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The Responsibility of Thinking in Dark Times

Hannah Arendt versus Hans Jonas

Lawrence Vogel

1. Introduction

Hannah Arendt and Hans Jonas remained friends from their student years in Germany under the spell of Heidegger, through their decade as sometimes team-teaching colleagues at The New School, until her death in 1975. But there's scant public record of their reactions to each other's work. It's tempting to suppose that this is because they have incommensurable philosophical interests. Arendt often denies she's a philosopher, preferring the term "political thinker." Her focus on the human condition, and more specifically politics, follows from her attempt to understand totalitarianism. Jonas makes no bones about being a philosopher. He takes living nature, and ultimately being as such, as his object of concern, which draws him toward bioethical issues, given the threats posed to the life-world and human nature by recent technology.

At a general level Arendt and Jonas share the view that modernity opens up a crisis for thought, owing to unprecedented powers that make it difficult for us to establish limits when everything seems possible. Given that they explore different aspects of the evil that can come from our novel powers of action, maybe we should regard their analyses as a division of labor: Arendt deals with *political* evil, Jonas with *technological* evil. Perhaps, even, Jonas helps us put Arendt's political thought in a wider cosmological and theological frame.

Such a happy synthesis, however, would smooth over how the fundamental premises of their thought put them at loggerheads. Richard Wolin's recent treatment of Arendt and Jonas as two of "Heidegger's children" places them side by side, next to Karl Löwith and Herbert Marcuse, but doesn't imagine a dialogue between them.¹ Because

Arendt and Jonas are treated as “two of a kind,” there’s little hint of the philosophical tension in their relationship and in their different critiques of Heidegger. But the prospects for such a dialogue look grim given Christian Wiese’s verdict in his 2007 intellectual biography of Jonas. Because our understanding of their relationship “is almost completely shaped by Jonas’ perspective,” Wiese concludes, speculations about how Arendt would have assessed his philosophy are “certainly inappropriate.”² I shall argue that there *are* in fact glimmerings of Arendt’s assessment in the published record, and they’re consistent with what we might expect her to say, based on the rest of her writings.

A transcript of an exchange between Arendt and Jonas at a 1972 conference in Toronto honoring Arendt’s work provides an indispensable clue,³ for it suggests how each would critique the other’s still-germinating last testament: Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind* and Jonas’ *The Imperative of Responsibility*. Subsequently, Arendt makes brief mention of Jonas in *The Life of the Mind*, and Jonas hints at an appraisal of her work in a 1977 retrospective in the journal *Social Research*.⁴ I shall draw on these “glimmerings” to make my case that we *can* appropriately imagine a full-fledged dialogue between them.

This is more than just a chapter in intellectual history, for what’s at stake in their philosophically charged friendship is the plight of poor, old metaphysics in our time. The debate will turn on whether Arendt’s agreement with Heidegger that we stand at “the end of metaphysics” successfully discredits Jonas’ unabashedly metaphysical project: his ontological grounding of an imperative of responsibility for the future of humanity. As philosophers, we must ask, does Arendt’s claim that we today must think “without banisters” prove that Jonas’ metaphysical approach is impossible—or, even if possible, implausible—and, at any rate, unnecessary to answer the problem of nihilism, a problem that both Arendt and Jonas aim to address?

2. Arendt on “Thinking without Banisters” after “The End of Metaphysics”

First we turn to Arendt, whose attempt “to dismantle metaphysics” must be seen against the background of Kant’s critical project. Kant famously purports “deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.”⁵ He relies on a basic distinction between the intellect (*Verstand*), oriented to the phenomenal world, and reason (*Vernunft*), which is propelled by a need to go beyond the bounds of empirical evidence. Though metaphysics can never become a science, Kant entitles us to appeal to “ideas of reason”—God, freedom and immortality—in order to make sense of our lives as practical, moral agents. We may act as if these

ideas refer to things-in-themselves in the noumenal or supersensible world. Kant's two-world theory is a "moral theodicy" because, although our freedom leaves the moral destiny of this world uncertain and we should not act dutifully for the sake of rewards, faith in God and the immortality of the soul promise that virtue and happiness coincide in the big picture.

The brunt of Kant's project is to raise the question, as Susan Neiman puts it, "Where everything that can be known has been proven, what becomes of all the rest"—that is, what becomes of the matters that invite us to think about the meaning of things as a whole?⁶ On Arendt's view, Kant should have said he had shown the limits of knowledge not to make room for faith, but rather to open up a space for "thinking": an activity animated by "the urge for meaning." The basic fallacy "taking precedence over all specific metaphysical fallacies," according to Arendt, "is to interpret meaning on the model of *truth*," for thinking "leaves nothing so tangible behind, and the need to think can therefore never be stilled by the insights of 'wise men'."⁷ And so her final verdict on Kant:

Although he insisted on the inability of reason to arrive at knowledge, especially with respect to God, Freedom and Immortality—to him the highest objects of thought—he could not part altogether with the conviction that the final aim of thinking, as of knowledge, is *truth* and *cognition*. . . . He never became fully aware of having liberated reason and thinking, of having justified this faculty and its activity even though they could not boast of any "positive" results.⁸

Thinking, according to Arendt, is primarily negative; it destroys unexamined opinions and dissolves established criteria. Withdrawn from the world, like Penelope spinning her web, the process undoes each night what seemed conclusive the day before.

But this leaves Arendt with a dilemma. For she seems to hope for results from thinking when she explains how she became preoccupied with the *vita contemplativa* in the first place. After her notorious book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which she traces the evil of the Nazi bureaucrat to his "banality" or "thoughtlessness," she's haunted by the question, if not-thinking can be the root of such evil, might thinking be an antidote to it? But, she worries, how can thinking help people resist evil if the perpetual quest for "meaning" yields "no positive results or specific content?"⁹

Metaphysics once reassured us that reason could provide "banisters" in "God or Being or the First Principles and Causes (**archai**) [**Greek**] or the Ideas": a suprasensory foundation "[that] is more real, truthful and meaningful than what appears."¹⁰ Arendt concedes that it is under-

standable for defenders of metaphysics to warn of the specter of nihilism, for once the supersensible realm is discarded, “the whole frame of reference in which our thinking was accustomed to orient itself breaks down” and “nothing seems to make sense any more.” Although questions of “meaning” aren’t “meaningless,” as positivists would insist, “the way [these questions] were framed and answered [throughout the history of two-world metaphysics] has,” Arendt tells us, following Nietzsche and Heidegger, “*lost plausibility*.”¹¹ Furthermore, “nihilism” is “a danger inherent in the thinking activity itself,” for, as Arendt witnessed firsthand in Germany, the relentlessly dissolving quest for meaning “can at any moment turn against itself, produce a reversal of the old values, and declare these contraries to be ‘new values’.”¹²

Just when Arendt seems to have brought our western philosophical tradition to the brink of shipwreck, she returns to its origin in Socrates in order to argue that the activity of thinking is of such a nature as to condition us against evil—not because it produces stable results or fixed rules, but because of two effects it has on the thinker. First, it yields conscience as “a moral side-effect.”¹³ I appear to others as one, Arendt notes, but for myself I am a “two-in-one” *if* I engage in a dialogue with myself. And thinking, moved by a desire for integrity or harmony with oneself, requires that the “two-in-one” be friends. It’s better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, Arendt claims, because you can’t befriend and live together with an evildoer, though you can remain friends with a victim. Arendt concludes that conscience is a “byproduct” of thinking. Those who (like Socrates) fear self-contradiction or who (like Kant) fear self-contempt are capable of resisting socially sanctioned evil, Arendt asserts, “neither because they possess a better set of values nor because old standards were firmly implanted in their minds and hearts, but because, disposed to think about what they are doing, they find themselves unable to live with themselves as murderers.”¹⁴

The second side-effect of thinking is that it liberates the political faculty of “*judgment*”: an “enlarged mentality” by which one imagines the world from the plurality of others’ perspectives and develops an opinion—meant to be persuasive not coercive—about what’s right or wrong, beautiful or ugly. Judging brings thinking out of hiding, “always concerns particulars and what is close at hand,” and “makes thinking manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think.”¹⁵

The practical implication of Arendt’s view is that the Eichmanns of the world are guilty of *negligence* for their failure to think, for thinking is not the special province of intellectuals, much less professional philosophers.

Thinking in its noncognitive, nonspecialized sense as a natural need of human life, the actualization of the difference given in consciousness, is not a prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty of everybody; by the same token, the inability to think is not the “prerogative” of those many who lack brain-power, but the ever-present possibility for everybody—to shun that intercourse with oneself whose possibility and importance Socrates first discovered.¹⁶

Arendt claims that the standard excuse—“I was just a cog in the machine”—fails to pass muster because it makes no sense in the courtroom where “a person is on trial, not a system or an ‘ism’.” The relevant question to a defendant like Eichmann is, “Why did you let yourself become and continue to be a cog, a nobody?”—which means, “Why didn’t you stop and *think* and seek to become a person with integrity?”¹⁷

Even after the end of theodicy, a longing for “poetic justice” persists in the idea that, although evil inflicts “useless suffering,” the wicked at least get their comeuppance because they are saddled with a tormented psyche. Arendt denies us even this consolation when she claims that the greatest evils of the twentieth century may well have left the perpetrators without a second thought. Yet she, too, seems ultimately reassured by two ideas: (1) that thinking, as “an ever-present faculty of everybody,” justifies our holding such evildoers responsible for their negligence; and (2) that the life of the mind, even without recourse to metaphysical first principles or fixed moral rules, can be counted upon to generate conscientious resistance to limitless, extreme evil. Even under the circumstance of “total moral collapse,” where “every legal act is immoral and every moral act a crime,”¹⁸ there remains something within our nature that we can rely on, namely the call of conscience, awakened by the activity of “thinking without banisters,” empowering one, at the very least, to resist the tide of socially sanctioned murder.

3. The Arendt/Jonas Exchange in Toronto, 1972

The arguments of *The Life of the Mind* are already “in the air” in Arendt’s seminars and her seminal 1971 essay, “Thinking and Moral Considerations.” At a 1972 symposium in Toronto, Jonas sees the writing on the wall and challenges Arendt’s leading idea that we today must “think without banisters” and that we don’t need more positive results or specific content to overcome nihilism.

The symposium takes place at the peak of disenchantment with the war in Vietnam. Arendt begins by addressing a charge leveled by the Canadian political theorist Christian Bay: that her indirect link between theory and practice, or thinking and action, shows a lack of seriousness about the obligation of political theorists to educate citizens

to solve urgent problems. Arendt replies that she worries more about professional philosophers who rush into passionate engagements that foreclose the process of thinking. It's enough that in extreme situations—when most go along with the crowd—the habit of thinking induces resistance and shows “who's really willing to stick his neck out.” But educators who preach to their students—telling them how to think and what to do—treat them “like they're in a nursery,”¹⁹ Arendt states, and this is a poor model for persuasion among equals in the political realm. Ideologues are more concerned about the purity of their souls than the stability and order of the world they purport to improve.

At this point Jonas intervenes and asks Arendt: “What does it take to care for the stability and good order of this world?”²⁰ The core question of political philosophy—What is a fitting home for humanity?—can be decided, Jonas tells us, only if we form some idea of what “*man*” is or ought to be: an idea that requires a “*truth* about man” that can validate our judgments about what we ought and ought not to do, especially regarding technological enterprises that are “putting their stamp on the total dispensation of things.”

As political action was understood until the twentieth century, Jonas concedes, the condition of the commonwealth didn't have to be decided by ultimate standards; we could do with “penultimates.” But, given the extreme danger that technology poses to the future of humanity, Jonas claims, we can't afford to declare metaphysics bankrupt and depend only on “shareable judgments,” for “we can share judgments to our perdition with many, but we must make an appeal beyond that sphere.”²¹

Arendt's post-metaphysical thinking, Jonas concludes, is too flimsy to respond to the crisis that Arendt herself describes in her earlier work, *The Human Condition*, under the rubric of “earth-alienation.”²² All she can say is that judgments about the limits of technology are political, not scientific, and call for fair-minded opinions rendered from the perspective of “an enlarged mentality.” But this offers no solid basis for distinguishing between valid and invalid judgments. And, as we fiddle, Rome burns. Jonas reminds us that Kant doesn't simply describe, as does Arendt, the *experience* of judging, but finds judging to be guided by “*the concept of the good*.” The idea of the supreme good may escape definition, Jonas admits, but it can't be entirely empty and it's related to our idea of the human essence. Therefore, Jonas concludes, against Heidegger and Arendt alike, metaphysics must be invoked to give us “*a final directive*.”²³

Just as Arendt's remarks in Toronto reveal the line of thinking she will spell out more fully in *The Life of the Mind*, so Jonas' rejoinder anticipates his emerging metaphysics, which will only come to fruition

with the 1979 publication of *The Imperative of Responsibility*.²⁴ But their main areas of disagreement are already on the table. For Jonas, a robust response to the ethical challenge posed by technology demands a metaphysics that includes a truth about man, an idea of the supreme good, and a final directive. Though Arendt had died by the time Jonas completed the book that would transform her friend from an ivory tower “professional thinker” into an internationally renowned public intellectual, we shall see that her responses to Jonas at the Toronto symposium tip her hand regarding how she *would* have reacted to his most important work. First, however, we need an overview of how Jonas carries out his task.

4. Jonas’ Ontological Grounding of an Imperative of Responsibility

The root of modern nihilism, according to Jonas, is mind/matter dualism: “the spiritual denudation of [the concept of nature] at the hands of physical science”²⁵ since the Copernican revolution. No longer believing that humanity belongs to a sacred order of creation or “an objective order of essences in the totality of nature,” moderns have lost not only the grounds for *cosmic* piety, but also a stable image of *human* nature, even the conviction that we *have* a nature. In the early 1950s, Jonas writes:

That nature does not care one way or the other is the true abyss. That only man cares, in his finitude facing nothing but death, alone with his contingency and the objective meaninglessness of his projecting meanings, is a truly unprecedented situation. . . . As the product of the indifferent, his being, too, must be indifferent. . . . There is no point in caring for what has no sanction behind it in any creative intention.²⁶

Existentialism, on Jonas’ diagnosis, is a symptom of “the ethical vacuum” caused by two key assumptions of the modern credo: (1) that the rest of being is alien and indifferent to our existence; and (2) that the idea of obligation is a human invention, not a discovery based on a good-in-itself beyond us. Heidegger’s authentic *Dasein*, at the moment of decision, stands unguided by any eternal measure: a “freely projecting existence” who must create values on the basis of nothing but the shifting soil of history. “Will replaces vision,” laments Jonas, and the “temporality of the act ousts the eternity of the “good-in-itself.”²⁷ Jonas traces Heidegger’s “leap” into the arms of the Nazis to “the absolute formalism of his philosophy of decision.”²⁸

The root of this formalism is dualism's stark divide between human beings and the rest of nature: a condition depriving us of the resources for thinking of nature as a meaningful whole to which we belong and which commands our responsibility. Hans Jonas' whole philosophy aims at explaining, in a manner consistent with modern science, why human destiny makes a real, objective difference—because living nature is a good-in-itself and our responsibility for the future of humanity is ontologically 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*).”²⁹

Jonas' recovery of the meaning of being unfolds in two stages: (1) existential and (2) ontological.³⁰ In the first stage, elaborated in *The Phenomenon of Life*, Jonas uses Heidegger's own existential categories to undermine the modern credo that human being is the source of all value. Jonas provides “an existential interpretation of the biological facts” that lets us see, in the spirit of Aristotle's psychology, how all organisms, not only humans, have “concern for their own being.”³¹ Value and disvalue are not human creations but are essential to life itself. Every living thing has a share in life's “needful freedom” and “harbors within itself an inner horizon of transcendence,”³² for each organism must reach out to its environment in order to stay alive.

Still, not all forms of life are the same. Plants, animals, and the human animal display an “ascending” development of organic functions and capabilities. Plants are driven by their metabolic needs and stand in an immediate relationship to their environment. In animals, the powers of motility and appetite, feeling and perception are grafted onto metabolism, allowing animals to have a more distanced relationship to their surroundings. “The secret of animal life,” writes Jonas, “is the gap it is able to maintain between immediate concern and mediate satisfaction.”³³ Finally, in humans, what Aristotle called the nutritive and sensitive powers of soul can be guided by the “rational” capacities for imagination, thinking, and moral responsibility. These capacities enable us to act from a sense of our place in the world as a whole. But our widened horizon of self-transcendence brings in its wake perils peculiar to human existence: moods like anxiety, guilt, and despair.

Against the mechanistic tendency of modern thought, which boils the complex down to its simplest parts, Jonas finds the germ of what is higher in lower forms of evolution. “Reality or nature is one,” insists Jonas, “and testifies to itself in what it *allows* to come forth from it.”³⁴ Jonas calls his view “integral monism.” It involves two conjectures that can't be proven but are consistent with biological facts, existentially interpreted: (1) that matter's feat of organizing itself for life attests to latent organic tendencies in matter; and (2) that the emergence of the

human mind does not mark a great divide within nature, but elaborates what is prefigured throughout the life-world.

The extension of *psyche* or self-concern to all organisms invites the second, ontological stage of Jonas' thought, presented in *The Imperative of Responsibility*. Jonas worries that a nihilist may acknowledge the presence of *subjective* value in nature, yet doubt "whether the whole toilsome and terrible drama is worth the trouble." What must be established is the *objective* reality of value—a *good-in-itself*—because only from it can we derive a binding duty to guard life: the gift of being. On the basis of "intuitive certainty," Jonas derives "the ontological axiom" that the goodness of life is not relative to already existing purposes, for "the very capacity to have purposes at all is a good-in-itself." Through life, being says "Yes" to itself. Only humans, however, are able to discern the ontological truth: that the presence of life in being is "absolutely and infinitely" better than its absence.³⁵

The ethical consequence of this axiom is that we have an obligation to protect the life-world, for we are "executor[s] of a trust which only [w]e can see, but did not create."³⁶ But not all organisms have equal moral standing. Insofar as we are able to understand the whole of which we are a part, we should see ourselves, to use Hegelian language, as "a 'coming-to-itself' of original substance."³⁷ The primary object of our responsibility is our own vulnerable place at the top of the "ascending order" of nature. Jonas states:

Since in [man] the principle of purposiveness has reached its highest and most dangerous peak through the freedom to set himself ends and the power to carry them out, he himself becomes the first object of his duty not to ruin, as he well can do, what nature has achieved in him by the way of his using it.³⁸

This is no anthropocentric conceit, according to Jonas, but "an objective assignment by the nature of things": to ensure the quality of life for future generations, to "never make the existence or essence of man as a whole a stake in the hazards of action."

Has Jonas provided the glimpse of eternity that he claims is necessary to overcome the irrationalist decisionism of Heidegger's nihilism? Jonas remains a modern in that he cannot rely on the vertical orientation of Platonic ontology that found the eternal beyond the transient: pure being apart from becoming. Today, Jonas reminds us, it must be becoming rather than abiding nature that holds out the promise of a reunion between ontology and ethics. Unlike the permanent and indestructible first principle of Platonic ontology, the good-in-itself of living nature, and especially of thoughtful, imaginative, and responsible life within it, is at the mercy of our actions.

Three decades ago Jonas admonished us:

The warning lights of various limits are coming on. The time for the headlong race of progress is over, not of course for guarded progress itself. . . . [T]he starry-eyed ethics of perfectibility has to give way to the sterner one of responsibility. The latter is not devoid of hope, but gives also fear its rightful place. Its heart is *veneration for the image of man*, turning into trembling concern for its vulnerability. Promethean immodesty . . . must yield to the modesty of goals that we and nature can afford.³⁹

The ethical upshot of Jonas' precautionary principle is to question the mantra of economic growth, and expose it as a cover for a culture of greed and waste; and to challenge the push towards "enhancement" in biotechnology, and reveal it as expressing contempt for "the integrity of the human essence."⁴⁰

Jonas draws on Heidegger's method of "existential interpretation" but extends it to the life-world as a whole. Jonas' critique of dualism opens up the possibility of metaphysics that Heidegger had preemptively ruled out.⁴¹ Having followed Heidegger down his post-metaphysical path, Arendt's "thinking," Jonas contends, is too flaccid to address the threat of nihilism and too dismissive of the possibility and necessity of metaphysics. It fails to leave us with the substantive vision we need to put limits on the dangerous technologies we possess today.

5. Arendt's Implicit Reply to Jonas' Ontological Project

Arendt's rejoinder to Jonas at the 1972 Toronto symposium foreshadows how she would have replied to *The Imperative of Responsibility* had she lived to see its publication. Recall Jonas' riposte to Arendt: that "we can share our judgments to our perdition with many, but we must make an appeal beyond that sphere" if we're to meet "the extreme danger that technology poses to the totality of life on earth."⁴² Arendt replies that if our future should depend on "an ultimate" that will decide for us "*from above*," then we're lost, for this demands that "*a new god* will appear." Arendt objects to such an appeal, for she asks, "Who's going to recognize it?" and "How will we avoid an infinite regress when we try to establish rules for recognizing it?"⁴³

Arendt identifies Jonas' hope for "a final directive" with religious revelation. This she regards as evading the reality we have faced since the eighteenth century, when the God of medieval Christianity disappeared, namely that "in our nakedness, we are confronted with the fact that men exist in the plural."⁴⁴ The totalitarian catastrophe, she concedes, would probably not have happened if people had still believed in "an ultimate"—like a God who ruled over heaven and hell. But amidst

the total moral collapse of Nazism and Stalinism, there were no “ultimates” to which people could appeal. Worse yet, those firmly convinced of “the old values,” Arendt observes, were most ready to exchange them for a new set, provided they were given one.

The hard lessons Arendt draws from totalitarianism are that “you’ll never know how somebody will act,” especially in a crisis, and that so long as you hand someone a set of values, they’ll be more than willing to exchange the old verities for new ones, for they are more interested in the feeling of certainty than in the content of the values. They get used to leaning on a “banister,” and so of not having to think for themselves. There’s no way, Arendt states, of stabilizing the situation we’ve been in since the discrediting of “ultimates” in the eighteenth century. This leads her to ask what we can rely on if no “final directive” is given. And her answer, as we now know, is the thinking process itself and its “side effects”: conscience and the faculty of judgment.

Jonas would see Arendt’s response as begging the question, for he appeals neither to revelation nor to a heteronymous law. He offers instead a rational, albeit speculative argument, yielding an imperative received on the basis of reason alone. The heart of the matter, however, is that Arendt would reject Jonas’ view not for being religious, but for being too rationalistic: for falling prey to “fallacies” that render metaphysics implausible today. The best evidence we have for Arendt’s likely line of attack comes from the one reference she makes to Jonas’ early work in *The Life of the Mind*.

On the surface, she applauds her friend’s 1954 essay “The Nobility of Sight” for being “of unique help in the clarification of the history of Western thought”: highlighting the advantages of sight compared to the other senses and explaining why it has served as a guiding metaphor for the thinking mind. As Jonas puts it, “the mind has gone wherever vision has pointed.” His key claim is that seeing necessarily “introduces the beholder,” and for the beholder, in contrast to the auditor, the “present is not the point-experience of the passing now,” but “is transformed into a dimension with which things can be beheld . . . as a lasting of the same. . . . Only sight, therefore, provides the sensual basis on which the mind may conceive the idea of the eternal, that which never changes and is always present.”⁴⁵

Having complimented her friend for his trenchant diagnosis of western metaphysics, Arendt shows how she would have criticized Jonas’ own metaphysics. First, she observes, the mind has *not* necessarily gone where vision has pointed. Though vision does inform the classical idea of thinking as cognition, culminating in reason’s dream of achieving noetic intuition with “the mind’s eye,” sight is a less appropriate metaphor for two other faculties of mind: willing and judging. The will

has traditionally been modeled on either desire or hearing, as in the Hebraic notion of the pious will obedient to God's commands. And judging has, in Kant for example, taken its cue from the sense of taste. Sight provides a poor model for the faculties of willing and judging.

Second, and more important, the faculty of *thinking* is misconstrued when it's modeled on sight. According to Arendt, "what recommended sight to be the guiding metaphor in philosophy—and, along with sight, intuition as the ideal of truth—was not just the 'nobility' of this most cognitive of our senses, but the very early notion that the philosopher's quest for meaning was identical with the scientist's quest for truth."⁴⁶ The senses are essentially cognitive because they are instruments enabling us to know and deal with the world. They aim at an end outside of themselves. But thinking is always "out of order" because, withdrawn from the world and restlessly seeking meaning, it produces no "end-results" that will survive its own activity.

Thinking, Arendt tells us, needs speech not only to become manifest, but in order to be activated at all. Enacted in sequences of sentences, thinking can never arrive at stable, certain truths confirmed by self-evident intuition available to speechless contemplation. "Meaning"—the target of "thinking," properly understood—is "slippery" because "nothing expressed in words can ever attain the immobility of an object of pure contemplation." The best sensuous model for thinking, Arendt suggests, is the amorphous "sensation of being alive."⁴⁷

Arendt modifies Heidegger's account of *Denken*: turning away from Plato not to the pre-Socratics but to Socrates himself. This enables her to find a moral nerve in the thinking process that's absent in Heidegger's mystifying talk of listening to the call of being. Though Arendt's rejection of supersensible vision isn't *intended* as a criticism of Jonas—whose *The Imperative of Responsibility* was still percolating at the time—it announces the most significant divergence between their two paths of thought. Arendt would criticise Jonas for trying, like Kant, to refurbish outdated "banisters" and "final directives" and for, like Heidegger, giving priority to ontology over politics as a way of placing a check on technology. By Arendt's lights, Jonas' craving for an "ultimate" runs the risk of invoking a "new god" who promises to save us but threatens to shut down the public realm and short-circuit our need for "judgment." If Jonas spies Arendt's post-metaphysical thinking through the filter of his worries about our assault on nature, Arendt would see Jonas' metaphysics through the lens of her concerns with totalitarianism.

6. Jonas' Last Stand: Metaphysics and Modesty

Can Jonas answer Arendt's implicit charge that his metaphysics has lost plausibility today? In the Toronto exchange he agrees that we can't have ultimates as "a command performance" simply because "we *need* them so bitterly." The fact that we need them, however, doesn't prove they don't exist, and, as Jonas puts it in *The Imperative of Responsibility*:

For the search to be unprejudiced, the worldly philosopher struggling for an ethics must first of all hypothetically allow the *possibility* of a rational metaphysics, despite Kant's contrary verdict, if the rational is not preemptively determined by the standards of positive science.⁴⁸

Jonas here denies Arendt's charge that metaphysics must reduce thinking's quest for meaning to cognition's quest for truth. Thinking aims at a different kind of truth than cognition, he proposes, and his ontological grounding of an imperative of responsibility aspires to truth, not mere Arendtian "meaning."

After boldly affirming the possibility of metaphysics, he seems to contradict himself, agreeing with his friend that we are *not* in possession of ultimates by knowledge or faith. Knowledge of ignorance is the better part of wisdom, he says, and should make us hesitate to launch into actions with far-reaching consequences in the public sphere. Our technological enterprises in particular have an eschatological tendency: a built-in utopianism. Even lacking knowledge of ultimate values, or of what "man" is such that the world can be a "fitting" habitat, Jonas insists, we should at least *abstain* from letting "eschatological situations" come about. Modesty in the face of our ignorance commands caution, even in the absence of comprehensive wisdom about "the good for man." With this, Arendt agrees.⁴⁹

Jonas' appeal to restraint based on "learned ignorance" is not inconsistent, I contend, with his metaphysical grounding of a final directive, for his precautionary imperative doesn't provide a full-fledged vision of "the good life for man." Rather, its force is *negative*: "Never make the existence or essence of humanity as a whole a stake in the hazards of action." Although Jonas' thinking does produce a fixed rule, judgments about how to interpret this imperative in the context of particular issues are still a matter of casuistry and opinion. These questions aren't settled by the simple application of a theoretically generated standard to a practical case. Jonas' own bioethical essays, where he takes stands on issues like experimentation on human subjects, the brain-death criterion, genetic engineering and cloning, attest to this.

His judgments are more substantive and directed than Arendt's "representative thinking," but less "ultimate" than the pronouncements of a new god.

7. Arendt's Last Stand: *Amor Mundi*

Perhaps there is more convergence between Arendt and Jonas than first meets the eye, for she is no less aware than he of technology as a threat to life on earth. As she puts it in *The Human Condition*:

If one wishes to draw a line between the modern age and the world we have come to live in, he may well find it in the difference between a science which looks upon nature from a universal standpoint and thus acquires complete mastery over her, on the one hand, and a truly "universal" science, on the other, which imports cosmic processes *into* nature even at the obvious risk of destroying her, and, with her, man's mastership over her.⁵⁰

Arendt clearly has nuclear catastrophe in mind, but soon she would have pointed to environmental degradation as well. These spring from our newfound powers to produce elements never found in nature, to transform mass into energy and radiation into matter, and to populate space around the earth with man-made stars, i.e., satellites. And well before the bioethical phase of Jonas' writing, she's prescient in identifying creative novelties that "used to be thought the prerogative of divine action":⁵¹ both the ability to create (or recreate) the miracle of life in a test-tube and the dream of extending the human lifespan far beyond its current 100-year limit. These alterations of natality and mortality express the wish to exchange the gift of human life for something we have made ourselves. It's a political, not a scientific or technical question, Arendt states, to decide whether we wish to use our knowledge in these ways.

For Arendt the "world" is humanly built, but it exists on the earth, the mother of life, and under the sky, which opens life out into the air and sheds light and rain on the things of the earth. The earth and sky give our world its enabling conditions, but don't grant it a teleological direction. As for our species, Arendt speaks of "the human condition," not "human nature." She defines who we are in terms of an ensemble of powers whose flourishing is necessary for a good life. But she rejects the classical grounding of "what Man is" on the basis of a natural essence or fixed teleology, for this would deprive us of freedom's indeterminacy. Still, she would affirm, citizens need to be grateful and to care for the natural environment that enables the existence of political life. But to Jonas' claim that the *cosmos* must once again be the horizon of political thought, Arendt would reply that recovering the meaning of

the earth doesn't require a cosmic teleology, and that such a metaphysically loaded view of nature can't supply a publicly agreed-upon first principle anyway.⁵²

8. Convergence: Truth and/or Friendship?

To our surprise, we find our two paths of thought converging. Jonas' cosmic piety yields an imperative that's not a visionary blueprint but an anti-utopian call to modesty. Furthermore, Jonas' anti-utopianism comprises the heart of his critique of totalitarian ideologies that would sacrifice the good for the illusion of the perfect. And Arendt's *amor mundi* is mindful of how the Promethean tendencies of *homo faber* threaten to squander the enabling gifts of nature—earth and sky—that make a habitable world possible.

Still, we can't overlook the profound differences of sensibility and doctrine that divide these two friends. Jonas' keen awareness of these differences is evident in his 1977 retrospective of Arendt:

She was intensely feminine and therefore no feminist (“I don't want to lose my privileges,” she used to say). She liked to be brought flowers, to be escorted, to have male attention to the lady. Yet she considered men on the whole the weaker sex, more removed from the intuitive grasp of reality, more subject to the deception of the concept, therefore more prone to illusion and less perceptive of the ambiguity and admixture of shadows in the human equation—thus actually to be protected.⁵³

That Arendt saw Jonas as fitting the mold of the male philosopher may be gleaned from a vignette that Hans' wife, Lore, recently disclosed to me after I had finished a draft of this paper. Late in her life, Jonas gave Arendt a chapter to read from his work in progress, *The Imperative of Responsibility*. As Lore recounts the episode,

She gave it back to him and said, “Hans, this is the book the Good Lord meant you to write.” He was very pleased with this comment. Later, she said to me, “I have objections to certain parts, but I don't want to disturb his fine frenzy.” Protecting the male ego as always.⁵⁴

And, I would add, the male ego caught up in the frenzy of metaphysics: in thrall to “the deception of the concept.”

If it is philosophical friendship, beyond doctrinal disagreements, that links them most of all, this may, ironically enough, be a last point in favor of Arendt. In her 1958 essay, “On Humanity in Dark Times,” she writes of Lessing:

A single absolute truth, could there have been one, would have spelled the end of humanity. . . . Any doctrine that in principle

barred the possibility of a friendship between two human beings would have been rejected by his untrammelled and unerring conscience. . . . He, while polemical to the point of contentiousness, was concerned solely with humanizing the world by incessant and continual dialogue about its affairs and the things in it. He wanted to be the friend of many, but no man's brother.⁵⁵

Arendt contrasts Lessing's embrace of plurality to Kant's penchant for the unity of reason:

[T]he inhumanity of Kant's moral philosophy is undeniable. And this is so because the categorical imperative is postulated as absolute and in its absoluteness introduces into the interhuman realm—which by its nature consists of relationships—something that runs counter to its relativity. The inhumanity which is bound up with the concept of “one single truth” emerges with particular clarity in Kant's work precisely because he attempted to found truth on practical reason; it is as though he who had so inexorably pointed out man's cognitive limits could not bear to think that in action, too, man cannot behave like a god.⁵⁶

Arendt anticipates her thesis in *The Life of the Mind*: that truth is an inappropriate target for the activity of thinking and has totalitarian implications when applied to the political realm. And her misgivings about Kant would only be aggravated in the case of Jonas who (1) goes beyond the cognitive limits Kant places on metaphysical speculation; and (2) expands the scope of the Kantian imperative, finding its source not in practical reason but in Being itself.

Arendt sides with Lessing against Kant and Jonas. This is more than a concession to the limits of philosophy, for there's a philosophical substructure to her plea on behalf of friendship. Thinking, on her account, is a ceaseless quest for “meaning” enacted in the soul's dialogue with itself, oriented by its desire for harmony—or *friendship*—with itself. But the thinker, I submit, needs *other* “two-in-ones”—philosophical friends—as a reality check: to test whether she's making sense about the world they seem to share in common. She needs to be challenged by the surprising perspectives of outsiders. Though the fact that others disagree—so that one finds oneself in disharmony with them— isn't a sufficient reason to change one's mind, friendship with oneself risks delusion if one disregards the unique angles that thoughtful others bring to the table. Thinking needs friendship. And because friendship requires “plurality,” one can't have true friends upon whom one wants to impose “one single truth.”

Jonas acknowledges Arendt's gift for friendship and appreciates how it transcends their philosophical disputes. In a letter composed in 1974 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of their friendship, he writes:

We are not exactly “related natures,” often see things differently, and react spontaneously in different ways to things. But as to the question of what matters in the end and always, about *that* we have understood each other from the start without having to say so. There was never any doubt about what was important and what unimportant. Thus we could, apart from the Eichmann-affair, debate to our hearts’ content about the debatable with the knowledge that we are “in principle,” or “in actuality,” or however one wants to call that thing, yet in agreement. And, in addition, there’s the plain fact—that one, thank God, need not give reasons to explain—I like you enormously.⁵⁷

By conceding that philosophical disagreements don’t impugn their unspoken “agreement” over “what matters in the end and always,” doesn’t Jonas grant the point of Arendt’s Lessing essay: that the ties that bind us in philosophical friendship matter more than “truth”?

I don’t think so. What’s most important to both, to be sure, is not whether they reach the same conclusions, but the other’s seriousness, dignity and originality of mind: as Jonas puts it in his eulogy at Arendt’s funeral, a refusal to let “a cheap formula for the human predicament pass muster.”⁵⁸ But Arendt goes beyond this, saying there’s no truth about questions of “meaning” that make us think, and here’s where she overstates her case. In his 1977 retrospective, Jonas argues that there’s an inherent flaw in Arendt’s model of thinking as essentially seeking no end-result. Following the Biblical idea of “casting your bread upon the waters” (*Eccl.* 11:1), Jonas claims that thinking is animated by the hope that one’s “bread” can withstand exposure to “the waters” because it possesses a truth that justifies its being tasted by future generations of thinkers. Insofar as Arendt’s own reflections on the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* aspire to this ideal, they, too, attest to the link between the quests for meaning and for truth.

Still, Arendt might retort, one should make a distinction between opinions about the human condition and metaphysical propositions about the supposed supersensible ground of the sensible world: “God or Being or the First Principles and Causes (**archai**) [**Greek**] or the Ideas.” It’s the latter she finds “implausible” today. But Jonas, too, rejects two-world dualism. His “integral monism” roots mind—even in its most abstract manifestation, “thinking”—in the life-world, and he agrees with Arendt that thinking never lets us escape our embodiment and mortality.

Even if Arendt isn’t persuaded by Jonas’ ontological argument (not to mention his theological arguments), she’s committed to more than she admits to. It would be dogmatic for Arendt to rule out *a priori* the possibility that her friend may be correct about the meaning of things

as a whole. And Jonas' "one single truth" doesn't bar the possibility of friendship because he understands that his conjectures aren't proofs.

Arendt's appreciation of relativity in the interhuman realm runs the risk of preemptively foreclosing important metaphysical and religious options in the ongoing conversation. If Arendt is concerned about a certain blindness in Jonas' conviction about the truth, Jonas is worried about an emptiness at the heart of Arendt's "thinking without banisters." But in their deepest moments, they recognize that they—and philosophical friendship itself—need each other, like Lessing and Kant, like Socrates and Plato.⁵⁹

NOTES

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1. See Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
2. Christian Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007), p. 86.
3. Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt and the Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's, 1979).
4. Hans Jonas, "Acting, Knowing, Thinking: Gleanings from Hannah Arendt's Philosophical Work," *Social Research* 44:1 (1977), pp. 25-43.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxx. [AQ: trans.?)
6. Susan Neiman, "What's the Problem of Evil?" in *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Maria Pia Lara (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 40.
7. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 15, 62.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 11.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
16. Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), p. 187.
17. See Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 31.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
19. Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," pp. 308-11.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 311-2.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 264.
23. Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," p. 312.
24. Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
25. Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p. 232.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
28. Hans Jonas, "Heidegger's Resoluteness and Resolve: An Interview," in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, ed. Günther Neske and Emil Kettering (New York: Paragon House, 1990), p. 200.
29. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 283.
30. For a more detailed elaboration of the stages on Jonas' way—including a third, theological stage—see my "Hans Jonas's Exodus: From German Existentialism to Post-Holocaust Theology," in *Hans Jonas, Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996).
31. Hans Jonas, "Is God a Mathematician? (The Meaning of Metabolism)" in *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 86.
32. Hans Jonas, "Evolution and Freedom," in *Mortality and Morality*, pp. 66, 60.
33. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 102.
34. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 69.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 80. For a synopsis of Jonas' ontological argument, see Jonas, "Toward an Ontological Grounding of an Ethics for the Future," chap. 4 of *Mortality and Morality*.

36. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 80.
37. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 283. Dmitri Nikulin made an excellent point in discussion: that Jonas sets himself up as the Hegel of our time, articulating a new self-consciousness of “the whole” that was not available to previous generations—because they could not foresee the crisis into which technology has thrown us. Like Hegel, Jonas shows how his ethics of responsibility is built on “the shoulders of giants,” comprising a synthesis of ancient and modern elements.
38. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 130.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 201-2.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
41. There is, to be sure, an affinity between Heidegger and Jonas in their shared concern about the dangers posed by technology. There is truth in the claim that, for both of them, we need to become “the shepherds of Being.” But the big difference is that, for Heidegger, metaphysics is the root of the problem, because it is “technological” and all too humanistic right from the get-go. For Jonas, on the other hand, metaphysics is the answer, and humanism is nothing to be ashamed of.
42. Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” p. 311.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 111-2.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
48. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 45.
49. Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” pp. 314-5.
50. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 268.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
52. Thanks to Professor Michael McCarthy of Vassar College for helping me with this section.
53. Jonas, “Acting, Knowing, Thinking,” pp. 25-6.
54. Thanks to Lore Jonas for showing me her unpublished memoir, *Private Memories of a Public Person*, from which this is drawn.
55. Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), pp. 27, 30.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
57. Hans Jonas to Hannah Arendt, November 7, 1974, quoted in Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas*, pp. 83-4.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
59. Richard Bernstein suggested in discussion that Arendt's and Jonas' positions are both deeply flawed—and “each had the other's number.” Jonas understood that Arendt's account of thinking and its relationship to conscience and judgment is the weakest link in her philosophy and can't make sense of Heidegger's ethical failures. And Arendt's criticism of metaphysics hits Jonas hard because his ontological grounding is, as Bernstein put it, “a poor argument.” Since Jonas has such a high standard for what we need in order to care about the future of humanity, he sets himself up for nihilistic disappointment, for nothing short of a final directive based on a metaphysical first principle can justify our ethical concern. Briefly put, if Arendt's account of morality is too minimalist, Jonas' is too maximalist. The question is whether there is a defensible middle-ground that answers *both* Arendt's worry about what we can rely on in ourselves under political circumstances where “every legal act is immoral and every moral act a crime” *and* Jonas' worry that we need unprecedented moral resources to address technological threats to future generations.