things with new eyes, wonder where others are dulled by habit, start out from where they had arrived,” thus protecting humankind against sinking into boredom and routine and against losing “the spontaneity of life.”⁸⁵ Even if the “magicians of biotechnology” succeeded at infinitely extending life, this would be less a blessing than a curse: It would leave us, burdened with a constantly growing past, “stranded in a world we no longer understand even as spectators, walking anachronisms who have outlived themselves.” Although Jonas strongly asserts humankind’s obligation to fight the causes of premature death—hunger, illness, war, and structural violence—he finds it no less important that we affirm the basic fact of mortality, even

without the consolation of an afterlife: “As to our mortal condition as such, our understanding can have no quarrel about it with creation unless life itself is denied.”⁸⁶

Despair or nihilism has no place in this affirmative attitude toward both life and death. In a very personal passage of his memoirs, where Jonas retrospectively attempts to assess the relative weight of light and darkness in his own life, and where—the difficult experiences he endured as a German Jew notwithstanding—he ultimately concludes: “I have to search very hard inside myself to find a tragic element in my life and in my relationship to the world, apart from the loss of my mother and of all that which every Jew carries around in himself after the Holocaust. But, although the world, of course, witnesses terrible things, it has never been a hostile place for me.”⁸⁷

This moving confession, an essential expression of Jonas’s self-conception, appears—beyond the purely biographical—to reveal one of the principal motifs of his philosophical work: the affirmation of life, threatened by death and man-made disasters, as an important value that implies the need for the intellectual and ethical effort, amidst modern civilization with all its risks and dangers, to live responsibly. For all its suffering, of which Jonas is fully aware, the world is not a “hostile place” from which it is legitimate to flee in the nihilistic manner of the Gnostics—at least not if humans accept their ability to think, feel, and act responsibly as a gift, which, as a toll for their vitality, bears irrevocably within itself life’s negation: death.

*De-Messianized Tikkun—Human Responsibility
for the “Divine Adventure”*

I.

Jonas’s philosophical reflection on the ethical relevance of Jewish tradition and Jewish existential experience reached its greatest urgency where he sought to confront what he himself described in his later work as metaphysical and cosmogonic “speculations,” that is, his intellectual struggles with the question of God and the createdness of life, with the phenomenon of evil, suffering, and the radical enormity of the Holocaust. The philosopher’s memoirs powerfully reflect how, with the profound grief over the fate of his mother and outrage at the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis in his heart—over the course of decades and by circuitous routes—he worked his way toward his interpretation

of the meaning of the Holocaust for an understanding of the concept of God and of man’s situation in a post-Holocaust world. This was, as he confesses, an intellectual “digression,” with which he “left the permitted ground of philosophy”—but he was strongly intrigued by this topic and took the risk of publicly reflecting on it in a very personal, intimate way.⁸⁸ This applies in general to his “theological” or religious-philosophical reflections, which he never failed to characterize as an aspect of his philosophy that was, although far from being a marginal element, an endeavor that was constantly at risk of transcending the limits of rational objectivity.⁸⁹ After having been—as he admitted not without self-mockery—“such a wise guy as to bring the deep need to be able to believe in a God or in something divine in the world into harmony with my philosophical insights and convictions,” he felt obliged to define his personal religious assumptions and to denote the limits of his approach:

I do not want to convince anyone or suggest any theological theory that I will then have to continue fighting for. I am not even sure whether I have convinced myself. But that is the modest maximum that I can still accept for myself of the divine—which once at an earlier time illuminated everything and which is now increasingly difficult to believe in—in conjunction with the overall state of things, including my scientific knowledge of the world, the universe, and life on Earth. I am, however, deeply convinced that outright atheism is wrong, that there is something beyond that which we can now perhaps express only with the help of metaphors, but without which the overall picture of Being would be incomprehensible. Although it seems to me that a philosophical metaphysics cannot develop a direct concept of God . . . that rather this route has been barred since the Kantian critique of reason (hence my reference to myth), I believe that it is not forbidden for a rational or philosophical metaphysics to engage in “speculations” about the divine in the world. Rather, it seems to me that philosophical ontology may at least leave a space for the divine. It is a questionable, tentative attempt, for which I have never made any claim to truth; for me, it has validity only through the fact that it does not simply dispute what once had such a huge influence on the history of humankind and in which, for example, in the words of the prophets, inspiration was expressed from a source that is more than just world and nature. . . . That [the mythological manner of speaking used by Jonas, C.W.] is perhaps the only way still open to us for expressing ourselves about these things—hinting, without claims to truth, and yet leaving room in the world for what lies beyond the world. For it seems to me that the human spirit is

evidence that there is a transcendent dimension in the hustle and bustle of the world [*Weltgetriebe*].⁹⁰

What was it that attracted Hans Jonas to these challenging topics? And how should one situate this unconventional preoccupation with theological-metaphysical questions, in which Jewish elements and Jewish language most clearly play a role, in his work as a whole? A glance at the chronology of his work reveals that Jonas composed the texts in question at the time when he was dealing intensively with questions of the philosophy of nature and ethics. Thus, although in their public effect they seem to belong to lesser-known facets of his later work and generally have received only marginal attention in the philosophical literature, these texts clearly belong at the center of his thought, forming, as I would like to argue, part of the anti-nihilistic “revolt” that he launched against escapism and ethical indifference.

Over the course of thirty years, time and again Jonas returned to questions regarding an appropriate concept of God, of divine silence or intervention in history, of human responsibility for God—with Auschwitz being the explicit or hidden challenge to which he felt obliged to respond. The first explicit reference to the Holocaust in Jonas’s work occurs in his reflections on “Immortality and the Modern Temper,” first presented as the Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard University in 1961, in which he focused on the transcendental effect of human action.⁹¹ Later, in his tribute to Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Faith Still Possible?” delivered in 1976 on the occasion of the academic commemoration of his friend and teacher, Jonas publicly displayed an important undercurrent of his thought that is crucial for understanding his view on divine action in the world. In an intriguing dialogue with Bultmann’s concept of “demythologizing,” designed to remove the obstacles of faith arising from the clash of the mythological-biblical world view with the modern one, Jonas reflects upon the “miracle” of God’s nonphysical intervention in the physical world. In view of the horrors of Nazi Germany and Eastern Europe, he seeks to rethink the “agonizing problem” of God’s lordship, which he rejects, but offers an alternative interpretation of divine intervention via revelation: What Jonas can accept is a notion of God’s will and power “to act in the world, and this via the human soul.”⁹² The acceptance of such an idea is possible, from his point of view, without *sacrificium intellectus*, although it is “a pure decision of faith.”⁹³ This is of vital importance for Jonas’s understanding of the role that he, as a philosopher, can attribute to God: Although powerless to act in the world

and, as we will see, utterly dependent on human action, God can make himself heard—but only through the human spirit. In his memoirs, Jonas defines his faith in God this way: “Through His spirit God can, as it were, win back power, while He can also fail because of human failure. It is not certain that God is being heard in the souls, and [that] the prophets illuminated by him will make his voice heard. . . . But, in principle, there is this gateway through which the transcendent can influence the mundane—the only causality that I still concede to God.”⁹⁴ Judaism, as we can infer from Jonas’s reflection upon the Jewish contribution to an ethics of responsibility, is one of those gateways—a “voice of revelation” in which God’s will might be heard, and one to which it is a covenantal duty that one respond. The question is: Is there any covenantal role left to God apart from this revelation through the human soul and through Jewish tradition? Jonas’s attitude in this respect, as we will see, is absolutely clear.

In 1984, when Jonas was awarded the Leopold Lucas Prize at Tübingen University, he felt challenged to respond to the fact that the prize was named after a German rabbi who died in Theresienstadt in 1943 and whose wife Dorothea Lucas, like Jonas’s mother, had been deported to Poland and murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. He decided, therefore, to go back to ideas he had first addressed in 1968 in a collected volume on post-Holocaust literature and theology and to devote his speech to the topic “The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice.”⁹⁵ Its argument will be presented after a brief survey of Jonas’s “theological” writings.

Jonas’s essay on “Matter, Mind and Creation” (1988) brings the insights of his philosophy of nature into discussion with cosmogonic “speculations,” which can be read as an attempt at a “proof of the existence of God,” even if that “proof” takes the form of speculative contemplation on the cause of a universe in which “reason, freedom, and transcendence” are possible or “perhaps even necessarily flow out of it.” Jonas admits that in these speculations “knowledge passes over unavoidably into faith,” characterizing his philosophical approach to questions of cosmology and cosmogony as a “rational faith” that takes the liberty to adopt elements of both the religious tradition and the history of metaphysics, in an attempt to present a new philosophy that would provide a basis for an ethics of responsibility for the transcendent dimension of the universe:

It [Jonas’s speculative cosmology] strives to be rational faith and not the faith demanded by revelation, although the voices of the great religions also belong

in the testimony to which we must listen. It renounces the capacity for proof, which is prohibited here. Yet the present approach to the question of all questions still sets out by appropriating whatever was of hidden validity in the old and constantly failed attempts at a demonstrable *theologia naturalis*. Strains from the cosmological, teleological, and ontological proofs for the existence of God, no longer clearly separated from one another, will not escape the trained ear. It should be enough for me if I have joined to the oft-repeated failure one more failure still, but perhaps in its own way an instructive one. Let us venture our own attempt, therefore, in the unending series.⁹⁶

Consisting of a stimulating series of reflections on the origins of life and the cosmos, Jonas's essay places modern natural science in dialogue with philosophical interpretations of the relationship between matter and spirit, and raises the question of an "initial creative will" behind the process of evolution.⁹⁷ In the freedom of thinking and in man's moral freedom, which means freedom for Good as well as for Evil, Jonas recognizes an immanent "transcendence" that points to the question of creation. However, in light of the failure of all attempts at a philosophical proof of God's existence, he sees his further explications as a "groping attempt and in all probability a mistaken one."⁹⁸

At the beginning of life, he suggests, there is a "cosmogonic eros" that endowed matter with the potential of mind, a "creative source" that Jonas terms "deity," or "Godhead," and which—after its initial act of creation—surrendered itself to the "endless play of the finite," the "inexhaustibility of chance," the "surprises of the unplanned," that is, the evolution of life.⁹⁹ This emphasis, so characteristic for Jonas's "theological" thinking, on "the blind, the planless, the accidental, the incalculable, the extremely precarious in the adventure of the world—in a word, . . . the enormous *gamble* that the first ground . . . wagered with creation," leads immediately to Auschwitz, which, from his point of view, has to be understood as a "theological event."¹⁰⁰ The central idea of his speculations is that of God's renunciation of power in favor of cosmic autonomy. While he finds a point of reference in Hegel's dialectic concept of the self-alienation of the primordial mind, or "the extreme self-divesting of the Creator-mind at the beginning of all things," he feels compelled to reject the optimistic idea, inherent in Hegel's "majestic account" of the world spirit [*Weltgeist*], of an intelligible, lawful, albeit dialectical, development of the world toward completion, or of a triumphal procession of mind through the world: In the twentieth century, "more sober onlookers of the large and small theaters of the world, of

nature and history” have to deny this doctrine. Rather than being the world spirit’s chosen, ultimately infallible executors, we human beings are responsible for the most terrible event in human history, which not only radically contradicted the idea of progress and completion, but which also posed a serious threat to the entire project of creation, including its divine source:

The disgrace of Auschwitz is not to be charged to some all-powerful providence or to some dialectically wise necessity, as if it were an antithesis demanding a synthesis or a step on the road to salvation. *We* human beings have inflicted this on the deity, we who have failed in the administering of his things. It remains on our account, and it is we who must again wash away the disgrace from our disfigured faces, indeed, from the very countenance of God. Don’t talk to me here about the cunning of reason.¹⁰¹

What is indicated here, the concept of the powerlessness of a suffering God and of humankind’s transcendent responsibility, found its most intriguing expression in Jonas’s aforementioned essay, “The Concept of God after Auschwitz,” where he attempted both to ground his ideas in philosophical reflections upon the essence of God and to link them to Jewish tradition. Among the many-voiced theological and religious-philosophical statements, discussions, and testimonies on Judaism and Jewish faith after Auschwitz, this essay represents a truly exceptional and distinct voice. It is very telling, in terms of Jonas’s ambiguous relationship to Jewish tradition and Jewish theology, that he never referred to other contemporary Jewish post-Holocaust theologies or philosophies, which apparently held little interest for him. There is, at least, no indication that he entered into a dialogue with other Jewish authors, read their works, and accepted or rejected some of their ideas on the theological significance of Auschwitz. Rather, his own ideas seem to have emerged first from an encounter between his philosophical reflections upon the origin and essence of human life, including its mortality, and his personal struggle with the memory of the Holocaust, and second, from his confrontation with the atheistic alternative to faith embodied by the—Christian-inspired—“Death of God Movement” that had been discussed in the United States since the 1960s. Protestant theologians such as Thomas J. Altizer, Paul van Buren, William Hamilton, and others, confronted with the impact of World War II, Hiroshima, and increasing secularism of religious thought, proclaimed the death of the transcendent God of biblical monotheism, often taking

recourse in a secularizing Christology that allowed it to assume an immanent presence in the divine in the world. Only later, challenged by Jewish post-Holocaust theologies like those of Richard L. Rubenstein and responding to Martin Buber's book *Eclipse of God* (1957), did the movement begin to think about the religious implications of the Nazi genocide.¹⁰² Although not a part of this diverse movement, Hans Jonas was aware of it and even contributed to an interfaith dialogue in New York, in which this sort of theology was discussed.¹⁰³ It certainly can be said that this was the intellectual atmosphere in which Jonas developed and discussed his ideas on post-Holocaust theology.

Another context that at least should be mentioned is a phenomenon to which Jonas developed a certain affinity because of the strong influence exerted by Alfred N. Whitehead's thought on his own philosophy of nature.¹⁰⁴ Theologians of the so-called "process theology" movement, most prominently Charles Hartshorne, John B. Cobb, and Ray Griffin, rethought the traditional concept of God in light of the insights of Whitehead's metaphysical thinking, with results very much reminiscent of central arguments that can be found in Jonas's writings. The most important were these: a new understanding of God's power as a noncoercive force, influencing the world in a persuasive, spiritual manner; a strong emphasis on freedom and self-determination as characteristic of life in the universe; the notion that God is affected by and changes with the development of the universe; and, finally, an interpretation of immortality, which assumes that, despite radical mortality, human experiences live on forever in God, conceived as one who contains all that ever was. It might not be entirely appropriate if John B. Cobb called Jonas's essay on the "Concept of God after Auschwitz" a "fine piece of 'process theology,'" and welcomed him as an ally, at least not in the sense that Jonas himself felt that he was influenced by and part of the movement. Still, the parallels are striking.¹⁰⁵ It is, however, an important task for the future to comparatively explore the affinities and differences in greater detail and to compare Jonas's philosophy to both Christian process-theologies and to Jewish thinkers, among them William E. Kaufman, Milton Steinberg, Harry Slonimski, and Samuel Alexander, who felt attracted to a sort of Jewish process-theology, mainly because it offered new ways to think about theodicy.¹⁰⁶

What are the main characteristics of Jonas's post-Holocaust philosophy? First of all, there is an acute awareness of the radical break that the experience of Auschwitz entails for any further theological or philosophical discourse. Jonas may not have been acquainted with George

Steiner’s reflections on the destruction of language in Auschwitz, with André Neher’s, Elie Wiesel’s, or Sarah Kofman’s struggling with silence, or with Susan Shapiro’s suggestions for a “hermeneutics of rupture,” according to which the Holocaust represents an historical event “that shatters the coherence of all human discourse and of theological language in particular,” thus radically calling into question all traditional ideas about the human as well as the divine.¹⁰⁷ However, like so many Jewish intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century, Jonas struggled with the existential questions with which survivors and any witness of the Holocaust inevitably were confronted in the wake of the Nazi genocide. Is it still possible and allowable to think about God as the God of history? Are the traditional answers to the “question of Job” still relevant? What had Auschwitz added “to what is familiar to us Jews from a millennial history of suffering and forms so essential a part of our collective memory?”¹⁰⁸ In contrast to philosophers such as Theodor W. Adorno, who rigorously rejected all attempts at theodicy, “because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience,” Jonas believed that those “shadows” of the murdered, his mother among them, deserved “that something like an answer to their long-gone cry to a silent God be not denied to them.”¹⁰⁹ Of course, he was aware of the abundance of attempts undertaken by Jewish tradition to lend meaning to suffering and persecution, including the concept of the covenant and the “riddle of election,” which implies the idea of punishment by God as a result of Israel’s unfaithfulness, or that of *Kiddush-ha-shem*, of the martyrdom of the innocent and the just for the sake of God. Both concepts, according to Jonas, have been shattered utterly when confronted with the unprecedented and unimaginable horror of the Holocaust:

Nothing of this is still of use in dealing with the event for which “Auschwitz” has become the symbol. Not fidelity or infidelity, belief or unbelief, not guilt or punishment, not trial, witness and messianic hope, nay, not even strength or weakness, heroism or cowardice, defiance or submission had a place there. Of all this, Auschwitz, which also devoured the infants and babes, knew nothing; to none of it (with rarest exceptions) did the factory-like working of its machine give room. Not for the *sake* of faith did the victims die, . . . nor *because* of their faith or any self-affirmed bend of their being as persons were they murdered. Dehumanization by utter degradation and deprivation preceded their dying, no glimmer of dignity was left to the freights bound for the final solution, hardly a trace of it was found in the surviving skeleton specters

of the liberated camps. And yet, paradox of paradoxes: it *was* the ancient people of the “covenant,” no longer believed in by those involved, killers and victims alike, but nevertheless just this and no other people, under which the fiction of race had been chosen for this wholesale annihilation—the most monstrous inversion of election into curse, which defied all possible endowment with meaning. There does, then, in spite of all, exist a connection—of a wholly perverse kind—with the God-seekers and prophets of yore, whose descendants were thus collected out of the dispersion and gathered into the unity of joint death. And God let it happen. What God could let it happen?¹¹⁰

Like Shapiro and others, Jonas thus felt the radicalism of the lack of answers after the Holocaust, the profound dilemma that lies in the fact that language appears to fail, breaking in pieces in the face of the utter meaninglessness of the history that has to be remembered—a history, as Dan Diner suggests, that remains a “no man’s land of understanding, a black box of explanation.”¹¹¹ Adorno’s famous challenging dictum in *Negative Dialectics*—“After Auschwitz there is no word tinged from on high, not even a theological one, that has any right unless it underwent a transformation”—is reflected in many Jewish (and some Christian) voices of the past decades, which, in the face of the destruction of European Jewry, have attempted to formulate a historical-theological interpretation of the Holocaust.¹¹² Although it would not be possible here to show which paths thinkers such as Emil Fackenheim, Ignaz Maybaum, Richard L. Rubenstein, Eliezer Berkovits, Arthur A. Cohen, Irving Greenberg, Eugene Borowitz, Elie Wiesel, Abraham J. Heschel, and many others took in order to banish the horrors of history and to hold fast to God, either with the help of elements from the Jewish tradition or in protest against it, at least a few aspects may be touched upon.¹¹³

II.

The traditional Jewish-orthodox interpretation of Israel’s suffering as punishment for its own sins, or as a test, an interpretation that desperately placed unconditional trust against the senselessness of the historical, was countered by attempts to understand Israel in the tradition of martyrdom as the suffering servant of God, who had to suffer on behalf of a humanity that could be shattered only by a terrible catastrophe.¹¹⁴ Other approaches announced the “death of God,” revealed by the Holocaust, and interpreted Jewish life in an existentialist way as an attempt to survive in a silent, unfeeling cosmos, devoid of hope

and transcendence.¹¹⁵ Such ideas of God’s “death” were opposed vehemently by Emil L. Fackenheim, who claimed that, although the Holocaust might seem to force future theology to refrain from believing in God as the lord of history, because there is no meaningful answer to Auschwitz, Jews are forbidden to permit Nazism to destroy the Jewish faith, lest they grant posthumous victories to Hitler.¹¹⁶

Other—more traditional—thinkers, such as the Orthodox Jewish theologian and philosopher Eliezer Berkovits, rely on biblical traditions (Psalms, Jeremiah), expressing the sufferers’ abandonment and their lament that God is silent and hiding his face (*hester panim*). Berkovits associates this notion with a philosophical view that interprets this experience as a consequence of the fact that “hiding the face” is an essential feature of God’s permanent relation to human existence and the world: God has, for the sake of the freedom and responsibility of his creation, withdrawn a part of his omnipotence and permitted the suffering of his people. The experience of Auschwitz challenges both a simple, naïve continuity of faith that would betray those victims who abandoned their faith in the face of incomparable suffering, and a self-assured denial of God that would betray those who, in the *monde concentrationnaire*, hold fast to their faith despite the horrible revelation of human cruelty. The question whether one can affirm one’s faith meaningfully, notwithstanding God’s terrible silence in Auschwitz, is answered by a theory of divine self-restraint that is simultaneously reminiscent of and different from Jonas’s thought, as we will see. Theodicy is not the most important aspect here, since the real issues raised by the Holocaust are moral ones about human nature and evil.¹¹⁷

No less moving than these attempts to provide justification for God are the traditions of protest, in which Job, who cries out his sorrow to God and does not accept any justifications, plays an eminent role. The tradition of the Yiddish *krign sich mit got* (of rebellion, of “waging war” with God), which holds on to God, lamenting and accusing at the same time, outraged by God but in the face of God, belongs among the most deeply felt testimonies of Jewish religious philosophy after Auschwitz. The work of one of the main representatives of this approach, Elie Wiesel, which launches ever-new attempts to confront biblical and Jewish traditions with the experience of the Holocaust, destroying them and emphasizing the profound meaninglessness of Auschwitz, enjoys, of course, the liberty of literary narration to engage in paradoxical language: In his novels and essays, Wiesel can deny God’s omnipotence and simultaneously praise it, he can have his figures curse God or take

Him to court and later put on the *tefillin*, and he can describe man in his utter inhumanity, while still hoping for the humaneness rooted in the memory of the victims. However, what characterizes his work most is a theology of protest against God who is not a powerless, abandoned, dependent God like Jonas's (although Wiesel knows the motif of God's suffering as well), but an omnipotent God who nevertheless remained silent, did not intervene, did not send his Messiah, that is, a God who has to be accused and still remains the Holy One to whom Jews can pray. This is a spiritual world totally different from Jonas's, and it would be worthwhile to bring them into a dialogue with one another.¹¹⁸

Whereas the struggle with God's silence in Auschwitz accentuates the dramatic challenge of theodicy, there are other approaches, in which it is precisely not the justification of God that is the most burning problem; rather, the Jewish experience in the ghettos and death camps reveals the *failure of humanity*. From their point of view, the silence of man, of all those who watched or ignored the suffering and thus abandoned the Jewish people to unutterable loneliness, is even more incomprehensible and more appalling than the silence of God. This view corresponds to the despairing hope against hope that at least now, after Auschwitz, people could, in remembrance of the genocide, work for a humane society in which such a crime would be unthinkable. Those Jewish thinkers who insist on human responsibility, on the ethical dimension, frequently refer to theological traditions that speak of God's powerlessness or of God's suffering. After the Holocaust, one encounters traditional stories in radically intensified form. These stories tell how God or God's *shekhina*, his "presence" among Israel, goes into exile with His people and shares the suffering of Israel, in a radically intensified form: Rather than merely withholding His power, as envisioned by Berkovits, God is truly powerless; He endures the isolation of his people, goes with them into the gas chambers, and suffers actual death.¹¹⁹

Hans Jonas clearly belongs to this tradition of reflection on God's powerlessness and suffering. What is fascinating about his thoughts on the "Concept of God after Auschwitz," presented in Tübingen "with fear and trembling" in memory of his murdered mother, is the mixture of existential shock at God's silence in the face of the unprecedented genocide, philosophical rigor in shattering the notion of an omnipotent lord of history, and the compelling beauty and depth of his poetic "tentative myth" about the emergent, suffering, transcendent God who, with the appearance of man in the evolution of creation, "awakened to

itself and henceforth accompanies his doings with the bated breath of suspense, hoping and beckoning, rejoicing and grieving, approving and frowning—and, I daresay, making itself felt to him even while not intervening in the dynamics of the worldly scene.”¹²⁰ The conviction that, after Auschwitz, the traditional (and absolutely central) Jewish concept of God as the lord of history, including the notion of his power to intervene, rescue, and redeem, is obsolete, leads to a radical rethinking of his attributes. As it is impossible to imagine, in the face of the burning children, a God who “is absolutely good and absolutely powerful, yet tolerate[s] the world as it is,” Jonas is forced to postulate God’s renunciation of power and to describe him in terms that he defines as (at least seemingly) incompatible with the biblical notion of majesty: (1) as a *suffering* God, not in the Christian sense of the *kenosis*, but a God suffering since the very act of creation—an idea justified by biblical images of God’s sorrow in the face of the failures of his chosen people; (2) as a *becoming* God, as opposed to the Platonic-Aristotelic tradition of philosophical theology, affected by the vicissitudes of the world-process; and (3) as a *caring* God, who is involved in the fate of his creation—one of “the most familiar tenets of Jewish faith.”¹²¹ However, this caring God is not “a sorcerer who in the act of caring also provides the fulfillment of his concern: he has left something for other agents to do and thereby has made his care dependent on them.” He is therefore also “an endangered God, a God who runs a risk.”¹²² While this still could be understood in the sense of a limitation of God’s power for the sake of human autonomy and responsibility (the idea most prominently invoked, as mentioned, by Eliezer Berkovits), Jonas radicalizes it by fundamentally excluding the possibility of God revoking such a voluntary concession, breaking his own rule of restraint, and intervening “with a saving miracle.” If God possessed the theoretical power to do so, he must have done it in the face of the demonic cruelty:

But no saving miracle occurred. Through the years that “Auschwitz” raged God remained silent. The miracles that did occur came forth from man alone: the deeds of those solitary, mostly unknown “just of the nations” who did not shrink from utter sacrifice in order to help, to save, to mitigate—even, when nothing else was left, unto sharing Israel’s lot. . . . But God was silent. And there I say, or my myth says: Not because he chose not to, but because he *could* not intervene did he fail to intervene. For reasons decisively prompted by contemporary experience, I entertain the idea of God who for a time—the time of the ongoing world process—has divested himself of any power to interfere