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# An Interview with Professor Hans Jonas

HARVEY SCODEL

IN THE spring of 1990, the author conducted an interview spanning four long mornings with Professor Hans Jonas at his home in New Rochelle, New York. Professor Jonas taught philosophy at the New School for Social Research from 1955 to 1976. Several of his articles were originally published in *Social Research*. The interview was to serve as background for an expository and journalistic piece concerning Professor Jonas's thought, with particular attention to *The Imperative of Responsibility*. The primary purpose of the essay would have been to analyze that work and to bring it to the attention of a wider American audience. To this day, *The Imperative of Responsibility* has achieved much greater attention in Europe—and in Germany and France especially—than in the United States, where Professor Jonas had, at the time of the interview, lived and worked for approximately 40 years. The interview itself was not intended for publication.

Professor Jonas's work is usually divided into three periods: an early one of gnosis studies (*The Gnostic Religion* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1958]), a period of work concerning the development of a philosophical approach to biological phenomena (*The Phenomenon of Life* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966]), and a late period of applied philosophy in which ethical questions—particularly those raised by technology and the new relationships of man to the earth and to his own nature that modern technology has brought in its train—are treated (*Philosophical Essays* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974] and *The Imperative of Responsibility* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984]). From Jonas's point of view, the period of gnosis studies represented an immersion in a representative form of Western dualism in which

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Hans Jonas, 1980 photo. By Omri Sharon. Reprinted courtesy of Lore Jonas.

the human subject is radically distinct from God or being and from nature. The middle stage represents an attempt to overcome dualism. The final period, characterized by the “heuristics of fear,” is generally a treatment of problems occasioned by technology and the contemporary world that must be addressed for a satisfying and philosophical human life to remain possible.

The interviewer’s acquaintance with the work of Hans Jonas began when he was an undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Jonas’s work is characterized by its seriousness of purpose in the search for truth and by its clarity of expression. The extracts from the interview published here cannot, and were not intended to do justice to the beauty to be found in Professor Jonas’s books and articles, most of which amply repay repeated reading.

On the occasion of the centenary of Professor Jonas’s birth, *Social Research* decided that the publication of portions of the interview transcript would provide a suitable, although hardly adequate, commemoration of Professor Jonas’s legacy.

Liberties have been taken with the wording of the interviewer’s questions (some have been shortened and made more intelligible), as well as with the sequence of the conversation. The transcript printed represents approximately one-third of the entire transcript. Professor Jonas’s words have been emended as little as possible, but they have in some cases been altered by the interviewer to make the English more idiomatic. Minor grammatical infelicities, redundancies, a tendency to use German word order, and the anacoloutha that are inevitable in prolonged and somewhat informal oral discourse have been removed. Words in brackets have been supplied by the interviewer to complete the sense of a passage or to indicate nonverbal actions. In no case has the editorial process described occasioned any material distortion of Prof. Jonas’s meaning.

—Harvey Scodel

*I. Biographical/The Economy of Life/Theory and Practice*

*Question: I wonder if you could tell me something about the extent of your Jewish education before you went to Palestine.*

Jonas: I come from a Jewish family where a certain liberal Judaism was practiced in the house. We observed the High Holidays, and occasionally a Sabbath service on Friday nights. But we had religious instruction and my father played a certain role in the Jewish *Gemeinde*, synagogue. I had a great uncle, the uncle of my father, who was the embodiment of pious Judaism, a great authority and much venerated among the Jews of my hometown. But the general tendency of my parents was that of assimilation into German society, especially the values of German culture. I mean every well-educated Jewish bourgeois, and most of the Jews of Germany were of the middle class, of the better middle-class, had their libraries, knew their classics, Goethe and Schiller and so on.

And then I grew up during the First World War. I was 11 when it started and 16 or 15 when it ended. One was patriotic, very German, and always with a consciousness that one was still alien somehow, was not fully accepted, was not fully integrated, that there was anti-Semitism, that there was social and professional discrimination, that one could not get into the civil service. Without baptism, it was very difficult for Jews to become professors, *realen* professors at the university, and so on. But in the decisive formative years of my adolescence, let's say during the last three years of high school, from the years of 15 to 18, I turned to Zionism. . . . You see, after the so-called German revolution of 1918, very soon the voices of anti-Semitism, of real hatred of the Jews, rose in Germany. The level of anti-Semitism was rising, was impossible to ignore. And my answer to that was very early the Zionist answer, to the great consternation of my father, who saw the goal of German Jews in an entirely different direction, namely in their final happy integration into German life.

But as to knowledge of Judaism, I had a fairly good knowledge of Judaism, of the Bible, of the so-called Old Testament, partly in

Hebrew, but mostly in translation. I had gone on with my Hebrew beyond religious school, and in the last three years of school I chose Hebrew instead of English as an optional language. The class was taught by a Catholic theologian for future theology students among the graduating classes, and I made it my business to make myself as familiar as possible with Jewish things, present and past, Jewish history, Jewish literature, and Jewish concerns, without that interfering with my growing interest in something supranational, namely philosophy, and in a way very German, because the philosophy, the philosophical things I read as an adolescent, I think they were all German, Kant and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. . . . Maybe Henri Bergson I read in translation. But generally, my philosophical reading was in German to begin with.

*In your last years of gymnasium you were already reading Nietzsche, Schopenhauer . . . ?*

Yes. And one essay by Kant which tremendously influenced, impressed, and determined me: *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, *Foundation of Metaphysics of Morals*, which had, well, an almost determining influence on my life because it fixed in a way for all time the idea, the secret idea I have of ethics, of a philosophical ethics. Later this impression was very much modified by my getting to know Aristotle. But this Kantian inspiration somehow stayed with me.

*Could you comment on your evaluation of, and your experience with, Husserl? I had noticed that he barely appears anywhere [in your writings]. I got the impression that you would regard him as a neo-Kantian.*

No, that would not be fair to him. He stays in the neo-Kantian [sphere], namely that philosophy means, in the last analysis, theory of consciousness and theory of knowledge, because the consciousness that Husserl was interested in was essentially cognitive consciousness. I mean, he conceded that there are other areas, like emotions, but what he really worked in were the cognitive acts. Well, I am not effusive about Husserl, but . . . I was as a young

student very greatly impressed by Husserl and I learned a good deal. Only, I think this is the entrance into philosophy; this is not the whole way of philosophy.

Description of the acts of consciousness, the analysis, intentional analysis and so on, it's a splendid school, it's a splendid training for philosophical attentiveness and dedication to what is there, to the evidence, to the record that things give of themselves, that one has to see what is there, and then have the differentiated tools, verbal, logical, and conceptual tools to describe this and refrain from constructing theories about it. Well, that is a splendid school, but it is not where philosophy stops. I think the philosopher has to go beyond this, because what is given in consciousness, apart from itself, in reflection, is the world, and Husserl did not offer, I would say, an approach to the world. He offered an approach to introspection, not to reality in its rawness.

For instance, I will give you an example. With Husserlian means, with Husserlian phenomenology, you may give a wonderful account of what you experience with the feeling of hunger, and perhaps also a very good description of what you experience with the stilling of hunger, with the satisfaction of your need for food . . . of what conscious phenomena are involved there. But this account is unable to raise the question, How much does the body need? Man must eat. How much? In proportion to the size of his body, and in proportion to the size of the environment. That in a great degree determines the human condition and is of fundamental importance. And in phenomenology you haven't the descriptive categories to deal with that question. There, you have to enter into a quite humble relationship, a knowing relationship with what science tells you. Why is there a recurrent feeling of hunger? I may phenomenologically give a very good account of what the experience of taste is, and of quenching of thirst, and so on, but it is an entirely different thing to know how much liquid my body needs and when lack of liquid becomes a danger.

So, now there, in my student days, I took a leaf from the Marxists. They posed questions, and they concentrated on facts and

problems with which phenomenology has no means of dealing. Should philosophy ignore the facts of our dependence on nature? Should philosophy ignore in what sense and to what extent we are enmeshed in the processes of nature and ignore the function of these processes? This is so essential for an understanding of our reality that a philosophy which puts its main, its sole emphasis on the self-examination of consciousness is certainly not the whole story. And it becomes sterile in the long run.

*I am a little bit surprised. . . . What was going on in Marxism during your student days? What teachers were there, or were there any?*

At the university? Teachers? Hardly any. No, that was amongst students. I knew of one teacher in Heidelberg, [Karl] Mannheim, who had been a revolutionary socialist, and had become part of the academic establishment but was still . . . intellectually a leftist. There were a few such, mostly Jews, and somewhat marginal, somewhat outsiders. No, no, you learned about Marxism from other students, from organized students.

*To what extent do you conceive of philosophy's task as being equivalent to the formula of "saving the phenomena?"*

[Pauses]. No, the task is not equivalent. "Saving the phenomena" meant that an account, intellectually satisfying, must also save the phenomena, that is, must not repress or leave certain phenomena out of the account. "Saving the phenomena" was not the aim but was a necessary injunction on philosophy. It must "save the phenomena. . . ." It must in the first place offer an intellectually satisfying, intrinsically coherent account of the sum total of reality, of the whole, or sometimes of a particular province of it, let's say of the city. But it is not allowed to buy this intellectual bliss or satisfaction at the cost of not letting the phenomena fully have their own say. So, that is, if it turns out that such an account is intellectually elegant and logically satisfactory only at the cost of ignoring this or that part of the record, or even violates certain evidence, then there arises the imperative of "saving the phe-

nomena. . . .” That is how I understand it. It’s not the main aim of philosophy. It’s a qualifying condition for claiming any particular fulfillment of that aim.

*I want to get to the question of the extent to which your criticism of Ernst Bloch [in The Imperative of Responsibility] is also an implied praise.*

Well, the book of Bloch was very influential, and it had a symbolic significance for the state of the post-Hitler German mind. . . . It was the big banner around which a younger generation could flock. And what I really aimed at was not so much Bloch, but utopianism, utopianism in any form. And Bloch seemed to be the most eloquent, and the most influential spokesman of utopianism at the time, and also the frankest one, the one who frankly confessed to utopia. So, he was a good anti-figure in my effort to steer the hearts and minds of people away from the magic of utopia and to the much less inspiring but so urgent goal of preserving our estate inviolate, or as little injured as possible, which is not an inspiring goal, as the heuristics of fear is not an inspiring thing, while the love of the highest good is wonderful and inspirational. So, I had to have a counterpole who had his own eloquence and was, and this was important, was unashamedly a utopian. I think I call him once the enfant terrible of contemporary socialism because he had the naïveté to call the thing by its name. “This is the fulfillment, this is where man will come to his perfection, reach the highest good.” Generally, in the socialist literature of the time, that almost transcendent language was no longer used.

*Is there a connection between your shift to writing in English and the changed emphasis in your work after the gnosis studies?*

Absolutely right, yes. That is quite convincing. As a matter of fact, I would have difficulty expressing myself in German in the context of modern science. I was so used to reading this in English. Everything I know about the evolution of modern science, well actually since the seventeenth century, since the time of Galileo, I know from English sources. I don’t think that I’ve ever

read a history of science in German. Perhaps occasionally. I think I read one book by Heisenberg in German. My whole contact with the fields of physics, mathematics, biology, and astronomy is overwhelmingly through the medium of the English language, and so in this realm it's natural for me, and even easier for me, to think in English first, and I would have to make an effort to express myself in German. So you are quite right with your guess that the change of subject somehow also facilitated the change of location, because I was living in an English-speaking realm, but the change of subject matter also had its share in this switch to English.

[The *Imperative of Responsibility* was written in German and then translated into English with Jonas's strong participation, primarily in order to save time, according to Jonas. He wanted to be sure that the book, the first German edition of which was published in 1979, when Jonas was 76-years-old, would be finished before he died.]

*In light of the anxiety, frankly, about your mortality, you say you felt when you came to write The Imperative of Responsibility, it must have come as something of a surprise to you that you've lived as long as you have.*

Yeah. I was, I have always been conscious of my mortality. I had not anticipated . . . that I would become as old as I have become, that I would live so long. I was considered, well, not of strong constitution. . . . Schmuael Sambursky . . . died at the age of 90 or 91. I don't remember whether he was born in 1900 or 1899. He was several years older than I. He lasted very long, but they all are dying now. The whole circle in Jerusalem is gone. Scholem, Ernst Zimmern, . . . Schmuael Sambursky, all of them. . . . And, well, about death I think it is [chuckles], it is natural and proper for life to have an end. And the whole idea of going on and on and on is deeply repugnant to me. I think it flies in the face of what life is about. Its finiteness, its finitude belongs to it. . . . Under the pressure of temporality and finitude . . . we have to make place again for new and young life that sees the world afresh with its own eyes and can therefore go beyond us. Therefore, I have noth-

ing against mortality. Of course, I have a lot against premature death. That's a different thing. And that can be very tragic and very sad. But death, I think, is described in the Bible, "And he was assembled to his forebears old and sated with days." "Sated with days," one can be sated with days.

*Do you think that the many people who have purchased The Imperative of Responsibility have actually read it? It is a difficult book, after all.*

Read all chapters? Look, with how many books have we done that? I know I could name a number of books which I really have read more than once in their entirety. But there aren't so many. In many even very important books one selects one's chapters or one's passages or one's subdivisions, or don't you do that?

*I feel that it's better not to start if I can't read the entire book.*

Yes, that's a very nice attitude, but I don't think you can in the long run live with that. I'll give you one example in my case. . . . I am a great admirer, a worshiper almost of Spinoza, and have studied *The Ethics* again and again. But even today (and that die is now cast), I have not read everything in it. I haven't read all the propositions and demonstrations. I know the trend of the argument. I know certain stages of the argument which are stunning but at the same time are open to very severe criticism, as is always the case with Spinoza. But I haven't had the time and strength to do it page-by-page and proposition-by-proposition and demonstration-by-demonstration, and so on. Certain of the demonstrations I may have passed by, partly in the certainty which I gained in my study that the demonstrations are by no means conclusive, that they are beset by a mortal weakness in logic. So that to study them all would be superfluous. But this is one example where I value a work in the highest degree and yet haven't gotten around to reading every word of it. And this is even so with the great Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which I have again and again studied and taught in seminars and so on. There are still certain stretches in it which I have bypassed. I have a brief impression of what they are

about and said, "Well, I can save myself the trouble, the time of doing that."

*Remarks Concerning the Relationship of Theory and Practice.*

Jonas: If I have enjoyed one particular advantage of living in New Rochelle, it was the familiar, intimate association with mathematicians. New Rochelle has a mathematicians' colony, and the way of thinking of mathematicians is that a problem invites solution because it is there. It is not that we want to solve the problem in order now to increase our capacity to deal with things, but it belongs to the internal logic of mathematical cognition that it demands the solutions of the problems, and the solutions consist in proofs, which the field itself generates. But we could desist from that by leaving our fingers off the field. Sure, we need applied mathematics in our dealings with nature. We wouldn't have a modern technology without a wonderful mathematical apparatus, but to be a helpmate to other pursuits is not what motivated mathematicians in the first place, and still animates the great mathematicians today. I concede that the solution of certain equations is required so that we can design a proper profile for the wing of an airplane. Without it, we will botch the job or come up with something of inferior performance. But that is not in the spirit of mathematics itself. Its usefulness is at some remove from its own original impulse and motivation. . . .

*One way of characterizing that article ["Socio-Economic Knowledge and Ignorance of Goals," reprinted in Jonas's Philosophical Essays] was to say, "Economists really have to become philosophers. They have to be concerned with ends, and this so-called scientific reticence about ends is a misunderstanding of the scientific enterprise." Why shouldn't it follow, conversely, that philosophers have to become economists?*

I would be all for philosophers being something else in addition to being philosophers, that is, for their being competent in some positive science. However, that economics is a positive science is doubtful, in my estimation. But to know, to be competent in

physics or chemistry or astronomy, that philosophers be in touch with some tangible reality in which there is solid knowledge and there are methods of increasing knowledge, of securing proof and so on, sure. I don't think that philosophy divorced from all positive [science], that sheer generality, is a healthy thing. That is also one of the reasons why I mistrust any idealistic contracting of the philosophical enterprise into theory of consciousness. The world has to be taken in, and it cannot be taken in only secondhand. There must be some intimacy, some familiarity with certain provinces of reality. For instance, a philosopher, if he is not competent in one of the natural sciences, should be a good historian, he must have some knowledge of, and practice in dealing with historical data such as past philosophies. Why do you think [that economics is so important]? . . . Well, nowadays perhaps economics, in particular, would not be a bad thing in a philosopher. I don't know. I am so untalented in the field of economics and so little interested that I [laughs] . . . that the idea doesn't appeal to me. But surely, there is always something to be said for [the idea] that the philosopher not be merely a generalist.

## *II. The Biology/Psychophysical Problem*

*In reviewing what you had to say about the teleological thrust of nature, I came to the conclusion that the argument basically turns, at both extremes, that of the transition from inorganic matter to the very first organism, and at the other extreme, that of the origin of the human brain and of thinking, on the possibility of a metabasis eis allo genos ("transition to another kind of being"). And that you are relying on the assumption of a principle of continuity.*

In the first place, I want to avoid any dualistic trick in accounting for this, how should I say, happening together of body on the one side and mind on the other, as if two different realms meet there. This has never . . . made good sense to me, though I concede that assumptions of this kind were very helpful in first extri-

cating the phenomenon of mind and consciousness . . . from the general record of reality and in focusing attention on this dimension of the mind, as distinct from matter. But to hypostatize this into two different things, two different entities, which have per se an existence independent of each other, and only come together either by design or by accident, by a divine act of ensouling or in some other manner come together in the specific case of human brains, of human brains being there ready to receive, to serve, as it were, as vessels for a mind which, on the other side of the divide, also stands . . . ready to enter such a vessel, this account of things violates a basic insight into the intimacy . . . of the connection of mind, a consciousness, with its body, to which it uniquely belongs.

Also, the continuity of evolution, the presumed continuity, in which there is a gradual ascent from apparently unconscious organisms to more and more obviously conscious ones, suggests that there is an essential connection between mode of organization of matter, on the one hand, and degrees of inwardness or presence of a subjective dimension on the other. And an account of the phenomenon of life, of organic entities, their behavior and the way of their being, which, as it were, methodically brackets out what we happen to know from introspection about what it is to be a subject exposed to the needs and risks of the world [cannot be correct]. And any such clear-cut bracketing out of the inner side leaves us . . . [in the lurch], although it may be, incidentally, very useful for getting a clear record of what is there on the side of the *res extensa*, of the quantifiable modes of existence which we connect with physics, with matter. But this cannot be more than . . . a temporary bracketing out of the other side, whose presence is not accidental but an essential aspect of the being of such things, and therefore something which must belong to the potentialities of nature from the beginning, which is not something added extra-neously to it. So this was the general tendency. To give a monistic account, but not in favor of one of the two sides, not an option for A or B, but, if possible, an understanding of their both belonging

to a full inventory of reality. That is, for a doctrine of being, for a theory of being, account must be taken of the phenomenon of life, however rare it may be in the universe. . . .

*Is the scientific expectation of explaining the phenomena of consciousness neurophysiologically doomed to failure?*

One has to specify what is meant by failure. What fails? Certainly, the attempt to correlate neurophysiological processes with certain states and events of consciousness can make indefinite progress. We may get better correlations there. But then the question, the thought obtrudes itself that there is an enormous superfluity there if we can give a complete account, a nonteleological account, of brain processes.

Let's stay with the brain and disregard the rest of the organism, but only for the moment. One cannot do this in seriousness. If we can give a complete account of . . . all the sequences, of brain states following upon brain states following upon brain states, then it is obviously unnecessary that this brain also has any consciousness of what is going on, because perforce the same result, the same performance is assured by the mere functioning of the physical causes alone. So what is the role of the subjective accompaniment, the violin accompanying the piano or the other way around? One cannot now come with the argument that the presence of consciousness somehow facilitates the functioning of brain processes, in other words, that it has a survival value. It can in evolutionary terms be explained as something which gives a certain advantage to the possessors of this dimension over such as do not have it. But then one has awarded causal efficacy to the presence of consciousness, and with this you have stepped out of the premises of the whole conception, of the whole materialistic-scientific conception. You are not allowed to do that. A dualist may do so, but a materialist is not allowed to ascribe to the subjective events, or to the whole subjective dimension, any causal efficacy. . . . It [can] only accompany that cause of things, and as

an entirely powerless, harmless, innocent, but self-relishing accompaniment.

But that doesn't make sense. That is obviously a self-defeating view of the matter. You have denied any evolution, any survival advantage to the possession of an awareness of the world. All that is needed is what looks like awareness but in fact is a sensitivity, an irritability of certain areas of the brain via certain sense organs, via certain nerves, and then certain organs like the retina of the eye and so on, a sensitivity to certain configurations or happenings of the outside world and the production of the proper response to it by outward-going nerves which operate motility, muscles, limbs, and so on, and leads to a certain behavior of the organism. There is nothing in this chain which requires the presence of an awareness, and the contrary really: the awareness is, as we must at the same time declare, a constant lie to itself because it views itself, as it were, as involved in the cause of things by, for instance, consciously withdrawing or consciously going after something, while in fact this all takes place without its help. It has always struck me as completely meaningless, to see this way.

This was my trouble with Spinoza, you see. Spinoza's ontological attempt is far superior to Descartes's. He does not say there are two substances, which in the case of man come together, but there are two different attributes of one substance, and their relation is that of complete parallelism. . . . The changes or the events in these two attributes in a given case, the same mode of universal substance which can be described in terms of the attribute of extension as this body, must in terms of the attribute of thought be described in such-and-such terms, as a mere parallel. But this strictly noninteractionalist model somehow defeats the idea of mind itself. One can show that the real account which Spinoza gives of what goes on is always in terms of the body. And the mind is not more than a reflection of what goes on in the body. They are not of equal status in the explanation of things. For the completeness of the account, they are both needed, but for the explanation of why the next movement of this body is this and not that

there is no need to resort to mind. And mind, since it is defined as the idea of an individual body (you remember), mind is there dependent on body, and not the other way around. So, Spinoza's heroic attempt at getting the two together as two aspects of the same reality does not really stand scrutiny. But I consider this one of the most serious attempts made in ontology to come to . . . a theory of the organism.

But the absolute exclusion of ends from the ontological account makes the whole thing incomprehensible as far as mind is concerned, as far as consciousness is concerned. Spinoza is very emphatic: he says body cannot be moved by anything but body, and mind cannot be moved by anything but mind. There is no crossing over, as it were. Well, the presence, therefore, of goal-directedness in the tableau of nature, and it is there, it is just there as a phenomenon of inwardness [gives the lie to Spinoza's conception]. . . . And some conviction that there is nothing completely in vain in nature, that there is nothing which is of no consequence whatsoever, because as some modern thinkers say, matter organized in certain complexity and carrying out certain operations, certain programmed work, computer-like programs, is by that very fact an appearance of consciousness, that formula is an act of evasion. This is as if to say, "If you have a sufficiently complex setup of, let us say microchips, then you will also have consciousness as one of the accompanying attributes." It makes its appearance there, but it doesn't have a function, and is even accompanied by an illusion, namely, as if it had a function, fancies itself to have a function. That is not what one can call a serious and responsible ontological doctrine because it's somehow tongue-in-cheek. . . . You see, . . . the fact that certain entities called animals feel, that they can experience pain and pleasure and fear and desire and anxiety and fury, there must be something to it. And what is there to it? A concern in being. That far Spinoza went. That to be means at the same time a *nisus* ["striving"] towards continuing in being. Without the attribution of such a term, the whole thing makes no sense, but as soon as it is

included, you have already trespassed on the strict Cartesian boundaries. . . .

*Were we to develop a monistic theory of organism fully, should we then speak of "mind" and "matter" only in a contingent, methodological way? In other words, the transitivity of mind on the body implies, perhaps, that mind is material in some way. Correspondingly, the nisus of nature implies something quasi-mental, even in the lowest form of organism, so that the whole distinction between mind and matter is merely contingent and we should speak properly only of organism or substance or being.*

Well, I would say that, in the vast majority of cases, when one makes a survey of what there is in the universe, one can ignore mind. It doesn't make much sense, though Whitehead did ask exactly that: What do molecules or electrons feel? How do they experience their being? According to Whitehead, they *are* experiences. Not only do they have them, but they are occasions of feeling. That's Whitehead's formula for the ultimate entities, I think he calls them. The most elementary entities are instances of feeling, and he in that respect comes close to Leibniz's *Monadology*: that the corporeality is a compound appearance of what is, in its true essence, somehow a mental event.

But generally speaking, . . . if we do not venture on such speculations, . . . when we speak about how a galaxy forms, and about how, within the galaxy, out of nebulae, of primeval nebulous matter there form stars, [all of] this is pure physics. But . . . it may be that, not in 9 out of 10 but in 999 of 1,000 of [cases], almost all of the universe can be described and can be done justice to in these terms.

It is only with such entities as we encounter here on earth, entities such as we are in the first place ourselves, and given in original self-experience, but also which we experience around us in the likes of us and everything that is alive, that the necessity of widening the categories of our description arises. So, why is this something so rare, if the possibility of it belongs to the nature of matter. . . ? And I have no answer to that. That is something which

one has to take as a given. The universe is vast, the earth is very small. We know by now that in the solar system we are probably alone, that the earth is alone as a home for life, that the possibility is not offered on other planets, and we may have the suspicion that we are also in the wider universe a very, very rare exception—perhaps even unique, but certainly a rare exception, which is a somewhat disquieting thought to many. Why is there a universe, vast, lifeless, hostile to life and we are here lonely, solitary, as something without which all the rest of the universe carries on perfectly happily [laughs]? There is something disquieting in the comparison of the vastness of the universe and the minimal size of life in it. How minimal it is, we don't know, but that it is minimal, that much we know already. Now, there everybody is free to entertain his own metaphysical speculation concerning what to make of this, but that is pretty idle. I mean, one does that in idle hours. When it comes to serious business, one deals with given facts and phenomena. One deals with the fact that we are here and are so and so, that life is there and is so and so, that it makes this difference, to be alive or not to be alive, and tries to interpret these given facts, and the wider context is an area for conjectures.

My own conjecture is that everywhere within the depths of matter there is a kind of waiting for the opportunity to also unfold the potentiality for life. The opportunity is very rare, but wherever it opens itself up, matter, as it were, will shoot into this opening and go the way of life. And the rarity of this opportunity occurring, of being offered, is not a matter of speculation for me. But the fact that opportunity . . . opens itself has been demonstrated here on earth, and there is no reason to assume that it is not something for which there is original readiness in the nature of substance itself, in the nature of matter itself, but in that case matter is not merely that which physical science confines itself to describing. It has, from the beginning, something more to it than what is necessary for its description as long as life is not there. But it must have this something more so that, given the opportunity, life will come forth from matter, and with life will open up a dimension of subjectivity. Now, this last statement may

be challenged as a dogmatic and unsupported contention, namely, that all life has an inner dimension, a dimension of inwardness. And surely, this cannot be proved, nor can it be disproved. But, considering the rise of something like consciousness and the dimmest stirring of some difference of feeling this way or that way, of being satisfied or being in search of something, this already testifies to some inwardness, some subjective dimension. . . . When we go down the ladder of evolution, we will surely come to levels where, . . . since we cannot interrogate these organisms, we [will be unable to] discover this dimension of inwardness, but the denial of it is arbitrary. And the assumption of it is somewhat more plausible. . . . I suspect it in plants, too. The assumption must not be abused for causal explanation, that the plant or the animal does this now because it has surveyed the situation and has decided to choose this as a goal and acts accordingly. This anthropomorphic abuse of the idea of goal-directedness and therefore of some inwardness, of concern, of interest, is unphilosophical and much too naïve. But no gradualism dispenses of the need to make sense of the fact that at the one end of the gradation there is something which manifestly is of a different sort than what is needed to describe the situation at the other end of the spectrum. . . . It can perhaps at no stage come to an absolute “no.” I am staying now with organisms. Whitehead was far beyond. For Whitehead, any occurrence of reality has something organic.

But I think this is an overreaching of speculation. Not that it's necessarily wrong, false, but it's uncalled for by the record of reality. That, at least within the organic world, that there may be an infinitely gradated presence of inwardness along the whole series, that is to me the most plausible assumption, the most plausible hypothesis. Its causal role becomes greater and greater the more articulated and outspoken this presence becomes. . . . Disregarding now the question of how this goes together with the determinism of natural law, I am completely free at this moment to decide whether I will continue talking to you or not. This makes quite a difference. . . . The presence or absence of con-

sciousness makes a difference. There, one has to acknowledge an additional causality in addition to the random selection processes.

*Is it your belief, nonetheless, that the scientific method is adequate to its aims and should not be altered?*

Yeah, that is my view, indeed. I think they will not only be justified, but they will also be wise in sticking to their guns, to their program, because that really guarantees, ensures a certain success, which is not the complete knowledge of things, but the knowledge in the defined orbit which they have staked out. I will illustrate this with a comparison. To have this view, to apply this view for instance to the course of human history, or to a description of a particular historical act, would be foolish. Nobody would even try to describe what is going on between nations and between governments and governed and between parties and so on, or among individuals, what moved Caesar to cross the Rubicon or to begin the civil war and so on . . . no one would even try to describe[these things] in materialistic terms— materialistic not in the sense that material interests moved them (material interests are also interests, that's historical materialism, not to be confounded with physical materialism), but to describe such things in terms of brain processes and neural events and organic transactions like metabolism and breathing, . . . nobody would even try that, that's nonsense. So there this method is not at home, and nobody needs to be warned against it, and nobody needs to be admonished to look at the subjective, the mental, and emotional aspects of the matter. Nobody needs that admonishment. It's self-understood. On the other hand, what every biologist sets out to do has nothing to do with that. . . .

*I had in mind . . . to talk a little bit about philosophy of religion.*  
What is meant by that?

*Well, you've taken it upon yourself on a couple of occasions to speak in behalf of theology, as though theologians can no longer do it for themselves.*

[see, for example, *Philosophical Essays*; "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice," *The Journal of Religion* 67:1 (January 1987) [also in German: "Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 1987]; "Response to James M. Gustafson," reprinted in *Knowing and Valuing: The Search for Common Roots, The Hastings Center, 1980.*]

Well, I'm not so sure that I will be a very willing partner in that . . . I have a bit of resistance to making this a topic of conversation. . . .

As a religious person, I would say that God, but not nature, has a stake in our existence. There, I would agree that it's blind. Can't even say that it doesn't care. It's not the kind of being to which one can ascribe caring or not caring. But within nature caring arises and has its place, its home, its seat, in whole communities of being. One can say that in an enormous variety of settings there is care and that things do make a difference, and that according to this difference action also occurs. And why should . . . nature be denied the acknowledgment of a merit in this, because, after all, it is nature which has let us arise? Either you can say "has allowed us to arise" or it has "*made* us arise," which makes a bit more sense to me, because the mere allowing somehow smuggles in another agent which then exploits this allowance, makes use of it. But it made us . . . a concurrence of natural causes has made beings like us arise. Therefore, they have a place, they belong to the account of nature. I mean, matter must be given the credit for that. That is perhaps a blunt way of saying it. Matter must be given the credit it deserves for letting arise, or making arise beings endowed with a sense of interest, and so on, and so on, and so on. . . . And if you *credit* matter with this, you have said something about hidden properties of matter at which you can only guess. But there must be hidden properties, hidden because in the raw states of matter they don't show at all. They are hidden, they are hidden from our eyes, but they must be there because, else, matter could not have produced us. Us, I mean not only us, a rat, an insect. . . .

### *III. The Riddle of Jonas's Place in American Intellectual Life*

*Can you explain why The Imperative of Responsibility has not found a wider audience in America?*

[Pauses]. Not really. I mean, I have a feeling that this was to be expected but I couldn't tell you why. My feeling is that this is quite in keeping with what America is, with what the American mind is. But if you want me to articulate this, I feel at a loss. Also, I don't think I have the right to judge the American mind. It is pretentious and conceited to say, "The Americans are unphilosophical," or "They haven't got the taste, the bent for real philosophy." The power of education, of a particular education, of course is very great. And this particular education here in America has gone in another direction for a long time, but this merely shifts the question. The question is why. Why does it go so strongly in this positivistic way? I suppose that an intelligent student of history could come up with an answer to that question.

But, as far as I am concerned, I cannot change myself. I have tried my best to make myself intelligible here. And also, I've tried to take account of what is considered important here. And I think the natural sciences *are* considered important. I mean not just the epistemological aspect but the content, what they really tell us and the broad view which they offer us. And I think in this respect I have become very much a Westerner. I am not what my contemporaries in Germany have remained, those [contemporaries] of my student years who all are dying now. They have stayed to the end with the orientation they received in their student days, be it under Heidegger, under Husserl, under Jaspers, or Nicolai Hartmann or Cassirer or Scheler, great ones, middle ones. They stayed with this general outlook, with this general emphasis and approach to philosophical questions, and *I have changed*. I mean, there's no doubt in some respect that emigration and the translocations of my life and my final location here in the American, Anglo-Saxon world have wrought quite a change in my style of philosophizing. But still, there remains a

gap, not only between what I can do and like to do and what is being done here, but even a gap between, well, I would say, between styles of thinking. . . .

*What do you make of the fact, if it is a fact, that the French version of hermeneutics has become so dominant in American academic circles, and to my mind has almost taken over the humanities temporarily?*

Temporarily, yes. Well, for one thing, America is very prone to fashions. . . . Now, about the French version of this original German growth, German product, hermeneutics and this further development into deconstruction, I'm not very well informed about it, but the little I have come to know about it makes it impossible for me to take it very seriously. But that was not your question. Your question was how do I account for its predominance at the moment here in America, and I would first say that it has the advantage of being entirely different, of being Continental philosophy and different from what is at home here, without being German. In its pure German form it was unacceptable, partly for political reasons, and the great unpopularity of anything German, for which there are many little proofs, would have disqualified it from a great impact here. But via the French it somehow became kosher. Then, the French have a great talent for making things sound, look very interesting—intellectually or aesthetically exciting. Indeed, it is [interesting], I mean compared with the boredom of analytical philosophy, the terrible boredom of analytical philosophy. Just think of young students, it's not so far back for you, who would not have turned to philosophy if there had not been some offerings in philosophy other than the reigning logical positivism.

*What about looking at it from the other side? What are the conditions, do you think, which caused The Imperative of Responsibility apparently to be so successful in Germany [the book has reportedly sold approximately 200,000 copies, most in the German editions]?*

Enormously, enormously successful. Well, several things, as far as I can tell. For one thing, it came at a very propitious moment.

Minds were just opening. Eyes were opening and minds were opening up in that direction and waiting for something to be said. Apparently it came at the right moment, because it was an immediate hit. Then, it profited a great deal from what up to now we have said I had little of measured by American standards, namely from what I had learned in the Western environment, and by Western I mean anything west of Germany, but especially, well, Anglo-Saxon. Because, after all, it did bridge something. It took natural science and what it is doing for us very seriously, much more seriously than German philosophy is used to doing.

It at the same time showed that this is a challenge to philosophy, to what the Germans had always prided themselves on. That philosophy has to discharge a certain task . . . and to answer the main question which is posed to us here: the awareness of a crisis, of an impending crisis, or a threatening crisis. We are perhaps more attuned to sounds of warning because the German experience had sharpened the sense for what can go on and shown that timely warning has a very important role to play. Also, it was written in a quaint, powerful German, uncontaminated by the whole inheritance of the last 50 years. It was from before the Fall, it was from before the Hitler interlude. And it apparently exercised a great spell. . . . The German for which I apologized in my preface . . . is very old-fashioned German, . . . [and this German] is perhaps not inappropriate for an old-fashioned way of arguing in ethical and metaphysical matters. And it is quite possible that a captivating aspect of the book [was to break through] the cacophony of a German which had gone through the linguistic defilement, and then the aftermath of the Nazi period. . . . It was in a way a reinstitution of a certain classical tradition in philosophy and in speaking German. But this is conjecture on my part.

*There's a sense in which you're taking Marxism extremely seriously, of course, which again may not have the right kind of resonance in America.*

Yeah, that could be. But you [laughs] have noticed a tendency to ask me questions which I do not feel really qualified or competent to answer, where I can have at best some conjectures, . . . but

it's very difficult for me to say. . . . I can only say that I didn't foresee that the book would have this kind of success in Germany. It came as a surprise to me, a very pleasant surprise. All right. But that was not the purpose of the book. . . . Has the purpose of the book been benefited by the success? And this is a serious question.

*I'm glad you asked it [laughs].*

#### *IV. Population/Policy*

Jonas: Yeah, I have some faint hopes there, little faith, but some hope, that such an impact is perhaps not quite without consequence in the sphere of policy making, be it on the governmental level or on the level of company management. So many people have been forced to take note of the book. . . . And the basic facts on which the book rests . . . are not contested by anybody. I mean there are differences of opinion in the evaluation of this or that factor, but on the whole it's accepted, namely that we are in hot water, that we'd better take stock and do something about it before it's too late. There's no one who says, we can ignore that, this will right itself automatically. But how far does this unanimity or this influence go beyond lip service? I wish I knew.

*The paradox is that you're meeting with a kind of mass success in a democratic society. What you want and need primarily is the attentive ear of Helmut Kohl, or Helmut Schmidt, or Willy Brandt. . . .*

Which I have, incidentally. Among the Social Democrats in Germany I have a very high rating. And I met with all of them, with Helmut Schmidt, with Willy Brandt . . .

*Right, so what does Helmut Schmidt, just for example, what kind of prospect does he hold out for either Germany or the West undertaking the kind of self-abnegation, on the one hand, and altruism, on the other, that will be required?*

I haven't asked him that, but I know that he sees the prospects for the next century in somber and dramatic colors. I was recently on a symposium with him. There was, I don't know whether the name Marianne Donhoff [means anything to you], Countess Donhoff, who is the chief editor of the most prestigious German weekly, *Die Zeit*, and she had her eightieth birthday recently and there was a small gathering of about 15, 16 people. . . . And Helmut Schmidt spoke there and in tones very, very similar to mine, [about] what the pressing problems are which really go beyond ideological differences and beyond the question of what will come in place of communism, [about], for instance, the population question, which is a biological colossus moving by its own momentum and which threatens absolutely terrible things. Unlike myself, he has a wonderful head for figures. He was able to quote certain extrapolations, certain statistical figures ahead for 20 years and 30 years. . . . But I don't think he has a formula either. What really can be done? But that it has to be more and more supranational, that's evident, that's absolutely evident.

*I had the impression that you could not countenance in principle the practical steps which would necessarily involve interference with human desire, the desire to reproduce . . . [if human population growth is to be reduced].*

Oh, no, no. That's a real misunderstanding. And recently, in a short review of a German book [that I wrote] in German, I even came out with the two requirements for coping with the pending global ecological crisis, namely, a diminishing (a) of the number of people and (b) of their level of consumption. Both. Without this, we won't be able to avoid a catastrophic, or at least a very, very serious and hurtful crisis, a biological and economic crisis on this planet. And how can one achieve this? I don't see.

*If, ideologically, one can say to one's citizens, "We want you to bear," one can equally say "We don't want you to bear." I don't see the problem.*

Yeah, but from what standpoint can one recommend a policy? If it is from a starting point of a stable population, you can say we

must now aim at a decrease. Since we are in the situation of a global population explosion, our next goal is to stop the explosion. It is an overburdening of, let's say, the political problematics of this whole thing, if one initially sets a goal which is already one or two steps ahead of what has to be done first. What has to be done first is to . . . reduce the expansion. It would already be a great victory if we could achieve stabilization within 20 years. Then, . . . maybe within that time the general social [climate], . . . minds will have progressed to a readiness to consider even a reduction. It's no use to set that goal at a time when we are moving in the opposite direction. . . . And I think it is a much more acceptable goal to tell people, "Let's restrain ourselves and let's not increase our existing problems of overpopulation." That will go down much better than telling them, "Now we[must] start shrinking." But that's a matter of policy, isn't it? What is ultimately necessary, in my opinion, is that population decline. But, surely there is a certain sequence in doing that.

*That is why I had asked at what point in the crisis you would, as a moral philosopher, accept the necessity of an authoritarian regime.*

I would accept it any time it's clear that it can't be done without it. But we haven't tried. We can't say that we have reached the point where all possible avenues of getting, at least, to equilibrium, let's say of population, and to equilibrium between mankind and environment have been exhausted, or even tried. So, I wouldn't rush into the authoritarian or dictatorial solution, but . . . if nothing else works. . . . Anyway, when it comes to the extreme conditions to which things are drifting, then we won't have any choice left, then democracy and liberty will end under the sheer pressure of distress. . . .

*No, I said first we try incentives and disincentives, and among the disincentives would be trading disincentives, cutting off aid and all of the kinds of things that you mentioned. But suppose that doesn't work. I'm already thinking ahead to the necessity of these authoritarian methods in order to save the human species, which is your main concern.*

Or save, also, a decent level of existence for that species. We can imagine all kinds of miserable continuations of the biological existence of the species. All right, look, let's contemplate two scenarios. One is that the Third World does not behave as it should in the matter of reproduction. Its population explosion continues. One might say that, if they are put into quarantine, that if we let that part of the world . . . stew in its own juices, just have a *cordon sanitaire* around it, don't let their population overflow into the rest of the world but also do not intervene, that that is one possibility. Now, there's another scenario. They go on with the burning down of the rainforests. And it can be calculated that when these are all destroyed the world climate . . . will deteriorate in a very serious way which will affect all mankind. There, the policy of the *cordon sanitaire*, of insulation, doesn't apply, because the destruction of the forests by itself has a . . . global effect, and not a local one. And the overindulgence in our powers vis-à-vis the environment has by its own nature a dynamic that affects the whole condition of life on earth. There, your idea of a military intervention makes some sense, but who should do that? Those who have sinned in this respect all the time and are continuing to be sinners? Who has the authority to do that? What you depict there would probably mean international anarchy, not an intervention for the sake of saving the planet, but the one-sided, egoistical exertion of superior power where it can enforce something.

*I'm not saying that this is desirable.*

No, no. I mean it is not even, it cannot be made acceptable, even under extreme conditions. What can be made acceptable under extreme conditions is that governments arise in such parts of the world which will employ such means, which we now abhor or at least deplore, in order to save their own existence, their own future. But that one part of mankind should presume to force another part to behave, without a superior moral authority, which we do not have by our own record. . . .

*Well, I guess I'm a little bit surprised that . . . you seem to me to be shrinking back from the very extreme situation which seemed to me to be the obvious conclusion toward which your thinking is going.*

No, look, on the contrary, I have said several times, it's one of my favorite expressions, "In a lifeboat situation all rules cease to apply." And we must prevent that lifeboat situation from coming about. If it is there, if you assume already the extreme, then, indeed, whatever we now may agree upon as acceptable or unacceptable won't obtain anyway.

*But isn't the politico-scientific problem precisely that whatever the current dispute about the measurable warming or lack thereof may be, one side is saying, "We have to do something serious now, and, if we don't do something now it will be too late," and the other side is saying, "No, it won't be too late."*

Yeah, but a priori, as you put it, the stronger position is on the side of those who say "Let's better be cautious now than sorry later." But even if in the eyes of an omniscient [being] the caution is excessive, that is, if we could have managed with less [abstinence], it's still the better bet in the condition of ignorance or uncertainty. I think that's a sound argument. It's not just an argument of pessimism or of black fears. . . . Since it is demonstrable that things may deteriorate badly, even if there is a chance that they will turn out better, if there is a substantial risk [that they will deteriorate badly], we cannot play with this kind of risk at this scale. In our private lives we play with all kinds of risks. We do this all the time. But there are certain risks which we are responsibly not allowed to take. That is the gist of my heuristics of fear. That is, the prophecy of doom in this case, if it is founded on sound reasoning, has a certain greater force, and a greater claim to influence action than the prophecy of bliss. As I say, you can live without the highest good, but you cannot live with the greatest evil. And so, even granted that the one side cannot completely prove its case, to the extent that it can't convince the other side, the other side has no particular prerogative of demanding that progress must go on, or that our standard of living must go on as

it is now. I mean, this is not in itself a holy goal for which one must stand at all costs, while our preservation from catastrophe is a goal which is valid even at great present cost. . . . You see, the so-called good life, what now in the West, in our entirely cheapened and degenerate value system is [said] to be the good life—this is a life of plenty, of a very vulgar kind that itself reflects a [vulgar] conception of the Good. Certainly, it's not necessary for the dignity of mankind and for the elevation of the image of man, as past ages, in which one could do without [this good life] show, and yet one had great minds and great feats of art, and so on. Also, great injustices, granted. But one can make the policy of sacrifice just, the policy of foregoing satisfactions or foregoing enjoyment, by having it equally distributed among the people. So, I think that those who say that everything is OK, although I cannot quite believe that it's going as far as that, but let's assume that that's the case, I don't think they have as good a case in determining policy as the other side, granted equal uncertainty.

*There is no question in my mind that what you've said is true, but the question is a purely pragmatic one, and as a matter of pragmatic politics my fear is that you are conceding too much to reason.*

Ah! It's at the moment our only hope. It's a very weak and frail hope. I am very skeptical myself. But, at the same time I forbid myself to give in to despair and say, "Nothing can stop the hold of this rush of things towards the abyss." . . . I mean, "appeal to reason." To what else? . . . It's not only reason in the formal sense . . . but it's also reason in the higher sense of the recognition of what the good of man is and of what duty is. I mean this is also moral reason and a sense of values. If we cannot make them throw in their weight in the struggle that's going on, then we are absolutely lost. We may even be lost with all their best efforts, but that you cannot say in advance. So, the only thing left for us is to try, as much as we can, to make what may become at some time a matter of the most brutal force, make that a matter of voluntary submission to a regimen of survival and of preservation. I would be much happier if I could pull out of my pocket a draft of a policy statement.