

FOREWORD  
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*One thing is clear: this is the book the good Lord had in mind when he made you.*

—Hannah Arendt, upon reading a chapter in *The Imperative of Responsibility*

When Hans Jonas's book *The Imperative of Responsibility* appeared in Germany in the fall of 1979, even his publisher, Siegfried Unseld, had no way of knowing that he was bringing out a work of philosophy that would become something of a best seller. Probably no twentieth-century work by an academic philosopher has enjoyed such rapid and wide dissemination in the German-speaking countries as this "attempt at formulating an ethics for technological civilization." No one was more surprised by this success than Hans Jonas himself. In the 1930s he had published a significant study of gnosticism in late antiquity, yet he was known only to readers with a particular interest in that subject. Now in postwar West Germany Jonas achieved a fame enjoyed by none of the other German-Jewish philosophers of his generation who had fled Hitler to countries in the West—including such eminent philosophers as Günther Anders, Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer, Alfred Schütz, and Leo Strauss. Jonas became a media celebrity, the star attraction at every conference on the world's prospects. Interviewers clamored for time with him, and during the 1980s no Catholic or Protestant academy worth its salt would plan a program that did not include him as a participant.

Seldom has a book appeared at such a propitious moment. Jonas's topic resonated with the spirit of the times, which, after the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* and the oil crisis of the early 1970s, was attuned to the environment. Postwar optimism had given way to skepticism toward progress and an unblinking awareness of the dangers posed by constant expansion in the scientific and technical realm. The project of modernism—liberation of human beings through ever-increasing control over nature, that utopia of all avant-garde thinking since the beginning of the modern era—had lost its power to persuade. Hans Jonas countered the new fatalism with his defense of the normality of human life. In his thinking, schooled on Plato and Kant, he focused on identifying the questions and answers to be obtained from a rational approach to the immense knowledge and the unprecedented and

potentially overwhelming power of the natural sciences. Rejecting both technophobia and unquestioning faith in science, Jonas placed his trust in a middle way. His ethics of responsibility was based on working out rationally all the possible outcomes of a given technological innovation or a new form of experimental research. His unpretentious manner in public, his rejection of rhetorical fireworks and attention-getting ploys, stands in welcome contrast to the sterile sensationalism we have witnessed recently in debates over genetic engineering. Amid the current din, we miss the calm voice of Hans Jonas, who, without whipping up panic, would call attention to inhumane aspects of the latest scientific research.

Hans Jonas was almost eighty when we first met in Munich. He drew one's attention less by his appearance than by his riveting way of speaking. Not a tall man — in fact, we were about the same height — Jonas was clearly an intellectual giant, and he spoke with such eloquence that his words could be printed almost verbatim. Even half a century of living abroad and writing and teaching in other languages had not impaired his German at all. On the contrary, in his slightly Rhenish diction he had preserved a piece of Germany that one hardly encounters nowadays. It vanished along with the highly educated middle-class Jews who went into exile or were exterminated by the Nazis. A comment Jonas made in the mid-1980s revealed to me that he felt cut off from changes in the German language and from developments in the German Federal Republic. He said he was considering canceling his longtime subscription to the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* because he kept stumbling over new expressions and topics he did not really understand.

After years of abstinence, Jonas returned to the German language when he set out at seventy to write *The Imperative of Responsibility*. In the late 1930s, as an instructor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he had composed his lectures in Hebrew, a time-consuming undertaking. Then, as a professor of philosophy in Canada and the United States, he had become proficient at writing in English, although he still spoke with a heavy German accent. Now he acknowledged that his mother tongue enabled him to articulate things as he really wanted to. Because at his “advanced age” time was becoming a precious commodity, he decided, in spite of all that had transpired in the meantime, to write the book in German. But in the preface he anticipates any possible criticism of the book's language by announcing that he intends to treat “a highly contemporary topic” not in a contemporary style but in one that might even be called “old-fashioned.” The over-

whelming response the book elicited proved him right. As an old man he finally received in Germany the recognition and the honor he deserved.

Our paths crossed in 1983, when Hans Jonas was offered the first Eric Voegelin guest professorship at the University of Munich. The circumstances of our meeting were propitious. My partner, Stephan Sattler, had studied with Eric Voegelin, a non-Jewish professor of political science who had emigrated to the United States in 1938 but later taught in Munich between 1958 and 1969. Stephan was well acquainted with the scholarly debates between Jonas and Voegelin over gnosticism in the ancient and modern worlds. After attending one of Hans Jonas's lectures at the end of February, Stephan and his brother Florian arranged to meet Hans and Lore Jonas in a restaurant in Schwabing, near the university. As Stephan told me, the Jonases wanted to know all about me. A day later they stopped by the bookstore to see me. Fortunately I had worked my way the previous summer through both volumes of Jonas's *Gnosticism and the Spirit of Late Antiquity*. Hans Jonas could not get over his amazement that someone outside academia would take a serious interest in intellectual movements from late antiquity, let alone "such a young woman," as he put it.

The friendship between Stephan and Hans Jonas began with their despair over Plotinus. Stephan was working on a study of Plotinus and was only too happy to discuss it with Jonas, who had never finished his own chapter on that thinker. The philosopher was delighted that when he recited Homer in Greek, Stephan was able to chime in. And indeed, almost always when we came together with Jonas, he would recite wonderful poems for us or read aloud meaningful passages from literary works. Like all Germans raised in cultivated circles before the war, this young man from a good Jewish family had known the poetry of Goethe and Schiller through and through, and Heine's likewise. In his last years, Jonas fascinated us on many an evening with the treasures of German culture stored in his memory.

Stephan and I loved to hear his stories. His memories conjured up a world of long ago. In Hans Jonas were resurrected the great minds of the educated German-Jewish elite who had been scattered to all points of the compass and had been forced to survive far from their home and their inherited culture, while their absence from Germany from that time on meant a terrible loss. As one of their last representatives, Hans Jonas offered a brilliant example of what had been driven out of Germany. Like most of the contemporaries of whom he spoke to us, he came from a largely assimilated family that still maintained ties to the Orthodox tradition but did not

hesitate to show patriotism. His father, a respected textile manufacturer in Mönchengladbach, belonged to the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith, whereas after 1918 Hans cast his lot with the Zionists. That decision would save his life. His father died “just in time” in 1938, but his mother was murdered in Auschwitz in 1942. Hans Jonas did not learn of her death until after the war. It would remain a wound that never healed.

As a Zionist, Hans had seen the handwriting on the wall and left Germany in 1933, going to Palestine by way of England. In Palestine he met others who shared his fate — at the Hebrew University, Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber, and, roaming the streets of Jerusalem, the poet Else Lasker-Schüler. He joined a literary circle; he found it much easier to compose German texts in the style of Thomas Mann or Goethe for the weekly meetings than to write his lectures in Hebrew. This intellectual gentlemen’s circle was highly distinguished, with members such as Gershom Scholem; the physicist Shmuel Sambursky from Königsberg; the journalist George Lichtheim, whose father, Richard Lichtheim, had been a force in the early years of Zionism; the classicist Hans Lewy; and the Egyptologist Hans-Jakob Polotsky. These men competed to see who could imitate most successfully the style of famous German writers. The group dubbed itself “Pilegesh,” a word composed from the first initials of the members’ names that meant “concubine.” The circle dissolved after several members married and were expected to stay home with their wives.

A number of factors account for Jonas’s emigration to North America. The two chairs for professors of philosophy at the Hebrew University were already taken. Jonas also found that conveying his ideas in Hebrew was not getting any easier, and the political situation was becoming increasingly hostile. After five years as a soldier in the British army during the Second World War, Hans Jonas was called up again in 1948–49 for the Israeli War of Independence. By then he had had enough of war. In 1949 he accepted a visiting professorship at McGill University in Montreal, and moved the following year to Carleton University in Ottawa. At last he was closer to New York, where Karl Löwith, a person he greatly admired and considered the most gifted of Heidegger’s students, was living and teaching. Hannah Arendt, his dear friend from their student days, also lived in New York. In 1955 Jonas was finally offered a teaching position at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. There he enjoyed a collegial relationship, albeit not always free of tension, with another philosopher, Alfred Schütz. Schütz was committed to Husserl’s phenomenology, while Jonas had been

deeply influenced by Heidegger's revolt against Husserl; thus the major controversies that had raged in German philosophy during the 1920s continued on the banks of the Hudson. At the New School Jonas enjoyed a fulfilling life as a scholar and teacher, retiring in 1976.

In the 1950s, Hans Jonas and Hannah Arendt became close again. That was possible only because each of them liked the other's spouse so much. After the terrible blowup that occurred in 1963 between Jonas and Arendt when Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a quarrel that resulted in a break of several years' duration, Lore Jonas intervened to restore the friendship. After all, the two philosophers had known each other ever since they had both studied in Marburg with the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann and with Martin Heidegger. Hans Jonas had been impressed by the courage of the young Arendt, who went to see Bultmann before taking his seminar on Saint Paul and made it absolutely clear that he should not try to convert her to Christianity. She was and would remain a Jew. Hans Jonas saw her as the prototype of a German "defiant Jew." It caused him immense emotional distress when he became the first to know about the love affair between Hannah Arendt and his revered "Herr Professor" Heidegger.

Whenever Hans Jonas touched on the subject of Heidegger, he expressed his profound disappointment in Heidegger as a human being. In 1924, Jonas had left Husserl in Freiburg and gone to Marburg to study with Heidegger, the rising star in philosophy. Almost everyone interested in philosophy in those days fell under his spell, including many Jews: Günther Anders, Herbert Marcuse, Jeanne Hersch, and Emmanuel Lévinas. Even later, few managed to escape from that spell. Hans Jonas was one of the few. Although he put Heidegger's "existentialism" to productive use in his book on gnosticism, this young man who had turned to philosophy with such enthusiasm precisely because he assumed that "dedication to the truth ennobled the soul" could not understand his teacher Heidegger's shameful alliance with the Nazis. "A philosopher should not have been taken in by that Nazi business," Jonas thought, least of all one of the "greatest philosophers of our time." Jonas saw this betrayal as a "catastrophe for philosophy" itself. He meant not only the infamous inaugural address Heidegger delivered when he was made rector of the University of Freiburg; he also could not forgive Heidegger's behavior toward his teacher, Husserl, whom Heidegger maligned as a Jew and forbade to enter and use the university library. Jonas emphasized the political danger posed in tumultuous times by a philosophy that "hurled" the individual fatefully into the current moment.

In 1945, when Hans Jonas first set foot on German soil again, he knew there was one person he “could not visit”: Heidegger. Upon leaving Germany in 1933, he had sworn to himself that he would return only as a soldier in a victorious army. And so it was. He returned as “a Jew conscious of his dignity,” proudly wearing the uniform of a British officer. For five years he had fought Hitler as a volunteer in the Jewish Brigade. With the British troops he had made his way to Germany through Italy and Austria. The person he sought out immediately was Karl Jaspers. Through the entire war Jaspers had remained in Heidelberg at his Jewish wife’s side. Both of them had always kept poison handy, “in case worse comes to worst.” Jonas described the reunion with great feeling. He had rung their bell during the “sacred midday rest period,” when Jaspers was not to be disturbed. Frau Jaspers opened the door and without the slightest hesitation immediately took him to her husband, whose exclamation, “It is our fault that we are still alive!” Hans Jonas repeated with a sob.

Next he went to see Rudolf Bultmann in Marburg, and his publisher Ruprecht in Göttingen, who immediately insisted that he should write the conclusion to the second volume of his book on gnosticism. Only much later did a meeting with Heidegger come about. Again Jonas’s hopes were dashed. He had expected Heidegger to say something “by way of apology.” Nothing came. After twenty minutes Jonas got up and left.

More and more Stephan and I felt it was incumbent on us to preserve this body of precious memories and share it with the world. Hans Jonas did not think highly of a philosopher’s portraying himself in an autobiography. Nonetheless, in the summer of 1983 I persuaded him to speak at the bookstore. First I had to dispel some of his doubts as to whether his experiences would be of any interest to the public. It was a hot day, and the room was filled to bursting, but the audience hung on his every word. Jonas spoke without notes, yet everything sounded as if it had been carefully formulated in advance. Suddenly he realized that beyond the two of us there was a German audience eager to hear his life story.

The Jonases came to Germany every year after that, usually in June. (Lore Jonas still makes the trip.) We spent a good deal of time together, taking excursions into the Upper Bavarian countryside, usually stopping for lunch at country inns that served cèpes, a type of mushroom Hans Jonas adored and could not get in America. During these outings I realized that he still had a childlike capacity for amazement, as if he were seeing things for the first time. His comment “You don’t say—really? really?” made every con-

versation exciting. We introduced the Jonases to our friends and families, and went to see them whenever we were in New York. They lived half an hour by train outside the city, in New Rochelle, where they had one of those wood-frame houses with a nice lawn that are typical of the area. Nearby lived several mathematicians or scientists who taught in New York or at the Hastings Institute, and with whom Jonas carried on lively discussions. Upon entering the Jonas's white house, one felt transported to another place and time. The rooms were invitingly furnished with splendid Biedermeier pieces; the library shelves were filled for the most part with works of German and Jewish intellectual history. It was easy to forget that one was in America. On the second floor hung lovely drawings done by Hans Jonas when he was a young art student. We met the Jonas children and were present when the family celebrated important birthdays and a very special occasion—the conferral of the Peace Prize of the German Publishing Industry in 1987. We had become friends of the family. Hans Jonas once described the situation thus: we had come to them “like two stray young dogs” with whom they had fallen in love.

We never ran out of things to talk about. Everything became a topic of discussion, above all the problem that preoccupied Hans Jonas during his last years: dealing with modern life. As in his book, he was preoccupied with the question of how to formulate an ethics appropriate to an age of runaway technology. Human beings had to take responsibility for their fragile environment, with the very future of the world at stake. “Man is the only being known to us that can take responsibility. Because he can do so, he is responsible.” This imperative (“Ability brings with it obligation”) accompanies me every day of my life. In the bookshop I have put up a poster, a wonderful portrait of Hans Jonas, with this dictum as a caption; it is read and commented on admiringly by many people.

But our conversations also dealt with less earthshaking topics, for instance our own happiness. Hans Jonas repeatedly stressed that Stephan and I should legalize our long-term relationship. At some point we could no longer evade his probing questions, so we tied the knot in June 1990, with Hans and Lore Jonas as surrogate parents. Along with my brother, Hans served as a witness. The chuppah or wedding canopy was put up in the Jonases' cherry orchard in New Rochelle. Speaking at the wedding dinner, repeatedly overcome with tears of emotion, Hans Jonas invoked the high points and low points of the German-Jewish relationship.

We had spent our most intense hours together in September 1989. I had

persuaded Hans Jonas to tell, one more time, in one fell swoop, his life story, of which we had heard many versions over the years. I wanted to record it on tape. Once Lore had consented, nothing more stood in the way. The Jonases were staying as usual at the Hotel Biederstein in Munich, not far from the Englischer Garten. Over a period of two weeks, we met every day in the adjoining lounges on the hotel's ground floor. Stephan and I took turns asking Hans questions about his life, which in the meantime had become part of ours. Each session lasted no more than an hour and a half. Hans was already suffering from emphysema, but he did not want to give up cigarettes. At regular intervals he would light up, though he sensibly took only a few puffs, then put out the cigarette and trimmed off the smoked end with a little scissors that he kept in the cigarette pack for this purpose. Lore plied us with cookies and tea or coffee. Sometimes we allowed ourselves a swig of brandy from the silver flask that Hans always had on him. Our conversations filled thirty-three tapes. It would have been impossible to convert them into a book in Jonas's style had it not been for his polished speaking style. Upon reading the transcript, we knew we had exactly what we needed. Our questions turned out to be superfluous; we could let Jonas speak for himself.

When I was organizing a discussion series under the heading "The End of the Century" for May and June 1992, Lore Jonas helped me persuade Hans to give his last major public address. At eighty-nine, he had doubts about his own stamina, but his speech, "Looking Backward and Forward at the End of the Century," earned him standing ovations in the packed Prince Regent Theater in Munich. That speech has meanwhile been published in book form.