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**Jewry and Judaism in Hans Jonas**

I would like in this paper of mine on Hans Jonas not so much to present his belonging to Jewish people, that is to say to Jewry, as to discover the Judaism which is implicit in his philosophy.

English language has two different words to express what in other languages we express with the same word: when we say *ebraismo* in Italian, *judaïsme* in French, *Judentum* in German, or *judaismo* in Spanish, the word indicates – it seems to me – the whole of the Jews as a religious community or as a people and at the same time the Jewish religion or the Jewish culture. For example, we use the expression *ebraismo italiano* to mean not only the peculiar Italian Jewish culture or the Italian form of Jewish religion, but also the human group which produces this culture or has this faith. Instead, in English we say *Jewry* when we speak about the community of Israel, the children of Jacob, and we say *Judaism* when we speak about the religion or culture of this community.

Now, about the Jewishness of Jonas, his considering himself as a member of Jewish people, we have many proofs and evidences. I think it is not necessary to consider this point in detail: it is so clear that he was a conscious and, I would say, proud and devoted member of the Jewry. In all his life he considered himself as a Jew and he lived in a very close relationship with Jewish figures and Jewish community, in Germany before 1933 and then in Palestine, Canada, US.

About this point I would like only to remind some well known events in his life. Jonas himself tells us a lot of interesting and sometimes also moving events which he lived in the beautiful book *Erinnerungen* (published in 2003). First of all, he was a son of a Jewish family where Jewish traditions were still alive, in spite of its distance from the orthodox way of life and its participation in German society and culture; he celebrated his *Bar Mitzva* in 1916; he was a Zionist from 1918, but a particular kind of Zionist because he connected history, the human or secular side of Jewish history and revelation, God’s voice and the human words articulating this voice, and because he did not see any contradiction between the message of Chassidism, as interpreted by Buber, and Kant’s ethics. He joined a Zionist circle in Freiburg when attending there the University as a pupil of Husserl and Heidegger at the beginning of his academical studies in 1921; he enrolled in 1921-22 in Berlin not only in the University, but also in the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, where he met Leo Baeck, Ismar Elbogen and Julius Guttmann who introduced him in the Talmud and in the history of Jewish mediaeval philosophy, keeping however his involvement in Zionist groups and fascinated by Jewish life in this town; when again in 1923-24 in Freiburg and afterward in Marburg, he always wanted – by Heidegger and Bultmann – like Hannah Arendt, to be recognized as a Jewish student, as a member of the Jewish German community, and also as a Zionist, until 1928, when he finished his PhD dissertation. We know how he spent the following years: in 1933 he left Germany, emigrated to Palestine in 1935, contributed there as a member of the *Haganah* to the defense of Jewish minority, fighted in Palestine and Europe against the Nazism and the Fascism between 1939 and 1945 (in the years 1944-45 he was in Italy as a member of the Jewish Brigade, part of the British army); moreover, he served in the Israeli army during the 1948 war, after the declaration of the independence of the State of Israel; in 1949 he began to work as a professor in the Canadian universities, in Montreal and Ottawa, and from 1955 onwards in New York at the New School for Social Research, always keeping ties with the local Jewish communities. During his staying in New York, from the sixties until his death in 1993, he was a member of a Reform synagogue together with his family and took part to the life of the American Jewish world also as a Jewish intellectual in dialogue with Christianity and with the representative of the secular culture.

All the life of Jonas was under the sign of his belonging to Jewry. Like Buber, like Scholem, who appreciated very much him especially as a historian of religions and with whom he exchanged ideas from his youth, he was a Jew who wanted to maintain tight connections with other Jews: he was at the same time a secular and a religious Jew, a Zionist and a Diasporic Jew. I would say that in him Jewish existence seems to show all its contradictory sides which do not exclude each other. On the contrary all these sides form part of Jewish existence.

It is quite easy and simple to point out the deep Jewishness of Jonas, how in all his existence he felt himself as a Jew. It is more difficult to show how Judaism, as a religion and a culture, is alive in his philosophy. Actually, Jonas always wanted to be a philosopher when building his doctrine because aware that philosophy has a universal value and meaning while a particular faith, as Judaism is, has a value and a meaning only for those who share it. We know from his writings (for example from the book *The Imperative of Responsibility*, published in 1984 in the English edition) that he did not want to propose a philosophy which has as its base and ground an irrational faith. He always preferred to consider only reason as the instrument of philosophy: reason as the means of arguing and reasoning, as a theoretical faculty whose field of research is the being, nature and history. He always wanted to be a philosopher in his philosophical writings: not a believer, but a human rational being speaking to other human rational beings.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that Judaism is interconnected with his philosophy. There are in his philosophy three main Jewish themes; and exactly these themes give to his philosophy a specific orientation, a specific tune.

The first theme is the criticism of the original sin in human beings, the anti-Gnosticism, the idea that a unique divine principle rules the world, and that this principle is a good one. The second theme is the idea of responsibility as human consciousness that there is a field of human values which is beyond our freedom as *liberum* *arbitrium*, something in the front of which we are responsible, we should *respondere*, give a response, not to be indifferent, unless we want to lose our very humanity as our own attribute. The third theme is the idea that ethics is that part of philosophy which has a priority with regard to ontology, the doctrine of the being, because we cannot think the being without assuming that the being itself has an immanent value, a teleological order.

I would like to say a few words about each of these three themes which show, in my opinion, a Jewish influence on Jonas’ thinking.

About the first topic – Judaism as a criticism of Gnostic religion – I would like to quote one of the most brilliant essays of his, whose title is *Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism,* published in English in 1952. Jonas writes in this essay that a gnostic inspiration moves the existentialistic philosophy of our times and that the last result of this philosophy is nihilism. According to the ancient Gnosticism, the world has no sense, rather is ruled by demonic forces that bring it to destruction: the only way for the individuals to save their souls is to be the masters of a secret knowledge about a God who lives beyond the world, does not share human events and human feelings in the world, and is not the Creator, but only an *absconditus* Redeemer. Man is lonely, for the Gnostic man, is a stranger in a country which he cannot recognize as his own, open to his desire to find a meaning. This unhappy attitude that produce Gnosticism, for Jonas, is similar to the attitude of Pascal, Nietzsche,Heidegger, all the thinkers who enclose human beings in a being which is either pure existence or pure temporality. Existentialist philosophers try to give a sense to human life by the means of the will which determines its own rules of action, by the means of a substitution of eternity with history or temporality, by the means of a consideration of man as a person, because a free agent. If the law which rules the social life appears as grounded only on violence, it is perhaps possible – according to the existentialists – to look at these rules as the results of a free will. But the final result of existentialist philosophy is necessarily the end of Humanism because finally human being itself becomes indifferent in an indifferent being. And thus existentialists, notwithstanding their emphasis on human existence as a special province in the being, join another trend of contemporary philosophy, which is naturalism, that is to say philosophy as a research on natural phenomena only connected by the chain of causes and effects. Jonas writes in this essay of his:

The stare at isolated selfhood, to which it [existentialism] condemns man, may wish to exchange itself for a monistic naturalism which, along with the rupture, would abolish also the idea of man as man. Between that Scylla and this her twin Charibdis, the modern mind hovers. Whether a third road is open to it – one by which the dualistic rift can be avoided and yet enough of the dualistic insight saved to uphold the humanity of man – philosophy must find out. (*The Gnostic religion*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1963, 2. ed., p. 340).

Now, this third road – according to Jonas’ thinking – is pointed out by Judaism: while Christianity did not abandon completely Gnosticism (especially the Augustinian tradition during the Middle Ages kept alive the voluntarism, individualism, activism which were typical of the Gnostic religion), Judaism opposes all the pessimistic concepts of man, the idea of the corruption of reason, and the subjectivism which does not recognize any objective commandments beyond the individual consciousness and the individual feelings and choice. In his essays *Jewish and Christian Elements in Philosophy: Their Share in the Emergence of the Modern Mind* (1967), and *Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective* (1968), both reprinted in Jonas’ *Philosophical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974), Jonas shows how Judaism challenges the modern mind - which is the result not only of modern science, but also also of Christian theological and philosophical tradition - with his teachings of creation, man as image of God, and moral revelation. We can take from these teachings the ideas that a unique God maintains the universe, that God has moral attributes, i. e. He acts according to loving kindness and justice, and that the universe has a final order and a last aim, and this is the survival of mankind and the development of its moral attributes.

About the second topic, the Jewish root of the concept of responsibility, I would like to remind the passage, in the book *The Imperative of Responsibility*, where Jonas describes what happens when we see the newborn and we feel ourselves to be called by an urgent, objective commandment – the commandment to take care of him or her in order to ensure its growth and flourishing. Without doubt this passage, that is a phenomenological description, inspired by Husserlian method, also reminds stories of the Jewish Bible, alludes to Jewish expressions, and is evocative of a Messianic future. This is the passage, which makes a distinction between facts and norms and at the same time has the intention to establish a bridge between them:

The concept of responsibility implies that of an ought – first of an ought-to-be of something, then of an ought-to-do of someone in response to the first. The intrinsic right of the object is prior to the duty of the subject. Only an immanent claim can objectively ground for someone else an obligation to transitive causality. The objectivity must really stem from the object. […] When asked for a single instance […] where the coincidence of “is” and “ought” occurs, we can point at the most familiar sight: the newborn, whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely, to take care of him. Look and you know. […] Here the plain being of a *de facto* existent immanently and evidently contains an ought for others, and would do so even if nature would not succor this ought with powerful instincts or assume its job alone. […] “But why evident?” the theoretical rigorist may ask: What is really and objectively “there” is a conglomeration of cells, which are conglomerations of molecules with their physiochemical transactions, which as such *plus the conditions of their continuation* can be known; but that there *ought* to be such a continuation and, therefore, somebody ought to do something for it, that does not belong to the finding and can in no manner be seen in it. (*The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, reprint. 1985*,* pp. 130-131, Jonas’ italics).

Reading this passage, we cannot help thinking about the Jewish newborns whom Pharaoh told the midwifes to kill, as it is written at the beginning of Exodus, about the Biblical words *na’ase ve-nishmah* (we will do while listening to the voice of God), about the obligations of not to destroy the life in the world so far as possible and to keep the life and ensure its development so far as possible, which is implicit in many *Mitzvoth* [commandments]or *Berachot* [blessings]. Moreover, In his essay entitled *Edmund Husserl and the ontological question*, published in Hebrew in 1938, Jonas underlines how the concept of self-responsibility of reason in the justification of its own operations and functions had in Husserl a Biblical ground: Husserl’s *cogito* has a Greek origin because he takes again and articulates, in a more precise and subtle way, Parmenides’ identity between being and thinking; but the idea of the responsibility of the thinker in front of all the other thinkers has a Jewish origin.

I come to the third theme I mentioned: it seems to me that the relationship between Judaism and the third topic – the priority of ethics with regard to ontology, or the priority of the *Sollen* upon the *Sein* – arises from a very clear passage, taken out from his lessons on *Problems of freedom* at the New School for Social Research in 1970. Jonas writes:

It is emphatically denied in the Jewish position that the world is image of God. The world was not created in the image of God and it cannot really tell us what God is, although it can teach us – when we view it with the eyes of a non-cosmic piety – a great deal about the power, will, and wisdom of God. But it cannot, in itself, reveal what is God. If it is not itself God nor the image of God then it cannot be the object of worship, nor can anything in the world be made to substitute as a symbol of the divine. […] But of man it is said that he is created in the image of God. […] As God is conceived as the Lord of the universe as well as its Creator, so man, in his image character, is the potential ruler of all other creatures, assigned to him by God as his rightful subjects. […] This kingship means that the rest of nature is not of the same dignity as man. It established from the beginning, in the Jewish conception, […] a clear distinction between man and the rest of creation, a distinction that […] finds its expression in action. Man is the rightful user of the rest of nature, by virtue of a title that comes from a higher sanctioning power, a higher authority. (*Problemi di libertà*, It. ed., Torino: Aragno, 2010, Appendix I: English text of the lectures, pp. 339-342).

In the Jewish commentaries of the Bible – from the ancient times to the contemporary ones – creation of the world as a *cosmos* presupposes revelation of the *Torah*, i. e. the ethical laws and the ethical norms which only allow a society to exist and to maintain itself, to avoid disintegration. If we look at the facts, what happens in the reality, we only observe phenomena, physical or psychic processes: the *logos* of the facts gives us the order of the being, a strict and necessary order which human will cannot ignore in its intentions. Only if we look at the facts after our knowledge of a supernatural, divine order, we can find in them a teleology: this order is the field of ethical commandments. According to Jewish tradition, our thinking of God does not refer to a *summum ens*, but to the source of ethical laws. We see in the newborn a precious being because his or her dignity rests on the objectivity of a *mundus intelligibilis* formed by ethical rules to be applied: our practical reason does not depend on our cognitive faculties that only concern the being. Between *Sein* and *Sollen* there is a clear difference, notwithstanding their contact in human beings. It seems to me that Jonas is much more Platonic and Kantian than Aristotelian or Hegelian.

Thus, Judaism enters in the philosophy of Jonas giving him – it seems to me – the three important insights I tried to present. Now, does it mean that his philosophy is no more only a philosophy, but implies a faith, a belief which reason cannot accept? The thesis I would like to defend – and this will be my conclusion – is that philosophical reason should on one side enlarge itself in order to accept Jewish sources as productions of reason, and on the other should recognize as its last point the idea of God as the Subject whose we have to imitate the actions. It is my impression that Jonas, when writing about the concept of God after Auschwitz, tries to propose these two aspects to philosophical reason. As we know from his *Erinnerungen*, he had a deep respect and admiration for Maimonides and Hermann Cohen who elaborated exactly these two aspects concerning the relationship between Judaism and philosophy. But it is also true that – as I said – the relationship between faith and reason always formed for him a problem: as a loving scholar of Greek philosophy, he connected philosophy much more to science than to religion.