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Important texts:

Über die hermeneutische Struktur des Dogmas: Appendix I on "Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem. Eine philosophische Studie zum pelagianischen Streit" (1930), KGA III/1, S. 150-160.

Introduction to: Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, I. Teil (1934), S. 1-91.

Introduction to: Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, II. Teil (1954), S. 1-23.

Gnostizismus, Existenzialismus und Nihilismus, in: Gnosis. Die Botschaft des fremden Gottes, Frankfurt 1999, p. 377-400. (English translation: The Gnostic Religion. The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity, 2nd. Edition, London: Routledge, 1992)

Heidegger und die Theologie, KGA III/2, S. 225-258.

Jonas develops his theory of myth and demythologization through methodological reflection on his studies in the history of religion, in particular, those relating to Gnosticism, St. Paul, and Augustine.

1. Myth

His concept of myth can be seen in the context of the discourse on myth that took place in the 19th and 20th centuries (Hegel, Schelling, Troeltsch, Cassirer, and later Blumenberg). Despite the huge differences in these various interpretations of myth, all of these investigations attempt to grasp the inner unity and rationality of myths and mythical thinking, as well as to determine their place in the history of ideas.

Jonas primarily focuses on the history of research into Gnosticism and differentiates his understanding of myth from that of other researchers into Gnosticism.

Myths can be defined at the level of description as follows:

- Myths assume the form of stories that take place in space and time;
- the protagonists in myths cause developments that lead to the creation of this world and the conditions under which life exists in our world;
- they claim to not only portray reality, but to actually be real.

2. Mythical Objectivations

In close cooperation with Heidegger and Bultmann, Jonas developed his own understanding of the origin of myths. He sees their genesis and reason for being in the phenomena of "Dasein," in existential phenomena that humans experience. The human spirit grasps or "symbolizes" these phenomena in language, concepts, and images. Dasein is tangible to and experienced by the spirit only through such objectivations. Jonas regards this dialectic as irrevocable. What is particular in this case is that within myths the "objectivation" takes place in a specific manner: It leads to the hypostasis of symbols, so that when humans think and perceive within the myth, they are not aware of them as symbols: "They are the determining and most real ways of perceiving towards which Dasein orients itself (although it originally constituted these symbols itself in a concealed act)" (GsG II, 8).

3. Demythologization

From this postulated “genealogy” of the myth, Jonas then derives the methodology of his research and interpretation of myths. Their truth is not to be recognized in what they portray as “true stories.” A demythologization must rather endeavor to uncover the Dasein phenomena expressed in the myth. This can only succeed when one has a philosophical elucidation of fundamental Dasein phenomena at one’s command. According to Jonas, this can be found in Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein, thereby providing an orientation for the interpretation of myths.

4. St. Paul, Augustine, and Gnosticism

Using this method, Jonas investigated two completely different bodies of texts: on the one hand, he examined the Gospel of John, Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, and the theology of Augustine; on the other hand, the available Gnostic myths.

In the texts comprising the New Testament and early Church writings, Jonas regards the problem of freedom as the central issue. According to Jonas, human freedom finds itself in a state of constant tension between freedom and a lack of freedom. This is because freedom can only be realized when it is objectified in decisions, yet is likewise set aside in this objectivation and determination. St. Paul finds an appropriate language for this dialectic. From Jonas’ perspective, Augustine, however, transforms this dialectic into the form of a hypostatized antinomy with the myths of original sin and divine predestination. Augustine can only think in opposites when addressing the issue of the relation of freedom between God and man. By contrast, says Jonas, “the Dasein is the living, unified consummation of the irreconcilable” (III/1, 153).

In the Gnostic texts, Jonas observes an objectivation of the Dasein constellations of Late Antiquity. Gnosticism subscribes to a strict dualistic worldview, in which the earth as well as temporal life was created by a fallen God and therefore belongs to world of spiritual darkness. Man yearns for deliverance from this chaotic and evil world, and therefore awaits the return of that divine spark found deep his soul, which will bathe in the light of the absolute transcendent and good God. This return is possible by following the path of realization (Gnosis). In this myth, according to Jonas, a Dasein is expressed in which confidence in the Antique cosmology has been lost and has succumbed to nihilism. Jonas views humanity in Late Antiquity as living in an incomprehensible and diverse Hellenistic empire.

5. Subsequent work

In the abovementioned investigations, Jonas avoids religious-philosophical speculation as far as possible. He undertakes a purely existential interpretation of myths.

Over the course of his research, Jonas shifts his emphasis. His distance to Heidegger grows. Jonas accuses Heidegger of the very nihilism that he recognized in the core of Gnosticism with the help of Heidegger’s philosophy. By contrast, Jonas pursues the possibility of overcoming the mind-body dualism of modern philosophy and finding a justification for ethical responsibility. In this context, he not only develops “metaphysical speculations,” in which the philosophy of religion plays a central role. He also creates his own myth in order to make his interpretation of human Dasein within the framework of the cosmos and life more comprehensible. He thereby makes reference to Plato, who permitted mythical language when speaking of the “sphere beyond the knowledgeable” (III/1, 410). Jonas thereby does not abandon his criticism of the classical myth – as a myth that reveals itself to be a myth avoids the transcendent hypostatization of its protagonists and knows that it is nothing other than an immanent, human expression of particular “Dasein phenomena.”