

Didactic Letters to Lore Jonas, 1944

Hans Jonas

1. January 3, 1944

Your “philosophically unschooled mind” has made quite a valid philosophical objection. You object to the proposition that the world requires the human being to be watchful for it, to reflect it and in that reflection, acquire a new existence for it. Rather, it seems to you that this claim is itself something the human being inherently postulates of his relationship to the world—a demand with which the human furnishes the world and which returns to the human from it: to a certain extent, as you express it a “doubled, reflecting” Taken on its own terms, this is perfectly correct, and I would not hesitate to employ it as a description of the human side of the way things are, were it not opposed as an alternative to those other ideas. This exclusionary *ausschließenden* meaning of your interpretation is founded upon the common assumption which has, over several centuries, become habitual to philosophical thought, that something like a “claim” can simply go out from the human I. This leads well beyond the immanent description of human phenomena and brings up the ontological question of the human in the being of the collective world. On this, the following remarks.

Idealism, which ties everything to consciousness and makes the subject the foundation of the world, at least insofar as it gives meaning to it, has for some time ceased having the final word for me. But, if one does not want to get oneself mixed up with dualism, the reality of the world requires credit to be given to matter for the accomplishment of having generated from itself: life in its ascending rank, the operation of the senses, human beings, and also therefore the intentionality of their consciousness of it—the world—itself. That hierarchical order of life leading up to human beings can be interpreted precisely according to grades of world-lightening, ever increasing world perception, and finally the most free and therefore the most faithful, most comprehensive objectivation [*Objektivierung*]. In this process, the “reflecting” of the world becomes ever more complete, beginning with a [221] most obscure sense perception somewhere in the lower reaches of the animal kingdom, indeed in the most primitive sensation of stimuli, in which world and object are already somehow experienced, i.e. made subjective. Such a continuous process, each time reaching itself higher, cannot possibly have gone forth blindly, the result of mechanical permutations of material elements, generated out of manifold substrates as an accidental by-product to which subjective appearances are attached. Furthermore, if matter has organized itself in this fashion and with this direction, then it is necessary to ascribe this possibility to it primarily and likewise to include in it the concept of world-substance as the governing, dynamic (teleological) motivator in the concept of world-causality. This transforms the whole of ontology. If substance has organized itself in this direction, then one should not avoid making the inference that it organized itself *with* this orientation, that the goal was contained within it and belonged to it, i.e. that the “possibility” [*Möglichkeit*] is a positive and productive characteristic of it, i.e. that life, sensation, perception, thought are intended in it; i.e. that through the human being’s objectivation of substance, an original tendency is fulfilled, i.e.—since the human being is substance’s own product—that in itself fulfills itself in that objectivation. Notice now that it indeed makes sense (and is not *just* anthropomorphism) to say that the world requires the human being ... but reason still requires a more essential completion in order to justify the concept of a claim, even if one already admits the possibility of fulfillment or realization. But back to that later. (More follows.)

2. February 25, 1944

When the infusorium touches up against another body, it is not merely affected in a mechanical sense, but also in terms of sensation, and correspondingly its reaction is not physical, but rather biological, or some such behavior. In this respect every external (mechanical) cause-effect relationship between bodies or forces is fundamentally surpassed. In sensation the “something” that affects is co-represented. In this way, a new existence for it as an object is opened in the tiniest fissure on the horizon, dawning in the subjective reflect, in the experience of touch. The affected thing also feels itself in the stimulus. In stimulus and reaction, approaching or withdrawing, accepting or rejecting, its self is activated, like a point against the environs of the not-self. This also reveals the polarity of the relationship of life in embryo. The premise of these phenomena is that the living substance, [222]organism, or smallest individual has originally individuated itself from and against the world and has made itself independent by setting itself against matter. The individuation shows that although the living being is itself a piece of the world, as far as it is concerned all that remains of the world is other, exterior, encroaching on the organism from without or escaping within, in the singular encounter with the foreign body (expanded or restricted as such), in the totality and as the horizon of the external world. The external world is only considered in terms of the organism’s. overwhelming interest in its own life-process, which has to assert itself in the external world and is by constitution egoistic. But this is already an appearance of an elementary ground on which all later characteristics of life are ultimately based and whose entrance into the cosmos marks an ontological revolution, recurring once again with the entrance of spirit: this is the way it is for freedom in opposition to matter.

The essence of life, which exists as a determinate agglomeration of matter, is not identical with the matter of which it consists. It is not captured through identity to matter but is rather an organizing form which has itself for a goal and which maintains its independence from a material existence to the degree to which it constantly changes its existence. Indeed, without exception, the organizing form only preserves itself through this variation. With this wondrous state of affairs a principle enters into the world without parallel in the physical world of mere matter.

This is the being of the simple, immediate identity of the in-itself. Each exists in its place in space-time as a determinate particle of mass, which it is, quite simply, apart from its own doing, in the empty self-identity of a category of substance; its duration is mere continuance, its selfhood is therefore a function of the continuity of the dimensions of space and time, its form an accident clinging onto matter, lacking authentic reality. It is this thing and not that thing, because *it* is here now and that thing is over there right now; it remains this thing, i.e. is the same at a later point in time, because the continuous succession of all intermediate states leads from its present place to its new one. This succession sort of passes it from one state to the next, not loosening its grip for a single moment. The discontinuity of subatomic processes as taught by modern physics does not annul the possibility of identifying touching substrates in a technical sense but rather places this possibility outside the extension of the concept of identity as the condition of its adaptability to what is nonliving; it does not satisfy the constancy of the form of development, in which variations happen. Particles of mass [223]have no other principle of identity than this external principle, which could either grant or deny to them the *principia individuationis* (space and time). This means that for matter identity is as much an external characteristic as individuation. This characteristic belongs to unities on the basis of the totality of the physical world, whose parts they are and this characteristic is determined by this totality.

The identity of the living being, however, is its own incessant production, the result of the active self-founding self-constitution and self-renewal of its form.

Its existence is a function and not a substance; its duration a happening and therefore not just continuance, whereas what merely continues is constantly left behind in the process of the living being's self-foundation. Should it ever become what merely continues, it would cease to be. The fixed, material identity of particles of mass stands against the dynamic, functional identity of what is living. Happening, to which fixed identity is subjected (what happens to it), is the proper element of the dynamic.

Consequently the existence of the living being is not given in itself, as is that of matter, but is rather its own creation in each of its moments. Admittedly, on account of its bodily presence, it is a concrete product of matter in each of its temporal cross-sections and on that side a thing among things: but its being is not the presence of the product that it is at each of these moments, but rather ultimately is itself only its ongoing self-creation. It is nothing else apart from this production: thus it gives itself over to itself entirely and is set upon itself. It sinks back into the being of the in-itself or the indifference of the substrate of the merely present when its production ceases.

Being as production demands a center, from out of which it can produce, a manifold, in which it produces, and a limit, up to which it produces—its unity constitutes these from without (its difference from the world) and inwardly everything—a finite quantity—each according to its component-function, is an agent of production. The principle of the organism is given in this elementary organization (which is present in the nucleus, protoplasm, and cellular membrane of the most primitive creatures). The indifferent contiguity of particles of mass is annulled in this organization and replaced by the differentiation of the organic form, which is founded on the residual indifference of the former as an entirely new plane of being, with its own categories of unity and variation. Without the fixed identity of substrates having changed themselves as such, they have become subordinated in their arrangement to an organizational principle, as parts of the living [224]substance, the organism, which disposes of them according to the laws of its dynamic identity, in the service of developing higher forms. As an organic product, such is the being of the organizing form.

Form, then—and I mean by this independent, self-actualizing form—is an essential characteristic of life. With it the difference between form and matter, which is a purely abstract difference in the case of the dead, emerges as a real difference. Indeed this marks a total reversal of the ontological relation: form has become the essence and matter the accident. Expressed ontologically: in organic configuration, the material element ceases to be the substance (which it still is on its own plane) and is now only the substrate.

The self-sufficiency of the living form shows itself primarily in that it does not have its material constitution once and for all time, but rather interchanges it with the surrounding world in ceaseless appropriation and expropriation—and that's how it remains itself. This means that its material constitution is concurrent, and this concurrence is its proper function. Seen from the perspective of the fixed identity of matter, the living form is only a transitory point for matter, through which it passes according to its own law, and its apparent unity nothing other than a constitutive state of its diversity. But in actuality [*Wirklichkeit*], from the standpoint of life taken as a new categorical plane, the form is what is actual in the relation: it does not simply passively allow world-material to flow through it, but rather it itself is that which actively draws material into itself and pushes it out of itself and builds itself from it. For the lifeless, the form is nothing but a varying condition of the underlying matter. For the living, active, organizing form, varying material contents are conversely conditions of its underlying identical being. Matter's diversity itself is the extent of the actuality of form's unity. Instead of saying that the form of life is a transitory point for matter, it is more correct to say that the succession of material constitutions, which are constituted concurrently, are transitory phases for the process of the being of the form.

In the material universe, in its immeasurable, mute, indifferent-quantitative history, which is a history of atoms and their bonds, life is naturally also a “state” of matter, and a very ephemeral state at that: but also a paradoxical slate, in which matter itself makes itself into the state of something different, which is founded upon it—the living form—and makes room for a qualitative principle, which it puts in control of its quantitative being; in short, a state, in which it transcends itself. The fact that the indifferent being of matter has produced this from its womb shows that principles are [225]concealed within it, principles we are not in the habit of connecting with their concept, but which we must incorporate into the most thoroughgoing interpretation.

The independence of form does not signify a separated being: the concurrent, concrete unity of matter and form, which is a universal, ineffaceable characteristic of the world, naturally exists here also namely in the co-occurrence of form with its material basis at each moment. The organism is always at the same time the form of a determinate manifold of matter. But while in the sphere of matter, as we have said, the separation of form and matter and the self-positing of form are abstractions accruing to substance from the accidental being of the form, on the ontological plane of life, conversely, the difference between both is concrete, and their concurrent equality, which can really be produced in the cross-section of each moment, is only an abstraction when regarded from the form of the totality of life: since even an individual cross-section of existence’s course of time is itself a mere abstraction from the perspective of the living being, The actuality of its form is in the succession of its momentary materialities, which it makes into its duration. This alone is the concretion of its unity, where unity where unity is taken not as a logical attribute, but rather as a productive completion. Although the now-point of the material totality—each now-point—gives the same completion and, as a theoretical index, can be replaced by any other, the organism’s cross-sectional now, which is material and still complete in that way, gives each apart from what is proper, life, the form of which can only be found temporally and in its functional totality. Temporality, not simultaneous space, is the medium of the totality of the form of the living being; and this temporality is not the indifferent being-apart that time is for the movement of matter and for the succession of its contents, but rather the qualitative element of the presentation of the form of life itself, as it were the means for binding its unity with the diversity of its substrates. Indeed this binding is life in its dynamic progress.

As much as an error as it is to be misled by the ability to abstract the material form from matter to hypostatize its form as being in itself, i.e. to forget its elementary dependence and to reinterpret abstract moments as concrete entities (an ontological misunderstanding at the root of much philosophy)—conversely, it would be equally wrong to understand the concurrent coincidence of form with its material substrate as an identity. But self-identity, which is merely a logical attribute for the dead being, the expression of which does not go beyond tautology, is ontologically richer [226]for the living being, in its proper function as material otherness rather than a constant, achieved characteristic.

If one takes the heretofore described structures together and recognizes the heretofore observed reversal of ontological relationships as opposed to those of the general substance of the world, at least in its given form, as matter, to whose region life *with* these reversals still necessarily belongs, then one is entitled to speak of an ontological revolution, which has happened in the history of matter with the appearance of this new material form of being, “life.” The principle of this revolution is the rendering of “form” as intelligible within matter, the enabling of a specific independence of form which, in accordance with all merely material structures of the world, is “impossible.” The description of its characteristic traits, instruments, and varieties is the task of biology: And the development and progression of its independence is the principle of the whole

history of the development of life, which occasions further revolutions as it proceeds, each a new step in the direction life has set out upon.

Emancipation of form from the immediate identity of matter, emancipation from the fixed self-identity of matter, dynamic self-actualization of form in matter and against matter: a principle of *freedom* lights up for the first time in the monstrous bondage of the physical world, arrested within itself. In the blind impulses of primordial organic substance, a freedom, alien to the suns, planets, and atoms—and its original, elementary expression is the variation of matter.

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