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The Promise of Jewish Theistic Naturalism for Jewish Environmental Ethics

Hans Jonas and Arthur Green

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explain the greater appeal of Jewish naturalistic theologies given our greater appreciation today of the ecological vulnerability of our world by examining the theological writings of two prominent twentieth-century Jewish thinkers—Hans Jonas and Arthur Green. The paper demonstrates that their espousal of naturalistic yet theistic worldview in their interpretations and reconstructions of Jewish tradition shares significant affinities and promotes an ethical attitude toward the environment. First, I show that Jonas and Green reject reductive forms of naturalism and embrace a nonreductive or “expansive” style of naturalism. Then, I argue that their theologies intend to stimulate a sense of responsibility toward all creation by envisioning humans as partners of a non-omnipotent God. I conclude by noting the metaphysical, epistemological, and moral promises of theistic naturalism to Jewish environmental ethics.

Keywords

Jewish thought – Jewish theology – Jewish environmental ethics – religious naturalism

1 Introduction

“In a time of ecological vulnerability,” writes Michael S. Hogue in *The Promise of Religious Naturalism*, “religious naturalism’s conceptions of and attitudes toward nature may have much to commend” (2010, xx). In this paper, I argue that the same is true for two of the most prolific and creative Jewish reli-

gious naturalists of the twentieth century, Hans Jonas and Arthur Green. These two thinkers are not often considered together in accounts of modern Jewish thought and theology, and for good reasons: There are profound cultural, generational, and geographical differences between the two. To these, one may add differences in temperament, intellectual commitments, scope, and even genre.

Hans Jonas (1903, Mönchengladbach, Germany—1993, New Rochelle, NY) received his academic training in German universities, where he studied under the guidance of philosophical luminaries such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Rudolf Bultmann.¹ Jonas is usually not counted in the “canon” of modern Jewish philosophy. Though he lived through the second part of his life in the United States, his scholarship remained rooted chiefly in the German philosophical tradition (Hösle 2008, 22). Unlike other modern Jewish thinkers, Jonas was not a rabbi. Neither was he a Jewish communal leader. Jonas was, by all accounts including his own, primarily a philosopher rather than a theologian. Though he attended the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin for a short time, he was admittingly much less at home in Jewish tradition and scholarship than other modern Jewish thinkers.² At the same time, his intellectual world was broader and his work more universal, seeking to address ethical questions from a philosophical—i.e., universal and rational—perspective. His thought reflects the deeply rooted ambivalence toward Jewish tradition in the liberal, secularizing atmosphere of German Jewry in the Weimar years (Wiese 2008, 458). He was interested in Jewish tradition primarily as a repudiation of the moral failings of Western philosophy, and his evocation of Jewish themes and images is in the service of this philosophical critique. For Jonas, Jewish tradition provided an opportunity to rise above the boundaries of the contemporary cultural and intellectual context. Specifically, Jonas was interested in tradition’s critical perspective on the modern temper and the technological age (Fossa 2019, 51).

Arthur Green (born 1941, Newark, NJ) emerged from and has engaged in a very different world, coming of age during the countercultural youth movements of the 1960s and then spending his life equally divided between Jewish academia and training future rabbis. Green received his rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1967 and later a doctoral degree from Brandeis University with a dissertation on Rabbi Nachman of Brat-

1 For more on Jonas’s life, and on the philosophical, cultural, and political context of his thought see (Wiese 2007; Jonas 2008).

2 Though Jonas never hid the fact of his Jewishness, most of his writings do not deal straightforwardly and particularly with Jewish issues. See (Levy 2002, 98–99). Nor does Jonas rely exclusively, or even extensively, on Jewish sources and texts. See (Lawee 2015).

slav. As a professor of Jewish mysticism at the University of Pennsylvania and at Brandeis and as the head of two rabbinical seminaries, Green has been a teacher of two generations of American rabbis and Jewish studies scholars.³ Whereas Jonas could not be easily characterized as a primarily “Jewish” thinker, Green developed his distinctively Jewish theology out of his scholarly work on Jewish mysticism. Green does not share Jonas’s philosophical frame of reference. Unlike Jonas’s uncompromising philosophical-rational commitment, Green considers himself a spiritual seeker who seeks to bridge between Jewish scholarship and Jewish theology. Thus, he writes primarily on Jewish themes and to a Jewish audience to create a “seeker-friendly” Judaism (Green 2015b, ix, 270). While Green’s work reflects a similar critique of Western culture and society to that of Jonas, this critique is developed less as a philosophical response to Kant and Heidegger and more as a countercultural response to the spiritual failings of modernity, consumerist America, and liberal American Judaism in particular.

Despite these differences, my decision to juxtapose Jonas and Green can be defended by the main argument of this paper, namely, that both Jonas and Green produce naturalistic theologies that seek the re-enchantment of the world of nature and, as a result, promote an ethical attitude toward the environment. Therefore, I argue, these naturalistic theologies bear a promise for Jewish environmental ethics.

2 Naturalism, Expansive Naturalism, and Theistic Naturalism

The main difficulty with defining naturalism seems to follow the ambiguity of the very term “nature.” Naturalism means different things to different people mainly because “nature” means different things to different people (De Caro and Macarthur 2004, 3). A prevalent definition understands nature to include just those objects and phenomena comprehended by science. While such a definition does have the benefit of not reducing nature only to matter, it does involve bias towards science (Ellis 2014, 15). By conceiving the limits of the natural to be comprehended in scientific terms, such scientific naturalism grants the scientist “the monopoly on the contents of the natural world” (Ellis 2014, 18). As Lisa H. Sideris writes, this modern tendency treats scientific descriptions as somehow “more real” than our non-scientific experience of the world. In this way, things like “a flower opening up with the warm spring sun,” or “the love a

3 For more biographical details see (Green 2020, 291–325; 2015b, ix–xvi; 2010, 1–8; Mayse 2015).

parent feels for a child,” for example, are “really” (or “merely”) programmed survival and reproductive strategies, according to the scientific narrative (Sideris 2017, 194–195).

As I show below, Hans Jonas and Arthur Green reject this form of scientific naturalism and embrace a nonreductive or “expansive” style of naturalism. Philosopher Fiona Ellis describes the gist of this expansive naturalism as the worldview according to which “there is more to nature than what the scientist comprehends, and more to inquiry than science” (Ellis 2014, 4).⁴ It is a naturalism that is “deeply tempered by a sense of the transcendent, an openness to the profundities of inner experience, and a humility about the limits of human knowledge” (Green 1984, 15).

Let us begin this account of theistic naturalism, which ultimately seeks to reenchant and even remythologize the world of nature, with Rudolf Bultmann, the father of *demythologization* and Hans Jonas’s teacher at the University of Marburg. For Bultmann, mythological and supernatural ways of thinking have become alien to modern people. Moderns adopted the scientific worldview, according to which the course of nature cannot be breached by supernatural forces. Famously, this conclusion led Bultmann to pursue his project of demythologizing Scripture by eliminating the historical and mythological elements from it and by developing an existentially intonated exegesis that concentrates on the perennially valid and present aspects of the text (Thornhill and Miron 2020). In a moving philosophical eulogy to his revered teacher, Jonas suggests that Bultmann gave science more than its due. Jonas admits that science issues a methodological command that prohibits us from basing our religious belief “on the occasional breaching or disrupting of the world order” for the sake of “the imperative of intellectual honesty” (Jonas 1996d, 135). However, he also points out that science has no pretension to metaphysical knowledge. As a method of generating or discovering knowledge regarding the natural causes of natural phenomena, science is limiting itself from the outset to a reductive view of reality (Jonas 1996d, 152).

4 Ellis bases her “expansive naturalism” on the conviction that there is more to nature than what can be comprehended scientifically. According to Ellis, “scientific naturalism” is too reductive in its description of reality because it discredits a whole range of important aspects of human life, most importantly values, which “make their demands on us and provide us with the relevant reasons for action.” (Ellis 2014, 66) Hogue uses the term “naturalistic empiricism” to describe a similar non-scientistic approach. According to Hogue, “genuine naturalistic empiricism” holds that while it is methodologically correct to argue that everything is susceptible to natural scientific explanation, it does not mean that epistemologically, everything can be exhaustively explained by science (Hogue 2010, 199–228).

The philosophical eulogy to Bultmann was not the first time Jonas expressed his concerns regarding a reductive view of reality. Though a comprehensive account of Jonas's philosophy is outside the scope of this paper, it is essential to say a few words on its broader themes and their relation to his theology. Jonas's philosophical project, broadly conceived, is an anti-nihilistic one. Jonas views modern nihilism as resulting from a distinctively modern attitude toward nature that conceives it as morally indifferent and devoid of intrinsic meaning (Jonas 2001a, 340). What makes modern nihilism so desperate—an unprecedented form of nihilism, according to Jonas—is this modern view of nature that envisions humanity as thrown into an indifferent, cold world and denies the possibility of objective value or meaning. Jonas directly refers here to his *Doktorvater*, Martin Heidegger, and his early existential philosophy. For Jonas, Heidegger's philosophy is a philosophical outcome of the scientific revolution and its reductive naturalistic worldview and technological reasoning (Herskowitz 2021).

Jonas's philosophical project is a critique of this modern attitude toward nature. In *The Phenomenon of Life* (1966), this project takes the form of philosophical biology. Through expanding Heideggerian existential categories to include the nonhuman domain, he shows that value is not merely a human creation but an essential feature of organic life. Ultimately, his teleological account of nature suggests that the universe has a direction and purpose: The development of self-autonomous life out of organic matter (Jonas 2001b). Later, in *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1979 in German as *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, 1984 in English), Jonas develops out of this core value he disclosed in nature alternative ethics that would account for the unprecedented power and capacity for destruction brought forth by modern technology (Jonas 1984).⁵

Let us return to Jonas's critique of reductive scientific naturalism. Jonas maintains that the natural sciences may not tell the whole story about real-

5 For Jonas, it is not so much that previous ethical systems are “wrong” as they are fundamentally unequipped to deal with the uniqueness of the modern situation, in which human power threatens the continued existence of humanity and the planet as we know it. Jonas points out that due to modern technology, the reach of our actions exceeds our prescience. Predictive knowledge regarding the consequences of certain actions falls behind our technical knowledge and ability. Put differently, in Jonas's ethics, it is not the contemporary context of action that constitutes the relevant horizon of responsibility, but the indefinite future. While previous ethical systems might still hold for the day-to-day sphere of human interaction, a new kind of ethics and a new dimension of responsibility are needed for the sphere of collective action and the enormity of its powers. See (Jonas 1984, 1–8; 117–118) (Jonas 1974b, 3–11) See also (Ellenson 2014, 100).

ity (Jonas 1984, 8). He articulated this position in his take on the famous short tale by Hans Christian Andersen, “The Emperor’s New Clothes”:

“But he has nothing on!” exclaimed the child, and with this one flash of innocence dispelled the make-believe, and everybody saw that the emperor was naked. Something of this kind was the feat of the Enlightenment, and it was liberating. But when in the subsequent nihilistic stage—our own—the confirmed reductionist or cynic, no longer the open-eyed child but a dogmatist himself, triumphantly states, “there is nothing there!”—then, lo and behold, once said with the tautological vigor of the positivist dogma behind it, namely that there *is* only that which science can verify, then, indeed, with eyes so conditioned, or through spectacles so tinted, we do see nothing but the nakedness we are meant to see.

JONAS 1974a, 176

Reason perhaps emancipated us from prejudice and blind faith in divine revelation. However, reason in the form of science redefined our concepts of nature and knowledge in ways that left certain aspects of reality outside their domains. Crucially, the validation of norms and values requires a more open, engaged, and participative epistemic approach that grants the possibility of non-scientific modes of comprehension. Because only by broadening the limits of reality—of what *is*—beyond scientific parameters, it would be possible to see that the world of nature is a bearer of value, meaning, and purpose. Such an approach, as Fiona Ellis shows, makes it possible to remain a naturalist while at the same time conceding that the world is “enchanted” by values that cannot be reduced to scientifically measurable objects or events (Ellis 2014, 73).

Jonas turned to speculative theology relatively late in his career. In those writings, he further develops his expansive naturalism to what may be termed theistic naturalism: an expansive naturalism open to the idea that the world is not only morally enchanted but also divinely enchanted. Jonas’s by-now-famous post-Holocaust myth is a creative reformulation of the Lurianic myth of *tzimtzum*. Jonas depicts a God who effaced or contracted God-self in the process of creation to “make room” for the world. This God lets the world run by chance, risk, and probability, without any divine direction and without knowing what this development will ultimately bring. The myth further portrays a suffering and changing God, who could be affected, hurt, and disappointed by the world God has allowed to create, particularly by human action. Jonas envisages, in other words, a non-omnipotent God who is helpless to prevent evil, a God who depends on the cooperation of humans in caring for creation (Jonas

1996a, 1996c). His commitment to naturalism forced Jonas to suggest that God's intervention in the world consists of mental acts that take place within the individual and thus leave the natural order intact.⁶ In this way, Jonas could grant God limited, non-coercive or *persuasive* power.⁷ More importantly, he could argue for the possibility of divine revelation, understood not as something supernatural, magical, or fantastic, but as initiating inward transformation (Jonas 1996d, 153–158).

Unlike the philosopher Jonas, Arthur Green's point of departure is not a philosophical critique of modern nihilism but a personal quest after a spiritually profound and intellectually honest Judaism (Green 2020, 12). Moreover, whereas Jonas's myth symbolically presents what seems to be an unfinished reflection on the theological meaning of the Holocaust in light of its author's naturalism, Green's work presents a comprehensive theological picture that relies heavily on Jewish mystical tradition. Like Jonas, however, an integral part of Green's quest involves a critique of modernity for not satisfying human spiritual cravings and a renewed appreciation of mysticism. Drawing inspiration from kabbalistic mystical sources, Green presents a Jewish panentheistic mystical theology that is "unafraid to proclaim the holiness of the natural world." His descriptions of God are typically mystical: God is commonly referred to as "the inner force of existence itself," "the single unifying substratum of all that is," or simply as the ground of being/life itself (Green 2002, 4, 19, 5). None of these definitions is exhaustive, however, and Green mainly refers to God as "One," that is, as the simple *wholeness* of being (Green 2015b, 271). In Green's

6 Jonas argues that when humans act from conscious choice, they codetermine, in nonphysical and unforeseen ways, the external course of things. Unlike "blind nature" that "will nearly always select the most probable," humans have the ability to "let the most improbable become actual." If humans have the ability to codetermine the external course of things in a nonphysical and mental way, we might think of God's actions in the world in a similar way. "If we can daily perform the miracle," he writes, "to intervene in and give *our* turn to the course of the world, then that kind of miracle that leaves the natural order intact should be possible also to God" (Jonas 1996d, 157; 2008, 218–219).

7 As Sandra Lubarsky noted, Jonas's philosophy shares several important affinities with Whitehead's process philosophy—the attention given to subjectivity as fundamental to the structure of reality, an epistemology that generalizes from human experience, a naturalistic commitment, and a conviction that power is relational (Lubarsky 2008). Consequently, Jonas's theological speculations share several affinities with process theology, including an understanding of God's power as non-coercive, the notion that God is affected by and changes with the developing universe, and a non-physical interpretation of immortality (Wiese 2008, 444). Among the other Jewish religious thinkers whose thought shares affinities with process theology one may mention Mordecai Kaplan and Bradley Shavit Artson (Guzi 2018).

panentheistic and monistic theology, God as One or as the unity of all existence is greater than the sum of its parts. Building on the Jewish mystical notion of *shekhinah ba-tahtonim mamash*, according to which God's presence infuses our "lower" world, Green asserts that "transcendence dwells within immanence" (Green 2010, 18). While God's presence is in each moment and all existence, God also exists beyond the world in unknown ways. Humans cannot grasp the full depth of God. God is epistemologically transcendent (Green 2015b, 276–277).

Green admits of being "not quite a theist" (Green 2010, 17). Indeed, his God is not the transcendent, all-powerful supreme Being or Creator who has a personal will or human-like consciousness and guides and protects God's creation and God's people, but the God of silence (Green 2010, 107). It is God's presence—the *shekhinah*, understood in kabbalistic sources as the tenth and lowest *sefirah*, representing the immanent aspect of God—that "underlies, surrounds, and fills" all that is. The human encounter with God's presence is understood as an intoxicating and transformative mystical experience and is accessible through disciplined religious praxis (Green 2015b, 271). Significantly, Green insists that this mystical experience does not involve the suspension of the natural order as science perceives it or any other supernatural occurrence. Mystical experience, he insists, consists of encountering the same reality from a different perspective, in which the oneness of God or of "Being" is revealed and experienced. Thus, the task of religion is not to offer counter-scientific explanations for natural phenomena but to help us notice and pay attention to "the incredible wonder of it all." Religious praxis should help us "develop an eye for wonder" and cultivate this awareness (Green 2015b, 282). Accordingly, the theologian's task is not to attempt to describe that which is genuinely ineffable but to "guide us toward a more profound appreciation of *that same reality*" (Green 2010, 20). Green's theology acknowledges a sense of mystery of a deeper reality without rejecting science and reverting to supernaturalism. Instead, it seems to collapse the supernatural into the natural. "Miracle" and "nature" point to the same set of facts, and the difference between them is one of perception (Green 2015b, 272; 2010, 22).

The theistic naturalism of Jonas and Green accepts scientific findings but does not conceive science as the final word on truth. Religion and religiosity, according to this view, do not rely on the supernatural and the miraculous. Instead, the miraculous may be discovered by clearing our "tinted spectacles" and developing an "eye for wonder." Genuine wonder, they seem to argue, is no mere reaction to something novel. Instead, it comes with seeing something familiar with fresh eyes (Sideris 2017, 184). Religious faith and experience, then, are rooted in a particular way of seeing. Religion, says the theistic naturalist, if

it genuinely wishes to lead its followers to salvation, should first enable them to “see” that this world is not to be reduced to morally blind scientifically verifiable facts.

3 Ethics of Responsibility

In their theological writings, Jonas and Green attempt to achieve more than scientifically or intellectually credible theology. They have a moral goal as well. By depicting a God who needs humanity and works through humanity, they essentially argue that the world’s fate depends on human action alone. The limited God of their theologies needs human partners. Such a view grounds human responsibility for preserving the world in a religious humanism that shifts the responsibility to moral and environmental evil from God to humans and views human responsibility toward the environment as part of the humanist duty (Jonas 2017, 9). As the first species powerful enough to determine the biosphere’s fate and the first species to develop consciousness and moral awareness regarding this power, humans have a responsibility toward preserving that they are dominating (Green 2015b, 281; 2020, 215). In this distinct kind of religious humanism, the prime importance attached to human matters does not come at the expense of other living things or organic matter. Both Jonas and Green stress the need to limit human freedoms and human standards of consumption in light of humanity’s responsibility to the environment.⁸ Humanity’s privileged position in the hierarchy of being becomes, in other words, the basis upon which a religious ethics of responsibility toward this being is established. Humans are charged with the task of saving the world because they are the agents of the world’s potential destruction (Green 2015b, 309; 2002, 14). Jonas finds it appropriate to link this insight to his interpretation of the Genesis creation myth:

The doctrine of creation teaches reverence toward nature and toward man ... As to nature, it means especially living nature, and the reverence in question is reverence for life. ... God, in the Genesis story, set man over all

8 Green points out that the changes needed in collective human behavior in order to save us from self-destruction are “stupendous,” and perhaps will cost us “some of our precious freedoms” (Green 2002, 14). Jonas seems to be more direct and more radical. Especially in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, he translates the conclusion of his ethical reflections into the realm of politics. (Jonas 1984, 136–177). The result, as Richard Wolin writes, is highly problematic from the perspective of liberal democracy, as it “flirts with the model of educational dictatorship” (Wolin 2001, 120–129; 2008, 11–15).

the other creatures and empowered him to their sovereign use: but they are still his creatures, intended to be and to adorn his earth. Subjection, not biological impoverishment, was man's mandate. Nowhere does the Jewish idea of man's preeminence in the created scheme justify his heedless plundering of this planet. On the contrary, his rulership puts him in the position of a responsible caretaker, and doubly so today, when science and technology have really made him master over this globe, with powers to either uphold or undo the work of creation. While biblical piety saw nature's dependence on God's creative and sustaining will, we now also know its *vulnerability* to the interferences of our developed powers. This knowledge should heighten our sense of responsibility.

JONAS 1974a, 179

Jonas turns to myth to vividly elucidate what is at stake: By granting creation a portion of the autonomy that is originally only God's own, God put at risk the fulfillment of God's purpose in creating the world. Possessing the powers "to either uphold or undo the work of creation," humans are more than partners with God—they quite literally hold the fate of God's creation in their hands (Levy 2002, 131). I will have more to say about Jonas and Green's use of myth below.

Green proposes a strikingly similar vision that emphasizes the holiness of all creation. Also similar to Jonas, and following his teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Green emphasizes God's dependence on human action and views humans as partners of God in the survival and maintenance of this planet (Green 2010, 27; 2015a). Like Jonas, he also finds inspiration in the biblical creation myth (Green 2020, 214–222). Underlying the Jewish creation myth—he argues, recalling a central idea of Jewish mystical tradition—is a simple yet profound truth: "before there were many, there was only one" (Green 2002, 8). Green's mystical monism, which views both the ever-evolving universe and the absolute stasis of Being as "two faces of the same One" (Green 2015b, 271), becomes the foundation of an ethical imperative. It views the bio-history of the universe not as the struggle of species against species, but as "sacred drama," as an ongoing and incomplete account of the One who strives to become manifest in more prosperous and more diverse forms of life, and who ultimately becomes articulate through human consciousness. The ethical implication of such monism is this: Each creature, or each organism, is worthy of protection because it is a unique manifestation of the One. It is part of God. There is a direct linkage between how one relates to every creature and one's relation to God. In Green's religious humanism, ethics of responsibility is rooted in religious awareness and experience of the all-encompassing One.

4 Myth and Transcendence

Jonas views traditional wisdom as providing an opportunity to rise above the boundaries of the contemporary cultural and intellectual context, and therefore as a vantage point from which to critically reflect on the modern condition (Fossa 2019, 51). He believes that traditional wisdom can teach epistemic humility or modesty. Though we possess more knowledge of nature and have more power and control over the environment, concerning our ability to discern “the proper ends of life and thus the proper use of the things we now so abundantly control,” our ancestors might have been wiser because they were less epistemically arrogant (Jonas 1974a, 178). Humility or modesty is necessary, he insists, for a more open, engaged, and participative epistemic approach that grants the possibility of non-scientific modes of comprehension:

Such humility, or modesty, would be willing to lend an ear to what tradition has to say about the transempirical, nondemonstrable meaning of things. Attention to our tradition is a Jewish prescription, directing us, not only to the human wisdom we may pick up there, but also to the voice of revelation we may hear through it. ... The simple attentiveness of such a stance may help us realize that we are not completely our own masters, still less those of all posterity, but rather trustees of a heritage. If nothing else, the tempering of our presumed superiority by that injection of humility will make us cautious, and caution is the urgent need for the hour. It will make us go slow on discarding old taboos, on brushing aside in our projects the sacrosanctity of certain domains hitherto surrounded by a sense of mystery, awe, and shame.

JONAS 1974a, 179

We may learn from our ancestors, in other words, how to be attentive to those “signals of transcendence” that modern society has banished from consciousness (Berger 1969, 74–75). But if for Peter Berger the modern denial of metaphysics is identified with the triumph of triviality, Jonas warns that the stakes are even higher: Without transcendence, nothing is sacred. And without the sacred—without a supreme value at its core—it is not clear whether a proper ethic of responsibility can be sustained:

It is moot whether, without restoring the category of the sacred, the category most thoroughly destroyed by the scientific enlightenment, we can have an ethics able to cope with the extreme power which we possess today and constantly increase and are almost compelled to wield. ... Only

aware of the sacred with its unqualified veto is independent of the computations of mundane fear and the solace of uncertainty about distant consequences. However, religion in eclipse cannot relieve ethics of its task; and while of faith it can be said that as a moving force it either is there or is not, of ethics it is true to say that it must be there.

JONAS 1984, 23

Something greater than mere fear must account for the metaphysical responsibility Jonas seeks to develop philosophically. Even though it can only “recommend itself to reason but not compel it” (Jonas 1996e, 166), Jonas turns to cosmogonic speculation because his ethics requires a transcendent and absolute foundation. Jonas’s myth, therefore, is more than a metaphorical reminder of metaphysical truth. The myth serves as the critical addition that provides an absolute rebuttal of nihilism by pushing, as it were, Jonas’s ethic of responsibility beyond the immanence of nature (Vogel 1996, 36; Wiese 2008, 435).

Indeed, the theistic naturalism of Jonas and Green is not exclusively immanent: God is neither merely a part of the world of nature nor is God identified with it. Unlike pantheism or nature mysticism, theistic naturalism retains some aspects of God’s otherness.⁹ However, unlike traditional theism, it does not overemphasize divine transcendence at the price of separating God from nature (Barbour 1993, 77–79). Still, this insistence on transcendence led Jonas and Green to embrace the language of myth in their theological writings. For them, the medium of myth is the most reasonable way to convey, without any ambition to give ultimate answers, that which the categories of science cannot comprehend. Myth, according to Jonas, has the ability “for expressing a truth that couldn’t be spoken directly” (Jonas 2008, 216). For Green, myths describe “a deep and ineffable reality, one so profound that it is not given to expression except through the veil of narration, through encapsulation in a story” (Green 2002, 8). Both argue that a symbolic understanding of myth may help us overcome the self-inflicted epistemic limitations of modernity by disclosing other dimensions of reality, which have been kept out of consciousness by the psychological atmosphere created by modern science and technology (Jonas 1974a, 177). Myths can help us grasp, express, and transmit the meaning of our experiences and make us more attuned to signals of transcendence within immanence.

9 For Jonas, God might have withdrawn God-self from the world, but “irruptions” of transcendence within immanence are still possible through humans. In Green’s mystical panentheism, while God’s presence fills the universe, God is epistemologically transcendent.

5 Conclusion: The Promise of Theistic Naturalism to Jewish Environmental Ethics

Building on Michael Hogue's "appreciative critique" of the emergent religious ethics of contemporary religious naturalism, I will, by way of conclusion, divide the promise of theistic naturalism to Jewish environmental ethics into three related promises.

First, the metaphysical dimension of theistic naturalism contributes to environmental ethics by dissolving dualisms, most notably the perceived ontological difference between human and nonhuman forms of life, which characterizes a substantial part of Western thought from Plato to Descartes to Heidegger. Instead, Jonas and Green's theistic naturalism seeks to reorient us toward nature in a way that views humans not as something distinct from their environment but as an integral part of it. It insists on the interconnectedness of all life and holds that no absolute line separates between human and nonhuman life. By so doing, theistic naturalism provides a more holistic view of reality, one that overcomes the mutual alienation between its human and nonhuman parts and grants life as such with a degree of dignity. This dignity, or the intrinsic value of being as such, constitutes an ethical call for its own preservation. Theistic naturalism, then, introduces nonhuman nature into the domain of ethics. Thus, it promises to make us more aware of how human action has unintended and indirect repercussions for the stability and future existence of various ecosystems. Moreover, because it rejects the strict dichotomy between nature and God, theistic naturalism still views the world of nature as the scene of God's continuing activity and thus as an object worthy of respect and appreciation (rather than exploitation or worship).

Second, the methodological or epistemological dimension of theistic naturalism seeks to develop a more modest orientation toward the limits of human knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, and thus promises to recover our sense of wonder. Acknowledging those limits and our ignorance may be a first step toward a more humble, democratic, and civic-minded worldview (Sideris 2017, 191–192). This approach is characterized by epistemic openness to different perspectives, experiences, and other forms of comprehension and knowledge, including our phenomenally irreducible inner life, but also "the outcry of mute things" (Jonas 1996b, 201–202; Green 1978, 31–34). It involves a certain reverence, an epistemological humility, and a willingness to appreciate (Keen 1973, 35). The promise of theistic naturalism, then, lies in its attempt to recover, in a manner that might be viable to contemporary "seekers," the sense of wonder in front of the world of nature and the responsibility that stems from it. Jonas and Green insist on the category of the sacred, which invests objects and

persons with the character of mystery that cannot be fully assimilated or comprehended, and thus views them as worthy of wonder and care (Keen 1973, 30; Sideris 2017, 196). As Sideris has argued, wonder shows affinities with a cluster of welcome dispositions that include compassion, generosity, openness, empathy, and humility (Sideris 2017, 172). As an “ingrained disposition,” wonder is an invitation to remain open and receptive to many perspectives, experiences, and ways of knowing. It “reconnects” us with our experiences by reminding us that there is more to nature than what the scientist comprehends and that human-made concepts or abstractions exist to illuminate the world—to fill in, as it were, for “reality”—and not the other way around (Sideris 2017, 195, 202). Wonder, in other words, implies epistemological humility that can foster moral habits and bring the environmental issue to the top of the list of our priorities. Therefore, the recovery and cultivation of the sense of wonder seem to bear promise for Jewish environmental ethics. Lastly, wonder does not necessarily entail a rejection or denial of the scientific or casual account of a given phenomenon. We can still wonder, for instance, at the persistence of fragile life on earth, surrounded by a vast and airless universe, or at the emergence of such diverse life in the first place from rocks, soil, and minerals. “Wonder,” writes Sideris, “is less an orientation about *what* something is or *how* it came about than *that* the thing is” (2017, 174).

Third, the moral dimension of theistic naturalism promises to teach us moral responsibility toward our environment and its inhabitants. Reflecting its metaphysical and epistemological dimensions, theistic naturalism instructs that we have responsibility precisely toward those things that are not ourselves. It views humans as a unique species, possessing a special privilege that spells great responsibility, and highlights the finite carrying capacity of the planet and our obligation to future generations. Thus, theistic naturalism rises above short-term considerations of costs and benefits. It encourages, for example, the use of renewable sources of energy and suggests restraint in consumption for the sake of posterity. Crucially, however, both Jonas and Green conceive our moral responsibility to the environment as one with our duty to God, who left the future of creation in the hands of responsible caretakers. Theistic naturalism, in other words, grounds moral responsibility in theology and myth. It heightens ethics to the realm of the transcendent, provides it with an absolute foundation, and expands our ethical horizon to include all creation, including future human and nonhuman life.

All in all, the theistic naturalism of Jonas and Green promotes an ethical attitude toward the environment. In contrast to supernatural religion, it eschews dualistic dichotomies and rejects traditional supernatural notions of life after death, salvation, otherworldly justice, and other conceptions that devalue the

world of nature. It does not view this world as a “vestibule before to world to come” (Mishnah, Avot, 4:16), let alone as a realm one must escape through a process of “de-worlding” [*Entweltlichung*], as Jonas argued the ancient Gnostics preached (Jonas 2001a, 48–99). In opposition to reductive “secular” worldviews, such as scientific naturalism and Heideggerian existentialism, it does not view the world as an indifferent prison with no intrinsic meaning into which humans were thrown and from which they may never escape. Instead, theistic naturalism views the world of nature as divine creation. It views all existence as meaningful and treats the phenomenon of life as the primary sacred reality and thus as worthy of protection (Green 2020, 217). Nevertheless, theistic naturalism acknowledges the freedom and creativity of humanity. It welcomes technology as a tool for ameliorating human life, but only when it is consistent with respect for all life—including future life—on earth. Theistic naturalism also respects scientific findings, yet it continuously reminds us that reality is more than what science, using its necessarily limited methods, can disclose. It turns with appreciation to the insight of religious traditions, in this case Judaism, regarding the holiness of the world and life and our supreme responsibility toward them.

The theologies of Jonas and Green cannot be “proven.” They demand, or so it seems to me, a certain leap of faith or at least, as Green puts it, “a leap of consciousness” (Green 2020, 19). Furthermore, one may argue that in the arena of public debate, environmental ethical convictions need to be expressed in “secular” terms of environmental values that people of various philosophical and religious persuasions can support, rather than in a religious idiom. Even more problematically, even those who agree with the general ethical principles sketched by theistic naturalism may disagree on specific policy recommendations involving more pragmatic considerations such as forming coalitions and enlisting public support (Barbour 1993, 80–84).

However, as Hogue points out, we should not expect religious naturalism, and theistic naturalism in particular, to offer a defensible universal religious ethics that all religious and moral people can and should embrace (Hogue 2010, 222). Jonas and Green teach that every speculative attempt to get a grip on the riddle of the universe must end in disrepute. Therefore, *any* account of nature can be more or less plausible but never compelling. All a speculation can hope for is to do as much justice as possible to “the evidence of the universe as we now can and must see it” (Jonas 1996e, 189, 194). The naturalistic theologies of Jonas and Green can be neither wholly proved nor disproved by science. Similarly, their religious ethics is too open to revision to be absolute and universal. Nevertheless, the significance of theistic naturalism lies not in the universality of its ethics but in its ability to make us more attuned to those aspects of

reality ignored by the scientific gaze. It aims to proceed beyond experience, as it were, without contradicting experience, by disclosing important additional aspects that belong to the world but remain imperceptible for reductive naturalism (Jonas 1994, 21). In Jonas and Green's theistic naturalism, "secular" doubt and suspicion and "religious" enchantment and sympathy mutually enrich one another (Hogue 2010, 226). Whereas both "secular" and "religious" ethical systems had failed us before,¹⁰ theistic naturalism offers a middle way approach that enlists both ancient wisdom and the scientific discoveries of the present, both the profound power of speculative myth and the rigor and integrity of philosophical inquiry. As Thomas Berry wrote, "we will recover our sense of wonder and our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe beyond ourselves as a revelatory experience of that numinous presence whence all things came into being" (1999, 49). The re-appreciation of the universe as a revelatory experience is precisely what the theistic naturalism of Jonas and Green preaches. It seeks to restore life's "transcendental integrity" not by a theology of radical transcendence but by paying attention to God's presence in this world, to the signals of transcendence within immanence.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, theistic naturalism promises not only transcendental responsibility but transcendental hope as well. As Barry writes, "We must feel that we are supported by that same process that brought the Earth into being, that power that spun the galaxies into space, that lit the sun and brought the moon into its orbit." The theistic naturalism of Hans Jonas and Arthur Green promises that those same forces are still present, that "we might feel their impact at this time and understand that we are not isolated in the chill of space with the burden of the future upon us and without the aid of any other power" (Berry 1999, 174). However, Jonas and Green do not direct us to look for these forces up in heaven. Instead, they suggest we look ever deeper into ourselves—and out the window, too.

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10 The former by its epistemic arrogance and blindness to past wisdom and real human experience; the latter by downplaying human power and freedom and by treating the tradition as final or closed.

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