

Jonas's Quest for a Path to Reconcile the Rift between Humans and Nature

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Abstract

The relationship between humans and nature is a timeless topic of human concern. How we understand this issue affects our values and actions, which in turn impact our sustainable development. The dualism of subject and object, introduced by Descartes, triggered a significant movement in the history of thought that highlighted human subjectivity. However, it also created a split between the material and the spiritual, disrupting the harmony between humans and nature. Hans Jonas, a responsible philosopher of the 20th century, critiqued the nihilistic elements of Gnosticism and contemporary existentialism to diagnose the roots of the crisis between humans and nature. He developed a life philosophy that emphasizes life as the highest good, aiming to find a new path that reconciles the rift between humans and nature.

Keywords

Human and nature; reconcile; life philosophy.

1. Introduction

Hans Jonas is recognized as a philosopher of the 20th century who was innovative, insightful, visionary, and imbued with a sense of responsibility. Benefiting from the teachings of existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger and New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann, he occupies a unique position in both existential philosophy and the study of ancient Gnosticism. He creatively interpreted Gnosticism and existentialism in light of each other, revealing the rift between humanity and nature. He argued that Gnosticism and modern existentialism shared a dualistic logical foundation, acting as “cousins” across ancient and modern times, characterized by a “contemporaneous” nihilistic trait. He profoundly pointed out that Gnosticism represented the opposition between humanity and the world, the world and the divine, devaluing nature, isolating the spirit, and rendering ethical norms meaningless, thereby casting humanity into a hostile, anti-divine, and anti-human world. Existentialism, on the other hand, was a dualism without metaphysics, leading to the alienation between humans and the world, culminating in a more desolate nihilism, while modern individuals were condemned to be thrown into an indifferent and silent abyss. Throughout his academic life, Jonas continuously pondered the place of humanity within the cosmic order—that is, the dialectical relationship between humans and the natural universe. Centering on the theme of life, he analyzed the intrinsic connections between humans and other living organisms, as well as between life and nature itself, exploring the inherent purposes and values of nature. Advocating for an ethics of responsibility oriented toward both nature and the future of humanity, he tirelessly sought a path to reconcile the rift between humankind and the natural world.

2. The Background of the Rift Between Humanity and Nature: The Subject-Object Opposition Derived from Dualistic Philosophy

Modern philosophy emerged from a series of significant transformations in modern human society, establishing a worldview based on dualism, reflecting the spirit of the era while also influencing the relationship between humanity and nature.

2.1. The Historical and Cultural Context of Dualistic Philosophy in Modern Western Society

The unprecedented development and change in modern Western society provided fertile ground for the growth of subject-object dualistic philosophy. Beginning in the late 15th century, a series of tremendous transformations occurred in the Western capitalist world. Within the feudal system, a capitalist mode of production emerged, representing new productive forces. The power of the church gradually declined, while a series of nation-states dominated by royal authority began to take shape. Meanwhile, science and technology advanced rapidly.

Zhang Zhiwei (2010) summarized the characteristics of the changes in modern Western society as “three discoveries”. The first is the “discovery of the world”, namely “the Age of Discovery”. This discovery promoted the development of European commerce and trade, enhancing productivity levels and facilitating the formation of the capitalist mode of production; on the other hand, it expanded the horizons of Europeans to a global scale, revealing vast territories filled with novelty and allure, freeing them from the narrow geographical views of the Middle Ages. The second is the “discovery of humanity”. The secularization of the divine during the Renaissance, along with the process of the secularization of divinity during the Reformation, represented the discovery of humanity. The collation of classical literature during the Renaissance provided spiritual nourishment for the in-depth development of modern philosophy, while its humanistic spirit laid the ideological foundation for modern philosophy. The Reformation dissolved the external authority of Christianity, leading to a focus on inner nature of human beings. The third is the “discovery of science”. Natural sciences developed rapidly during this period, establishing authority for reason and providing ideological materials for philosophy, as well as laying the groundwork for the philosophical interpretation of nature. The explanation of nature shifted from a theological perspective to scientific language. These three discoveries laid the foundation for the Enlightenment movement in modern Western society, which advocated rationality, pursued freedom, promoted science, resisted superstition and resisted feudalism, as well as the emergence of modern philosophy.^{[1]249-250}

2.2. Modern Western Dualistic Philosophy was a Great Spiritual Movement in the History of Human Thought

The subject-object dualism established by Descartes is the fundamental spirit of modern philosophy. Descartes' methodological principles, the formulation of the idea “I think, therefore I am” and his contributions to the natural sciences reshaped the spirit of rationality while also highlighted the awakening of the subject, earning him the title of the father of modern philosophy. Descartes believed that the substance exists independently of any other thing, and God is the sole substance of ultimate significance. However, the substance has multiple meanings and can be applied to different objects in different contexts. In sense of epistemology, Descartes divided the world into two types of substances: one is the mind, whose attribute is thought; the other is matter, whose attribute is extension. These two types of substances have no commonality in their essential properties, thought has no extension, and extension cannot think. They exist independently and do not depend on each other. This theory expelled pre-scientific assumptions such as the soul, spirit, and God's will from natural physics, strongly promoting the development of natural science. However, it failed to adequately account for the correlation between human spirit and behavior, as human beings are a special substance

distinct from natural objects. They are a combination of material substance and spiritual substance, and the dualism principle holds that the body and the mind cannot interact with each other. In order to reconcile the relationship between body and mind, Descartes hypothesized the "pineal gland" in the brain as the junction between mind and body; however, this hypothesis contradicts the dualistic principle that the mind has no extension, leading to endless philosophical debates on the mind-body relationship.^{[2]219-221}

Philosophy, as the essence of the spirit of the times, also shapes the spirit of the era. The philosophy of subject-object dualism is undoubtedly one of humanity's great achievements in the history of thought. The core of this philosophy is the exclusive recognition of the human subject position, with humans being the subjects of knowledge, value, and cognition; it asserts that only humans possess subjectivity, which encompasses purposefulness, initiative, self-awareness, creativity, cognitive ability, and wisdom. Humans are the source and destination of value. Life and nature other than human beings are viewed as objects, which are the subjects of human recognition, transformation, and utilization, therefore, they lack subjectivity, purposefulness, initiative, self-awareness, creativity, cognitive ability and wisdom, and consequently have no value.^{[3]41} The establishment of the principle of subjectivity, on one hand, celebrated the great power of human subjectivity, leading to rapid development of material resources under the spirit of conquering nature, producing industrial civilization achievements that astonish the world. On the other hand, philosophers, inspired by successes of science, sought to employ scientific theories and methods to understand and comprehend nature, society, and humanity itself, thereby reconstructing a rationalist spirit guided by the tenets of scientism.

2.3. Negative Impacts of the Dualistic Worldview

However, while the theoretical and practical significance of this dualistic worldview has been fully manifested, it also exposed its limitations and exerted immeasurable impacts across several dimensions.

Firstly, the Great Power and Value of Nature were disenchanted. Encouraged by the rapid development of science and technology, human beings had inflated its confidence in understanding nature, conquering nature, and transforming nature. Only by shaking off the influence of the God and resorting to the power of science and reason can human beings understand the universe and nature and probe into the fullness of the world. Under the sunlight of science and rationality, the enchantment of the natural universe was washed away. Man became the subject dominating all values, therefore, life and nature other than humans were viewed as objects for knowledge, transformation, utilization, and conquest, losing the value they possessed in pre-modern society. The rupture between humans and nature as well as the root causes of the ecological and social crises in contemporary society thus had been arisen.

Secondly, A Mechanistic Worldview was formed. Before the scientific revolution, the natural universe was vibrant and full of mystery. The dualistic thought represented by Descartes divided the world into two independent entities, mind and matter, that do not affect each other. In his work *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), he described the entire universe as a vast machine, operating according to mechanical laws transmitted from one component to another. The force producing motion does not originate from within but comes from outside the material. The forces can be transmitted between materials, but the total amount is maintained constant by "God". Matter is merely extension with attributes like quantity, shape, and motion, while mystery exists only in God and the mind. This idea denies the internal sources, qualitative changes, leaps in development of motion in things, and it also denies the progress from the lower to the higher and from the simple to the complex. Descartes and his followers posited that mechanical laws universally apply to the material world, suggesting that biological and human physiological movements and functions can also be explained in terms of mechanical

dynamics. This concept which uses mechanical idea to explain natural, social, and life phenomena, is called the “mechanistic worldview”. This approach regards human beings as “machines” assembled from materials and parts, leading to a complete loss of human value and dignity.

Thirdly, the Organic Connection between parts and the whole was broken. The philosophy of subject-object dualism emphasizes the reductionist epistemology and the analytical methodology. Reductionism presupposes the world as a machine that can be reduced to its various fundamental components. The world, as an object of knowledge, is independent of the subject; human understanding of things is merely a passive reflection. Only by separately recognizing the various parts of the machine can one understand and grasp the entire world. Analyticism advocates that understanding things structurally is the best understanding, and that recognizing the parts is key to solving problems. Such an emphasis on the parts severed the organic connection between the parts and the whole.

Lastly, the anthropocentrism was promoted towards individualism. The philosophy of subject-object dualism highly affirms the supreme position of human beings in nature, and this paradigm of thought had given rise to the trend of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism believes that human beings are the measure of all things, and everything must be centered on the interests of people. In reality, anthropocentrism does not measure by the interests of all humanity, but rather by the interests of individuals or a small group of people, leading anthropocentrism to ultimately evolve into individualism, which has become the foundation of the worldview in modern society.

Jonas is extremely vigilant about of this reductionism or simplism with the tendency of reducing the life to non-living and inanimate death, which provides a metaphysical basis for modern life sciences to manipulate the human body including genetic modification. In his view, such practices effectively treat humans as objects assembled from materials and parts, resulting people completely lose their dignity and value.

3. The Situation of the Rift Between Humans and Nature: Wandering Alone in the Aimless Physical Cosmos

Jonas pointed out in his paper *Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism* (hereinafter referred to as “GNW”) that the nihilism as the weirdest guest for the modern society had entered the door, and existentialism attempted live with it causing a crisis in life, which originated in the 17th century. The human psyche was shaped in that era, manifesting as an overwhelming sense of isolation and a profound loss of purpose.

First, Jonas believes that the decisive feature of the spiritual situation of the modern people is: “man’s loneliness in the physical universe of modern cosmology”.^{[4]213} He affirmed that Pascal was a pioneer who bravely confronted this terrifying implication, providing a detailed and eloquent explanation of the modern human spiritual condition. Jonas endorsed Pascal’s description of the feeling of loneliness humans experience in the modern physical cosmos: human beings were cast into this infinitely cosmic space; they appeared trivial stemmed for the disproportion as measured against the cosmos’ vast scales of time, space, and quantity; the universe and humans were strange to each other, and the universe was indifferent and silent to humans’ matters. This sense of abandonment, insignificance, and neglect constitutes humanity’s profound loneliness within the totality of all things. Furthermore, the superiority of the human mind leads to its own utter estrangement. Jonas uses Pascal’s metaphor of humans as a fragile reed capable of thought within the universe to illustrate the unbridgeable chasm between man and the cosmos. Pascal states: “Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature; but he is thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapour, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But, if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more

noble than that which killed him, because he knows that the dies and the advantage which the universe has over him; the universe knows nothing of this.”^{[5]82-83} Compared to the universe, this “reed” is an extremely fragile contingency, easily crushed by the vast and blind universe at any moment, yet he is a “thinking reed”, aware even in the moment of its crushing. This ability to think is what sets humans apart from the universe. As Descartes said, the cosmos is *res extensa*, and extended existence cannot think. Man thinks alone in this cosmos, sharing only the mechanical laws of nature with their bodies, no longer sharing the meaning of nature. The consciousness that human beings possess that is unique to nature far from enabling a higher unity with universal existence, instead severs man from the cosmic community, resulting in a solitary and unsupported condition. In this situation, although man may perceive the immanent Logos of the universe and occupy a nominal place within the overall order, both the cosmos and the overall order have effectively vanished, reducing his status to mere contingency.

Second, Jonas pointed out that another condition of modern man: the indifferent nature devoid of teleology. This condition is precisely the one diagnosed by Nietzsche, in which the European nihilism surfaced. Jonas argued, the causal system of nature rejected teleology, and this purposeless nature could no longer ground human purposes; The collapse of the cosmos’ intrinsic hierarchy caused the values to lose their ontological foundation, and the pursuit of self-meaning and value must rely entirely on oneself; meaning transformed from something to be discovered to something projected, and value shifted from objective realities to evaluative constructs; purpose, as a function of will, is merely created by oneself; will replaces insight, while the temporality of action expelled the eternity of the “the good in itself”.

Jonas argued that the teleology was deconstructed according to Pascal’s cosmological perspective. In Pascal’s view, the cosmos was still created by God; the solitary individuals had lost all earthly support, yet their inner self can still reach toward the God beyond this world. However, this God was indeed unknown and cannot be identified from the signs of His creations. The cosmos did not reveal the Creator’s purpose, goodness, wisdom and perfection through its orderly patterns, abundant creations, harmonious phenomena, or the beauty of its wholeness, rather, but only manifested the Creator’s tremendous power through its vast expanse of space and time. If the world were simplified to merely the manifestations of energy, once it lost its transcendent reference, humans are left to dwell in solitary existence within the world, maintaining only energetic relationships with it. Jonas delineated Pascal’s role as the first existentialist. In Pascal’s view, the God who created the world remains inconceivable and can only be posited as sheer Will and Power. Human existence, along with this indifferent nature, rests merely on the contingency of divine will rather than serving any genuine purpose.

Jonas insightfully observed that the modern cosmological view, centered on anthropological anti-cosmism, constituted the metaphysical foundation for modern existentialism and its nihilistic implications. The emergence of this modern cosmological perspective was not only influenced by modern physical science, but cosmic nihilism itself has also contributed to shaping this state. Jonas further pointed out that cosmic nihilism evolved into the characteristic features of existentialism, which was essentially a form of dualism.

4. Symptoms of the Rift Between Man and Nature: The Nihilistic Characteristics of Gnosticism and Modern Existentialism

Jonas mastered existentialist thought through his prolonged study under Heidegger. This intellectual journey ignited his profound interest in Gnosticism research, ultimately establishing him as an authoritative international scholar in this field. Initially, employing existentialist methodologies, he uncovered previously overlooked dimensions in Gnostic thought. Later, he reversed his approach, utilizing Gnostic empirical materials to illuminate contemporary existentialism. Jonas discovered an extraordinary congruence between

existentialism and Gnosticism. Their congruence so precise it seemed tailor-made and this commonality is nihilism. In “GNW”, Jonas diagnosed the shared nihilistic characteristics of both systems, precisely locating the symptomatic rift between humanity and nature.

4.1. The Emotion of Extreme Dualism

As previously mentioned, dualistic thought posits that the world consists of two entities: spirit and matter, which cannot be reduced to or influence one another. Jonas believes that both Gnosticism and modern existentialism share an extreme dualistic sentiment, which serves as the underlying logic governing their overall attitudes and manifests as an expression and assertion of their ontological nihilism, as well as constitutes the roots of other forms of nihilism. Through his research, Jonas found that the ontology of Gnosticism was a tripartite structure consisting of humanity, the world, and the true God. In this structure, humans and the God belong to the same side, yet they are in fact strictly separated by the world. The dualism in Gnostic ontology manifests in two absolute divisions: that between the world and God, and that between humanity and the world—both of which are essentially the same dualism. Jonas analyzed the dualistic doctrine of Gnostic ontology in three dimensions: theology, cosmology, and anthropology. In the theological aspect this doctrine states that the true God is alien to the world and His existence is neither revealed nor hinted at within it. The God remains indifferent to the physical cosmos, cannot be known in terms of any worldly analogies, and is a totally unknown Other. In the cosmological aspect it states that the world was not created by the true God but by the inferior Demiurge whose law it carries out. In the anthropological aspects, while the human body is subject to natural laws, man’s inner spirit—the inner self—is not a product of nature nor does it belong to this world. Like the transcendent God beyond the material realm, it is a totally transcendent being cannot be apprehended through empirical categories.^{4[218]}

The dualism in existentialism reflects the alienation between humans and the world, resulting in the loss of the intimate cosmic worldview. This dualism exhibits the extreme opposition between humans and nature, excessively focusing on human existence while neglecting the existence of nature. In the existentialist perspective, the transcendent world that once held hope, or the deity or God from which value derives, no longer have a place in this cosmos. Nature exists in an indifferent state, becoming the true abyss. “Dasein” becomes the sole focus of existentialist concern and humans are placed in unprecedented predicament: they are left lonely, anxious, or fearful; within their finitude, they face nothing but death; they exist in contingency, with the meaning they projecting appearing in an objectively meaningless form. Jonas emphasized that in Gnosticism, humans were cast into a hostile, anti-divine, and anti-human cosmos; in existentialism, humans were instead thrown into an indifferent nature. The existentialist condition represents absolute emptiness and a truly bottomless abyss.

4.2. Anti-Cosmism in Cosmology

The extreme ontological dualism in Gnosticism and existentialism engenders both the demonization and nullification of the cosmos, thereby epitomizing a vehement anti-cosmological stance.

The sacred and unified conception of the cosmos was thoroughly demonized during the Gnostic era. Jonas examined the reverential cosmic worldview held by the ancient Greeks, primarily from Plato and Aristotle to the Stoics. He pointed out that the cosmos was traditionally regarded as a perfect archetypal whole that is the cause of order in particular things, which themselves were imitations of the cosmic order. The world was viewed as a vital, intelligent, and wise totality. He argued that shift in cosmic perception during Gnosticism did not stem from advances in human astronomical knowledge but rather from sociopolitical upheavals. The relationship between the classical poleis and their citizens had transformed: the poleis disintegrated into fragmented structures, and citizens lost their active role in self-realization

within the city-state, becoming passive subjects. The traditional hierarchy whereby the whole transcends its parts collapsed, which the whole is ontologically alien to its parts, while the parts remain existentially insignificant to the whole. In Gnosticism, the cosmos is created by the Demiurge, a being far inferior to the supreme God, through ignorance and passion, driven by a will of domination and oppression. The cosmos is viewed as a product and embodiment of the anti-knowledge, revealing an ignorant and evil force, whose essence is ignorance. Gnostic myth depicts the cosmos as an onion-like prison, with archons of varying ranks guarding different tiers, while the earth-humanity's dwelling is confined to the innermost and most heavily fortified cell. The essence of humanity is gnosis, a spark of light in darkness, which renders humans alien to the vast, dark cosmos, resulting in existential isolation and helplessness. In Gnostic thought, the cosmos completely loses its former sacred majesty, even being contemptuously referred to as "these wretched elements" or "Demiurge's shack", becoming an hostile order against humanity, fundamentally opposed to human longing. For Gnostics, human can only overcome this world through a redemptive capacity and achieve liberation from such a state of enslavement. Such capacity derives from the God who transcends this world and the saving gnosis emanating from Him.

Existentialism exhibits phenomena strikingly similar to Gnosticism in vastly different contexts. Jonas summarized two key characteristics of the modern existentialist cosmology: First, modern man experiences an extreme sense of solitude within the physical cosmos. Humans are passively thrown into a vast cosmos—an alien realm where neither recognizes the other. Human actions appear absurd to the cosmos, just as the cosmos remains utterly indifferent to human deeds. Compared to the immensity of the cosmos, humans are insignificantly small and may be destroyed at any moment. Yet the unique consciousness and reason that humans possess lead to an insurmountable chasm between them and the totality of existence. Absurdly enacting human affairs, they forge an existence of profound solitude within the cosmos. Second, existentialism rejects any teleology in the natural order. From an existentialist perspective, the nature is cold and purposeless, and even its own existence is contingent. Such purposeless nature cannot provide support for human goals, nor can it serve as an ontological foundation meaning and value. Thus, despite the vast temporal and spatial distance between Gnosticism and existentialism, they both share a profoundly anti-cosmic worldview.

4.3. The Principles of Defying Legalism

The anti-cosmic stance shared by Gnosticism and existentialism leads the alienation and hostility between humanity and the cosmos, resulting in the rejection of all cosmic laws, norms, or principles.

Jonas points out that in Gnosticism, the true God failed to bestow any norms or laws upon this cosmos. He analyzed the nihilistic implications of Nietzsche's proclamation of "God is dead", which signified the self-abrogation of the highest values, rendering coercive values impossible, that is, as explained by Heidegger, the transcendental world had lost its influence. Drawing on Nietzsche's "death of God," Jonas argued that the metaphysical foundation of the nihilistic metaphysics exhibited in Gnosticism was the idea that "the god of the cosmos is dead". The Gnostic God differs from Plato's world of Ideas or Lord of the Jewish faith. It has no affirmative connection to this sensible world, is not the essence of this world, but rather its negation and abolition. The Gnostic God is also not the "Demiurge" who created this cosmos. Its essence can only be revealed through negative experiences such as radical otherness, difference, and indescribable freedom, maintaining no formal relationship with this world, representing a nihilistic concept that provides no norms or laws to be followed for this world and those living within it.

Jonas elaborated on the Gnostic argument against legalism. Since this cosmos was created by an inferior god, the Demiurge, the laws within it are also created by it. The laws consist of two

parts: natural laws, which govern the physical world and the human body, and moral laws, which act upon the human soul. Ethically, the function of these laws is to consistently and stably bind the soulish man to worldly affairs, coercing human wills into submission to this oppressive system through rules of reward and punishment, ensuring the system operates unimpeded. From the perspective of Gnostics, laws are governed by an external, unattainable power, with the state as its earthly executor. The duty of soulish man is to adhere to a set of laws that render his actions legitimate and normative. The authentic self's freedom and dignity belong to the pneumatic spiritual man, who must reject all objective norms and dismantle their motivating force. As Jonas states: "pneumaticos, 'spiritual' man, who does not belong to any objective scheme, is above the law, beyond good and evil, and a law unto himself in the power of his 'knowledge'."^{[4]228} Rooted in an anti-cosmic worldview, the moral attitudes of different Gnostic sects manifest in two opposing extremes: hedonism and asceticism. Hedonism: rejecting loyalty to nature through infinite indulgence, achieving freedom through the abuse of liberty. Asceticism: rejecting loyalty to nature by isolating oneself from it, achieving freedom through renunciation. Both positions advocate for living beyond the law.

Jonas dissected the claims of rebellion against law or morality by representatives of existentialism. Nietzsche's outcry that "God is dead" announced the devaluation of supreme values, stripping the world of its source and foundation for objective and absolute values. Sartre, on the other hand, argued that the transcendent is silent and no sign in this world, and that human is abandoned in this world and forced to bear a desperate freedom, "he 'is' that freedom, man being 'nothing but his own project'," "all is permitted to him".^{[4]225-226} Jonas pointed out that Heidegger's opposition to the classical definition of "man is a rational animal" stemmed from this definition placing humanity's status too low. Heidegger's stance reflects his rejection of any definable human nature, opposing the subjugation of human existence to a determining essence, thereby denying that humans are merely a component of an objective essence within the natural whole. Jonas contended "In this conception of transessential, freely 'self-projecting' existence I see something comparable to the gnostic concept of the transpsychical negativity of the pneuma."^{[4]228} Gnosticism and existentialism, through different theoretical paradigms, express contempt and indifference toward cosmic and nature. Values and meaning lost their ontological support, becoming subjective evaluative criteria. Both perspectives, grounded in ethical subjectivism, advocate the rejection of any behavioral norms.

4.4. The Absence of the Present within Temporality

The dualistic thought roots of Gnosticism and existentialism, along with their cosmological and anti-legalist assertions, give rise to another nihilistic characteristic: the absence of the present within temporality. "Gnosis", as the liberating knowledge for the spiritual man in Gnosticism, constitutes merely a dynamic instant. Gnosis also stands as a core concept in Gnostic thought, which Jonas elucidated through a renowned Valentinian formula articulated as follows: "What makes us free is the knowledge who we were, what we have become; where we were, wherein we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what is birth and what rebirth."^{[4]228} Jonas noted that the term "been thrown" made us reminded of Pascal's "Cast into the infinite immensity of spaces" and Heidegger's concept of "Geworfenheit" (having been thrown), which originated in Gnosticism itself. He also noted that there was a standing phrase in ancient literature of Mandaean Gnosticism in Iraq and southwestern Iran, "life has been thrown into the world, light into darkness, the soul into the body."^{[4]229} Jonas believes this description conveys that humans were violently thrust into this world from the very beginning, arriving at their current state and becoming themselves; they have no choice; this world and its laws do not belong to them. The image of being thrown reveals the dynamic totality characteristic of existence, where life is a projection of trajectory toward the future in the world into which one is cast. Thus, Jonas observed in the Valentinian formula that only the past and

the future hold significance; gnosis itself is a instantaneous flash, without temporal present terminology.

Jonas praised his teacher Heidegger's Being and Time as the most profound and significant manifesto of existentialist philosophy. He observed that Heidegger developed a "fundamental ontology" based on the existential modes of the self, employing various categories of existence to explicated these modes. These categories are not of reality but of realization—that is, they are not given cognitive structures of an objective world but functional structures active movement of inner time, through which the world is sustained and the self is originated as an event of continuity. This temporal category is intrinsic and spiritual, and can be divided into three horizons: past, present, and future. Jonas attempted to arrange Heidegger's "existential categories" under those three temporal horizons, and he made a striking discovery that the head of "present" remained practically empty. All the relevant existential categories with possible authenticity of selfhood fall in correlate pairs under the head of either past or future. Jonas explicated: "'facticity,' necessity, having become, having been thrown, guilt, are existential modes of the past; 'existence,' being ahead of one's present, anticipation of death, care, and resolve, are existential modes of the future. No present remains for genuine existence to repose in." [4]231 Through this analysis, Jonas concluded that in Heidegger's existential categorie, the present failed to constitute an autonomous dimension, resulting in the absence of the present. Moreover, he profoundly analyzed the metaphysical implications of the disappearance of the genuine content-bearer in the present, which is that the nature has been so objectified becoming a deficient mode of existence. Jonas lamented, "No philosophy has ever been less concerned about nature than Existentialism, for which it has no dignity left: this unconcern is not to be confounded with Socrates' refraining from physical inquiry as being above man's understanding." [4]232 Existentialism, influenced by modern physical science's spiritual impoverishment of nature, degrades the concept of nature, which shares a certain commonality with Gnosticism's disdain for nature.

5. The Quest for the Path of Human-Nature Integration: From the Holism of Life to a Future-Oriented Ethics of Responsibility

How to reconcile the rupture between humanity and nature's wholeness caused by subject-object dualism; how to overcome the nihilistic malaise resulting from this rupture; and how to resolve the ethical vacuum in moral law created thereby, for which Jonas had engaged in a diligent quest, and he reflected in the conclusion of "GNW" that if the isolated selfhood and the rupture were change into monistic naturalism, which would still abolish the idea of man as man. Hence, he thought that philosophy ought to find a third road, in which the dualistic rift can be avoided and yet enough of the dualistic insight saved to uphold the humanity of man. [4]234 To this end, he developed an existential interpretation of biological facts, endowing all organisms with the dignity of being, positioning humans as guardians of life, and grounding ethical values in the meaning of life itself. On this foundation, he constructed his practical philosophy, the ethics of responsibility, designed to awaken humanity's consciousness of vulnerability, inspire behavioral reform, and summon humanity's sense of moral responsibility.

5.1. Holistic Monism of Philosophy of Life

Jonas developed his philosophy of life by drawing upon ancient philosophical wisdom, incorporating theories from modern thinkers such as Whitehead and Darwin, and synthesizing these with his firsthand existential encounter with wartime devastation. His life philosophy system encompasses both a philosophy of organism and a philosophy of mind, revealing life's essential characteristics of wholeness, continuity, and purposiveness. To overcome the polar opposition of the soul and body caused by dualistic philosophy, Jonas posits that life as a psychophysical unity within organic wholes. He acknowledges the significant role of dualism in

the spiritual history of humanity, highlighting its historical impact on breakthroughs in natural sciences. While dualism recognizes the distinction between body and spirit in life, it radicalized this difference into an absolute schism, ultimately setting them in opposition. He further points out that the materialist and idealist monism resulting from the decline of dualism represents a one-sided monism. Both materialism and idealism distinguish between the first substance and the second substance, with the former emphasizing matter and function, and the latter emphasizing consciousness and representation. Each manifests the contradictions of one-sided monism, namely, the failure of reducing one element to another. In the case of materialism, this failure happens in relation to consciousness, in that of idealism—in relation to the thing-in-itself.^{[4]17} Within vibrant life, Jonas identified a mutual transcendence between body and mind: the body can surpasses itself toward mind, and the mind can likewise embody itself physically. He argued, “It must be described as extended and inert, but equally as feeling and willing—and neither of the two descriptions can be carried to its end without trespass into the sphere of the other and without prejudging it. The physical-outward description cannot be carried to its end without compromising the freedom and thus the genuine reality of the mind; the vitalistic-inward description not without compromising the total determination and autarky of the ‘extended’ realm.”^{[4]18} Life is the unity of psychological and physical manifestations in all organisms, indicating that this separation is only an illusion. Through living organisms we can observe that they simultaneously possess a world and belong to a world, that perceive and are perceptible. Jonas traced back to the ancient interpretations of nature, which were guided by the concept of pan-vitalism—the belief that life is universal, vibrant, and interconnected. This early wisdom provided humanity with the revelation of “holistic monism.” However, we must not retreat to a naive monism unscrutinized by Philosophy simply because of the dilemmas posed by dualism or the limited perspective resulting from materialism and idealism. Jonas emphasizes that future theories must transcend these dilemmas of their predecessors by pointing to the holistic unity of the mind-body relationship—a unity inherent in the very nature of the organism. The body-mind relationship is not dichotomous or isolated, and the complete significance of each can only be fully manifested in relation to the other.^{[6]99}

Having completed the discussion on life as organic integration of mind and body, Jonas next needed to demonstrate how the body and mind are interconnected. He drew upon Aristotle’s concept of a hierarchy of organisms from *On the Soul*, where the higher is built upon the lower, and the lower is retained within the higher. Jonas reinterpreted this view to reveal the continuity of the organism, describing it as follows: even the lowest organism prefigures the presence of mind, and even as the mind reaches its highest point, it still belongs to a part of the organism. To this end, he addressed the question of an organism’s freedom and its initial manifestation—metabolism.^{[7]124} Jonas opposed the assertion that humans are the only beings with freedom, putting forward his own core argument: all organisms possess freedom. For if spirit is inherently presupposed in organisms, then so is freedom. It is just that different levels of life perceive freedom to varying degrees. As the level of life rises, the diversity and fullness of perception continuously increase, and the scope and capacity for action also continuously improve, ultimately reaching a state of self-reward. In other words, the process of ascending life is one of separation between the self and the world, as well as the continuous enrichment of subjectivity. This subjectivity reaches its extreme in humans, who not only seek to master the external world but also regard themselves as objects in order to acquire and control the self.^{[7]124} All organisms possess subjectivity, which is the necessary foundation of freedom. Jonas argued that the freedom of a subject was fully manifested in the organism’s unique function of metabolism, and he referred to this function as the primary form of freedom. “The emergence of perception and motility opens a major chapter in the history of freedom that began with organic being as such and was adumbrated in the primeval restlessness of metabolizing substance.”^{[4]99} Metabolism is defined by Jonas as the function through which organisms

exchange substances with their surrounding environment. This function allows organisms to expel waste materials and absorb new ones, thereby maintaining their own existence. If an organism ceases to interact with the external world, its form of survival comes to an end, which is a key distinction from other inorganic entities or machines. Jonas discerned the dialectical nature of life's freedom in the metabolic function of organisms. "In this process of self-sustained being, the relation of the organism to its material substance is of a double nature: the materials are essential to it specifically, accidental individually; it coincides with their actual collection at the instant, but is not bound to any one collection in the succession of instants, 'riding' their change like the crest of a wave and bound only to their form of collection which endures as its own feat. Dependent on their availability as materials, it is independent of their sameness as these; its own, functional identity, passingly incorporating theirs, is of a different order. In a word, the organic form stands in a dialectical relation of *needful freedom* to matter."^{[4]80} Jonas pointed out that this freedom becomes conscious with the emergence of the human spirit, which always strives to break free from the body belonging to the material world, constituting an inherent tension of life. If inorganic matter is the foundation of organic matter, then inorganic matter is not purely rigid and lifeless either; it is merely that freedom lies in a state of inert dormancy. Thus, the continuity of life's freedom is manifested throughout the entire natural world.

Through Jonas's elucidation on the continuity of life, we can observe a tension between freedom and necessity, mind and body, and the living and the non-living. Resolving this tension is not only key to overcoming the dilemma of dualism but also a pathway to surmounting the abyss of nihilism. Jonas opposes the notion that the two sides of this inherent tension are mutually exclusive contradictions, instead viewing them as a dialectical unity where each necessitates the other. He seeks to argue, by restoring and refining the intrinsic purposiveness of life, that life inherently possesses its own goal-directedness, rather than being a value-neutral matter as proclaimed by natural science.^{[7]129} Fang Qiuming (2004) summarizes Jonas's concept of "purpose" as follows: "purpose is that for which something exists, driving a process to emerge and persist, motivating an action to occur—it is the answer to the question 'why'".^{[8]48} The existence of life manifests as the trait of subjectivity, and subjectivity necessarily embodies the purposiveness of life, which is demonstrated through the metabolism of organisms. In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas states, "Every organ in an organism serves a purpose and fulfills it by its functioning. The overarching purpose jointly served by all the special functions is the life of the organism as a whole."^{[9]65} In other words, the intrinsic purpose of life is to preserve itself, maintain itself, and continue itself; life itself is its own end. To elucidate the nature of life's purposiveness, Jonas selected several examples to make a compelling argument. The metabolic function in animals creates an imbalance in internal equilibrium, necessitating material exchange with the external environment to alleviate physiological tension caused by deficiency, with the aim of sustaining their own existence. There is a similarity between the material exchange governed by an organism's survival mode and the constant motion of individual particles in a wave, which maintains the wave's form. In an organism, metabolism embodies life's uniqueness in sustaining itself through itself and for itself, whereas in a wave, the wave is not the purpose of particle motion; rather, it merely results from the transmission of motion among adjacent particles. In his essay *Cybernetics and Purpose: A Critique*, Jonas criticizes the application of scientific cybernetics to explain the structure and functioning of organisms. Cybernetics removes the emotional factor inherent in animal metabolism, leaving only sensibility and motility, reducing animal behavior to the information transmission of effectors and receptors. A machine, even when information transmission ceases, remains a machine, but an animal that ceases material exchange is no longer an animal. The intrinsic existential concern of an animal is its perpetual purpose. Jonas's teleology facilitates the dialectical unity of the dualistic opposites, enabling the two opposing entities to fully express

their meanings through each other, thereby seeking a new pathway to bridge the rift of dualism.^{[7]129-132}

5.2. The Ethics of Responsibility Based on the Phenomena of Life

Through his examination of the wholeness, continuity, and purpose of life, Jonas reversed the status of nature—despised in Gnosticism and treated with indifference in existentialism—thereby restoring the value of life and nature. The aim of this epistemological insight is to transition into his practical philosophy, namely the ethics of responsibility.

On the one hand, he fundamentally transformed the perspective of traditional ethical philosophy. As discussed earlier, the philosophy of subject-object dualism has led to a crisis of nihilism in philosophy. Within this crisis, the cosmos is regarded as a blind, material, and valueless accumulation of matter, while the human spirit exists as alien to this world, and the world is merely a field for the exercise of will; everything, including value, is considered a fabrication of the spirit. This has resulted in an ethical vacuum characterized by the collapse of the moral-legal order. In this world without rules, measures, values, or responsibilities, man either resists nature with fear, like the gnosis in Gnosticism, or passionately seeks to dominate the world, like Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, or, as in Heidegger's existentialism, is concerned not with actuality but with actualization.^{[7]133-134} In Jonas's view, although Gnosticism failed to regard nature as a creation of evil, it at least retained a certain negative guiding value. Existentialism, however, exhibits an utter indifference toward nature, leaving behind an indifferent nature and thereby constructing a true hell for man. To overcome nihilism, Jonas strives to restore the broken relationship between man and the cosmos as a whole, constructing a metaphysics in which the cosmos, nature, and life coexist in harmony, thereby establishing an ontological foundation for the source of ethics. Because the construction of an ethical system must have an ontological foundation, which determines the scope, measure, and principles of ethics. He grounds this ontology in living life itself, for life is an end in itself, a self-affirmation that cannot but exist, and the highest purpose and manifestation of value. Nature as a whole is oriented toward life, and nature itself contains eternal objective values, which are revealed through the emergence of life. Jonas emphasizes that his ethical ontology is based on the objective distribution of the nature of things. "Hence would result a principle of ethics which is ultimately grounded neither in the autonomy of the self nor in the needs of the community, but in an objective assignment by the nature of things (what theology used to call the *ordo creationis*)-such as could still be kept faith with by the last of a dying mankind in his final solitude."^{[4]283} Zhang Rong (2023) points out that Jonas's ontology is grounded in the general theory of being and life beyond humanity, the principle of the nature of things, and primordial substance, and that he uses this naturalistic and vitalistic ontology to lay the foundation for ethics.^{[7]312} Life takes itself as the highest end, and since nature as a whole is oriented toward life, nature itself possesses value. This value is not subjectively established by humans but exists objectively, inherent in nature itself, possessing an eternal dimension, and is manifested through the emergence of life. The ethical implications of life thus become evident. ^{[7]134} By taking life itself as the supreme ethical principle, Jonas broke with the dualistic subjectivist ethics grounded in metaphysics, thereby fundamentally transforming the ontological perspective upon which subjectivist ethics is founded.

On the second hand, Jonas built a bridge between "is" and "ought". Although an ontological foundation with life as objective value has been found, an ethical system cannot be automatically established on this basis. For a gap still exists between "is" and "ought" that needs to be filled, and the relationship between "is" and "ought" has been a problem that thinkers have struggled to solve since Hume. Although utilitarianism and transcendentalism have offered powerful arguments, their conclusions remain unconvincing. For Jonas, bridging the gulf between "is" and "ought" and connecting value with responsibility is the key to his ethics of

responsibility. Jonas establishes life as the good itself, thereby building a bridge between “is” and “ought.” In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, he analyzes: “Thus our showing up to now that Nature harbors values because it harbors ends and is thus anything but value-free, has not yet answered the question of whether we are at pleasure or duty bound to join in her ‘value decisions’: ...Not the theory of ends—which showed values to be present in nature as the objects of purpose—can answer that question, but the theory of value must do so, to which we now turn. But showing the immanence of purpose in nature made asking this question now possible; and it will turn out that, with the gaining of this premise, the decisive battle for ethical theory has already been won.”^{[9]78} He further explains: “For with any *de facto* pursued end (whatever made it into this), attainment of it becomes a good, and frustration of it, an evil; and with this distinction the attributability of value begins. But from *within* the predecided goal commitment, where henceforth only success or failure counts, no judgment upon the goodness of the goal itself is possible, and thus beyond the factual interest, no obligation can be derived from it.”^{[9]79} Susanne Lindberg (2005) also reflects: “The bold and provocative philosophy of Hans Jonas’ nature period is an attempt to answer a single burning question: how could life be an object of *responsibility*? Or, to put it in another way: given that our time is determined by the overwhelming presence of technology, how can we get aware of the requirements of life on the one hand, and responsibility on the other?...henceforth, the task of philosophy is to comprehend life and responsibility and, what is more, to show the fundamental interdependence of these two problems that might, at the outset, seem to exclude one another.”^{[10]175} To bridge value and responsibility, Jonas introduces the “good itself” to achieve this end. He points out: “Is there then any sense in saying that anything ought to be, no matter whether or not it promotes its coming-to-be on its own by influencing desire, instinct, or will? We said that a “good-in-itself” would be such a thing.”^{[9]80} The good itself is the pure capacity to have any purpose whatsoever, absolutely superior to any purposeless existence. Jonas developed Husserl’s slogan “to the things themselves” into “you see, and you know,” and on this basis established life as the “good itself.” In Jonas’s view, the whole of nature—from amoeba to human—constitutes a continuous, organic, and unified ecosystem; its purpose is survival. Life is the supreme, primary, and self-evident ontological axiom. Thus, life, which possesses value, becomes the “good itself” in Jonas’s philosophy of life. Because of living life, the concept of good is no longer a transcendental object, eternal being, or absolute standard, but is rooted and situated in this world. Due to the psycho-physical duality of life, as well as its fragility and susceptibility to damage and destruction, it essentially calls for an “ought”—an unconditional responsibility. That is, the good itself urgently awaits careful care and preservation by man. This also reveals the essence of the concern and care that characterizes Jonas’s ethics of responsibility. The object of this concern and care is no longer limited to man but extends to the whole of nature—this is what makes Jonas’s ethics of responsibility unique.^{[7]136} As Jonas himself states, “only what is alive, in its constitutive indigence and fragility, *can* be an object of responsibility.”^{[9]98} Humanity’s special status and capacities within nature determine its position of responsibility toward nature and the human future; the paradigmatic model of this ethical orientation is the care of parents for their children. Zhang Qingxiong (2009) summarizes the attributes of Jonas’s ethics of responsibility: it concerns the survival of the individual, others, and even humanity as a whole and the world; it concerns not only the actuality of individual existence but also its real possibilities; it is primarily embodied as altruism grounded in selfless devotion. Hence, genuine moral practice is not motivated by self-interest or by agreements of mutual benefit, but because it is itself good. Whatever is good summons the subject to realize it.^{[11]152} Angela Michelis (2013) states the central role of Jonas’s ethics of responsibility, “Human responsibility can be grounded and conveyed by going back to the “objective” side of a renewed idea of nature, that history itself demands for the survival of mankind, after several industrial and techno-scientific revolutions, and nihilisms. In view of a power which extends to the ability to intervene inside nature,

initiating artificial processes with largely unforeseeable and probably irreversible consequences, it is now becoming increasingly impossible to avoid considering possible approaches to implement in the chiefly political issue of taking responsibility for nature and humanity.”^{[12]29} It is worth noting that Jonas’s reenchantment of nature’s value is not an attempt to reduce humanity to the level of animals or to eliminate the distinct differences between humans and animals. Rather, it highlights the unique human capacity to recognize the dynamic relationship between life and nature, thereby entailing the man’s responsibility to care for the continuity of life. Because, “Man is the only being known to us who can assume responsibility.”^{[13]101}

6. Conclusion

Since Descartes, modern Western philosophy of subject-object dualism has reshaped the spirit of rationalism, manifested the awakening of subjectivity, and initiated a great spiritual movement in the history of human thought. However, this dualistic philosophy has led to the fragmentation of subject and object, spirit and body, fact and value, truth and falsehood, good and evil, as well as theory and practice, brewing the strong wine of moral relativism and nihilism in the contemporary era, and creating a rift between humanity and nature—a rift that has given rise to such modern problems as global ecological crises and the existential predicament of humanity. Having experienced the trauma of war, Jonas, concerned with human existence and the future, set for himself the arduous task of exploring a new path to bridge the rift between humanity and nature. This new path is characterized by its ability to avoid the dualistic rift while fully preserving the valuable insights into human nature that dualism upholds; its difficulty lies in its attempt to transcend the limitations of utilitarian and transcendentalist ethics. To this end, he deeply examined the nihilistic elements in Gnosticism and contemporary existentialism, diagnosing the manifestation and root causes of the rift between humans and nature, and developed a holistic monism in his philosophy of life, attributing the source of value to life in its wholeness, continuity, and purposiveness. Jonas’s entire philosophy, in a way that is compatible with modern science, explains the genuine and objective particularity of human destiny: because living, vibrant nature is essentially good and worthy of care; she even expects to receive our care, so that we, as her noblest creation, may continue to exist. Jonas’s philosophy of life, which posits life as the supreme good, contains metaphysical implications of naturalism and vitalism. It seeks a general principle of existence and life beyond humanity, attempting to restore a vision of harmonious unity between humans and nature. His thought holds significant implications for contemporary reflection on value judgment, the delineation of practical limits, the pursuit of ecological civilization, and the assurance of sustainable human development.

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