

“The Phenomenon of Life”, by Hans Jonas.

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Hans Jonas. *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001. ISBN 0-8101-1749-5.

Value and emotion, which have been part and parcel of phenomenological thought, are now beginning to make headway in cognitive science. Their roots in organismic activity are in need of clarification, as is the connection between what an organism does and what it is. All of this makes it the right time to publish a new edition of Hans Jonas’s 1966 book *The Phenomenon of Life* and let the clarity of his single-stroke treatment of these questions illuminate current debates.

Starting from the rift that life introduces in the material universe, Jonas uncovers the development of the dialectic between organism and medium. He describes, in Aristotelian style, the transitions leading to human mind as the expansion of modes of freedom and mediacy in different forms of life. The starting point for the journey is its own destination – the embodied experience of concern. Only thus can we convince ourselves that our understanding of life is not illusory – a major departure from non-existential attempts at naturalizing mind and intentionality. Only life can know life; a disembodied god may still harbour doubts about it.

This view is complemented by an unusual companion: Darwinism. By introducing continuity in the realm of living, evolution succeeds in divesting humans of a special place in the book of life. But in so doing, evolution contains the overcoming of its own materialist premises – it isn’t human beings that lose their existence and inwardness (for how could any scientific theory honestly negate our strivings and our enjoyments, when we experience these firsthand?), it is other organisms that regain some of it.

Jonas locates this passage to inwardness at the origin of life itself. At its centre lies metabolism, an ongoing turnover of matter and energy which actively builds the conditions for its own continuation. In close parallel to systemic theories developed a couple of decades later (like the theory of autopoiesis), Jonas sees metabolism as the building and perpetuation of a self-distinct physical unity. Organisms never actually coincide with their material constitution. In constant flux, they maintain an organization which assures durability in the face of randomizing events and gives them an identity where form prevails over matter. Such is the revolutionary break that life brings into the universe.

Only a disembodied mind, Jonas argues, would take this description of the life as dynamic form merely as a question of epistemological convenience. An embodied perspective says something different. We can ascertain that organisms have an identity beyond the detached, ascriptional sense. Access to this knowledge is given by our own organismic nature and the direct availability of our bodies in the world. We have, as Jonas puts it, inside knowledge.

An organism’s constant dependence on matter, but lack of attachment to a specific collection of particles, implies that life’s relation to matter is one of *need* on the one hand and of *freedom* on the other. Metabolism is already seen as a centre of concern,

an entity with an interest in the outcome of its commerce with the environment and a degree of choice through regulation. Interactions between organism and environment are tinged with value as metabolic activity introduces its own normativity by dividing what's relevant for viability from what's irrelevant. This is the simplest system we find in nature which parallels the basis of our own existential condition, though much of it may only be found only in nascent form in simpler organisms.

What follows is a story of transitions connecting basic freedom and inwardness with more developed forms of life. Not all these transitions seem as sharp as that between non-life and life. These transitions may be understood in two ways not always clearly delineated in the book: 1. as the renovation of being, a transcendence in the current dialectics of needful freedom, or 2. as the specialization of the current dialectics through their transformation reaching thus new modes of being that rely on previous ones constitutively and not in a historical sense only.

Motility opens up the basic dimension of needful freedom by bringing forth action/perception in the coping of the spatial distance between need and satisfaction, as well as emotion in the coping of the time interval between the two. Need develops into appetite and desire for unattained goals, but also fear of danger; satisfaction into satiation and relief. None of these is possible without the enabling freedom provided by metabolism which is able to store up energy to be used up in motion.

Jonas doubts that this is an intrinsic gain of any sort. What is gained in freedom is lost in increased precariousness. The implication is that the transition to animality is simply another way of achieving the same. This neutral view is gradually blurred from this point onwards as it conflicts with the intuition displayed by Jonas that a new form of life introduces its own value-making activity. Of the passage to animality he says that once started down this path there's no going back.

Yet, what was a firm argument for the case of metabolism (value is provided by its logic of self-constitution) is only intuitively true in this case. In what circumstances will a novel form of life tend towards its own conservation? Could the values thus introduced transcend the central value they derive from, that of life itself? The answers to these questions (answers which Jonas ultimately does not provide here) would have profound ethical implications and could elucidate whether all animal values, including sex, care of the offspring, etc., derive ultimately from metabolism and whether evolution, often proposed for explaining such values, can originate them or merely 'moulds' the inwardness already achieved.

It would also be possible to know whether we can build artificial systems that, while not metabolizing, can still enjoy an intrinsic intentionality. For Jonas, a goal-seeking machine is still far from being a value-generating machine, its purposes are derived and do not feed back into its constitution. It remains to be seen whether artificial intentionality is impossible short of building a fully metabolizing system or whether there is an alternative in the understanding of how non-metabolic values originate. Cybernetics and artificial intelligence have not seriously taken up this challenge but the sounds coming from new disciplines such as autonomous robotics seem appropriate.

On the road to increased mediacy and freedom it is *sight*, of all senses, that allows for the next transition. Sight enables the simultaneous perception of a distant manifold unlike others senses that rely more strongly on temporal integration (hearing) or direct interference on the outside by the perceiver (touch). It is through sight that an object first becomes available as a whole; detached from the organism. Objectivity, and ultimately theory-making are possible because of the passive contemplation that sight affords.

Jonas is rather absolutist in his treatment of the senses. A static image would seem to have little or no temporality. And although he demonstrates that movement is necessary for the genesis of depth perception, actual passive contemplation requires movement not merely as genetic but as constitutive, due to the need to scan, to focus, to follow

contours and salient details, and many other unconscious motor adjustments that must be continuously present in order to achieve the visual intention of a static, clear image. This qualification does not undermine Jonas’s argument. While the differences between the senses are not as sharp as purported by Jonas, sight is indeed the sense that mostly contributes to the expansion of the mediacy.

With roots on vision, human beings introduce a further widening of mediacy by interposing between an object of perception and the perceiver a manipulable image that can render the object present at will and guide action eidetically. Freedom of action is expanded where before only engagement with an actual situation was possible. Image-making also brings forth the experiences of truth and falsehood and slides a veil of representation and symbolism between humans and their world.

Human beings eventually turn their image-mediative skills upon themselves (presumably thanks also to social mediation, though this is never raised by Jonas). They objectify their selves and become aware of their lives as something to be shaped in the light of an image. As persons, they know their own mortality and are therefore open to aspirations and frustrations. Their centre of inwardness is divided against itself by becoming an object and a project for itself and so only humans can know happiness and unhappiness.

All this is covered in a single book. The extraordinary journey finishes with essays on the practical uses of theory, a comparison between gnostic and existential nihilism, Jonas’s 1964 address where he famously stood up against Heidegger and a reflection on immortality and the modern temper. There is an immense richness in the stages that lead up to this final phase, partly in the strength of Jonas’s discussion but even more so in the room and clues he leaves for further development as signposts along a terrain that still needs to be charted. Probably like no other recent thinker Jonas has brought human existence closer to nature.