Mythic Truth and the Art of Science:

# Hans Jonas and Eric Voegelin on Gnosticism and the Unease of Modernity



1952 was a crucial year for those interested in the relevance of the category of Gnosticism to the understanding of the specificity and especially the specifically identifiable political and spiritual disorders of modernity. Most famously it saw the publication of Eric Voegelin's 1951 Charles L. Walgreen lectures, delivered at the University of Chicago, as The New Science of Politics. This proved to be Voegelin's most widely noted book and central to its thesis was the argument that the political culture developed in the West since the period of the high middle ages was marked by a disordering phenomenon, modern gnosticism, that, by reason of the claim of its more or less self-aware devotees to a form of salvational knowledge capable of delivering mankind from the otherwise knowable constraints of political existence, bore a marked affinity and stood to some degree in historical continuity with the world denying heresies condemned by the Church fathers and such Neo-Platonists as Plotinus as Gnosticism. This was a theme to which Voegelin was to return in later writings, notably his inaugural lecture "Science, Politics and Gnosticism", delivered in Munich in November 1958, and the article "Ersatz Religion" which appeared in the journal Wort und Warheit in in 1960. Together with the translation of Voegelin's final pre-war book, The Political Religions, these writings, in which the author's considerable polemical gifts are much in evidence, now form Volume Five of his Collected Works.[(1)]

Despite the fact that the category of gnosticism tends to disappear from his later analyses and that the name given to an empirically identifiable political phenomenon is always arguably secondary to the establishment of its existence and significance, the forcefulness and apparent eccentricity of Voegelin's designation of modernity as "gnostic" in the eyes of more mainstream and less acute political scientists has guaranteed that it remains to this day the theme by which he is best remembered in the academically orthodox establishment. More relevant to the theme of

the present paper is the fact that among students of Gnosis as a general and not necessarily Christian-heretical feature of the early centuries of the Common Era Voegelin's use of the term gnosticism has, where not ignored, been received in a spirit of generally unfavourable criticism, even by scholars as generally sympathetic to his hermeneutical approach as Hans Jonas. Clarification of some of the reasons for this is a primary purpose of the present paper.

1952, the year of the publication of Voegelin's New Science, also witnessed the appearance of Hans Jonas's article "Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism" in the journal Social Research. Later reprinted as an appendix to his book The Gnostic Religion (Boston, 1958) and included as well as the ninth essay comprising The Phenomenon of Life (Chicago, 1966), this essay attempts persuasively to establish the revealing parallels between the world-view of ancient Gnosis and that of the existentialism of Jonas's philosophical mentor, Martin Heidegger. Unlike Voegelin, Jonas is recognised as an authority on the history and character of the Gnosticism of ancient times, both by virtue of the English work mentioned above and because of his two volume German study Gnosis und spätantiker Geist (Tubingen 1934 and 1954). These works, and perhaps especially that in English, constitute to this day the best, most vivid and philosophically perceptive introduction to the weird yet strangely familiar world of a once widespread religious universe that is today represented in living form only by the small communities of the Mandaeans of Southern Iraq, who claim as their founder John the Baptist, and of whom a considerable proportion now live as new immigrants to Australia.

There are affinities but also crucial differences between Voegelin's application of the term "gnostic" to the political culture of modernity and Jonas's perception of near identity between the world-rejecting creed of ancient Gnosis and what he sees as the nihilistic implications of Heidegger's existentialism. To these I shall return, but for the moment I want to draw attention to what is the central reason why students of Gnosticism as a religious phenomenon of the first centuries of the Christian era regard Voegelin's characterisation of modernity as gnostic with suspicion. Essentially this reason is simple and for those who hold it decisive. Voegelin sees the essence of modern gnosticism as being to displace the hope of heavenly salvation to the plane of worldly existence - a goal to be brought about by revolutionary action carried out by men who claim to possess a privileged knowledge of how this quasi- ontological transformation can be attained. By contrast the salvational knowledge embodied in all variants of ancient Gnosis, from

the subtle speculation of Valentinus to the teachings of Mani, through whom Gnosticism achieved the status of a world-religion with a universal ambition, albeit one that was ultimately to be persecuted to the point of extinction through an orbit that at times extended from North Africa to China, aims at redeeming not the world or its inhabitants but at liberation of a purely spiritual element from the irredeemable evil of earthly entrapment.

Despite a shared reliance on a form of salvational insight, considered as something both apart from and superior to common knowledge, between modern revolutionary sectarians and the ancient Gnostics, there is, as Voegelin himself admits in The New Science of Politics, a clear difference between the world-immanent schemes of the ideologues of revolution and the cosmically transcendent goal of original Gnosis. One aims at raising a remediable earth and its incarnate beings to a qualitatively higher level of being: the other aims at escaping a form of being, incarnate existence, that can never be so redeemed. Equally while the saving knowledge of the so called modern gnostic is seen as acquired by the elect or revolutionary vanguard from within this world, often in a form described, as in Comte's positivism or Marxian socialism, as "science", its apparent equivalent for the ancient believer is introduced to the world by an alien messenger dispatched by the supra-cosmic source of spiritual being who is alone the proper object of Gnostic veneration. As an aside it is worth noting an echo of this second, ancient view when Martin Heidegger declared, famously if rather gnomically, to his interviewer from Der Spiegel: "Only a god can save us." In Science, Politics and Gnosticism Voegelin characterises Heidegger as the most subtle of modern gnostics. But, judged by the criteria of ancient Gnosis and the words of the Spiegel interview, he was, apart the surviving Mandaeans, its only modern representative -- an interesting conceit for sure but one which drives a coach and horses through Voegelin's broader designation of revolutionary modernity as gnostic to its core. However great may be the influence of Heidegger on the current intellectual scene we can scarcely see it as retrospective to the point of having formed the opinions of the 13$^{th}$ Century cleric Joachim of Flora, whom Voegelin regards as the fons et origo of modern gnostic speculation nor reasonably suppose that the mass of voguish post-Heideggerian theorists have been most persuaded by what is, even in a notoriously complex opus, one of their master's more mysterious pronouncements.

Certainly in "Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism" Jonas points to parallels in vocabulary and world-view between Heidegger and the Gnostics, drawing particular attention to the near-

identity between the Heideggerian and Valentinian formulations of our having been "thrown" into a world in which we are not, or not as yet, our "authentic" selves. But this affinity is neither enough for Jonas to call Heidegger a Gnostic nor apparently is he prepared to recognise as valid the historical affiliations which, according to Voegelin and the scholars to whom he appeals, link in continuity the existentialist with the authentically Gnostic Weltanschauung.

In order to understand the distinct ways Voegelin and Jonas employ the category of gnosticism as a means of identifying, at least by analogy, aspects of modernity it is, as this point, advisable to explicate the biographical and disciplinary differences between the two men, taking first the case of Eric Voegelin. With his background in jurisprudence and political science, and his enduring allegiance to the ethical universe of the Rechtsstaat, Voegelin, during the 1930s, attempted repeatedly to understand the extremist political movements, National Socialism above all, that threatened the existence of constitutional order with a murderous tide of destruction.

Dissatisfied with the category of "Political Religions," as employed in his 1938 book of that title, Voegelin turned, predominantly under the influence of his reading of Hans Urs von Balthasar's 1937 work Apokalypse der deutschen Seele, to an identification of revived gnosticism rather than on the wider notion of political religion as such in order to comprehend the unforgiving violence with which contemporary mass movements attacked as utterly corrupt the shaky remains of a once viable political order rooted in an essentially Christian, Augustinian view of the state. However, as Klaus Vondung observes, in doing this Voegelin's subsumed under the term Gnosticism elements of a no less ancient tradition, that of Apocalypticism - a spiritual phenomenon which like Gnosticism itself first appeared during the period that Voegelin was later to call the Ecumenic Age when ethnically compact nations and the cults of essentially tribal deities found themselves subject to new imperial powers that threatened to extinguish both their political existence and the continuity of the religious practices of their inhabitants.[(2)]

The spiritual movement of Gnosticism arose in conditions when, in consequence of these unforeseen historical circumstances, existing religious aspirations were radically transformed and transferred from a world that now seemed the realm of uncaring powers, often perceived as demonic. Such hopes thus came to be vested in a newly imagined, more purely spiritual realm, ruled by a world-transcendent deity and therefore free from earthly powers who could by virtue

of their mundane ontological status, never penetrate such an immaterial and hence invulnerable sphere of being. As a consequence this led the Gnostics to a no less radical devaluation of the worthiness of earthly existence. This could, in the absence of any enduring sense of virtue embodied in a righteous political community, lead, on an individual basis, either to extreme asceticism or, more rarely, a no less extreme licentiousness but it was scarcely conducive to a programme of effective political response in a world already regarded as beyond redemption.

By contrast, the contemporary movement of Apocalypticism, to which Vondung draws our attention, reacted to the same circumstances by endowing the activism of the remaining faithful with the simultaneously religious and political role of defeating, or at least aiding God in defeating the otherwise overwhelming force of powers perceived as demonic in consequence of the threat they posed to inherited beliefs and practices. Thus, as comparison with Gnosticism shows, Apocalypticism encompassed from its inception at a moment of crisis a revolutionary, political potential that found no place in the world-view of Gnosis. For while the Apocalyptic tradition regarded existence as capable of restoration through the providential alliance of divine will and human action, the Gnostic path rejected the material world as irremediably evil and thus displaced its eschatological hopes onto faith in the redemption of an element of unsullied spirit from what was now seen as a bodily existence rendered intolerable by incarnate power.

Though Voegelin was never entirely to disown the gnostic thesis of modernity in his later works, it ceased to play a central role, especially as his focus of interest shifted from the more combative political writings of the 1940s and 50s, composed under the impact of a hot war against National Socialism, and later the cold war directed at Communist expansion, toward a no less existentially engaged but less polemically formulated attempt to renew the positive sources of political and psychic order through recovery of the experiential roots of classical philosophy. Thus, despite the value of The New Science of Politics and related works, which no reservations regarding the author's use of the category of gnosticism, however well justified, should allow us to forget, I cannot but feel that Voegelin's reputation in the eyes of posterity will rest less on the books by which he is now best known to the academic establishment than on the theory of historically and ontologically embodied consciousness developed in Anamnesis (1966), on the fifth volume of Order and History and on the late essays that form volumes 12 and 28 of the Collected Works which is currently being completed by the University of Missouri Press. Viewed retrospectively,

from a perspective informed by these writings, The New Science of Politics, and with it Voegelin's reliance on the suggestive but hermeneutically dubious category of modern gnosticism, appears, to this reader at least, as, at best, a preliminary opening to a deep hermeneutic of order in soul and society that achieved completion in works composed when the pressure of political events had, at least to some extent and perhaps only temporarily, receded as a presently felt and immediate threat to the unforced cultivation of the life of the mind.

Insofar as Eric Voegelin's category of modern gnosticism seeks to establish an historical connection with the original Gnosis of the early common era it tends to continue the habit of the patristic, anti-Gnostic literature, which extends from Ireneaeus's Adversos Haereses of the 2nd Century AD to the 8th Century Dialogus contra Manichaeos of John of Damascus, to treat Gnostic teachings as essentially Christian heresies. This is understandable both in terms of the historical fact that many of the Gnostic teachers, such as Marcion and Valentinus, did in fact regard themselves as Christians - indeed as the only authentic bearers of the message of Christ - and that until the early 20th Century our knowledge of their teachings depended almost entirely on the summaries of their doctrines that form a substantive part of the writings of their orthodox opponents, which were all that seemed to survive from what had originally been a more equally balanced field of theological controversy. In Voegelin's case this tendency to endorse the patristic perspective is furthermore reinforced by a distinctive view of history that both regards modern gnosticism as a falling away from the tensions of authentic Christian faith and by the already noted temptation on his part to include within the category of modern gnosis features that more properly belong to the more exclusively Judaeo-Christian Apocalyptic tradition.

However, in the eyes of most recent students of ancient Gnosticism, including Jonas, this is a perspective rendered untenable by the notable expansion of the range of original Gnostic material that has become available since the late 19th Century discovery of a mass of Manichaean literature, in various old Persian and Turkic languages, from the oasis of Turfan in Chinese Turkestan. Among the more notable of these later finds, which have brought to light a multitude of non-Christian Gnostic writings, apart from the already known Poimandres of Hermes Trimegistus and the Mandaean scriptures first introduced to Europe in the 17th Century but only made generally accessible to scholars by their translation into German by M. Libardski less than a hundred years ago, two are of especial importance. These are the library of Coptic Manichaean

manuscripts found at Medinet Madi in South West Fayum in Egypt in 1930 and the collection of 13 Papyrus-Codices recovered in 1945 near the town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt that seems to form the remainder of the library of a 5th Century Christian Gnostic community. Also written in Coptic, this includes, besides unorthodox Christian works known previously only from their citation by patristic sources, a number of non-Christian texts, notably the tractate known as Zostrianos, which clearly derives from the orbit of Iranian, quasi-Zoroastrian Gnosticism.

The implication of these discoveries, of which Jonas in successive editions of The Gnostic Religion takes full account, is an understanding of Gnosticism that sees it not as an originally Christian heretical movement but, in the words of Robert Haardt, as: "an essentially non-Christian movement occurring in late antiquity, which manifested itself in widely-scattered communities, and under many different guises."(3) In his English language study Jonas invokes Oswald Spengler's idea of "pseudomorphosis" in order to understand the confusing situation in which the student of Gnosis finds himself in the face of a widespread religious and spiritual phenomenon that exists in numerous varieties, some Christian, some not, some cast in apparently philosophical language and others in a more overtly mythological form but all sharing a number of crucial defining features centred around the belief in the essentially evil or alienating character of man's material existence. "Pseudomorphosis" describes the geological process whereby: "if a different crystalline substance happens to fill the hollow left in a geological layer by crystals that have disintegrated, it is forced by the mould to take on a crystal form not its own and which without chemical analysis will mislead the observer into taking it for a crystal of the original kind."(4) By analogy, Gnostic spirituality takes on differing forms depending on its historical context, or cultural space, while never losing its singular, distinctive and identifiable character.

It is this that lets Jonas speak of a single "Gnostic Religion" despite the manifold ways in which it is manifest in the sects and cults of antiquity. And it is for the same reason that the interpreter can, with sufficient hermeneutic sensitivity, identify a shared, essentially mythological core both in overtly mythological and in apparently philosophical or theological texts - a core which may be understood as an intelligible if ultimately fallacious human response to a world perceived as intrinsically disordered and beyond hope of recovery. At least to this extent Jonas's approach resembles that urged by Voegelin in "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History:"(5) a resemblance all the more striking in that Jonas's distinction between such overtly

mythological formulations as those of the Mandaeans and the pseudo-philosophic discourse of a Valentinus can be understood along the Voegelinian axis of the movement, at least at a linguistic level, from the compactness of myth to a more differentiated terminology of "philosophy." The "Mythic Truth" of this paper's title is the authentic Gnostic rendering intelligible of the all too real experience of worldly disorder: the corresponding "Art of Science" is the duty of the interpreter to make this mythic expression intelligible to a contemporary reader.

For purposes of clarifying Jonas's contribution to our understanding of Gnosticism and its relevance to the self-interpretation of modernity let me expand upon the two terms of my title, taking first the phrase "art of science" and then that of "mythic truth." In common parlance both have an element of the paradoxical. 'Science' and 'art' are commonly considered as qualitatively different undertakings, while 'myth' is usually seen as opposed to 'truth.' At least in English, the term 'science' is normally construed in a more narrow sense than the German Wissenschaft, as meaning the practice of the mathematising sciences of nature and as excluding the interpretative or hermeneutic pursuits of human inquiry; but, leaving aside my own conviction that even the most mathematical of formulae in natural science rest upon an initial act of interpretation by the scientist and that consequently even these sciences are, in their foundations, hermeneutic, I wish to make plain that here 'science' is taken to include the discipline of interpreting the phenomena of ancient Gnosis and 'art' as the skill that the interpreter must bring to bear in carrying this out.

Relative to Gnosticism the objects of interpretation are texts composed by adepts and opponents alike; and these are open to interpretation subject to two conditions, one linguistic, the other anthropological. The linguistic condition is met when the interpreter can understand the language in which the text was first composed or into which it has been adequately translated. The anthropological condition is met by virtue of the fact that the authors of these works were beings much like ourselves, inhabiting a world that, for all its historical specificity, we would still recognise as our own. In "Change and Permanence: On the Possibility of Understanding History" Jonas argues that the possibility of interpretation rests on shared possession by the interpreter and his object of a common human horizon founded in certain foundational and enduring features of human nature and response.[(6)] Adequate interpretation of the other, so construed, depends less on the "knowledge of like by like," in the sense of an exact commonality of experience, than on what Jonas calls: " a shared potential mediated by symbol." It is thus, to use his own examples,

that we can understand the grief of an Achilles for his Patroclus, the love of Romeo for Juliet and the response of the fishermen to the call of Jesus on the shores of a distant Palestinian lake. The truth of this view seems obvious enough to me but to those who doubt it I recommend either a reading of Jonas's text or consideration of the problems a teacher would face if compelled to explain the problems of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow to beings who felt neither heat nor cold, who took sustenance directly from the air, and who could fly at will from place to distant place.

What then of 'mythic truth?' Here our problem is a little more complex. The underlying truth to which Gnosticism is a recognisable response is that our world is a puzzling and often painful place. The specificity of the Gnostic response is that the toils of human existence are attributed not, as in orthodox Christianity, to human fault nor, as in the classical world-view to the immutable conditions of mortal as opposed to divine existence. Instead they are seen as a consequence of the world having been made by a flawed or malign Creator in conscious or unconscious rebellion against the ultimate source of spirit, of whom, or of which, a vestige remains in dissatisfied man. Students of Gnostic myth often refer to its dualist character in which an integrally good source of spiritual being is counterposed to an evil creator of the impure world of matter. But this form of theological dualism is only truly radical in the Eastern, Iranian types of Gnosticism, such as the teachings of Mani, which reverse and alter the orthodox Zoroastrian doctrine of dualism, according to which the Cosmos and man are seen in their integrity of body and soul as creatures of the good god Ohrmazd and not of the evil Ahriman who struggles for their domination and destruction. For the Manichaean, by contrast, only the spiritual element in man is seen as the creature of the god of light: his body, and the body of the world, is the creature of the dark. In Manichaean doctrine spirit alone may be redeemed and ultimately is so in an eschatological scheme that Mani himself expounds in astonishingly vivid mythological detail. (7)

Aspects of such theological dualism are also present in more Western forms of Gnosticism, as exemplified in the common hostility, most marked in Marcion, for the Jewish creator God of the Old Testament, and in the Gnostic denigration, condemned by Plotinus, of the divine immortality of the stars. But, according to Jonas, the most pervasive dualism in Gnosis is not theological opposition between two more or less equal divine principles, one good, one evil, but an

existential dualism rooted in the Gnostics' feeling of estrangement from a cosmos that, in the beliefs of the classical world, and of the cosmological civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, was regarded as ultimately beneficent and divine. In this existential interpretation of Gnostic dualism one recognises the influence of Jonas's teacher, Martin Heidegger, in whose depiction of Dasein's situation in Being and Time he also noted an unconscious yet unmistakable echo of that sense of alienation from the mundanity of everyday being which also typifies Gnosticism. In this way the ideas of the early Heidegger serve a clear dialectical function in Jonas's research, both providing a key to understanding ancient Gnosis and exemplifying its nearest modern equivalent.

Among students of Gnosticism Hans Jonas stands out not so much in terms of the range of the material he covers but because he approaches it from an identifiably philosophical perspective. This moreover is a perspective formed, as he puts it, "in the school of such teachers as Husserl, Heidegger and Bultmann."[(8)] Of these it is the last two who are most significant for his studies of Gnosis, Heidegger for the reasons already mentioned, and Bultmann because it was he who introduced Jonas to the field of research into the cultural and spiritual environment associated with the origins of Christianity in which Gnosticism plays a vital part. Under Bultmann's guidance Jonas's first book dealt with the problem of Augustine's ideas on free will in the context of the Pelagian controversy,[(9)] while his second was the first volume of his study of Gnosticism which, as indicated above, was published in Germany in 1934. It is of some biographical interest that by the time the book was published Jonas had already emigrated from Germany and that the volume by a Jewish author appeared with a preface composed by Rudolf Bultmann. This was an act of considerable courage on Bultmann's part and is one of the many reasons why Jonas always regarded Bultmann with such esteem and respect despite the trenchant criticisms he was later to make of aspects of Bultmann's theology. It goes without saying that Bultmann's behaviour in these matters stands in marked contrast to that of Jonas's other teacher, Heidegger; and it says much for the honesty and liberality of Jonas's intellectual orientation that he never allowed the question of Heidegger's political commitment to National Socialism to stand in the way of his acknowledgement of the debt he owed to Heidegger in forming, if partly by way of reaction, his own distinctive philosophical approach, not least in his interpretation of Gnosticism.[(10)]

I have already noted that Heidegger's influence on Jonas's approach to Gnosticism has two distinct aspects. On the one hand it sensitised him to the possibility of interpreting ancient Gnosis

as a religious and spiritual response to a set of historically formed existential conditions that arose in the early years of the Common Era (AD). On the other, it enabled him to see parallels between this response and features of the intellectual life of his own times: notably aspects of the existentialist approach developed by Heidegger, and the influence this exerted on the minds of his contemporaries, not least his own.[(11)] Unlike Voegelin, Jonas neither calls Heidegger a 'gnostic' nor seeks to establish any historical continuity between the ancient and the modern phenomena. In Voegelin's terms, the parallel Jonas establishes between the two is instead one of equivalence of experience and symbolization rooted in a certain commonality of human, historical situation.

In view of the complex nature of the issues involved it is worth citing at length Jonas's own explanation of the relationship between his Heideggerian formation and his understanding of Gnosticism: "When ...I turned to the study of Gnosticism, I found that the viewpoints, the optics as it were, which I had acquired in the school of Heidegger, enabled me to see aspects of gnostic thought that had been missed before. And I was increasingly struck by the familiarity of the seemingly utterly strange. In retrospect, I am inclined to believe that it was the thrill of this dimly felt affinity which had lured me into the gnostic labyrinth in the first place. Then, after long sojourn in those distant lands returning to my own, the contemporary philosophical scene I found that what I had learnt out there made me now better understand the shore from which I had set out. The extended dialogue with ancient nihilism proved - at least to me - a help in discerning and placing the meaning of modern nihilism: just as the latter had initially equipped me for spotting its obscures cousin in the past. What had happened was that Existentialism, which had provided the means of an historical analysis, became itself involved in the results of it. The fitness of its categories to the particular matter was something to ponder about. They fitted as if made to measure: were they, perhaps, made to measure? At the outset I had taken that fitness as simply a case of their presumed general validity, which would assure their utility for the interpretation of any human 'existence' whatsoever. But then it dawned on me that the applicability of categories in the given instance might rather be due to the very kind of 'existence' on the other side - that which had provided the categories and that which so well responded to them.....In other words, the hermeneutic functions became reversed and reciprocal - lock turns into key, and key into lock: the 'existentialist' reading of Gnosticism, so well vindicated by its

hermeneutic success, invites as its natural complement the trial of a 'gnostic' reading of Existentialism."[(12)]

These words are crucial both for understanding Jonas's own development and as a guide to his approach to Gnosticism as well as for his attempt to establish its relevance to identifying key aspects of modernity. On the first, it enabled him to see that the categories of Heideggerian existentialism do not describe human existence as such but only one particular type, characterised by a sense of estrangement from the cosmos and a tendency to ethical nihilism. This encouraged Jonas to distance himself from Heidegger and develop another, altogether sounder interpretation of the human condition. On the second it helped him to see that existentialism and Gnosticism were nonetheless equivalent responses to parallel yet historically unique circumstances.

Equivalence, however, is not identity; and Jonas is careful to distinguish between an existentialist philosophy of apparent ontological freedom that, in denying man a determined nature akin to that of other animate beings, seems to leave him at liberty to decide what he is to become and a Gnostic myth that envisages him as enslaved by intra-cosmic powers. Nevertheless the tenor of Jonas's argument is that this distinction is more apparent than real, and that underlying the distinction is a more fundamental affinity rooted in a common feeling of alienation, both ontological and ethical, that separates, in Gnosticism, man's spiritual or pneumatic essence and, in existentialism, his 'authentic' self from the regulatory conditions of the otherwise normative conditions of earthly being. Beneath the apparent contradiction between the Gnostic belief in a transmundane God from whom the spiritual element in man derives but who plays no part in the order of the cosmos, and the existentialist denial of reality to any objective supernatural or natural measure of human conduct, lies a shared sense that, in this world at least, man is utterly alone in determining what he is to be. On the level of theology the deus absconditus of Gnosticism and non-existent god of modern existentialism are effectively as one. On that of anthropology and ethics the denial of intrinsic and objectively given meaning and value to man's place in the cosmos results in what Jonas, following Nietzsche, terms nihilism. But while Nietzsche sees this state of affairs as consequent upon what he calls "the death of God," by which, as Heidegger puts it, he means "that the supra-sensible world is without effective force,"[(13)] Jonas gives it a more extensive and less specifically Christian theological

meaning as signifying the rupture of a sense of meaningful and normative relationship between human existence and the order of the cosmos.

In Christian teaching, as in that of Judaism and Islam, the validity of this relationship rests upon belief that, though transcendent, God is nevertheless the creator of the cosmos: the very doctrine that Gnosticism most consistently denies. But though crucial in establishing an opposition between Gnosticism and Christian orthodoxy, faith in divine origins of the world represents an attenuated and thus vulnerable token of consonance between man and cosmos when set against the typical forms of pagan piety, whether embodied in the beliefs of what Voegelin calls the "cosmological civilizations" of Egypt and Mesopotamia or in the Stoic idea of a cosmic logos that both informs universal order and gives objective ethical direction to human conduct. And it this that offers Jonas the theme of one of the most philosophically challenging chapters of The Gnostic Religion when he contrasts the Greek and Gnostic evaluations of the cosmos.[(14)]

The chapter devoted to the cosmos succeeds Jonas's survey of the general symbolic content of Gnostic myth and his broad though far from exhaustive examination of the teachings of a representative selection of Gnostic sects. This is sufficient, at least for the general reader, to convey both the variety of Gnostic doctrines, their widespread geographical distribution and, at the same time, their essential unity of outlook based upon a shared denigration of the value of mundane existence. In the opening section of his book, Jonas identifies this spiritual movement of human estrangement from the world as an intelligible reaction to an existential crisis brought about by the disorienting destruction of older, more ethnically and religiously homogenous forms of political community by imperial powers; and by an accompanying ferment of ideas in which Western, essentially Greek, beliefs and concepts cross-fertilised in numerous different ways with religious ideas and cults of oriental and Egyptian origin. Of these Gnosticism is only one among many: though one decisively set apart from the rest in consequence of its systematic rejection of the positive valency of worldly being for a residually spiritual creature such as man is taken to be. Between this analysis of the spiritual-political crisis of late antiquity and the Voegelinian notion of an "ecumenic age," readers will note an apparent affinity; even if, in consequence of his focus on Gnosis, the picture that Jonas draws of the situation has a somewhat more negative slant.

In this age Gnosticism as well as such phenomena as the cosmic piety of the Stoics represent cognate if opposed reactions to a common experience of spiritual estrangement from ancestral and locally particular cults, characterised by individual and communal devotion to one's native god and to the tribe or city of which this god was supposed to be the especial patron but to which he, or she, could no longer offer the protection traditionally expected and ascribed. However what makes Gnosticism a uniquely revolutionary phenomenon, not in a political but an ontological sense, is that, alone among potential reactions to this situation, it reacts to the experience of disorientation not by extending in a universalist direction a formerly localised divine principle, whether the Hebrew God or the cosmic deities of Greece and Rome, but by imagining the world as an originally and innately demonic sphere, the creation of a malign demiurge; and then in attributing to authentic divinity an acosmic status with which the spiritual element in man can be reunited only by communication of that esoteric knowledge, Gnosis, which, in this world, releases him from earthly obligations, and, in another, ensures the ultimate salvation of the elect.

It should be noted here that, clear though it seems, this characterisation of Gnosticism does not pass unchallenged among Jonas's fellow students of Gnosis. In a recent book, Rethinking "Gnosticism:" An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category,[(15)] the Washington scholar Michael Allen Williams, a specialist in the study of the Nag Hammadi library, has even argued that the very category of Gnosticism, and with it Jonas's idea that there is such a thing as a "Gnostic Religion," is a hermeneutically misleading notion that induces students to see a unity where historically speaking none existed, while continuing into the world of 20th Century scholarship a negative and essentially polemical reading of a variety of teachings that has its source in the writings of early heresiologists, whose purpose was not dispassionate study of a multiform religious phenomenon but the definition of what came to be accepted as a Christian orthodoxy which, for various reasons, the doctrines of those termed "Gnostic" were seen to challenge. Certainly when The Gnostic Religion first appeared in 1958 the contents of the Nag Hammadi library, on which Williams' case so much depends, were scarcely known; and when, in the second edition of the book, published in 1963, Jonas engages with these writings, in a chapter entitled "The Recent Discoveries in the Field of Gnosticism"(The Gnostic Religion pp.290-319), he provides a reading of the teachings of the newly discovered codices that perhaps exaggerates

their overall unity as well as their consistency with the image of Gnosis derived from patristic sources.

Nonetheless, though this is not the place to answer more fully Williams's objections to the category of Gnosticism, which is anyway a task requiring more specialist knowledge than I possess, something should be said in defence of Jonas's use of the term, and thus in furtherance of the case advanced in this paper for its utility as a notion helpful both in identifying an ancient spiritual phenomenon and to highlight certain aspects of modernity, though not necessarily those featured by Voegelin. In the first place, despite Williams' skepticism, the world-view conveyed by the Nag Hammadi writings does express a vision of existence distinct from that of the most revealing comparison, which is not with that of Christian orthodoxy but with the dominant forms of pagan piety at the time of their composition. And second, that important though the Nag Hammadi texts may be, by virtue of their number and their relatively good state of preservation, they represent, with exceptions, the legacy of only one wing of a more general phenomenon of late antiquity of which we find evidence, if in more fragmentary form, in a body of Gnostic literature less indebted to Christian imagery. These are relevant texts to which Williams, perhaps, pays too little attention.

This is of special significance when we recall that if most surviving Gnostic literature, as represented in the Nag Hammadi library, speaks, as it were, the language of Christianity, so also the body of Christian scripture is, in ways identified by Rudolf Bultmann, deeply indebted to the imagery and even the theological imagination of Gnosis.[(16)] Of course Bultmann does not claim that the two are identical. This would not only be a perspective incompatible with his status as a Christian theologian but is, if only in the last resort, a position unwarranted either by theological evidence or by the historical record. Nevertheless where Bultmann is surely right, and in a way that amply justifies the stress that Jonas places on the opposition of Gnostic acosmism to pagan rather than to orthodox Christian spirituality, is in emphasising that, though ultimately decisive in theological terms, Christian faith in the divine origins of creation, as evidenced in such biblical sayings as "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof," is perhaps all that stands between Gnostic and orthodox teaching on the relationship between man's proper destiny and the order of the cosmos. As Bultmann observes, especially in the New Testament: "There is nothing to suggest the classical view that God is immanent in the world, no suggestion that the orderly,

law-abiding process of nature and course of history are proofs of divine immanence. The New Testament knows nothing of the Stoic conception of providence. There is a great gulf between God and the world."...a realm perceived as subject to the domination of "principalities and powers" that are themselves conceived as not merely separated from but even radically opposed to divine will.[(17)] In his pages on "Redemption," Bultmann also points to affinities between Gnostic and orthodox doctrine both with regard to man's state of estrangement from the order of this world and the dependence of his ultimate and preeminently desirable salvation from this state on the intervention of a figure, Jesus Christ, who is, in his effective nature though not in the material form of his incarnation, sent into this world from one beyond.

Further discussion of the theological intricacies involved here would transcend the scope of this paper; for what is important at present is only to clarify why Jonas, who writes not as a theologian but as a philosopher of existence, albeit one with a view distinct from that of Heidegger, should stress the historic import of what, without exaggeration, we may call the Gnostic revolution against the form of piety that prevailed, almost without exception, throughout the ancient world. In its most transparent form the central symbol of this piety is the Greek idea of the cosmos as a realm of innate order and the only worthy, or possible, homeland of mankind. And, like Gnosis itself, it is relevant that the most articulate form of this myth of cosmic beneficence arises only in late antiquity.

This last point throws light on what may seem an apparent oddity in Jonas's presentation of of what he understands as the essentially Greek idea of the cosmos and man's place within it. Namely that while the idea is described as Greek the exemplary figure whom Jonas chooses to present it is a Roman, Cicero. Indeed, the most extended citations of what Jonas terms "cosmos piety" are drawn from the latter's work On the Nature of the Gods, in a series of passages that culminate in Cicero's declaration that: "Man...was born to contemplate the cosmos and to imitate it; he is far from being perfect, but he is a little part of perfection."[(18)] This "concluding statement," Jonas observes, "about the purpose of human existence in the scheme of things is of profoundest significance. It establishes the connection between cosmology and ethics, between the apotheosis of the universe and the ideal of human perfection: man's task is the theoretical one of contemplating and the practical one of 'imitating' the universe, the latter being explained in a fuller statement as 'imitating the order of the heavens in the manner and constancy of one's life.'"

Behind Cicero's Latin words lies a whole Greek tradition of veneration for the cosmos, a term that originally meant "'order' in general, whether of the world or a household, of a commonwealth or a life." Cosmos is a term that: "By a long tradition... had to the Greek mind become invested with the highest religious dignity. The very word by its literal meaning expresses a positive evaluation of the object - any object - to which it is accorded as a general term...Thus when applied to the universe and becoming assigned to it as to its eminent instance, the word does not merely signify the neutral fact of all-that-is (as the term 'the All' does), but expresses a specific and to the Greek mind an ennobling of this whole: that it is order." (19)

Jonas calls what he terms the "Cosmos Piety" of late antiquity a "position of retreat." It arises, like the alienation of the Gnostics, in an historical situation in which man feels himself no longer able to influence the course of events, as once he had in his tribe or city. The special quality of the cosmic piety of a Cicero, and what links it dialectically with the cosmic estrangement of the Gnostic, is its strangely de-politicised character. The ennobling cosmos of the Stoic and the enslaving cosmos of the Gnostic share this feature: that they signify a preeminent whole to which man belongs but which he can neither alter nor inform. Once the rise of world empires diminishes the individual's role in the conduct of local cult and culture, impersonal fate is experienced, with ever greater impact, as the defining reality of life. And while Stoicism embraces this fate as providence, Gnosticism condemns it as enslavement. In myths alternate yet akin, the cosmos remains alone as supreme token of a world-immanent, implacable order that is in the one to be celebrated and in the other escaped.

Students of historic Christianity will observe how, in its teaching, the Church was able to fuse aspects of both these myths in a synthesis that combined elements of Stoic providentialism with a belief, related though not ontologically identical to that of the Gnosis, that ultimate human salvation is only attained in a spiritual realm beyond this world. That however is not the theme of this paper, which is the relevance of Gnosticism to what my title calls "the unease of modernity." And here, I propose, it is Jonas rather than Voegelin who has most to offer our understanding: especially in an environment threatened less by revolutionary political movements, whose historic affiliations with Gnosis are anyway open to question, and more by recurrent symptoms of imbalance between the powers at man's disposal and the integrity of the world, the humanly relevant cosmos, on which he continues to depend. Certainly it is this that provides the overall

theme that guides Jonas's work, from his initial studies of Gnosticism, through his work on philosophical biology and anthropology in The Phenomenon of Life (1963), to his attempt to formulate an ethic suitable for a quantitatively unprecedented technological age in The Imperative of Responsibility (1984) - and even beyond, into such late, theological essays as "Matter, Mind, and Creation" (1988), where Jonas develops a scientifically informed yet avowedly speculative approach to cosmology that, albeit in a rather different context, he is not afraid to describe as "a tentative myth I would like to believe 'true.'" [(20)]

For a more complete justification of this interpretation of the underlying unity or "integrity"of Jonas's work I refer the reader to my book Hans Jonas: The Integrity of Thinking.[(21)] Here our theme is necessarily more narrow in focussing on the exemplary significance of Gnosis as an historically primordial and unprecedented form of expression of that sense of radical estrangement between human aspiration and natural order which arguably also underlies the seemingly very different view of man's place in a world now seen as both independent of the marks of divine creation and devoid of inherent value except as a field for presently satisfying exploitation. There is of course a clear distinction between the Gnostic myth of the cosmos as inherently demonic and the modern scientific view that regards it as simply "value free." But this distinction, significant though it may be, should not be allowed to obscure a more existentially fundamental reality of human experience that links across the centuries what Jonas, in 1952, characterised as ancient and modern forms of "nihilism:" a designation that, in later writings, he seeks to justify both by indicating the essential emptiness of an ethics without ontological foundation and in demonstrating the potential compatibility between a modern, scientifically informed ontology and an objective order of ethical commitment.[(22)]

In a recent discussion of his work, Richard Wolin has attributed Jonas's attempt to bridge the gulf between ontology and ethics - the philosophically notorious logical if metaphysically self-defeating chasm between the 'is' and the 'ought' - to what he calls: "The subterranean affinities of Jonas's position with the 'German Ideology' in its vitalist phase:" an association that Wolin finds disturbing if only because of the historical links between this life-philosophy with the irrationalist philosophies associated with National Socialism.[(23)] But though there is undoubtedly a biographically rooted affinity to be found between the two - Jonas was, after all, a child of his time - Wolin's accusation, for such it is, misses the more important distinction between a

philosophy, such as vitalism, that encompasses all existence in the blind force of a principle of life impermeable because alien to reason and an interpretation of animate being which, like that of Jonas, endeavours to discern the roots of reason in the inherent dynamic and structural imperatives of the phenomenon of life.[(24)] Whatever may be the immediate biographical origins of this philosophy, its intellectual resemblance is less with the tradition of German vitalism than with the teachings of Aristotle, for whom reason provides a universal principle of interpretation because it is perceived as inherent in the workings of nature as well as in the imagination of man.

It is, of course, hard to resist the conclusion that, at least from a modern natural scientific perspective, there is an undeniably mythic component in this understanding of natural processes: and certainly it is very far from the image of nature conveyed by the mainstream of contemporary research in the sciences of life and matter. But not only may such a myth be practically true, in that it reestablishes a meaningful and anthropologically sustaining link between human reason and cosmic happenstance that ancient Gnosticism was the first belief system comprehensively to deny, but, on a more theoretical and coldly scientific level, we may even speculate, legitimately if not conclusively, that the imperative of survival, which underlies evolution, and is in man alone raised to the level of a rational articulation of future prospects, guarantees, if only because it requires, a substantive measure of agreement between the principle of reason and the phenomenon of life. However, at this plane of abstraction, which may only attain a more concrete and scientifically informative content through further research conducted along avenues suggested by Jonas's philosophy of life, the line between mythic truth and the art of science begins uncomfortably to blur: and with the onset of such shadows my own considerations must draw, not before time, to their own inevitably tentative but hopefully temporary conclusion.

1. 1. Eric Voegelin: The Collected Works, Vol. 5, edited with an introduction by Manfred Henningson, University of Missouri Press, 2000.

2. 2. Klaus Vondung: "Eric Voegelin, the Crisis of Western Civilization, and the Apocalypse" in International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Eric Voegelin, edited by Stephen A. McKnight and Geoffrey L. Price, University of Missouri Press 1997.

3. 3. Robert Haardt: Gnosis: Character and Testimony, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1971, p.1

4. 4. Hans Jonas: The Gnostic Religion, Beacon Press, Boston, 1958, pp.36-7

5. 5. Voegelin: Collected Works, Vol.12. pp.115-113

6. 6. Jonas: Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man, University of Chicago Press, 1974, 237-260

7. 7. See David J. Levy "'The Religion of Light': On Mani and Manichaeism" and, for contrast "'The Good Religion:' Reflections on the History and Fate of Zoroastrianism" in Levy: The Measure of Man: Incursions in Philosophical and Political Anthropology, University of Missouri Press, 1993, pp.170-206

8. 8. Jonas : Philosophical Essays, 1974, p.xi

9. 9. Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1930

10. 10. On these matters see David J. Levy: Hans Jonas: The Integrity of Thinking, University of Misssouri Press, 2002, and Richard Wolin: Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse, Princeton University Press, 2001, pp.101-133

11. 11. In a footnote to "Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism" Jonas says: "I am speaking here throughout of Sein und Zeit, not of the later Heidegger, who is certainly no 'Existentialist'." In another essay "Heidegger and Theology," that appears in The Phenomenon of Life, Chicago 1966, pp.235-261, Jonas discusses what he regards as the generally nefarious influence that Heidegger's later writings have had on certain Christian theologians. This essay is a tour de force that combines information and polemic with a skill that is characteristic of Jonas's best work. It is worth reading even by those who have no special interest in its overt topic, but it is not particularly relevant to Jonas's attempt to draw parallels between what he seesas the nihilism of Gnosticism and that of Heideggerian existentialism.

12. 12. Jonas: The Gnostic Religion, pp.320-321

13. 13. Martin Heidegger: Holzwege, p. 200, cited by Jonas in The Gnostic Religion, p.332

14. 14. Jonas: op.cit. pp. 241- 265

15. Michael Allen Williams: op.cit. Princeton University Press, 1996

16. 16. See Rudolf Bultmann: Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting, translated by Reginald H. Fuller, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1956, especially the final two chapters of the work devoted respectively to early Christianity's image of "The Situation of Man in the World" and its concept of redemption. Bultmann: op.cit. pp. 189-208.

17. 17. Bultmann: op.cit. p.190 ff.

18. 18. Cicero: De Natura Deorum II p.14 in the translation of H.M. Poteat, University of Chicago Press, 1950.

19. 19. Jonas: The Gnostic Religion, p.241

20. 20. "Matter, Mind, and Creation" may be found in the anthology Mortality and Morality, edited by Lawrence Vogel, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1996, pp.165-197. The phrase "the tentative myth I would like to believe 'true'" appears in his hardly less remarkable essay "Immortality and the Modern Temper" in The Phenomenon of Life, p.278, where it refers to "a truth which of necessity is unknowable and even, in direct concepts, ineffable, yet which, by intimations in our deepest experience, lays claim upon our powers of giving an indirect account of it in revocable, anthropomorphic images." Though applied in this context to the issue of immortality, this notion of myth, akin to the idea of a "true myth" adumbrated by Plato, is arguably no less applicable to the cosmological speculation of "Matter, Mind, and Creation," in whose overall view one can identify echos of the Stoic myth of a logos that informs both the structure of the cosmos and the existentially proper form of human conduct.

21. 21. University of Missouri Press, 2002

22. 22. For a brief statement of Jonas's position on this issue see his essay "Toward an Ontological Grounding of an Ethics for the Future" in Mortality and Morality, pp.99-112.

23. 23. Richard Wolin: Heidegger's Children, Princeton University Press, 2001, pp124-5

24. 24. This is the notion that underlies Jonas's suggestive and as yet under-exploited effort to discern the ontological roots of human reason, both theoretical and practical, and of freedom in the process of metabolism that distinguishes