PART THREE

RESPONSES AND REFLECTIONS
CHAPTER NINETEEN

REFLECTIONS ON THE PLACE OF GNOSTICISM AND ETHICS IN THE THOUGHT OF HANS JONAS

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My response to the articles of Benjamin Lazier and Micha H. Werner cannot do justice to their richness. I cannot repay adequately the debt I owe them. I can, however, make a small deposit in earnest. I offer a tentative and perhaps convoluted answer to a simple question: Is there something constant, essential, or abiding in the thought of Hans Jonas? Might that something be the ethics of responsibility or “overcoming Gnosticism”, as Lazier’s original title put it? Transposing my question into spatial terms yields this result: In the architectonic floor plan of Jonas’s thought, what are the place and function of ethics and Gnosticism?

Over the past several months, in preparation for this conference, I’ve been renewing acquaintance with some old and trusted companions. I’ve been rereading major sections from The Phenomenon of Life and The Gnostic Religion. I’ve also been reading for the first time several essays and chapters that will inhabit my thinking for years to come. Among the new companions called to our attention by Benjamin Lazier was a stunning passage, an apocalypse, delivered by Hans Jonas in Italy six days before his death on February 5, 1993:

It was once religion which told us that we are all sinners, because of original sin. It is now the ecology of our planet which pronounces us all to be sinners because of the excessive exploits of human inventiveness. It was once religion which threatened us with a last judgment at the end of days. It is now our tortured planet which predicts the arrival of such a day without any heavenly intervention. The latest revelation—from no Mount Sinai, from no Mount of the Sermon, from no Bo (tree of Buddha)—is the outcry of mute things themselves that we must heed by curbing our powers over creation, lest we perish together on a wasteland of what was creation.¹