

Remembering the Phenomenon of Life

The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology

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Northwestern University Press, 303 pages, 2001

The most pervasive and destructive intellectual error in the modern world, the one largely responsible for the current moral and theoretical disintegration of our understanding of what it is to be a human being, is *reductionism*, a vice of the mind which has often been erroneously identified with the scientific attitude. I am not speaking of the rational practice of attempting to understand the constituent elements of which natural organisms are composed. Nor am I referring to the commitment not to multiply explanatory causes needlessly.

These are simply basic principles of sound reasoning canonized since the writings of Aristotle. Rather, I am speaking of the methodological commitment to accept only external, quantifiable data as scientific evidence for what a thing is, and thus the insistence on accounting for natural, living things *entirely* in terms of their material parts and processes. Thus, integrally related to the reductionist mindset is the acceptance of *materialism* as the fundamental explanation of the nature of reality.

If these two ideologies are indeed artificially parasitic upon authentic scientific endeavor and yet constitute the chief source of our fragmented view of man, then understanding both their arbitrariness and inadequacy for sound scientific inquiry ought to be one of the primary goals of contemporary intellectual endeavor. Few introductions to this task could be more profitable than Hans Jonas' classic work of natural philosophy, *The Phenomenon of Life*. This penetrating book is one of the few successful attempts in 20th century philosophy to recover what can only be termed an Aristotelian understanding of nature and organism as constituted by a unifying essential form and inwardly directed toward certain nature ends.

In eleven distinct, but conceptually related essays, Jonas critically delves into the philosophical assumptions and blind spots of modern scientific reductionism, traces its emergence from the incoherent wreckage of Cartesian dualism, shows its logical collapse into existential nihilism, and, most importantly, points out the path to its overcoming through the recovery of a more sound, honest, and experientially open understanding of what it means for an organism to be alive and have vital operations.

This latter claim may sound pedestrian and redundant, but the startling fact of modern "scientific biology," Jonas rightly notes, is that despite its claim to be the 'study of life', contemporary biology in fact "submerges the distinction of 'animate' and 'inanimate'." In other words, it does not and, due to its adopted methodological commitments, cannot recognize a real and qualitative distinction

between living and non-living natural bodies. Modern biological practice, confining itself as it does “to the physical, outward facts...ignore[s] the dimension of inwardness that belongs to life.”

The consequence is a study of living organisms as nothing more than highly complex physical mechanisms constituted only by their distinct material parts and the motive properties of those parts. Once this view is adopted, it follows inevitably that scientific “explanation has to be in terms of the lifeless,” with no room being allowed for the experience of sentience, consciousness, freedom, agency, and most of all, inherent, natural purpose.

One of Jonas’ principal points throughout these essays is that this self-imposed limitation on what is allowed to count as an observational experience of nature is entirely artificial and indeed unreasonably distorting. There was no “new finding” or discovered “fact” that rationally necessitated the modern scientific repudiation of substantial form and self-directed teleology. The triumph of mechanistic materialism was not so much a victory of sober observation over metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, but of uncomprehending hostility over an honest acceptance of the fundamental and inescapable interior human experiences of agency and finality. Jonas writes:

Regarding final causes, we must observe that their rejection is a methodological principle guiding inquiry rather than a statement of ascertained fact issuing from inquiry. There is not first a record of persistent failure to detect them in nature...The mere search for them was quite suddenly, with the inauguration of modern science, held to be at variance with the scientific attitude, deflecting the searcher from the quest for true causes. It is only then, in the exercise of that attitude, that the negative record is accumulated, viz., by the success of doing without final causes...[I]t has never been argued that final cause is a far-fetched or abstruse or even ‘unnatural’ concept – on the contrary, nothing is more cognate to the human mind and more familiar to the basic experience of man: and this was precisely what in the new scientific attitude counted against it.”

Jonas is one of the few philosophers in the twentieth century to see so clearly that the scientific emperor is rather scantily clad when it comes to the rational justification of this prejudice. What we are dealing with here is a pre-scientific dogma, and an incoherent one at that, for the scientist holding such views cannot conduct his research without relying upon such experiences in the very practice of scientific investigation. His own experienced operations of enduring agency, free deliberation, rational observation, inference, and deduction are presupposed by, and inextricable from, the scientific process.

And yet, on a reductionist view of organisms, these operations must be explained away as accidental “epiphenomena” [i.e. accidental surface appearances] of countless unthinking, naturally determined bodies behaving according to necessary properties which act without thought or reference to truth, consciousness, or understanding. The latter logically dissolve into residual folk terms of an outdated psychology that did not recognize the “human organism” as,

in reality, nothing more than a dizzyingly complex collection of basic material entities behaving according to unthinking and necessarily determined laws. Annihilated in the process is a thinking, conscious subject (i.e. the scientist) who endures through time and is capable of both theoretical argument and the discovery of truth. Jonas observes:

Nothing could be more devastating for this account of theory-forming than to be found self-illustrative.'...*In abstracto* the behaviorist [another term for our reductionist] must count himself among the objects of his method. But *in concreto* he must make the implicit reservation of self-exemption, at least with regard to his reasoning in support of the behavioristic thesis, for the sake of its claim to validity.

This “self-exemption” results in what Jonas calls “split personality theorizing,” the widespread indulgent habit of not applying one’s general conclusions about nature and man to the significance of one’s own thoughts and actions. The moment logical consistency is afforded its due place, however, the reductive materialist position can be seen to destroy the very possibility of reasoning and truth, including its own. Jonas explains:

The present argument [i.e. that of accounting for the rational operations of human consciousness as nothing but passive products of more basic material entities]...is by this view the epiphenomenon of physical occurrences determined by necessities of sequence entirely foreign to “meaning” and “truth.”...[T]here is no way on the part of those engaged in the argument, marionettes as they are to those necessities, to evaluate the issue on its merits, and thereby to decide between two alternatives.”

The consequence is the self-refutation of the reductive materialist position, for assuming it is “true,” it follows that there are no true arguments. The mechanistic biologist cannot possibly claim that he is holding his view because the evidence has persuaded him of its veracity. On his view of the world, there are no causes at work in nature that have a care for the truth or that do not work according to blind necessity. Whatever “his” “consciousness” is, it is not something that has the power to deliberate between hypotheses but is rather passively molded according to the material necessities which are its real moving causes.

And yet we know that that we do make valid arguments, freely deliberate between opposite conclusions, and differentiate between the true and the false. These interior experiences of our cognitive operations are immediately evident to us and, more importantly, are more known to us than any speculative claim about the ultimate constituents of nature. Jonas simply makes the valid inference that if reductive materialism cannot account for these experiences or advances claims which deny them, then there must be a richer and more expansive view of nature and the human organism. It is just this that Jonas calls us to pursue by becoming more attentive to the full range of our human experience, interior as well as exterior:

The evidence we find *in* ourselves is an integral part of the evidence concerning life which experience puts at our disposal. That it must be used critically to

avoid the pitfalls of anthropomorphism goes without saying. But used it must be – and as a matter of fact, most of the time it is, however much biologists and behaviorists may assure us and themselves of the contrary.

Accordingly, “The nondogmatic thinker will not suppress the testimony of life; he will accept it today as a call to a revision of the conventional model of reality” hitherto dominant in modernity. What precisely constitutes this testimony we have only briefly indicated. In the pages of *The Phenomenon of Life* much more is said about its content and structure, but even Jonas is aware that he is only pointing toward the re-inauguration of an authentic philosophy of nature. The complete success of that project will require both a full recovery of the Aristotelian understanding of the principles of nature as well as the reflective deepening of the sources, significance, and range of those principles. One would be hard pressed to find a more profitable first step toward the accomplishment of both of these goals than to pick up and ponder this philosophical gem of a book.