



# The roots of human responsibility

## *As raízes da responsabilidade humana*

**Angela Michelis\***

University of Turin, Italy

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### **Abstract**

Starting from Hans Jonas' works, this essay researches the bases of human responsibility and its reasoning is made up of four points. 1. He was aware of how his experience had influenced his thought and he questioned what means reflecting starting from extreme situations: «The apocalyptic state of things, the threatening collapse of a world, the climatic crisis of civilization, the proximity of death, the stark nakedness to which all the issues of life were stripped, all these were ground enough to take a new look at the very foundations of our being and to review the principles by which we guide our thinking on them». 2. Faced with these situations he rediscovered the richness of the Ancients' thought. For example, the Stoics inherited and transformed the illuminating aspects of the theory that conceived of the 'being' as contemplation of the whole, which had permeated Greek natural philosophy and scientific speculation. They took it on as the capacity to identify one's own most internal principle with the principle of the whole, in a more religious sense. The discovery in the whole of what is felt to be the highest and noblest in human beings – like reason, order, and form - makes our orientation towards a super-regulating end a liberating wisdom. 3. Jonas considers that starting from XVII century

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\* AM: PhD in Philosophy, e-mail: [angmich@tin.it](mailto:angmich@tin.it)

the two aspects, here distinct as external and internal, remain at the core of the issue so far as the problem of freedom is concerned. Moreover, theoretical efforts now move in the direction of rendering, of discovering a conception of freedom which is logically compatible with causal determinism, while in the history of philosophy, the problem of freedom was not born in the sphere of logic. So it is necessary to rethink Modernity and how it is possible to found human freedom and responsibility nowadays.

**Keywords:** Hans Jonas. Ancients. Moderns. Responsibility.

### **Resumo**

*A partir das obras de Hans Jonas, este ensaio investiga as bases da responsabilidade humana e seu raciocínio é composto de quatro pontos. 1. Ele sabia como sua experiência tinha influenciado seu pensamento e questionou o que significa refletir a partir de situações extremas: "O estado apocalíptico das coisas, o colapso ameaçador de um mundo, a crise climática que afeta a civilização, a proximidade da morte, a nudez absoluta a que todas as questões da vida foram despojadas, tudo isso foi suficiente para dar uma nova visão aos fundamentos de nosso ser e rever os princípios pelos quais orientamos nosso pensamento sobre eles". 2. Diante dessas situações, Jonas redescobriu a riqueza do pensamento dos Antigos. Por exemplo, os estoicos herdaram e transformaram os aspectos iluminantes da teoria que concebeu o "ser" como contemplação do todo, que permeou a filosofia natural e a especulação científica grega. Eles assumiram isso como capacidade de identificar o seu próprio princípio mais interno com o princípio do todo, em um sentido religioso. A descoberta em tudo o que se considera ser o mais alto e o mais nobre nos seres humanos - como a razão, a ordem e a forma - fez com que nossa orientação para um fim super-regulador fosse uma sabedoria libertadora. 3. Jonas considera que, a partir do século XVII, os dois aspectos, aqui distintos como externos e internos, permanecem no cerne da questão no que se refere ao problema da liberdade. Além disso, os esforços teóricos movem-se agora no sentido de tornar, de descobrir uma concepção de liberdade que seja logicamente compatível com o determinismo causal, enquanto na história da filosofia o problema da liberdade não nasceu na esfera da lógica. Por isso, é necessário repensar a Modernidade e como é possível fundar a liberdade e a responsabilidade humanas hoje em dia.*

**Palavras-chave:** Hans Jonas. Artigos Modernos. Responsabilidade. Moderns. Responsibility.

## Introduction: in Extreme Situations

The stark reality of existence and the ultimate mystery of life become more apparent to us in situations characterized by harshness and urgency. All of us, one way or the other, experience such a truth as a call to awareness away from our distractions, false ideas and illusions; it is an experience we cannot avoid tackling. This severe, precious truth warns us about the precariousness of life. As we realize our own poverty and deficiency we are set free from such fictitious constructions, and are offered a chance of renewal towards a more authentic way of life, where our real needs are fulfilled.

Hans Jonas (1903–1993) was passionate about Jewish Studies. A gnosis scholar<sup>1</sup>, as well as a philosopher of liberty and responsibility, he was aware of how his experiences—many of which were shared by others living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century — had influenced his thought. In the introduction to the collection of essays *From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* he wrote:

Five years of soldiering in the British army in the war against Hitler ushered in the second stage in my theoretical life. Cut off from books and all the paraphernalia of research, I had to stop work on the Gnostic project performe. But something more substantive and essential was involved. The apocalyptic state of things, the threatening collapse of a world, the climatic crisis of civilization, the proximity of death, the stark nakedness to which all the issues of life were stripped, all these were ground enough to take a new look at the very foundations of our being and to review the principles by which we guide our thinking on them<sup>2</sup>.

Those endless years spent oscillating between life and death eventually brought his philosophical approach to a turning point. A new awareness developed amidst his dire and merciless clash with reality.

<sup>1</sup> Jonas (1934), Jonas (1954) Jonas (1958).

<sup>2</sup> Jonas (1974), p. XII.

Concepts based on the idealism of conscience, the kind of philosophy he studied in Germany in the form of neo-kantism, phenomenology, and existentialism, no longer seemed adequate or complete to him. First, they did not adequately take into account the organic basis upon which the mental activity of living beings — including humans — is rooted.

The distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, inherited from Cartesian dualism, does not allow us to understand living beings in all their complexity and dynamism. The withdrawal of philosophy into the domain of the *res cogitans* is restrictive, and merely aimed at providing a functional interpretation of the world.

The experience of the fundamental importance of corporeity for survival when in constant danger, and the ongoing war, made the indissoluble fusion of interiority and exteriority in the living organism evident to Jonas<sup>3</sup>.

Such fusion, which maintains a dialectic relationship between different non-reducible elements, becomes the key to the investigation of a philosophy intended to overcome reductionist schemes in order to more effectively interpret the experience of reality, as an objectivity not to be swallowed by the subject.

Jonas sought to locate the basis for a renewed capacity for human beings to think, communicate, cooperate, and, as far as nature is concerned, provide ecological answers to the new cultural, social and scientific-technological — and therefore environmental — situations that we faced at the end of the twentieth century, and still face at the beginning of the twenty-first.

The discovery, and rediscovery, of an approach aimed at ensuring the continuation of life on Earth, necessarily connects ethical reflections to ecological ones, and begins with experience and its impact on language.

Language, as an interpretation of experience, and the need for communication and action are common to all rational beings. They

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<sup>3</sup> Jonas (1987), (2001).

connect, at every instant, the individual and the universal, even within the inevitable limits of finitude.

Recognition of the psycho-psychical unit of life, and a being's own capacity for self-acknowledgment, are essential for any consideration on the ethical imperative of responsibility toward life — especially human life. They become the ground for renewal and recovery of the capacity for thought, conversation, and cooperation among human beings in the complex worlds in which they dwell and relate to one another.

This is what raised our interest in Hans Jonas. We consider the acquisition of awareness of the link between ethics and ecology in inter-subjective development, which Jonas's philosophy implies, as being fundamental at the present time.

## Reconsidering the Origins

In the first article of *Philosophical Essay. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, entitled *Technology and Responsibility: Reflections on the New Tasks of Ethics*, and in the first chapter of *The Imperative of Responsibility*<sup>4</sup>, in German: *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*<sup>5</sup>, Jonas begins by dealing with ancient considerations on the unique capacities and abilities of human beings, as the famous chorus of Sophocles' *Antigone* chants.

Many the wonders but nothing more wondrous than man.  
This thing crosses the sea in the winter's storm,  
making his path through the roaring waves.  
And she, the greatest of gods, the Earth –  
deathless she is, and unwearied – he wears her away  
as the ploughs go up and down from year to year  
and his mules turn up the soil.  
[...]

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<sup>4</sup> onas (1984).

<sup>5</sup> Jonas (1979).

Clever beyond all dreams  
the inventive craft that he has  
which may drive him one time or another to well or ill.  
When he honors the laws of the land and the gods' sworn right  
high indeed is his city; but stateless the man  
who dares to do what is shameful<sup>6</sup>.

This wonderful tribute to the power of human beings that came down to us from ancient times underscores the possibility for human intelligence to turn towards good or evil, and to play a constructive role in nature and society, or to set out foolishly on paths that lead only to hopeless wanderings. Men have always attempted to build shelters – houses safe from the forces of nature – and have progressively learned to subject the environment to their own needs. They have become the authors of their own lives – except in the face of death, which approaches relentlessly as their ultimate destiny.

In a course given at the New School University in New York in 1966 – and with revisions in 1970<sup>7</sup> – entitled *Problems of Freedom*, he explains that human beings lack absolute freedom since they must look for food, shelter, and clothing, and provide for whatever needs may arise.

Civilizations – which include among other things the formation of societies, the transmission of culture, and technology – are expedient. They attempt to provide increasingly effective responses to the needs of the human organic condition.

Civilization is one way – and I use this as Aristotle used it. i.e., division of labor plus the organization of the living together of men under law and therefore the founding of cities – civilization is one of the ways man deals with physical necessity. It opens up a new dimension of existence that is closed to animals<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 335-370, in Jonas (1984), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Jonas (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Jonas, *Problems of Freedom*, 1966, p. 10, in Michelis (2005), p. 481.

Jonas observes that what makes the division of work — and all human interactions — possible is language, a form of communication that allows us to analyse means and ends dialogically, as well as to distribute tasks and define the positions of participants in the social order. This means dealing with physical needs on a new level, in their communal management. Thus, pure instinct, which guides animals in the immediacy of daily self-preservation, is regulated and incorporated in civil society in a system of deliberations or agreements among individuals. He states: “*Now in this evolution of speech as a new dimension of freedom it is assumed that deliberation is not a mere manipulation of images, but that it puts me in the possession of choice. [...] the choice made is one to which I stand on the basis of rational affirmation*”<sup>9</sup>.

Language increases the capacity for reflection in the individual and the group, widening the scope of mediation between unreflective, instinctive, impulsive, and compulsive actions – present under the circumstances of physical need – and the possibility of choice and, therefore, of deliberation. On this capacity for discourse the political body is founded and built, both the polity based on the authority of a leader or a group, and the polity based on law.

Freedom – understood in a political sense as being both the potential capacity to regulate, and at the same time, submission to what is regulated – maintains, therefore, those dialectical characteristics that are encountered in organic life, and that are already manifest at the animal stage, characterized by the double aspect of the metabolism of capacity and need.

Freedom in the ancient Greek conception, for example, meant being regulated by laws in which the citizens, i.e. those recognized as in control of their own actions, could recognize themselves as legislators inasmuch as they, or their ancestors, had taken part in their development. Jonas argues:

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<sup>9</sup> Jonas, *Problems of Freedom*, 1966, p. 11, in Michelis (2005), p. 482, the italics are ours.

The secret of the Greek conception of a free man therefore has this two-fold aspect: on the one hand, it is the freedom of the ruling part of the soul, in which the power of speech is located, and the rational part of the soul, which has authority over human thought, and therefore the motivations for the ruling part of the soul's actions. On the other hand, it comprises a conception of being under laws that are self-made, i.e., being restricted and directed and even commanded by such laws of action as are ultimately affirmed as emanating from the will of the free citizen himself<sup>10</sup>.

In the ancient Greek mentality, reason, the socio-political order, and action are closely connected. Regulations, embodied in civilizations and political orders, are necessary for increasing the possibilities in life itself. Such regulations complement organic physical needs. Even in the sphere of human decision-making, there has always been a tacit reservation, a condition in which hope is placed — a sacred fear — that is universally expressed in phrases such as 'if it pleases the gods' and 'if nothing goes wrong'. The ancient Greeks, for example, understood that not everything follows a linear, rational order, and that the unforeseeable plays a large role: *tyche*, fortune, often crosses our path, but men are somehow able to face its whims and even bend them to their own purposes. Above all, nevertheless, fate dominates as destiny, *Moirai*, or as necessity, *Ananke*, so that whatever humans try to do, the course of their destinies and the course of great events remain preordained.

Here, two aspects of the concept of freedom are brought to light, one internal and one external. The external aspect concerns the human power to act and change things; the internal aspect concerns the power of self-determination by means of rationality and knowledge. And this liberating knowledge may even be the knowledge that we are not externally free and do not have the power to change fate, since if this knowledge prevails over our desires, it can free us internally.

Jonas underscores that the classical aspects of the problem of freedom are characterized by the common consideration of freedom as a current problem, and not as a matter of theoretical principle.

<sup>10</sup> Jonas, *Problems of Freedom*, 1966, pp. 16-17, in Michelis (2005), pp. 486-487.



The question is not whether the conception of freedom is compatible with the causal nature of reality as such, but whether in fact freedom can be achieved against the opposing power within reality. Be these the outward powers of the cosmos, or be these the powers in my own sub-rational nature, the issue of freedom is decided in a conflict of forces, even if their respective trends should in fact give freedom no chance – i.e., in the internal sense it would still be a struggle between classical freedom and that which prevents it<sup>11</sup>.

Only that which is potentially free, in fact, can be said not to be free, while that for which nature does not foresee the possibility of freedom cannot be described in this way. The tragic hero of the Greek classics is the symbol of the fearless struggle against adverse fate. Even in succumbing he affirms his own possibility, which is impossible to renounce: to be free in his awareness and control of himself.

The expansion of the *polis* in the vaster Hellenic world paradoxically led, on the one hand, to the identification of this group not with a political community, but with the idea of a universal humanity, and, on the other hand, to a narrowing of the *arete* of the collective, political dimension to the individual's interior dimension.

Under conditions in which external results and success escape the control of the agent due to a tangle of historical situations, the interior dimension becomes the theatre of the true exercise of freedom. This represents the possibility for self-possession and self-realization regardless of external circumstances, even if they should be those of slavery, and circumstances in which many previously so-called free people might find themselves because of complex and violent historical changes. Furthermore, such processes of change could not but be marked by the inevitable syncretism that is born from the meeting of diverse cultures.

Jonas underlines that contemporary philosophy, compared to classical philosophy, had a greater need of recognition by the traditional wisdom of the ages insofar as tracing distinct lines of continuity in

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<sup>11</sup> Jonas, *Problems of Freedom*, 1966, p. 23, in Michelis (2005), pp. 492-493.

periods of great changes had become an unavoidable operation in the important establishment of roots.

In this open and multiform world of the Hellenistic era, where the direct local direction broke down, where the continuity of the polis did not exist anymore, where people as free, roving individuals could change place, affiliation, environments, and in the face of the multiplicity of races and local groups, regional groups, the appeal to something which had always held, which had always had validity was of vital importance. Therefore, we find that philosophers, or thinkers generally, throughout that era, were at great pains to stress the solidarity of mankind. To stress the solidarity of mankind means also to respect the traditions of mankind. It means also to discover in the diversity of tradition the inklings, the traces, of a common truth<sup>12</sup>.

The search for common truths – even within the greater tolerance of difference with respect to the more self-enclosed earlier worlds – became exactly one of the tendencies that pervaded rational argumentation. Thus, the *consensus generis humani*, the consensus of the human race, became a strong proof of the truth of what is commonly held. Individuality and particularity rediscovered the possibility of communication in a renewed universal idea of the human race as participating in the *Logos*. The connection with the whole nature by means of the same divine *Logos* – which is in everyone and ties us to the ever changing world – was also rediscovered.

Jonas maintains that in this context, the Stoics' position, which takes up the task of reconciling the idea of fate, universal determinism, with the idea of virtue as the capacity for self-determination and therefore for freedom, is particularly interesting. Above all he notes:

What is stressed is the oneness of the universe, and this oneness means that there is one law, one principle, of which all the particular causal connections are manifestations. This one universal principle of the

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<sup>12</sup> Jonas, *Problems of Freedom*, 1966, p. 65, in Michelis (2005), p. 518.

cosmos is the *logos*, the world-reason. This world-reason is an intellectual principle, and is therefore related to goodness or to a good, and to ends or a goal. Thus, though there is complete determinism, there is not blind determination<sup>13</sup>.

In fact, the purpose of the *Logos* – the divine fire and the source of heat – which governs and vivifies the processes of the universe, moves in the same direction as the *Logos* of an organism, that is, towards its greatest realization, and in general towards the maintenance and continuation of cosmic harmony. Jonas observes that the *Logos* which pervades the universe is “interested in” the continuous bringing to perfection of everything, and in caring for the maximum perfection of the parts in view of the whole. What is necessary in the Stoic sense, therefore, has two dimensions: it is necessary in a causal sense, but it has an end that is a more perfect universe, or rather the efficient causality is in the service of the final causality in a teleological way. *Heimarmene* is the name chosen by the Stoics to indicate the universal necessity ruling over everything and making everything conform to the interest of the whole. Jonas clarifies that this was understood as destiny, thereby differentiating it from *ananke*, which indicates constraint.

They called it *heimarmene* which means distribution, as in a governmental system where things are distributed, and functions, roles, rewards and punishments are meted out, distributed by lots, and assigned to everything, and whatever occurs is part of this universal dispensation. For the impulsive and repulsive part this is the same as *ananke*. For the part that tries to resist the dispensation of the whole there is no difference between brute *ananke* and the *heimarmene*, which is an expression of the universal reason of things. In other words, for the unreasonable or rational parts, the universal law is a law of brute necessity. But to the extent that agents or parts of the universal system are endowed with the capacity to determine their own inner attitudes towards the universal rule, the subjection to it may turn from one of mere necessitation to one of assenting conformity<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Jonas, *Problems of Freedom*, 1966, p. 83, in Michelis (2005), pp. 527-528.

<sup>14</sup> Jonas, *Problems of Freedom*, 1966, pp. 87-88, in Michelis (2005), pp. 529-530.

It is the secret of the Stoic cosmic piety. Human beings are capable of conceiving the idea of the whole and of rising above the condition of a simple limited part by means of their assent to such a necessity in an attitude of *synkatathesis* or refusal, insofar as the *Logos* operates within them, not only as a universal principle, as in the rest of nature, but also as an individual, autonomous principle. The real freedom of human beings consists, therefore, of what the Stoics call ‘the complete power to give or deny assent to whatever is offered’ and in the progressive acquisition of control over increasingly greater areas of the psyche by the continuous exercise of this freedom of assent or dissent, in the tendency toward interior perfection, and the awareness of being a part of the whole. “So the dimension of power and the dimension of relevance ultimately coincide in the sphere of the self-consciousness of man”<sup>15</sup>.

These Stoic ruminations on human beings, at the same time conscious individuals and contingent elements in an eternal natural cycle, remind us of the issue – always arising in the history of philosophy – of the power or impotence of subjectivity, and the influence or the lack of the subjective purpose. Jonas affirms:

The theoretical problem is: how is the freedom of assenting or not assenting, confirming or not confirming, struggling or not struggling, compatible with the principle of universal determination, which if it is universal and all-encompassing should also extend to the very act of our willing itself<sup>16</sup>?

Yet the issue naturally arises from the way the two spheres can be kept so separate from each other as to demand autonomy for one, and to conceive of the other as completely subject to universal necessity. For the Stoics, the course of destiny cannot be changed, and human freedom does not make human beings the rulers of their own destiny, because their place and their role in the overall design is predetermined by a continuous necessity of the whole.

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<sup>15</sup> Jonas, *Problems of Freedom*, 1966, p. 136, in Michelis (2005), p. 555.

<sup>16</sup> Jonas, *Problems of Freedom*, 1966, pp. 98-99, in Michelis (2005), p. 535.

According to them, to fight against destiny is an attitude that derives from a lack of understanding, and from a partial and limited perspective. The identification of the regulating principle of the individual being with the regulating principle of the universe is the source of true harmony and authentic freedom. The Stoics inherited and transformed the illuminating aspects of the *theoria* that conceived of the “being” as a contemplation of the whole, which had permeated Greek natural philosophy and scientific speculation. They took it on as the capacity to identify one’s own most internal principle with the principle of the whole, in a more religious sense. The discovery in the whole of what is felt to be the highest and noblest in human beings — in other words reason, order, and form — makes our orientation towards a super-regulating end flow forth in a liberating wisdom.

## Reconsidering Modernity

Jonas considers that in the contemporary world – a child of the theoretical science of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – the two aspects, here distinct as external and internal, remain at the core of the issue so far as the problem of freedom is concerned. A radical change has taken place, however, in that both aspects, external and internal, are interpreted in light of the scientific principle of causality, unconditionally accepted for the entire range of experience. Theoretical efforts now move in the direction of rendering, of discovering a conception of freedom which is logically compatible with causal determinism, while in the history of philosophy, the problem of freedom was not born in the sphere of logic. In the rigidly causal conceptual frameworks in modern science, freedom either finds no place, or does so only with difficulty. Jonas observes:

Science believes itself compelled by its principles to deny the possibility of freedom in either sense, the external or the internal, as the power to act and as the power to govern one’s own thoughts. In the external sphere, the denial takes the form of physical mechanism; in the internal

sphere that of psychological determinism. The two are very unequal in theoretical data, and second, rest mainly on a misappropriation of the word 'cause' from the first area, that of physical mechanism. Both, in their absolute versions, imply more of the mistaken metaphysical dogmatism than did any of the pre-scientific treatments of the problem of liberty and necessity<sup>17</sup>.

In the face of such a dogmatically materialistic and monistic mentality, Jonas seeks a new way that is capable of giving adequate responses to new times. He is searching for new and convincing evidence of the peculiar reality of the subjectivity, which cannot be simplified and reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of matter. It is no longer possible to avoid taking into consideration that this interacts – in a phenomenological way – in the world in as objective a way as corporeal entities. On this subject, Jonas writes in *The Imperative of Responsibility*:

In this case, too, reality means efficacy, namely, to have causative force inside *and* outside of itself – thus: for thought to have the power to determine itself in thinking and, through this, the body in acting. But with the determination of the body, which hence continues forth into the surrounding world, subjective purposes acquire an objective role in the fabric of events: that fabric, therefore, that is, physical nature, must have room for such interventions by a nonphysical agency. The long-held, would-be axiom that nature does on principle not allow this room is an overstatement of its determinism, which the most recent physics no longer shares<sup>18</sup>.

The demonstrative procedure of such statements develops substantially in a negative way. The opposite hypothesis, i.e. the impotence of the subjective, reveals itself to be absurd with respect to the experience of sensitive life and *not necessary* for the defence of the integrity of natural laws.

If the primacy which it deserves can be restored to the experience of sensitive life as the basis from which, by nature, human observations,

<sup>17</sup> Jonas, *Problems of Freedom*, 1966, pp. 24-25, in Michelis (2005), p. 535.

<sup>18</sup> Jonas (1984), p. 64.

reflections, interpretations, and scientific and cultural theoretical constructions flow, thought is no longer constrained by artificial and sterile alternatives that are incapable of effectively narrating or describing the life that is lived beyond the windows of the ivory towers which humans have built up over time.

If we return phenomenologically to the experience that is given to the consciousness – the “psyche”, the “soul” understood as interiority – the “will” can only be considered as a principle among the principles of nature, without any need for the dualistic Cartesian stratagem, and from a perspective of psychophysical interrelations that is compatible with natural laws.

Jonas affirms that one cannot expect an irrefutable demonstration of a truth from such a new model of interpretation, but rather a demonstration of the possibility of psychophysical interrelation, in that it is not contradictory either with respect to phenomena, against which it is placed as an interpreter, or intrinsically, that is, with respect to itself.

In *The Phenomenon of Life, Toward a Philosophical Biology*<sup>19</sup>, in German *Organismus und Freiheit*<sup>20</sup>, Jonas argued at length precisely about such a possibility, choosing as an interpretive lens the philosophy of biology in an original – and modern – dialogue between philosophy and science, arguing for and supporting the possibility of a dialectical freedom for living beings, especially obvious in the subjectivity of human beings. According to Jonas, the metabolism of every organism makes it obvious that the living being, while composed of matter, is “enjoying a sort of *freedom with respect to its own substance*”: his constant need to exchange matter with the external world means that the organism is in a never-ending state of transformation, which naturally emancipates it from its basic needs, making it into something more. This fact is easily confirmed in man, who is never just what he eats.

Certainly the price of freedom, when the living substance detached itself, through an original act of isolation and realization of its identity, from the universal integration of all inanimate things in the

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<sup>19</sup> Jonas (1966).

<sup>20</sup> Jonas (1973).

whole of matter, is the difficulty in satisfying its own needs and the fight for survival, on a knife-edge between being and non-being.

Jonas notes that in ancient times, all human actions had as their background the cosmic order of nature, which was not altered in any substantial way by human initiative. Human life, in fact, unfurled between the permanence of nature and its cycles, and the transience and change of human works. Among the latter, the city was certainly the most eminent. Such an artificial continuity of the urban culture soon revealed, though, its inescapable contingency: the recurrent possibility of weakness, decline, and destruction. The space for self-determination, and therefore for freedom that the city carved out – sheltered from simple natural forces – could not expel the instability and precariousness of the human condition. Even here, human control is scarce; the potential for chance events and irrational elements is latent in human affairs. The city however, inasmuch as it was the sphere of civilization built by human beings, was the main place of both self-determination and the exercise of responsibility towards others and towards institutions, which together regulated their lives. Jonas observes: “But in the city, the social work of art, where men deal with men, cleverness must be wedded to morality, for this is the soul of its being. It is in this intrahuman frame, then, that all traditional ethics dwells, and matches the size of action delimited by this frame<sup>21</sup>”.

Such a *nomos*, distinct from the *physis*, presented itself as an anthropocentric ethic of proximity; it was what allowed civilizations to live and to be passed down, presenting itself as a sound method of identification, deep-rootedness, and orientation for individuals in their respective communities, which also permitted them to govern the changes which would come about in the course of time.

Their relationship with objects, in contrast to human beings and their possessions or products, was of no ethical importance. The whole realm of *techne* was ethically neutral, with the exception of medicine.

Furthermore, the basic characteristics – seen as common to the human community – were considered constituents of the essence of

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<sup>21</sup> Jonas (1984), p. 4.



humanity, as well as permanent, even in the unavoidable coming into being of the parabola of every existence, and, therefore, as not liable to becoming objects of *techne*, of human manipulation.

Starting from the cultural and scientific innovations of the Renaissance and modern times, we experienced a gradual expansion of the city in completely new ways, described by Jonas in the passage on the movement from the “Hellenic world” to “Hellenism”. In fact, we witnessed a progressive expansion of the *polis* within nature to the point where awareness of the border between artificial and natural has become difficult and sometimes impossible:

The city of men, once an enclave in the nonhuman world, spreads over the whole of terrestrial nature and usurps its place. The difference between the artificial and the natural has vanished, the natural is swallowed up in the sphere of the artificial, and at the same time the total artifact (the works of man that have become ‘the world’ and as such envelop their makers) generates a ‘nature’ of its own, that is, a necessity with which human freedom has to cope in an entirely new sense<sup>22</sup>.

## Founding Human Responsibility

In the *Preface to The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas states that the research that he presents with systematic and not homiletic or religious intentions, finds its place in the ethical vacuum of the virgin land of collective practice, into which humanity has ventured with high technology in an era of relativism as far as values are concerned. What can provide a first indicative criterion? According to Jonas, as it has always been for human beings in history – so far as both phylogeny and ontogeny are concerned – this is given by the capacity of thought to foresee danger. By foreseeing the future developments of the actions we start, and their probable consequences on other human beings – even on a planetary scale – it is possible to single out the ethical

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<sup>22</sup> Jonas (1984), p. 10.

principles from which new duties – which are the consequences of new powers – are deducible<sup>23</sup>. Here is what he defines as a ‘heuristic of fear’:

Only the distortion of man helps us to seize the concept of humanity that must be preserved from that danger. We know *what* is in play only if we know that it is in the game. Since here this is not only of human destiny, but also of the image of man; not only of survival, but also of the integrity of being, the ethics that has the function to protect both must be, beyond prudence, that of respect (*Ehrfurcht*)<sup>24</sup>.

Certainly, the heuristic of fear cannot and should not be the last word in the search for good; however, it is useful because we all understand much better what we do not want than what we do want. The perception of *malum*, in fact, is generally more immediate and less exposed to differences of opinion than that of *bonum*, which without reflection can pass unnoticed. Therefore, in order to better understand what is appreciable, it is necessary to analyse fears before wishes.

Jonas declares that the objective of his research is the foundation of an ethic fit for technological times. This foundation, with theoretical intentions, will extend to metaphysics in order to show the value of the imperative regarding the future existence of human beings, in the awareness that such a metaphysical extension moves in a different direction from the prevalent positions of contemporary positivistic and analytical philosophy. He travels his own road – unconcerned with political and academic correctness – with the humility and love of truth that the experience of Nazism, and the struggle against it, had nourished in him<sup>25</sup>.

His analysis of the present historical trajectory, with its Promethean dreams, has imposed on him the necessity of returning to the nature of things, of reflecting on the roots of phenomena, of taking upon his own shoulders the limited but important responsibility that belongs to every one of us as men, in whom nature is able to reflect upon itself. Jonas emphasizes that

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<sup>23</sup> Jonas (1985).

<sup>24</sup> Jonas (1979), pp. 7-8. Preface to the German edition, the translation from German is ours.

<sup>25</sup> Jonas (2003), (2008).

Reality, or nature, is one and testifies to itself in what it allows to come forth from it. What reality is must therefore be gathered from its testimony, and naturally from that which tells the most – from the most manifest, not the most hidden; the most developed, not the least developed: the fullest and not the poorest-hence from the ‘highest’ that is accessible to us<sup>26</sup>.

And if we turn to nature we cannot escape the observation that – even in freedom –organisms tend for the most part towards the self-affirmation of being as opposed to non-being.

At any rate, we repeat, just as manifest subjectivity (which is always particular as well) is something of an upstart surface-phenomenon of nature, so too is it rooted in that nature and stays in continuity of essence with it; and that continuity makes both participate in ‘purpose’. On the strength of evidence of life [...] we say therefore that purpose in general is indigenous to nature. And we can say something more: that in bringing forth life, nature evinces at least *one* determinate purpose – life itself<sup>27</sup>.

In this way, he asserts that ‘purpose’, beyond every consciousness, both animal and human, extends to the physical world as its ‘principle of origin’. Starting from the observation that the natural world has purposes, Jonas concludes that it is not inconsequential that something is important for the natural world. He writes:

In purposiveness as such [...] we can see a fundamental self-affirmation of being, which posits it *absolutely* as the better over against nonbeing. In every purpose, being declares itself for itself and against nothingness. Against this verdict of being there is no counter verdict, for even saying ‘no’ to being betrays an interest and a purpose. Hence, the mere fact that being is not indifferent toward itself makes its difference from nonbeing the basic value of all values, the first ‘yes’ in general<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Jonas (1984), pp. 69-70.

<sup>27</sup> Jonas (1984), pp. 73-74.

<sup>28</sup> Jonas (1984), p. 81.

The presence of purposes – linked to the self-affirmation of being – reveals in an intuitive way ‘a good in itself’, insofar as it is evidently superior to the absence of purposes. Therefore, attributing self-evidence to the self-substantiation of the purpose of being, Jonas assumes it to be the ontological axiom, clarifying that we are dealing with a sort of *argumentum ad hominem*, since:

It exploits a spontaneous preference for one of two logically possible alternatives. But perhaps with this very bias it restores the balance to a matter which, in the preemptive course that philosophical theory has taken in its long seclusion with natural science and itself, has not had its proper say for most of the time<sup>29</sup>.

In accepting the ontological axiom of the superiority of purpose over the absence of purpose and interpreting manifest subjectivity – the conscious will as an epiphenomenon of nature – that is rooted in it in any case and whose continuity in the scale of being gives a teleological character to the whole – what follows for human beings is the duty to impose on their own faculties the negation of non-being.

In its fullness or in any of its particular manifestations, being can well generate respect. And recalling how in every ethical theory there is a rational basis of obligation, which constitutes the aspect in some way acknowledged as ‘objective’, and a psychological basis of its capacity to move the will, – which constitutes the ‘subjective’ aspect in that it becomes the cause of action for the subject – he affirms that it is by means of respect as *an affection of our feeling* that being can come to the aid of that otherwise powerless moral law which demands that we satisfy through our lives the innate claims of existence.

Respect can become operative if the sense of responsibility arises: a sense that Hans Jonas defines as the feeling that more than any other causes in us the willingness to favour – by means of our very existence – the being’s right to existence. Therefore, the concept of responsibility implies that of ought, above all as the need of being of something and then as the rule of acting of someone in response to the need of being. Jonas observes

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<sup>29</sup> Jonas (1984), note 1 of chapter 4, p. 235.

that all moral norms lead back to the demonstration of an ‘ontological’ ought and that the presumed gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ appears to be an insuperable abyss in contemporary ethical reflection since it can be mediated only by a divine or human *fiat* – both of which at present appear to be problematic sources of validity, one because its existence is not necessarily recognized, and the other because of the lack of a universally-based authority<sup>30</sup>.

On closer inspection, however, an ontic paradigm in which an “ought” coincides with a simple “is”, negating the possibility of a “merely is”, exists and is the starting point of each one of us: a new-born baby’s direct and irrefutable “you ought” to its surrounding environment. This is the original example – the archetype of every responsibility – in the genetic, typological, and even “gnoseological” senses, by virtue of its immediately evident quality. Jonas explains:

The newborn unites in himself the self-accrediting force of being already there and the demanding impotence of being-not-yet; the unconditional end-in-itself of everything alive and the still-have-to-come of the faculties for securing this end. [...]The immanent ought-to-be of the suckling, which his every breath proclaims, turns thus into the transitive ought-to-do of others who alone can help the claim continually to its right and make possible the gradual coming true of the teleological promise which it carries in itself from the first<sup>31</sup>.

The “ought” of the newborn in its plainness, concreteness, and urgency represents the initial core of responsibility, which extends to other horizons: namely beyond being, as in the parental relationship, and responsibility towards others. It is, in its fullest significance, an attitude of responding to the world and of taking upon oneself the questions and emergencies, which regard its very existence. Jonas notes:

The pure being as such, and then the best being of the child, is what parental care is about. But isn’t this precisely what Aristotle said of the *raison d’être* of the state: that it came into being so that human life would

<sup>30</sup> Jonas (1996).

<sup>31</sup> Jonas (1984), p. 134.

be possible, and continues in being so that the good life is possible? This then is also the object of the true statesman<sup>32</sup>.

The procreative relationship, however, maintains a pre-eminent position as evidence of responsibility, notwithstanding possible analogies. The responsibility which exists by nature, as it clearly shows in the example of parents, is owing to a direct causality that comes before consent; it is intrinsically irrevocable, non-negotiable, and global. Responsibility instituted “artificially”, however, is owing to the assignment and the acceptance of a duty by spontaneous assumption, and is limited in content and duration. There is a simple naturalness in the former, exercised in a direct rapport, and artificiality in the latter, mostly exercised through the mediation of organizational machinery.

The common elements making both phenomena paradigmatic and original are retraceable, according to Jonas, through the concepts of “totality”, “continuity” and “future” in relation to the existence and happiness of human beings. Human beings, like all other living beings, are ends in themselves; however, only human beings are able to carry out strategies which safeguard their being ends in themselves. Therefore, their very capacity for action implies an *objective* obligation in the form of external responsibility. For these reasons they can be defined as moral beings; that is, as capable of carrying out morally responsible or morally irresponsible behaviours<sup>33</sup>. Jonas reaffirms in any case that the archetype of every responsibility is that of human beings for human beings, in which the subject-object connection in the relationship of responsibility is irrefutable, and through this the responsibility for every living thing becomes clear.

The totality of responsibility may be characterized by the paradigmatic examples of parents and of the statesman, which combine as the opposite poles of the greatest particularity and the greatest generality. In particular, the educational sphere demonstrates how the responsibility of parents and of the State are related, and how the private and public spheres integrate reciprocally, encompassing all aspects of the life of human beings. As Jonas describes,

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<sup>32</sup> Jonas (1984), p. 101.

<sup>33</sup> Jonas (1981).

the education of the child includes socialization, beginning with speech and progressing with the transmission of the entire code of societal convictions and norms, through whose appropriation the individual becomes a member of the wider community. The private opens itself essentially to the public and includes it in its own completeness as belonging to the being of the person. In other words, the 'citizen' is an immanent aim of education, thus a part of parental responsibility, and this not only by force of the state's enjoining it. From the other side, just as the parents educate their children 'for the state' (if for much more as well), so does the state assume responsibility for the education of the young. The earliest phase is left in most societies to the home, but everything after that comes under the supervision, regulation, and aid of the state – so that one can speak of a public 'educational policy'.<sup>34</sup>

The continuity of responsibility depends on its own very nature since, for example, neither the care of parents nor the care of the government can cease, as they must respond to the ever new needs of life, which is rooted in the past and moves towards the future. Of course, political responsibility is greater in both temporal directions in relation to the greater duration of the historical community with respect to individual existence.

Responsibility is projected beyond the present and today's care into the future, despite life's unpredictability; therefore, responsibility must have the function of making possible more than determining the present. Jonas writes:

The object's self-owned futurity is the truest futural aspect of the responsibility, which thus makes itself the guardian of the very source of that irksome unpredictability in the fruits of its labors. Its highest fulfillment, which it must be able to dare, is its abdication before the right of the never anticipated, which emerges as the outcome of its care [...]. In the light of such self-transcending width, it becomes apparent that responsibility as such is nothing else but the moral complement to the ontological constitution of our *temporality*<sup>35</sup>.

Thus, every total responsibility, such as that of a parent or that of statesman or stateswoman – beyond its specific and important

<sup>34</sup> Jonas (1984), p. 102.

<sup>35</sup> Jonas (1984), p. 107.

duties – is always also the preservation of the future possibility of responsible actions and of politics itself.

Jonas affirms that by means of the difficult journey through the various regions of responsibility, he also found the answer to the question that at the beginning seemed to represent “the critical point of moral theory”: how to transform the will into the “ought”.

The transition is mediated by the phenomenon of *power* in its uniquely human sense, in which causal force joins with knowledge and freedom. [...] Only in man is power emancipated from the whole through knowledge and arbitrary will and only in man can it become fatal to him and to itself, his capacity is his fate, and it increasingly becomes the general fate. In him, therefore, and in him alone, there arises out of the willing itself the ‘ought’ as the self-control of his consciously exercised power<sup>36</sup>.

Human beings, as an epiphenomenon of nature capable of determining for itself the aims of actions and to carry them out autonomously, have reached even within nature the point at which their own self-destruction is possible. This imposes upon them the duty to pay special attention to not destroying, through irresponsible use, what exists, what has come about, and all the other living things, which are somehow in their power. Therefore, it is clear that, at the present time, human power not only requires the union of will and obligation, but also undeniably places responsibility at the centre of morality.

Ethics and politics are necessarily interwoven, and Hans Jonas – in a situation where survival is threatened, of emergency, owing to the exponential development of technological power, and in the conviction that human beings cannot adapt themselves to everything – declares: “For the moment, all work on the ‘true’ man must stand back behind the bare saving of its precondition, namely, the *existence* of mankind in a sufficient natural environment”<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Jonas (1984), p. 129.

<sup>37</sup> Jonas (1984), p. 139.



Responsible politics turns towards the future with the consciousness that it must guarantee the very possibility of responsible action and the existence of future generations, as well as the right to life of the world. It urges a limitation of technological development and the pursuit of a moderate and equitable use of resources.

Philosophy itself has the task of watching over what fundamentally cannot be renounced, and indicating and motivating the understandable and agreeable *reasons* – in the broad, Aristotelian sense of the term – for political movement towards great renunciations out of respect and responsibility for life, which is a free gift, like the earth which we inhabit and the sky above us.

In concluding his reflection on the theory of responsibility, Jonas reaffirms that the place of responsibility is the being immersed in becoming, subject to transiency and corruption, for which this theory turns to beings not *sub specie aeternitas* but *sub specie temporis*, in a vulnerability which makes their loss constantly possible at every instant, and where responsibility itself contributes to their *continuum*.

In late modernity we can discover some positive courses: a) the exit from a subjectivity which has become a devourer and has collapsed upon itself; b) *the recognition of the self-affirmation of being*, who is given a way to participate in nature and in its children; and c) the respect of this as a given, regardless of our will, of our knowledge and of our power – respect which in the final analysis is *respect and responsibility for life* in and beyond ourselves. These phenomena can constitute *the rediscovered common denominator* in order to renew the possibility of dialogue among human beings: with themselves, with others, and with the world they encounter. Accepting with humility and honesty the self-affirmation of being is the first and also the ultimate key to opening the door to a new beginning, based on faith in the radical positivity of what we are.

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