**Hans Jonas and Phenomenology**

Abstract for the Hans Jonas Conference in Siegen, 6-9 June 2018

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*Preliminary remark*

My contribution to the conference represents the first draft of an article for the Jonas handbook. The handbook is intended for the wider public and not only for specialists. As such, this draft includes material that will probably be quite familiar to connoisseurs of Jonas’ work.

Whoever asks the question “What do you think about phenomenology?” with respect to the work[[1]](#footnote-1) of Hans Jonas will not find a simple answer. Ostensibly, this is due to the fact that Jonas devoted himself with comparative intensity to extra-philosophical subject areas, such as physics and biology, which similarly include the expressions ‘phenomenology’ and ‘phenomena’ in their technical vocabulary. Yet, within the history of philosophy and its related subject matters, the use of the term ranges from Hegel’s ‘*Phenomenology of Spirit*,’ Brentano’s *phenomenological psychology*, and Merleau-Ponty’s ‘*Phenomenology of Perception*’ to Austin’s *linguistic phenomenology*. In a wide sense, then, phenomenology could be seen as a metadisciplinary collective term for heterogenic approaches, which endeavors to describe what appears to the observer as *phenomena*. As a student of Edmund Husserl, the founder of *transcendental* phenomenology, Jonas was naturally quite familiar with talk of “phenomena.” At the same time, he kept his distance from transcendental phenomenology and considered its concept of the “phenomena” as being too restrictive.

(1) In order to understand Jonas’ relationship to phenomenology, let us turn to the diagnosis he introduces in his work on the philosophy of the organism. The argument turns on the dualistic division of being into *res cogitans* und *res extensa*, spirit and matter, which was introduced with the scientific revolution of modernity and brought into focus by Descartes. Since then, thought has been held captive by the alternatives of its monistic “disintegration products,”[[2]](#footnote-2) the modern currents of idealism and materialism. As such, the living body, the organism, remained completely misunderstood. Life disappeared “between ‘consciousness’ and the ‘external world.’”[[3]](#footnote-3) Jonas intended to overcome this impasse with a post-dualist *ontology* of life, which “comprises the philosophy of the organism and the philosophy of mind.”[[4]](#footnote-4) *Methodologically*, such an ontology demands that its “phenomena” (!) be taken seriously, as “the phenomenon of life itself negates the boundaries that customarily divide our disciplines and fields.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In order to do justice to the ontological integrity of the living being, the philosophy of the organism should advocate a methodological pluralism.

(2) Jonas acknowledges his teacher as a renewer of the humanistic-rationalist tradition and its new understanding of the Platonic *theoria* in the form of “categorical intuition,” in which the intentions of consciousness could be fulfilled in non-sensuous, ideal objects (logical categories, universals). In Husserl, the ideal of intentionality becomes the “duty of intentionality to justify thought”[[6]](#footnote-6) – a duty that Jonas regards as rooted not in phenomenology, but rather “in a religious conception of mankind.”[[7]](#footnote-7) From the perspective of Jonas’ diagnosis of modern thought, the phenomenology of Husserl, with its strict bracketing of being into a world external to consciousness and its withdrawal into the immanence of consciousness, finds itself on the side of *idealism*, namely, that which is to be overcome. Jonas postulates a primacy of ontology, which also brings to light the deficits of the phenomenological viewpoint.

(3) Jonas’ ontology of the organism includes a *doctrine of individuality*, which ideally illustrates his relationship to phenomenology. Broadly characterized, it results in a threefold differentiation: (a) simple *numerical* *identity* (i.e. a simple ‘particle’), with the ‘solution’ to the problem of identity over time achieved through the recursion of the *principia individuationis* of time and space; (b) *phenomenological* *identity*, in which we assume physical (dead) objects and phenomena (i.e. pebbles or an ocean wave rolling towards us). The identity of the producing energy lies here solely within the perspective of the observer and “is not a characteristic of the thing itself, not a factor of its being”; and (c) *ontological individuality*, which is internally produced as a self-centered identity constituted through active self-demarcation in space and through self-preservation over time. Only and all *living organisms* are in a position to fulfill this condition.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, Jonas’ writings are cited from the *Kritischen Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Hans Jonas* (KGA), eds. Dietrich Böhler, Michael Bongardt, Holger Burckhart, and Walther Ch. Zimmerli, Freiburg i.Br./Berlin/Wien: Rombach. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. H. Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit*, KGA I/1, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. H. Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit*, KGA I/1, p. 11, in English as H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. H. Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit*, KGA I/1, p. 5, in English as H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966, p. xxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. H. Jonas, “Husserl und Heidegger,” KGA III/2, p. 205-224, here p. 211 f.; idem, “Husserl und die ontologische Frage,” KGA III/2, p. 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. H. Jonas, “Husserl und Heidegger,” p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)