

Jonasian Gnosticism*

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■ Abstract

This article proposes that Jonas's understanding of gnosticism differs substantially from the account typically associated with him. That standard account takes the basic tenets of existentialism as the foundation to its discussion of alienated individuality, whereas Jonas's system uses neo-Kantian epistemology to construct both alienation and individuality out of a unified field of human interaction. Within his framework, gnosticism is a single historical-philosophical episode of inauthenticity, highly influential yet isolated in time, unlike the ubiquitous understanding of it. This article reviews Jonas's system, elements of its early and later acceptance, along with selected issues raised by critics, from Heidegger and Scholem to Colpe, Yamauchi, Williams, and King.

■ Keywords

Hans Jonas, gnosticism, Manichaeism, early Christianity, existentialism, Heidegger, neo-Kantianism, philosophy of life

* The author is indebted to the works of Roger Johnson, Michal Waldstein, Christian Weise, and Yotam Hotam, beyond differences and more than can be read from their citations below. I am also grateful to Joseph Agassi, Marcelo Dascal, Yosef Schwartz, Adi Molad, Oren Rose, Sebastian Luft, Daniel Wilhelm, and the anonymous readers of *HTR*.

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HTR 116:1 (2023) 91–122



■ Introduction

During the second half of the twentieth century, a particular existential theory of gnosticism dominated early Christian studies and spread into neighboring disciplines, from literary theory to political science. The philosopher Hans Jonas (1903–1993) was considered responsible for this surge of interest in a relatively well-documented but otherwise obscure controversy from the early centuries of the Christian era. His theory promised, at least for a time, to inform discussions of human essence, constraint, and freedom in ways that intersected with modern worldviews.¹

The present article argues that this phenomenon was not due to Jonas's actual views but to another theory of gnosticism, incorrectly attributed to Jonas. Building on and adapting neo-Kantian studies of epistemological frameworks, Jonas developed a comprehensive philosophical system of a unified humanity. According to Jonas, gnosticism was a part of this unity that developed following the Alexandrian conquest, which itself was a rapid unifying transition that challenged partial awareness of the unified field. Perceived as a crisis of worldviews, the conquest triggered the development of an inauthentic mode of existence, associated with the invention of individuality and estrangement. Jonas believed that gnosticism was its extreme manifestation, whereas Christianity was a moderate version, although influenced by the gnostic worldview. The latter claims constitute, in my opinion, a specific theory within his system. For brevity's sake, I will often refer to the theory and metaphysics together, as "Jonas's system."

By contrast, the theory that scholars typically attribute to Jonas references the classic existentialist framework, which focuses on alienation and individuation as the underlying truth of the human condition and authentic freedom. Supposedly, Jonas formulated an account that derived the gnostic worldview from these tenets: a personal existential choice, individuality as authenticity, and estrangement. Allegedly, Jonas claimed this existential insight made the gnostics aware of their alienation from the created world, thereby identifying with a hidden, divine realm.²

The first three sections present what I take to be Jonas's actual system. The first section describes elements of Jonas's background and intellectual context: his neo-Kantianism, semi-idealist monism, and the discussions of "crisis of culture" in Weimar. Never a victim of his zeitgeist, Jonas used this broad set of background influences to develop a system of philosophy that guided his investigations, from gnosticism and Judaism to the phenomenon of organic life. Section two focuses on Jonas's method and its philosophical underpinnings, independent of its presumed sources. The third section focuses on Jonas's theory of gnosticism, how he derived its specifics from the assumptions of his wider system, and its role in the general

¹ Ioan P. Culianu, "The Gnostic Revenge: Gnosticism and Romantic Literature," in *Gnosis und Politik* (ed. Jacob Taubes; Religionstheorie und politische Theologie series; Munich W. Fink, 1984) 290–306.

² See below for a more comprehensive discussion of this model.

history of being and thinking. I will discuss, in particular, gnostic ethics, the Alexandrian crisis, pseudomorphosis, symbolic inversion, and non-Jewish origins.

Section four reviews responses to Jonas, starting with the evaluation of his doctoral dissertation by Dietrich Mahnke and Martin Heidegger and continuing with the appropriation and adoption of some of his suggestions by Rudolf Bultmann and Gershom Scholem. The latter two referred to de-mythologization and antinomian religiosity, respectively. Centering on the theory typically attributed to him, I present Jonas's rejection of classic existentialism and specific elements of the attributed theory. Given the latter's success, I survey elements of its criticisms launched by Carsten Colpe, Edwin Yamauchi, Michael Williams, and Karen King, who discredited the attributed account. The fifth and final section discusses the resources available in Jonas's system in order to answer the critiques, proposing revisions to some of his suggestions.

■ Gnosticism and Monism

At the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, philosophers like Herman Cohen and Paul Natorp developed a scientifically informed epistemology of a "unified field," forming the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism that was prominent among other contemporary approaches grouped under that title.³ Following the success of the unification efforts in mathematical physics during the nineteenth century, they reasoned that as mathematics possessed epistemological unity and mathematics described (or could describe) the world, the world must be a single unit.⁴ As represented by Natorp and Cohen, neo-Kantianism objected to standard dualist epistemologies that distinguish subject and object. Briefly, objects were assumed to reflect more generally applicable laws, an idea that Natorp found in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Consequently, Cohen's and Natorp's "objects" were considered signifiers that point to an ontology of laws (rather than signifieds).⁵ Simultaneously, the specific way a subject is conceptually related to its conceptualized objects and how they both interact determines that subject's gnoseology (*Wissenschaftlehre*): a methodologically consistent application of

³ Jeremy Heis, "Neo-Kantianism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. Edward N. Zalta; Summer 2018 Edition) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/neo-kantianism>.

⁴ Roger A. Johnson, *Philosophy and the Origins of Demythologizing Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 40–45.

⁵ Neither objects nor laws were considered as arbitrary or strongly subjective. See Natorp's "On the Objective and Subjective Ground of Knowledge," in *The Neo-Kantian Reader* (ed. Sebastian Luft; London: Routledge, 2015) 167 ("The synthetic connection of the unlimited manifold of appearances in the unity of the law, the bringing together into unity, as Plato says [*Theaetetus* 147d], is what makes the phenomenon understandable and so explains it"), 171 ("the object signifies the *law*" [italics in original]), 177 ("we might designate the law of *lawfulness itself* as the basic objective law of knowledge" [italics in original]). *Theaetetus* 147d marks the beginning of an exchange regarding the nature of knowledge, where Socrates eventually encourages Theaetetus "to designate the many forms of knowledge by one definition" (148d; [trans. by Harold N. Fowler; LCL 123; London, Heinemann] 29).

epistemological principles, or science of sciences.⁶ The neo-Kantians could therefore discuss, for example, Kantian gnoseology, and attempt to extend it beyond Kant's actual work, typically attempting to unify Kantian intuition and understanding (by a radical expansion of Kant's transcendental apperception or by the principle of "origin").⁷

The framework was purportedly monistic, at least as an epistemological ideal, but still held a pluralistic caveat: an autonomous ground where no further objectivation could take place. This "deepest level, above which all the special contents of consciousness are built," served as an autonomous, spiritual identifier, influencing the "objectifying [of] that which is or that which ought to be."⁸ Reconstructed by a semi-Kantian critical development of a priori principles, the "deepest level" comprised condition(s) of possibility, and also cultural norms, often hidden and implicit.⁹ Neo-Kantian thinking could therefore discuss the logic and repercussions of norms, applicable to historical and sociological scholarship from Harnack and Windelband to Simmel and Weber.

Jonas did not claim to be a committed neo-Kantian, nor do I claim that he was so. Instead, I argue that Jonas was influenced by neo-Kantianism, specifically, by neo-Kantian notions of unity, object-world construction according to a law, and its use of "gnoseology." Note that these notions, which Jonas used as conceptual building blocks, are sometimes considered by students and scholars of Cohen's and Natorp's work not as precise "doctrinal" indicators but general members of the neo-Kantian lexicon. Some distance is implied, for example, in Jonas's treatment of autonomy. Jonas would classify the deep levels as autonomous spiritual signifiers, according to their degree of "authenticity" and the number of different knowledge systems they simultaneously employed. According to him, genuinely authentic and free worldviews and choices are informed by the epistemological unity of totality. Inauthenticity, by contrast, relates to epistemological pluralism and dualism. Finally, an antinomian relation between "self" and "world" is radically inauthentic or anti-authentic. For obvious reasons, this usage differs from Natorp's autonomy.

On the other hand, Jonas's use of the neo-Kantian substructure was recognized for its impact on Rudolf Bultmann's demythologization procedure, arguably the most important application of existentialism to the field of theology.¹⁰ Bultmann acknowledged his debt to the "important remarks on the hermeneutical structure

⁶ Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, (trans. John Denton; Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997) 26–33, 41–44, 61–64; Poma's translation does not infer any relation to gnosticism.

⁷ Scott Edgar, "Hermann Cohen," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/cohen>.

⁸ Paul Natorp, *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der Humanität: Ein Kapitel zur Grundlegung der Sozialpädagogik* (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1908) 45, translation cited in Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 71–72.

⁹ Heis, "Neo-Kantiansim," 1.1, 1.6; Poma, *Hermann Cohen*, 201–2.

¹⁰ Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction* (trans John Bowden; London: Continuum, 2003) 272.

of dogma in Hans Jonas.”¹¹ Accordingly, Roger Johnson’s study of Bultmann provides a detailed account of Jonas’s pioneering role and his appropriation of neo-Kantian elements.¹² Originally a doctoral dissertation written during the mid-1960s, Johnson’s research was indebted to the unofficial assistance of “Professor Hans Jonas” for “the conversion of vague hunches into demonstrable statements.”¹³ Furthermore, and central to this paper, Jonas explained to Johnson that his analysis of demythologization was no less than “the philosophical and hermeneutical basis of his whole undertaking.”¹⁴ Eventually, the neo-Kantian contribution to Jonas was central to his epistemology and his non-Heideggerian form of existentialism.¹⁵

However, we should be mindful of other potential influences on Jonas’s system. At the turn of the twentieth century, and notably after the First World War, the German scene gave rise to philosophies that emphasized individual selves, sometimes predicated on the organic and biological.¹⁶ Another aspect was an explicit discussion of crisis and its location in the history of thought, including theological discussion that often challenged neo-Kantianism explicitly.¹⁷ Readers of Jonas sometimes position his thinking within this latter sphere.¹⁸

¹¹ James M Robinson, “The Pre-history of Demythologization,” *Interpretation* 20 (1966) 65–77, at 71; Hermann Diem, *Dogmatics* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959) 78.

¹² Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 207–31; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980) 223–26, 256–58.

¹³ Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, vii; see their correspondence (Hans Jonas, *Correspondence with Roger Johnson* (Hans Jonas Archive, Konstanz University, 1964) 4-13-12 [internal archive designation]).

¹⁴ Quoted in Robinson, “The Pre-history of Demythologization,” 70 n. 17.

¹⁵ See Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 32, 170–72. Following discussions with Jonas, Johnson opted to nearly equate Jonas’s existentialism with the application of his demythologizing procedure, a “method of interpretation directed to texts of the past,” (Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 171) that resembles neo-Kantian versions of the transcendental method (as discussed further below). For aspects of Jonas and Heidegger’s views of their relation, see below. For more references to object-world epistemology see, for example, Jonas’s correspondence with Bultmann in 1929 (Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* [New York: Atropos, 2010] 335–48). For gnoseology and object-world construction see his accounts of ancient animism (e.g., Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 7) and his critique of non-objectifying thinking (the original title of his “Heidegger and Theology,” cites his “basis” explicitly [*ibid.*, 260]). See Waldstein, “Hans Jonas’ Construct ‘Gnosticism’: Analysis and Critique,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000) 341–72, at 357–8; idem, *Fatalismus wäre Todsünde: Gespräche über Ethik und Mitverantwortung im dritten Jahrtausend*. (ed. Dietrich Böhler; Münster: LIT, 2005) 24, for similar observations regarding Jonas.

¹⁶ Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins* (Hannover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990) 253–366.

¹⁷ Yotam Hotam, *Modern Gnosis and Zionism: The Crisis of Culture, Life Philosophy and Jewish National Thought* (trans. Avner Greenberg; Oxford: Routledge, 2013) 15–30; Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 5–6.

¹⁸ For the “existentialist” reading of Jonas, see below. For a reading of Jonas as a *Lebensphilosoph*, see Hotam, *Modern Gnosis and Zionism*, 49–50, 75–77. Reading Jonas as a critique of his contemporary modernity is a related topic (*ibid.*, 78) since German 19th cent. thinkers, neo-Kantianists included, used history to engage their modern period (Hartung, *From Hegel to Windelband: Historiography of*

As we shall see, Jonas argued that the concept of biologically isolated selfhood resulted from a particular law of object-world construction related to the perception of crisis. His fuller response also seems related to another school of monist thought, nineteenth-century German Idealism, according to which objectivation is a category of logical necessity that organizes the history of a unified Spirit ontologically.¹⁹ Accepting the claim for resemblance, Jonas nevertheless denied any direct influence. His exposure to non-critical Idealism was perhaps unconscious, he told Johnson.²⁰ Presumably, Jonas was referring to the detailed argumentation of German Idealism, which he seems to have avoided, unlike the “transindividual” ontology,²¹ which he developed.

Let us review a few examples of Jonas’s application of monist ontology, crisis, and object-world conceptualization, embedded with references to ancient gnosticism. Elements related to unity, diversity, and biblical evidence appear already in Jonas’s first paper, “The Idea of Dispersion and Recollection in the Prophets,” published in 1922.²² Citing an array of prophetic quotations, Jonas explains dispersion, diaspora, as a step of “examination, education, purification” “required as a prerequisite for uniting with God.”²³ He also posits that the predictive value of the prophecies is relevant to Zionism.²⁴ Combining purifying dispersion and political recollection, Jonas’s reading of the prophets anticipates the “pneumatic equation” he would come to associate with Valentinian gnosticism in *The Gnostic Religion*, published in 1958. There, the “human-individual event of pneumatic knowledge is the inverse equivalent of the pre-cosmic universal,”²⁵ a doctrine that “justified the equating of individual unification with the reuniting of the universe with God.”²⁶ Jonas immediately qualifies this epistemological-turned-ontological statement, where knowledge relates to the universe: “Dispersal and gathering, ontological categories of total reality, are at the same time action-patterns of each soul’s potential experience, and unification within *is* union with the One.”²⁷

“God after Auschwitz,” published in 1987, suggests a similar myth of creation: selecting worldhood over isolated selfhood, God rearranged himself as spiritual

Philosophy in the 19th Century (ed. Gerald Hartung and Valentin Pluder; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015) 21–22), arguing, for example, that Schelling’s deep structure was gnostic (Wilhelm Windelband, *History of Modern Philosophy* [trans. James H. Tuft; New York: Macmillan, 1895] 619–20).

¹⁹ Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 217–19, 229.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 250.

²¹ Waldstein, “Hans Jonas’ Construct ‘Gnosticism,’” at 341.

²² Hans Jonas, “Die Idee der Zerstreuung und Wiedersammlung bei den Propheten,” *Jüdische Jugend herausgegeben vom Präsidium des Kartells Jüdischer Verbindungen in Berlin* (Berlin: Ferdinand, 1922) 30–43.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

²⁵ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 2001) 176.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 61 [italics in original].

Self/s, spread in every actual being.²⁸ Accordingly, these three texts that span Jonas's career represent a primacy of unity over diversity, a claim associated with monism.²⁹ In anticipation of the analysis to follow, note that the texts share a metaphysical outlook, where diversity and unity are interchangeable, and significant transitions are represented either as the rise of diversity from unity or unity from diversity.

In 1938, already in Jerusalem, Jonas delivered a lecture in memory of Edmond Husserl, his professor at Freiburg. Based on his personal experiences with Husserl, Jonas proposes that Husserl exemplifies a worldview where a single, integrated field engages all problems of philosophy. He then generalizes the observation: philosophy, Jonas argues, is a unified field focused on studying the relation between thought and being, themselves united. Periods of philosophical history that had awareness of this unity were followed by periods of unawareness, in a continuous cycle. Forms of object-world construction, monism and pluralism could therefore interact in historically meaningful ways. Predicated on a distinction between self and world, the latest break of unity presumably came to a close with Husserl. However, the duration of the previous epoch exceeded Husserl's analysis. Jonas writes:

The abyss between in and out, between self and world, was foreign to the Greeks. The Greek distinction between mind and matter, that is, between form and substance, was a dichotomy within one world-being, within objective actuality. In the idea of the unworldly self, and even in the root of the concept of the subject at large, the influence of Christianity and its gnostic aspect can be discerned. There the unworldly self was first discovered.³⁰

Selfless, the Greeks were far more united with the world than the gnostics and Christians (or rather, the gnostic and Christian object world[s]), which constitute themselves in the "abyss" between self and world. For Jonas, Husserl's achievement was, therefore, a monistic overcoming of Christianity, including its gnostic "aspect."³¹

Twenty years later, in 1958, *The Gnostic Religion* repeats the monist-pluralist-agnostic theme, its historical positioning, and the discovery of selfhood:

The large Hellenistic monarchies neither called for nor permitted such close personal identification; and just as they made no moral demands on their subjects, so the individual detached himself in regard to them and as a *private person* (a status hardly admitted in the Hellenic world before) found satisfaction of his social needs in voluntarily organized associations based on a community of ideas, religion, and occupation.³²

²⁸ See Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice," *The Journal of Religion* 67 (1987) 1–13; see below.

²⁹ Jonathan Schaffer, "Monism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/monism>.

³⁰ Hans Jonas, "Edmond Husserl and the Ontological Question," *Maznaim* (1938) 581–89, at 584.

³¹ See below for a fuller discussion of Christianity and gnosticism.

³² Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 7 [italics in original].

As in his lecture in Jerusalem twenty years earlier, Jonas argues that the concept of a “private person” was barely used before the Christian era.³³ The Greeks and Romans, he explains, represented an identity, or worldview, broader than a particular individual. Illustrating monism’s scale and harmony in the “classic mind,” Jonas quotes three full pages of Cicero’s account of stoic monism. “No more telling contrast to the gnostic attitude can be imagined,” he concludes.³⁴

Jonas’s philosophy of organic life, also known as Philosophical Biology, provides the last example. Its first academic exposition was an outline of a seminar he proposed to the Hebrew University in 1947, where Jonas explained the continuity of the seminar with his studies of monism and dualism. “Since in the organism there is a meeting of two attributes of substance—the internality and the externality—as both sides of a single reality, the question of dualism and monism in the theory of being is relevant.”³⁵ The seminar was, in fact, a remarkably complete statement of his philosophy of organic life,³⁶ published over the next twenty years,³⁷ where a central argument proposed that the very concept of the organism proves the possibility of “integral monism.” The actual existence of organisms is, therefore, empirical proof for monism.³⁸ Famously, Jonas developed the argument through a history of comprehensive systems of ideas, or object-worlds. As in his 1938 lecture on Husserl, variants of monism competed with dualism. However, his later discussions provided further detail: ancient thought was originally a form of vitalist monism, understood as a neo-Kantian construction law. During late antiquity, vitalist monism was replaced by another object-world construction law, a thoroughgoing dualism. As of the early modern period, dualism was replaced by a system of competition and cooperation between two monist worldviews, mechanistic and idealistic (thereby the need for “integral monism”).³⁹ Gnosticism, Jonas noted while presenting the historical sketch, was both the origin and peak of the dualist development.⁴⁰

■ Jonas’s System

According to Jonathan Schaffer, there are many monisms: “What they share is that they attribute oneness. Where they differ is in what they attribute oneness to (*the*

³³ For a previous account of this “enhanced importance of personality” around the early Christian period, see Windelband, *History of Modern Philosophy*, 223; the observation resurfaced, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (ed., intro. A. I. Davidson; trans. M. Chase; Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 81–101, 242, 273; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self* (New York: Pantheon, 1986) 39–45, at 43 n. 3.

³⁴ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 243–45.

³⁵ Hans Jonas, Letter to Hugo Bergmann, Hans Jonas’ file, The Hebrew University, Jan. 15, 1947, [trans. by author].

³⁶ Hans Jonas Archive, Konstanz University, file 10–19, 1947.

³⁷ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001) 7–37.

³⁸ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7–18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

target) and how they count (*the unit*). So strictly speaking, there is only monism relative to a target and unit, where monism for target *t* counted by unit *u* is the view that *t* counted by *u* is one.” Among pluralists, he adds, it is useful to single out “the *dualist*,” who holds that *t* counted by *u* is two.⁴¹ On the most general level, a monistic account may target the categories themselves and consider whether the hierarchy of categories expresses overall unity.⁴²

Ontological monism is the view that the world is one interactive unity, but it can still be discussed in terms of distinct categories. Epistemological monism, the view I ascribe to Jonas, holds that ultimately, everything that can be thought, observed and engaged, shares one conceptual system of interaction, however complex. In Schaffer’s terms, epistemological monism is reducible to the position that the number of fundamental, true categories of a system of knowledge (the target), counted by the number of independent sets of concepts (unit), is one. Predicated on “objectivation,” Jonas’s monism views the world as a diverse yet necessarily unified a priori, manifest and known through a body of knowledge similarly diverse yet unified.

With this principle in place, Jonas investigates ancient traditions through the lens of historical documents. Canonized by communities but also associated with the name of a specific individual, such works present a challenge to the trans-personal view described above. A system-builder with an eye for detail, Jonas does allow for individual thinkers in the integrated, interactive cosmos he envisions, but only as partial expressions of overlapping influences due to local “Spirits,” which are more extensive than a “private person.” Consider Jonas’s analysis of Philo of Alexandria. The first local “Spirit,” manifest by Philo, is Judaism, which, according to Jonas, emphasizes the impossibility of knowing the divine and the abyss between God and creation.⁴³ At the same time, this view is also available from Platonic sources (a second tradition in this analysis)⁴⁴ and Stoicism (a third tradition), which Philo found plausible.⁴⁵ Philo was a manifestation of the tripartite overlap. However, according to Jonas, Philo was ultimately unsuccessful in harmonizing such fusions. Besides the three traditions above, Philo had also added gnosticism, a fourth tradition that calls to do altogether away with the attempt to know creation, while attempting to know God to the fullest.⁴⁶ Jonas thus proposes that the form in which Philo formulated

⁴¹ Schaffer, “Monism,” 1 [italics in original].

⁴² Ibid., 1.2, and see below.

⁴³ Hans Jonas, “The Problem of Knowledge of God in Philo of Alexandria,” in *Sefer Yohanan Levi* [Book of Yohanan Levi]: *Studies in Jewish Hellenism* (ed. Moshe Schwabe and Yehoshua Gutman; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1949) 70 (Hebrew).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁵ By the use of “middle knowledge of God.” Although the essence of God cannot be grasped, God’s being is another matter, that can be known (as opposed to believed). Ibid., 72–73. Jonas distinguishes between this type of middle or mediating knowledge and other forms of dualist distinction between subject and object (ibid).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 74–76. At the end of the article, Jonas proposed that Philo’s “middle knowledge” was exceptionally similar to gnostic concepts of experiential knowledge of God (“gnosis theos;” ibid., 84).

his version of the knowledge of God, *Gnosis Theos*, was a “complex, multi-faceted composite,” in which Judaism, Stoic thinking, Platonism, and Gnosticism share in approximately equal parts, but sometimes in opposed directions.⁴⁷ Reading Philo or other ancient authors, therefore, is to engage with the different, trans-individual worldviews that influenced them. For Jonas, this engagement defines the task of the historical interpreter as an embodiment of the “hermeneutic return” of “the real author, namely historical existence understood as a totality which reached beyond individuals and generations to produce this expression of itself.”⁴⁸ For Jonas, actual authors therefore stand in for broad trends and not the individuals themselves; that is, trans-individual attitudes expressed through individuals, as opposed to attitudes shared by those individuals.

Put differently, and utilizing the conceptual language he appropriates from neo-Kantianism, Jonas provides the connection between texts, individual authors, and a crucial entity termed “Spirits,” portions of totality that are broader than a specific individual person, yet still limited compared with totality itself. Again, his neo-Kantian lexicon proposes that “objects” of thought are organized as meaningful combinations of concepts, that is, “object worlds” that are constructed conceptually (as opposed to discovered empirically) through a process of “objectivation,” object-world-building under a law.⁴⁹ Accordingly, the “real author” of any object is its construction law.

To decode the construction law, Jonas reads its lasting products, concise formulations of essential beliefs, termed after religious dogmas. As defined by Jonas, “dogma” is a subset of an object-world, composed of “subject-predicate formulations and as such they place their meaning in the realm of objectivities in a coherent, logical context.”⁵⁰ This definition treats dogmas as a vehicle of epistemological dualism, where distinct “realms” are associated with coherent/incoherent truth. However, although limited by their “non-dialectical object sentences,” dogmas still link objects to forms of historical existence, making them available for logical interpretation.⁵¹ Due to their robust logical structure then, dogmas endure. Their persistence and accessibility to analysis make them a means by which individual people or collective traditions can approach their past. Specifically, this concept of dogmas allows Jonas to study the credo-like, subject-

⁴⁷ Ibid., 74–76.

⁴⁸ Hans Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem. Ein philosophischer Beitrag zur Genesis der christlich-abendländischen Freiheitsidee* ([1930], repr.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1965) 84, translation cited in Waldstein, “Hans Jonas’ Construct ‘Gnosticism,’” 346.

⁴⁹ Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 47–50.

⁵⁰ In Jonas’s usage, a monist object-world would contain subject-predicate sentences (i.e., subsets) but also dialectical definitions, presumably expandable to cover totality in full. Object-worlds fully defined by dogmas would be less authentic due to their dualist structure, partially supplemented by myths (see below).

⁵¹ Hans Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, 81.

predicate formulations in the writings of the “mainstream” Church fathers (for example, “the gnostics believe this and that”).

At the same time, since Jonas considers dogma to be but a part of an object-world, the use of dogma as a complete account of authorship is problematic. However, if supplemented with critical context essential for historical epistemology, dogmas could provide material for fuller historical reconstructions. He writes:

Ultimately, the dogmas are self-objectification. In the particular case, above that general ontogenetical “condition of possibility,” *they satisfy theoretical interests in the specific sense of “theory”* as, for example, harmonizing constructions, by relating and uniting the problematic factor of existence into the already constructed system of metaphysics of this existence. In this constructive role in the service of a rational whole, dogma is in many cases already the answer to tormenting antinomies . . . by its world-like object character.⁵²

Dogmas interact with the “primarily given,” that is, “human existence” [*Dasein*], which expresses and interprets itself in language.⁵³ Dogmas, therefore, transform *Dasein* as the general human existence into a more specific form of human existence and historical reality as experienced by local spirits who are the “real authors.” The “primarily given” is, consequently, a dogmatic modification of human existence. Given this distinction, existence as experienced by the authors of the dogmas, their law of construction, can be recovered by comparing the subject-predicate formulation with the real sense of *Dasein*, known in advance to be monist. “The comprehensive meaning of the world,” writes Jonas, “expressed in the crudest myths or the most sublime philosophical forms, is determined for a given sphere of history, which acquires its essential unity out of this ground.”⁵⁴ In short, Jonas analyzes documented accounts of the world and reconstructs subject-predicate relations or dogmas. From the difference between the dogmas and what he considers actual reality—monism—he infers the historical-existential situation of the “real authors” and elements of their object-worlds, in addition to the dogmas already reconstructed. Thus, a set of subject-predicate, credo-like statements is accorded high importance. Matched against monism as a stable reference point and supplemented with dates and locations, the detailed experience of monism can be reconstructed as an existential-historical account. Similar to neo-Kantian versions of the transcendental method, Jonas’s procedure can be viewed as an explanatory device that begins with “facts of culture” to construct an account of their conditions of possibility, interpreted as a fundamental account of a given aspect of human existence.⁵⁵

⁵² Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist Teil I: Die Mythologische Gnosis* ([1934], repr; Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments Series 51; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1988) 82 [italics added].

⁵³ Hans Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, 81.

⁵⁴ Hans Jonas, *Gnosis I*, 13 (translation cited in Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 228). Heis, “Neo-Kantiansim,” 2.1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* In this version, the method is employed to deduce object-world construction laws from its

Since monism is employed as a valid, corrective reference and since the non-dialectical subject-predicate formations are dualist classifications, the modes of existence discovered through this process are a manifestation of dualist inauthenticity. Put differently, it seems that one could use the method, perhaps slightly adapted, together with non-monistic context(s) serving as a reference, producing conclusions different from Jonas's. His historiographical process is, consequently, a monist methodology developed for the study of false but persistent dualisms. Among them, Gnosticism was more than a specific implementation of a unique system of unified existential phenomenology. Instead, it was the name of a central station in the development of the present world.

■ Jonasian Gnosticism

Development is not necessarily linear, and Jonas is, as we shall see, fascinated with the prospects of studying historical dynamics, meaning the appearance, fading away, and traces of laws of object-world construction. He takes as his "facts of culture" the reports of the polemicists, apologists and heresiologists,⁵⁶ along with scientific studies of antiquity that he considers sufficiently grounded to support a deduction of their possibility-conditions as states of unified Being, or "*Dasein*."⁵⁷ Jonas writes,

The movement of *Dasein* to self-objectivation, which governs the entire self-apprehension and self-interpretation of *Dasein*, even to its immediate

"objects"; for the neo-Kantian's transcendental method and its relations to that of Kant (and Plato) see Alan Kim, "Paul Natorp," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition) 2–3 <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/natorp>; Luft, in *The Neo-Kantian Reader*, 161, and Natorp's Halle lecture on Kant and the Marburg School (ibid. 180–97).

⁵⁶ These designations often overlap, and the discussion also involves classificatory categorization theories (etc.), which I avoid for brevity's sake (see below for similar issues regarding "gnosticism"). Jonas tended to use "heresiologists" as an umbrella term, proposing that the heresiologists combined a tendency for "prosecution" with innovative scholarship (*The Gnostic Religion*, xxxii). Compare Todd S. Berzon, *Classifying Christians: Ethnography, Heresiology, and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016) 6–18. For a discussion of "heresiological apologetics," a term suggesting continuation and subclass containment, see Kurt Rudolph, "Hans Jonas and Research on Gnosticism from a Contemporary Perspective" in *The Legacy of Hans Jonas*, (ed. Hava Tirosch-Samuelsen and Christian Wiese; Leyden: Brill 2008) 91–106, at 92; Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis – The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (New York: Harper 1987) 9.

⁵⁷ In *Being and Time*, *Dasein* is famously defined as an "entity which each of us is himself" (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [New York: Harper, 1962] 27), which "in its Being has this very Being as an issue" (ibid., 68). The first quotation roughly corresponds to Jonas's *Dasein*, the latter to Jonas's account of the primarily given (see the discussions of dogmas, above), distinguished from Jonas's *Dasein*, human existence, which predates the concrete historical existence, experienced by the "real authors." Years later, Jonas would refer to *Dasein* as "the self-experience of existence," which for Heidegger, he argued, is centered on and limited by the notion of "having been thrown" (Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 334–35), again a specific mode of existence that differs from Jonas's ontological construction of *Dasein* as a quasi-Hegelian *Geist*, partially manifested by a plurality of "modes" (Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 216–17). For a comparable account by a Heidegger scholar, see Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2020 Edition) 2.1, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/heidegger>.

self-consciousness, is a necessary, not accidental, or avoidable movement. It is precisely in this movement . . . that the primary existentialist ontological motive of dogma is to be sought.⁵⁸

For Jonas, *Dasein* is governed by its “entire” self-apprehension. A necessary movement, rather than an accidental or avoidable movement, it has little to do with autonomy, and the only proper object of its knowledge is the thing itself, identical with the thinker. Therefore, history is the history of unified thought, which progresses, although that progress is not necessarily known to all portions of the unified totality. Specifically, it is unknown to non-monist Spirits. Jonas develops a detailed model of this non-intuitive movement, proposing that it gave rise to the phenomenon of Gnosticism, eventually (and fundamentally) an expected outcome of *Dasein*'s expanding awareness of its comprehensive unity.

The specific crisis of unification relevant to Gnosticism developed in the aftermath of the Alexandrian conquest, to be discussed further below. First, I present the ways Jonas's gnostics built object-worlds according to antinomian versions of construction laws, manifested in his account of gnostic ethics and gnostic myths.⁵⁹ Driven by an epistemological experience that restated unification as a crisis of worldhood rather than an expansion of the human horizon, the peculiar object-worlds of the post-Alexandrians signified Gnosticism, an objectivated existence claiming separation and negation from these worlds. Jonas summarizes this construction law of objectivated existence as “radical anti-cosmic dualism.” These are “radical possibilities of choices that man can make,” he clarifies, “concerning his view of his position in the world, of his relation to himself.”⁶⁰ As shall be seen, they were not only radical but complex.

A. Unification, Crisis, and Ethical Choices

Events of unification challenge local Spirits, who interpret that event as a “crisis,” a situation in which their object-worlds do not function and are thus refuted. Therein, *Dasein* encounters “another mode of being,”⁶¹ other possibilities of existence apart from its previous object-world and monism; a “non-*Dasein*” ontology of interpretation. The transition will eventually become authentic and advantageous. However, until then and within the scope of non-monist Spirits, “non-*Dasein*” is an ontology of selfhood that is detached from worldhood, either as the ideal monist worldhood or the non-monist, yet functional and well-developed, object-worlds which predated the crisis.

⁵⁸ Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, 82 (translation cited in Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 217).

⁵⁹ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 331.

⁶⁰ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, xxv.

⁶¹ Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist Teil II: Von der Mythologie zur Mystischen Philosophie* (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments Series 63; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1954) 9.

According to this logic, when conceptual object chains became dysfunctional, they are distanced from the viewing self, and this situation opens up an “abyss” between self and previous object-worlds with their objectified representations of the actual.⁶² At the same time, the “vacuum” entailed by the failure of the law is one experienced as freedom. Jonas writes:

We are confronted both with a total and overt rejection of all traditional norms of behavior and with an exaggerated feeling of freedom that regards the license to do as it pleases as a proof of its own authenticity and as a favor bestowed upon it from above . . . a new type of human being who from here on is no longer to be subject to the standards and obligations that have hitherto always been the rule. Unlike the ordinary, purely “psychic” individual, the pneumatic is a free man, free from the demands of the Law . . . inasmuch as it implies a positive realization of this freedom, his uninhibited nihilism fully reveals the crisis of a world in transition: by arbitrarily asserting its own complete freedom and pluming itself on its abandonment to the sacredness of sin, the self seeks to fill the vacuum created by the “interregnum” between two different and opposing periods of law.⁶³

Whereas this paragraph could be read to support existential freedom, Jonas’s “interregnum” should not be colored by that tradition. The paragraph should instead be read as a description of “selfhood,” a phenomenon that develops in the wake of a broad crisis, criticized for its naiveté. The “psychic” nihilist is, on this account, not a practitioner of freedom but a symptom of what Jonas considers to be a limited, underperforming, largely deterministic object-world construction. Another difference relates to the observation of the situation: whereas analysis of existential freedom typically centers on the here and now, Jonas uses hindsight that takes into account the previous period of “law” and the subsequent period. Between two periods of functional object-world construction, the interregnum implied object-world emptiness he takes to be his protagonists’ overriding experience. According to Jonas, they utilized the prior law to fill the epistemological/normative “vacuum,” and so provide immediate relief. Then, and although temporary in principle, the concepts that developed during the interregnum would nevertheless go on to participate in defining the next period of “law.”

In his account, Jonas speaks about object-worlds as diverse as animism and mechanism and their transition periods; what he calls “the detour.”⁶⁴ “Radical anti-cosmic dualism” or Gnosticism was originally a form of dualist epistemology in line with the world. Challenged with an epistemological crisis, the dualist object-world responded by separating self and object-world, and radicalized that separation into an overall incongruity, terming it “freedom.” In fact, freedom was

⁶² Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 174, 316 n. 48; Waldstein, “Hans Jonas’ Construct ‘Gnosticism,’” 357–58.

⁶³ Jonas, *Gnosis I*, 234 (translation cited in Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* [New York: Random, 1995] 133–34).

⁶⁴ Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, 82; Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 12.

dictated by the construction law implicit in the gnostics' thinking: the true God became transmundane, whereas the "cosmos," in which sparks of transmundane light are enslaved, was created and governed by an evil entity. Far from signifying the physical, this object world still offered some agency, albeit narrowed only to attempts to rejoin the transmundane origin.⁶⁵ Jonas further highlights the constraints imposed on gnostic freedom by discussing its two forms of "ethical choices," which could be practiced while still attached to the world. The first, "libertarian" form is informed by the previous law, which it systematically "inverts." The second form of ethical choice is the "ascetic," according to which the world is avoided altogether.⁶⁶ These two forms could develop serially: libertarianism only takes into account the previous law and its limitations, in the face of which it attempts to construct another object-world. By contrast, ascetic ethics are also mindful of the potential evils of lawless acts in the world, which include acts belonging to a sinful libertarian ethic.⁶⁷ Consequently, ascetic Gnosticism rejects both the previous law and its logical complement and, doubting any object-world, proposes an essentially empty set of practices. Methodologically inverted by gnostic libertines and avoided by gnostic ascetics, the category of the object-world is eventually distinguished from the subject, a personal "self" conceptually separated from the "world."

B. Myths, Gnostic Myths, and Gnosis

Jonas relates the above constraints, and their practice, to gnostic groups' numerous myths. Intuitively, formulating a myth that describes a realm external to the world could suggest that new objects are being added to the object-world to create a new object world, including the idea of an outer domain. In object-world language, this concept is self-contradictory: first, because the extra-worldly is not in-worldly, thus raising a paradox similar to Russell's ("the set of all sets"); second, because such object worlds call for object-world construction, supposedly doubted and denied by Jonas's object-world denying gnostics. His theory of myth, to which I turn next, provides a response to such challenges.

To recap, Jonas's dogmas are sets of subject-predicate statements that express a moderate form of dualism rather than monism. As such, they are still fundamentally inauthentic, a situation reflected in disharmonies and formal contradictions. These manifest the pre-theoretical, non-monist commitment of dogmatic objectification. Totality, however, is in fact a single system of interactive knowledge, challenging dualist pre-theoretic commitments in ways that do not fit any dualist law of construction. These residual outliers are conserved as myths. Adequately analyzed, myths (the sets of dogmatic contradictions) expose a more fundamental structure of being, which for Jonas is also more authentic, that is, for him, closer to monism.

⁶⁵ Jonas, *Gnosis I*, 5.

⁶⁶ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 46.

⁶⁷ Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, 88.

Consequently, regular dogmas contain contradictory statements that are nevertheless informative.⁶⁸

Myths, given their subject-predicate formulation, are either dogmas or elements of dogmas. But, unlike regular dogmas, myths are primarily logically invalid and constructed as such. Jonas has proposed that these invalidities are evident, being “the ontological and special nature of this type of self-objectivation.”⁶⁹ His explanation refers to a significant contemporary challenge, the objectivation of the subject now transformed into an ontological item. Furthermore, myths combine the anthropomorphization of object-worlds and the worldizing of the human.⁷⁰ Consequently, myths subjectify the objective and objectify the subjective: being and world are given “only in and with each other,” expressing “the undivided interweaving of the subjective and the objective, I and thing.”⁷¹ As such, myths provide a repertoire of dualist accounts that are either false or partial. Ordinarily ignored in object-worlds analysis, they can nevertheless be accessed, he argues, to construct meta-myths, which reflect on mythical inconsistencies.

Developing another of his convoluted formulas, Jonas proposes that reflection on mythical worldizing is the worldizing of deworldizing. Myths allow this activity, he writes, since “the in-worldization of a tendency to escape the world is a paradox, yet [it is] also a real fact of existence.”⁷² Taking “worldizing” to mean the construction of an object-world and deworldizing its deconstruction, the chain of thought seems to proceed as follows: 1) dogmatic worldizing is the act of combining concepts into object-worlds; 2) dogmatic invalidities document the shortcomings of moderate dualism to relate to fundamental reality by non-dialectical, subject-predicate formulas; 3) myths are dogmatic invalidities combined to highlight such weaknesses, in that, 4) myths perform deworldizing, that is, the conceptual deconstruction of object-worlds; 5) reflection on myths is conceptualization, or object-world-building, or worldizing, of deworldizing objects. It is also 6) an engagement with reality that is more fundamental than the dogma; 7) that is, an encounter with underlying reality. Reflection on myths is then a form of existential analysis. Indeed, 8) with the mythic formula available, Jonas explicitly notes that “gnosis,” reflection which worldizes the “thematic I-world relation,”⁷³

⁶⁸ See Diem, *Dogmatics*, 25–27.

⁶⁹ Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, 81.

⁷⁰ Jonas, *Gnosis II*, 5. Jonas attempted to expand a late Neo-Kantian discussion, quoted from Cassirer: “If the purely inward must be objectified, must be transformed into something outward, then, on the other hand, all intuition of the outward remains penetrated and interwoven with inward determinations” (Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Symbolic Forms, Volume 2: Mythical Thinking* [London: Routledge 2021] 128). Following the quotation Jonas comments, “this only formulates the question!” (*Gnosis II*, 5 n. 2).

⁷¹ Jonas, *Gnosis II*, 7.

⁷² Jonas, *Gnosis II*, 13.

⁷³ Jonas, *Gnosis II*, 12.

makes existentialist phenomena analogous with “quasi-objectual visualizations,” conceptualized as worldly entities.⁷⁴

The latter formula entails further unpacking. Whereas regular, common myths are composed of false I-world relations largely ignored within the dogmas, gnostic myths use *thematic* I-world relations, signified by elements borrowed from regular myths.⁷⁵ Properly combined, the variety of gnostic myths could be utilized to support a claim for a unified framework: “at the same time variations and developments of certain main themes [were] shared by all; these together form what we may call the simpler basic [gnostic] myth.”⁷⁶

As a meta-mythological reflection, gnosis does not add concepts to previous object-worlds, now negated. Instead, gnosis meditates on the limits of the object-worlds that are reflected as dogmatic inconsistencies, such as the existence of evil in a created world, and gnostic myths document these meditations. Accordingly, gnosis was a consistent meta-myth borrowing and combining an inconsistent array of myths, myth elements, and symbols. Comparably, Jonas’s demythologizing procedure uses citations from gnostics themselves, combined to give an informative account of their “religion” in Natorp’s sense (discussed above)—to present the ground of their being-in-the-world as against their stated objectivations.

C. Symbols, Pseudomorphosis, and the Demiurge

Gnostics did join the crisis with formulas and symbols that extended beyond the symbolic vocabulary of their dogmas. However, any partial dogma was eventually an aspect of the total Spirit that “interprets itself in objective formulas and symbols.” Jonas writes, “In order to come to itself, it follows its own nature and takes this detour through symbols, in whose enticing tangle of problems it tends to lose itself, far from the origin preserved in these symbols.”⁷⁷ His approach to symbols considers them a manifestation of the interaction between dogmas that went through the unifying crisis and its aftermath. As such, it implies a methodological refinement, where Jonas’s preferred historical tools (dogmas) could also be studied together, and “the new vocabulary reflects the revolution of meaning as an established semantic fact.” The establishment of facts provide a window into the power relations of late antiquity after Alexander, where the heavenly ordered *cosmos* (Greek for “order”) became a “detractive term” that signified arbitrary, valueless power.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, 81.

⁷⁵ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 20, 24–25, 38, 90–97.

⁷⁶ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 42. Jonas originally utilized the myth of the “Saved Savior,” or redeemed redeemer, which was supposedly recovered from multiple pieces of evidence collected throughout Asia in the 19th cent. Its pre-Christian dating was refuted a few times (see section below). Other “basic myths” were proposed as replacement. See Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987) 12; Marksches, *Gnosis*, 26.

⁷⁷ Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische*, 82, translation cited in Waldstein, “Hans Jonas’ Construct ‘Gnosticism,’” 358–59.

⁷⁸ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 222; Jonas, *Gnosis I*, 72.

In his semantic analysis, Jonas employs “pseudomorphosis”—initially a term used in a geological context for the formation of pseudo-crystals in cavities, but utilized by Oswald Spengler for the study of cultural interactions.⁷⁹ Following Spengler, Jonas uses pseudomorphosis to discuss the reformulation of weakened traditions within the semantics of the power system that developed after Alexander.⁸⁰ According to this account, members of the former traditions could and would use terms appropriated from the new power’s conceptual vocabulary, assigning them meanings that differed from their “original” signifiers. Remarkably, Jonas claims that both “Greeks” and “Eastern elites” considered themselves weakened. The “Greeks” lost the principal constituent of their identity, independence; the “Easterners,” their intellectual prestige. Greek thought, “the older crystal of the simile,” disintegrated after losing its freedom. The intellectually belittled Eastern priesthood, by contrast, was a “new substance forced into its mold.”⁸¹ Appropriating the term “gnosis” from Greek culture allowed Eastern elites to reaffirm their relation to a higher monarch outside the “cosmos.” Simultaneously, with “cosmos” symbolized by the Greek term, they thereby insinuated that Greeks knew little of ultimate governance and comprehensive order. Traveling westward, the Eastern rejoinder precipitated Westerners’ engagement with the “slow death” of their previous socio-political culture, which reduced their actual and potential independence. Accordingly, a thought pattern that originated in Eastern elites became applicable for the West’s marginalized classes.⁸²

In Jonas’s account, this combination resulted in the gnostic portrait of the demiurge: a reference to a set of previous myths that described a benevolent God who created a world dualistically distinguished from him. With the symbols rearranged and evaluated differently than in pre-conquest traditions, gnostics could use them to depict the creator as an ignorant, lowly, and evil ruler of a world that exhibited the characteristics of his creator: the Gnostic Demiurge rather than the Artesian in Plato’s *Timaeus*.

D. Self-Objectification and Non-Jewish Origins

Jonas, as we saw, conceptualizes human subjects, a process sometimes considered a neo-Kantian conundrum. As seen above, thinking in terms of object-worlds

⁷⁹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 2:189. Perhaps preceded by Windelband: “the Gnostics . . . attempted to transform Oriental myths into Greek conceptions by allegorical interpretation” (Windelband, *History of Modern Philosophy*, 222).

⁸⁰ Lazier proposed that pseudomorphosis, a deterministic account of normative transitions, served Jonas to excuse some “failures of an age.” Plausibly, Jonas’s empathic suspension of normative evaluation was indebted to his concept of unified totality, the source of fundamental commensurability of experience (discussed above). Benjamin Lazier, “Overcoming Gnosticism: Hans Jonas, Hans Blumenberg, and the Legitimacy of the Natural World,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003) 619–37, at 626–29.

⁸¹ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 37.

⁸² Jonas, *Gnosis I*, 68–70.

constructed according to a law proved fruitful and instrumental for the paradigm case of mathematical physics. By contrast, the concept was deemed less useful in the humanities, where humans were understood to be at the same time objectivated objects, but also autonomous object-world builders who codify laws. In Jonas's Marburg, Bultmann and Heidegger termed this latter instance of objectivation "objectification" and "self-objectification."⁸³

Jonas seems to believe that he has solved the problem of objectification, treated as self-objectivation or improper objectivation: non-monist selfhood was an erroneous, inauthentic interpretation of existence, not because of the circularity of self-knowledge, but because it struggled to avoid that circularity. Gnostic myths, he writes, were "the ontological and special nature of this [gnostic] type of self-objectivation."⁸⁴ By contrast, the authentic form of an object-world building is a more or less direct application of "cognizant monism" that expresses the total Spirit. Jonas does not provide much conceptual detail regarding the authentic, dialectical form of objectivation. Nevertheless, it seems that the scale of (self) objectification suggests a theory of what the gnostic origins were not; that is, they were not Judaic.

"There is hardly any sign of oriental self-assertion within the Hellenistic orbit in the whole period from Alexander to Caesar," he writes, "with the one great exception of the Maccabean revolt."⁸⁵ According to Jonas, Judaism politically resisted Hellenism, the Greek-Oriental synthesis that developed after Alexander, and so, unlike its peers, was not subject to the crisis and its gnostic responses.

This observation is emphasized when Jonas argues that in and of itself, Judaism was conceptually distinct in that at the very "heart and soul" of gnosticism, the latter exhibited an "upside-down" reversal of Judaism.⁸⁶ As such, Jonas's gnostics treated post-crisis Judaism as they dealt with worldviews that dominated before the crisis and gradually declined afterward, unlike Judaism.

To achieve that level of stability in Jonas's system, Judaism must have occupied the position of a local Spirit aware of the entire field, hence resilient to the travails of Spirits who do not possess such a monist account.⁸⁷ A proper form of objectivation that manifested onto-epistemological monism, Judaism was necessarily resilient to crisis. Given worldly changes, it would not fall back on an original dualist (pluralist) commitment it did not possess but adapt its monism. Consequently, Gnosticism could not have developed out of Judaism: a properly objectivating

⁸³ See Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 53–57, 69–73. In contrast, Heidegger considered "objectification" to represent a "sign-thing . . . experienced as a mere Thing and misplaced into the same realm of Being of the present-at-hand" (Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 212; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 113).

⁸⁴ Jonas, *Gnosis I*, 81.

⁸⁵ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 20.

⁸⁶ Jonas "Response by Jonas," 288.

⁸⁷ Admittedly reductive, Jonas's view of essential Judaism was not entirely idiosyncratic: see Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, xiv for his debt to Buber, and Martin Buber, *On Judaism* ([1911] repr.; New York: Schocken, 1996) 22–33; also Martina Urban, "Towards what Kind of Unity? David Koigen, Leo Baeck and the Monism-Theism-Debate," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 54 (2009) 127–47.

monism, inherently protected from the consequences of crisis (a view I critique in the final section below).

■ Responses, Appropriation and Criticism: From Heidegger and Scholem to Williams and King

The first response to Jonas's system occurred in 1928 Marburg, upon the submission of his doctoral dissertation. Martin Heidegger's evaluation of Jonas's dissertation praises it as an answer to a pressing need due to his, and Husserl's, success with the phenomenological suspension of judgment. Since the application of "judging" is progressively overcome, he writes, there exists a "philosophical-historical task of fundamental importance" to re-engage the "history of the concept of knowledge since antiquity," expanding on the previous, neo-Kantian (and Scholastic) readings. However, Heidegger is also responding to a previous, negative evaluation of Jonas's submission by Dietrich Mahnke (1884–1939). Attending to the latter's critique, Heidegger explains its methodology.

The phenomenological analysis of the cognitive phenomenon is guided by the following basic conceptualization: in all its modifications, cognition functions as a mode of the existence of human existence [*Dasein*]. The way in which this mode of existence is interpreted is primarily determined by the pre-conception of the structure of being to which the cognitive behavior is primarily related.⁸⁸

"Pre-conception" here refers to the a priori derivation that Mahnke considered superfluous (i.e., problematic) in Jonas's presentation of a phenomenological investigation.⁸⁹ In response, Heidegger compares Jonas's methodology to neo-Kantian object-world construction-law theory (or "gnoseology"), then hints how to position it in his own thinking: that is, he locates the pre-conceived a-priori within the mode of existence that studies existence, comparable to knowledge of knowledge-systems (in a sense, Heidegger's own "gnoseology"). The attitude known as "Gnosis," Heidegger further explains, is an existential attitude constituted by a unique approach to what knowledge is, as the term implies.

⁸⁸ *Evaluation of Hans Jonas's Dissertation* (Marburg University Archive, 1928) 307d/305. "Die phänomenologische Analyse des Erkenntnisphänomens ist von folgender Grundauffassung geleitet: Das Erkennen fungiert in allem seinen Abwandlungen als ein Modus der Existenz des menschlichen Daseins. Die Art und die Weise, in der dieser Existenzmodus jeweils ausgelegt wird, bestimmt sich primär mit aus der Vorauffassung der Seinsstruktur des Seienden, zu dem sich das erkennende Verhalten vornehmlich verhält." For a previous account of the event see Hans Jonas, *Memoirs* (ed. Christian Weise; trans. Krishna Winston; Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008) 66, and Christian Weise, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007) 95. The full picture, including a distinction between the dissertation and other publications (such as, Jonas, *Gnosis I & II*), Mahnke's position in Marburg and some dating issues, needs to be discussed in a dedicated publication (such a publication is being considered by the present author).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Heidegger does not write on the continuities and differences between Jonas's novel approach and his own work on *Dasein*. But the topic is broached in another text by Mahnke, a private letter he sent to Heidegger, warning the philosopher that Jonas's use of existential terminology was, in fact, an ironic "parody."⁹⁰ An exceptional historian of mystical ideas and analytic philosophy specializing in Leibniz, Mahnke probably meant that Jonas explicitly noted that his endorsement of Heidegger's lexicon aimed only to use it as an approximation of the gnostic worldview, an "ironic" application, rather than "a philosopher's stone."⁹¹ Heidegger's reference to "a mode" of existence, above, might have doubled as an answer to Mahnke that hinted at other modes beyond or besides cognition, therefore implying that Jonas's monism could be accommodated within Heidegger's pluralist approach to *Dasein*.

At the same time, Heidegger's evaluation also asserts that Jonas worked out the details of the gnostic position towards the world, providing it with ontological meaning also developed from its self-interpretation. As such, Heidegger considers the dissertation exceptional, independent, and potentially fruitful, worthy, not of revision, but of extraordinary distinction, which eventually Jonas received.⁹² Recruited by Heidegger as an expert in the specific domain, Rudolf Bultmann joins Heidegger in this judgment, arguing that Jonas's methodology was used to derive the living gnostic past from its objectivations, an innovative account of the seemingly irrational.⁹³

Reviews of Jonas's first volume of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* mark the second phase of response to Jonas. All in all, the book did not secure much attention. Yves-Marie Faribault, a Dominican scholar, expresses a judgment of Jonas's project somewhat similar to Mahnke's. Reviewing the first volume he notes that it was written from the perspective of neither gnosticism nor Christianity. Since Jonas had considered both to be close, not only to each other but also to nihilism, Faribault infers that Jonas writes from another perspective, one not fully specified.⁹⁴ Another reviewer, Arthur Darby Nock, judges it nearly incomprehensible, although "of value," presumably limited, for studying the spiritual-philosophical movements of late antiquity and their emphasis on individuality.⁹⁵

During the same period of time, a different outcome began to emerge, due perhaps to Jonas's personal acquaintance with Gershom Scholem and Rudolf

⁹⁰ Dietrich Mahnke, *Letter to Martin Heidegger, 11 Feb. 1928* (Mahnke estate at Marburg University Archive, 1928) 862/305.

⁹¹ Jonas, *Gnosis I*, 90.

⁹² Jonas, *Evaluation of Hans Jonas's Dissertation* (Marburg University Archive, 1928, unnumbered page).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, (unnumbered).

⁹⁴ Yves-Marie Faribault, "Un Livre: Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist," *Extrait Des Etudes et Recherches* Ottawa (1937), 157–208; Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, xxii, xxvii n. 19.

⁹⁵ Arthur Darby Nock, "Gnosis und spätantiker Geist," *Gnomon* 12 (1936) 605–12, at 605, 608–10, 612.

Bultmann. Scholem uses Jonas as a theoretician of estranged individuals (such as Jacob Frank and his followers), who travel from “the law of Moses” to the realm of “Esau.”⁹⁶ Avoiding trans-individual analysis and hermeneutics, Scholem turns Jonas’s theory of an “interregnum” between two opposed periods of “law” into an operational device that charismatic leaders may use in providing their followers with a “path” through the “abyss” between these periods. Supposedly exposed by Jonas’s work, Scholem’s Frank interprets the abyss as corresponding to a voluntary and performative “abasement of one’s own sense of self,” rather than as resulting in the invention of selfhood.⁹⁷ Rudolf Bultmann’s response to Jonas was in many ways similar to Scholem’s. As we saw above, Bultmann credits Jonas for the invention of existential demythologization. However, like Scholem, Bultmann changes Jonas’s account considerably. As Johnson notes, “the philosophical presuppositions of objectivation which are present in Jonas’s writings tend to fall out of sight in Bultmann.”⁹⁸

Combining credit together with appropriation and significant shifts of meaning and overall outlook, patterns such as Scholem’s and Bultmann’s would become even more significant after the war. In 1945 Mohamed Ali al-Samman found a set of papyri in Nag-Hammadi consisting of 52 texts written by expert scribes.⁹⁹ Some of the documents contained the gnostic myths described by the heresiologists (i.e., Irenaeus’s account of the Gospel of Truth); others were previously unknown but similar. The fact that numerous mythologies shared the same container and even the same codex, and their anti-cosmological language have changed the status of the existential interpretation of gnosticism. Scholars began to consider gnosticism as a form of human existence, an attitude manifest in ways nearly equivalent to institutional religion and relevant to other fields of study.¹⁰⁰ Other than Bultmann and Scholem, scholars such as Eric Voegelin, Harold Bloom, and Hans Blumenberg came to discuss gnosticism within their respective, sometimes overlapping fields. Differences abounded: Scholem was often favorable to gnosticism, whereas Voegelin and Blumenberg considered it something to overcome. Nevertheless, all understood gnosticism to recur. “For me, Gnosis is a constantly self-repeating structure within religious thinking,” Scholem writes to Jonas. “For you,” he continues, “it is a unique historical-philosophical phenomenon, with which the parallel structures are not understood as identical but rather isomorphic.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, 129–34.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁹⁸ Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, 231.

⁹⁹ Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justine Ariel Blount, “Rethinking the Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” *JBL* 133 (2014) 399–419.

¹⁰⁰ Culiuanu, “The Gnostic Revenge.”

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Yotam Hotam, “Gnosis and Modernity—A Postwar German Intellectual Debate on Secularisation, Religion and ‘Overcoming’ the Past,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8 (2007) 591–608, at 601. For more analysis of this interaction see: Hotam’s article; Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy*; Willem Styfals, *No Spiritual Investment in the World: Gnosticism and Postwar German Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

This representation differs from Jonas's and focuses on an existential situation that is centered on an individual, private person who experiences worldly evils. Based on these experiences, the agent concludes that the world is alien to the self, and that the evil that is experienced through this estrangement is a necessary feature of the world. Combined with theism, the agent further assumes that an underperforming deity, the gnostic demiurge, created and governed the world. Consequently, the agent concludes that it belongs to and originated from a hidden extra-worldly domain, which is devoid of evil, and home to a divine hierarchy that transcends the demiurge. Following this realization, the agent focuses on escaping existence, allowing for two interim modes of behavior: "ascetic" avoidance of the world and the evil associated with it, or "libertarian," antinomian promiscuity that opposes regular codes of conduct.

Presented by various myths and theological speculations, Gnosticism nonetheless expressed a fundamental unity of thought that reflects its unified origins, the specific existential interpretation just outlined. "According to Jonas's analysis," writes Pagels, "many people at the time felt profoundly alienated from the world in which they lived, and longed for a miraculous salvation as an escape from the constraints of political and social existence."¹⁰² Evidently, this model that is attributed to Jonas is divorced from origin, object-worlds, and objectivation. Instead, it is depicted as a theory of estranged individuals distinct from Jonas's group existence that responds to unification, inventing both individuality and alienation. While the attributed theory celebrated gnosticism as a direct manifestation of authentic individuality, Jonas considered it inauthentic and, in a complicated way, also evidence of humanity's integrity. Again, Jonas's discussion takes only one relevant event to have occurred in more than two millennia. By contrast, the attributed theory proposed that gnostic attitudes were essentially ubiquitous.

In a 1952 article Jonas later appended to the second edition of *The Gnostic Religion*, as "Epilogue: Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism," Jonas distances himself from both gnosticism and standard schools of existentialism.¹⁰³ He describes a series of affinities between existentialism and gnosticism. The similarities between existential accounts and gnostic myths,¹⁰⁴ Jonas proposes, present a constant ratio. The gnostics reacted to God's hiddenness, while the moderns to his non-existence.¹⁰⁵ The same claim can be made, he writes, regarding nature, or the cosmos, which the gnostics considered demonic and the moderns indifferent and arbitrary.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1989), xxx.

¹⁰³ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 320–40. According to Jonas, the first edition of *The Gnostic Religion* overtly avoided the "difficult philosophical elaboration" (*ibid.*, xxxv). The epilogue was therefore added to the second edition to enrich the discussion beyond "the strict terms of historical study" (*ibid.*, xxx).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 335–38.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 323, 332.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 330, 338, 333–34.

Pointing towards Heidegger's "loss of the very possibility of obligatory values"¹⁰⁷ and Sartre's claim that "all is permitted,"¹⁰⁸ Jonas treats Nazis and Allies alike. According to him, both Heidegger and Sartre express a worldview and culture that developed after the seventeenth century's crisis of civilization due to the scientific expansion of knowledge. Understanding the existentialists as claiming that nature could not provide any determinative essence,¹⁰⁹ Jonas alleges that they reached the point that natural existence implies a "deficient mode of existence."¹¹⁰ Consequently, whereas the gnostics maintained that transcendence entails an "origin" and "aim," the moderns saw neither origin nor aim.

"I am thinking of gnostic antinomianism," Jonas writes of gnostic and existential accounts of freedom, as the "denial of every objective norm," comparing both zeitgeists within categories of thought that, he states, "articulate primarily structures, not of reality but of realization."¹¹¹ Typically condensed, "articulation" here seems to mean his version of the neo-Kantian construction laws, the processes of "realization" he previously studied. "Not cognitive structures of a world of objects," he explains, "but functional structures of the active movement of inner time by which a "world" is entertained and the self-originated as a continuous event."¹¹² In other words, regular existentialism is not an account of being but an expression of an attitude that is not sufficiently reflexive and introspective. As Jonas reports, he observes this when examining the system of his former teacher through a classic table of categories, concluding that it was either ethically empty or inauthentic in its engagement with the world.¹¹³ Jonas then promotes a framework that would be more comprehensive than both existentialist and gnostic phenomenology. "The true dimensions of existence," he writes while circumventing the term "categories," mandate an improved version of "monistic naturalism," that could be distinguished from the nihilism of "isolated selfhood."¹¹⁴ Jonas hints at his integral monism, already developed more than ten years before publication. Charting the gnostic "typology" in 1965, he would again appeal to the unity of the "manifold," the technique of ideal-types, and object-world construction.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 331–32.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 333.

¹¹⁰ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 336. For an updated, similar retrospective, see David Cooper, "Existentialism as a Philosophical Movement," in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* (ed. Steven Crowell; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 27–49, at 29.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 335.

¹¹² Ibid.,

¹¹³ Ibid., 335–36.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 340.

¹¹⁵ Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, 267–68. For more literature, and current views of Jonas's critique(s) of Heidegger, see Fabio Fossa, "Nihilism, Existentialism, and Gnosticism? Reassessing the Role of the Gnostic Religion in Hans Jonas's Thought," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46 (2020) 64–90; Jonathan Cahana-Blum, "A Gnostic Critic of Modernity: Hans Jonas from Existentialism to Science," *JAAR* 86 (2018) 158–80.

Developed and endorsed by an extensive research community, Jonas's model was nevertheless subject to a series of progressively harsher criticisms, which marks the later stages of engagement with his work, or more precisely, the work associated with his name. In the early 1960s, Carsten Colpe and Hans-Martin Schenke refuted the pre-Christian dating of the myth of the "saved savior," developed before Jonas but utilized by him.¹¹⁶ In 1973, Edwin Yamauchi showed that nearly all evidence for pre-Christian gnosticism was either poorly dated, grounded in circular argumentation, or both.¹¹⁷ Thus, many of the classic possibilities for dating a historical origin of gnosticism, such as in Zoroastrianism, were erased. Jonas, however, was neither blamed nor was his authority challenged. Colpe participated in drafting a canonized version of Jonas's model,¹¹⁸ and Yamauchi carefully noted that Jonas was not concerned by his findings.¹¹⁹

Nevertheless, gnostic myths did reference biblical episodes, and Second Temple Judaism was the only hypothetic pre-Christian option to (barely) survive Yamauchi's critique. Accordingly, the "Jewish sources" hypothesis of gnosticism gained ground. As noted above, Jonas had already objected to this hypothesis.¹²⁰ His arguments were considered unconvincing. He noted himself that the type of "metaphysical antisemitism" he associated with gnosticism, the core of his argument against Jewish origins, was evident even in the texts most intimately aware of their contemporary rabbinic Judaism. Often based in the Hebrew University, a generation of scholars saw no such contradiction and reinforced the "Jewish origins" hypothesis, often within the standard existential model.¹²¹

Related to Judaism and limited to the early Christian period, the revised account of Gnosticism was clearly a problem for the view that Gnosticism could be a general theory of a recurring human condition. It also allowed for a correlation with the early Christian movement, given that the latter's Jewish origins are, obviously, well stated. The situation intensified when, led by Michael Williams and Karen King, scholars analyzed the standard existential model attributed to Jonas, arguing that it was not only inconsistent, but reflected participation in damaging power structures.

Williams courteously acknowledges the importance of the existential analysis that was associated with Jonas. Nevertheless, he measures it as a sociological typology, a list of separate social variables that qualify an ideal-type of a gnostic phenomenon and relate to Williams's concerns regarding ideal-model sociology

¹¹⁶ Carsten Colpe, *Die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule. Darstellung und Kritik ihres bildes vom Cnostischen Erlösermythus* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1961); Hans Martin Schenke, *Der Gott "Mensch" in der Gnosis* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1962).

¹¹⁷ Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (London: Tyndale Press, 1973).

¹¹⁸ In *Origins of Gnosticism: Papers, Messina Colloquium April 1966* (Studies in the History of Religions 12; ed. Ugo Bianchi; [1967] repr.; Leiden: Brill, 1970).

¹¹⁹ Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 185.

¹²⁰ Jonas "Response by Jonas."

¹²¹ For a survey of the extensive research see R. Van Den Broek, "The Present State of Gnostic Studies," *Vigiliae Christianae*, 37 (1983) 41–71.

in general. Ideal-types, he claims, tend to involve typologies with many distinct dimensions, or “variables.” His own sociological preference is for a single “tension,” measured vis-à-vis surrounding society.¹²² Moreover, although Williams notes that supposedly arbitrary ideal dimensions do exist in gnostic texts, he finds them to be only partially explanatory, or insufficient according to Williams’s criteria. Alternatively, they were not fruitful enough to be used by scholarship or allowed too much variance between scholars.¹²³ Only in the cases of ascetic and libertarian ethics, Williams thinks, evidence could completely refute this aspect of the typology.¹²⁴

As a substitute, Williams proposes an alternative that combines his single-variable model of social tension, with a version of the “Theory of Religious Economy,” an application of Rational Choice Theory developed in the 1980s by Rodney Stark and other collaborators.¹²⁵ Within this framework, Williams suggests reclassifying gnosticism as a “Biblical-Demiurgic Tradition.”¹²⁶ “Tradition” denotes, after Stark, a rational choice constrained by previous choices in a version of a competitive marketplace.¹²⁷ Effectively, Williams substitutes a theory that highlights individual agency with an approach that concerns collective social commitments, pressures, and tensions, somewhat resembling Jonas’s original system.¹²⁸

Ten years after Williams, yet after twenty years of research, Karen King criticized scholars and their heresiological sources with methodological, ideological, and moral arguments, also aimed at the existential theory attributed to Jonas.¹²⁹ Providing a description far more detailed than the previous accounts, King translated sections of the first volume of *Gnosis and The Spirit of Late Antiquity*. Furthermore, she frequently considered them valuable. For example, King notes that Jonas avoided the “trap” of sociological reductivism while treating complex societal structures and emphasizing the analysis of concrete situations.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, perhaps because many philosophical aspects were only presented in the second volume, she thinks, for example, that Jonas was merely applying the “demythologizing methods of the German intellectual circles of his day,” meaning Bultmann’s, rather than being their originator. Gnosticism as an existential phenomenon remains an “experience of alienation” experienced by individuals throughout “every age and every time.”¹³¹

King also connects Jonas’s intellectual habitus to essentialism and racism. Assuming that origins are a kind of essence, Jonas’s existentialism and

¹²² Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) 109; see below.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 46–49, 60–63, 76–77, 96, 139–40, 162, 190.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 164, 189; see below.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, xv, 109–11.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 51–53.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 83–84, 93. A choice becomes “tradition” once chosen and brought to the “market.”

¹²⁸ For example, compare Williams’s view of traditions as a marketplace with Jonas’s account of Philo, discussed above.

¹²⁹ Karen Leigh King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005) viii, 115–37.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

phenomenology supplied an advanced form of essentialism.¹³² Discussing his anti-existentialist epilogue, King correctly observes that Jonas correlated gnostics, existentialism, and nihilism.¹³³ However, she maintains that his analysis was existential, appealing to the same sense of individuated existentialism that Jonas rejected as “nihilist.”

King therefore argues that it is not precisely the category of Gnosticism that is flawed, but the way in which it was conceived and applied, a self/other rhetoric that she studies as an ancient yet also living framework.¹³⁴ Accordingly, King claims that ancient heresiologists, notably Irenaeus of Lyons but also Tertullian, practically invented gnosticism,¹³⁵ perhaps, in order to strengthen the social ties among some early Christians at the expense of other early Christians through a distinction between those who are “LIKE-US or NOT-LIKE-US.”¹³⁶ Scholars such as Jonas, she argues, adopt the terminology and theoretical frameworks from texts authored by ancient heresiologists. By doing so, not only do scholars continue to reinforce the rhetoric of selfhood and otherness, but they collaborate with oppressive discourses of orientalism, imperialism, racism, and chauvinism,¹³⁷ because “every time we engage the ideology of orthodoxy and heresy, we reinscribe some part of those discourses.”¹³⁸

However, if some early Christians effectively fabricated the category of Gnosticism, it arguably had little connection with their and other early Christians’ reality. More so because, as King argues, Christianity was initially diverse, both in theory and practice. In this context, the designation “Gnosticism” was as inapplicable as any other designation of fellow Christians, and using it distances scholars from historical and theological substance. Moreover, when Gnostics were purposefully and incorrectly categorized, that speech act also rendered the remaining portion of Christianity less diverse for centuries to come.¹³⁹

Although their arguments differ, sometimes significantly, King and Williams have been hugely successful. Scholars have endorsed both of their critical approaches, transforming the name of the field into “Nag Hammadi studies,” and within this field, refraining from mentioning Hans Jonas’s name (and terms such as existentialism, alienation, or estrangement) even in surveys of the history of the studies.¹⁴⁰

¹³² Ibid., 119, 224–27.

¹³³ Ibid., 137.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 19, 26–38.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 25 (following Jonathan Smith) [capitalization in the original].

¹³⁷ Ibid., 219, 189–90.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 340.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 236.

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) 5–10). For works still committed to Jonas (i.e., the attributed model), see *The Gnostic World* (ed. Garry W. Trompf, Gunner B. Mikkelsen, and Jay Johnston; London: Routledge, 2018); Jonathan Cahana-Blum, *Wrestling with Archons: Gnosticism*

■ Jonas and Selected Critiques

How would Jonas handle the criticism of the model attributed to him? As Yamauchi argues, Jonas was not concerned with the factual refutation of pre-Christian Gnosticism, a crucial point for the first wave of criticisms.¹⁴¹ Decades before this, Jonas had indeed observed that the Mandaean literature is “violently anti-Christian,” and therefore post-Christian.¹⁴² Similarly, his history of Gnosticism is concerned only with developments later than the Jesus events, from Simon Magus to the Hymn of the Pearl, Carpocrates, Basilides, Marcion, the Poimandres, Valentinus, and Manicheism.¹⁴³ This can be partially attributed to his acquaintance with the works of Lidzbarski and Leitzmann, who, in 1927 and 1930 respectively, preceded Yamauchi in dating the Mandaean literature to the post-Christian era. More theoretically, Jonas proposes that Gnosticism was a transitory response to the crisis initiated by Alexander’s conquest. It did not exist before that point in time, but afterwards, developing, peaking, and eventually disappearing during a new “period of law.” This contradicts the standard model, according to which a gnostic attitude always exists, and should therefore be ubiquitous, including in pre-Christian contexts. Thus, Yamauchi did refute the standard model, whereas Jonas might have considered his version reinforced.

This does not imply that Jonas’s views cannot be challenged historically. For example, it is now more common to note that before the *tosafist* reinterpretation during the high Middle Ages, both the Bible and Talmud were not considered as coherent as they would later come to be.¹⁴⁴ Jonas’s claim that Jewish monism was stable because it “knew” unified totality and interpreted historical changes accordingly, can therefore be questioned as an account of Second Temple Judaism(s). However, since Jonas uses only non-Jewish accounts, the Jewish interpretation does not play a role in his historical reading of dogmas. A revised account could allow Gnosticism, metaphysical antisemitism included, to develop in the pre-medieval Jewish environment.

Indeed, it is conceivable that Jonas might have revised his account of Gnosticism, at least in its positioning vis-à-vis Judaism, in light of another historical event. In his “God after Auschwitz” of 1986, Jonas observes that evils done to the righteous (Jews) were previously contained within the framework of “martyrdom,” which he associated with the Maccabean period.¹⁴⁵ The holocaust is epistemologically challenging, by this account, precisely because it extended beyond the sphere of the righteous, destroying believers and unbelievers alike.¹⁴⁶ In response, he constructs a

as a *Critical Theory of Culture* (London: Rowman, 2018).

¹⁴¹ Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 185.

¹⁴² Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 33.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 101–237.

¹⁴⁴ Haym Soloveitchik, *Principles and Pressures: Jewish Trade in Gentile Wine in the Middle Ages* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003) 19–24 [Hebrew].

¹⁴⁵ Jonas, “God after Auschwitz,” 2.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

universal myth significantly indifferent to the Torah, which reformulates the concept of God as impotent rather than omnipotent, maintaining that God is omnipresent and omnibenevolent, but weaker than any creature: as such, Jonas's God could not become demiurgic. Moreover, the myth could not be gnostic in Jonas's original sense because it does not teach a separated selfhood but its opposite, an essential unity. Nonetheless, recommending a new view of God implies that Judaism is less resilient to epistemological challenges than Jonas previously thought.¹⁴⁷

Another potential update relates to Williams's rejection of gnostic ethics (discussed above). Williams's fundamental challenge relates neither to lack of evidence nor to unfulfilled ideals but to the ideals themselves. Following heresiological accounts of voluntary gnostic participation in social practices like the rites of the imperial cult, Williams deduces that the evidence may indicate an affirmation of the Hellenic world.¹⁴⁸

This observation could entail further revision in some conclusions Jonas drew from his system. Jonas's Gnostics were epistemological pluralists who employed object-worlds separable into distinct fields of knowledge. Accordingly, epistemological pluralism should have allowed them to maintain some aspects of their life unchanged by a crisis that influenced other segments of their object-world. As a result, the gnostic communities might have been more moderate, socially, than Jonas's ethics implied.

An aspect of the above extends, conceivably, to the secretive practice of queer sexuality, also challenged by Williams. Therefore, since only some parts of the pluralist object-worlds are impacted, the Gnostics are distinguishable more by elements of their unique object-worlds and less by being a separate social group with group practices widely varying from others. Furthermore, since pluralism allows for the separation of practice and ideology, pluralists may opt to conceal elements of their conceptual and ritual object-worlds from outsiders, maintaining and maximizing the scope of their functional existence unaffected by the crisis. Accordingly, in principle and with some cost, Jonas's system could accommodate several factual critiques that challenged the standard model.

However, Williams's and King's analyses, which form the second, updated wave of criticism, are also concerned with systematic inconsistency and categorization. King has pointed out that the same documents may contain sections that express seemingly opposite attitudes. For example, the *Secret Revelation of John* is indeed "anti-cosmological," yet the text does not "regard the body and the world as evil *per se*, but only as a battleground."¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Williams claims that the "category" of Gnosticism is not divorced from evidence but that neither the category nor the

¹⁴⁷ For other discussions see Hotam, *Modern Gnosis and Zionism*, 53; idem, "Gnosis and Modernity, 600–601; Waldstein, "Hans Jonas' Construct 'Gnosticism,'" 344; Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy*, 60–62; Willem Styfhals, *No Spiritual Investment*, 41–42.

¹⁴⁸ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument*, 142–43.

¹⁴⁹ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 199–200 [italics in original].

evidence can fully represent one another. Less concerned with direct contradictions than King,¹⁵⁰ Williams provides tabulated data to demonstrate the partiality of “narrative reversal” in gnostic texts,¹⁵¹ unattested in half of the biblical episodes he analyzes. At the same time, he notes, the data demonstrates why scholars thought there to be a gnostic narrative reversal occurring in the remaining half.¹⁵² Overall, the standard model of Gnosticism is expressed partially in the data, or expressed with intertextual inconsistency, or it is attested in one section but contradicted by another within the same text.

These observations have precedents. Early Christian heresiologists considered the inter- and intra-textual diversity of gnostic writings to be so exceptionally inconsistent and variable that it was evidence of diabolic influences. Comparably, for King, although with widely different judgment, the concept of “early Christianity” embraces such levels of diversity, shared by heresiologists and Gnostics in ways that seemed opposed.¹⁵³ Williams provides another possible interpretation, proposing that Gnosticism was an array of discussions devoted to theodicy and the interpretation of biblical “problem passages.”¹⁵⁴ Likely inconclusive, the theodical discussion model of Gnosticism allows for diversity and partiality. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to request that any theory of Gnosticism provide some account of inconsistencies. Indeed, proponents of the standard existential model sometimes compare Gnosticism to artistic creativity, accounting for inter-textual diversity.¹⁵⁵ Intra-textual inconsistencies nevertheless pose challenges to the standard model, which conceives the gnostic texts as lucid expressions of individual authenticity.

Like Williams and King, Jonas uses Gnosticism’s partialities and inconsistencies to sketch a varied field. As we saw, he correlates Gnosticism with selfhood, individuality, and reflection,¹⁵⁶ elements appropriated by theoreticians of the standard model. Accordingly, Jonas treats inter-textual diversity similar to the artistic theory of gnostic creativity. But unlike the standard model, Jonas’s system also interprets Gnosticism as a form of individuated inauthenticity that avoids regular object-worlds. Accordingly, gnostic meta-myths were dogmas that used logically false subject-predicate statements (as discussed above). With contradictions and paradoxes used as elements integral to its framework, Jonasian Gnosticism could, in principle, account for inconsistencies inherent within a single text, affording an exceptionally permissive license for gnostic expression.

One specific framework proposed by Charles Turner is particularly relevant to the discussion of inconsistencies, sociological positions, forms of categorization, and Jonas’s intellectual environment. Starting from relatively common observations,

¹⁵⁰ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 150.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 61–62.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵³ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 223–24.

¹⁵⁴ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 63–67.

¹⁵⁵ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 19–20.

¹⁵⁶ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 101–102, 179.

Turner distinguishes three “styles” of categorization: taxonomical, dialectical, or ideal-type.¹⁵⁷ The taxonomical style divides social phenomena to establish broad but fixed relationships of resemblance and difference, fully exhaustive and mutually exclusive. By this logic, if two categories apply to the same phenomenon, the categorical structure should be overhauled. The dialectical or critical style radicalizes this conclusion, contests dichotomization and the presumption of a stable relationship, emphasizes inconsistencies to argue for diverse social fluidity, and criticizes any taxonomy as an instrument of power. Lastly, ideal-type thinking segments the social world according to “artificial” devices (“ideas”) employed by researchers without making a claim to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive, thereby legitimizing partial and hybrid categorizations. All approaches were available for Jonas to use: Turner uses Durkheim to exemplify the taxonomical style, Marx for the dialectic/critical style, and Weber for ideal-type categorization.¹⁵⁸

Williams rejects Gnosticism as a suitable category of human behavior, while King argues that it is divorced from the fluid varieties of reality. This is not to suggest that Williams and King reject the standard model merely because it implies a theoretical outlook that they do not share. Nevertheless, their criticisms expand beyond historical difficulties; the style of categorization of the standard model is taken to be false in and of itself, and this view is then utilized to advance their respective outlooks. Notably, both equate the typology of the standard model with the taxonomical style in Turner’s sense; no category is applicable to the human condition, according to King and the dialectical/critical categorization style. In a similar, anti-taxonomical spirit, Williams seems to appeal to exceptionally demanding exclusion and exhaustion criteria (for example, in the discussion of narrative inversion). As an alternative, Williams proposed his “Biblical-Demiurgic tradition,” where two instances of “traditions” overlap, without claiming to be exhaustive, suggesting idea-typical categorization.¹⁵⁹

Since Turner’s taxonomies distinguish between exclusive sets of data and thought with objective claims for exclusion and exhaustion, they are examples of the very epistemological dualism/pluralism that Jonas rejects. Instead, he proposes a form of monism where everything epistemic interacts. Like the dialectical presumption, radical monism assumes that no phenomenon is fundamentally separable from any other. In other words, Jonas’s approach to the thing-in-itself seems to share much with King’s attitude regarding early Christianity. He seems to inherit this form of “Marxian” categorization from Weber, who considered it to intersect with Kant’s “infinite manifold of objects of thought” that “never attain absolute completeness.”¹⁶⁰ In Jonas’s usage, incompleteness implies partial interpretations,

¹⁵⁷ Charles Turner, *Investigating Sociological Theory* (London: Sage, 2010) 52–53, and subsequent discussions.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 55, 57–58, 73–77.

¹⁵⁹ E.g., Williams’s “tension” (discussed above) maps some non-exhaustive types, identified as religious institutions, allowing for potential overlap.

¹⁶⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* (ed. Henry Allison and Peter Heath;

performances, and awareness(es); the worldized history of the local “Spirits.” To decode them, Jonas applies the transcendental method to “facts of culture,” which combine both a “theoretical” and “empirical.” The procedure results in sets of possibility-conditions, which, once recognized, sharpen the view of the totality, foregrounding the detailed elements of Jonas’s universe. Manifest in actual phenomena, those possibility-conditions are “categories,” ideal-types that allow for overlap and inconsistencies, as we saw in Jonas’s account of Philo. Jonas’s theory of crisis-driven worldviews assumes that symbolic expression will include intra- and inter-textual inconsistencies: an ideal-type categorization allowing some inconsistencies, applied to a class of human behavior admittedly diverse but not inconceivably varied.

I have no desire to argue that Jonas’s system is the unqualified truth. However, we should be mindful of the breadth and depth of his undertaking. In non-monist epistemology, the universe of knowledge is constituted by a diversity of disconnected systems. From this pluralist point of view, monism is not particularly unique; it is a possibly valid approximation for specific fields of interest, from a unified physical theory to the worldviews of early and late antiquity. By contrast, since monism holds that everything interacts, a monist needs to explain how any specific system of thought fits into and reflects the general order of things (contemporary mindsets, ancient texts), how the global order of things reflects systems of thought, and so, what antiquity implies regarding modern patterns, and all explained as forms of the single field. For Jonas, this undertaking seems to have entailed an existentialism that concerns being-in-the-world literally, that is, where “being,” “in” and “world” all intersect and overlap, and shifts in emphasis mark historical transitions. Given this, Jonas’s analysis of Gnosticism is a necessary element of his commitment to monism, perhaps the performance of a monistic imperative.

trans. Michael Friedman; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 188; and see Max Weber, *Methodology of Social Sciences* (trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch; New York: Routledge, 2017) 72.