Boris Pasternak, in “Translating Shakespeare,” speaks of Hamlet as one whom chance has allocated “the role of judge of his own times and servant of the future,” the high destiny of “a life devoted ... to a heroic task.” Hans Jonas was such a judge and can do great service for our future. In *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, Jonas casts a critical eye upon the unprecedented powers of modern technological civilization. He fears that our age is rapidly moving toward global ecological and human disaster. Nature, specifically the realm of organic life, cannot long withstand the technological assault. Jonas calls upon us to renounce utopian dreams of human mastery over the conditions of life and to exercise a new responsibility commensurate with our novel powers. Our ethical responsibility, and our fateful ontological option, is to do what is necessary to ensure the ongoing, worldly integrity of man and living nature into the indefinite future.

The signaling of ecological and moral crisis is by now commonplace. However, Jonas’s recognition that traditional systems of ethics lack the resources to cope with our unprecedented technological powers, and his endeavor to fill the philosophic and practical vacuum with an “ethics of responsibility,” are anything but ordinary (ix–x, 128). The fashioning of a new ethics of responsibility is Jonas’s heroic task, summoning the full resources of his philosophic abilities and originality. We are taken into previously uncharted waters, and it is important to appreciate carefully the nature and force of his argument.

According to Jonas, the very forces that have spawned our new and fateful powers of action, in particular the twin giants of modern science and technology, have significantly undermined philosophy and ethical theory. The modern philosophy of nature and its practical applications, scientific materialism and its technological successes, have conquered our minds. Philosophy and ethics have been set in disarray, just when they are needed the most. At the heart of the conquest is scientific materialism’s forcible theoretical denial of the autonomy of thought and the reality of intrinsic values, ethical or otherwise (22–23).

The modern philosophy of nature is the crux of our philosophic problems and the chief obstacle to an adequate theory of ethical obligations. Jonas squarely fastens on this cardinal issue. He held that the initial fateful move came historically amidst the rise of modern science, with Descartes’s dualistic partition of the world into res extensa and res cogitans. All purpose, subjectivity, and value were banished from nature into mind. Nature was left valueless and dead, a mere play of mechanical forces or efficient causation, just as the new mathematical science required. Correlatively, organic life was written out of
this philosophic scene altogether. Organisms were reduced to natural mechanisms. Thinking and its valuations, including ethics, reasonably held their own as long as the autonomy of the mind was upheld, as with Descartes and Kant. Yet logically even here all values and valuations had to be decidedly anthropocentric or theocentric. At least, they could not concern the intrinsic worth of nature, for now by metaphysical fiat it had none. Moreover, backed by the successful thrust of scientific materialism, belief or confidence in an extramundane deity and the autonomy of mind or reason was undercut. Even anthropocentric values lost a legitimate home and any philosophic justification. Blind and arational forces of nature reign supreme, in theory if not in practice. Such forces require and can have no philosophic, rational, or ethical justification (22–23).

This is the dominant cultural and philosophic situation that confronts us and that requires such radical measures to overcome—measures needed to save philosophy, ethical theory, and perhaps in the end the very existence of man and organic life. Although *The Imperative of Responsibility* aims foremost at establishing our practical obligations in the face of technological power and potential ecological disaster, Jonas’s argument unobtrusively but crucially involves an explicit and damning critique of the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of mind espoused by scientific materialism (205 ff.). Out of the ruins of the discredited philosophic materialism, Jonas speculatively proposes a new theory of nature that philosophically rehabilitates nature, life, mind, and objective values, and that serves as the ontological and justifying ground of the new ethics of responsibility.

**NATURE REVALUED: THE PHILOSOPHY OF PURPOSIVE BEING**

Jonas begins his substantive speculations and the crucial philosophic rehabilitation of nature by returning to human subjectivity its own self-validating credentials (64–65). We are what we seem. Philosophically, this means taking the inner testimony of our subjective life seriously. This specifically entails recognizing the circumscribed potency of subjectivity and crediting the reality of efficacious purposes in determining autonomous trains of thought and bodily activities.

Moreover, in philosophical speculation we must bow before well-established scientific and empirical facts. Minds or subjectivity are nowhere found independent of physical, organic bodies. In fact, we know directly from inner experience that the activities of mind are impossible without our bodies and the surrounding world. The mind lives off the primary objects of its thoughts, the world abroad, and the interests and emotions arising from the worldly involved organism. In short, if we were not biological organisms, we would and could not be efficaciously purposive subjects or minds.

Further, we know and must take seriously the now incontrovertible fact that all organic life has evolved out of and remains within nature. This fact, coupled with the ultimate organic and worldly grounds of all subjective and mental activities, blocks the serious entertainment of dualistic theses and the intrusion of mind, subjectivity, or soul from some anatural elsewhere (66–67). Philosophically we can no longer accept anatural or antinatural ontological principles. We are all, or should be, post-Darwinian, scientists and philosophers alike. In any case, radical Cartesian dualisms and their like have always been hounded by fatal flaws of incoherence or inconsistency, the problem of bringing dual features of reality—for example, mind and body—rationally together. Things fundamentally or substantially dissimilar do not easily fit into a single scheme of things. The urge toward a philosophic “monism” that respects the full diversity and complexity of the real has always been the more rationally attractive option.

All purpose, subjectivity, and value were banished from nature into mind. Nature was left valueless and dead, a mere play of mechanical forces or efficient causation.

Jonas explicitly adheres to this rational desire to weave a coherent story of man and nature. He starts with the self-evident and widely attested fact of man’s subjective potency and employs an eminently sensible philosophic method. Whereas science reduces natural phenomena to their underlying physical causes, which “explain” them scientifically (the “reductionist method”), philosophy in its “interpretation” of concrete nature must work regressively (69 ff.). If man is thoroughly a natural and organic being, and if man exhibits the reality of effective purposes, then purposiveness must be a fundamental principle of reality, reigning in various degrees of intensity throughout nature, as intertwined with “physical” or efficient causation. Nature manifestly shows itself in man, and we must “work back” from the evidence of ourselves.

Human interests, aims (purposes), feelings (emotions), thinking, and bodily activities are all intertwined natural principles and as such can be judiciously or critically employed in philosophically interpreting, if not scientifically explaining, the natural realm (71–72).

In sum, these characteristic human features naturally result from and are ongoingly involved in the dynamics of the natural
realm. Using the regressive method and brooking no radical leaps or discontinuities in nature (philosophic monism requires such a principle of continuity [69]), we are rationally justified in asserting that effective purposiveness is a fundamental feature of natural being.

This is decisive. This basic assertion underlies Jonas’s bold and original speculative philosophy. The philosophic interpretation of the world and ourselves undergoes a systematic sea change.

Most fundamentally, nature is rehabilitated as a significant realm of existence. It is a realm that harbors its own overall value and specific concrete values, its own intrinsic goodness, and its own “ends-in-themselves” (80 ff.). The materialist’s nature, we recall, is inherently valueless, a mere dynamic concatenation of blind physical forces, in which there is no true subjectivity or activity. It is merely and contingently there, indifferent to itself. With respect to value, it is indistinguishable from nothingness or nonbeing.

Not so with purposive nature or being. Individual instances of subjective activity and purpose are the concrete self-affirmations of being in the face of the ever-present potential of not-being or nothingness (81). With subjectivity there is an ever-recurrent and active “no-to-nonbeing,” a primordial self-assertion that intrinsically matters to being itself. For Jonas, nature is anything but a realm of indifference. With purposiveness, natural reality becomes inherently dramatic. In ontologically staving off nonbeing, it creates its own particular forms, values, and goodness in passing. (A concrete, natural value is the mating of individual purposive activity and definite form.) The primordial value and goodness of “nature active” is precisely this purposive staving off of nothingness and valuelessness. There is an “infinite distance,” an incommensurability, between purposive being and nothingness (46). Concrete purposive activities, laden with their own particular values, are emphatic being over against the purposeless nothing, an absolute chasm never “in reality” to be traversed. Thus individual purposive beings are the aboriginal and self-justifying “ends-in-themselves,” ontologically harboring intrinsic “value-in-itself” and “goodness-in-itself” (81, 83).

These philosophic reflections and speculations bring us directly to our contemporary cultural and ethical situation. The ontological facts and achieved results of purposive nature and our natural estate determine both the capacity and the need for ethical responsibility.³ We now urgently require a substantive philosophy to reveal and to clarify our objective obligations. In us, purposive nature has potentially overrun herself (138). The vulnerability and finitude of nature and ourselves—with the threats to nature’s goodness and intrinsic worth that issue from newly empowered, technological man—must be met by our aboriginal but circumscribed powers to say no to not-being (139–40).

**NATURE AND ETHICS: THE THEORY OF RESPONSIBILITY**

Jonas’s theory of ethical responsibility rests on violating two cardinal principles of modern philosophy: there can be no metaphysical truth, and no “ought” can be derived from what “is.” Both tenets hold within a philosophy crucially determined by scientific materialism (44). If scientific, empirically verifiable knowledge is the epistemic benchmark for all that we can know or understand, then metaphysics, which offers a “speculative,” conceptual comprehension of reality, must be an idle pursuit (45). If nature or being is, as the materialism takes it to be, an inherently valueless physical realm, then indeed no “ought” can be derived from an “is” (130). Valueless being can offer no clues about what would be for the better or for the worse, let alone establish the foundation of ethical obligation. But nature and life are not devoid of inherent ontological value. Over crucial matters, the fundamental ontological facts of selves and the world determine what we ought, and ought not, to do (131 ff.).

This philosophic reintroduction of value into nature has its darker side. In an indifferent nature, nothing can harm, and nothing can be harmed. The opposite holds in purposive nature. Under its own worldly spur, nature evolves concrete purposive individuals, acting subjects, that are by ontological necessity finite, mortal, and vulnerable (5, 81). In their self-constituting self-affirmations, the natural actors do not merely face blank nothingness. Rather, they necessarily face and essentially depend on each other and on dynamically evolving nature as a whole. In its various and recurrent self-affirmations, purposive activity is fundamentally the meeting of natural, biological necessities and the confrontation with worldly others to which the purposive individual is essentially tied (198). This is the fundamental message of the metabolic existence of biological organisms, nature’s most elaborate entities. (Metabolic existence and
Organisms can be only by ever becoming and by riding the crest of relation to the worldly other. In this necessary truck with the world abroad, an organism’s purposes can be frustrated and its achievements destroyed, most importantly its own active endeavor to be. To gain entrance into the worldly web of purposive existence is to assume a circumscribed potency constantly threatened and eventually overcome. In short, the fundamental value and goodness of nature active and its inherent vulnerability are intrinsically tied together.

To understand critically Jonas’s substantive philosophic vision of nature, we must be clear about what he means, and does not mean, by natural purposiveness and his regressive analysis. He does not claim that conscious human subjectivity is diffused throughout nature in more or less minimal forms. Subjective activity does not necessarily imply consciousness, and purposiveness as such presupposes neither (72–73). To gain a coherent picture of dynamically evolving nature, Jonas speculatively posits concrete instances of “psyche,” striving, or aim (that is, purposiveness) that are not individual organisms or subjects in the emphatic biological sense (71). These “inorganic” strivings underlie a natural “telos” of the universe to evolve concrete instances of organic life and individual subjects proper (74–75).

The key to the objective grounding of obligations and the moving of ethics beyond the bounds of the arbitrary subjective will of man is to discover intrinsic value or a final “good-in-itself” within being (49, 77–78, 84). Jonas recognizes this intrinsic goodness in the general purposiveness and the concrete purposive beings of nature (75). Such ultimate value and goodness, constituted by entities actively fending off nonbeing—the struggle within metabolic life between being and nothingness—has a moral claim on human action. It should subsist. It should be preserved. The goodness of the self-affirmation of being, in

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**effective purposiveness is a fundamental feature of natural being.**

This means that, ontologically, intrinsic value, goodness, and “ends-in-themselves” are not inherently tied to human subjectivity or consciousness. In varying degrees, they are spread throughout nature, most emphatically in the organic realm of life and perhaps minimally beyond. This blocks any overweening anthropocentric vision of the world and philosophically establishes the objective status of intrinsic values, the good, and self-justifying natural beings and activities. The realm of value no longer threatens to be swallowed up and lost in an arbitrary human subjectivity or will radically independent of the natural world.

Correlatively, with our anchoring in natural reality, we are enlightened about our status in the scheme of things and about our circumscribed powers and inherent limitations. In Jonas’s monistic vision, we are interpreted as purposive nature’s most elaborate performance, engendered in its dynamic ongoingness. In us, efficacious purposiveness has become emphatically subjective and individual, conscious and desiring of itself, moving decisively beyond organic others (129). In our interdependence, in our essential relations with nature and our own human past, present, and future, we have become nature’s most significant actors. We are purposive nature become cultural, political, scientific, technological, artistic, religious, philosophical, and moral. But all these decidedly human powers and characteristics are circumscribed and limited. They have not flown in from elsewhere, with an adequacy and sufficiency all their own. They are the issue of the slow evolutionary workings of nature, of which we more and more have become an active agent (27).

**In an indifferent nature, nothing can harm, and nothing can be harmed.**

Powers of sensory discrimination, emotion, thought, and bodily activity have evolved to meet worldly necessities and to take advantage of worldly opportunities. No powers have been greater than the sustained emotional necessity, the vivid imagination, and the conceptual thought that are the natural dynamos behind our science and technology. But even here we remain nature’s creatures, plagued and perhaps blessed by mortality, finitude, and vulnerability. We are neither gods nor angels. Jonas emphasizes that we are by nature better equipped to perceive error than to discover final truth, to recognize an imposing malum than to ascertain clearly the summum bonum (27). Life more or less lives straightforwardly until pressed. Scientific, philosophic, and moral insight are born as much from worldly crisis as from indwelling eros and are always “unfinished.”

The cosmic reality of purposiveness underlies the advent of subjectivity and conscious mentality; subjectivity and mind do not underlie the reality of purposiveness.) Living organisms are concrete intensifications of nature’s primordial purposiveness, the means employed to realize the overall general aim of nature, which is to gain an effective natural foothold and empathic intensification of purposiveness itself, being’s own effort to be. Thus Jonas speculatively interprets the coming-to-be of organic and human life within the natural universe (75).
which being is concerned with itself, is its own justification and is recognized as such by us, thanks to our own aboriginal status as self-affirming, purposive beings (80).

This primordial “ontological ought” becomes a “moral ought” in the worldly situation in which we find ourselves (80 ff.). Naturally purposive beings, who “ought-to-be” and who are intrinsically finite and vulnerable, come within the reaches of our human power (92 ff.). We can affect them for better or for worse; we can wrong or harm them or benefit and allow them to pursue. Moreover, we are aware of our power and responsibility to do what sustains the good of vulnerable life. In virtue of our native, worldly powers of controlled action, knowing, and circumscribed freedom, the “ought-to-be” of the vulnerable ones becomes the “ought-to-do” of ourselves (89, 93, 129 ff.). Natural being significantly determines human moral action.

The feeling of objective obligations to valuable and vulnerable others is the feeling of responsibility, for which nature has prepared us in the intimate family relation of parent and child (85, 95). The newly born needy one, instinct with purposive life and human capacities to come, ever threatened with nonbeing, addresses those who brought it into existence with the “demand” for care (134). To respond to the insistent demand that issues from the newborn is to act responsibly. Not to do so is to be irresponsible. Over this natural responsibility, there is no choice. Our moral freedom is tied (95). This paradigm of responsibility for our own offspring is the model for the responsibility for the care of all of life and nature.

It is out of such native soil of worldly responsibility that we have creatively evolved as complex moral creatures and philosophically can develop a fleshed-out theory of ethical responsibility (98 ff.).

the fundamental value and goodness of nature active and its inherent vulnerability are intrinsically tied together.

The substantive content of an ethics of responsibility is determined by the particular ontological facts that pertain to both the objects and the subjects of ethical obligation. This is ethics determined by the concrete, fundamental nature of the constituents of the world, imperatives arising from the abiding character of organic and human life.

To repeat the fundamental facts, organisms, as mortal and vulnerable purposive beings, necessarily live an interdependent existence. Concrete life carries on only by a metabolic mode of existence that requires individual encroachment on the worldly, organic other and the symbiotic balance of the biospheric whole (137). Nestled within this wider realm of life, there have evolved the purposive powers of man, his freedom from nature as within nature. Among these powers is moral responsibility itself, which requires the intertwined capacities of sensory discrimination, emotional feeling, rational insight, will, and bodily activity.

Man’s complex, native power of moral responsibility is what the organic realm of life objectively, if silently, addresses. The “cause of the world,” the upholding of the already realized manifoldness and intensity of purposive being, objectively binds us to protect and promote the ongoing realization and integrity of man and organic nature into the indefinite future (38 ff.).

In a time of overweening and collective technological power, with its indefinite global and temporal reach, we are ethically enjoined to take care and be cautious (38). Human powers of action dangerously outstrip capacities for knowledge and wisdom. We are to do nothing that would throw evolved man and nature disastrously off balance, threaten their creative being, and thwart their emergent complexity. With respect to man, this specifically means ensuring the continuing potential for morally responsible action—that man’s circumscribed but potent capacities for freely taking care of himself and the world be kept intact (99 ff., 117). The concrete ontological essence of man, and whatever we can discern of it in our philosophic “images of man,” must find its realization in the indefinite worldly future (43). Given the essential interdependence of all life, this necessarily further entails protecting the ongoing integrity of the organic realm, whose intrinsic goodness and decided significance for thehumanly good life already lay objective obligations on us, independent of narrow self-interest (8, 136). The demise of either man or organic nature, but most emphatically of nature’s “highest creature,” would be an infinite loss. That we, through irresponsible ignorance or indifference, should be responsible for such an infinite loss, such an ultimate sin against the goodness of being, should make us shudder (42 ff.). We should cringe before the possibility of such guilt.

In sum, the objective goodness of things that “ought-to-be” should determine our subjective moral life, our “ought-to-feel,” “ought-to-think,” and “ought-to-do”—a harmony of objective and subjective being prepared for us, if imperfectly, by nature. Jonas squarely faces both the goodness of life and the world and our own potentialities for good and evil. He unsentimentally
accepts and affirms the metabolic rigors of organic being, that life must use life in order to be itself (131). He recognizes the goodness of finitude and mortality, of purposive being ever beginning anew out of its past achievements (19). He judiciously measures our circumscribed powers and, while clear-eyed about limitations of human powers, calls for their humane, creative, and effective use. We must learn to circumvent invertebrate ignorance and unknowing powers of action. We need further to develop native powers of feeling, especially the capacity to fear malum, and to exercise vivid and speculative imagination to envisage far-off possibilities of evil, thereby bringing to conscious light the goodness that is already here in actuality and potentiality (27 ff.). All this is to serve, to clarify, and to deepen our objective responsibilities to ourselves and the world, which are most fundamentally to protect ourselves and the world from our own misadventures, practical and theoretical.

Here Jonas shows himself to be the advocate of organic and human life, the world, and their future (125–26). He is the champion of circumscribed purposive freedom ever meeting worldly necessity (135, 198). Thus he sternly judges utopian drifts and dreams—man trying to get out of nature by technologically conquering her, the urge to escape the rigors of worldly life and to get off scot-free (194 ff.).

With all this sober judgment of his own times and his call for us to face objective obligations to the future, Jonas’s ethics of responsibility is intrinsically neither ascetic nor grim. It is not a call to abstract or anatural duty, nor to angelic perfection. The required responsibility is for the objective and natural goodness of organic life, the world, and ourselves, in potentiality if not always in fact (201–2). This service to life and call to worldly virtue carries its own inner rewards. The good name thus returned to responsibility is the issue of ethics having gone natural and having realigned itself with the intrinsic and palpable goodness of being.

**PRIMARY EXPERIENCE AND THE RENEWAL OF PHILOSOPHY**

Before developing our interpretation of Jonas further, let us pause to contrast once more [Ernst] Mayr and Jonas, this time in terms of their respective accounts of morality and contemporary ethical responsibilities. Both Mayr and Jonas consider themselves enlightened, post-Darwinian anthropocentrists, with responsibilities to humankind foremost, intrinsically conjoined with responsibilities to nature both for its own sake and because of our intricate implication in and dependence on a well-functioning, flourishing nature. However, the two arrive at this moral Rome by decidedly different ethical roads.

Mayr traces the roots of our moral life back to evolutionary processes that include, of course, evolved genetic programs and their interactions with somatic and worldly environments. These genetic programs, Mayr recurrently insists, are often open-ended. We humans, thanks to our time-honed genetic backing, can learn from experience, enter into and creatively evolve human cultures, and decide things for ourselves, freely and responsibly, within worldly (including genetic) constraints and opportunities. There is in Mayr no genetic, environmental, or cultural determinism, bane of the cruder forms of behaviorism and sociobiology. (Mayr is not what Jonas calls an “epi-phenomenalist.”) The future is open, undecided, in principle unpredictable, and we have become increasingly significant actors in it, often for the worse.

Characteristically, Mayr’s ethical interests and reflections are also centrally informed by evolutionary biology and ecology. If we are truly to live up to culturally honored democratic ideals and strive for equal opportunity for all, for example, Mayr insists that we must devise plural modes of education for our citizens, young and old. We do not all have the same capacities or learn in the same way. There is much human biodiversity amidst human commonalities. Mayr’s moral pluralism is undergirded by his populational thinking, by his recognition of individual differences.

*This paradigm of responsibility for our own offspring is the model for the responsibility for the care of all of life and nature.*

Further, Mayr is centrally exercised over our biologically ill-informed emphases on individual interests and freedoms at the expense of communal and systemic needs. The latter must be seriously and adequately addressed if we are to flourish in the future. Mayr joins Aldo Leopold and other conservationists in the call to responsibility for nature’s future well-being.

Jonas likewise champions our worldly responsibilities for the human and natural future. This is the heart and soul of *The Imperative of Responsibility.* He similarly traces the full reaches of human morality and responsibility back to natural, organic origins—but to the human parent-child relation, to the natural feeling and unchosen responsibility for the utterly needy and vulnerable but intrinsically valuable infant, with all its promise (130 ff.). Jonas does not trace moral capacities back further into natural time, à la Mayr. Rather, he takes a characteristic metaphysical and existentialist turn (46 ff., 79 ff.). The
intrinsic or fundamental value of all animate life and organic beings originates in the aboriginal ontological revolution—the purposive “no-to-nonbeing,” the active individual assertion of the worldly self, the precarious and ultimately futile staving off of death. The more complexly active and capacitated the effort, the weightier or higher the moral stakes. When life’s capacities include moral responsibility itself, as with humankind, we come upon an absolute moral threshold and an ultimate categorical imperative, ontological as well as moral: humankind, and the nature so necessary to humankind and to a morally responsible life, “ought to be.” Over this imperative, we have no freedom to choose. Moral responsibility, in potentiality and actuality, harbored in human beings and being human, is for Jonas the ultimate good in itself.

In the main, Mayr would agree with the conclusions, but perhaps not with the philosophy. Though Jonas in *The Imperative of Responsibility* explicitly and critically supersedes Kant’s “here and now” categorical imperatives, Jonas’s moral arguments retain an unmistakable Kantian ring, a sense of transcendent absoluteness (11). “Humanity and nature ought to be”; “Never put humankind at risk” (38 ff., 43). What are we to make of this Kantian legacy? Has Jonas fully left traditional essentialism behind? Has he adequately superseded Newtonian physicalism and determinism? With his “Nature Purposive,” has he fully abandoned cosmic teleology? At one point, Jonas speculatively finds an aboriginal purposive striving (nonconscious and subjectless) behind the advent of organisms and ever more complex organisms or individual subjects. Did Jonas want to join Mayr’s naturalist, Darwinian revolution? Indeed, Jonas might not have intended to use philosophic strategies to elaborate a full allegiance to a naturalist’s or philosophic evolutionary biological point of view.

Jonas intended his Kantian, absolutist ring, adjusted to the realities he deemed disclosed by evolutionary biology and which he accepted and endorsed. Mayr might retort that, willfully or not, Jonas missed the full import for practical ethical responsibility of the centrality of emergent organic properties, “orchestral causation,” and genomes. And in the end, Mayr might be right. Jonas may not have exploited the full philosophic fruits of the Darwinian revolution. Of course, truth be told, we are all more or less in the same boat. We are still largely ignoramuses, peering through a glass darkly, a mystery to ourselves. But recognizing Jonas’s possible bias toward the traditional Western philosophical canon does not mean we do not need both Jonas and Mayr in our philosophic arsenal.

Jonas’s moral reflections, arguments, and exhortations are timely and compelling. They carry the ring of truth. Yet equally significant is his explicit call to the serious renewal of speculative philosophy or metaphysics, as intimately related to ethics. Jonas’s arguments typically move back and forth between ontology, epistemology, scientific fact, and ethics. This is uncharacteristic of our age. Jonas is decidedly out of step with the times. What accounts for Jonas’s “going it alone” and whose footsteps should we follow?

The key, I think, is Jonas’s fundamental approach to firsthand, immediate experience and his conception of the relation of philosophy and theory to such experience. This is usefully seen in Jonas’s quarrel with the scientific materialists and their epiphenomenalist thesis. Beyond all questions of theoretical incoherence, inconsistency, and absurdity, Jonas’s fundamental charge is that the epiphenomenalists are not interpreting our experience of ourselves and our world, but are explaining it away in accord with the demands of their theory. But this is the wrong relation of theory to experience. Philosophic theory ought to be generated out of human experience, which in turn it more or less adequately interprets.

This has decided methodological significance. The philosopher must take a first and final stand in the immediate experience of the self and the world and jealously guard this primary, fundamental, and complex evidence against theoretical extravagances. Yet it is precisely theoretical extravagances (bad philosophy or metaphysics) that have taken over our modern minds and made us radically suspicious of immediate experience. We have become “bookish” thinkers, more ruled by theory and great systematizers than by primary worldly evidence. Witness the ease with which the materialists and epiphenomenalists dismiss the reality and efficacy of subjectivity and purpose, a scandal from the perspective of primary experience. Effective purposes are no problem save for a philosophic theory that centrally incorporates the notion of efficient causation as the sole mode of natural efficacy. This is most, if not all, of our modern philosophic theories.

Jonas refuses to be bamboozled by theory and returns to a stand within primary worldly experience. His stance is critical and reflective. He poses questions to, thinks about, and ponders over experience. But he does not belong to what Nietzsche has termed the “Age of Suspicion,” commencing with Descartes, which radically doubts the deliverances of experience, whether or not this suspicion be motivated by the theoretical demands of the new science.

Despite Jonas’s considerable learning, primary experience is
his foothold in the world and the ultimate source and critical check of his philosophizing. This is his Archimedean point, though it is not an epistemologically privileged or secure position. The philosopher is born with no certain ideas or final standards of truths. He has to think his way through things like the rest of us. Moreover, Jonas is chary of philosophic methods, theory driven, which promise a sure way to humanely ascertainable truth—whether these be empiricist reductions to sense data and their connections, Kantian transcendental arguments, Husserlian phenomenological bracketings and reductions, or Wittgensteinian linguistic analyses. All these aim at circumventing the vagaries and pitfalls of concrete experience but threaten to leave important dimensions of experience out of account, for example, the complex reality and efficacy of causation and purpose. Rather, Jonas credits us as thinkers with being natively equipped with limited or circumscribed epistemic and human powers that suffice for speculative philosophy, as long as the latter is critically reflective and renounces any pretension to certain and absolute truth.

The philosopher must take a first and final stand in the immediate experience of the self and the world.

Perhaps ironically, this epistemic humility and circumspection are matched by a philosophic boldness uncharacteristic of the more methodically assured “academic” schools. This arises from the strengths that Jonas discovers in primary experience, unsuppressed by theoretical prohibitions. There he finds the reality and efficacy of individual subjects, activity, and purposes. There he finds the ontological goodness of organic being and the self-justification of purposive existence. Finally, there he finds the ontological goodness of organic being and the self-justification of purposive existence. Jonas argues in terms of bonum and malum, “good” and “bad,” as they are discovered in worldly experience and in terms of the moral responses and principles that these discoveries of goodness engender. He eschews the more abstract, theory-laden language of “interests” and “rights” favored by consequentialists [utilitarians] and deontologists, respectively.) All these “worldly facts” are recognized as there in experience prior to philosophic intervention. They are not created or freely constructed by theoretical imagination. It is the business of human language and theory to gather these fundamentals of human reality and experience into explicit, conscious attention and to express their nature and interconnections adequately. This is the task of speculative philosophy. The task is not to create a thought-world prior to and ungrounded in experience.

Critics might charge Jonas with indulging in an unwarranted and delusive “intuitionism.” What Jonas has found, he has put there, according to such critics. Philosophy and all theories are artifacts, through and through conventional or cultural constructs. Any connections to experience are thoroughly mediated and transformed by language and prior conceptions.

In my judgment, this charge is both unfair and begs the question of the fundamental philosophic issue at hand, namely, our deep rootedness in experience, organic being, and the world. Jonas can offer no guarantee of his ontological reading of experience and of the final adequacy of his ethical theory. Both are always open to reconsideration and to a philosophic reexamination of experience. Indeed, with his emphasis on “purposiveness” one can ask whether he has downplayed or submerged the ontological and ethical significance of concrete form, wholeness, and integrity, both organic and subjective. But to damn Jonas’s enterprise from the start is to take a stand within a rival philosophic position that is itself suspect, most especially if it denies the validity of firsthand experience.

In sum, the ultimate importance of The Imperative of Responsibility may be in restoring a circumspect and judicious confidence in the firsthand deliverances, ontological and ethical, of our worldly experience. We should be more on guard against abstract, imperious, and intolerant theories than against the rich texture and complexities of the primary experiential evidence of ourselves and the world. This freedom from the hegemony of theory allows us once again to pursue philosophy seriously.

Strachan Donnelley (1942-2008) was founder and president of the Center for Humans and Nature. His book Frog Pond Philosophy: Essays on the Relationship between Humans and Nature, from which this essay is drawn, was published by the University Press of Kentucky in 2018.

From Strachan Donnelly, Frog Pond Philosophy, eds. Ceara Donnelly and Bruce Jennings (University Press of Kentucky, 2018). Used with permission.

NOTES
2. H. Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). All subsequent references to this work will be page numbers given in parentheses in the text.