



Immortality in Hans Jonas' Thought: From Gnosis to Jewish Platonism

di

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ABSTRACT: Two types of religious and philosophical sources, that oppose each other, had the most persistent influence on Hans Jonas' thought. He studied them during his youth. The first type – the prophets, Maimonides, Kant, Martin Buber – directed him towards Jewish Platonism, i.e. a Platonism centered on the idea of the Good interpreted through the Jewish idea of God as a Subject whose activity is only characterized by love and justice, and through the Jewish idea of the Evil as real, and incomprehensible, in the world. The second sources, Heidegger's writings, directed him towards Gnosis which he considered – because of his philosophical analysis grounded on Heidegger's *Existenzialphilosophie* – as the expression of a crisis in human life which implies a radical separation between Good and Evil, the divine and human beings, the consciousness and the world. A careful reading of Jonas' work shows that these conflicting influences never really coalesced. Exactly this circumstance makes his philosophical teachings so meaningful and at the same time so open to different interpretations, inspired by the defense of an immanentistic ontology on one side and the idea of ethics as *prima philosophia* on the other. The main philosophical book of Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984), proves this wavering. The aim of my paper is to demonstrate that also in the case of his reflection on time and its relationship with immortality, he ponders both perspectives, but with a different emphasis. In *Immortality and the Modern Temper* (1963) the Gnostic myth prevails which indicates liberation from finiteness in the choice itself, in the instant of decision, in freedom as independence from external causes. In *The Concept of God after Auschwitz. A Jewish Voice* (1987) the Jewish Platonic view prevails which includes the idea that God's attributes only are the attributes of action, i.e. ethical measures: freedom is mostly identified here with the listening of God's commandments, the obedience to pure practical reason whose root is the *mundus intelligibilis*. These last philosophical teachings give us suggestions for a future thinking.

KEYWORDS: Judaism, Platonism, Gnosis, *Existenzialphilosophie*, Ethics, Ontology

ABSTRACT: Due tipi di fonti, religiose e filosofiche, tra loro antitetiche, hanno avuto grande influenza sul pensiero di Hans Jonas. Egli le studiò in gioventù. Il primo tipo – i profeti, Maimonide, Kant, Martin Buber – lo indirizzò verso un platonismo ebraico, ovvero un platonismo incentrato sull'idea del Bene interpretata attraverso l'idea ebraica di Dio come Soggetto la cui attività è caratterizzata soltanto dall'amore e dalla giustizia, e attraverso l'idea ebraica del male come reale, e incomprensibile, nel mondo. Le seconde fonti, gli scritti di Heidegger, lo indirizzarono verso lo Gnosticismo che egli considerava – a causa della sua analisi filosofica fondata sulla *Existentialphilosophie* heideggeriana – come espressione di una crisi nella vita umana implicante una separazione radicale tra il bene e il male, il divino e l'essere umano, la coscienza e il mondo. Un'attenta lettura dell'opera di Jonas mostra che queste due influenze non si sono mai unificate. Proprio questa circostanza rende i suoi insegnamenti filosofici così significativi e nello stesso tempo così aperti a interpretazioni diverse, ispirate da un lato alla difesa di una ontologia immanentistica, dall'altro all'idea dell'etica come *prima philosophia*. Il libro più importante di Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984), prova tale oscillazione. L'obiettivo di questo articolo è dimostrare che anche nel caso della sua riflessione sul tempo e sulla relazione di quest'ultimo con l'immortalità, egli ha presenti ambedue le prospettive, ma con enfasi diverse. In *Immortality and the Modern Temper* (1963) prevale il mito gnostico, che vede la liberazione dalla finitezza nella scelta stessa, nell'istante della decisione, nella libertà come indipendenza dalle cause esterne. In *The Concept of God after Auschwitz. A Jewish Voice* (1987) prevale la concezione ebraica platonica che implica l'idea che gli attributi divini siano soltanto gli attributi d'azione, ovvero misure etiche: la libertà è identificata qui con l'ascolto dei comandamenti divini, con l'obbedienza alla pura ragione pratica, la cui radice è il *mundus intelligibilis*. Questi ultimi insegnamenti filosofici ci danno suggerimenti per un pensiero futuro.

KEYWORDS: ebraismo, platonismo, gnosticismo, *Existentialphilosophie*, etica, ontologia

I. Introduction

In my article I would like to defend three theses that are also three steps in the path I intend to follow:

1. The first thesis is that Hans Jonas in his youth was strongly influenced by two contrasting kinds of religious and philosophical sources – on one side a philosophical tradition inspired by Plato, which he unified with the Jewish Bible and Jewish thought, and on the other Heidegger. Heidegger's philosophy moved Jonas' thinking towards the problem of the relationship between Being and human

existence: it awakened in him an interest in Gnosis as a religious experience that was typical of hard times, when human beings can no longer recognize the world where they live as their own, and therefore have a sense of the loneliness and absurdity of their life in the world. Both sources – those which led him towards a Jewish Platonism and Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* – were decisive for him.

2. The second thesis is that these contrasting trends, which never seem to really coalesce in the evolution of his thought, certainly make Jonas' philosophy rich and meaningful, but also somehow enigmatic, ambiguous, open to opposing evaluations. This is particularly evident in his *opus magnum*, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984)¹: here he appears as a philosopher who, dealing first of all with the world and the problem of knowledge of phenomena and our intercourse with them, intends to build ethics on ontology, and at the same time as an ethical thinker who first of all considers ideal measures – justice and loving kindness – as independent from Being and prior to Being.

3. My third thesis is that this dual influence on his thinking – by the Jewish Platonic tradition and Heidegger's *Existentialphilosophie* – and this dual orientation of his thought, wavering between ontology and ethics as *prima philosophia*, also make his idea of immortality dual: human beings are immortal on one side when they show their independence from external causes, and decide and choose on fundamental questions, as if time were suspended in these moments; on the other when they listen to commandments coming from a transcendent God whose only positive attributes are ethical. For Jonas immortality lies in freedom: but in the first case freedom is self-determination, in the second it is obedience to one's own practical reason which makes man a citizen of an intelligible world. If the first meaning of immortality indicates how he was influenced by his studies on Gnosis as the old form of an existentialistic ontology, the second shows his Jewish and Platonic inspiration. We find this dual idea of immortality in both his essay *Immortality and the Modern Temper* (1963)² and his essay *The Concept of God after Auschwitz* (1987)³.

¹ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1984.

² H. Jonas, *Immortality and the Modern Temper* (1963), in Id., *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. by L. Vogel, Northwestern Press, Evanston 1996, pp. 115-130.

³ H. Jonas, *The Concept of God after Auschwitz. A Jewish Voice* (1987), in Id., *Mortality and Morality*, cit., pp. 131-143.

But it is my impression that in the first essay the emphasis is on the first meaning of the term immortality, while in the second essay on the second. This justifies the subtitle Jonas gave to *The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice*, as if he were aware here (when explicitly speaking as a Jew) of his distance from the ontological perspective considered as fundamental for human beings.

In a concluding remark I would like to explain why I consider the Jewish Platonic Jonas more worthy to be preferred than the Jonas who – as a faithful pupil of the philosopher of Being Heidegger – remains deeply inspired by Gnosis, notwithstanding his criticism of this religious attitude.

2. Jonas' religious and philosophic education: Autobiographical fragments

In August 20-25, 1973 Jonas participated in Stockholm at a Colloquium on Gnosis and was asked by the organizer Geo Widengren to give the concluding address: Widengren suggested he tell the audience the story of his first steps in the field of research about Gnosticism, coming not from theology or the history of religions, but from philosophical studies. Jonas was a little embarrassed by this request, but agreed. However, he began his story not with his Heideggerian schooling in philosophy but with his first important juvenile readings, which all belonged to Jewish tradition and the German Enlightenment interpreted in the light of a metaphysical interest:

In my later school years [...] I had two or three decisive reading experiences of an intellectual, moral and emotional nature. Those were the concluding years of the First World War and the beginnings of the post-1918 period. A world had collapsed and the violent motions of nascence and, as it later turned out, abortion of the German Republic took place. The two or three decisive mental experiences were the following: Firstly, the *prophets of Israel*, whom I read at that time not in Hebrew, but in a translation provided by the Protestant text-critical school. [...] Secondly, *Immanuel Kant*, of whom I read as my first reading *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, which begins with this immortal sentence that thunders through my life similarly to the words of the prophets: "Es ist überall nichts in der Welt, ja überhaupt auch ausser derselben zu denken möglich, was ohne Einschränkung für gut könnte gehalten werden, als allein ein *guter Wille*." Thirdly, there was *Martin Buber*. At that time I

read Buber's famous *Drei Reden über das Judentum* and *Die Legende des Baalschem*, the beginnings of his great work on Chassidim, and strangely enough it blended with Kant and with the prophets of Israel. It was a blending which could probably not stand a rigorous critique of compatibility, but somehow it fused in my own mind⁴.

From these lines we can understand how Jonas, in the difficult first years of the Weimar Republic, was looking for a salvation – through the Jewish prophets, Kant and Buber – in a religious-philosophic perspective that I would like to define as an ethical-messianic metaphysics. Of course the sources that he mentions here are very different one from the other: Buber, in his first books⁵, was rather a critic of God's transcendence maintained by Jewish religiosity than a supporter; and Kant's first book on ethics does not allude immediately to God's kingdom to be realized in history as prophetic ethics does⁶. However, these sources mixed together in Jonas' mind and prepared in him the ground for a better understanding of another part of Jewish legacy, i.e. Jewish medieval philosophy. Later, in 1921-22, he would learn medieval philosophy in Berlin, at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, from his teacher Julius Guttmann, who came from the famous Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, a rabbinical institution which – unlike the traditional *Yeshivoth* – used not only rabbinic hermeneutics, but also historiography and philology as instruments for research on Jewish religious sources.

In another autobiographical page, in his *Erinnerungen* (2005)⁷, Jonas particularly recalls Maimonides and Yehuda Ha-Levi as the most important representatives of Judeo-Arabic philosophy, whom he read during his Jewish studies at the *Hochschule*. The spirit of Hermann Cohen, who had passed away in 1918 – author of the book

⁴ Jonas' speech, with the title *A Retrospective View*, is in G. Widengren (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism*, Brill, Leiden 1977, pp. 1-15. I quote from a reprint: H. Jonas, *On Faith, Reason and Responsibility*, The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont 1981, pp. 107-122, p. 109 (Jonas' italics).

⁵ M. Buber, *Drei Reden über das Judentum*, Rütten & Loening, Frankfurt a. M. 1911; Id., *Die Legende des Baalschem*, Rütten & Loening, Frankfurt a. M. 1907.

⁶ I. Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, hrsg. von P. Menzer, Akademie Ausgabe, Berlin 1903, vol. IV, pp. 385-463 (first ed. 1785).

⁷ H. Jonas, *Erinnerungen*, Vorwort von R. Salamander, hrsg. und mit einem Nachwort versehen von C. Wiese, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 2005, pp. 87-88.

Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums (1919)⁸, where he considers the doctrine of God's attributes of action as ethical patterns for man the center of medieval Jewish philosophy – was present in these years in the *Hochschule*, according to Emil Fackenheim's testimony who studied there in the thirties⁹. We may presume that Jonas, who would refer to this doctrine in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*, mentioning the infinite goodness or loving care of God as his main quality, was introduced to it by Guttman: Guttman's work *Philosophie des Judentums* (1933)¹⁰ shows how much the Platonic and Kantian Cohen influenced him. Thus the young Jonas, on the ground of his own autobiographical remarks, presents himself at the same time as an heir of a Platonic inspiration in Jewish thinking on God and the world and as an adherent to a religious and metaphysical Kantianism: this is the first anchorage of his philosophical reflection.

But the goodness or love of the unique God does not exclude evil in the world. I would like to recall that in the prophets of Israel, in Kant, in Jewish medieval philosophy, as in Plato, the optimistic view about human nature – able to arrive at the supernatural through the spirit (*ruach, nous*) – does not mean the reduction of evil to a non-being. Jonas discusses the problem of evil in the writings of the prophets in an article that he published in 1922 entitled *Die Idee der Zerstreuung und Wiedersammlung bei den Propheten*¹¹: it is true that the prophets defend the ideas that God is the master of the events, that history has a meaning, that suffering can be a means for a renaissance, that redemption will come with the help of God; all this, however, does not annul for them the darkness and tragedy of Jewish people's history during the *Galuth*, i.e. their exile and dispersion among other peoples. Only the messianic times, which will collect them again in Jerusalem, will give the final victory over the evil for all the nations.

After this memory of his early religious-philosophic background,

⁸ H. Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, hrsg. von B. Strauss, Kauffmann, Frankfurt a. M. 1929, 2. revised ed. (first ed. 1919).

⁹ E. L. Fackenheim, *An Epitaph for German Judaism. From Halle to Jerusalem*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2007.

¹⁰ J. Guttman, *Die Philosophie des Judentums*, Reinhardt, München 1933.

¹¹ H. Jonas, *Die Idee der Zerstreuung und Wiedersammlung bei den Propheten*, «Jüdische Jugend», hrsg. von Präsidium des Kartells Jüdischer Verbindungen in Berlin, Verlag Ferdinand Ostertag, 1922, pp. 30-43 (repr. «Beiheft 2 der VJS-Nachrichten», Informationsblatt der Vereinigung für Jüdische Studien, Berlin 2001, mit einer Einführung von M. Voigts, pp. 1-16).

Jonas in his address in Stockholm recalls his encounter with Gnosis and why he considers the Gnostic texts still relevant and meaningful:

I want to say [...] a few words about why I think that Gnosticism is really interesting, apart from the fact that so many documents happened to be discovered which somehow cry out for edition and interpretation. What is really important here? What is interesting? In other words, why should a philosopher spend his time on the interpretation of such a phenomenon? [...] Something in Gnosticism knocks at the door of our being and of our twentieth-century being in particular. Here is humanity in a crisis and in some of the radical possibilities of choices that man can make about viewing his position in the world, about his relation to himself, to the Absolute and to his mortal being. And there is certainly something in Gnosticism that helps one to understand humanity better than one would understand it if one had never known of Gnosticism. [...] To see it in this strange and even shocking form of an extreme option about the meaning of Being, the situation of man, the absolute importance of selfhood and the passionate concern with saving this selfhood from all the powers of alienation that impinge on man – to live in the company of this kind of thinking and imagery [...] is, I think, of interest not merely to the historian of religion. I still confess to a primary *philosophical* interest in the subject of Gnosticism¹².

In this way Jonas explains the reason that drove him, a student of philosophy in German academy, to make Gnosis the subject of his doctoral dissertation, which was completed with Heidegger as his mentor in Freiburg in 1928. Later, in his brilliant essay on Gnosticism and modern Nihilism (1952), Jonas would expound the modernity of the ancient Gnosis and the implicit, hidden Gnosis of the modern mind¹³. There can be no doubt that his interest in this radical religious experience could not have emerged without the conviction that

¹² H. Jonas, *A Retrospective View*, cit., p. 121 (Jonas' italics).

¹³ Cf. H. Jonas, *Gnosticism, Existentialism, Nihilism* (1952), in Id., *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, Beacon Press, Boston 1970 (first ed. 1958). In this essay Jonas focuses the feelings that the Gnostic and the *Existentialphilosoph* share: strangeness to the world, solipsism, a sense of the vanity of every human thing in front of death. The difference between the Gnostic and the *Existentialphilosoph* is that for the first redemption is possible through a secret knowledge of the true God who lives beyond this world, for the second redemption is absolutely excluded from human life, condemned to meaninglessness.

philosophy deals with Being, is in search of the sense of Being and, in order to reveal this sense, has to reflect on human existence: an existence open to the world, in the grips of violent feelings as the concern for its survival, anguish of death, sense of guilt for its finitude and its inability to win its destiny. Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927)¹⁴ – as Jonas himself points out in his talk – was the origin of this conviction.

3. The Imperative of Responsibility: *Ontology or Ethics as prima philosophia*?

The two types of religious-philosophic trends Jonas met in his youth through his reading of two types of sources – Jewish ethical metaphysics through the Bible and Jewish philosophers on one side and existential analysis through Heidegger's writings on the other – always fascinated him deeply. But it is precisely here that we find a central question for the evaluation of his thought. Actually, if one takes into consideration the facts that the first type – Jewish ethical metaphysics – makes a distinction between life and spirit, while the other – existential analysis – underlines the continuity between Being and human existence; that the first deems the unique God as transcending the world, while the second aims to discover a trace of the Divine at the bottom of human finitude itself when the existence discovers its necessary connection with the phenomena of the world; that the first connects the human mind with a transcendent ethical reality, while the second connects the human mind only with the Being that is immanent in the phenomena of the cosmos, then these two trends appear hardly compatible. According to Jonas, Heidegger remained faithful to this perspective also after his “turn”, at the end of the Twenties, from a philosophy of existence to a thinking of Being beyond the entities which are the objects of knowledge¹⁵. It seems to

¹⁴ M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Halle a.d.S. 1927.

¹⁵ In his essay *Heidegger and the Theology* (H. Jonas, *Heidegger and the Theology*, «Review of Metaphysics» 18/2 (1964), pp. 207-235) Jonas explains how there is a continuity between the “existential” phase and the “post-metaphysical” phase of Heideggerian thinking: paganism as a completely immanentistic view is the character which both philosophic proposals share, notwithstanding the first still emphasizes the role of human being in the Being, although its destiny is death, and the second instead the Being whose human being at the same time is the leader and the servant, like a “shepherd”, and therefore anyway submitted to time. A secularized Gnosis, i.e. a Gnosis

me that this dual influence makes important points of Jonas' philosophy unclear and ambiguous.

Now, a consequence of this dual inspiration is the fact that the *Grundlegung*, i.e. the foundation, of ethics in the book where the author seeks to provide precisely an ethics for our technological age, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, remains uncertain, not really grounded. Certainly, it is evident that all Jonas' effort, in the six chapters of the book, is directed to elaborating an ethics that presupposes a doctrine of Being as a teleological system, in order to avoid the dualism between *Sein* and *Sollen*, the world and the I, what pertains to our knowledge of matters of fact and what pertains to the field of values. Ontology comes before ethics in order not to make ethics abstract, utopian, purely ideal. But, in section 7 of Chapter 4, an extraordinary analysis of the sight of a new-born child is offered, where ethics manifestly has primacy over ontology. This seems to introduce a break in Jonas' reasoning.

At the beginning of this section, entitled *Parent-Child Relation: The Archetype of Responsibility*, Jonas underlines how here an «object» which belongs to the world has claims to being kept in existence and to be the recipient of care so that it will be able to grow and flourish according to its nature: here what exists, a particular being, is the ground for an ethical duty – the adult becomes responsible for the infant. But, at the end of the section, Jonas adds:

The theoretical rigorist may ask: What is really and objectively “there” is a conglomeration of cells, which are conglomerations of molecules with their physicochemical transactions, which as such *plus the conditions of their continuation* can be known; but that there *ought* to be such a continuation and, therefore, somebody ought to do something for it, that does not belong to the finding and can in no manner be seen in it. Indeed not. But is it the infant who is seen here? He does not enter at all into the mathematical physicist's view, which purposely confines itself to an exceedingly filtered residue of his otherwise screened-off reality. And naturally, even the brightest visibility still requires the use of the visual faculty for which it is meant: it is to this that our “Look and you will see” is addressed¹⁶.

without any transcendent perspective, remains the background of both philosophical positions. Cf., about this essay, S. Bancalari, *Jonas' «Heidegger und die Theologie»*, in M. Bongardt-H. Burckhart-J.-S. Gordon-J. Nielsen-Sikora (eds.), *Hans Jonas - Handbuch. Leben - Werk - Wirkung*, Metzler, Heidelberg 2021, pp. 176-179.

¹⁶ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, cit., p. 131 (Jonas' italics).

What is extremely interesting here is, first of all, Jonas' use of the word «infant» (unable to speak – *in*, negation, and *fant*, from the Latin verb *fari*) to characterize a body which is radically distinct from any other organic bodies: «infant» means a «conglomeration of cells» which potentially is a speaking being, a member of humanity, therefore is not an object or a thing, part of the world, but a subject, a Thou, a potential I. Secondly, in this passage Jonas refers to an «infant» as such, isolated from the context to which it belongs, when pointing out the commandment to take care of it: this means that the «infant» is not a member of a teleological system at all, but has an intrinsic value, is an end in itself, arises from the Being as something completely different from Being, notwithstanding its own being, the fact that it is. And, finally, the formula «Look and you will see», which Jonas introduces here, is taken from the Hebrew Bible (Gen 18:2, Josh 5:13, Chr 21:16) where it appears when the sight of something opens another dimension of reality, which is supernatural. Ethics here is not grounded on Being; on the contrary, Being somehow is only a metaphor that indicates something different from Being.

It is interesting to observe how in a single section of Jonas' *opus magnum* the two trends – Platonic Jewish metaphysics and the immanentistic philosophy of Being – that characterized his early thinking, according to his reading of two different kinds of sources, interlace their suggestions without losing their peculiarities. But they produce in it an internal tension and restlessness.

4. *The first human freedom: Choice or listening to a rational commandment?*

In his writings *Immortality and Modern Temper* and *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*, which I have above recalled, Jonas tells the same myth of the creation of the world by the divine principle – a myth that he himself formulates drawing on Plato's *Timaeus* and the Lurianic *Kabbalah*. I quote some lines from the first essay:

In the beginning, for unknowable reasons, the ground of the being, or the Divine, chose to give itself over to the chance and risk and endless variety of becoming. And wholly so. [...] On this unconditional immanence the modern temper insists. [...] Not, however, in the sense of pantheistic immanence: if world and God are simply the same, the world at each moment and in each state represents his fullness, and God can neither lose nor

gain. Rather, in order that the world might be, and be for itself, God renounced his own being, divesting himself of his deity – to receive it back from the Odyssey of time weighted with the chance harvest of unforeseeable temporal experience: transfigured or possibly even disfigured by it. [...] The advent of man means the advent of knowledge and freedom, and with this supremely double-edged gift the innocence of the mere subject of self-fulfilling life has given way to the charge of responsibility under the disjunction of good and evil. To the promise and risk of this agency the divine cause, *revealed at last*, henceforth finds itself committed; and its issue trembles in the balance. [...] In this awesome impact of his deeds on God's destiny [...] lies the immortality of man¹⁷.

If we read these lines carefully we notice how God's transcendence seems to acquire different and conflicting aspects: on the one hand it arises with the choice of human beings who are free to establish their own ethical concepts, because the divine presence does not remain as such, after the annulment of God in his own creation, and therefore God's image reflects human actions. But, on the other hand, the divine transcendence reveals itself to man, because – according to Jonas – he is the only being who can understand what good and evil mean, and between them as revealed principles man has to choose in order to give a sense to his life. So we are faced with the question: does the transcendent God arise as the result of human intentions that produce some specific actions or does the transcendent God arise again together with man in order to reveal to him what is good or evil as objects of his choice? On the reply to this question depends of course what one considers primary freedom in human beings to be.

Actually, if human beings affirm their own values in time and there are no ideal ethical principles, then immortality is grounded on the choice itself because it is exactly this choice that builds the Absolute, the Divine: the possibility to choose, self-determination, becomes the first freedom in human beings. But, if human beings are the listeners to God's voice, which reveals good and evil to their spirit, then immortality is this contact with God: in this case freedom is first of all the listening to rational commandments, the autonomy of a practical reason as a divine gift which connects man with God.

¹⁷ H. Jonas, *Immortality and the Modern Temper*, cit., pp. 125-127 (my italics).

In this case – as Kant has already noted¹⁸ – freedom as autonomy is necessary to discover our capacity to choose between good and evil, i.e. freedom as spontaneity.

The two freedoms appear in both essays: both are positive, mean the affirmation of human characteristics; but the first regards the particular position of man in Being, the second his connection with a *mundus intelligibilis* formed by those of good will. So Jonas writes in *Immortality and the Modern Temper* while describing freedom as choice and eternity as the instant of fundamental decisions:

In what situation and in what forms do we encounter the eternal? When do we feel the wings of timelessness touch our heart and immortalize the now? In what manner does the absolute enter the relativities of our everyday existence? [...] In *moments of decision*, when our whole being is involved, we feel as if acting under the eyes of eternity. [...] To look in this direction for a tenable concept of immortality is in keeping with the modern temper, which we find so keenly conscious of the essential temporality of our being, of its intrinsic reference to finite situation, and so suspicious of the possibility and the very sense of endless self-persistence¹⁹.

And so he writes in the same essay, reminding all those who in our times died or suffered without any guilt because of the behaviour of others which was the reason for «the disturbance of the transcendent order» – an order of eternal laws, the ethical order, to which human beings as free agents should first of all refer:

We may discern two responsibilities of man: one in terms of worldly causality, by which the effect of his deed extends for some greater or shorter length into a future where it eventually dissipates; and a simultaneous one in terms of its impact on the eternal realm, where it never dissipates. The one, with our limited foresight and the complexity of worldly things, is much at the mercy of luck and chance; the other goes by knowable norms which, in the Bible's words, are not far from our hearts²⁰.

In *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*, while keeping the idea that

¹⁸ I. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, hrsg. von Paul Natorp, Akademie Ausgabe, cit., vol. V, p. 4.

¹⁹ H. Jonas, *Immortality and the Modern Temper*, cit., pp. 119-122 (Jonas' italics).

²⁰ Ivi, p. 130.

human freedom means deciding our destiny and the destiny of God, for better and for worse, therefore the capacity to choose between different objects of the will, Jonas recalls also the other human freedom, the capacity to be a member of an invisible ethical community. He speaks here about the Jewish philosophical concept of God. According to this concept God is comprehensible and active in history as an ethical subject: He is the model and example for man who is free when he accepts the *Torah* given to him through human beings who were prophets; goodness or loving compassion is God's main attribute in his relationship with humankind. If this second concept of freedom is not maintained, human beings do not form any universality. But, notwithstanding his insistence on human finiteness, Jonas is convinced that an ethical kingdom exists.

Also this double idea of freedom – autonomy and self-determination – depends on Jonas' double inspiration, the Platonic Jewish one and the Heideggerian one (or Gnostic one, given the similarity between Heidegger's philosophy and Gnosis²¹): it seems that Jonas in both essays moves seamlessly from one idea of freedom to the other, although in his first important publication, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem* (1930)²², and also in his lectures at the New School for Social Research in 1966 and 1970 – lectures published in a posthumous edition²³ – he makes a distinction between freedom as free obedience to a law (typical of Stoicism and of Augustine when interpreting Paul's *Letter to the Romans* before he entered into the anti-Pelagian polemics) and freedom as a choice in the sense of a radical option, an *aut aut* (typical of the anti-Pelagian Augustin).

However, it is possible to say that in *Immortality and the Modern Temper* it is the Heideggerian or Gnostic meaning of freedom that is dominant: this is proven by the fact that here the Jewish symbol of the Book of Life (which means the eternity only of good actions) is interpreted – through the Gnostic symbol of the image-reflex of man acting in this world in another world – as the symbol of a Book where every action will be taken into account, be it good or bad²⁴. Actually,

²¹ Cf. above, notes 13 and 15.

²² H. Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem. Eine philosophische Studie zum pelagianischen Streit*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1965 (first ed. 1930).

²³ H. Jonas, *Problemi di libertà*, a cura di E. Spinelli, con la collaborazione di A. Michelis, Aragno, Torino 2010.

²⁴ H. Jonas, *Immortality and the Modern Temper*, cit., pp. 122-125.

in Jewish tradition, evil certainly exists in the world, but it is nothing in comparison with the unique God who alone has reality. By contrast, in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz* it is the Jewish symbol of the thirty-six *Zadikim*, the righteous human beings, which is strongly emphasized and leaves freedom as the ability to choose in second place.

Actually, in this last essay Jonas particularly underlines the Jewish legend of the incarnation of the transcendent ideal of justice in a few human beings, which is necessary to allow the world to subsist²⁵, rather than the Gnostic myth of a supernatural mirror-image of the choices of those who act in the world. In Jewish Platonism the Infinite, the first point of reference for man, gives a form to the cosmos and to human beings; in Heideggerian philosophy it is the cosmos with all its different forms and with the Being as their background that is the prime and only object for human thinking. Here Jonas seems to be closer to the first direction than to the second one: his «Jewish voice» seems stronger than the voice that comes from a scholar and follower of Heideggerian thought.

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In his *Réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme* and in *Autrement qu'être* Emmanuel Levinas considers every philosophy of Being dangerous because it does not recognize human beings as having any dignity²⁶. This is also the case when a distinction between *physis* and *logos* is introduced: here too the philosophy of Being does not recognize any real *évasion*²⁷, reduces transcendence to immanence, eternity to time, and man to a natural or historical phenomenon.

It seems to me that this criticism of Levinas is also relevant to Jonas' philosophy when it considers the theme of life, human existence, time as its beginning. But, when following a Platonic inspiration and Jewish tradition, Jonas fully escapes this criticism. Eternity becomes in this case the first object of his thinking – but not as another.

²⁵ H. Jonas, *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*, cit., pp. 140-141.

²⁶ E. Levinas, *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme*, «Esprit» 26 (1934), pp. 199-208 (repr. Rivage, Paris 1997); Id., *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Biblio Essais, Paris 1990 (first ed. 1974).

²⁷ E. Levinas, *De l'évasion*, «Recherches philosophiques» V (1935-36), pp. 373-392 (repr. Biblio Essais, Paris 1998).

er being, rather as a practical reason, a spiritual force, that is present in time.

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