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## Hans Jonas' Work on Gnosticism as Counterhistory

Elad Lapidot

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# Hans Jonas' Work on Gnosticism as Counterhistory

*Elad Lapidot*

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**Abstract:** In this article I propose a reflection on the basic meaning of Hans Jonas' work on Gnosticism. This reflection carries implications not just for how to re-evaluate Jonas' work on Gnosticism, but also for how to re-evaluate Jonas' intellectual project in general. I will not be able to fully and systematically develop here my reflection on Jonas' Gnosticism project, much less to provide a full account of its broader implications. What I will propose is a paradigm, a basic hermeneutic perspective for reading or re-reading Jonas. My basic claim is that in his work on late-antiquity Gnosticism Jonas develops not just the conceptual or existential features of a specific historical-spiritual figure, but a narrative, a story, which suggests itself as an alternative deep intellectual history of the West, what I will call here a "counterhistory". In other words, Jonas does not only re-tell the story of Gnosticism, he also re-tells the story of Western thought. Or more precisely, he lays the foundations for such a revised history. As incomplete and preliminary as they may be, these foundations – this is the broader implication I suggest for re-reading Jonas – will continue to inform also Jonas' later, so to speak "post-Gnostic" project. I would even hazard to say that to a certain degree, Jonas' late work is not fully comprehensible without his historical narrative. That is to say, the story of Gnosticism, as told by Jonas, may also provide a narrative structure for the story of Jonas' own lifework.

**Keywords:** Jonas, Heidegger, Existentialism, Gnosticism, Counterhistory.

## 1. Introduction

In this article I propose a reflection on the basic meaning of Hans Jonas' work on Gnosticism. This reflection carries implications not just for how to re-evaluate Jonas' work on Gnosticism, but also for how to re-evaluate Jonas' intellectual project in general. I will not be able to fully and systematically develop here my reflection on Jonas' Gnosticism project, much less to provide a full account of its broader implications. What I will propose is a paradigm, a basic hermeneutic perspective for reading or re-reading Jonas.

My basic claim is that in his work on late-antiquity Gnosticism Jonas develops not just the conceptual or existential features of a specific historical-spiritual figure, but a narrative, a story, which suggests itself as an alternative deep intellectual history of the West, what I will

call here a "counterhistory". In other words, Jonas does not only re-tell the story of Gnosticism, he also re-tells the story of Western thought. Or more precisely, he lays the foundations for such a revised history. As incomplete and preliminary as they may be, these foundations – this is the broader implication I suggest for re-reading Jonas – will continue to inform also Jonas' later, so to speak "post-Gnostic" project. I would even hazard to say that to a certain degree, Jonas' late work is not fully comprehensible without his historical narrative. That is to say, the story of Gnosticism, as told by Jonas, may also provide a narrative structure for the story of Jonas' own lifework.

An introductory word about the concept of "counter-history": this article is based on a paper delivered in 2015 in Pisa, in a conference on "The Wisdom of the Ancients. Jerusalem rediscovers Athens: The German-Jewish Revaluation of Ancient Philosophy". My focus in the paper was on the notion of "re-evaluation", namely on the operation of rethinking value, of putting into question a certain consensus and discourse about the value of something and perhaps of attaching new values to it. What interested me was the way in which this operation does not simply consist in attaching new values to the same thing, here "ancient philosophy", but more profoundly in revising the very understanding of what "ancient philosophy", "antiquity" or "philosophy" in general actually is. In other words, I was interested in how reevaluating ancient philosophy entails or entailed rewriting the history of philosophy, and eventually rewriting history itself. This is why, for designating the intellectual project I was reflecting on, I chose the concept of "counter-history".

Under the concept of "counter-history" I do not have in mind a very specific theory. On the conceptual level, it means an alternative narration of history, which does not simply tell a completely different story, but re-reads the same facts in a different manner, thereby ascribing to them a new meaning, which runs counter, opposite to the traditionally accepted one. On a deeper level, in question here is a certain type of intellectual project, of philosophical project, whose fundamental act of conceptual rethinking is inherently intertwined with an act of counter-history, of re-narration of history.

That philosophical thought should imply an act of historiography at all is far from trivial and the cases in which it does not doubt belong to a specific configuration of knowledge and thinking, which in its turn may perhaps itself be characterized historically, for instance as modern. That philosophy should produce *counter*-historiography – this would be a further determination of the same histori-

cal configuration. Ultimately, this article is another effort to think this configuration, through the work of Hans Jonas.

For the sake of comparison, one famous articulation of the counter-historiographical project was offered by Walter Benjamin in *On the Concept of History* (1940), under the notion of history “against the grain”.<sup>1</sup> There, Benjamin describes philosophy from the outset as a historiographical figure, the figure of (crypto-theological) “historical materialism” (thesis I, p. 693). Benjamin’s fundamental observation in this context is that the philosophical struggle, the battle of ideas, is not fought only or even primarily on how we shape our future, but more basically on how we see our past: “[T]he dead too will not be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious” (thesis VI, p. 695). Philosophy thus has a hermeneutical-historiographical task, i.e. to re-read tradition: “In every epoch one must try to deliver tradition anew from the conformism that threatens to take control over it” (ibid.). And so Benjamin arrives at the famous formulation of what I would call his counter-history project:

“No document of culture exists without being simultaneously also a document of barbarism. And just as this document itself is not free from barbarism, so the process of tradition, in which this document has fallen from one [hand] to the other. The historical materialist thus moves as far away from this tradition as possible. He considers it as his task to brush history against the grain” (thesis VII, 696).

As Benjamin notes, the very project of counter-history, i.e. of resisting the prevailing hegemonic narrative, also means resisting the very idea of history as “the image of progress of human kind in history”, namely implies a “critique of the image of progress in general” (thesis XIII, 700), aspiring “to explode the continuum of history” (theses XV and XVI, 701-2). It is so that Benjamin’s idea of explosive counter-history, conceived as resistance to fascism, interestingly corresponds to Amos Funkenstein’s explicit concept of “counter-history”, which diametrically designates historical revisionism and negationism and thus carries the exact opposite connotation, as a “pernicious action, destructive and self-destructive”.<sup>2</sup>

That I should propose to situate the thought of Hans Jonas, the philosopher of life and world affirmation, in this mercurial environment, is less than obvious. This proposition challenges a narrative that Jonas himself has offered with respect to the relation between his work on Gnosticism and his later work, and the reception of this narrative in the literature on Jonas. It further recalls into question the relation between the Jonasian and the Heideggerian projects, by pointing at a deep affinity between Jonas’ (counter-)history of Gnosticism and Heidegger’s *Seinsgeschichte*.

The structure of my argument will thus be as follows: (1) I will start by explaining in what way my reading of Jonas’ work on Gnosticism as counter-history presents a challenge to Jonas’ own self-narrative; (2) I will then, as the main part of this article, present and demonstrate this reading in Jonas’ major texts on Gnosticism; subsequently, in order to understand the meaning of what I perceive as Jonas’ counter-history, (3) I will indicate its affinity with Heidegger’s project, especially his *Seins-*

*geschichte*, and its fundamental difference from it; to (4) conclude in an epilogue noting the paradoxical nature of Jonas’ “history against the grain”, which perhaps accounts for its absence from his own self-narrative, and how it may call for a new sensibility in the reading of “The Phenomenon of Life”.

## 2. From *Gnosis* to Life? A Short History of Jonas

My claim that in his work on Gnosticism in late-antiquity Jonas developed a basic counter-historical narrative that remained decisive for his later work on philosophical biology, stands in opposition to Jonas’ own account of the meaning of his early Gnosticism project to his later philosophy. In a nutshell, the basic motif of Jonas’ account is the profound *break* between his early “historical” research of Gnosticism and his later, non-historical but rather “philosophical” work on the phenomenon of life. This motif of “break” also implies a very specific understanding of the “historical” nature of the Gnosticism project.

Talking about Jonas’ account, I am referring here to Jonas’ retrospective autobiographical narrative of his life work. There should be nothing scandalous in challenging this self-interpretational narrative, in comparison to other readings of Jonas’ work. On the contrary, as Jonas himself noted in 1974 at the beginning of his “Retrospective View” on his work on Gnosticism: “To reminisce is a dangerous matter, as everyone knows. When one looks back, things have somehow been edited in one’s mind, unintentionally but inevitably”.<sup>3</sup> This caveat reads almost as an invitation to counter-narration.

In Jonas’ own retrospective view, his work on Gnosticism had a very defined and limited scope. In his 1964 preface to the second edition of his *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* of 1934, he described the book’s project as a “philosophical interpretation of a historical phenomenon”.<sup>4</sup> In his memoirs of 1989 he explained: “If one wants to talk about my philosophy, it doesn’t start with Gnosticism, but with my efforts for a philosophical biology. My work on Gnosticism was, in contrast, only my apprenticeship [*Gesellenstück*] – an implementation of Heidegger’s philosophy, especially the existential analytics [...] on specific historical material, in this case the Gnosticism of late antiquity”. This work presented nothing more than “a special contribution to the research of late antiquity”.<sup>5</sup> The same version was repeated by Lore Jonas in her foreword to the memoirs: “I recognize in the work of my husband three phases: his work on *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* he called his ‘apprenticeship’ – a historical work. In *Organismus und Freiheit* he turned to the present, and in *Prinzip Verantwortung* he expressed his concern about the future”.<sup>6</sup>

It is in the “*Lehrbriefe*” to Lore, namely the philosophical letters that the soldier Hans Jonas has written to his wife from the field during Second World War, which his memoirs locate the supposed radical break with the historical “apprenticeship” for the sake of real, non-historical philosophy: “Far from books, without any means of erudite research work, I was thrown back to what actually should concern the philosopher, namely the question of one’s own being and the being of one’s sur-

rounding world. So I started to reflect on what it means for the theory of being, that there are organisms".<sup>7</sup> Jonas presents here a clearly anti-historicist and anti-hermeneutical view of philosophy: the philosopher's concern, "being", shows itself primarily not in books, but in non-historical existence, i.e. in organic life. Accordingly, his own work on the Gnostic literature does not really belong to his philosophy. As he also expressed it in his "Retrospective View": "I came back from the war with the decision to work out a philosophical program which would take me far afield from historical studies, from Late Antiquity, from Gnosticism and so on: namely the philosophical understanding of our organic Being, and not only ours, but of life in general".<sup>8</sup>

The philosophy of life would constitute a break with the historical study of Gnosticism, because neither the primary object of philosophy, organic life, nor philosophy itself are essentially historical. And so, in his retrospect of 1974 Jonas found himself in need of an "*apologia* for my life as a scholar", i.e. for his historical study of Gnosticism, and identified the "primary philosophical interest in the subject of Gnosticism" in a non-historical, rather typological "analogy between things gnostic and things modern".<sup>9</sup>

This self-narration has also been identified and presented by most prominent contemporary Jonas scholars. Christian Wiese, for instance, in his excellent afterword to the memoirs, distinguishes between the "research of Gnosticism" and the "philosophical work" of Jonas.<sup>10</sup> In this perspective, the earlier work on the Gnostic tradition was, as Jonas himself described it, an exercise of the Heidegger student Jonas in applying his master's existential analytics to "this alien religious-historical phenomenon of antiquity".<sup>11</sup> I equally doubt something like Gnostic-based counter-history was what Dietrich Böhler had in mind when, in his recent introduction to the new critical edition of Jonas' collected writings, he proposed "Against the Stream" as "a general critical motto" for the life, thought and work of Hans Jonas.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Böhler does indicate, following Leo Strauss' observation, the "revolutionary character of Gnosis", as told by Jonas, a revolutionary element that has had "a certain philosophical heritage".<sup>13</sup>

I know wish to show that the designation of this revolutionary element as constitutive heritage of Western philosophy is a central motif in Jonas' Gnosticism project from its inception.

### 3. Jonas' Gnostic Counter-History

#### 3.1. Jonas' Gnosticism Project

It would be inaccurate to call Jonas' work on Gnosticism his "early work", since his engagement on this subject, in various forms, continued for the most part of his academic career, for almost 50 years. This work started in 1925 or 1926 in a talk on *Gnosis* in the Gospel of John that Jonas delivered at Rudolf Bultmann's New Testament seminar in Marburg.<sup>14</sup> It developed to a doctoral dissertation on *The Concept of Gnosis*, which Jonas wrote under Heidegger's supervision and submitted in 1928.<sup>15</sup> The dissertation then led to a larger project, *Gnosticism*

and the *Spirit of Late Antiquity*, the first part of which, *The Mythological Gnosis*, was published in 1934<sup>16</sup>, and the second part, *From Mythology to Mystical Philosophy*, 20 years later, in 1954.<sup>17</sup> These books were both in German and published in Germany. In 1957 Jonas published the already mentioned *The Gnostic Religion*<sup>18</sup>, a shorter, partly reformulated English version of his work – to quote Jonas: without "the more difficult philosophical elaboration, with its too technical language".<sup>19</sup> In between and also after, he held lectures on Gnosticism, for example in 1938/39 in Jerusalem<sup>20</sup> and in 1967/1968 in the New School in New York<sup>21</sup>, and published on the subject up to as late as 1974<sup>22</sup>.

In what way could Jonas' Gnosticism project be said to constitute "counter-history"?

#### 3.2. Gnosticism as the Paradigmatic Foreign to Common Historiography

The first and most obvious fact in this respect is the historiographic status of the subject-matter, of Gnosticism: it is paradigmatically foreign to common historiography. The phenomenon called "Gnosticism" appears in Western history from the very beginning as an antagonist, a counter-figure. The main sources on Gnosticism from late antiquity have been, until late 19<sup>th</sup> century, almost exclusively anti-Gnostic texts, mostly polemics of early Church Fathers against Gnosticism. Newly discovered sources were literally dis-covered – namely excavated by archeologists. It is as if the very essence of Gnosticism has been to appear in order to disappear. As Jonas poetically describes it in the Introduction to the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the *Gnostic Religion*:

"Out of the beginning of our era there looms a pageant of mythical figures whose vast, superhuman contours might people the walls and ceiling of another Sistine Chapel. [...] [But their] tale has found no Michelangelo to retell it, no Dante and no Milton. The sterner discipline of biblical creed weathered the storm of those days, and both Old and New Testament were left to inform the mind and imagination of Western man. Those teachings which, in the feverish hour of transition, challenged, tempted, tried to twist the new faith are forgotten, their written record buried in the tomes of their refuters or in the sands of ancient lands".<sup>23</sup>

If this is the status of Gnosticism in the history of religion – it is all the more so in the history of philosophy. As Jonas observes in 1952, Gnosticism, "a freak even in its own time", was "never admitted to the respectable company of our philosophic tradition".<sup>24</sup> Gnosticism would be the paradigmatic "foreign" of the two major Western intellectual historiographies: religion and philosophy.

It should be noted that this encounter and convergence or re-convergence of the Western traditions, discourses and disciplines of religion and philosophy is a significant feature of Jonas' project, already on the existential level. It started in Bultmann's New Testament seminar and turned into a philosophy dissertation with Heidegger.<sup>25</sup> Note the significance of the fact that it was not the other way around: to become a doctor of theology in Germany, then and also today, one has to be a member of the church. This may open up a more general reflection on

the role of thinkers of Jewish descent in the modern re-connection of theology and philosophy.

In any case, this was an important aspect of Jonas' *Gnosis and the Spirit of Late Antiquity*, published as Volume 33 in the series of "Researches on Religion and Literature of the Old and New Testament". Later, writing in Canada his preface to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of 1954, Jonas will explain that "religion is an essential aspect of humanity, and [...] no study of philosophy is possible without somehow being joined with a study of religious phenomena".<sup>26</sup> However, he admits, due to the philosophical nature of the book, even in its own series it was "like an alien [Fremdling]": its method was alien to theologians and historians of religion, and the material was alien to philosophers, "on whose interest I counted more".<sup>27</sup>

In fact, the original work was not about the "Gnostic Religion", but on "Gnosticism and the Spirit (*Geist*) of Late Antiquity". In other words, from a Christian anathema, Jonas turned Gnosticism into an element of universal intellectual history, what is called in German "history of spirit" (*Geistesgeschichte*). More specifically, Jonas was interested precisely in the conceptual interrelation between *gnosis*, Greek for "knowledge", and, from the one hand, the Christian *pistis*, and, from the other hand, the ancient Greek *episteme* of "philosophy and science".<sup>28</sup> Here, in ancient *Gnosis*, he perceived a point of tangency between what for Moderns seems to be the distinct traditions of philosophy and religion: they converge in what seems to be foreign to both.

### 3.3. Gnosticism as the Hidden Oriental Principle of the West

This seeming foreignness to intellectual Western tradition is – and this is my second point – precisely the fundamental historiographic motif that Jonas calls into question. In his 1934 introduction he critically refers to earlier researchers, such as Bousset<sup>29</sup> and Gruppe<sup>30</sup>, as having identified in Gnosticism "everywhere products of the past, nowhere proper creation and new original impulse", with "a future value for the history of spirit".<sup>31</sup> In contrast, to Jonas, Gnosticism, this common "other" of Western religion and philosophy, which has so far been invisible and foreign, is to become the basic principle for Jonas' revolution of history, for his counter-history of the West.

The emergence of this history, its crucial, inaugural event, takes place in what Jonas calls "Late Antiquity". "Late Antiquity" is a threshold, a *krisis*, separating the antique from the non-antique, from the new. It is the beginning of a new era. In Late Antiquity, says Jonas, a new world is born – these are the centuries of the *Zeitenwende*, the change of times.<sup>32</sup> What new era begins in late antiquity? What does Jonas refer to? It seems that this new era is none but *our* era, the era of the West, CE: the "common era", the "current era". It is in "late antiquity" that we usually locate our year zero. According to this common count, the beginning of the current era is the birth of Christ; it is therefore, so goes this historiography, the "Christian era".

It is precisely in these terms that Rudolf Bultmann understood the meaning of Jonas' first book on Gnosticism. In his foreword to the book he located Gnosticism at the "turn from the antique understanding of the world

to Christianity".<sup>33</sup> Bultmann recognized the historiographic novelty of Jonas' narrative of late antiquity, but he inscribed it within the general framework of post-antiquity as the Christian Era. For Bultmann, Jonas' contribution lied in showing the importance of Gnosticism not just for "individual phenomena of the New Testament and the old history of the Church", but for "the entire understanding of world and salvation in Christianity".

Jonas' historiographic operation, however, so I submit, is more radical than that. He takes a further step back, and points at *several* spiritual phenomena that appear in the Hellenistic world around the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, before our current era: (1) Hellenized Judaism; (2) Babylonian astrology and magic; (3) the mystery cults and religions; (4) Christianity; (5) the Gnostic systems; (6) transcendental, neo-platonic philosophy.<sup>34</sup> The "Spirit of Late Antiquity" is a syncretism, a mix of these elements. But what is the center, what is, Jonas asks, "the organizing force in the syncretistic matter", what was "the directing principle, and what the direction", what is "the true agent" of this beginning of our history?<sup>35</sup> According to Jonas, the answer is not Christianity, but Gnosticism:

"It appears everywhere in the movements coming from the East, and most conspicuously in that group of spiritual movements which are comprised under the name 'gnostic'. We can therefore take the latter as the most radical and uncompromising representatives of a new spirit, and may consequently call the *general principle*, which in less unequivocal representations extends beyond the area of gnostic literature proper, by way of analogy the 'gnostic principle'".<sup>36</sup>

What Jonas suggests here is that the fundamental spiritual principle that defines our era, our history, is not Christian, but Gnostic. That is the first element of his counter-history.

The second element concerns the *origin* of the Gnostic principle. As Jonas points out, the traditional view, which considered Gnosticism as a Christian heresy, identified it primarily as Greek, namely as originating in the Greek intellectual tradition of philosophy and science. Exemplary is Adolf von Harnack's position, who defined Gnosticism as the "acute *Verweltlichung*, i.e. becoming-worldly, secular, or Hellenisation of Christianity".<sup>37</sup> Now, one of the most significant motifs in Jonas' 1934 book, following the then new directions in Gnostic studies, was the decisive shift from the Greek origin of Gnosticism to what Jonas calls "the East", a geo-ideo-logical designation for the various phenomena mentioned earlier. Interestingly, Jonas' points out how the new "oriental" paradigm of Gnostic research in fact brings together all the different and so far disparate fields of antiquity studies, "beyond the coincidental fragmentation according to linguistic, geographical or religious-dogmatic perspectives in unrelated individual fields of material, and their division in special disciplines, towards a unified observation".<sup>38</sup> Oriental Gnosticism emerges, so to speak, as a secret unifying principle both in history and in the historical studies.

In this, Jonas declares a historiographic break with the "exclusive status of Greekness"<sup>39</sup> and the humanistic tradition. In other words, by laying the Gnostic principle at

the foundation of Western history, Jonas identifies its core as being something deeply *foreign* to what he calls the “humanistic intellectual history, including the history of philosophy”.<sup>40</sup> Gnosticism would be the hidden Eastern principle of the West.

### 3.4. The Gnostic Principle

This brings us to the heart of the matter – the Gnostic principle itself. What is the Gnostic principle and in what way does it counter the Greek-humanistic principle?

This question touches the heart of my reflection here – and of Jonas’ thesis. In order to answer it in a way that moves forward my argument, I will proceed in two phases. I will first provide an initial, more immediate answer, which will conclude this section. On the meaning of this initial answer I will then provide, in the next section, a more complex reflection.

Jonas characterizes the countering effect of the Gnostic intellectual movement as the “*Umwertung antiker Werte*”<sup>41</sup>, the “revaluation of antique values”. It is noteworthy (and this is a first hint to a more fundamental point I will make shortly), that this description, even as it challenges the Greco-centric narrative of Western historiography, remains itself within the Greco-centric perspective. Eastern Gnosticism is characterized essentially as non-Greek, as “foreign” to Greekness, as a shift or perversion of Greek values. Topologically, Jonas can only describe Gnosticism as “the eschatological world-mood of the time, which emerges from the East”<sup>42</sup>, because his own narration is situated in the West.

What does this “revaluation” consist in?

On the first, immediate level, we are referred to the “primal content” (*Urgehalt*) that Jonas provides for the Gnostic movement, a concise formulation of its ideal core. It is precisely to showing how this primal content is in fact the ideal core of the foundational Gnostic texts that the greatest part of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* is dedicated. This ideal core of Gnosticism, according to Jonas, is: “anti-cosmic eschatological dualism”.<sup>43</sup> This formulation Jonas refers to an even deeper, more concise “driving motive”, which he expresses in one German word: *Entweltlichungstendenz* (ibid.), i.e. a tendency of taking distance from the world. The fundamental “anti-cosmic” tendency implies an opposition between the world, as a negative principle, element or *topos*, and a fundamentally different, outer-worldly principle, the positive one. Anti-cosmism implies dualism. Since man is in the world, i.e. in the midst of negativity, anti-cosmism also means a movement of departure, of liberation from the negative, the evil, directed towards the positive and good – an “eschatological” movement of redemption. It is easy to see how this characterization is essentially *negative*, designating a movement of resistance or “distance-taking” with respect to a more primal attitude – a *pro-world* attitude, which Jonas identifies with the Greek. In its content too, Gnosticism is counter-Greekness.

What is the counter-historiographical meaning of this Gnostic principle? In other words, how does the discovery of this principle in late antiquity, as the constitutive anti-cosmic, anti-Greek, oriental principle of the Common Era, affect Jonas’ history of the West? Where and how does the hidden Gnosticism of the West manifest itself?

It is at this point, I think, that Heidegger enters the story.

## 4. The Story of Jonas and Heidegger

### 4.1. Gnostic Physics

The figure of Heidegger is omnipresent in Jonas’ work on Gnosticism. Not only is Heidegger, together with Bultmann, said by Jonas to be his most important teacher and influence in this project<sup>44</sup>, but in his 1934 book Jonas takes Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* as the “systematic foundation” for his own interpretation of the Gnostic sources.<sup>45</sup> It is in the Heideggerian categories of the *Daseinanalyse* that Jonas presents Gnosis as the Gnostic *Dasein*, the Gnostic existence. This procedure is presented in the book as purely methodological: Heidegger’s “philosophy of existence”, as Jonas refers to it, simply provided a useful set of basic categories in which to conceptualize human existence in general, and thus also the specific Gnostic one. It is the very notion that human existence in general *can* be, within a legitimate academic project, conceptualized by a limited set of categories, which provided Jonas his innovation vis-à-vis the purely historical-philological Gnostic studies, namely the attribution of the entire Gnostic literature to one basic existential posture – *Entweltlichungstendenz*.

Nonetheless, this professedly methodological use has at least one important exception. This exception is found in one of the rare places in the 1934 book where Jonas concretely tries to point at the Gnostic principle at work in the heart of Western intellectual tradition, i.e. concretely engages in counter-historiography of the West. This attempt is found in a long and rich footnote, so to speak the “historiographic footnote”, which also contains valuable statements concerning the roles of Judaism and Christianity in the hidden Gnostic history.<sup>46</sup> Jonas himself will remember well this footnote and refer to it ones again at a historiographically critical point of his “Phenomenology of Life”.<sup>47</sup>

Gnosticism, Jonas explains in this footnote, by alienating man and God from the world, operates (through the historical mediation of Christianity) “the *Entgöttlichung* [i.e. de-divinization, de-sacralization] of visible objectivity, thereby flattening it to the level of things that are indifferently present-at-hand [*vorhanden*], merely worldly”. This leads in “the spirit of later periods” – “one may well hazard the claim” – to “the fundamental possibility of a purely ‘physicalistic’ observation of nature”.<sup>48</sup>

It is easy to recognize here a Heideggerian critique of the mathematical-physicalistic nature of Western, particularly modern, post-Cartesian thought and science, as Heidegger presented, for example, in *Being and Time*:

“The classical example for the historical development of a science and even for its ontological genesis, is the rise of mathematical physics. What is decisive for its development...lies in *the way in which nature itself is mathematically projected*. This projection discovers primarily things that are constantly present-at-hand [*ein ständig Vorhandenes*] (matter) and opens the horizon for the guiding perspective on its constitutive moments, which are quantitatively determinable (movement, force, location and time).”<sup>49</sup> [emphases in the original]

In 1934, so it seems, Jonas did not only analyze the historical phenomenon of Gnosticism in Heidegger's philosophical terms, but identified the Gnostic principle as the deep source that has been generating the very fundamental attitude to the world that was the object of Heidegger's critique of modernity, namely the "purely" or "mathematical" physicalist ontology.

#### 4.2. Gnostic Existentialism

20 years, one World War later, Jonas revised his position. In his aforementioned 1952 essay on "Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism"<sup>50</sup>, the Gnostic principle is taken as a key for understanding the spirit of modernity, of which the physicalism of modern natural science is now understood as being only one side of the coin. The other side of modern Gnosticism is "man's loneliness in the physical universe of modern cosmology".<sup>51</sup> The modern human condition is that of a "foreigner in the world".<sup>52</sup> The counterpart of modern natural science is therefore a modern philosophy that is profoundly world-negating, profoundly, says Jonas, "nihilist". The hidden Gnosticism in modernity is nihilism, and modern nihilism, Jonas observes, has reached its most accomplished manifestation in existentialism, whose "most profound and still most important manifestos" is Heidegger's *Being and Time*.<sup>53</sup>

Having used Heidegger's categories for conceptualizing late-antique Gnosticism, Jonas now turns in the opposite direction and takes the Gnostic categories for interpreting Heidegger, who now becomes the embodiment of modern Gnosticism. As Jonas describes it: "the hermeneutic functions become reversed and reciprocal – lock turns into key, and key into lock: the 'existentialist' reading of Gnosticism, so well vindicated by its hermeneutic success, invites as its natural complement the trial of a 'gnostic' reading of Existentialism".<sup>54</sup> This reversal is not just a methodological *Kehre*, but a reevaluation. 20 years and one World War later, Jonas, as many others, turns from a student into a critic of Heidegger.

#### 4.3. Gnostic History and "Seinsgeschichte"

There is, however, another important side of Heidegger's thought, which is highly or even primarily relevant for appreciating the counter-historiographical aspect of Jonas' notion of Gnosticism. In his discussions of Heidegger both before and after the war, subject to one famous exception that I will discuss below, Jonas refers exclusively to Heidegger of *Being and Time*, that Jonas, as many others, understands as the "existentialist" Heidegger.<sup>55</sup> If this designation is at all appropriate for Heidegger's early philosophy (Heidegger himself denied it<sup>56</sup>), his later writings take a different direction, what is commonly referred to in the Heidegger's reception as the "*Kehre*", the turn.<sup>57</sup> One of the first shapes that Heidegger's post-turn philosophy takes, from the early 1930s, i.e. during the exact time that Jonas was writing the first volume of *Gnosticism and the Spirit of Late Antiquity*, is that of the *Seinsgeschichte*, which can be translated as "the History of Being". This is a very inadequate translation, but it does convey the important point for me now,

namely of a philosophical thought that is essentially engaged in historiography.

Although Jonas, writing in the early 1930s, is aware of Heidegger's concept of *Seinsgeschichte*<sup>58</sup>, nowhere, to my knowledge, does he reflect on the relation between the Heideggerian historical-hermeneutical project and his own work on Gnosticism. I would like to suggest a rather close relation. Without going here into the specifics of Heidegger's onto-historical project<sup>59</sup>, I submit that both this project and Jonas' Gnosticism project set out, during the same years, to perform a reevaluation of Western intellectual history, both are in this sense counter-histories. It seems to me that a very general comparison between the basic features of the two projects could shed more light on the exact meaning and profound ambivalence of Jonas' Gnostic history of the West.

The two counter-narratives, the Heideggerian and the Jonasian, have one crucial point in common: both take Athens, i.e. classic Greek antiquity, as the ultimate reference point for Western history. The two narratives, however, are diametrically opposed in their basic appreciation of the role of the Greek beginning in this history, and of this history in general, *as history*. For Jonas, as I showed above, the hidden "foreign" element exposed by him in Western history, *Gnosticism*, was an Eastern disruption and negation of the original, positive Greek *cosmos*. In contrast, for Heidegger, it is Athenian philosophy itself that constitutes the metaphysical disruption in the original event of being – the beginning of *Seinsverlassenheit*, the "abandonment of being", of *Seinsvergessenheit*, the "forgetfulness of being".<sup>60</sup> Simply said, the Greeks begin the history of being by an act of forgetfulness of being, by forgetting being, i.e. the history of being begins in Greece by forgetting itself as such, *as a history of being*. Heidegger's first counter-measure against this forgetfulness is precisely the *Seinsgeschichte*.

This is not at all Jonas' project. His self-narration, as I demonstrated above, is outspokenly anti-historicist: a development from the historical study of Gnosticism to the real philosophical study of organic life. In the one famous exceptional occasion, where Jonas does refer to the later Heidegger, namely in his strongly critical 1964 speech on "Heidegger and Theology", he criticizes, in the name of freedom of thought, the "fateful nature of thought" in Heidegger. This fatefulness of thought lies, thus Jonas' reading of Heidegger, in its "dependence upon what is sent to it, and the sending issues from the history of being".<sup>61</sup> In Jonas' own counter-reading of Western thought, the forgetfulness of history is most definitely *not* what has gone amiss through the Gnostic disruption of Greekness.

On the contrary, I suggest that to a very important extent, in Jonas' conception, historical thinking itself is an expression of the Gnostic principle. As already said, Gnosticism for Jonas is the embodiment of the "new". It introduces a new era – ends antiquity. In fact, it not only ends antiquity, it generates antiquity: "antiquity", the ancient, old time, is only produced through the emergence of the new time, the new, post-antiquity era. The Gnostic "new" breaks the Greek continuity of time. This break in the continuity of time, generating old and new, is precisely what generates something like "history".

It should be well noted that this is not just the relative effect of the emergence of Gnosticism, but it constitutes

the essence of Gnosticism. According to Jonas, in contrast to the ancient spirit of human harmony with the given *cosmos*, the given natural, sociological, political, moral order of the world, late-antiquity *Gnosis* is the exact negation of this givenness, namely the fundamental human foreignness to the given world, to "this" world. Gnosis is not at all, as Harnack thought "worldly", but the exact opposite principle of being *weltfremd*, foreign to the world, the world as it is, as it is present-at-hand (*vorhanden*).

In fact, what is for Jonas a seminal Gnostic text, "the programmatic formulation of Gnosticism"<sup>62</sup>, a passage from Clemens of Alexandria's notes on the teachings of the Valentinian Gnostic teacher Theodotus, which Jonas quotes in all his works on Gnosticism, can be read as a possible definition of the very philosophical vocation of historical knowledge:

"[What makes us free] is the knowledge [of] 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" [Clemens Alex., *Exc. ex Theod.* 78, 2].<sup>63</sup>

I leave here open the question about the precise relations between Gnosticism and historicism in themselves.<sup>64</sup> It seems to me that in Jonas' conception they have a lot in common. Jonas' post- and anti-Gnostic project is not formulated as proceeding from cosmology to history, but from history to cosmology. I wonder if this project could not be described as countering history itself, as returning from the oriental *mythos* to Athenian *physis*. Jonas' central criticism against Heidegger is that "[n]o philosophy has ever been less concerned about nature".<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the conclusion of Jonas' years of Gnosis and Heidegger seems to be a decisive return to pre-Gnostic Greek philosophy of man's harmony with nature, which would become a central motif in Jonas' later work.

## 5. Epilogue: Counter-History of Life

The result of the aforesaid is somewhat paradoxical. It indicates in Jonas' oeuvre a critical historiography that accuses Western thought of a Gnostic tendency to historicism. In other words, the aforesaid suggests in Jonas a counter-history, which counters the very principle of historicity, an anti-historical counter-history. This anti-historicity, I think, is more radical than Benjamin's resistance to the idea of history as "the image of progress of human kind in history", to which also Heidegger's *Seinsgeschichte* could subscribe. Both Benjamin and Heidegger contest a common notion of history in order to argue for a different notion, whereas Jonas appears to counter the very dimension of history as essential for thought. This is what makes his historiography paradoxical, which could explain why it is excluded from his own and accordingly common account of his work.

To conclude, I would like to quickly suggest that awareness to the historiographical elements in Jonas' earlier work, with its paradoxical or ambivalent nature, may also lead to a new sensibility in reading his later work. Primarily, it will complicate the narrative about the alleged shift from the "historical study" of Gnosticism to

the "philosophical inquiry" of life. In this framework, it will be necessary to reflect on the precise nature of the conceptual struggle, the intellectual drama at work in "The Phenomenon of Life".

One struggle is that of life itself, emerging in the primitive form of vegetal metabolism and climbing up the scale of freedom, liberating itself to ultimately achieve the summit of human thought, action and knowledge. Next to this organic drama, however, Jonas' text traces another plot, no less dramatic, which concerns not life itself, but precisely the *phenomenon* of life, namely the image or idea of life. There would be a life struggle that takes place in the dimension of knowledge and thought of life, a dimension that is not organic, but historical. There would be thus a struggle of life itself against the history of the idea of life, a history of alienation, anti-cosmism and dualism, as Jonas tells it, which has been the historical spirit of science itself, since around late antiquity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, „Über den Begriff der Geschichte“ (1940), in *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.2, hg. v. R. Tiedemann und H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1991 (1974), 691-707. The translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Amos Funkenstein „History, Counterhistory, and Narrative“, in: Saul Friedländer (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Published as the "Preface to the Third Edition" of *The Gnostic Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1991, xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. 1. Die mythologische Gnosis: mit einer Einleitung zur Geschichte und Methodologie der Forschung*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988 (1st ed. 1934; 2nd ed. 1964), p. viii.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Jonas, *Erinnerungen*, Nach Gesprächen mit Rachel Salamander, Vorwort von Rachel Salamander, Geleitwort von Lore Jonas, Herausgegeben und mit einem Nachwort versehen von Christian Wiese, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2003, S. 117. The translations are mine.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>8</sup> *The Gnostic Religion*, xxvi.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>12</sup> Dietrich Böhler, „Einführung in die Kritische Gesamtausgabe“, in: *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Hans Jonas*, Band I/1, hg. von Horst Gronke, Freiburg/Berlin/Wien, 2010, XVII-LXIV, p. XVII.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, XXXVIII, where Böhler quotes Jonas telling how Strauss, having read his book on Gnosticism, wrote to Jonas that "based on his personal acquaintance with me, he never realized that I was actually a hidden revolutionary" (see *Erinnerungen*, 262).

<sup>14</sup> *The Gnostic Religion*, xvi.

<sup>15</sup> Hans Jonas, *Der Begriff der Gnosis*, Marburg, Univ., Diss., 1928, Teildruck, Göttingen: Hubert 1930. This publication only contains a part of the dissertation. Further parts of the dissertation, partly handwritten and partly typewritten, is found in the Hans Jonas Archive in Konstanz, as HJ-2-17-54 and HJ-13-30-1.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. 1. Die mythologische Gnosis: mit einer Einleitung zur Geschichte und Methodologie der Forschung*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934 (hereinafter, „GSG 1“).

<sup>17</sup> Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. 2.1. Von der Mythologie zur mystischen Philosophie*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954.

<sup>18</sup> See above.

<sup>19</sup> *The Gnostic Religion*, xxxv.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Jonas Archive, HJ-13-18 ("The Jerusalem Lectures").

<sup>21</sup> Hans Jonas Archive, HJ-20-12, HJ-1-17-15 and HJ-1-17-17.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance, Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1974.

<sup>23</sup> *The Gnostic Religion*, xxxi.

<sup>24</sup> Jonas, “Gnosticism, Existentialism, Nihilism”, first published as “Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism”, *Social Research* 19 (1952), reprinted in and quoted here from *The Gnostic Religion*, 320-341, p. 320.

<sup>25</sup> “Heidegger talked to me about it and said, ‘If you want to, I am willing to accept a dissertation in philosophy on that topic or something connected with it.’”, *The Gnostic Religion*, xvii.

<sup>26</sup> GSG 1, xiv.

<sup>27</sup> GSG 1, viii-ix.

<sup>28</sup> GSG 1, xviii.

<sup>29</sup> Wilhelm Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1907.

<sup>30</sup> Probably Otto Gruppe, *Die griechischen Culte und Mythen in ihren Beziehungen zu den orientalischen Religionen*, Leipzig 1887.

<sup>31</sup> GSG 1, 23-24.

<sup>32</sup> GSG 1, 74.

<sup>33</sup> GSG 1, vi.

<sup>34</sup> GSG1, 25; The Jerusalem Lectures, 19.

<sup>35</sup> *The Gnostic Religion*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 1. Band, Akademische Verlagsbuchhandlung von J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Freiburg i. B. 1888, 190.

<sup>38</sup> GSG, 4.

<sup>39</sup> GSG, 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> GSG 1, 146.

<sup>42</sup> GSG 1, 5.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *The Gnostic Religion*, xiv.

<sup>45</sup> GSG, 90-91.

<sup>46</sup> GSG, 176-7, n. 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Organismus und Freiheit*, KGA Jonas I/1, p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> GSG, 176-7, n. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1967 (1927<sup>1</sup>), 362. The translation is based on John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson’s translation, *Being and Time*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1962, p. 413-414, with my modifications.

<sup>50</sup> *The Gnostic Religion*, pp. 320-341.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>55</sup> In contrast to “the later Heidegger who is certainly no ‘Existentialist’”, *ibid.*, 337, note 13.

<sup>56</sup> See his marginalia to his copy of *Being and Time*, where, with respect to the statement that the question of existence aims at “the analysis of what constitutes existence” (p. 12), he write: “so no existential philosophy [Existenzphilosophie]” (*Sein und Zeit*, p. 440). See also Martin Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus* (1946), GA 9, 313-365.

<sup>57</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Ein Vorwort. Brief an Pater William J. Richardson* (1962), GA 11, 143-152.

<sup>58</sup> He speaks of a “*seinsgeschichtliche Prozess*”, GSG 1, p. 187, note 1.

<sup>59</sup> For a recent presentation, see for instance Tobias Keiling, *Seinsgeschichte und phänomenologischer Realismus. Eine Interpretation und Kritik der Spätphilosophie Heideggers*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2015; see also Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning*, New York: Fordham, 2003, pp. 189-252.

<sup>60</sup> See for instance Martin Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*, GA 9, 203-238.

<sup>61</sup> Hans Jonas, “Heidegger and Theology”, *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Dec. 1964), 207-233, pp. 215-6.

<sup>62</sup> GSG 1, 108.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted by Jonas in GSG1, *ibid.*; The Jerusalem Lectures, 39; “Gnosticism, Existentialism, Nihilism”, in *The Gnostic Religion*, 334; *The Gnostic Religion*, 45.

<sup>64</sup> There seems to be at least one thinker, a contemporary of pre-WWII Jonas, Franz Rosenzweig, for whom history might have been the answer to Gnosticism, see Benjamin Pollock, *Franz Rosenzweig's Conversions: World Denial and World Redemption*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> “Gnosticism, Existentialism, Nihilism”, 337. It should be noted that this critique stands in a *prima facie* contradiction to Jonas’ criticism of Heidegger in the name of Christian theology: “It must be clearly and unambiguously understood that the ‘being’ of Heidegger is, with the ‘ontological difference’, *inside* the bracket with which theology must bracket in the totality of the created world. The being whose fate Heidegger ponders is the quintessence of this world, it is *saeculum*. Against this, theology should guard the radical transcendence of its God, whose

voice comes not out of being but breaks into the kingdom of being from without”, in “Heidegger and Theology”, p. 219. I would suggest that the critique of inner-worldliness and the critique of anti-naturalism merge into a critique of historicism.