Hans Jonas' Image Theory

Fabio Fossa, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

Roberto Franzini Tibaldeo, de Educação e Humanidades, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná, Curitiba, Brazil

Abstract. This essay explores Jonas' multifaceted and rich enquiries into the notion of image. In particular, it argues that reflecting on the "image" helps Jonas clarify the unique condition of human existence, where the twine of thought and being reveals a paradoxical (and yet crucial) relationship between time and eternity, change and permanence, immanence and transcendence. The employ of the interpretative device provided by the image enables a nuanced understanding of the human complexity which goes beyond the partial and reductive descriptions of relativistic immanentism, on the one hand, and immutable transcendence, on the other. By commenting upon its anthropological, aesthetic, and ethical significance, we propose that the study of Jonas' thoughts on the image not only offers valuable insights into the philosophical understanding of such a fascinating object, but sheds also a new and interesting light on the unity of his oeuvre.

Keywords. Hans Jonas; image; homo pictor; likeness; image of the human being; ethics.

1. Introduction

The enquiry into images is one of the cornerstones of Hans Jonas' thinking. In virtually all his major works he employs mythical and/or religious images to clarify "the basic question of the *relationship between thought and being*" (Jonas 2001 [1938], 7). Especially in his early publications, he puts great efforts in understanding the philosophical relevance of the literary and religious images provided by Gnostic, Christian, and Jewish narratives. Later, the image proves once more to be central to Jonas' phenomenological and ontological account of the human being's specificity, which relies on the "image-faculty" (Jonas 1966, 184) and results in the following description of the human condition:

> Man 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 – in agreement or in conflict, in acceptance or in defiance, in compliance or in repudiation, with good or with bad conscience. The image of man never leaves him, however much he may wish at times to revert to the bliss of animality. To be created in the image of God means to have to live with the image of man (Jonas 1966, 185).[1]

This reflection culminates in Jonas' ethics for the technological age. It is because of the transformative power of technology over nature and human biology that we have to carry out an attentive enquiry into its limits and possibilities. This entails posing "the question of the worthwhileness of the whole human enterprise" (Jonas 1984, 20), answering which – concludes Jonas – "involves the image of man we entertain. We must think it anew in light of the things we can do with it or to it now and could never do before" (Jonas 1984, 20).

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[1] Enquiring into Jonas' philosophical use of the traditional expression of the human being as "imago Dei" would exceed the scope of this article. For a recent reflection on this issue, see Settimo 2023.

How can the persistence of Jonas' interest in the image be understood?[2] And how can the relationship between the image and the idea of the human being be clarified?[3] Indeed, not much research has been carried out on these relevant aspects of Jonas' thinking.[4] The thesis we endeavour to argue is that reflecting on the image helps Jonas clarify the unique condition of human existence, where the twine of thought and being reveals a paradoxical (and yet crucial) relationship between time and eternity, change and permanence, immanence and transcendence. The employ of the interpretative device provided by the image enables a nuanced understanding of human complexity which goes beyond the partial and reductive descriptions of relativistic immanentism, on the one hand, and immutable transcendence, on the other. Furthermore, Jonas' analysis of images provides a peculiar criterion of truth, namely likeness, which – as we shall see – is also endowed with ethical relevance and is capable of shedding a new light on Jonas' idea of the human being.

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[2] It would be interesting to extend this enquiry also to Jonas' *Gnosisforschung*, where the image plays a primary role (see e.g. Jonas 1988 [1934], 1–91, 140–251; Jonas 1954, 1–23; Frogneux 2017; Fossa 2019). However, in the present contribution we limit our enquiry to the relationship between Jonas' philosophical biology and his ethics of responsibility.

[3] Jonas uses the expressions "image of man" (e.g., Jonas 1966, 185–186; Jonas 1984, x, 20, 26, 201) and "idea of man", respectively (e.g., Jonas 1984, 43–44; Jonas 1974, 240; Jonas 1985, 292). In this paper, we use the more adequate expressions 'image of the human being' and 'idea of the human being' to refer to them.

[4] See Dewitte 1988; Kersten 2001; Frogneux 2008; Wiesing 2009; Schirra & Sachs-Hombach 2010; Halawa 2011; Ulama 2012; Morris 2013, 80-84, 178-182; Rubio 2014, 2019; Fossa 2015; Nielsen-Sikora 2017; Franzini Tibaldeo 2019, 2021; Coyne 2020, 87-93, 130-131; Settimo 2023. These publications mainly focus on the biological-philosophical phase of Jonas' thinking without carrying out a detailed enquiry into the relationship between Jonas' biological philosophy, anthropology, and ethics in the light of the *fil rouge* of the image – as we endeavour to do here.

2. The Paradoxical Condition of the Image

Our enquiry begins with Jonas' study of the human being's specificity in the wider context of his philosophy of life.

In this regard, Jonas does not wish to carry out a biological enquiry, but a philosophical interpretation of biological facts. His philosophical account of human specificity does not lay claim to be a genealogical theory of how organic life gave birth to the human being. In other words, the aim of his reflections is not to provide an alternative to Darwinian evolution. Quite the contrary, Jonas approached his subject by focusing on a historical phenomenon (the prehistoric appearance of 'human' artefacts) and enquiring into its prerequisites (the existence of living beings endowed with the capability to produce such artefacts), which ultimately rely on a specialisation of the basic dynamic of life that is distinctive of mankind. In this account, images and the image faculty play a pivotal role.

2.1. The Basic Dynamic of Life

Being human existence a specialisation of the basic dynamic of life, it is necessary to briefly contextualise Jonas' anthropology in his overall philosophy of the organic phenomenon.

Jonas' philosophical reframing of life relies on the centrality of "organic form", which stands in a "dialectical relation of *needful freedom* to matter" (Jonas 1966, 80). The existence of organic form depends on its material and metabolic exchange with the environment, but also reveals "a certain independence […] with respect to its own matter" (Jonas 1966, 81). This means that the organism's being is somehow emancipated "from the type of fixed self-identity that is matter's, to give scope to a different, viz., mediate and functional, kind of identity" (Jonas 1966, 81), namely an identity "which from moment to moment reasserts itself, achieves itself, and defies

the equalising forces of physical sameness all around" (Jonas 1966, 83). For an organism, to be means to strive for its own existence and survival in an active way. Therefore, the organism needs to develop "means of survival" in order to bridge the spatial–temporal gap between itself and the world (Jonas 1974, 196, 204).

The "basic situation of freedom" (Jonas 1966, 83) characterising organic form reveals a "polarity of self and world, of internal and external, complementing that of form and matter" (Jonas 1966, 83), which cannot be successfully understood neither in monistic nor in dualistic terms. In a word, organic freedom is characterised by an opposing and dialectical *dynamic*, which reveals the organism's tendency to emancipate or *transcend* itself by going "constantly *beyond* the given state of things" and "beyond the given condition" (Jonas 1974, 197). At the same time, this outward dynamic is complemented by an interior one, namely "inwardness or subjectivity", which imbues "all the encounters occasioned in its horizon with the quality of felt selfhood, however faint its voice" (Jonas 1966, 84). In this sense, the organism's self-concern and self-centeredness "at the same time bridges the qualitative gulf to the rest of things by selective modes of *relation*" (Jonas 1966, 84). The result of this dual continuous process is "organic form", whose meaning cannot be simply reduced to dependence, although its existence certainly relies on this feature (Jonas 1966, 80).

Moreover, according to Jonas, the organism's "opening into an environment" and "having a world" carries the evolutive "promise of higher and more comprehensive stages" of life (Jonas 1966, 83, 106). What is envisaged here is that, thanks to self-transcendence, the organism's striving for self-preservation somehow leads beyond itself by opening to the broad phenomenon of evolution, which ultimately culminates in the human being. In other words, the revolutionised, dynamic and dialectical attributes related to the primary level of life, defined by metabolism and organic form, characterise also the more complex levels of life, including the human one.

Let us briefly recall how Jonas describes the 'progress' within the evolutive dynamic of life. On the one hand, different species share the same basic biological pattern, while, on the other hand, they are characterised by different levels of openness to the world. Life manifests a plurality of forms *within* its own domain – a plurality that stems from the fact that individuality admits of a "more-or-less" and, thus, comes in various degrees (Jonas 1974, 204). The plurality within organic life relies on dissimilarities in *mediacy* and *distance*; this is to say that living beings are in need of bridging the gap between self and world in order to survive (Jonas 1974, 204). According to Jonas, the disparate degrees of individuality rely on the specific means of survival developed by organic individuals in order to exist and cope with the dialectic of mediacy and distance. And, as we shall see, this characterises, although with a radical leap, the human being too.

2.2. The Ontology of the Image and the 'Homo Pictor'

According to Jonas, human specificity in contradistinction to other living beings resides in a "more-than-animal" and "symbolical" form of mediation between the self and the world (Jonas 1966, 158). However, it is also true that between animal and human capabilities there are "fluid boundaries" (Jonas 1996, 79). To be sure, the possibility of distance-taking from the biological level must, to certain degrees, "be credited even to some higher animals" (Jonas 1966, 170). According to Jonas, these capabilities arise "with higher sense-perception as such (i.e. prior to man)" (Jonas 1966, 178), and especially thanks to *sight*, the "noblest" of all senses, due to the unique role played by sight "in the higher mental performances […] in the case of man" (Jonas 1966, 136; see also Jonas 1966, 184). However, what guides animals is a behaviour pattern confined within the "realm of animal necessity" (Jonas 1996, 79) that human beings can invoke no more. Why not? Because the human being "is one that indulges in the making of useless objects, or has ends in addition to the biological ones, or can serve the latter in ways remote from the direct

6

usefulness of instrumental things" (Jonas 1966, 158) – in a word, the human being has enhanced organic freedom and the related potential to transcend the given state of things in a unique way.

How does Jonas justify this statement? He focuses on three specifically human features: (A) the capacity to produce and use artificial "tools" (Jonas 1996, 78–79); (B) the "image faculty" as a "further degree of mediacy" distinguishing humans from animals (Jonas 1966, 184); and finally (C) a "threshold to a further mediation", which is achieved thanks to "reflection" (Jonas 1966, 185).

First, *tool creation*: although it is still "very closely connected with the realm of animal necessity", tool creation is indeed something new viz. human, since "it serves animal needs in a supra-animal manner" (Jonas 1996, 79). Tools add a further degree of mediacy to the satisfaction of natural urges, allowing their users to add distance from the pressing demands of biological life and to acquire a richer and more articulated relation to both the world and the self.

Second, the *image faculty*, namely the specifically human capacity to make and behold images, which are different from tools. But what is an image, and why is it so important to Jonas' account of the human specificity?

An image is both an internal and an external entity characterised by a series of ontological properties (Jonas 1966, 159–165), which are fully developed by human beings only: likeness, intentionality, incompleteness, selection, alteration, visibility, and neutralisation. Let us briefly review these properties.

Each image is in a relationship of *likeness* with respect to a real object, and this underlines the relational character of the representation. Secondly, being the image an artifact, its figurative relationship with and likeness of an object means that it embodies the external intention of the painter – intention that "lives on as intrinsic 'intentionality' in the product" (Jonas 1966, 159). Third, the resemblance of the object is *incomplete*, otherwise the image would be a duplication.

7

The incompleteness with which the image depicts the object is therefore not an accidental trait or an imperfection, but its essential feature. This incompleteness is thus "predecided with the image intention in general, and no longer a matter of choice in the particular case" (Jonas 1966, 160), nor does it rely on a greater or lesser reproductive ability. Fourth, the image's incompleteness entails that the painter intentionally *selects* the features to be depicted, in the sense that many of the object's characteristics are left out. The previous two features expressing the image's "dissimilarity in similarity" (Jonas 2010, 284), namely incompleteness and selection, are however supplemented by the *alteration* "of the selected features themselves, as a means of heightening the symbolic similitude, or in order to satisfy visual interests other than representation, or just as the result of inadequate ability" (Jonas 1966, 161).

The countless nuances introduced by alteration into the human process of depicting can be brought back to unity through the recognition, in the variations, of the underlying intention from which the image originated. This reflection gives Jonas the opportunity to underline the breadth of human imagination, which can even go beyond reproductive representation, without prejudice to the recognisability of the intention, as happens, for example, with symbolic conventions, thanks to which "an increasing range of substitutions and graphical abbreviations becomes available, with increasing emancipation from 'literalness'" (Jonas 1966, 162). The philosophical interpretation of this human ability ultimately leads to human inventiveness.

The sixth character of the image, *visibility* (Jonas 1966, 162), allows Jonas to find at the level of perception – which, as we have seen, is inclined towards transanimality – the same dialectic of matter and form characterising life since the organic level. While both cases evidence a dynamic transcendence of form beyond the metabolic exchange of matter, the depicted form embodies a higher degree of mediacy and independence from its own matter. The image loses the dynamic of organic form, and turns into an *inactive*, stable, and fixed being, which is excluded from the

dynamic and causal relationship with things. Due to a singular paradox, the image's substantiality, although concrete (being, for example, the image painted on a material support), nevertheless "is submerged in its symbolic aspect" (Jonas 1966, 163); the "image-thing, starting its own history, continues to be part of the causal order" (Jonas 1966, 163), but at the same time the "activity that went into its making is a matter of the past, of which the image-present keeps no record" (Jonas 1966, 163). The image thus effectively succeeds in *neutralising* its condition as a causal effect and achieves an *ontological difference* from other beings.[5]

It is worth noting that the image's paradoxical condition clarifies the threefold stratification evidenced by artificial images. First, the image is different from its material support (substratum). Second, the image does not coincide with the depicted object. Third, it follows that the image can be regarded as ontologically independent of any material admixture. Jonas therefore concludes that "the image or likeness hovers as a third, ideal entity between the first [the image's substratum] and the last [the depicted object], both real entities, connecting them in the unique way of representation" (Jonas 1966, 164).

The abovementioned characteristics and possibilities offered by the image are employed by Jonas to shed light on the being who is capable of producing them. And it is for this reason that the enquiry focuses on the image faculty, as the specifically human trait.

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[5] See also Fossa 2015. The image's disengagement from the usual availability of the world and the capacity of the image's visibility to achieve an "autonomous form of being" (Fiedler 1991, 191) were core aspects of Konrad Fiedler's (1841–1895) well-known aesthetics, which Jonas almost certainly knew, due to his personal interest in art and to the fact that, while attending three academic semesters at the University of Berlin in 1921–1923, he studied history of art among other subjects (Jonas 2008, 19–21).

Images rely on sight, a sense organ which the human being shares with other animals. But there is also an important difference: although all animals endowed with movement and sight are somehow capable of image perceiving (Jonas 1966, 135–156), only human beings are capable of perceiving images "in a certain way" (Jonas 1966, 165) – namely *as images*. What does this mean exactly? By actualising the evolutionary potentials related to sight (Jonas 1966, 152), human perception evidences the achievement of a new capability, namely the faculty "of separating *eidos* from concrete reality, or form from matter" (Jonas 1966, 167): "the image becomes detached from the object, that is, the presence of the *eidos* is made independent of that of the thing" (Jonas 1966, 170; see also Wiesing 2016). So, what truly distinguishes the human being is the capacity to cope with the challenges of survival and bridge the gap with the world by developing "eidetic freedom", namely the capacity to produce internal and external images.

This twofold possibility relies on the "eidetic control of imagination" and the "eidetic control of motility" respectively:

> 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 (Jonas 1966, 172–173).

From the moment humans develop their image faculty, they quit the kind of freedom and mediacy characterising animality, and initiate a qualitatively different viz. symbolic experience, in which new capabilities are developed:

> Imaging and speaking man ceases to see things directly: he sees them through the screen of representations of which he has become possessed by his own previous dealings with objects […]. Their greatest role, however, lies in between experiences, when the actual object is not

10

present for direct perception: then the abstracted images that are at the command of the subject provide in themselves the material for an "experience" at a remove – symbolic experience, in which the world is taken hold of without imposing its presence (Jonas 1966, 184–185).

However, "true man" fully appears thanks to a further step in the dynamic of human mediacy, namely when the *homo pictor* not only paints, but lingers on the depicted image, glances towards it, and ultimately "turns to concerning himself with the unpaintable image of his own conduct and the state of his self" (Jonas 1966, 185). According to Jonas, this image-based reflective attitude opens to the existential space of ethics, since – as we will see in detail in Section 3 – through the apprehension of myself and of my behaviour as another appears what is identifiable as normativity. We will also see that this event too enacts, albeit on a different level, the very same paradoxical dynamic of the image, which we are currently examining.

The step from the paintable to the unpaintable enabled by the image faculty is called *reflection*, which is embodied in the third specifically human artefact, namely the *grave*. Reflection appears through the *homo pictor*'s glance on himself-as-another and then develops into the *homo sapiens*' reflective awareness, which is imbued with interpersonal and social significance (Jonas stresses the social act of commemorating the dead – Jonas 1996, 83). It is in this context that the previously analysed capacity of the *aesthetic image* to transcend the state of given things develops into something more comprehensive, namely an image of a different kind characterising the human beings' worldly existence and behaviour *as such*, as evidenced by the passage quoted in Section 1 (Jonas 1966, 185). We suggest referring to this aspect as the *anthropological* image or the image humans entertain of themselves reflectively, whose evidence is the grave with all its religious significance and its open resistance to the world. Indeed, common to both the aesthetic and the anthropological image is that they "somehow defy our apparent mortality, pointing beyond what is visible to the invisible, from the material to the immaterial" (Jonas 1996, 83). In other words,

11

although they rely on contingency and historical change, both the aesthetic and the anthropological image evidence a tendency to *transcend* this condition and free themselves from their constitutive worldly and bodily relatedness, and thus achieve permanence. In Section 3 we analyse a further implication of this dynamic, namely the one related to the appearance through historical change of an image humans entertain of themselves that pretends to be a permanent ethical norm. However, before this, we have to clarify other implications of Jonas' reflection on the image.

2.3. The Image's Aesthetic and Anthropological Implications

What we find interesting in these reflections by Jonas is, first, that if human beings had not integrally belonged to life and had not been connected to the world through sensorial bodily experience, they would not have become human at all (see also Jonas 1974, 246). As evidenced in the previous section, human capacities like fabricating tools, painting and representing, thinking and reflecting, rely on organic potentialities, which were actualised by humans in a unique way. Second, being human entails preserving this peculiar bodily and worldly-connected experience, otherwise the very existence and meaning of what is human disappears and makes no sense (see for instance Damasio 1994). Third, if the "homo" had not been primarily "faber", but especially "pictor" viz. "symbolicum", they would have not developed into "sapiens" (Jonas 1996, 79, 82; see also Cassirer 1944). Moreover, Jonas' reflections not only evidence a revolutionised perspective on how the aesthetic image is to be correctly understood, but also shed light on the anthropological image, whose implications we now endeavour to develop further.

Let us briefly return to the three human artefacts mentioned by Jonas: tool, image, and grave. They reveal something about the beings that produce and use them, and they show how they cope with and understand the world – in a word, they exhibit the kind of freedom enjoyed by that being:

These are basic forms in which man, in uniquely human fashion, answers and transcends what is an unconditional given for man and animal alike. With the tool he surpasses physical necessity through invention; with the image, passive perception through representation and imagination; with the tomb, inescapable death through faith and piety (Jonas 1974, 252).

What is more, in his study in the phenomenology of the senses, Jonas details the role played by *bodily sight* in the higher mental performances as follows: there are "virtues inherent in sight" which provide

the ground for some basic concept of philosophy. *Simultaneity of presentation* furnishes the idea of enduring present, the contrast between change and the unchanging, between time and eternity. *Dynamic neutralization* furnishes form as distinct from matter, essence as distinct from existence, and the difference of theory and practice. *Distance* furnishes the idea of infinity. Thus the mind has gone where vision pointed (Jonas 1966, 152).

That is, a thinking-related effort like philosophy and the ideas it uses like time, eternity, duality, and infinity rely on capacities provided by bodily sight and then actualised by the human being thanks to both the aesthetic and the anthropological image.

To clarify this statement, we have to stress that, in the same way as the other basic features of life mentioned in Section 2.1 (freedom, transcendence, organic form, mediacy, and distance), also the aesthetic and the anthropological image ought to be understood in the terms of a paradoxical dialectics implying the *transcendence* of the pictorial form from its material support, on the one hand, and its *dependence* on the givenness of the worldly/bodily experience or at least its connection to the latter in the form of an intention or decision, on the other – "*adaequatio imaginis ad rem*" states in this regard Jonas: this is the realistic, practical basis of his image theory (Jonas 1966, 171–172; Jonas 2008, 233), which so far has not been adequately underlined in the literature. This dynamic-dialectic interplay between distance/freedom and *adaequatio* reveals the image's uniqueness, along with its creative potential. Thanks to the possibilities offered by the

image, the *homo pictor* can make "new things" by departing from the original, namely from what is simply given or experienced (Jonas 1966, 172).

As showed in Section 2.2, what enables this unique capability is the fact that the relationship between image and object is one of *incomplete likeness*, rather than one simply stating the *imperfection* of the image's capacity to portrait the depicted object. Incomplete likeness reveals a creative and dynamic interplay between the image and the depicted object, which results in a more nuanced understanding of the truth or *adaequatio* of the first to the second. Once again, the concept of freedom turns out to be useful to shed light on this peculiarity:

> Vision grants the greatest freedom to the mediacy of representation […]. There are many, equally recognizable, visual shapes to the same object, as a result of relative position and perspective: its "aspects"; each of these enjoys an independence from the variation of size due to distance; an independence from variations of color and brightness due to conditions of light; an independence from the completeness of detail, which can merge and disappear in the simultaneous wholeness of an object's view. Through all these variations of sense the form remains identifiable and continuously represents the same thing (Jonas 1966, 162).

The image's faithfulness and truth-oriented essence is to be understood, then, in the terms of a creative interplay between image and object appealing to the development of further *relational* possibilities between them, rather than the more or less faithful unidirectional depiction of a purely objective and 'fixed essence' – although, due to capacity to *transcend* matter, the image seems also to evidence a paradoxical striving for objective and permanent truth. Moreover, the correspondence between the plurality of possibilities and the image's claim to truth provides the opportunity to rethink the relationship between permanence and change in terms of *dissimilarity in similarity*, in the sense that the similarity between images of the same object succeeds in combining the

permanence of the original theme and the peculiarities of the specific perspectives[6] – a topic which will be developed by Jonas especially from an ethical point of view, as we will see in Section 3.

Jonas' image theory provides a further aesthetic and anthropological hint. It has been noted that the aesthetic image evidences an "ontological difference" from other objects (Jonas 1966, 165), due to its tendency to neutralise its dynamic-dialectical relationship of dependence and transcendence to matter and its dependence on bodily motility. The point is, however, that albeit neutralised in the image's independence and immutability, this dynamic condition ought not to be overlooked, since it is relevant to understanding both where the image stems from (namely, sight), and why, although free from "dynamic commerce" (Jonas 1966, 146), the image still relies on the relationship with the world through the bodily experience. In this regard, the image shows the same dynamical dialectic characterising life as such: on the one hand, the image relies on a relationship with the world, while on the other it manifests a tendency to transcend matter which results in actually achieving an ontologically different level of reality.

It is worth noting that in both cases (living being and image) this transcending entity is referred to in the terms of "form" or "eidos" (Jonas 1966, 167, 170, 185–186), which incidentally is the etymology of the term "idea". And it is of paramount importance to recall that these poles cannot be properly understood unless they are considered in their *paradoxical* and *dynamic* relationship. In other words, Jonas shows that considering the aesthetic image as a mere product of

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[6] It is worth noting that this very relationship between permanence and change is the specific focus of another influential work by Jonas, i.e. the essay "Change and Permanence" (Jonas 1974, 237–260). Here, the very possibility of understanding historical change relies on a "transhistoric element" (Jonas 1974, 242), which transcends change and, yet, is connected to it. Due to space constraints, a discussion of this essay - which evidently belongs to the same enquiry we are developing in these pages – must be postpone.

neutralisation is not enough and, to some extent, even wrong, since this may result in "falsifying reality"[7]. What characterises the image instead is its dialectic relationship with the human being's dynamic, bodily experience. This very dialectic continues to exist even if the image as *eidos* succeeds in breaking free from and *transcending* it.

3. Ethics, the Image, and the Dialectic of Likeness

What has been said so far with reference to the image in Jonas' philosophical anthropology interestingly resonates when one turns to the philosopher's ethical reflection. In what follows, we try to shed some light on the image and the dialectic of likeness as critical components of Jonas' ethical thinking.

We explore this subject in a twofold way. On the one hand, we comment on Jonas' use of the image to characterise ethical value in a manner that concurrently incorporates two elements commonly understood as heterogeneous: formal integrity (or permanence) and historical dynamism (or change). Furthermore, we analyse how he resorted to the dynamic of likeness as a blueprint to sketch the main characters of human moral experience. As a result, we claim that Jonas' ethical reflection exhibits one more instance of the tension between form (*eidos*) and dynamism already explored in the previous sections, which ultimately represents his most paradoxical and yet more productive contribution to the philosophy of the image.

Before proceeding, let us bridge the gap between Jonas' philosophical biology (which includes anthropology) and his ethical enquiry. Once again, the image is key. As Jonas points out

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[7] Of particular importance is the following, which refers to sight but holds for the image too: "The evidence of sight does not falsify reality when supplemented by that of underlying strata of experience, notably of motility and touch: when arrogantly rejecting it sight becomes barren of truth" (Jonas 1966, 149).

– in too swift a way and without developing the topic further –, ethical normativity appears *through* the anthropological image and thanks to the latter's reflective potential (see Section 2.2): "Man models, experiences, and judges his own inner state and outward conduct after the image of what is man's" (Jonas 1966, 185). The corresponding German version of the text is even clearer, due to the use of the reflexive verb *sich gehören*, which means "to be appropriate for", in the sense of "to conform to the rules of decency, the norms of morality":[8] "man models, experiences, and judges his own inner being and outward conduct after an image of what is appropriate for him".[9] If we understand correctly, this is the point where the *anthropological* image humans reflectively entertain of themselves individually, socially, and historically turns into a *normative* image, which from that moment onwards never leaves them. As a result, the faculty of judging and evaluating (myself and the other) in the light of an image-related normativity is what characterises the human condition. Being sensitive to normativity is what opens the existential space of ethics.

However, ethical reflection also entails questioning the *meaning* of this normativity, and here – points out Jonas – one cannot be satisfied with those accounts of normativity stating that the *true normative image* (which is the meaning of the locution 'image of the human being', hereafter IHB) is a contingent construct relying exclusively on mutable historical choices. Normativity discloses something permanent and true, which goes beyond history. What is the foundation of this feature? As we said, Jonas does not develop further the meditation on IHB, probably because this would have entailed a "metaphysical speculation" exceeding the scope of his biological-

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[8] "Den Regeln des Anstands, den Normen der Sittlichkeit entsprechen, sich schicken" (https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/gehoeren).

[9] "Der Mensch gestaltet, erfährt und beurteilt sein eigenes inneres Sein und äußeres Tun nach einem Bild davon, was sich für den Menschen gehört" (Jonas 2010, 320).

philosophical investigation.[10] The following pages try to shed light on the status and meaning of IHB, as well as its relationship with historical change and its ability to provide a standard for the critical assessment of the latter.

3.1. From Permanence to Change: The Vulnerability of the Image

The first thesis we wish to discuss is that Jonas used the notion of IHB to enquire into the status of ethical value. In this sense, the problem he sought to face is to clarify how value, as a formal and permanent meaning, could remain significant through the historical dimension, which is dominated by change and dynamism (Jonas 1966, 186). His research on the image, we contend, allowed him to sketch a conceptualisation of ethical value as incorporating – perhaps paradoxically – both a formal element of permanence and dynamic element of change.

Let us begin with discussing IHB as including a formal element of permanence. The first pages of *The Imperative of Responsibility* already provide clear evidence of the relevance that the image assumes in Jonas' ethical thinking. As soon as in the *Preface*, Jonas resorts to it to articulate some of the most central claims of his moral philosophy.

After stressing the transformative power of modern technology and the need for an ethics of self-restriction that may prevent it to become the doom of humanity, Jonas wonders what could serve as a compass to human agency. In the vacuum of values in which technology unfolds its power, what is truly at stake according to Jonas is no less than the very image of the human being. The image, he suggests, enshrines human integrity and presents itself as the ultimate ethical compass to navigate the technological age. Ultimately, it demands respect and concretisation of

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[10] Hints of this "metaphysical speculation" can be found in key passages of Jonas' works – e.g., Jonas 1996, 165–197; Jonas 2008, 226, 291; Jonas 2010, 159–160. We cannot develop this further here.

what is proper to humanity beyond its mere survival as a species (Jonas 1984, x; Jonas 2015, 15–17).[11]

First and foremost, then, IHB serves the need for a criterion to human agency. Historical humans are expected to look at the image in order to figure out what route to trace in the labyrinthine and ever-changing technological world. The primary function of IHB, thus, is to provide ethical guidance.

If the image must serve as a criterion to guide humanity through the changes of history, it must necessarily incorporate a formal element of permanence and stability. To a significant extent, it must remain equal to itself through time. It must transcend historicity, as forms are traditionally conceived of. Surely, the image cannot be as historical as humans are. If it were so, it could not function as a guide and criterion to distinguish between ethically acceptable and unacceptable change. To be normative, it must exhibit a stable, permanent meaning. Its inner sense must therefore transcend the historical expressions of human will. What the image enshrines cannot be reduced to an historical product. It must be, rather, a given that manifests through history as a call for acknowledgement, respect, and safeguard.

This formal element of permanence, however, is not enough to fully grasp the status of the image. Permanence and stability must not be taken as its defining features, as usually happens with forms understood as pure *eidos*. Rather, and quite paradoxically, the image also exhibits a layer of dynamism and change. What is permanent and stable in it is concurrently exposed to change and dynamism (as evidenced in Section 2).

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[11] We refer to both the original German version of the book (Jonas 2015) and the English translation (Jonas 1984) carried out by Jonas himself with David Herr since there are some important differences, as happens with the *Vorwort/Preface* we are referring to.

Jonas clearly states that IHB cannot be entirely described in formal terms. *Full* transcendence, permanence, and stability – i.e., the traditional characters of pure forms – are unfit to account for the status of the image. It is perhaps for this reason that Jonas preferred the semantics of the image to that of the idea, which he uses only rarely when discussing this issue (Jonas 1984, 43–44; Jonas 1974, 240; Jonas 1985, 292). The traditional characters of the idea we have just mentioned make it impossible to express what Jonas had in mind. Adopting its language would have led him astray. Indeed, the current condition of historical humans requires to understand ethical value as something worthwhile in itself that, however, is exposed to our deeds, that could be lost, and that we are thus responsible for. In a word, as something *vulnerable* (e.g., Jonas 1984, 32–34).

Jonas provides incontrovertible evidence of this. The conditions to conceive what is ethically valuable as "eternal", "overarch[ing] temporality", and being "equally 'there' for every now" are irretrievably gone (Jonas 1984, 125). Otherwise, one should endorse the claim that IHB is entirely separated from existence – an essentialist outcome Jonas does not concede, since it would misrepresent the irredeemable risks inherent to the technological age. In fact, technology has deprived this traditional conception of any relevance (Jonas 1984, 125–126). Through the mediation of increasingly powerful technological means, our actions have brought change into IHB itself, which must be then thought "anew in light of the things we can do with it or to it now and could never do before" (Jonas 1984, 20). What happens in the contingent dimension of human history reverberates on it. The image is capable of orientating human agency, but it is also affected by it. Far from being self-assured, its existence lies in our hands.

As paradoxical as this might sound, then, Jonas contends that the image must be now conceived as permeable to the historical dimension. The eternal transcendence of forms, shielded from change and dynamism, is ill-suited to grasp the modality in which the image manifests itself

in the technological age. Its formal element of permanence and stability can only be understood if its *vulnerability* to the deeds of historical humans is factored in. The current vulnerability of the image, paired with the value of what it enshrines, is the source of its normative ethical power: it poses an impellent duty of safeguard to historical humans. Stability and permanence, then, remain part of the image *even if* it is exposed to change.

What kind of change is this – a change that inscribes historicity into value, without dissolving its formal permanence; a change that drags the image into historical immanence, without annihilating its ontological difference and transcendent meaning in the process? And why is technology so powerful, so far-reaching in its effects, to force a change of paradigm in how ethical value is to be conceived, away from self-assurance and on to vulnerability?

3.2. From Change to Permanence: The Integrity of the Image

Including an element of change in IHB is a dangerous move. If the value that is supposed to guide us through historical change also changes with time, what guidance can be actually expected from it? What guidance could a changing image ever offer?

The risks involved in opening IHB to historical changes were a source of major concern to Jonas. An ever-changing image mirroring historical changes as they happen would be utterly unable to provide ethical guidance. What is worse, it would do precisely the opposite: it would justify any change historical humans, following their own lawless will, would inscribe in it.

This is, according to Jonas, what technology ultimately allows us to do: to forge new images capable to compete with – and, possibly, substitute – the image enshrining the integrity of human life. IHB must be conceived as vulnerable because human agency powered by technology can *obliterate* it. The kind of change to which the image is exposed is not related, then, to its *meaning* – the integrity of human life – which remains permanent and stable, and capable of providing a

"transhistoric" criterium to understand and assess historical change.[12] Rather, it is related to its *historical visibility* – to our possibility to acknowledge it as worth of respect and concretisation.

Support to these claims is offered by Jonas' critique of genetic engineering. Jonas is deeply convinced that the modern worldview dominated by technological science inherently pushes for the substitution of IHB with more contingent simulacra, pure expressions of the whims of our will. The root of this worldview, he argues, is to be traced back to the theory of evolution. Evolutionism has failed to acknowledge, or has perhaps rejected, the formal element of permanence proper IHB. As a result, it has deprived ethical thinking of its potential for guidance. "Since the same evolutionary doctrine of which genetics is a cornerstone has deprived us of a valid image of man", Jonas (1979, 41) writes, "the actual techniques, when they are ready, may find us strangely unready for their responsible use". Ultimately, this modern worldview "surrenders our being to a freedom without norms" in which we become our own creators (Jonas 1979, 41).

If no image of human integrity is to be respected and concretised, there are no boundaries to the manipulation of human life. Genetic engineering revokes the factual inviolability of the image – i.e., of the integrity of human life –, thus making of it just another object of human will. Or, one might say, just another anthropological image of what humans can do of themselves:

> In the image he entertains of himself – the programmatic idea which determines his actual being much as it reflects it – man now is evermore the maker of what he has made and the doer of what he can do, and most of all the preparer of what he will be able to do next (Jonas 1984, 9).

As mentioned earlier, this anthropological image that we entertain of ourselves, which

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[12] In its hermeneutic use, this element recalls what Jonas develops in the already mentioned essay on "Change and Permanence" (Jonas 1974, 237–260).

mirrors but also inspires the collective agency of historical humanity, presents different characters from IHB. Sure enough, it is also an image representing human life. However, it does not enshrine a meaning of its own, independent from the will of historical humans. Rather, it is "programmatic" – entirely immanent: it incorporates what historical humans want to do, and do, of themselves. It is, then, a sort of *mirror-image* that transmutes the contingent features of historical humans into models to be pursued.

With this figurative hypostasis of the historical human being, the changes introduced by *homo faber* assume normative valence. As such, mirror-images can supplant the criterion of integrity represented in IHB. Genetic engineering offers the occasion to explore in a more concrete way the tension that arises between historical mirror-images and the element of permanence proper to IHB. According to Jonas, human biological self-creation directly challenges IHB as a source of guidance. It aims at freeing modern "image-makers" (Jonas 1974, 166) from the stable model the IHB represents, delivering humanity to the full dynamism of contingency (Jonas 1974, 165).

Even if IHB is now challenged, the conditions for ethical criticism and actions still apply. Alterations and manipulations dictated by human will are still to be deemed acceptable or inacceptable. We can still ask the question: "Who will be the image-makers, by what standards, and on the basis of what knowledge?" (Jonas 1984, 21). If molecular biology enables the Promethean temptation of manipulating our own image from its very seed (*vom Keime*: Jonas 1987, 10), "in what image" (Jonas 1974, 146) is the human being to be made?

These questions challenge us to understand the element of change proper to the image against the background of its formal element of permanence. As shown in Section 2, the image is characterised by a dialectic structure. As its formal element of permanence is conceivable only by reference to its dynamic element of change, so is vice versa. Change is part of the image only in a

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way that preserves its potential for guidance. Something valuable will be lost if the wrong mirror-images will take the place of IHB.

Genetic engineering is so delicate a technology precisely because it threatens the constitutive IHB (Jonas 1974, 141). It fully exposes the vulnerability of the image. We have now all is needed to clarify the kind of change by which the image is affected. As already seen, the meaning of the image is independent from human will and agency: it lies beyond the reach of human deeds. What constitutes the integrity of human life is stable and permanent. It transcends history and does not change. The fact that IHB precedes human historical will does not imply, however, that the former can exist separated from the latter. IHB is nothing without its mundane adventure, without its successive historical concretisations. Paraphrasing Jonas, one could say that IHB is "thirst for temporality in its ever-new, always unprecedented productions, which no knowledge of essence can predict" (Jonas 1984, 126). The image acquires the consistency of existence only through human agency – without which it would remain just a void form.

Being acknowledged and affirmed throughout the dynamism of historical time is essential to IHB. This is precisely what the deeds of historical humans can annihilate: the *historical visibility* of the image – i.e., the possibility of the image to become an object of human moral experience (or, which is the same, our possibility to contemplate the image). The integrity of human life ultimately resides in our ability to acknowledge value and be responsible for its immanent existence. In *The Imperative of Responsibility* Jonas rephrases this statement in the terms of the core ethical imperative stating that "we are, strictly speaking, not responsible to the future human individuals but to the *idea* of Man, which is such that it demands the presence of its embodiment in the world" (Jonas 1984, 43). And he clarifies further: "It is this ontological imperative, emanating from the idea of Man, that stands behind the prohibition of a *va-banque* gamble with mankind. Only the idea of Man, by telling us *why* there should be men, tells us also *how* they should be" (Jonas 1984, 43).

What this imperative demands is that, notwithstanding historical changes, there be *true* humans capable of acknowledging value and being responsible.[13]

Depriving historical humans of a valid image, then, means destroying the possibility for any historical experience of value independent from our will – what Jonas (1966, 233) defines as nihilism.[14] It means pursuing mirror-images that would make it impossible for humanity to truly experience ethical value as something given, vulnerable, asking for concretisation. The vulnerability of the image, its element of change and dynamism, consists in the fact that its permanent and stable meaning can be irreparably lost to history.

What discussed so far shows the relevance of IHB in Jonas' ethical reflection on the technological age. The notion of image – and, in particular, its peculiar tension between form and matter, permanence and change, stability and dynamism discussed in Section 2 – offered him a blueprint to conceive ethical value as concurrently exhibiting an element of integrity and vulnerability. Such a conception allows to think value as both transcending history – and thus endowed with the potential for guidance – and truly participating in history – and thus meaningfully calling for our respect and responsibility, to the point that its existence depends on it.[15] As the last consideration suggests, this conception of *value as image* is inseparable from a corresponding

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[13] This key point has drawn the attention of recent scholarship – e.g., Morris 2013,178–182, who does not seem to distinguish the anthropological image from IHB, thus inclining towards a certain pre-eminence of change over the permanence of a true image or idea of the human being; Coyne 2021, 130–131, 139, 191, who instead underlines the difference between IHB and the true "idea of Man"; and Franzini Tibaldeo & Frogneux 2020, 507, who try to show the compatibility of historical change and the permanence of a formally true character in human existence.

[14] On this, see also Fossa 2019.

[15] On this see also the famous essay *The Concept of God After Auschwitz* (Jonas 1996, 131-143), on which more cannot be said here.

conception of moral experience, which Jonas – we argue – sketched in terms of *likeness*. We now turn to it as the final part of our enquiry.

3.3. The Dialectics of Likeness and Moral Experience

Building on the previous considerations, we now suggest that Jonas characterised human moral experience by recurring to the dialectics of likeness. Historical humans find themselves amidst a game of images determined by similarity and difference. On the one hand, IHB represents its integrity, asks for respect through history, and thus provides a moral compass to navigate through the technological age. On the other hand, humans express themselves through historically determined mirror-images. The space in-between the two images is the space of ethics. The task of ethics is, then, to ensure that the exploration of what is peculiar to each mirror-image also preserves its relationship of similarity to IHB. Or, which is the same, to concretise and enact the integrity of human life through the different and peculiar forms of historical contingency.

The dialectics of likeness sketched in Section 2.2 is particularly fit to conceptualise this phenomenon since it allows to think the relation between permanence and change as *variations on a theme* where similarities and peculiarities are equally valuable. In light of this, we suggest that Jonas might have turned to it precisely to conceive the paradoxical relation between the permanence of value and the dynamism of history. Being characterised by similarity through difference, likeness can help acknowledge the contingency of history while, at the same time, ensuring that what is inherently and permanently valuable is not foregone in the process.

The dialectics of likeness weaves together a formal element of permanence and a contingent element of change. The two become inextricably – and perhaps paradoxically – entangled, just as happens with ethical values in the moral experience. As Jonas writes,

From the objective validity of "value" or "the good" which we here already presume, together with its abstract "claim", it is yet a further step to the *task* which is posed to action here and now as, at this moment, *mine*: the step from the timeless into time (Jonas 1984, 83).

The formal element of permanence – what constitutes human integrity – presents itself differently in different historical circumstances, poses different challenges, and requires actions that are deeply rooted into the contingency of historical contexts. Moreover, the vulnerability of the image – the fact that human integrity can be actively dismantled to the point that it cannot become an object of experience anymore – calls for human care and responsibility, which can only be exercised through history and change. IHB exists only insofar as it is explicitly acknowledged and likeness to it is actively and consciously pursued.

Human agency, then, is exposed to a double responsibility. Historical humans are not only responsible for what they do to and of themselves, but also of the possibility that IHB remains visible and accessible in the historical dimension (see Section 3.2). Defying the likeness to IHB runs the risk of cutting it off from existence. Conversely, by actively seeking likeness between mirror-images and IHB, historical humans also care for the image itself – its possibility of being visible and becoming an object of moral experience. Exercising responsibility through history also safeguards IHB – the sheer possibility of there being ethics.

At the same time, the dialectics of likeness provides the room for normative considerations and criticism. The permanent meaning of IHB allows to spot deteriorating traits of dissimilarity in mirror-images and, thus, furnishes ethical thinking with the necessary potential for critique geared towards the preservation and "future integrity of 'human likeness'" (*kunftige Integrität des 'Ebenbildes'*: Jonas 2015, 420). Referring to IHB helps suspend the allure and fascination of current mirror-images, without however losing contact with the historical dimension. The duty of likeness fully situates the ethical agent within history, even though by virtue of a meaning that,

being permanent, lies beyond change. Paradoxically, the image can serve as an ethical criterion to assess mirror-images only if concurrently incorporates both an element of permanence, as a form, and an element of change, as an entity that makes itself visible historically and can historically be lost. Only by virtue of such paradoxical status the image can play the role of a value that is concurrently permanent and historical, transcendent and immanent, independent but needful.

To conclude, Jonas framed the task of ethics as safeguarding the likeness between historical humanity and IHB through vigilance and action.[16] The imperative is to preserve the likeness to the image through the changes of historical time – to care for the likeness between mirror-images and IHB. Commitment and responsibility concretise the respect for human integrity through time. Ultimately, the image and the related dialectics of likeness offered Jonas a blueprint to reconceptualise value and moral experience in a way that would fit the peculiar conditions of the technological age – as the traditional static notions of form, idea, and essence would be incapable of.

4. Conclusions

As detailed in the previous pages, the notion of image plays a perhaps latent, but crucially important role in Jonas' philosophy. He explored it from both an anthropological, aesthetic, and

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[16] To be precise, the dialectic of likeness seems to involve at least three elements: 1) individual agents and their own anthropological image; 2) the public image – or images – which represents the *Zeitgeist* or the dominating conception(s) about human existence and position in the world (as, e.g., the Gnostic *logos* of *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist* or the *Weltanschauung* proper of the technological age); and, finally, 3) IHB, representing its integrity. The dialectic of likeness entails all three components in its dynamic. In this essay we have focused especially on the relation between the formal level and the historical level. To the latter entirely belong both individual and public images. Further enquiries into the interplay between these two contingent images are for now to be postponed.

ethical angle to uncover or refine significant aspects of his thought.

With reference to philosophical anthropology, the image as the most distinctive human artefact and the image faculty as its existential prerequisites are acknowledged as what characterises human life vis-à-vis animality. On an aesthetic level, the image provides Jonas with the understanding of the dialectic of likeness between images as a possible form of relation between permanence and change, form and matter which avoids any reduction of one term to the other. Finally, and on this basis, Jonas resorts to the image in his ethical reflection as a blueprint to conceptualise value and moral experience in a way that be adequate to the conditions of the technological age.

The reflections we have commented upon display a common thread: the effort to think form and matter, permanence and change, stability and dynamism, transcendence and immanence not as opposites, but *dialectically* – in accordance with the most significant trait of Jonas' entire philosophy. In light of the above, we believe that the study of Jonas' enquiries into the image not only offers valuable insights into the philosophical understanding of such a fascinating object, but sheds also a new and interesting light on the unity of his oeuvre.

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