

# The Silence of God at Auschwitz: The Contributions of Hans Jonas

Peter Takov

Catholic University of Cameroon, Bamenda, Cameroon

Herbert Niba Cheo

St. John Paul II Major Seminary, Mamfe, Cameroon

What is peculiar about Hans Jonas' concept of God after Auschwitz? How is it distinguishable from that of the proponents of process philosophy? By way of analysis and valuation, this article argues that Jonas' contribution on the silence of God at Auschwitz proposes a unique solution to the question of theodicy which excludes the atheism and relativism often characteristic of modern philosophical speculation on the subject. At the same time, his concept of God remains compatible with humankind's existential experience of suffering. In the face of evil, Jonas charges man with the responsibility of "preserving life", a theme that is central to his thought.

*Keywords:* God, evil, Holocaust, omnipotence, mythology, responsibility, silence

## Introduction

With the outbreak of the Holocaust in Germany, a large number of Jews lost their faith in God. Many philosophies advanced points that relegated any discourse on God to the background and what more. The basic question of whether God even exists resonated in most critical minds as it does today. Herein, one embraces the themes of meaninglessness in life, frustration, absolute and humanistic atheism, etc. Richard Rubenstein, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh for instance, rejected the biblical notion of a creating and provident God in favour of a Holy Nothingness, a Sacred Void out of which man came and to which he will return for no apparent reason (Rubenstein, 1966, pp. 219-225). Process thinkers on the other hand challenge the traditional notion of a God who is static, unchanging being, suggesting that like all living beings, God is "in process": living, suffering, and growing right alongside of us, albeit just a step or two ahead of us. The origin of this current is attributed to Alfred North Whitehead. Generally God is presented in utterly debased images so as to claim full autonomy of humanity in the world. Again, the philosophical inability of accommodating the reality of human experience with an all-powerful, eternal, and all-Good God, has led philosophers of all persuasions to bring forth varied conceptions of God (Bonansea, 1979, pp. 46-47), which more than often call into question the traditional conception of God, with more or less repetitious themes in their patterns of thought.

For Hans Jonas, however, the traditional conception of God becomes a relic of bygone ages when faced with the Auschwitz debacle or the "Holocaust". The mixture of existential shock at God's silence in the face of

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Peter Takov, Ph.D., Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Catholic University of Cameroon (CATUC), Bamenda, Cameroon.

Herbert Niba Cheo, St. John Paul II Major Seminary, Mamfe, Cameroon.

Auschwitz, in which his mother was murdered, and other ignominious deaths endured by the Jews, convinces him that the traditional (and absolutely central) Jewish concept of God as the Lord of history, including the notion of his power to intervene and to rescue men is obsolete. *Ipsa facto*, there arises a need for a rethinking of God's attributes, so he thinks. This leads to his philosophical rigour in shattering the notion of an Omnipotent God of History, and rendering God powerless; the central idea of Jonas' speculations premised on God's renunciation of His essence in favour of cosmic autonomy and human responsibility for God's suffering (Weise, 2007, p. 124). This, he expounds in his article, "The Concept of God After Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice", first published in *Immortality and the Modern Temper* (Harvard Theological Review, 1962) and in his book, *The Phenomenon of Life* (University of Chicago, 1982).

### Investigating Jonas' Conception of God

Via a personally invented myth, Jonas advances an argument that God in the act of creation out of necessity embraces the risk of contracting himself and as a consequence becomes a "caring", "suffering", and "risk-taking" God. This leads him to render God "mutable" as opposed to "immutable", "impotent" as opposed to "omnipotent", and he also postulates, God's "lack of foreknowledge" as opposed to "Divine omniscience" and "foreknowledge". All these enumerated contrary views to his are held and cherished by Theodicy and the biblical world of Judaism. Indeed, Jonas' God is a God who limits his essence, so as to make man autonomous, and as a consequence, becomes "radically" dependent on man for His being. The self-invented myth portrays this situation vividly.

In the beginning, for unknowable reasons, the ground of being, or the Divine, chose to give itself over to the chance and risk and endless variety of becoming. And wholly so: entering into the adventure of space and time, the deity held back nothing of itself: no uncommitted or unimpaired part remained to direct, correct, and ultimately guarantee the devious working-out of its destiny in the creation. On this unconditional immanence, the modern temper insists. It is its courage or despair, in any case its bitter honesty, to take our being-in-the-world seriously: to view the world as left to itself, its laws as brooking no interference, and the rigour of our belonging to it as not softened by an extramundane providence. The same our myth postulates for God's being in the world. Not, however, in the sense of pantheistic immanence ... Rather, in order that the world might be, and be for itself, God renounced his own being, divesting himself of his deity—to receive it back from the odyssey of time weighted with the chance harvest of unforeseeable temporal experience: transfigured or possibly even disfigured by it. In such self-forfeiture of divine integrity for the sake of an unprejudiced becoming, no other foreknowledge can be admitted than that of possibilities, which cosmic being offers in its own terms: to these, God committed his cause in effacing himself for the world. (Jonas, 1996, p. 134)

Jonas' rationale in resorting to mythology is after the example of Plato due to the ability of myths to carry the imagination as though by a vehicle to the arena beyond the knowable (Jonas, 1996, p. 134). Moreover, Immanuel Kant had divorced the problem of God from the business of reason, with the claim that it is beyond pure reason—it is of the *Noumena*, and as such, it cannot be known or it cannot be an object of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the only language that can fully accommodate such an idea is the language of myth. Nevertheless, keeping in line with the rigour of the concept and philosophical clarity, Jonas explains his myth immediately after stating it (Rea, 2002, p. 531). The immediately evident factor in this mythical capsulation and its

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant writes of all objects of experience possible to us, that they are nothing but appearances (*Phenomena*). That is to say, they are mere representations, which in the manner in which they are represented, as extended beings, or as a series of alterations, have no independent existence outside our thoughts. Again the thing in itself (the *Noumenon*) is given and one can have no insight as regards its nature. Consequently, the Noumenon does not constitute an object of knowledge (I. Kant (1965), *Critique of Pure Reason*. New York: St Martin's Press, 439 & 484).

subsequent explanation which relates the relationship between God, human beings, and the cosmos is the view that creation is a deed of renunciation of the essence of God. To safeguard the autonomy of the world, God has to act within constraints.

Creation for Jonas means the act by which God contracted Himself or His essence, to make room for the world. The implication of this idea says Jonas, is that, God's essence becomes limited, since by this very act, God renounces His power to the finite, and leaves His course into its hands (Rea, 2002, p. 531). In this way, God is fully exhausted by His own creative effort and He engages in this act of self-limitation in order to make room for free will (Wolin, 2001, p. 129). The *raison d'être* for creation is not substantiated by Jonas, yet God's decision makes room for a *possibility*—the existence of the cosmos as an autonomous being. This has far reaching implications on the being of God as Jonas suggests.

Jonas mainly proceeds via a three-pronged explanation of the being of God namely: God "suffers" and consequently "becomes", "cares", and "takes a risk" in creation. As a consequence of these three, combined with the theory of God's self-contraction, Jonas pronounces God "powerless". With this, he is able to explain the notion of evil in the world, and man's responsibility for the destiny of creation. One can attempt a brief consideration of the major elements in his conception of God.

Jonas speaks of a "Suffering God", a conception, which to him clashes with the biblical image of the "Suffering God" centered on the incarnation and the crucifixion.<sup>2</sup> In his own application of the terminology "Suffering God", Jonas sees God's suffering as flowing from God's relation to the whole world, from the moment of creation, and most probably, from the creation of man (Jonas, 1996, p. 136). He suffers by virtue of his limitation, an idea which to him is portrayed by biblical images of God's sorrow in the face of the failures of his chosen people.

Pursuing the theme of a suffering God, Jonas postulates the idea of a "becoming God": "a being, that emerges in time instead of possessing a completed being that remains identical with itself throughout eternity" (Jonas, 1996, p. 137). In this flux, God's being is affected or better still altered, and made different by what happens in the world. This, to Jonas, harmonises very well with the spirit and language of the Bible, than the ontological distinction of "being" and "becoming" vouched for by classical thought, which divorces the question of becoming from the pure absolute being of the Godhead. In the same vein, Jonas rejects the idea of an eternal recurrence of the same,<sup>3</sup> postulated by Nietzsche as an alternative to Christian metaphysics. To buttress his point, Jonas seeks recourse to the very act of creation, wherein he argues that the act of creation itself was a decisive change in God's own state since God was after all the all in all (Jonas, 1996, p. 137). The implication of this is obvious; Jonas writes:

insofar as He [God] is now no longer alone, his continual relation to creation, once this exists and moves in the flux of becoming, means that he experiences something with the world, that his own being is affected by what goes on in it. (Jonas, 1996, p. 137)

<sup>2</sup> For Jonas, the biblical notion of the suffering God—the incarnation and crucifixion mean a special act by which the deity at one time, and for the special purpose of saving man, sends part of itself into a particular situation of suffering. The difference between the two notions probably hinges on Jonas' stand that a suffering God is a limited and dependent God.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche's doctrine of Eternal Recurrence holds that history repeats itself in identical circles. Nietzsche believes that the course of the world after any given moment ultimately leads back to that moment in a ring of Eternal Recurrence. All the moments of every man's life must forever return. Thus considered, whatever happens now will continue to happen without end (F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), A. Tille (Trans.), Heron Books, Bucks, p. 79 & W. Kaufman, "Nietzsche Friedrich", in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 5, p. 512).

This situation is expressed by Jonas as a transcendent effect of the Holocaust. He writes:

And this I like to believe: that there was weeping in the heights at the waste and despoilment of humanity; that a groan answered the rising shout of ignoble suffering, and wrath—the terrible wrong done to the reality and possibility of each life thus wantonly victimised, each one a thwarted attempt of God. “The voice of thy brother’s blood cries unto me from the ground”: should we not believe that the immense chorus of such cries that has risen up in our lifetime now hangs over our world as a dark and accusing cloud? That eternity looks down upon us with a frown, wounded itself and perturbed in its depths? (Jonas, 1996, p. 129)

Since God changes, it means that He is involved in the world somehow and this way of involvement for Jonas is termed “Caring”. Thus, the consequence of the notion of a Suffering and Becoming God is the notion of a Caring God.

The “Caring” God is a God “not remote, detached, and self-contained” but totally involved in what He cares for (creation). Again, this “God of Jonas” is not a sorcerer who in the act of caring also provides fulfillment for His concern, but one who has left something for other agents to do as a consequence of which He is ultimately dependent on (Jonas, 1996, p. 138). Thus, He is a God who is deeply involved in the fate of His creation, since from the very act of creation He ceased to be self-contained (Jonas, 1996, p. 138). It is a God who has left something for other agents to do and thereby makes divine caring dependent on these agents. This, to Jonas, also implies that God runs a risk.

Since it was necessary in the first place for the world to be, Jonas envisions an endangered God, who takes a risk in creation, without which, the world will be in a state of permanent perfection (Jonas, 1996, p. 137). The fact, therefore, that the world is not perfect, portrays a dual significance, namely, that the one God does not exist (though more than one may) or that the one has renounced its power to an agent of its own creation for the agent to act on its own right and therewith a scope for co-determining that which is a concern of His (Jonas, 1996, p. 138). Jonas sides fully with the latter, in which the divine adventure can end in God enjoying an enriched being, or in failure, hence it is risk taking (Jonas, 2008, p. 216). That is also why as earlier seen, his caring God is not a sorcerer. Now, if God creates such that the effects from him can act in their own right, then he is powerless. This brings Jonas to the ultimate point of his speculations on God, the powerlessness of God. God is powerless because he relinquished all his powers in the act of creating and could not get them back again.

Jonas’ God is not omnipotent; and he admits that this “truth” directly varies, with the time-honoured medieval doctrine of absolute, unlimited divine power (Jonas, 1996, p. 138). Jonas takes his cue from the scientific consideration of the concept of power, wherein one cannot talk of power without counterforce. Power without counter power is empty and for Jonas, this is a metaphysical truth (Jonas, 1996, p. 139).<sup>4</sup> The existence of another object other than God immediately limits his power; in such fashion that attributing absolute power to God is faulty, because absolute power, scientifically speaking, has no object on which to act. According to Jonas, therefore, having “temporalized” Himself via the very act of creation and allowing Himself to be affected by human suffering, God’s all-powerfulness has undergone a diminution, without which even the concept of “Freewill” is baseless. Making use of the scientific rationale for the concept of power, Jonas maintains:

<sup>4</sup> This view that power, by definition, needs a counterforce is not rejected by some metaphysicians, like Thomas Aquinas for instance. In the case of God considered as an infinite power, it is not possible logically to conceive a contrary. It is impossible to have two contraries that are infinite. The very existence of one cancels the other. That is the reason Aquinas holds, like Augustine before him, that good and evil cannot be considered as equal and opposite. The one (evil) is the deprivation of the other. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 2 a. 3.

Absolute power, then, in its solitude, has no object on which to act. But as objectless power it is a powerless power, cancelling itself out: "all" equal "zero" ... power meeting no *resistance* in its relatum is equal to no power at all, power is exercised only in relation to something that itself has power. (Jonas, 1996, p. 139)

Thus considered, power to Jonas is a relational concept, and consequently it requires relation in order to be. The power of God is already relational by the very act of creation and one cannot attribute absolute power to Him.<sup>5</sup>

From the foregoing considerations, a question arises: Does the positing of a limited God therefore, in the sense that he is suffering, becoming, and risk taking, caring and eventually impotent not have implications for the situation of man in the world in terms of man's relationship with God? It certainly does, Jonas admits, and this is why one of his corpuses centers on humankind's transcendental responsibility—*The Imperative of Responsibility*. In addition, any discourse involving God and man cannot be divorced from the reality of evil, especially following man's experience in the world. Hence, what has already been analyzed above as regards the nature of God by Jonas, serves as a logical thread to his attempt at addressing the situation of man in the world, and evil. All these can be viewed as the consequences of his conception of God on man.

The idea that God created out of nothing in the course of creation, is asserted by Jonas, and the view that God is powerless as a result, is his conviction. God's silence at Auschwitz, Jonas contends, was not because God chose not to intervene, but because He could not have intervened; perhaps this is for the reason that He is powerless. Thus, he dismisses the doctrine of unlimited divine power. Jonas conceives power, in purely materialistic or physical terms. This is immediately evident from the fact that after defining power as the "capacity to overcome something", Jonas alludes that "only to the Physical realm does the impotence of God refer" (Jonas, 1996, p. 141). In this physical world the *sine qua non* for the existence of power is an environment of conflict and competition (Jonas, 1996, p. 139).

Power, physically speaking, is a relational concept and has meaning only in a social construction of reality (Lubarsky, 2008, p. 411). Material arguments on power like Jonas' are based on motion, and particularly motion that is intelligible to the human mind. Thus considered, divine omnipotence becomes meaningless, as it entails an absence of a relationship or in other words, is objectless and consequently powerless (Jonas, 1996, p. 139). Jonas goes further than this to say that in the face of evil a claim of divine omnipotence dismisses any claim of divine goodness, and so admits of the compatibility of divine goodness with evil. Pondering on this Jonasian view of power, one sees that it is not logically impossible that the omnipotent God limits His own power, thus, exchanging omnipotence for limited power. The main question rather, as Marcel Sarot observes, lies in the possibility of this logical possibility (Sarot, 1992, p. 178). This will entail that God goes against His very nature as God, and hence an absolute impossibility.

### **Humankind's Transcendental Responsibility**

The entire dramatic exchange between God and His creation, which in the final analysis is championed by man, becomes that of total dependence of God on man. Man has to help the creator, by taking responsibility for

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<sup>5</sup> To fully understand Jonas' position that power is a relational concept, it is necessary to understand his conception of "Existence". For Jonas "Existence" means resistance and thus opposing force. Moreover, reality can better be described as a relationship between two opposite forces: organic and inorganic matter, subjective interiority and mechanistic materialism, living being and dead matter, freedom and necessity, and lastly being and non-being. These, in other words, can be called polarities. They are characterized by struggle, exertion and opposition. (H. Jonas, "Evolution and Freedom: On the Continuity Among Life-Forms", in L. Vogel (Ed.), *Mortality and Morality* (pp. 59-74)). With this consideration of existence itself, one cannot therefore talk of power as an isolated entity. It must be in relation to something.

his vulnerable affairs. In fact, as expressed in one of Jonas' writings, "Immortality and the Modern Temper", man must take his life into his own hands; he must mend the world for the sake of a caring, suffering, and becoming God, who is powerless to realize the promise of his creation on His own (Jonas, 1996, pp. 115-130). For, bringing the world into being, God puts at risk not His own existence but the fulfillment of his purpose in granting to creation a portion of the autonomy that is originally His own. Thus, a heavy responsibility is placed on man as the being vested with this autonomy, with all the risks that it may entail. Vittorio Hösle captures Jonas' claims as follows:

For him [Jonas] the evolution of the world is at the same time the realization of God—a God who, with creation, has limited his omnipotence and renounced intervention in the course of the world. The actualization of the moral law contributes to his becoming while the self-destruction of humankind would maim God himself, whose purposes can be realized, only with the help of man ... in any case whether humanity will act responsibly towards future generations, God's fate itself is at stake. (Hösle, 2001, p. 39)

The task of human responsibility is important for Jonas, who was at the same time very much preoccupied with the question of formulating an ethics appropriate to an age of *runaway* technology: a technology that runs head-on towards the gradual destruction of the world and humanity. This ethics is an ethics of responsibility: "an ethics implying a specific duty of humans towards humans and towards the non-human world" (Nikulin, 2001, p. 101). With this view in mind, the problem of Auschwitz becomes primarily that of man, in which case, the silence of man, during this period (those who watched or ignored the suffering, thus, abandoning the Jews to unutterable loneliness) is "even more incomprehensible and more appalling than the silence of God" (Wiese, 2008, p. 447). Hence, with the very nature of the world at stake, man, the only being known to take responsibility, must take responsibility for his fragile environment (Jonas, 2008, p. xiii).

As a logical consequence of God's impotence, in order to render the concept of God meaningful after Auschwitz, according to Jonas, is to admit that God's goodness is compatible with the existence of evil (Jonas, 1996, p. 140). To reiterate this, Jonas explains: "Having given Himself whole to the becoming world, God has no more to give: it is man's now to give to Him" (Jonas, 1996, p. 142). In the case of Auschwitz, God was silent not because He chose not to intervene, but because He could not have intervened. God remains impotent in the physical realm, but addresses us through the manifest goodness of creation itself with the "mutely insistent appeal of his unfulfilled goal" (Jonas, 1996, p. 141). Evil and suffering to Jonas are real. He gives an in-depth discussion of the argument on God's powerlessness in which he deftly delineates its proper objects, hence stating concisely the situation of evil in the world. In this way, there are three attributes of God at stake: intelligibility, absolute goodness, and absolute power. For Jonas, these attributes are logically related in such fashion that the conjunction of any two excludes the third, the reason for this being that, "we can have divine omnipotence, together with divine goodness, only at the price of complete divine inscrutability" (Jonas, 1996, p. 139). Thus, enclosed with the inevitable problem of evil, intelligibility in God must be sacrificed to the combination of the other two attributes, since according to Jonas, "only a completely unintelligible God, can be said to be absolutely good, and absolutely powerful, yet tolerate the world as it is" (Jonas, 1996, p. 139). Hence, with the above three attributes, goodness is inalienable from the concept of God, and not open to qualification. Intelligibility, on the other hand, which is conditional on both God and man's nature, cannot also be eliminated. That which can be eliminated is God's omnipotence, for, if He were absolutely omnipotent, then He will be either not good or totally unintelligible. As a conclusion, therefore, if God is to be intelligible, His goodness as already stated must be compatible with the existence of evil, and the *sine qua non* for this is that God is not all

powerful, then and only then, can it be possible that God is intelligible and good, and yet there is evil in the world (Jonas, 1996, p. 140).

### **Tampering Atheism**

Hans Jonas stands out so different from these currents in that his claims for speculating on God do not take a totally radical negation of his existence, but to see how he could preserve some faith in the Jews. That is why Christian Wiese writes of Jonas that the question of God for him must be accounted for in the face of the modern undermining of all metaphysics and in the face of Auschwitz, which seems to relegate all reflection on the divine to the realm of the ineffable and the inconceivable (Weise, 2007, p. xxv). Jonas' account of God from this point of view, at least makes God effable and conceivable, seeming as it is to exonerate God from being responsible for evil in the world.

The forgoing point has to be made clear, for, scanning through his concept of God and some of his works; one immediately gets the impression of a seeming rejection or skepticism about God. This is evident in his ethics wherein arguments have been advanced which suggest that God is totally self-effacing in his ethics. It is nevertheless, important to note that the question of God and his existence animates Jonas' life, for at the end of his *Concept of God After Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice*, he describes his speculation on God as mere stammering. He writes:

All this, let it be said at the end, is but stammering. Even the words of the great seers and adorers—the prophets and the psalmists—which stand beyond comparison, were stammers before the eternal mystery. Every mortal answer to Job's question, too, cannot be more than that. Mine is the opposite to the one given by the Book of Job: this, for an answer, invoked the plenitude of God's power; mine, his chosen voidance of it. And yet, strange to say, both are in praise. For the divine renunciation was made so that we, the mortals, could be. This, too, so it seems to me, is an answer to Job: that in him God himself suffers. Which is true, if any, we can know of none of the answers ever tried. (Jonas, 1996, pp. 142-143)

Again, in his *Memoirs*, rejecting outright atheism as though speaking to his contemporary thinkers he writes: "There's a mystery that holds us in thrall, regardless of any temporally determined private, personal positions we may embrace intellectually and consciously" (Jonas, 2008, p. 214).

This is perhaps why although drowned in an age of intellectual and moral entropy, modern man still feels the need of the absolute, of an encompassing truth and love, but he has become so subjective and so much aware of his freedom that he hesitates to commit himself. According to Deepak Chopra, in the absence of knowing the infinite source of energy, and creativity (God), life's miseries come into being. Therefore, getting close to God "heals the fear of death, confirms the existence of the soul, and gives ultimate meaning to life" (Chopra, 2000, p. 2). The position of Jonas as regards the necessity of God in human living which sharply counteracts atheism reveals the inherent reality that atheism is not absolutely speaking possible. Jacques Maritain, one of the leading Neo-Thomists, is known to have remarked that the internal dynamism of the will's choice of good as against evil, involves an implicit affirmation of God, the Good itself, as the ultimate good of human existence (Copleston, 1999, p. 259). This is a purely practical knowledge of God which can co-exist with theoretical ignorance of God. In addition to "practical atheists", who believe that they believe in God but deny him by their conduct, and "absolute atheists", Maritain admits of "Pseudo-atheists" who believe that they do not believe in God but who in fact believe in him unconsciously (Maritain, 1952, p. 70).

Atheism, if stretched to its ultimate roots in the will, would simply end up “killing the will metaphysically”. From a Thomistic perspective, in desiring finite goods, man seeks God without knowing it since the will by nature aspires to the Good as such, Pure Goodness, God himself. With this, one appreciates the cry of despair of the atheist, Voltaire: “I die forsaken by men and by God”. In the evening of his life he sought the consolation of “repentance” in vain. He had never been sincere in his attacks against religion (O’Sullivan, 1992, p. 78). Indeed, no man can possibly live as an atheist without annihilating his very being.

Jonas seems from his speculation on God to be deeply immersed in the “now” or “present”, looking at man in his experiential situation without considering so much the spiritual aspect of man. Notwithstanding, a critical study reveals that Jonas’ feet, as has been said of Plato, are deeply planted on the ground while his eyes look upwards. This reveals a kind of balance between talking about the reality of God and man’s existential situation. Jonas illustrates this by his usage of the myth to talk about God, which renders a certain finesse to his speculation far more than what other philosophers have attempted to do. The Jonasian mythological method merits ulterior reflection.

However, one wonders if this does not contradict the very idea of an impotent God. How could such an impotent being be necessary? In which sense can we talk about necessity here given that he cannot even help us solving our problems?

### **On the Jonasian Employ of Myth in His Speculation**

Jonas’ myth stands midway between God and the cosmos—a kind of blend between faith and reason (Jonas, 2001, pp. 259-261). To better appreciate this Jonasian employ of mythology which is not only visible in his *Concept of God after Auschwitz*, it is necessary to reflect on the relation between mythology and philosophy.

It may indeed be stunning for many who read Jonas’ works, that Mythology makes its appearance within the confines of Philosophy. This particular worry gives rise to the mind-puzzling question: What link is there between Philosophy and myth; is there really any link between these two? In an attempt to answer this question, one shall proceed via a triple-bind consideration: first, considering Mythology—being at the very beginning of Philosophy; secondly, considering Mythology as a way of expressing philosophical themes, consequently, portraying Mythology as a style of philosophizing and thirdly, myth as a handmaid of philosophy.

In the first place where myth is regarded as being the very beginning of philosophical thought, we take a look at the situation prior to the Ancient Greek Philosophers. This was an era in which, faced with the fundamental questions about the reasons for the existence of phenomena, many were provoked to thinking out and finding solutions to these questions. Some of these questions were: Where does the world (and all its contents) come from? Who is responsible for the existence of everything? What should man do? Why is there evil (death, suffering)? With all these and more, many sought solutions in myths—the supernatural to explain the natural. But being dissatisfied with these supernatural explanations, some took upon the task to probe deep and come up with natural solutions to resolve these problems. Hence, it was then that Philosophy—the science that applies the natural to explain the natural—was born with the advent of the Ancient Greek Philosophers.

Secondly, as a style of expressing Philosophy, we could seek refuge in the phrase: “Literature incarnates Philosophy” (Kreeft, 2005, p. 22). As part of Literature, myths were the best way, sometimes the only way, of conveying particular truths (Philosophy), that would otherwise remain inexpressible. This is what may be known today as the “inherent truth of Mythology” (Pearce, 2005, p. 243). Thus Philosophy and myth belong



together. While the former argues abstractly, saying what truth is conceptually, the latter shows truth in concrete terms, and so persuades. It is for this reason that there is in Mythology (Literature), a certain force, spiritual, which drives across the philosophical themes, truths, contained in thought. Nevertheless, human thought is both concrete (particular) and abstract (universal) at the same time. We cannot think of abstract universals like “man” without imagining some concrete, particular example as well. Whenever we recognize a concrete particular as intelligible and meaningful, we use an abstract universal to classify and define it. Therefore, these two are necessarily linked and reinforce each other. Philosophy makes Literature clear and shows essences; Literature makes Philosophy real and shows existence.

A third approach to the role myths play in Philosophy is provided by Josef Pieper. In his study of Plato’s Dialogues, he separates the Platonic stories from the myths, especially the eschatological myths, which are often found at the end of the dialogues, such as *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. In doing this, he makes a valid case for a truth, especially found in the eschatological myths, that is not reducible to the rational truth sought by philosophers. Though not purely rational truth, it is not inferior. The truth stems from tradition, which is gotten through “hearing”, and handing down, but which is not mere “hearsay”, and does not seem to be expressible by philosophical arguments (Pieper, 2011, p. xii). Aristotle too confirms this when he holds that our forefathers handed down to posterity a tradition, in the form of myth about the gods, which must be considered as inspired utterance. But the task is separating this original material from the additions which have distorted it (Aristotle, 1985, *Metaphysics*, 12:18). By establishing a threefold distinction of eschatological myths from other stories in Platonic dialogues (some of which even Socrates dismisses, like that in *Gorgias* 524a8f), Pieper makes for myths as a handmaid of philosophy.

Valuating Jonas therefore, from his employ of the myth in his philosophy, one immediately appreciates the complicated nature of the subject matter he is dealing with, which necessitates a kind of language that does justice to an empirical and transcendental dimension of life.

Viewing Jonas from the Kantian perspective, the recourse to myth is consistent with a commitment to reason in so far as a myth symbolizes what can never be an object of knowledge for us but can be imagined. Jonas’s point here, which is obviously borrowed from Kant, is not to reject as meaningless what lies beyond the realm of our knowledge, but to show the limits of knowledge, and as such making room for faith (Takov, 2009, p. 106).

It is important at this juncture to access, the Jonasian conception of God’s impotence, which is the fulcrum of his speculative enquiry on God, in the sense that everything about his conception of God revolves around it, as must have been evident from the analysis.

### **The Relevance of Jonas’ Conception of an Impotent God**

Jonas’ categorization of God as impotent and yet, necessary, leaves us with a number of philosophically puzzling questions.

True enough, Lubarsky observes, that there is a shift from talking about divine omnipotence to speaking of divine impotence. This implies that any involvement of God in the world would result in a subvention of natural laws and the autonomy of the world. Hence the replacement of God’s previous “absolute sovereignty” by absolute impotence (Lubarsky, 2008, p. 412). God is thus presented as radically unable to intervene in the world and this accounts for his silence at Auschwitz. Nevertheless, an examination of Jonas’ definition and

explanation of the relational nature of power within the physical realm reveals an interstice—the non consideration of the aspect of “time”.

Power has a precise meaning in the physical arena wherein it is defined as the amount of work done per unit of time (Heimler & Price, 1977, p. 38). The more rapid work is done, the greater the power. In other words, power is the rate at which energy is transferred. If  $P$ ,  $W$ , and  $T$  stand for power, work done, and time respectively, then  $P = W/T$ . If the work that is done is against resistance, it follows that power is the capacity to overcome that resistance, which must take place in time. All power that one possesses is power to actualize states of affairs in a certain time, and since one cannot bring time to a standstill, the power one possesses elapses with time. Hence, as soon as one has the capacity to do something, as the above equation illustrates, time limits the power (Sarot, 1992, p. 179). According to Sarot, “the limiting quality of time is a given, and one can exert no influence on its existence” (Sarot, 1992, p. 179). Sarot once more affirms that “the only influence we can exert on our actions is not on whether our power will be limited or not, but on how our power will be limited” (Sarot, 1992, p. 179). This difference is very important for, given the same time and work done, two people can use their powers differently. It follows from this that:

S limits its own power at T if and only if, S restricts the range of states of affairs it is able to bring about at some time after T. The fact that every state of affairs [B] brought about by S at T excludes the actualization of “not-[B]” at T does not count as a limitation of the power of S. Consequently, the fact that God brings about [B] at T and thereby chooses not to actualize “not-[B]” at T does not count as a limitation of the power of God. (Sarot, 1992, p. 180)

The fact that God does not therefore intervene at a particular time, perhaps in human suffering, does not mean that his power is limited. It could rather mean that he chose to restrain himself. External manifestations of action are not always the best use of power, or the best evidence of closeness (Sarah, 2017, p. 93). Inferring from ordinary life, our closest friends are sometimes distant from us, but that does not prevent them from loving us dearly or acting in our favour. In the face of the horror of Auschwitz, Jonas sees the attributes of omnipotence and goodness as mutually exclusive. The question of God’s self-restraint is an option which Jonas is in sharp disagreement with, as can be seen when he avers:

Nothing of this is still of use in dealing with the event for which “Auschwitz” has become the symbol. Not fidelity or infidelity, belief or unbelief, not guilt or punishment, not trial, witness and messianic hope, nay, not even strength or weakness, heroism or cowardice, defiance or submission had a place there. Of all these, Auschwitz, which also devoured the infants and babes, knew nothing ... There does, then, in spite of all, exist a connection of a wholly perverse kind with the God-seekers and prophets of yore, whose descendants were thus collected out of the dispersion and gathered into the unity of joint death. And God let it happen. What God could let it happen? (Jonas, 1996, p. 133)

But then, to talk about God’s powerlessness in the physical realm which is logically understood, but does not tally with man’s exercise of power with his fellow man and cosmos, necessitates a subtle consideration of God’s self-restraint as reason for not intervening in grave situations like Auschwitz.

If God resolves not to interfere with human freedom (self-restraint), the result for human beings is apparently the same as when He did not have the ability to interfere (self-limitation). Again, if it is by the self-limitation of God that man is free, it implies that God gives up all control, whereas if it is by self-restraint, God remains in control (Sarot, 1992, p. 182). Jonas admits the former stand, which is more radical and as he says, irrevocable. Considering the latter, God has the option to interfere whenever He wants. With these considerations, how therefore, can one understand the possibility of God limiting His omnipotence when He could achieve the same results by restraining himself? By implication, God’s self-restraint of power cannot be

accepted in the Jonasian view because despite restraining Himself, God is expected to interfere in extremely grave circumstances like Auschwitz, but He does not. Taking Jonas' standpoint of God's self-limitation of power, it makes matters worse. This is because there will eminently be no need for a God who is good and has good intentions but limited in power. Again, looking at both considerations, God will not be trustworthy if He could let things go out of hand because He restrained Himself, or worst still, because He chose to be limited. There is an additional difficulty posed by the self-limitation of power. Metaphysically speaking, the attributes of God are not further qualifications of his being; rather, they are co-extensive with his very essence. This means, God cannot possess one attribute in fullness, and possess others in a relative fashion. If God is not omnipotent, then he cannot likewise be necessary, eternal, infinite, all-loving or all-just, and so on. A God with limited power contradicts the very idea of a self-subsistent being. Nevertheless, the idea of God's self-restraint of power carries more weight. This is first and foremost, because man is totally in need of a God who is not hidden and powerless. The categories of a God who restrains His power, readily fit with this description, while those of a God who limits his power do not. One cannot trust such a God, or worship him as Jonas seems to portray. The best idea therefore, is the admittance of a God who "restrains" Himself in favour of cosmic autonomy, or better still humanity's freedom (Vogel, 2001, p. 134). Such a God remains powerful. This certainly is the message Jonas seeks to pass across, albeit indirectly.

The idea that God limits his power in favour of human freedom is also supported by Nietzsche when he says that God is dead and no longer possesses any validity. The death of God according to Nietzsche, is understood metaphorically as man's liberation. Since God is dead, man is the centre of all things. God was an obstacle to man's progress but now that he is dead, man is supremely free (Nietzsche, 1883, p. 11). Lawrence Vogel comments that Jonas agrees with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Levinas that the God of theology-as-theodicy is dead (Vogel, 2001, p. 134). Notwithstanding, it is important to note that together with Levinas, Jonas rebukes Heidegger's positing of a non-objectifying listening to the call of Being, which amounts to a pagan deification of the world. Here, the divine does not transcend but belongs to Being. "Jonas also disagrees with Levinas", Vogel contends, about what it takes to think God's transcendence. For Jonas, the theologian is beholden to objectifying thought and language, even though this objectification inevitably fails to do justice to the divine (Vogel, 2001, p. 134). One can also best appreciate Jonas' concept of God, from the value Jonas gives to life, which ultimately blames man for his silence in Auschwitz being more blameworthy than that of God. As observes Sandra Lubarsky, Jonas' arguments against omnipotence correspond to those advanced by process thinkers who affirm the relational nature of power as well as the perfection of God's goodness. But there are some differences which make for Jonas' uniqueness.

First and foremost in defining power as "the capacity to overcome something" and which operates in and contributes to an environment of conflict and competition, one immediately observes that power involves a relationship of "over-against" (Lubarsky, 2008, p. 411). This is evident in his consideration of existence as resistance or opposing force. This idea is totally different from that of process thinkers who consider power in absolutely equal terms. Again, given the risky nature of God's adventure, one sees that for Jonas, power relative to man is destructive. This comes out clearly in his *Imperative of Responsibility* (Jonas, 1984, p. 138; Lubarsky, 2008, p. 412). More so, there is an unspoken assumption that God's power is supernatural, which would indeed have to be if the world were created by God *ex nihilo* (Lubarsky, 2008, p. 412).

The question of a suffering God is age-old both in philosophy and theology. From the dawn of the patristic period, Christian theologians held as axiomatic that God is impassible. He does not undergo emotional changes

of state, and so cannot suffer. Towards the end of the 19th and 20th centuries, we find a shift among many theologians, some influenced by two world wars, and others by the Process theodicy of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, who held that God is by nature passible and so can suffer (Weinandy, 2001, p. 2). For some philosophical currents, human suffering is inconceivable, talking less of divine suffering. Francis Bacon's new ideal for modernity marked a transition from knowledge for the purpose of truth and virtue, to "knowledge for power" (Bacon, 1960, pp. 3-4, 267-268). In this ideal, suffering is a scandal, a problem to be conquered rather than a mystery or moral challenge to be lived. This position would make no sense out of the question of God's suffering, which Jonas sees as flowing from God's relation to the whole world, from the moment of creation, and most probably, from the creation of man. A brief look at the philosophical attempts to reconcile this tension about the suffering of God will show the implications of Jonas' position.

One explanation holds that Greek philosophical thought, especially Platonism hijacked biblical revelation. Thus conceived, the static, self-sufficient, immutable, and impassible God of Plato usurped (through Philo and the early Church Fathers) the living, personal, active, loving, and passible God of Biblical revelation. Proponents of this view find a peak of this integration in the Scholastics, like Aquinas who said: "In God, there are no passions. Now love is a passion. Therefore love is not in God or God loves without passions" (Aquinas, cf. Cobb & Griffin, 1976, p. 75).

However, within Scholastic thought one still finds a rich understanding of why God is immutable and impassible. For Aquinas, creatures constantly change because they continually actualize their potential for good or evil. But God, by virtue of being pure act, is not in this scheme of self-actualization. However, this does not make God inert, as a rock. God is impassible because his love is perfectly in act (God is love), and no further self-constituting act can make him more loving. Bernard of Clairvaux expresses this in a paradox that has become classic: God does not suffer, but can suffer-with, "*Deus pati non potest, sed compati potest*" (Bernard of Clairvaux, 1844-1845, p. 906). Though he is unchanging, his compassionate love and providence amidst human suffering, is his "suffering with".

Jonas argues that God suffers by virtue of his limitation: an idea which to him is portrayed by biblical images of God's sorrow in the face of the failures of his chosen people. However, this view stands to be corrected by a right biblical hermeneutic that is consistent with the philosophical issue in question. Biblical references to God's grief (Gen 6:6-7), or God "relenting his anger" (Jonah 4:2), need not be taken as literal statements of a change of emotional state, or possibility of suffering, but as references to his compassion. Such reactions or changes predicated of God, actually express a deeper truth—that of God's unchanging and unalterable love and justice as the transcendent other. The "suffering" of God advocated by Jonas is at the expense of his omnipotence. This need not be so, for as Weinandy argues, there need not be a contradiction between the immanent operations of God and his utterly transcendent nature. He who is completely other than the created order can be present to and active within the created order without losing his complete otherness (Weinandy, 2001, p. 2). God is immanent *because* he is transcendent.

### **Conclusion: The Value of Life and Man's Silence in Auschwitz**

One cannot however immediately fail to see the value placed on life by Jonas: a value which necessitates a categorical imperative for preserving it. Indeed a central message one gets from Jonas is that life is not given to us to receive but to achieve. We have a responsibility to preserve life which ripples to our future generations.

This explains why the silence of man during Auschwitz becomes more blameworthy than that of God. Søren Kierkegaard even defends the apparent “silence” of God by holding that God is quiet out of love, just as he speaks or acts out of love. With the same paternal heart, God guides both with his voice, or admonishes with his silence (Kierkegaard, 1990). Robert Sarah, in this connection, says to equate the “silence” of God with indifference, abandonment or powerlessness is to misinterpret the power of silence. “Silence” can also be a reproach, or an invitation for man to probe into the mystery of his dignity, and how that dignity can be compromised by the misuse of freedom (Sarah, 2017, p. 90).

Man’s freedom is a gift from God. To give anything to an unperfected being for proper use is to face the possibility of an improper use, and this fact is particularly evident in the case of human freedom. But to give a thing for use is not to cause or will abuse; on the contrary it is to will and to make possible its proper use (Xavier, 1989, p. 66). Freewill has its ultimate object in the good, and man decides to do evil wilfully. Consequently, he is a problem to himself and even for his very environment. Augustine of Hippo maintains that moral evil cannot be traced to any other source beyond the misuse of man’s freewill (Augustine, 1999, VII, 3). Already, presented with the present situation of the world, massively animated by relativism, moral anarchism etc., one is beginning to realize in what a sad plight both nature and man would be in if they were completely at the mercy of man and his vagaries (Heschel, 1976, p. 40). This fact is evident, if one considers the very dramatic situation of the Holocaust of which Auschwitz serves a good sample. The outcome of Auschwitz cannot only be attributed to Hitler who masterminded the whole quest. Hitler had a portion of people who supported him and carried out his operations. Why could those men not reject such heinous motives of his? If they did, Hitler should not have gone that far. The whole reality of the Holocaust emerged from man, and it was left at the discretion of man to stop it. Such is what obtains in many other existential situations that man faces. In a “technocratic society”, man has lost his selfhood and dignity (Lescoré, 1973, p. 177). This glaring fact can be seen from his misuse of freedom and power.

Jonas’ ethics of responsibility, overtones of which can be seen in his concept of God after Auschwitz, becomes of utmost importance in our present generation and for generations to come. This ethics is an ethics of “life”; man must preserve life; to say that he must “preserve” life implies that life does not come from man but from some other Being (God) who creates it. Man’s function is thus to preserve and maintain it at all cost. A heavy responsibility placed on man. Man for Jonas has the ability to do so, given the fact that he is a rational creature. To fully understand this position of Jonas, according to Vogel, it is necessary to note that Jonas believed that creation is good in itself, meaning that God’s cause cannot go wrong in as much as life retains its innocence. But then, with the evolution of humanity, life arrives at the highest intensification of its own value, as man is endowed with the capacity for knowledge and freedom. Consequently, there is a price to be paid, since with knowledge and freedom comes the power to will and do evil. And for Jonas, this power becomes absolute in a technological age with our ability to destroy ourselves (Vogel, 1996, p. 23).

Furthermore, Jonas’ ethics is an ethics for the future, which means a contemporary ethics concerned with the protection of the future for our descendants, which can ultimately be attained, if one acts very well in the present, amidst technological advancements and plurality in all forms.

This is particularly because technology threatens not only the now but the future and as such, “moral responsibility demands that we take into consideration the welfare of those who, without being consulted, will later be affected by what we are doing now” (Jonas, 1996, p. 99).

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