

From Dualism to the Preservation of Ambivalence

Hans Jonas' "Ontological Revolution" as the Background to his Ethics of Responsibility

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AT THE ORIGINS OF THE WESTERN CIVILIZATION: DUALISM AND MODERN MATERIALISTIC MONISM

As a brilliant pupil of Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas began his philosophical research in the field of ancient religion. He soon became an expert in Gnosticism and early Christian religion. As stated by his first works,¹ he discovered that the first Centuries of our era were generally characterized by a *dualistic* attitude towards life, consisting in the belief that the true destiny of human being had to be realized in opposition to nature. This separation expressed, however, a deeper ontological dualism of spirit (life) and matter (death). According to Jonas, this was indeed the most powerful way to promote and protect a remarkable learning about the essence of the human being: that is, "the self-discovery of the soul in its entirely specific status (*Sonderart*)"² and in its difference from nature.

At first, Jonas considered dualism as the specific feature of a historical period, namely the centuries corresponding to the beginning of the

1 H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, t. 1, *Die mythologische Gnosis*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934, 1954², 1964³, 1988⁴; H. Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem. Ein philosophischer Beitrag zur Genesis der christlich-abendländischen Freiheitsidee*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1930, reed. *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem. Eine philosophische Studie zum pelagianischen Streit*, with an introduction by J. M. Robinson, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965.

2 H. Jonas, *Materie, Geist und Schöpfung. Kosmologischer Befund und kosmogonische Vermutung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main (eng. tr. *Matter, Mind, and Creation: Cosmological Evidence and Cosmogonic Speculation*, in H. Jonas, *Mortality and Morality. A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. L. Vogel, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1996, p. 165-197, § 3.

Christian era. Faithful to Heidegger's *Daseinsanalyse*, Jonas was persuaded that, in its process of self-constitution, *Dasein* evidences a certain degree of *ambivalence*, which derives from the fact that *Dasein* itself is undeniably characterized by a "necessary, but non-casual nor inevitable motility [...] towards self-objectiveness (*Selbstobjektivierung*)".³ The point is — states Jonas — that this essential human *motility* (that is, the *motility of freedom*) may easily give rise to a *dualistic* view of the relation between *Dasein* and the world, and between subject and object. Here — according to Jonas — lies the hermeneutical problem encountered by both Gnosticism and early Christianity in explaining human freedom and its relationship with the world.

However, afterwards Jonas discovered that to some extent the *longa manus* of dualism and of its outcomes also characterized the Modern Age up to Heidegger's own thinking. But with a difference from its ancient form: Ancient dualism lead to a nihilistic belief, according to which the salvation of the soul had nothing to do with natural life. On the contrary, the Modern form of the ontological dualism of spirit and matter (Descartes) found nihilism already in its own essence. Indeed, because of the scientific and technical revolution one of the two sides of dualism — namely, matter — appeared to be stronger. As a consequence, most of the post-Cartesian philosophy and science thought it was time to reject the concepts of spirit and soul (first phase: gnoseological reductionistic attitude), and then reduced Being *as such* to its materialistic, quantitative and mechanistic aspects (second phase: ontological reductionistic attitude). Results: on the one hand, Nature and the universe became indifferent to the human being's existence, and were no longer considered as endowed with life (and, indeed, Darwinism gave a strong help in reducing the complexity of the so called phenomenon of life to matter only); on the other hand, the human being's former specificity was *neutralized* and *erased*, that is reduced to a cybernetic mechanism only. These — as we shall see in the following of this paper — are the characteristics of Modern nihilism as an essential feature of ontology, and subsequently of ethics.

LIFE'S AMBIVALENCE AND FREEDOM

However, Jonas believes that both ontological dualism and Modern materialism are little suited to answering the question "what is life?" Indeed, this is a crucial question. According to Jonas' first biological works (the *Lehrbriefe*,⁴ written during the Second World War), the phenomenon of life is able *as such* to evidence the inadequacy of both dualism and materialistic monism. Life is, in fact, the most eminent feature of Being, and is able to point out its essential characteristics. Among these the most relevant is the fact that Being has a dynamic, ambivalent, twofold, and complex structure.

Jonas refers to this rediscovery as the idea of "ontological revolution".⁵ This revolution is evidenced by life even in its simplest form — namely, organic metabolism. Its "ontological" feature depends on the fact that renewed research starting with the organic metabolism may lead to understand the ontological characteristics of life.⁶ Each of these features expresses the polar and dialectical dynamics of life. Moreover, Jonas believes that this dynamic ontology may be indicated as a *dialectics of freedom*.⁷

Basically, Jonas thinks that the philosophical analysis of the living organism and of its metabolism (the organism is the only evidence of life) highlights a relevant fact: the existence of the organism evidences a *qualitative difference* from mere *res extensa*, yet a qualitative difference whose existence is related to — and depends on — the dynamics of matter. In other words, the organism evidences a certain degree of *freedom* (since its form does not coincide with matter and to some extent *transcends* matter) and evidences a *willingness* to exist.

The dynamical, dialectical, and polar characteristics of organism are the following — which I can only mention, without going into details: needful freedom towards matter, autonomy and dependence of living form, relationship between self and world, and between interiority and exteriority,

⁴ Now published in H. Jonas, *Erinnerungen. Nach Gesprächen mit Rachel Salamaender*, ed. Ch. Wiese, Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig, Insel, 2003 (eng. tr. *Memoirs*, Lebanon, Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2008). The philosophical core of these "theoretical letters" will later be developed in *The Phenomenon of Life*.

⁵ H. Jonas, *Memoirs*, op. cit., p. 222.

⁶ See H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology*, New York, Harper & Row, 1966, p. 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83-86.

self-transcendence, the intensive meaning of temporality, and teleological or finalistic nature.⁸

So, let us return to Jonas' criticism of ontological dualism and Modern materialism. Both are unequivocally mistaken. Nevertheless, they can not be simply reduced to pure mistakes, since they also provide some fundamental and helpful insights. Ontological dualism is certainly a hermeneutical error, because it considers as *substantially* double what is, in fact, only *dynamically* polar. Yet, on the other hand, dualism is somehow close to truth, because it recognizes *within* the domain of Being a qualitative difference—and this, according to Jonas, is certainly true. The problem is that dualism interprets this qualitative difference as if it was 1) specifically human only and 2) ontologically separated from nature and/or matter as such.

As for materialistic monism, it is certainly mistaken, since it pretends to reduce the duality of Being to simplicity, and because it exchanges a part (namely, matter) for the whole. Accordingly, Modern science erroneously reduces *any* examinable ontological feature to quantity, measurability, and movement. For the same reason, Modern science and materialistic philosophy incorrectly and arbitrarily remove any concern for the ontological relevance of *interiority* and its dynamics, traditionally expressed by the idea of *finalism*.⁹ However, on the other hand, materialistic monism (and Darwinism, as its collaborator) is certainly right to refuse the *dualistic* separation of spirit and matter, human being and nature, quality and quantity, etc. Indeed, this division is false and fails to give a full account of life. The problem is, however, that together with dualism, materialism gets rid of polarity and qualitative differences as well, which are indeed key features of life.

Therefore—to summarize Jonas' position—a *renewed ontology* is able to point out that the living organism is characterized by a "productive and

8 See H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, op. cit., p. 79-86.

9 Thus, according to Jonas, it is not "the suppression of teleology and of substantial forms" which ought to be justified; "rather—the states—has the revolution in method, which the sudden obsolescence of these venerable concepts signalizes, itself to be accounted for" (H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 70). Modern science has opted not to consider such metaphysical characteristics while studying natural facts. Therefore, Jonas states that "the exclusion of teleology is not an inductive result but an a priori prohibition of modern science" (H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 34). In addition to this, the thinker analyzes the logical and ontological inconsistencies generated by this deliberate decision of Modernity (H. Jonas, *Macht oder Ohnmacht der Subjektivität? Das Leib-Seele-Problem im Vorfeld des Prinzips Verantwortung*; Frankfurt am Main, Insel, 1981, reed. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1987).

visible purposiveness (*Zielstrebigkeit*).¹⁰ this is the first result. In addition, there is a second relevant outcome: Jonas believes that a correct interpretation of life—and of its ambivalence—is able to give a deeper insight into the complexity and the ambivalence of nature itself (and—we shall see—further consequences will be drawn by his ethics of responsibility): "the teleological structure and behavior of organism is not just an alternative choice of description: it is, on the evidence of each one's own organic awareness, the external manifestation of the inwardness of substance".¹¹

Life manifests an ontological peculiarity—that is, a qualitative difference from inanimate objects: the existence of a living organism is no given datum, but a *task* which demands action and a certain degree of freedom. For any organism existence becomes a risky and ambivalent challenge characterized by openness to other, freedom and need, success and defeat, life and death: "Without this universal counterpart of otherness—states Jonas—, there would be no 'self'. And in this polarity of self and world, of internal and external, complementing that of form and matter, the basic situation of freedom with all its daring and distress is potentially complete".¹²

THE HUMAN BEING'S PECULIAR AMBIVALENCE

If freedom already manifests itself within the phenomenon of life, are we still to believe that human beings are *different* from other living beings, as believed by dualists? If freedom is a quality of life already, should not we then agree with evolutionism, which believes that the human being has no longer a *Sonderstellung* in the world? Yet, if we disagree with this result of Modern materialism and if we firmly believe in the evidence of the human being's specificity, how can we hold together this distinctive feature and the human being's solidarity with the biological phenomenon of life—that is, without falling back again on dualism?

In dealing with this delicate problem, Jonas develops his former intuition concerning the ambivalence of *Dasein*, with the help of the later

10 H. Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit. Ansätze zu einer philosophischen Biologie*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973. German edition with changes of *The Phenomenon of Life*, then re-edited with the title *Das Prinzip Leben. Ansätze zu einer philosophischen Biologie*, Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig, Insel, 1994, and Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1997, p. 157. The German noun "Zielstrebigkeit" underlines the dynamical and uncertain essence of living beings.

11 H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, op. cit., p. 91.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

achievements of his biological philosophy. In brief: against dualism, Jonas believes that the human mind and its ideas (such as being, temporality, eternity, theory, infinity, and truth) have their dynamical and biological basis in “trans-animal potentialities”¹³ manifested by animal life; however, against materialistic and reductionistic monism, Jonas believes that the further mediacy (or quality) highlighted by human life and by its capacity to freely recognize and produce images (= Jonas’ well-known *homo pictor*) literally evidences a “metaphysical gap”¹⁴ between human being and other forms of life. In Jonas’ words:

What we here have is a trans-animal, uniquely human fact: eidetic control of motility, that is, muscular action governed not by set stimulus-response pattern but by freely chosen, internally represented and purposely projected form. The eidetic control of motility, with its freedom of external execution, complements the eidetic control of imagination, with its freedom of internal drafting. Without the latter, there would be no rational faculty, but without the former, its possession would be futile.¹⁵

What role does *ambivalence* play here? In agreement with the broad phenomenon of life, human life as well evidences the same polarities of form and matter, interiority and exteriority, and so on. What is more, the human being experiences a further dimension of ambivalence, which is generated by the *eidetic faculty*. Already superior animals are endowed with the possibilities of error and of its rectification, possibilities which – according to Jonas – arise “with higher sense-perception as such (i.e. prior to man).”¹⁶ However, what guides animals in this effort is a fixed behaviour pattern, something automatic that human beings can invoke no more. The specifically human form of the relationship between exteriority and interiority is to be identified in the mediacy of *freely built images*. So, the human being “models, experiences, and judges his own inner state and outward conduct after the image of what is man’s. Willingly or not he lives the idea of man.”¹⁷ But, at the same time, the human being experiences the *ambivalence* of this situation: he/she is free to build his own image, but the fulfilment of this endeavour is very difficult, almost impossible, since the human being has

13 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 172-173.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

become a question to him/herself (“*Quaestio mihi factus sum?*”)¹⁸ and since there can be no ultimate and definite achievement really:

The German word *Verzweiflung* somehow renders the connection of despair with the twofoldness, the division of the self, that has come about with the transfer of the subject-object split to the realm of the subject itself, making it the quivering product of evermediating relation instead of an immediate possession.¹⁹

The full account of these anthropological and ontological reflections on ambivalence is given at first by Jonas in a very peculiar way: in the form of a *hypothetical myth*. Curiously enough, after a couple of decades the very same issue (that is, human ambivalence) becomes the centre of Jonas’ ethics of responsibility. Here is Jonas’ mythical narration:

In the beginning, for unknowable reasons, the ground of being, or the Divine, chose to give itself over to the chance and risk and endless variety of becoming. And wholly so: entering into the adventure of space and time, the deity held back nothing of itself: no uncommitted or unimpaired part remained to direct, correct, and ultimately guarantee the devious working-out of its destiny in creation.²⁰

In other words, the creation of the cosmos is allowed by God’s refusal of almightiness. We do not know why God behaved so. Nevertheless, what we can clearly distinguish is that His decision made space for a *possibility*, namely the existence of the cosmos as an autonomous being, together with its evolution in space and time:

In order that the world might be, and be for itself, God renounced his own being, divesting himself of his deity – to receive it back from the odyssey of time weighted with the chance harvest of unforeseeable temporal experience: transfigured or possibly even disfigured by it. In such self-forfeiture of divine integrity for the sake of unprejudiced becoming, no other foreknowledge can be admitted than that of possibilities which cosmic being offers in its own terms: to these, God committed his cause in effacing himself for the world.²¹

18 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 186-187.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 275.

21 *Ibid.*

The point is that with the advent of human beings and of their knowledge and freedom—that is, the double-edged gift of working for the accomplishment of good *or* evil—God's worldly adventure comes to a crucial turning point. On the one hand, with the “appearance of man, transcendence awakened to itself”,²² but, on the other hand, the destiny of this awakening relies on the ambivalence of human actions and decisions:

As transcendence grows with the terribly ambiguous harvest of deeds, our impact on eternity is for good and for evil: we can build and we can destroy, we can heal and we can hurt, we can nourish and we can starve divinity, we can perfect and we can disfigure its image: and the scars of one are as enduring as the lustre of the other.²³

In this sense, any human beings responsible for the destiny of transcendence, which manifests itself in his/her heart. Therefore—according to Jonas—human existence as such may be understood as a cosmic and divine adventure involving not just *liberty*, but *responsibility* as well. Human existence takes place thanks to God and His primordial decision, and in front of Him. Indeed, with their actions the human beings play an active and self-conscious role in this divine enterprise, since humanity bears witness to the awakening of transcendence to itself. This means that each human act is like a tile in a mosaic that represents the history of the relationship between God, human beings, and the world. Moreover, since God has opted for impotence, human freedom and responsibility gain cosmic relevance, in an ambivalent sense: thanks to human beings, God's creation may continue its worldly adventure, or this worldly adventure may be ruined. Human beings have the liberty to be faithful to God's moral obligation, which is testified by life, or they may decide to refuse this obligation.

Now, one recent historical event has had an enormous impact on the nature of human freedom: the birth and advance of the technological age. Jonas knows very well that the “shadow of the Bomb”,²⁴ as well as the risks for the earthly environment caused by the Promethean technological progress,²⁵ evidence that “We literally hold in our faltering hands the

²² *Ibid.*, p. 277.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

²⁵ See H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Frankfurt am Main, Insel, 1979, eng. tr. *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.

future of the divine adventure and must not fail Him, even if we would fail ourselves”.²⁶

THE IRRESPONSIBILITY OF MODERNITY AND THE NEED FOR RESPONSIBILITY

It is now time to take a closer look at Jonas' criticism of Modernity. About the specificity of the Modern knowledge of nature, he quotes F. Bacon's idea that “knowledge must deliver man from the yoke of necessity by meeting necessity on its ground, and achieves freedom for him by delivering the things into his power”.²⁷ This is precisely what Modern science and technology tried to attain, thanks to their quantitative interpretation of being. As a result, “the modern knowledge of nature [...] is a ‘know-how’ and not a ‘know-what’, and on this basis it makes good Bacon's contention that knowledge is power”.²⁸ Any question concerning the *meaning* or the *value* of things is—therefore—considered unworthy. All that matters is to gain power over reality and to dominate it with science and technology. But—states Jonas—this produces very serious consequences:

If ever we entrust or resign ourselves wholly to the self-corrective mechanics of the interplay of science and technology, we shall have lost the battle for man. For science, with its application governed solely by its own logic, does not really leave the meaning of happiness open: it has prejudged the issue, in spite of its own value-freedom. The automatism of its use [...] has set the goal of happiness in principle: indulgence in the use of things. Between the two poles of emergency and indulgence, of resourcefulness and hedonism, set up by the ever-expanding power over things, the direction of all effort and thereby the issue of the good tends to be predecided. But we must not let that issue be decided by default.²⁹

In other words, since “Dynamism is the signature of modernity”,³⁰ this daughter of Modernity called *technology* aims at its self-perpetuation only. The only acknowledged value is the development of its need for competence and, as a result, the human's pursuit of happiness is reduced to the sole

²⁶ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, op. cit., p. 281.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 208-209.

³⁰ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, op. cit., p. 119.

achievement of technological goals. This is precisely what Max Weber referred to as the *reversal* of the means-end relationship:³¹ the production of means itself becomes an end—in other words, *happiness* loses its rank of autonomous moral value and is reduced to a motivational incentive for human beings to perform more efficiently their technological duties.

According to Jonas, the trouble with Modernity is that it reduces the idea of human freedom to the achievement of technical goals and unrestrained power over nature.³² As a consequence, the Modern idea of freedom implies the negation of the *ambivalent* essence of the human nature: there is no need to temper freedom with responsibility, since there is supposedly no need to set limits on human freedom. Technology is the magic wand, which can successfully solve any problem. This is the ultimate outcome of technology: it has deeply altered the very nature of human action.³³

What are the further consequences of modern technology for the idea of human existence? The most important is the subversion of fundamental notions, such as *meaning* and *value*: “Meaning—states Jonas—is no longer found but is ‘conferred’. Values are no longer beheld in the vision of objective reality, but are posited as feats of valuation.”³⁴ A further change affects the Modern notion of human action and its relationship to reality: “a world reduced to a mere manifestation of power also admits toward itself—once the transcendent reference has fallen away and man is left with it and himself alone—nothing but the relation of power, that is, of mastery.”³⁵

In brief, Modernity culminates in Nietzsche’s nihilism. The human being suffers from an existential loss of meaning, which deposes the images and metaphors traditionally used to express his/her specific identity. Indeed, the most significant achievement of modern anthropology is—according to the nineteenth century Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi—the human being’s “somma conformabilità” [remarkable adaptability].³⁶

31 See T. M. T. Coole, « Philosophical Anthropology and the Problem of Responsibility in Technology », in P. T. Durbin (ed.), *Technology and Responsibility*, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster/Tokyo, Reidel, 1987, p. 47.

32 See H. Jonas, « Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective », *Central Conference American Rabbis Journal*, 15 (1968), p. 27-39; then in H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1974, p. 168-182.

33 See H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, op. cit., chapter 1.

34 H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, op. cit., p. 215.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

36 G. Leopardi, *Zibaldone: a selection*, New York, Lang, 1992. However, on this topic see also the attainments of the XXth century anthropological philosophy (especially Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen).

This means that it is virtually impossible to find an answer to the question concerning the human being’s essence. There is really no such essence, since the human being *is* what he *performs* and *produces* technologically: as Hannah Arendt had already stated, the outcome of Modernity is the reduction of the *homo sapiens* to the *homo faber*.³⁷ Hence, the human being has lost its own identity and image. Nonetheless, as we have seen, Jonas’ counterproposal sounds quite different: he highlights not the loss of the image of man, but the intrinsic complexity and paradoxical character of the human search for such image.

So—to recapitulate briefly—Modernity depreciates the complexity of human nature. Indeed, Modernity ignores that responsibility and freedom are interwoven in human nature, and it ignores that freedom may give rise to a twofold outcome—namely, good or evil. In other words, the modern *Weltanschauung* completely erases the difference between good and evil, for—in a sense—the human technological being (Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*) cannot act badly or commit anything wrong: he/she is simply *beyond good and evil*. Since modern *freedom* is unchained from its counterbalance—namely, *responsibility*—, there is no place for morality or moral sense, notions that appear to be relics of the past. In such circumstances, the human being is simply not capable of perceiving the difference between good and evil. And—even worse—the human being is not capable of going beyond self-concern, since there is no other value than the efficient enhancement of one’s own freedom. But freedom alone leads humankind to despair and vacuity; and to the nihilistic belief in the pure unrelatedness of human existence to others and nature.³⁸

However—according to Jonas—Modernity as such is not responsible for this situation. The human being is the only subject who can take responsibilities and who is possibly to blame for the misuse of freedom. Accordingly, Modernity is not the result of an overall *Geschick* of Being (as believed, for instance, by Martin Heidegger), and is always to be considered as the product of human endeavour and ambivalence.

The above-mentioned consequences of Modernity are undoubtedly problematic. However, as such that epoch cannot simply be overcome or

37 See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958.

38 See H. Jonas, « Philosophische Meditation über Paulus, Römerbrief, Kapitel 7 », in E. Dinkler (ed.), *Zeit und Geschichte. Dankessgabe an Rudolf Bultmann zum 80. Geburtstag*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1964, p. 557-570. Eng. tr. « The Abyss of the Will: Philosophical Meditation on the Seventh Chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans », in H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, op. cit., p. 335-348.

erased as a mere mistake. Quite the contrary, Jonas insists that one of the major philosophical tasks to be undertaken is a widespread evaluation of Modernity's negative and positive aspects. After all, modern technology certainly appears to be the full expression of humankind's essential desire to enhance its own freedom and give shape to the world. And it is a fact that the Modern *dynamical ontology* seems to offer a far more realistic and effective philosophical background than the earlier static and dualistic one, which produced a distorted and schizophrenic understanding of the human nature.

Yet—as we have already seen—the technological triumph of Modernity plays a decisive role in the development of dangerous illusions, such as the self-sufficiency of liberty and the negation of the ontological and ethical complexity and ambivalence of human beings. More than just this, Jonas points out that technology has altered the nature of human action and that the lack of caution in the employment of technology may lead to the extinction of earthly life. These are the reasons why responsibility becomes a central political and ethical issue:

The crucial point in all this is that the nature of human action has changed and with it the focus of ethical theory. For, reflecting on everything—on the magnitude of our novel powers and the novelty of their products, their impact on the human condition everywhere, and the dynamism they let lose into indefinite future—we must see that responsibility with a never known burden and range has moved into the center of political morality.³⁹

NEITHER AUTONOMY, NOR HETERONOMY, ONTOLOGY AND ETHICS (AND POLITICS)

Once again the hypothetical myth helps to better comprehend the heart of responsibility. The idea of “res-ponsibility” (in German “Verantwortung”) encapsulates the basic conception of religion as the effort to connect the human being with God. Religion consists in the human disposition to search for an appropriate relationship with the divine, which is mostly understood as the absolute Other or pure Otherness. According to the Jewish tradition, God Himself desires to enter into a relationship with humankind and calls upon each human being during the event of revelation. A peculiar dialogue may then ensue between God and the human being, who experiences his/

her own commitment to *listen and answer* (in Latin “respondere”, in German “antworten”) to God's call.⁴⁰ Thanks to God's primeval decision-revelation, the human being has the possibility to *freely answer* to such a call. Hence, to some extent, God ultimately seems to provide the foundation for the human hendiads of freedom and responsibility, and of their inseparable brotherhood.

What is the object of this call, anyway? What are we responsible for? What cogency does the human being experience towards the “ought” of responsibility?

The philosophical justification for Jonas' theory of responsibility is the core subject of the well-known *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* [*The Imperative of Responsibility*], published in 1979. Jonas' argument may be summarized as follows: first, the phenomenon of *life* is a *purpose* of nature, which becomes self-evident in the human being's capacity to set and achieve aims and goals; second, the *purposiveness* evidenced by life is “a fundamental self-affirmation of being, which posits it *absolutely* as the better over against nonbeing”;⁴¹ third, there is an “ontological axiom”, according to which purposiveness is a “good-in-itself, of which we grasp with intuitive certainty that it is infinitely superior to any purposelessness of being”;⁴² fourth, the ontological axiom gains an *obligating force* on human liberty, which “is no longer its automatic executor but, with the power obtained from knowledge, can become its destroyer as well”;⁴³ fifth, the human being has the ethical duty to offset *responsibility* against indiscriminate freedom.

So, properly speaking, *what* are we responsible *for*? Jonas answers by means of the *first commandment* of his ethics: “the *existence (Dasein)* of mankind comes first”, since “the possibility of there being responsibility in the world, which is bound to the existence of men, is of all objects of responsibility the first”.⁴⁴ There is, however, a *second commandment*: humankind not only has to survive, but to “live well” too. In other words, we are also charged with the duty toward the *condition (Sosein)* and the quality of life of human beings⁴⁵—that is, that they can live according to their ambivalent nature.

40 See H. Jonas, « Heidegger and Theology », *The Review of Metaphysics*, 18 (1964), p. 207-233; then in H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, op. cit., p. 235-261.

41 H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, op. cit., p. 81.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Besides, this implies that also the organic world has to be included within the domain of responsibility, since it represents a necessary condition of man's own existence.⁴⁶ However, being responsible for the natural world does not at all mean that humankind is entitled to adopt an anthropocentric stance towards nature. On the contrary, any human being must put him/herself "at its service, free of all appetite for appropriation".⁴⁷ To be sure, this is responsibility, the only conduct that it is possible to adopt if we are to recognize and respect nature's intrinsic value and truth. So, if rightly understood, the preservation of humankind's *Dasein* and *Sosein* "comprises the rest under its obligation".⁴⁸

However, thanks to technology we also know that the object of responsibility is fragile and calls for our care. Jonas ends *The Imperative of Responsibility* with an appeal to preserve the integrity of the human being's essence, since "something sacred" discloses itself through humankind, something "inviolable under no circumstances (and which can be perceived independently from religion)".⁴⁹ Against the triumphalism of utopian ideologies, Jonas reaffirms that humanity courageously has to accept its demanding task of humbly fulfilling the *ambivalent* hendiads of freedom and responsibility.⁵⁰

This modest task of responsibility consists in a "power over power"⁵¹ and requires the empowerment of freedom's capacity for self-restraint. The enhancement of responsibility calls for the aptitude to resist the seductions of power and for the self-control of the human being's "consciously exercised power".⁵²

This is the basic justification for believing that an *ought* filters through the *being* of human life: any performed deed *ought* to respect the *fact* that life always manifests more than what—strictly speaking—is currently there.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

49 H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, op. cit., p. 393 [page of the German version, which differs from English, my translation].

50 "The time for the headlong race of progress is over, not of course for guarded progress itself. Humbled we may feel, but not humiliated. Man's mandate remains exacting enough outside of paradise. To preserve the integrity of his essence, which implies that of his natural environment, to save this trust unstinted through the perils of the times, mostly the perils of his own overmighty deeds—this is not a utopian goal, but not so very modest a task of responsibility for the future of man on earth" (H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, op. cit., p. 201-202).

51 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Individual and collective freedom ought never to put at stake this *promise of a future* evidenced by humanity, which highlights life's overall ontological feature—namely, its transcending dynamics of freedom beyond the modern idea of *res extensa*. Indeed, humanity has the unique opportunity to perceive, understand, and respect this promise as the evidence of Being's overall ontological feature. And responsibility ought to guarantee the fulfillment of that promise through the existence of future generations.

Strictly speaking, in Jonas' view, the ontological axiom and the above-mentioned reference to the sacredness of life should never be read independently from his "ontological revolution" and from its consequences for the understanding of the human nature—that is, from the anthropological duality of freedom and responsibility. In no case can the value of being be effective if the human freedom refuses to give a chance to it, if the human being is no longer able to perceive it, or if he/she is not willing to listen to its reasons. In a sense, the ontological value recognized within life is no *heteronymous* quality (be it natural, divine or whatever), which can constrain freedom against its own will. The ontological value cannot impose itself upon human freedom, since it can only *propose* itself to the latter with all its persuasive capacity. The future of such value cannot but be intrinsically at stake, because—just like God—it has given "itself over to the chance and risk and endless variety of becoming",⁵³ and therefore it depends on human freedom. History is an open adventure and Jonas firmly refuses any *success story*. As a result, it is clear that the political transposition of such ideas can by no means be interpreted as if humankind should renounce to freedom.

However, on the other hand, this means that freedom is not able to give a full account of human essence. In this respect, it is certainly true that the value recognized in Being is not a pure creation of human freedom. Value is something more than just the embodiment of the human being's moral *autonomy*. In agreement with his "ontological revolution", Jonas once again points out that this is only half of the story—the one specifically enhanced by Modernity. The other half is called *responsibility*—that is, the specifically human capacity to recognize preemptively that I have not my origins in myself, for there is something *alreddy there*, something that calls for care, that questions my freedom and that demands for my *answer* (in German, "Antwort").

53 H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, op. cit., p. 275.

Therefore, Jonas's suggestion of regaining a balance between freedom and responsibility, autonomy and heteronomy, may be understood not only as the aim of human life, but also as a relevant goal for ethics and politics in the contemporary age.