

## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

*Lore Jonas*



Upon being asked to write an introduction to this book, I found myself wondering what I could possibly add to Hans Jonas's own words. Eventually I decided I should try to convey a sense of the character of this man, whose life I shared for more than fifty years.

If curiosity lies at the root of all philosophy, as the ancients asserted, my husband possessed this gift to an unusual degree. I am tempted to say that he was naïve—in a way that made it possible for him to look at things in a new light, as if no one had ever looked at them before. Occasionally this trait caused others to rebuke him for not citing earlier thinkers. In response he would invoke his friend Gershom Scholem's witticism: "Thinking for yourself is good for you."

He gazed upon the world with fresh, perennially astonished eyes, and was as excited by his grandson's first brave attempts at walking at a year and a half as by a magnificent sunset seen from our garden or the works of the great poets, many of which he could recite from memory even at an advanced age.

He was a proud and loving father to his three children, Ayalah, Jonathan, and Gabrielle.

Hans had received an education in the grand humanistic tradition that was typical of his generation, and is almost unknown today. He could quote Homer in Greek and Cicero in Latin, learned Hebrew in secondary school, and was fond of the Prophets. He learned English in his late forties, and in America that became his medium of communication; native speakers of English attest that he achieved considerable mastery in that idiom. Not until his seventies, when he wrote *The Imperative of Responsibility*, did he return to his mother tongue.

If other men could charm one with their good looks or manners, he could charm one with his speech. I still recall the first time I invited him to dinner; it was in Palestine in the late 1930s. The meal included olives, and he held up an olive and delivered a paean to the olive that began with the anointing of Homer's Greek heroes, went on to the use of olive oil by the high priests of the Old Testament, and eventually arrived at Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*.

Between 1940 and 1945 he served in the British army. He wanted to join the armed struggle against Hitler. During his military service, when he was far from any libraries, he thought about *life*—for obvious reasons, given the ever-present danger of being wounded or killed—and that sparked his interest in the natural sciences. While he was in the field, I sent him, at his request, seminal scientific works by such authors as Charles Darwin, Aldous Huxley, John Haldane, and many others—whatever I could lay my hands on in Palestine.

He first recorded his thoughts about science in his “didactic letters” from the field, which he later developed into the book *Organism and Freedom*, which in later editions bore the title *The Phenomenon of Life*. His love for the natural sciences and his knowledge of them deepened in America, where he spent much of his time in the company of scientists and mathematicians. There were quite a few of the latter in New Rochelle, where we took up residence in 1955. They were mathematicians from Göttingen who had moved to New Rochelle on the urging of Richard Courant, the former head of the University of Göttingen Mathematics Department. He had left Germany in 1933 and wanted to be able to have discussions with his mathematical colleagues even on weekends.

Then came the Hastings Center, where Hans Jonas was made a fellow in 1969 and where he befriended both humanists and scientists who came together there, discussed ethical questions, and, amazingly enough, listened to one another.

He was an enthusiastic and impassioned teacher. One of his earlier students, Howard McConnell, recalled his experience with Hans at Carleton University in Ottawa this way: “Some of my most wonderful memories are connected with Hans Jonas. In his courses, philosophy became a lively and fascinating subject. He told us that we were participating in the eternal search for the answer to the great moral and cosmic questions that had occupied thinkers from Thales on, and that each generation had to confront anew.”

In my husband’s work I can make out three phases: he called his study *Gnosticism and the Spirit of Late Antiquity* his “beginner’s piece”—a historical work. In *Organism and Freedom* he turned his attention to the present, and in *The Imperative of Responsibility* he articulated his concerns about the future. At the time he was seventy-five, yet no lessening of his powers could be detected, and it was lovely to see the feistiness of his earlier years giving way to a more conciliatory attitude, while the urgency of the problems he was treating demanded greater effort on his part.

It is well known that he had the best teachers one could possibly have in the 1920s in Germany—Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Rudolf Bultmann. That experience set a standard that he never wearied of striving to meet, yet also never allowed him to be satisfied. In a poem he wrote in English on the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday (he did write poetry at times), the line occurs, “You and I know I did sometimes, not always my best. / Now is the time for the long, long rest.”

He had no fear of death, but held the view that he expressed in “The Burden and Blessing of Mortality”: “As far as each one of us is concerned, the knowledge that we are here for but a short while, and that a non-negotiable limit is imposed on the time we may expect to have, may well be necessary as an incentive to count our days and to live them in such a way that they count for something.” I believe that is what he did.