**“Monism” in the work of Hans Jonas**

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The key to Jonas’s philosophy lies in his **monistic credo**: “Reality (or nature) is one, and testifies to itself in what it allows to come forth from it.” (IR 69) Jonas’s monism is teleological, not reductively materialistic, for the unity of nature is gleaned from the evidence of its “highest,” most manifest developments: subjectivity or life and ultimately “mind,” even though these outgrowths of *physis* are late and rare in cosmic history. Jonas regards dualism – the divorce between non-human nature and humanity - as the root cause of “nihilism,” for “a universe without an intrinsic hierarchy of being, as the Copernican universe is, leaves values ontologically unsupported, and the self is thrown entirely back upon itself in its quest for meaning and value.” (PL 215) “Nihilism” is the result, Jonas contends, for “there is no point in caring for what has no sanction behind it in any creative intention.” (PL 234) Jonas traces the “creative intention” in nature to two roots: **1)** evolution and **2)** cosmogony.

1. Though orthodox Darwinism is based on blind, mechanistic principles of random variation

and natural selection, Darwinism contains, in Jonas’s pregnant metaphor, “the germ of its own overcoming,” for **evolution** placed upon matter “the full weight of a burden from which dualism had kept it free: that of having to account for the origin of mind, in addition to the physical organizations themselves.” (PL 53)

Opposing every form of dualism is the monistic testimony of evolution… Natural scientists need to be deaf to the language of subjectivity, or, if they do hear it, to accuse it of lying, for it speaks of goals and purposes. But this enigma must give no rest to philosophy, which has to listen to both languages, that of the external and internal worlds, uniting them in one statement about Being that does justice to the psychophysical totality of reality. (MM 52)

Jonas defends Aristotle’s idea that “the organic, even in its lowest forms, prefigures mind,” but, with the help of Darwin, he reads this hierarchy teleologically, claiming that the history of life on earth expresses a “tendency” towards the progressive evolution of freedom in perception and action. (PL 2)

1. The unity of nature requires a “substantial continuity” that links not only life and mind in

evolution, but also matter and life in **cosmogony**.

No materialism as formulated by physics can comprehend how the same primeval substance present throughout the universe in galaxies, suns and planets, has also brought forth life, pleasure and pain, desire and fear, seeing and feeling, love and hatred. (MM 52)

In order to bridge the gap between aeons of material stirrings and the recent emergence of life and mind in nature, monism “requires an ontological revision and replenishing of the concept of ‘matter’ beyond the external qualities abstracted from it and measured by physics.” (MM 171-2)

Jonas cannot accept the modern scientific consensus that “caring is a product of the uncaring,” that “teleological nature is begotten unteleologically.” (PL 233) There exists, he speculates, a “cosmogonic *eros*”: “a secretly longed-for goal” in matter to actualize a potentiality for life. (MM 173) He acknowledges his proximity to the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead for whom even the most elementary entities are instances of feeling and so qualify as organic. Jonas rejects panpsychism, however, as “an overreaching of speculation”; the organic, he insists, remains different than the inorganic. Nonetheless, he conjectures, matter is not neutral and indifferent, but is predisposed to “shoot into [that rare] opening and go the way of life.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Long before his late essay, “Matter, Mind and Creation,” where he introduces the idea of a cosmogonic *eros*, Jonas foreshadows this hypothesis in The Phenomenon of Life:

Even the transition from inanimate to animate substance, the first feat of matter’s

organizing itself for life, was actuated by a tendency in the depth of being towards the

very modes of freedom to which this transition opened the gate. Such a hypothesis affects

the entire inorganic substrate on which the structure of freedom is reared.” (PL 4)

In sum, Jonas’s expansion of "the ontological locus of purpose from what is apparent at the subjective peak to what is hidden in the breadth of being" involves **two conjectures** that cannot be scientifically proven but are allegedly consistent with the biological facts, existentially interpreted:

1. There is "**progress in the evolution of life**," for organic matter possesses a tendency to generate "ascending modes of freedom," and ultimately the human mind, within the life-world (PL 81), and
2. Primeval matter carries a "**cosmogonic eros**" - a "striving" or "yearning" to organize itself for life and hence for subjectivity, (MM 173).

These two conjectures are the linchpins of Jonas’s critique of dualism, for they support:

1. The **monistic** credo that there is “substantial continuity” throughout nature - not only between life and full-fledged mind, but even between primeval matter and life (or between the universe as a whole and our earthly biosphere) – and
2. The **teleological** principle that the less developed is for the sake of the more developed.

Ultimately, however, we cannot avoid asking whether, by insisting on a “creative intention” in both the life-world and the universe itself, Jonas must supplement his teleological naturalism with his theology. Is his naturalism **crypto-theological** after all?

**Questions for Discussion**

* Is Jonas’s monistic philosophy of nature – especially his speculations that there is progress in evolution and that primeval matter harbors a “cosmogonic *eros*” - compatible with the best of biochemistry, evolutionary biology and cosmology today?
* Does Jonas’s ontological grounding of an ethics for the future depend on accepting either or both of these speculative hypotheses?
* Is Jonas’s theology compatible with his ontological naturalism (i.e., stages #1 and #2 in the outline)? Does the theology merely “supplement” his philosophy of nature, or is it a necessary addition? Is his ontological naturalism (and ethics) already influenced by theological premises to the point where they might be called “crypto-theological”?
* If, as he claims, Jonas’s theology is not necessary to ground his ethical imperative of responsibility, then what does theology add to his ontological naturalism?
* Is it true that “there is no point in caring for what has no sanction behind it in any creative intention” (PL 234)? Can we have good reasons, and even an obligation, to care about future generations without grounding ethics in the weighty metaphysics of either cosmogonic speculation or theology?

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1. Scodel, Harvey. “An Interview with Hans Jonas.” Social Research70, 2 (2003), 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)