Hans Jonas was a fearless thinker, willing to entertain a whole range of possibilities, including ones so unpopular as to put his reputation as a philosopher of the natural sciences at stake. Two of these are the subject of this essay: his championing of subjectivity throughout nature and his bold theological speculation which strikes a blow to divine omnipotence. On both of these significant points, Jonas finds philosophical kinship with the thought of Alfred North Whitehead. Indeed, Jonas’s affinities with Whitehead are several and important. They include the position that subjectivity is fundamental to the structure of reality, a mutual commitment to aligning science and human experience, an epistemological method that generalizes from human experience, and a shared conviction that power is relational.

Jonas pays tribute to “the great Alfred North Whitehead” at various points in his writing\(^1\) and regards the “intellectual force and philosophical importance” of his philosophy as “unequaled in our time.”\(^2\) Jonas held Whitehead in high esteem, encouraged his graduate students to take up the study of his thought, and eagerly sought to deepen his own understanding of Whitehead’s metaphysics.\(^3\) He was clearly aware of the consonance between their philosophies; indeed because their philosophical sensibilities are in such accord it is fair to see Jonas as a process philosopher. In Whitehead, Jonas found a philosophy that resonated with his own intuitions regarding subjectivity, freedom, and the natural world.


\(^3\) Strachan Donnelley reported that Jonas looked forward to reading each completed chapter of his dissertation on Whitehead, seeking to learn more about this philosophical system.
However, by the time Jonas came to a reading of Whitehead, he was so far along on his own philosophical journey that his reflections on Whitehead’s thought are given mostly in footnotes and appendices, indicative both of Jonas’s keenness to entertain Whitehead’s ideas and his own well-trodden philosophical path. Had Jonas encountered Whitehead’s system earlier in his development, he may very well have found a way to solve two of his most intransigent problems: how to avoid psycho-physical dualism; and, theologically, how to conceive of God as a non-supernatural yet efficacious agent in the world. But Jonas’s commitment to a particular understanding of power as coercive and dominating, made early and coloring much of his thinking, impeded him from giving full consideration to Whitehead’s alternative understanding of internal relations or of God’s power as persuasive. Thus, despite Jonas’s extension of subjectivity beyond the bounds of human mentality, his insistence that human mentality is implanted in a physical body which is part of an ecological system, and his recognition that subjectivity is a non-physical yet effective force, he was unable to anchor his insights into subjectivity or to develop a post-Holocaust theology of divine action that does not violate the natural process of life. Still, Jonas was enthusiastic about Whitehead’s thought and what follows is an examination of the interplay between Jonas’s philosophy of power and his encounters with Whitehead. What is revealed is an example of noble philosophy, home to its own cogent authority but rooted in an honesty that values uncertainty over satisfaction and completion.

1. Jonas on Existence and Power

With important modifications, Jonas’s philosophy is deeply influenced both by the existentialist assumption of human-world alienation and the not incompatible Darwinian claim that species survival involves ongoing struggle. “Existence,” Jonas writes, “means resistance and thus opposing force.” Life involves resistance—against undifferentiated physicality, against necessity, against all that is not-self, even as these same adversaries are the blood relations on which life depends. Reality is best described as a relationship of polarities—between organic and

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