

## Phenomenology and Teleology: Hans Jonas' Philosophy of Life

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### ABSTRACT

Although Hans Jonas' theory of responsibility has been influential on continental European environmental ethics, his philosophy of life, which seeks to rehabilitate a teleological account of living beings and describe their differing degrees of "existential freedom", is less well known. In this article I reconstruct the stages of Jonas' phenomenological account and address the key criticisms levelled at it. I argue that although Jonas' theory is flawed by internal contradictions these may be rectifiable, and, if so, his philosophy of life could also provide an ontological rationale for a biocentric ethic. I conclude that for these reasons his work deserves greater scholarly attention.

Keywords: life, phenomenology, organism, teleology, philosophical anthropology

### 1. Introduction

A key strand of environmental philosophy since its development into a distinct field is the ethic of biocentrism, which is sometimes (though not always) supported by an appeal to teleology. For instance, Paul Taylor – perhaps the best-known exponent of this view – claims in his *Respect for Nature* that 'all organisms are teleological centers of life in the sense that each is a unique individual pursuing its own good in its own way' (1986: 100). What our justification is for conceiving of living beings in this way is a matter of some debate. A possible answer to this question can be derived from the work of German-Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas. Highly influential on German environmental philosophy and politics in the 1980s,<sup>1</sup> Jonas is perhaps best known for his ethic of responsibility for future generations, outlined in *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984). However, his earlier work *The Phenomenon of Life* (1966) can be interpreted as providing an ontological rationale for a teleologically-grounded biocentric ethic (although this was not a possibility Jonas himself fully pursued). Reconstructing and evaluating his ontology is the focus of the present article.

Jonas' philosophy of life consists of an "existential" interpretation of biological facts' (xxiii).<sup>2</sup> In part adopting Heidegger's early phenomenological method, Jonas sets out to show that teleology is essential for a full account of life as it is actually lived. Crucially, however, he also argues that Heidegger's early approach is itself fatally limited as 'existentialism, obsessed with man alone, is in the habit of claiming as his unique privilege and predicament much of what is rooted in organic existence as such' (*ibid.*). Drawing on biological findings and concepts from philosophical anthropology, Jonas seeks to describe an alternative ontology which might do justice to the existential freedom common to all life-forms in their teleological activity. He then attempts to show how various organic capacities, in evolving, brought about differing degrees of such freedom at the ascending levels of

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts of this influence, see Schmidt (2013) and Schütze (1995).

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Francesca Michelini for alerting me to the fact that in *Organismus und Freiheit* (1973), Jonas' own German-language translation of *The Phenomenon of Life*, the word 'existential' is in this line replaced by 'ontologische' (3). However, I take the original English-language edition to be definitive as Jonas' use of 'existential' better fits his reference to 'contemporary existentialism' in the following line, which is preserved in the translation.

plants, animals, and humans. The end result constitutes a revision of the *scala naturae*, or “great chain of being”, which, though insightful, is by no means uncontentious, as I will show by examining some broad criticisms Jonas’ philosophy of life has received.

## 2. A Note on “Integral Monism”

Firstly a word of justification is required. Jonas is aware, of course, that advancing a teleological account of life puts him at odds with the modern philosophical and scientific consensus. However, he notes that the discrediting of teleology as a descriptive category of nature can be traced to Descartes’ problematic division of the world into *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, or ‘extended’ and ‘intelligent’ substances (1968: 57). The former, *res extensa*, was the world of matter described by the new physical sciences where material and efficient causation are taken as sufficient to explain its workings. The latter substance, *res cogitans*, was the human mind which accordingly became the central object of philosophical enquiry as sole terrestrial possessor of purposes. It is this ‘bifurcation of nature’, as Whitehead had it (1920: 32), which Jonas seeks to close.

The philosophical objections to substance dualism are well known, and I will not rehearse them – merely note that after the Darwinian revolution we have good reason to believe that human and non-human life are ontologically alike, and a monistic perspective is required instead. Jonas’ take on this is as follows: ‘evolutionism undid Descartes’ work more effectively than any metaphysical critique [...]. If man was the relative of animals, then animals were the relative of man and in degrees bearers of that inwardness of which man, the most advanced of their kin, is conscious in himself’ (1966: 57). If materialism reflects just one half of the dualist bifurcation, then truly overcoming the Cartesian legacy requires an ‘integral monism’ (19) holding that ‘right from the beginning matter is subjectivity in its latent form, even if aeons, plus exceptional luck, are required for the actualizing of this potential’ (1996: 173).<sup>3</sup> While he did not ally himself with thinkers such as Bergson (1922) and Klages (2013), this stance has nevertheless exposed Jonas to the charge of vitalism.<sup>4</sup> Whether this is accurate is not an issue I will examine here, but one ought to bear in mind that what follows assumes the legitimacy of his metaphysical position.<sup>5</sup>

## 3. Heidegger’s Existentialism

To properly understand Jonas’ phenomenological account we must take a detour through the early existentialism of his teacher and greatest influence, Martin Heidegger. Lawrence Vogel has argued that the core of *The Phenomenon of Life* consists of Jonas ‘extending his teacher’s [existential] categories’ to nature as a whole (1996: 170), an interpretation which is broadly correct. In so doing Jonas did not embark on a radically new direction for phenomenology, but rather adapted one Heidegger had gestured towards in his early studies of “*Dasein*” culminating in *Being and Time* (2010a). *Dasein*, in Heidegger’s usage, refers to those beings for whom their being is an issue. A rock, a painting, and a memory are all beings, but they are not beings which are concerned with themselves – only *Dasein* is characterised in this way, by *care* for its own being (175), and it is clear that Heidegger has the human being specifically in mind. Care entails that *Dasein* has an *existence* (11-12). In defining

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<sup>3</sup> For Jonas’ critique of materialism and a fuller account of his integral monism, see Chapter 3 and the appendix of *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984), and the essay ‘Matter, Mind, and Creation’ (1996: 165-197).

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Mayr, for instance, accused him of invoking ‘nonmechanical forces that were not acceptable to most biologists’ (2004: 25). According to Strachan Donnelley, however, Mayr nevertheless described Jonas as ‘one of the few thinkers who took organic life and organisms seriously’ (2008: 261).

<sup>5</sup> Here Jonas’ philosophy anticipates enactivism, in particular the notion of *autopoiesis* on which he has been influential – see Weber and Varela (2002) and Thompson (2007: 149-165).

“existence” Heidegger draws on its Latin etymology, emphasising its original meaning of “standing-out” or “standing-forth”. Dasein exists, in this sense, in that it never simply resides in its present situation (like a stone, for example). On the contrary, Dasein is both one step ahead of itself in its preoccupation with things to come – including the inevitability of its death – and one step behind, so to speak, in being constituted by a history (as distinct from a mere past). These characteristics of Dasein are the existential categories Vogel referred to above: historicity, being-toward-death, being-with-others, and so on. Together these categories structure the “world” of Dasein.

From his 1921 lectures published as *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle* (2001) through to the 1926 course published as *Basic Concepts of Ancient Philosophy* (2008), Heidegger flirted with the possibility of the extension of Dasein and worldhood to non-human life.<sup>6</sup> At his most generous, in a 1925 essay on Wilhelm Dilthey, he states:

Life is that kind of reality which is in a world and indeed in such a way that it has a world. Every living creature has its environing world not as something extant next to it but as something that is there for it as disclosed, uncovered. [...] [W]e miss the essential thing here if we don't see that the animal has a world. (2002: 163).

However, by the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927 the question of non-human Dasein barely appeared at all, and in the 1929-30 lecture course published as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* Heidegger turned a corner and famously conceived instead of animals as ‘poor in world’ (1995: 176). Finally, by 1935, Heidegger had jettisoned this approach entirely, claiming in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* that the ‘animal has no world [*Welt*], nor any environment [*Umwelt*]’ (2000: 47).

Jonas argues that the failure of Heidegger’s existential engagement with non-human life is due to the latter’s ignorance of the body’s role in structuring Dasein’s world. Of Heidegger’s treatment of the body, Jonas asks: ‘[i]s “care” ever traced back to it, to concern for nourishment, for instance – indeed to *physical* needs at all?’ (1996: 47). Indeed, in a seminar on Heraclitus conducted late in life, Heidegger admitted that ‘[t]he body phenomenon is the most difficult problem’ (Heidegger and Fink 1993: 146), and in the ‘Letter on Humanism’ even spoke of ‘our scarcely conceivable, abysmal bodily kinship with the beast’ (1977: 206). Hence, as Jonas points out, by ‘*Being and Time* the body had been omitted and nature shunted aside as something merely present’ (2002: 31). For Jonas, it was this almost Cartesian tendency in Heidegger’s thought which ultimately hampered the latter’s early attempt to develop an existential philosophy of life.

#### 4. The Phenomenological Account

Jonas, by contrast, might be said to rethink living beings in the way Heidegger declined to, as unities of mind and body. In defence of his approach Jonas argues that only this method can explain why it is possible to identify the presence of life at all: because we, too, are living beings. This is no arbitrary observation but an argument about the conditions of possibility of biological knowledge, which science cannot itself provide. In Jonas’ words: ‘[t]he observer of life must be prepared by life [...] and this is the advantage – perennially disowned or slandered in the history of epistemology – of our “having”, that is, being, bodies’ (1966: 82).

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<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge Jonas attended several of Heidegger’s courses during this period, including the Freiburg, Summer 1921 “proseminar” on Aristotle’s *De Anima* which according to Theodor Kisiel (1993: 230-232) actually focused on Book 7 of the *Metaphysics*, and the Marburg 1924-1926 courses published as *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* (2009), *Plato’s Sophist* (1997), *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena* (1985), and *Logic: The Question of Truth* (2010b).

In short, the possibility of our “inner” understanding of living beings – the intertwining of mind and matter – is that we too are such a being. From this perspective Jonas argues that there is not, as Heidegger had it, Dasein on the one hand and mere life on the other, but rather *degrees* of world-openness realised in evolutionary advance. He characterises this as a progression of existential freedom in perception, action, and – eventually – thought, running ‘like Ariadne’s thread through the interpretation of Life’ (3). ‘[I]n the dark stirrings of primeval organic substance’, he writes, ‘a principle of freedom shines forth for the first time’ (*ibid.*). As such, this ontology takes us far from the Cartesian dualism of animating soul and lifeless matter toward a unified natural world.

As discussed, at the heart of Jonas’ phenomenological account is the rehabilitation of teleology, which he takes to be ‘a descriptive, phenomenological concept [...] indispensable in progressively organizing the evidence’ provided by the life sciences (1959: 163). The form of teleology Jonas has in mind is ‘immanent’ rather than ‘transcendent’ (1966: 34). The latter, transcendent teleology, is the notion that the development and apparent order of the natural world is in accordance with a preordained plan or goal. What Jonas means by immanent teleology, however, is the ‘teleological structure and behaviour of the organism’ (91). Of this two-fold definition the aspect most evident is that our own behaviour involves subjective ends. As such, and bearing in mind Jonas’ commitment to monism, when speculating on the existence of *teloi* in nature ‘we must let ourselves be *instructed by what is highest and richest concerning everything beneath it*’ (1984: 69). In essence this means that phenomenology is the key which unlocks life’s door, revealing to us the intertwining of both physical and psychical aspects of reality and the presence of ends therein.

## 5. Metabolism and Teleology

Since phenomenological reflection affords us ‘peepholes into the inwardness of substance’ (1966: 91), and – by virtue of a monistic ontology – this indicates something of the condition of all organisms, we can explain how each living being enacts ‘a striving of its own for existence and fulfilment’ (61). This ‘purposiveness’ is

effective already in all vegetative tendency, awakening to primordial awareness in the dim reflexes, the responding irritability of lowly organism; more so in [the] urge and effort and anguish of animal life endowed with motility and sense-organisms; reaching self-transparency in [the] consciousness, will and thought of man: all these being inward aspects of the teleological side in the nature of “matter”. (90).

In the unicellular organism – residing at the very bottom of this hierarchy – we can locate in its metabolic activity ‘the first form of freedom’ (*ibid.*): an ‘ontological revolution’ (81) which allows us to speak meaningfully of life in a universe that previously only possessed its latent possibility. What does this rudimentary ‘freedom’ consist of? Jonas notes that in the process of material exchange the organism partly achieves an ‘independence of form with respect to its own matter’ (*ibid.*), as the organism can absorb and excrete substance whilst maintaining a more-or-less continuous structure. As he puts it in the later essay ‘Biological Foundations of Individuality’, the organism’s identity is an on-going achievement of metabolism: ‘[t]eleology comes in where the continuous identity of being is [...] executed by something done’ (2010: 198, emphasis removed). Unlike a stone or a machine, neither of which self-perpetuate their formal identity and are thus reducible to their material composition at any given moment, the organism exists in a state of negative entropy. In this freedom of form from matter lies the first type of immanent teleology.

This is bought at a heavy price, however: the life of the organism is dependent on the continuation of metabolic activity, such that with its cessation comes death. All life is characterised by this paradoxical ‘*needful freedom*’ (1966: 80). The organism exists in the sense of standing out from non-living beings, but its metabolising is subject to the necessity of acquiring sustenance – hence the ambiguous nature of this freedom, which is not to be understood as absolute or unconstrained. Regardless, in seeking sustenance the organism brings with it the first identifiable manifestation of the following existential structures:

The great contradictions which man discovers in himself – freedom and necessity, autonomy and dependence, self and world, relation and isolation, creativity and mortality – have their rudimentary traces in even the most primitive forms of life, each precariously balanced between being and not-being, and each already endowed with an internal horizon of “transcendence”. (xxiii).

These structures again indicate the organism’s “going-beyond-itself”, its existence. As such, Jonas argues that the relation between self and world is also an achievement of metabolism and so co-extensive with life: ‘self-concern, active in the acquisition of new matter, is essential openness for the encounter of outer being. Thus “world” is there from the earliest beginning, the basic setting for experience – a horizon of co-reality thrown open by the mere transcendence of want’ (84). Unlike Heidegger, Jonas thereby links *care* to life as such: the capacity for transcendence, the self-world relation, indicates a ‘concern of the organism with its own being and continuation in being [...] at the same time bridg[ing] the qualitative gulf to the rest of things by selective modes of relation’ (*ibid.*, emphasis removed). Care thus comprises the second form of immanent teleology: the organism having goals in reaching out, consciously or otherwise, to satisfy its metabolic needs.

## 6. Plant and Animal Life

Clearly, so briefly reconstructing Jonas’ existential account of the organism leaves much to be analysed. For now his position can be summarised in the following maxims: ‘there is no organism without teleology; there is no teleology without inwardness; and [...] life can only be known by life’ (91). Regarding the manifestation of “inwardness”, the presence of world and selfhood, Jonas adapts the classical notion of a natural hierarchy – the *scala naturae*. Although he claims that a philosophy of life ‘need not mean a return to Aristotle’, he nevertheless holds that ‘the manifold of existing life presents itself as an ascending scale’ (2) of freedom. He continues:

Aristotle read this hierarchy in the given record of the organic realm with no resort to evolution [...]. The terms on which his august example may be resumed in our time will be different from his, but the idea of stratification, of the progressive superposition of levels, with the dependence of each higher on the lower, the retention of all the lower in the higher, will still be found indispensable. (*Ibid.*).

Much like his rehabilitation of teleology, Jonas argues that the discarding of one version of the *scala naturae* does not mean that the notion is nonsensical *per se*. As mentioned above, Jonas believes that life can be characterised by an ascending realisation of existential freedom, roughly demarcated by increased motility, perception, and thought, which together allow us to identify “higher” and “lower” life-forms. As such, Jonas upholds a hierarchy of plants, animals, and humans as evolutionary “levels”. If such stark divisions seem at odds with Jonas’ avowed gradualism, it ought to be noted, firstly, that these are broad classes which themselves allow for gradation – as indicated by the gulf between, for example,

bivalves and the great apes – and secondly, what Jonas attempts to identify are *the basic empirical manifestations of existential freedom*. Let us look at these in turn.

Jonas writes that plants possess, in key respects, a primordial existence as the ‘germ of sensing unfolds to [a] distinct world-relationship, just as the cells grow into the differentiated, composite organism’ (99). As an organism it is of course a metabolising being – in this case a photosynthesising one. As such, it possesses immanent teleology not only in maintaining its organisation during material exchange, but also its functional acquisitions of water and sunlight. To meet the latter needs a seed has to fall by chance in a location which allows it to take root. Jonas notes that this is the ‘most efficient means of exploiting the inherent advantages’ of photosynthesis – through roots ‘we have immediacy guaranteed by constant contiguity between the organs of intake and the external supply’ (103). However, this fixity of position and – for the most part – regular satisfaction of needs means that the plant’s relation to its surroundings ‘cannot take on the keen edge of want’ (*ibid.*), which would constitute a sentient world-relation. Thus the plant’s placid nutritive existence is not greatly more developed than that of the organism as such.

Jonas suggests that animal life signifies a huge existential gain. He writes that the defining characteristics of animal life are the ‘three modes’ of ‘perception, emotion, and movement’, which ‘express the mediacy of animal being’ (2010: 206). Although part of the gradual advance of organic freedom, Jonas holds that these features nevertheless realise a ‘real world-relation’ (1966: 100). He states:

The differentiation of sentience [...] furnishes the beginnings of a true world of objects; [...] the exercise of motility (in turn implying centralization, viz., of control) subjects it to the *self-assertion* of freedom, which thus answers on a higher plane to the basic necessity of the organism. (*Ibid.*, emphasis added).

Animals are therefore distinguished by these co-arising modes, since their metabolic requirements – whether carnivorous or herbivorous – are such that movement is integral to their fulfilment. Unlike a plant’s virtually immediate attainment of sunlight, the object of an animal’s satisfaction lies at a distance, spatially and temporally – a meal must be sought out in order to continue the animal’s life. The necessary “internal” counterparts of this motility are sentience and emotion. As survival thus ‘becomes a matter of conduct in single actions, instead of being assured by well-adapted organic functioning itself’, the animal’s ‘precarious and exposed mode of living commits to wakefulness and effort [...] but it also knows the pang of hunger, the agony of fear, the anguished strain of flight’ (105). As such, Jonas identifies in an animal’s sentient, emotional, and motile mode of existence the first *conscious* manifestation of Heidegger’s care.

## 7. The Human Being

The final stage of Jonas’ *scala naturae*, and the final stage of our reconstruction of Jonas’ philosophy of life, is the position of humanity in nature. In addressing this issue Jonas draws on philosophical anthropology, the guiding question of which is “What is the human being?”. The early philosophical anthropologists in varying ways defined humans against animals, following Aristotle’s example of the ζῷον λόγον ἔχον.<sup>7</sup> Jonas maintains this approach, holding that distinctively human freedom is epitomised by our preoccupation with more than that which is simply found in the world. Specifically, humans possess a greatly increased

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<sup>7</sup> See Cassirer (1944), Plessner (1975), Gehlen (1988), and Spengler (2015) – the latter probably the closest to Jonas.

mental freedom in the power of abstract thought, and true to his philosophical biology Jonas explains this achievement physiologically. In the late essay ‘Tool, Image, and Grave’, Jonas stresses a multitude of such characteristics: ‘the increase in man’s brain size, his hand, [and] his erect posture reveal their significance in what they allow us to accomplish’ (1996: 77). This way Jonas bridges the gap between the human organism and abstract thought, demonstrated concretely with reference to the three aforementioned human artefacts, the tool, image, and grave. Brought into being with the help of the dextrous opposable thumb, these are not just objects: they also embody ideas.

Firstly is the tool: an ‘artificially devised, inert object interpolated as a means between the acting bodily organ (usually the hand) and the extracorporeal object of the action. It is given permanent form for recurring use and can be set aside in readiness for this use’ (78). Jonas’ carefully-formulated definition – reminiscent of Heidegger’s discussion of the hammer (2010a: 69) – precludes any comparison with a creative organic function, such as a caterpillar’s chrysalis or a spider’s web. It is also intended to exclude the utilisation of objects observable in mammalian – and particularly primate – life. However, given the existence of the latter Jonas concedes that ‘here we can most readily speak of fluid boundaries between animal and human capabilities’ (1996: 79).

The definitive human capacity is image-making, which, he claims, ‘from its very beginnings in its most primitive and awkward products, displays a total, rather than gradual, divergence from the animal’s [...] – fluid boundaries are not even conceivable here’ (*ibid.*). He defines an image as ‘an intentionally produced likeness with the visual appearance of a thing [...] in the static medium of the surface of another thing. It is not meant to repeat the original or pretend that it is the original, but to “re-present” it’ (*ibid.*). The image is thus a product of will which depicts an idea (*eidōs*, the “look” of a thing) through semblance: ‘[a] figure of *Pinus sylvestris* in a work on botany is a representation not of this or that individual fir tree but of any fir tree of that species. The antelope of the bushman drawing is every antelope remembered, anticipated, identifiable as *an* antelope’ (1966: 165). Jonas notes that the capacity for image-making – though carried out with the hands – is primarily an achievement of vision, in that the *eidōs* is abstracted therefrom (168). Jonas argues that an image ‘has to be more or less true to the object’ (172), and the fact that an image can succeed or fail in its aim of representation thus paves the way for rudimentary experiences of truth and falsehood as correspondence.<sup>8</sup>

However, it is the grave, Jonas’ last object of study, which he fully invests with metaphysical significance. Whereas humanity’s earliest pictorial achievements – a cave painting of a bison, for example – represent the *eidōs* of the bison, Jonas holds that the grave represents *abstract* ideas. Its presence ‘tells us that a being, subject to mortality, reflects about life and death, defies appearances, and raises his thinking to the realm of the invisible, utilizing tool and image for this purpose’ (1996: 85). Not only that – Jonas also argues that in reflecting upon death humanity thereby becomes a problem for itself. Apparently alone amongst living beings, we possess a self-conscious concern for our existence that in the grave ‘takes on concrete form: “Where do I come from; where am I going?” and ultimately, “What am I – beyond what I do and experience at a given time?” With these questions *reflection* emerges as a new mode of dealing with the world’ (83-84). Thus the highest freedom is achieved only by the human who can reflect on life, death, and its own place in the world, all encapsulated in the invention of the grave.

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<sup>8</sup> Here Jonas diverges from Heidegger’s conception of truth as unconcealment, as Lindberg notes (2005: 177).

## 8. Criticisms of Jonas: Kass

Having reconstructed Jonas' philosophy of life I would now like to consider two different objections levelled at it: Jonas' own concessions regarding its limitations, as reported and expanded upon by Leon Kass, and Andrew Tyler Johnson's illuminating Heideggerian critique.

In the essay 'Appreciating *The Phenomenon of Life*', written for a special issue of *The Hastings Center Report* posthumously commemorating Jonas' life and work, Leon Kass recounts a question put to him by a student which he in turn addressed to Jonas: why, in the ascending scale of capacities constituting organic freedom described by Jonas, does reproduction not feature? According to Kass, Jonas fell silent, then 'commented that this was the most serious and powerful objection anyone had yet raised against his account' (1995: 11). Unfortunately Kass does not relay us Jonas' reasoning as to why he felt this, only his two-fold justification for the omission: firstly, that 'reproduction and sociality are not indispensable functions of life for an individual animal *qua* living thing', and secondly, that at the time of writing the book Jonas 'was still too much in the grip of the teachings of Heidegger and his view of life as (mainly) a lonely project over-against-death' (*ibid.*). The first defence is partly justified – an organism, though the product of reproduction, need not itself engage in it – and moreover, Jonas does describe the importance of the passion of animal life, under which rubric sexual desire might fall. But this does not get at the existential significance of reproduction as such.

Kass is right, I think, to say that 'we would need a more complicated account of appetite and desire, even for animals', as the urge to conceive and nurture – often at great cost to the parent – entails that '*self*-preservation cannot be the sole and sufficient paradigm for desire' (*ibid.*). Jonas' characterisation of animal life as 'essentially precarious and corruptible [...], an adventure in mortality' (1966: 106) would have to be heavily qualified with the transcendence of self in both copulation and in the rearing of children. At one point in his writing he does point toward the latter, celebrating animals 'who are able to play, namely animals with brood rearing, especially mammals with their sheltered childhood, who are still free from the grim pressure of animal needs but enjoy already the powers of movement' (2010: 249).<sup>9</sup> In this is a partial recognition of the social aspect of organic existence, yet the conceptual possibility is not pursued. If it had been Jonas would have had to describe its varying stages, from symbiosis to broods, groups, and eventually society, but this would have required a major revision of his individualistic depiction of life. Jonas excused himself by citing the influence of Heidegger at work in his thought, but this does not stand up to scrutiny since Heidegger's account of Dasein did in fact accommodate a social existence, via the category of being-with-others. Heidegger claims that 'the world is always already the one that I share with others. The world of Dasein is a with-world' (2010a: 115-116). Jonas' neglect of life's dimension of sociality thus unnecessarily restricts his project.

## 9. Criticisms of Jonas: Johnson

The second overarching criticism comes from Andrew Tyler Johnson's insightful comparative account of Heidegger and Jonas, 'Is Organic Life "Existential"?' (2014). Johnson is chiefly concerned with Heidegger and Jonas' accounts of world and existence. He recognises the attraction of Jonas' notion of gradated existence over Heidegger's eventual division between Dasein and non-human life, but rightly observes that Jonas' philosophy of

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<sup>9</sup> In the unpublished manuscript 'The Female of the Species' Jonas mentions that this thought came to him whilst watching dolphins play from the deck of the ship on which he emigrated to America (1955: 2-3).

life does not, in fact, truly live up to its monistic premise: when it comes to detailing the empirical indications of degrees of freedom Jonas seemingly slides into ontological distinctions of type. Johnson argues that since Jonas ‘wants to segregate the human from the rest of life, he cannot avoid, in exactly the same manner as Heidegger, quietly divesting life of certain basic structures that he otherwise so insistently portrays as constitutive of its essence’ (270).

The qualitative break with animals is linked to image-making, which Jonas notes is a capacity particular to humans. In being able to perceive and create images representative of something, he argues that we hold the status of a ‘speaking, thinking, inventing, in short “symbolical” being’, which, he says, ‘is not a matter of degree’ (1966: 158). Johnson rightly asks, however: ‘[o]n what grounds is this exemption justified?’ (2014: 269). After all, is an animal’s ability to use tools not also empirical evidence of an ‘inventing’, and so ‘symbolical’, being? Secondly, Johnson wonders whether the capacity for abstraction is simply a higher manifestation of same existential structure of world-relation that Jonas initially attributed to all organisms:

Is it not the same set of conditions that makes possible (1) [...] perceiving identity and alterity simultaneously (as we do when we perceive the likeness of an image to its object), and (2) an understanding of a “self” that stands apart from a world that is other-than-self? (*Ibid.*).

I admit that I have no definitive answer to this latter point, and will leave it open. Either way, Johnson’s observations here pose a problem for Jonas: if symbolic thought is indeed born of a fundamental structure of existence then Jonas necessarily denies it to animals, introducing a stark division of type between humans and animals. Conversely, if Johnson is wrong and it is not born of the same structure, he is still right to say that Jonas’ analysis of animal life fails to recognise the significance of tool-making as indicative of symbolic existence. The latter criticism entails an exaggerated difference of existential degree between humans and animals, rather than a distinction of existential type – but it would nevertheless confirm Johnson’s suspicion that Jonas unjustly diminishes animal existence.

It is Jonas’ analysis of plants, however, which undoubtedly introduces an existential segregation between that form of life and others. Given his metaphysical claim for the gradation of existence, one would expect Jonas to conclude that plant life is characterised by a *quantitatively* minimal degree of world-openness, but which is nevertheless *qualitatively* the same. Puzzlingly, however, he does not, saying instead that ‘[w]ith its adjacent surroundings the plant forms one permanent context into which it is fully integrated, as the animal can never be in its environment’ (1966: 104). As a result, Jonas holds that the sedentary plant’s world is ‘fundamentally different’ to an animal’s, as its lack of movement ‘offers no room’ for temporal and spatial dimensions to arise (*ibid.*). As Johnson points out (2014: 270), without these fundamental existential structures it is not clear what sort of world plants actually have.

## 10. Jonas’ Conundrum

These insights, courtesy of Kass and (particularly) Johnson, highlight the inconsistencies in Jonas’ philosophy of life and undermine some of the findings that his phenomenological investigations had previously yielded. The basic problem is that Jonas’ approach pulls in two directions at once. He would like to both gradually trace the realisation of existence through the organic realm, thereby committing to his monistic metaphysics, whilst at the same time claim that at certain points these gradations imply major qualitative differences. Yet precisely

because he attempts to identify these differences with reference to gradual empirical manifestations he is unable to do so. As a result, the great promise of Jonas' ontology – that it should account for the evolution of life and existence without succumbing to reductionism or old dualisms – is not realised. This is because, as Johnson noted, Jonas withholds entire existential structures from plants and at least a recognition of the symbolic degree of existence from animals also. In elaborating his *scala naturae* in such a fashion it is impossible, therefore, for Jonas to uphold his central thesis since certain existential categories now appear *ex nihilo* rather than gradually intensifying from life's beginning.

Two questions arise here: firstly, can Jonas' philosophy of life be rectified, and secondly, ought it? To both I would answer – tentatively – in the affirmative. In response to the latter, I would note that his theory is both based on a compelling metaphysical proposition, and accounts better than (some) competing ontologies for the teleological capacities of human and non-human life. Above all, his rich phenomenological descriptions of the various types of organic existence lay bare aspects of being that arguably eluded even Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. The *scala naturae*, though flawed in execution, is an intriguing attempt to modernise an ancient principle of ontology, and finally, as we shall see, Jonas' philosophy could have a role to play in grounding a biocentric ethics such as Taylor's, which also invokes the notion of immanent teleology. These are promising gains for our understanding of the natural world and should not be lightly cast aside.

Regarding the ultimate viability of Jonas' phenomenology, Johnson concludes that Jonas 'was too liberal in his desire to attribute full existence (formally – i.e., it is only the richness and intensity of the structures that vary in Jonas' account) to every manifestation of life' (274). In line with Heidegger, he says this is because 'it is impossible to overlook that "abyss of essence" that separates the most sophisticated animal from the most primitive human being' (273). In other words: Jonas' core thesis is implausible because there obviously are major qualitative and not just quantitative differences between the existence of plants, animals, and humans. As we have seen, in the final analysis Jonas himself seems to share this opinion, speculating that at most the *scala naturae* could be 'nearly continuous' (2010: 206, emphasis added). But this intuition, however compelling, remains untested. For it is not self-evident that Jonas' failure to consistently pursue his thesis means that it is impossible to do so – this would only be proven by showing that the existential differences between life-forms simply cannot be accounted for as differences of degree. To abandon a Jonasian philosophy of life on this basis may therefore be somewhat premature, and I will conclude with two suggestions as to how its radical potential might be upheld, one metaphysical and the other axiological.

## 11. Revising the *Scala Naturae*

The most promising way to improve Jonas' *scala naturae* is to point toward empirical phenomena – some of the evidence for which has emerged in recent decades – indicating that his qualitative divisions do not stand up to scrutiny. I will outline this strategy which, if successful, would run counter to the intuition that existence simply cannot be a matter of degree. Firstly there is the break with plant life, which Jonas attempts to justify with reference to movement. In *The Phenomenon of Life* the crux of Jonas' interpretation is that as a rooted being 'the plant is relieved of the necessity (as it is also deprived of the possibility) of movement' (1966: 103). Now, this is obviously incorrect: although plants lack *locomotion*, they clearly possess *motility*: a flower turns to the sun, a tree's roots take hold in the earth, and a Venus fly trap catches its prey. Quite why he failed to acknowledge this is unclear. Perhaps, as Scheler notes (1961: 9), it is because the plant's pace of movement, usually so

much slower than our own that it is invisible to the naked eye, can give the impression that it does not *really* move in an immanently teleological way.

Whatever the reason, Jonas apparently recognised his error and changed tack, subsequently arguing in the ‘Biological Foundations of Individuality’ that plant movement – unlike that of the animal – is not ‘under the agent’s control’ (2010: 205). He admits that ‘for the opening and closing of blossoms and even for the startling performance of certain insectivorous plants [...] the outward likeness to the animal pattern is indeed strong’ (*ibid.*). The key difference, he claims, is that ‘the “direction” here is not central but strictly in response to local stimulation, with no central control involved’ (*ibid.*). Presumably Jonas’ reference to ‘central control’ is not meant to imply a conscious intention, given that according to his basic analysis of the organism sentience is not necessary for teleology. The greater likelihood is that he is referring to the increased unity of the animal organism courtesy of its nervous system, which is lacking in plant life. But if so, this would once again be an insufficient empirical difference, since the parts of plants do not function in complete isolation from one another, but rather contribute to the life of the whole (photosynthesis being an obvious example). In this is an organismic unity, albeit of a less refined sort than the nervous system achieves, but as teleological activity it would be sufficient for temporal and spatial dimensions of existence. Whilst the recognition of plant movement is welcome, introducing the criterion of centralised control fails to justify the qualitative distinction Jonas would like to make.

Secondly there is the difference between animal and human existence. The key point, as mentioned above, is that the inability to make images would exclude abstract thought and a symbolic world from animal life (and possibly indicate the absence of the self-world distinction altogether). Again, however, the empirical observation Jonas offers as justification does not stand up to scrutiny. Against him one could argue that the creation and use of tools does in fact indicate a capacity for abstraction, to some degree. For instance, in using a stick to draw termites from a nest a chimpanzee shows that it can take up *this* object for *that* invented end, shaping it – albeit crudely – for that purpose. Jonas claims that what is different about human tool-making is that, like image-making, it is created according to the ‘eidetic power of imagination and eidetic control of the hand’, which lies ‘beyond the ability of animals’ (1996: 78-79). It is not clear, however, whether this power really does distinguish a human tool from a chimpanzee’s. By virtue of other physiological advantages such as the opposable thumb, a human can certainly better shape the stick and according to a more refined idea. But again this would simply be a difference of degree: a chimpanzee must still have some idea of the tool – which it learns from others – in order to repeatedly make it. The same could be true, in a yet more rudimentary sense, of other inventive phenomena such as a beaver’s dam or perhaps even a bird’s nest (both still distinct from creative extensions of an organism). In any case, it seems that Jonas has erected another questionable barrier.

Then one might question whether the sort of freedom for abstraction demonstrated in the grave – a capacity for religion, ethics, and metaphysics – does categorically set humanity apart, since this rests on Jonas’ observation that “no animal buries or gives further consideration to its dead” (83). For one thing, this may just be empirically false: Cynthia Moss reports witnessing a group of elephants who, upon encountering the carcass of an elephant not belonging their herd, “began to kick at the ground around it, digging up the dirt and putting it on the body. A few others broke off branches and palm fronds and brought them back and placed them on the carcass” (2000: 270). This is not equal in significance to the human’s burial mound, to be sure, but if accurately described it would indicate some understanding of death which Jonas does not accommodate.

Finally, building on Kass' remarks, we might attempt to reinstate the social dimension of existence (Heidegger's 'being-with-others') to both animal and plant life. The former is obvious – as stated above, symbiosis, broods, and groups all indicate this structure in animal life, a point Jonas briefly touched upon. Regarding the latter, it is admittedly counter-intuitive to claim that plants possess a social existence, even to a minimal degree. This may, however, prove unreliable: the accumulating evidence for plant "intelligence" – including, crucially, their ability to communicate with one another (Karbon 2015; Mancuso and Viola 2015: 90-99) – might indicate a rudimentary manifestation of this structure. These reflections are all tentative, merely gesturing towards areas of further study. However, we can provisionally note that if one pursues the logic of Jonas' original position it might be consistently upheld, and in a way that makes sense of biological findings.

## 12. Conclusion

I will end on my second suggestion for future research: that if the contradictions of Jonas' version of the *scala naturae* can indeed be overcome, it would constitute a valuable ontological grounding for a biocentric ethic of the sort developed by Taylor. The connection between the two theories is their shared emphasis on teleology. On Jonas' schema every organism possesses a two-fold immanent teleology, which he describes with reference to metabolism and care. He believes, of course – and Taylor agrees (1986: 122) – that the ends of such activity are no less real when 'silhouetted in premental form' (1984: 75). For both, the axiological consequence is this: to have ends, to pursue something, brings subjective value into the world. As Jonas says: 'with any *de facto* pursued end [...], attainment of it becomes a good, and frustration of it, an evil; and with this distinction the attributability of value begins' (79). In Taylor's terminology we would say that each organism has, consciously or not, a 'good of its own' (1986: 124) realised by satisfaction of its ends, and that life is therefore co-extensive with valuing. From there Taylor goes on to build his biocentric ethic which I will not recount – the point is that Jonas' philosophy of life, if rectified, could act as a basis for such an ethic in bridging ontology and axiology via teleology. In addition to preserving and developing its metaphysical insights and phenomenological richness, this ontological grounding for biocentrism would be worth pursuing.

In the end, although it is true that Jonas' somewhat idiosyncratic philosophy of life suffers from inconsistencies in its original form, its radical core could yet be satisfactorily developed by following the path I have outlined. If successful this would constitute a promising contribution to the philosophy of nature and environmental ethics, and it is for this reason that Jonas' phenomenology is deserving of greater attention than it has received to date.

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