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Overcoming the mentor: Heidegger's *present* and the presence of Heidegger in Karl Löwith's and Hans Jonas' postwar thought

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ABSTRACT

German scholars of Jewish origin who were students of Martin Heidegger in the 1920s and 1930s are frequently criticized for their supposed postwar refusal to 'disavow earlier liaisons with Heidegger.' These scholars are thus indicted for being fundamentally anti-liberal or apolitical, and for those reasons dangerous disciples of Heidegger. By examining the works of Karl Löwith and Hans Jonas, two of Heidegger's influential former students, the following paper presents a more nuanced reading of the relationship between master and disciples, namely that Jonas and Löwith operate with Heidegger's philosophical grammar in order to turn against Heidegger, philosophically and politically. Within this framework, the article fleshes out the crucial importance of theology to the understanding of Jonas' and Löwith's philosophical critique of Heidegger's thought. Following this theological turn, the paper demonstrates the complexity of Jonas' and Löwith's postwar approach, that is an anti-Heideggerian ethical and political quest which is anchored nonetheless in Heidegger's philosophy. As such, Jonas' and Löwith's political projects demonstrate the manner in which Heideggerian categories are not exhausted by Heidegger's own political interpretation; they grippingly denotes the aptitude to steer Heideggerian philosophy towards new ethical and political shores.

German Scholars of Jewish origin such as Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, Herbert Marcuse and Karl Löwith, who were students of Martin Heidegger in the 1920s and 1930s, continue to attract historical fascination and even controversy. Wrestling with the 'conundrum of trying to reconcile their devotion to Germany's most gifted philosophical spirit of the interwar period with his triumphant conversion to Nazism,' as the historian Richard Wolin argues, these thinkers are reproached not only for their supposed postwar refusal to 'disavow earlier liaisons with Heidegger,' but also for their role in his persistent influence on Western postwar political thought, such as Marxism (Marcuse) or environmentalism (Jonas).[1] Bluntly put, these scholars are indicted for being fundamentally anti-liberal or apolitical, and for those reasons dangerous disciples of Heidegger.[2]

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[1] See Wolin's introduction to: Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger & European Nihilism*, ed. Richard Wolin (New York: Columbia UP, 1995), 6–7; Anson Rabinbach, *In The Shadow of Catastrophe* (Berkeley, California UP, 2000), 121–28; Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004), 4–7; On Marcuse and Jonas see Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

[2] For example in: Wolin, *Heidegger's Children*; Luc Ferry & Alan Renant, *Heidegger and Modernity* (Chicago, Chicago UP, 1990).

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This approach which underlines these scholars' alleged reluctance to reject Heidegger, suggests their 'guilt by association,' which, in turn, is further debated in relation to other Jewish scholars who were influenced by Heidegger's philosophy, such as Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas.[3] Indeed, if Martin Heidegger is without doubt one of the predominant continental philosophers of the twentieth century, he also became one of the most controversial after he cast his lot with National Socialism, even if for a short while. The relationship between his philosophical brilliance and political folly has perplexed as many scholars as it has intrigued. For as Rockmore and Margolis argue, the bond between 'the source of one of the most influential currents of philosophical thought in our century' and 'the main example of absolute evil. . . . is without any known historical precedent.'[4] Nonetheless, as the political theorist Dana R. Villa pointed out, suggesting 'guilt' by association with Heidegger is 'both interpretively dubious and intellectually lazy.'[5] Such an approach serves as an ethical tribunal, stigmatizing these scholars for having been disciples of Heidegger, even after his affair with Nazism, while underplaying the fact that none of them remained such a disciple in any simple sense after 1933.

A more nuanced reading of the relationship between master and disciples can be won by examining the works of Karl Löwith and Hans Jonas, two of Heidegger's influential former students.[6] By analyzing Karl Löwith's *Heidegger: Thinker in Destitute Times* (1953), a text that became 'a minor classic' since its initial appearance, and the last chapter of Hans Jonas' *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (1958),[7] this article demonstrates how Jonas and Löwith operate with Heidegger's philosophical grammar in order to turn against Heidegger, ethically and politically. These two scholars' turn against Heidegger informed their wish to save the modern-secular tradition (a tradition which they regarded liberal) from its nihilistic fate.

In arguing for such a complex relationship between these two former students of Heidegger and their awe of his teachings, this article attempts to transcend the interpretive zero-sum game in which writers either defend or attack thinkers for their association with a stigmatized thinker. While rejecting the moral austerity of a position that demands Löwith and Jonas disavow their links to Heidegger, this paper also acknowledges that they did not severe their previous intellectual reliance on Heidegger's teachings. That these scholars' postwar works demonstrate a continuing reliance on Heidegger's teachings is not disputed. As Christian Wiese, for example, has recently argued, the intellectual relationship with Heidegger "had profound and enduring effects on Hans Jonas's thought."[8] The issue would have to be, however, what sort of reliance. Here, a more complex, perhaps contradictory relationship is identifiable. It is important to differentiate between two distinct elements of these scholars' postwar response to Heidegger: first, that these scholars clearly turned against Heidegger's philosophy and politics; second, that this turn was nonetheless based on Heideggerian philosophical assumptions. Interpreting these scholars' postwar works along the lines of an alleged ongoing admiration to Heidegger misses this complexity by confusing an inability to overcome Heidegger's philosophy with reluctance to do so. And yet, was it possible to overcome Heidegger by using his philosophical categories? This article demonstrates that the genuine conundrum Heidegger's students faced was their genuine wish to overcome him while remaining in thrall to his mode of thinking.

Within this framework, the article advances two pivotal arguments. First, it fleshes out the crucial importance of theology to the understanding of Jonas' and Löwith's philosophical critique of Heidegger's thought. Heidegger's 'crypto-theology' is a theme quite well worked over in a wide range of philosophical and historical studies.[9] Nonetheless, the manner in which Heidegger's students such as Jonas and Löwith declared Heidegger a 'crypto-theologian' has remained largely understudied in the scholarly literature; these scholars' contribution to the study of Heidegger's theological roots should be acknowledged as well. Both scholars read Heidegger's Existentialism, including his concept of temporality, as if resting upon a division between immanence (the world) and transcendence ('beyond' the world). They did so, however, by turning from ontology to theology, that is by considering Heidegger's concept of transcendence as a theological rather than mere philosophical category. Here, both scholars saw in Heidegger's concept of transcendent temporality a structure of eternal time that lies beyond our worldly experience but that endows this experience with meaning. In his concept of the 'present' moment (*Augenblick*) in particular, they perceived a secularized version of the theological numinous unity between the human being (*Dasein*) and God. Both concluded that Heidegger's philosophy is a type of 'concealed' (Löwith) or 'Gnostic' (Jonas) theology. As a consequence, both scholars connect between Heidegger's *Dasein* as the new divinity, nihilism and eventually Nazism;

[3] Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham, Brandeis UP, 2007), 1–3, 21, 25, 44; Samuel Moyn, 'Judaism against Paganism, Emmanuel Levinas's Response to Heidegger and Nazism in the 1930s,' *History and Memory*, 10 1 (1998), 25–35; Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[4] See the introduction to Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989), ix.

[5] Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996), 115.

[6] See Löwith, *Heidegger*, 1; Christian Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas* (Waltham, Brandeis UP, 2007), 8; Wolin, *Heidegger's Children*, 71–76, 101–8.

[7] The text was originally published under: Karl Löwith, *Heidegger: Denker in Dürftiger Zeit* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953); Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1958), 320–40. The text was originally published under: Hans Jonas, 'Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism,' *Social Research* 19 (1952): 430–52.

[8] Wiese, *The Life and Thought*, 87.

[9] See for example: (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006); Peter E. Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley, California UP, 2003); Stephan Mulhall, *Philosophical Myth of the Fall*, (Princeton, Princeton UP, 2005); Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1990).