

Vision, Image and Symbol

Homo Pictor and Animal Symbolicum in Hans Jonas' Anthropology

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1. *Vision and the «animality» of man*

At first glance, it seems quite reasonable to classify Hans Jonas' thoughts on man as an aesthetical anthropology. In 1963, after almost four decades dedicated to the study of Gnosticism, Jonas published a book, *Zwischen Nichts und Ewigkeit. Zur Lehre vom Menschen* (Jonas 1963). He collected there three essays, previously issued on different reviews¹ between the early Fifties and the early Sixties². The themes discussed in these essays did not concern Gnosis any longer, but contemporary philosophy. In fact, Gnosticism showed an unexpected similarity to the modern way of considering the world and man as a part of it. In Jonas' opinion, a critique of Gnosticism could emphasize some weaknesses of modern thought, and outline the guidelines towards a new challenge in philosophical thinking. As he explained in *Gnosticism and modern Nihilism*, clarifying the relationship between man and being is critical to overcome any dualistic ontology that either condemns man to an unbearable solitude, or wards him off to a naturalistic monism where he might lose his peculiar features. The essence of man is once more the real issue at stake. In other words, a review of Gnosticism in the light of

¹ The first essay, *Gnosis, Existentialismus und Nihilismus* was previously published in English as Jonas (1952); the second, *Die Freiheit des Bildens. Homo pictor und die differentia des Menschen*, appeared as Jonas (1961) (from which I extract the German quotes) and in English as Jonas (1962a). The third, *Unsterblichkeit und heutige Existenz*, was firstly published as Jonas (1962b).

² It was a very fecund period for Hans Jonas. During these years he wrote most of the essays that later became part of *The Phenomenon of Life*. Among others, *Causality and Perception* (1950), *Materialism and the Theory of Organism* (1951), *Is God a Mathematician?* (1951), *Motility and Emotion* (1953), *A Critique of Cybernetics* (1953), *The Nobility of Sight* (1953-4), and *The Practical Uses of Theory* (1959). A thorough analysis of them can be found in R. Franzini *Tibaldeo* (2009).

the modern thought underlines the need for a new philosophical anthropology³.

Furthermore, it makes clear that any theory of man aiming at overcoming a dualistic ontology must address two preconditions. Firstly, man should not be considered as separated from the context in which he happens to exist, i.e., the natural world. Some kind of continuity between nature and human being must be discovered. Secondly, despite the affinity between the two, man should be considered as a distinguished citizen of the realm of nature. His distinctive trait, or traits, must be identified and examined, in order to protect the peculiar phenomenon of man from the undetermined stream of nature⁴. This is the challenge Jonas has taken on in the second essay, on which we are going to focus: *Image-making and the Freedom of Man*.

The aesthetical features of Jonas' anthropology seem undeniable. The primary question that opens the essay addresses the specific evidence that allows recognition of humanity beyond any physical affinity. Physical affinity is indeed too weak a criterion to define the essence of man. On the contrary, such evidence ought to be simple, primitive and unmistakable. Jonas finds an answer to the question in the ability to draw and recognise pictures. Whenever we see a picture on a cavern wall, we can be sure that only one kind of being could have drawn it, i.e., man. No animal could have been its author, since there is no biological purpose in the act of image making [Bildmachen, Bilden]. Therefore, whoever is capable of drawing a picture, is also capable of acting beyond the immediate responses of natural instinct, following his own purposes. One could well argue that this being produces useless things, but it is probably more appropriate to say that he is expressing a new type of interest or freedom. This interest is inconceivable by means of mere biological categories. The freedom it represents is the highest stage of mediacy [*Mittelbarkeit*] in relation to the object, unknown to any other being but man. It is freedom from the influence of the surrounding environment. Something else is at work here, and this is exactly the *differentia specifica* of man. As far as this ability of producing pictures, and recognising them as pictures, is the quality that eminently inherits to man, and thereby defines it as such, a first conclusion is that the above described theory can be classified as an aesthetical anthropology.

Naturally, the issue is far more complex. The role of pictures and the act of picture-

³ This argument is splendidly proposed again in the first paragraph of Jonas (1996). The second paragraph is a summary of the essay on the *homo pictor*.

⁴ Cfr. Jonas (2001): 234: «whether a third road is open to it - one by which the dualistic rift can be avoided and yet enough of the dualistic insight saved to uphold the humanity of man - philosophy must find out».

making need further clarifications, in order to discuss whether aesthetical concepts really are indispensable to conceive man along with Jonas or not. The first step in this direction is to examine, «which faculties and attitudes [Vermögen und Haltungen]» (Jonas [2001]: 158). are required to make pictures, or even images [Bild]. Jonas feels no need to be systematic or thorough. He outlines a theory of human faculties that deserves to be analysed to properly understand the uniqueness of man and his relationship to animals and life in general. By reorganising his reflections upon a large set of objects such as vision, image faculty, symbol and so forth, I intend to retrace the structure of these acts that, according to Jonas, belong exclusively to man. Only then will it be possible to evaluate the exact role played by aesthetical themes in his theory of man.

As already mentioned, human beings ought not be conceived as separate from their natural background. Therefore, the research shall move from human belonging to animal life. Man shares with animals a particular way to relate to the external world, a starting common level of mediacy in the relation to the object: the sense perception [Sinneswahrnehmung]. An analysis of the sense perception will uncover the joint grounds on which the peculiar features of man may arise. In the field of perception the «givenness of reality» (Jonas [2001]: 167) shows itself to the subject, not only as an amount of qualities, but also as something that co-exists with the self. The actual content of sense perception is the determinate existence of objects beyond the perceiving self. Still, perception shall not be considered as mere receptivity⁵. Vision [Gesichtssinn], for instance, is more than a simple collection of data. While it certainly offers a range of information that no other sense could retain, it also contributes to structure these evidences into visual shapes [visuelle Form] of an object: its «aspects [Aspekte]» (Jonas [2001]: 162). However, if the visual shapes may vary with perception, the form of the object does not change, which allows recognition⁶.

It appears, then, that sight is already performing a representative function. By organizing data in streams of variable aspects, vision is able to structure its contents in discernible sets of experience. It then subsumes the multiplicity of its collection under

⁵ Cfr. Jonas (2001): 152-156. On these themes see also Franzini Tibaldeo (2009): 213-242.

⁶ Therefore, memory doesn't play any role in the act of recognition. Past memories cannot be of some help in identifying things, since they should be exactly the same of the contents of actual perception. On the contrary, the series of possible transformations of the object's visual aspects allows to attribute the actual perception to a configuration. The term "form", here, ought not be intended as usually (an intellectual product); the author means a visual product, that has to do with the proportion of parts in a fix configuration. Hence, there is no conceptual "form" ongoing in vision, but a primitive, utterly optical, organization process.

«an idea of “form”» (Jonas [2001]: 162)⁷ that has visual features exclusively. That «idea of “form”» should be conceived of as a pattern including every possible transformation in the object’s appearance. Due to this particular concept of form, the single datum leads to the recognition of what it stands for since it is part of an object's visual pattern. It implies that the several aspects are images of the object, since they recall it «through a likeness that comprehends unlikeness» (Jonas [2001]: 169), which is the essence of the representational function⁸. Each view can be regarded as a symbol, a way to reach unity and permanence out of a manifold. So, Jonas argues, sight may be «the home ground of abstraction» (Jonas [2001]: 162). It is very unusual that abstraction, traditionally an act of intellect, is now associated with sense perception in general, and vision specifically. What does Jonas mean here by abstraction? How is it possible that a sense such as sight can ever perform a similar act?

Jonas interprets the term *lato sensu* as an act of detachment, «disengagement [*Absehen*]» (Jonas [2001]: 168) from intrusive circumstances during an encounter. This act consents to deal with the phenomenon at hand in a different manner, according to purposes that go beyond the encounter itself. Vision performs a double abstraction. Firstly, it overlooks that each of its item is, directly at least, a sensory stimulation, an organic affection, and not a real object that exists independently. Nonetheless, we perceive the external world as something that stands by itself, conforming to its own way. In fact, sense perception is able to neutralize the «felt affectiveness» (*ibidem*) of its connection to the outward, thereby allowing the object to present itself (i.e., objectivity). Jonas names it «dynamic neutralization» (Jonas [2001]: 145-149). Secondly, vision (and to a certain extent perception altogether) disregards the irreducible

⁷ In a certain grade, even touch may reach a formal synthesis. Anyway, it is possible thanks to vision, or better thanks to the image-faculty that is partially active in sight. Blind men are able to «see» by touch not because touch might offer the same performance than sight, but since they are «endowed with the general faculty of “vision”», though they lack sight. Cfr. Jonas (2001): 135-156.

⁸ I very briefly recall that the first paragraph of Jonas' essay is dedicated to a phenomenology of image. It consists of the following claims: 1. Images exhibit a likeness, 2. produced with intent, 3. that is not complete (an image is not an imitation). 4. This incompleteness marks an omission, a selection of the object's most representative features. 5. Hence, the image includes a representational function based on a symbolic similitude. 6. Aim of this function is the object visual shape. 7. Image existence is nondynamical, it stays in a nontransient and timeless present: images embody an ideal element. So, 8. image is an ideal entity that overcomes its real support (the imaging thing) and its real reference (the imaged object), «connecting them in the unique way of representation» Cfr. Jonas (2001): 164. The essence of images is the imaging function, or better representational function.

singularity of every perceived state of things, granting the object its identity along the range of its different visual aspects. Hence, abstraction performs a sort of detachment from the immediacy of sense, obtaining a new approach to its objects. In these terms, in addition to consciousness, abstraction might also be attributed to some highly evolved perceptual systems: almost as an «automatism», an operative function [Leistung der Abstraktion]. Since both perception and vision are faculties that man shares with other living beings, it is possible to attribute that capacity also to higher animals. At the same time, it contains the seeds of a further evolution: «abstraction, representation, symbolism - something of the image function» (Jonas [2001]: 170)⁹, that will fully develop only among humans. Vision, or sight, along with its characteristic «mechanism» of abstraction, is the link between human beings and their natural background. At the same time, it is the bud of the essence of man.

2. Image

In quest of the essence of man, the primitive, unequivocal and simple clue lays in the relationship with images. Vision, as mentioned, discloses something of this bond, hinting at the image function which fully appears exclusively among human beings. What in vision played a merely operative role (abstraction and the representational function), is now coming to surface. It is consciously grasped and reproduced. Humans establish a singular connection to images and representations, which no other organism shares. Therefore, this connection needs to be analysed carefully. Firstly, it is important to understand which «faculties and attitudes [Vermögen und Haltungen]»¹⁰ are involved in the relation to images. At this point, Jonas introduces a chief concept in his reflection on man. Human beings happen to bear a relationship to images, therefore the ability to consider images has to be counted among proper human acts; or better, it could be stated that man is provided with an image faculty [Bildvermögen]. Moreover, since the core of images is the representational function, and the image faculty takes images for its own objects, it could be called representational faculty as well. In addition, Jonas usually uses the word “picture” to refer to actual images (paintings, cave art and so forth), and

⁹ Cfr. Jonas (2001): 136: «The unique distinction of sight consists in what we may provisionally call the *image*-performance, where “image” implies these three characteristics: 1. *simultaneity* in the presentation of a manifold, 2. *neutralization* of the causality of sense-affection, 3. *distance* in the spatial and mental senses». Cfr. Jonas (2001): 184: «But sight, as the Sixth Essay has shown, contains trans-animal potentialities of beholding and attitude which a higher mental faculty can actualize».

¹⁰ Cfr. Jonas (2001): 158. See also Franzini Tibaldeo (2009): 243-291.

the word “image” to refer to the ideal content displayed by a picture. The difference between the two is, anyhow, quite subtle. Hence, Jonas sometimes uses the expression “pictorial faculty”. Image faculty, representational faculty, pictorial faculty are almost synonyms; they all indicate a possible relationship between human beings and images. Image faculty, then, can be analysed in its own features starting from the features of its object, the image. Namely, it has to be asked what «properties [Eigenschaften] are required in a subject» (Jonas [2001]: 165) in order to deal with images. The phenomenology of image, developed by Jonas in the beginning of the essay, may then subsequently guide the research towards the faculty that grasps images. This faculty should be able to get the qualities that define images. So, how is the image faculty organised or structured? Which are its distinctive acts, and which essential truth on man may they reveal?

First of all, the image faculty includes two types of act: beholding images [Auffassen], and making images [Machen]. Although the tasks they conduct are different from each other, these two acts are substantially equal, i.e., their possibility is set in the same capacity: the ability to deal with images. Note that one implies the other. As these two constitute the connections achievable between a self and an image, they are the modalities into which the image faculty organises itself. Take the act of beholding images. Beholding images means, precisely, to «behold something as an image [etwas als ein Bild wahrnehmen]» (ibidem), and since images are the utterance of a likeness, this act is founded on «the ability to perceive likeness [das Vermögen Ähnlichkeit wahrnehmen]»(ibidem). Yet, likeness has to be perceived as «mere likeness [bloße Ähnlichkeit]» (Jonas [2001]: 166). This job oversteps animal capabilities. It is not just a matter of sharpness of sense perception. Something else, something more important, is involved in this particular kind of recognition. In fact, animals cannot grasp likeness such. On the contrary, as they get in touch with an object that utters a likeness, either that likeness is not noticed, or they take the object for what it represents. Animals can perceive «either sameness or otherness, but not both in one, as we do in the apprehension of similitude» (ibidem). Hence, the apprehension of likeness steps out of mere perception, and opens a new dimension in the mediacy relationship between subject and object: a «conceptual dimension [begriffliche Dimension]» (ibidem)¹¹. As far

¹¹ I think that «concept» (*Begriff*), and *eidos* too, ought not be read as usual but, yet again, «in a somewhat stretched sense of the term», cfr. Jonas (2001: 168), as a mental content different from a perceptive content. The dissimilarity between the two, as of now not that clear, is going to be analysed.

as the real components of the representational function are held together by the ideal image link, likeness is discerned as it is. This connection to images shows, therefore, that man can relate to an ideal element, in addition to real objects. That ability exceeds the performance of perception.

What is required, then, to grasp mere likeness? On the one hand, the imaging object, i.e. the physical support, has to be discerned from the image it represents. On the other, the self must be able to distinguish the image from the imaged object, i.e. the representation itself from the represented thing (likeness shall not turn into illusion). Hence, likeness is perceived as a reference, and image as an ideal object that stands for something else (a real object, an intent). In the apprehension of likeness, consequently, the actual perception of real objects is overcome by an ideal link, «the similitude or eidos as such». An image consists in its representational function. The term eidos, here, is to be intended in the broad sense of the word, as mental content. Perceiving likeness allows the proper quality of human mediacy to appear, that is: the capability of «the mental separation of form from matter [*die intentionale Trennung von Form und Stoff*]» (Jonas [2001]: 167). In this «new level of mediacy [*neue Ebene der Mittelbarkeit*]» (Jonas [2001]: 170) an unprecedented freedom manifests itself. Any eidos, any mental element can be held back by the self in spite of the actual presence of the object it represents in the range of perception. Appearance [*Erscheinung*] springs up, as a different dimension from what is actually real; and the self, the human organism, acknowledges the latter as a strict cause-and-effect order, whereas he discovers the «free possession [*freie Verfügung*]» of the former.

Freedom of detachment, Jonas argues, is freedom of control. Once the eidos is made independent from its real basis, then it becomes an ideal entity as such, under the command of the self. This type of control upon mental contents is initially experienced due to imagination [*Einbildungskraft*, Imagination] and its peculiar correlation to memory [*Gedächtnis*]. While animal memory is tied to sensation, in the sense that the recollection process is always bounded to a real element (need, perception, appetite), human memory is able to focus freely on what it prefers. In other words, animal memory seems to exhibit utterly circumstantial working principles¹². On the contrary, human

¹² Hence, we cannot be sure that animals are endowed with something as a «past». The set of recollections, which takes part in animal interaction to the environment, may not be intended by animals as past experiences at all, but just as knowledge of cause-and-effect patterns. I would like to notice that the matter of autonomy or eteronomy of animal behaviour is not at stake here. Jonas is not arguing that, since the environment plays an active role in animal recalling processes,

memory can relate to its object freely: It is gifted with a «freely reproductive faculty [*freie Reproduktionsvermögen*]» (Jonas [2001]: 171)¹³, imagination. Imagination has recollections, which are images of things, under its command. And its power has no limit. It can associate, dismember, and alter them at its own sake. Under this regard, thanks to abstraction, the application of imagination to memory completes the detachment performed by vision. At this new level of work, abstraction appears in all its power. This free attitude that imagination undertakes has no regards to reality. The possession of the object, as a remembered eidos, does not depend any longer on its actual occurrence, but it is always at self-disposal, so that it can ponder things at its call. This is the most simple and striking application of the capability that defines human essence, as it has been seen: the power to separate form from matter, eidos from reality.

At this stage, we need to take a step back. The analysis of beholding images has led to the threshold of something that seems to be far more demanding than the plain study of image faculty. Before engaging with the crucial problem of *Trennung*, the ability of making images still awaits to be inspected. As will be demonstrated, the study of making images points to the same direction. Firstly, the capability of making images has a physical side that must not be underestimated. By making pictures man presents a highly adaptable and accurate control over the movements of its body. A type of control that stems precisely from the guidance of an image, a mental project, a model that requires to be realized. The ability to guide a body to fulfil self-chosen purposes is the precondition to any kind of human technology. Only man can rely on the «eidetic control of motility [*eidetische Kontrolle der Motilität*]» (Jonas [2001]: 172), and move his limbs beyond any strict pattern, but «by freely chosen, internally represented and purposely projected form» (ibidem). Form, as a mental content drawn from matter and its becoming that can be further elaborated by the self, comes back to the stream of reality thanks to the human activity it supervises. It is obvious, then, that eidetic control of

then animal behaviour is completely explicable by cause-and-effect patterns. The thesis, here, is as following: Whereas, in animal life, perception and memory are on the same level, being equally linked to reality («At any rate, the “recalling” is done not by the subject but by circumstances for the subject», cfr. Jonas (2001): 165), in human life imagination allows to elaborate the contents of memory in a manner that exhibits a certain grade of independence from the performance of perception, that is from reality itself. That does not mean that animal behaviour is reducible to a strict cause-and-effect pattern. Cfr, Jonas (1953).

¹³ Similar observations in reference to the «image-function of sight» in Cfr. Jonas (2001: 147). The detachment sight provides leads to the threshold of objectivity, *theoria*, theoretical truth, separation of form from matter through imagination and abstraction, creative thinking and so forth. It proves the strict relationship between sight and image faculty.

motility assumes the capability to separate the eidos from reality. Once again, the problem of *Trennung* hides itself in the foundations of image faculty.

We may now get back to the mental side of image faculty. The contents of memory, to which imagination applies its power, can also be externalized into real objects: pictures. When pictures are perceived, they do not transmit information about the imaged object directly, but about its perception, its representation. Picture is «externalized memory» (Jonas [2001]: 171), saved either from the everlasting becoming of reality or oblivion. It gains an existence that somehow defies time. Moreover, as image is «an objectification of individual perception [*eine Objectivierung individueller Wahrnehmung*]», in its translation to picture «it is also made sharable [*mitteilbar*]» (ibidem). The image faculty, indeed, does not get it as a common object, but as an image that stands for something else, natural object or intention it may be. The image communicates something that enhances knowledge. Making pictures, as a matter of fact, means remaking things, and in this process the artist deepens the knowledge he has of the object and communicates it to the observers at the same time. Furthermore, as long as the *homo pictor* is able to make things all over again, and to consider them freely, he is also the creator of new things. Creativity, indeed, is a gift of the same faculty that makes the representation of likeness possible. The same choice, the choice of drawing something, «unlocks that dimension of freedom in which faithfulness to the original, or to any model, is only one decision» (Jonas [2001]: 172). It opens the gates to the «realm of the possible» (ibidem).

On the contrary, reality is represented as it is, recreated in the image-making activity under the criterion of likeness. Thus, the possibility of a comparison between picture and imaged object is made possible. Pictorial man discovers truth as one of its own capabilities together with creative thought and invention. The same faculty that provides man with the power of new, provides it with the power of truth as well. This is not some kind of aesthetical truth (e.g. truth in beauty or else), but «the first form of theoretical truth [*theoretische Wahrheit*]», intended as adequacy between mind and reality. The criterion of likeness leads directly to the one of adequacy. «The *adaequatio imaginis ad rem*» (ibidem)¹⁴ marks the possibility, embodied in man, of relating to objects truthfully. From that primitive expression the «verbally descriptive truth» may stem, and this in turn is where «scientific truth» (ibidem) originates. However, it is clear that truth (at least in the way the word is used here) requires the ability to separate form from matter, and to return

¹⁴ See also Jonas (2001): 175-182.

to matter through the light provided by the formal principle. In its relation to truth, the image faculty shows once again a connection «to the more fundamental one of separating eidos from concrete reality, or form from matter [*das fundamentalere Vermögen, das Eidos vom Dasein zu trennen, oder die Form vom Stoffe*]» (Jonas [2001]: 167).

In conclusion, it has been observed that the image faculty (representational faculty, pictorial faculty) provides man with the ability to refer to a particular object: images. As the essence of image lies in its representational function, that is the utterance of a likeness, the image faculty consists in the ability to relate to this likeness. Image faculty, moreover, can be thought of as being structured on two levels. Firstly, it bears a bodily side, the eidetic control of motility, and a quite complicated mental side, which includes the most primitive expressions of higher human functions. Secondly, the image faculty sustains the ability to behold images, and to make images. Besides, whenever research examines more closely the acts, which (just for argument's sake) are collected within the boundaries of this faculty, it finds a constant presence of a different element. Since the analysis of image faculty has brought to the border of the more fundamental faculty of *Trennung*, it is critical to clarify the structure of that new element, in order to get a proper perspective in evaluating the effective role aesthetics plays in Hans Jonas' anthropology.

3. *Symbol*

Previous observations have shown that the image faculty is not able to stand on its own feet. On the contrary, it requires a more fundamental capability. At this point, it would be compelling to conduct a thorough analysis of that human act, where the so long sought essence of man is very likely located. Jonas, however, is more interested in clarifying the attributes of image faculty and spends only a few scattered words on its foundations. Nevertheless, an access to this crucial act may still be gained. In fact, during the whole essay, Jonas continuously refers to other proper human acts which, in addition to the image faculty, express something about the peculiarities of man. Although image faculty is preferred to the other human acts, this is no reason to reduce human essence to the ability to behold or to make images. A number of other acts are equally worthy of being taken as signs of human uniqueness. A closer look at these other «faculties» that, here and there, appear in Jonas' considerations, may allow insight into the existence of a common ground to them all.

It is therefore necessary to weaken the centrality of the image faculty and concentrate on occurrences of other interesting human acts. First of all, Jonas repeatedly mentions a

so-called rational faculty [rationales Vermögen]. What does he mean by this? Which are the connections between rational and image faculty? The most important occurrence of this expression takes place in a very singular moment of Jonas' essay. At the end of his sketch of the image faculty, Jonas goes back to its inner unity and explains how every side of the relationship with images is held together by a common principle. Eidetic control of motility, and «eidetic control of imagination» (Jonas [2001]: 172) (that is, the command that imagination practices on recollected forms) are two different sides of the same freedom that characterizes human *Mittelbarkeit*. They must go together, because «without the latter, there would be no rational faculty, but without the former, its possession would be futile» (Jonas [2001]: 173). *Homo pictor*, as a common ancestry shared by *homo faber*¹⁵ and *homo sapiens*, displays the most complete notion of human freedom. Let us focus on *homo sapiens*. The rational faculty seems to be some kind of evolution that stems from the eidetic control of imagination. As mentioned, the control that imagination has of memories is a formal one, and consists of a powerful exercise of abstraction that detaches the recollected forms from their link to reality, thereby having them at its own disposal. Thus, it seems that rational capabilities are somehow related to abstraction. As abstraction is practised more and more thoroughly, it is possible to suppose that human mind improves its skills until it reaches new conquests, e.g. «the abstraction of geometrical form and rational concept» (Jonas [2001]: 174). These new elements entertain brand new relationships with imagination and memory - though they stem there, because they cannot exist without the *Trennung* of *eidos* from reality. All those are potential consequences of something that originates, primitively and most evidently, in the image faculty but is located elsewhere. Furthermore, it may be also recalled that the «first form of theoretical truth» (Jonas [2001]: 172), where both descriptive and scientific truths are rooted, receives a pictorial baptism. The *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*, essential for the existence of rational faculty, is an advancement from the simpler pictorial likeness. Image faculty and rational faculty are strictly connected, and at the same time hint at a third pillar on which they both rest. Rational faculty too, for the continuity it shares with the image faculty, indicates the power of *Trennung* as the crucial quality of human beings.

Beside rational faculty, Jonas considers another most peculiar human act, and the attention he dedicates to it confirms its importance. Already in the first lines of the essay, the image is closely associated to speech [*Sprechen*], or language [*Sprache*]. Seeking the

¹⁵ See Jonas (1996): 78-9. Image making and tool production are analogous acts. They both imply «an eidetic power of imagination and eidetic control of the hand» and involve imagination.

identifying trait of man, Jonas decides to focus on image, though underlining that «no claim of exclusive validity is implied in the choice» (Jonas [2001]: 157). Due to its primitivism and simplicity, image-making fits the requirements of the criterion better than other human acts, e.g. speech. Evidently, an analogy between the two acts is supposed. The phenomenon of language, however, is indeed central and characteristic, but is far too complex to offer a plain criterion of analysis. Firstly, recognizing a language as a language requires abilities that are clearly more complicated than the ones that allow the recognition of a likeness. Moreover, the concept of language (as the concept of rational itself) has grown too problematic to be used properly here. This causes the propensity to deal with images, though a reflection upon language keeps arising during the analysis of image faculty. «In fact, an understanding of the image faculty may contribute something to the understanding of the more elusive phenomenon of speech» (Jonas [2001]: 158). Beyond any doubt, a connection between image faculty and language is caught in its validity.

Regarding the substance of this connection, Jonas notices that it insists upon the generality images and language both share. Referring to *Genesis 2:19*, he points out that giving names to creatures is «the first distinctively human act» (Jonas [2001]: 173), by which man settled his dominance upon the things he named. That act, ordering the manifold of creation in fixed classes according to its qualities, marks a «symbolic duplication of nature by names [die symbolische Vordoppelung der Welt durch Namen]» (ibidem), which is an analogous act in respect to «the remaker of things “in their likeness”» (Jonas [2001]: 172) that was already discussed. Indeed, both name and image express a generality. They do not stick to individuals. Therefore, «the drawing of the image is analogous to the act of calling by names», since they both express «the symbolic making-over-again of the world [*das symbolische Noch-einmal-machen der Welt*]» (Jonas [2001]: 173). Of course, they both suppose the performance of a more fundamental faculty that assures «the availability of the *eidos* as an identity over and above the particular» (ibidem). This task can only be completed by the faculty of *Trennung* and its own peculiar capability of abstraction, that offers symbols as means to constitute a new and unprecedented relationship with the object, a new level of *Mittelbarkeit* peculiar to human beings¹⁶.

The availability of the *eidos*, that makes the symbolic making-over-again of the world

¹⁶ Cfr. Jonas (2001): 183: «The separation of *eidos* from reality with which we met in the phenomena of “image” and “truth” signifies the passage to a new, critical level of mediacy in the relation of organism to environment».

possible, works in advantage of «human apprehension, imagination and discourse». Image faculty, rational faculty and language are kept together by the common relation to what has so far been called the faculty of *Trennung*, and which we may now define as symbolic faculty. The capacity of extracting *eide* from the flux of reality is then a symbolic ability, that defines the essence of man. All these evidences point at the same conclusion: «the more-than-animal nature of its creation; (...) his being potentially a speaking, thinking, inventing, in short “symbolical” being [*ein potentiell sprechendes, denkendes, erfindendes, kurz ein “symbolisches” Wesen*]» (Jonas [2001]: 158). Image, rational thought and language are signs of a unique and more fundamental act, which the essence of man consists of: his faculty of symbolic utterance. Indeed, symbolic elements are present in every step of image faculty, as well as in language and thought. Even vision, as previously underlined, exhibits a symbolic attitude. Firstly, it has been shown how vision shares elements of a symbolic function. «Thus each view alike represents the object “symbolically” (though as a symbol one view may be superior to others [...])». To a certain degree, «symbolism» may be attributed to vision itself. Furthermore, the making of images expresses a «symbolic similitude» by the «symbolic concentration on the essentials», recognised through the «the capacity of symbolic understanding». Out of that utterance-recognition process a «symbolic convention» might arise, which is based on the image's most «symbolic aspect», which in turn overcomes the real elements of the representative phenomenon. Again, the generality of images is based on a symbolic function: «image sensibly symbolizes generality poised between the individuality of the imaging thing and that of the imaged object». This generality is shared by speech, that is a «symbolic making-over-again of the world», a «symbolic duplication of nature by names». Language too, as we know, is a form of «symbolic utterance». Even dance is considered an act that displays a symbolism. Hence, the «more-than-animal nature» of man consists in his «“symbolical” being» (Jonas [2001]: 1158-73).

Symbolism, that is the ability of separating *eidos* from reality in order to gain a free access to it, is the defining human act, and it determines the peculiar relationship between human self and the environment. The anthropological claims, previously presented, find here their satisfaction. On the one hand, vision links human beings to animal life, proposing an ontological interpretation that avoids any fracture in the realm of nature. Along this line, this interpretation displays a continuity based on the arising of symbolic abilities. On the other hand, the highest development of abstraction introduces a brand new step in the relation of mediacy, which consists in an unprecedented

distance from reality, a freedom that allows the self to have objects at his utter disposal, thus marking his own *differentia specifica* from all other living things. Beholding and making images, speaking and rationally thinking are different manifestations of this unique and essential capability.

What may then be said about the symbolic faculty and its structure? The symbolic faculty seems to recall the architecture of image faculty. There is no wonder in that, of course, image faculty being one of its possible expressions. Its structure is also two-folded. It bears an interpretative and a productive side. In other words, it allows both the recognition and the making of symbols. Once again, imagination plays a very important role in the process. Since Jonas' essay concentrates on images, the theme of symbolic utterance appears in the image phenomenology context. As the artist or the painter chooses how to represent something, he chooses from the real model a set of characteristic traits, which carries a more communicative potential. During this selection – that may even turn into alteration –, the artist explores his freedom from reality, – and instils in his product a new feature, intention. Thus, the traits he selects are different from all others due to their symbolic power. As long as an image presents a likeness, it presents a «symbolic similitude» (Jonas [2001]: 161). Image is a particular kind of symbol, and consequently image faculty is a particular kind of symbolic faculty. Yet the way image may symbolize the imaged object can vary significantly along the line of human freedom. «There is almost no limit, Jonas says, to the stretch of imagination [die Spannweite der Imagination] that the capacity of symbolic understanding [*das Vermögen symbolischen Verstehen*] may command» (Jonas [2001]: 162).

In order to completely understand this sentence, it is necessary to recall the connection between imagination and memory. How imagination works on memory contents, abstracting them from the strict bond to actual perception and reality and gaining access to the realm of *eidos* has been previously discussed. At this point, the symbolic faculty shows its recognition skills. Thanks to the free movements of imagination, which produce symbols by alterations of recollected form or creation of new shapes out of them, the self, walking backwards, can solve and understand the riddle of any symbolic representation. Hence, the symbolic faculty is the actual principle of many typical human expressions. Their fundamental possibility rests on the faculty that provides the performance of *Trennung*. The very act of separating *eidos* from reality, in order to reach objects freely and through innovative perspectives, is the symbolic task, from which both the making and the understanding of each types of symbolic utterance derive.

The reason why terms related to the semantic field of symbolism are constantly

present throughout the essay, and why they are so often linked to the anthropological discourse, should now have been made clearer. Images, names, and concepts are symbols. They are made possible by the symbolic act of separating form from reality and maintain a reference to the object through the expression of a likeness of any kind. In other words, they represent it. Trennung and representational function are the essential elements of the symbolic faculty, and consequently of all its derived aspects.

4. *Homo Pictor, Animal Symbolicum*

At this point in the analysis, some conclusions shall be drawn. First of all, it has been shown that Jonas' anthropology ought not be primarily considered as an aesthetical theory of man. The *homo pictor* ought not be taken as the whole truth about the essence of humanity. Image faculty, speech, technology and rational faculty are possible advancements of a unique and more fundamental capability, which exclusively characterises man among all other living things: his power of symbolic act. Even before being a *homo pictor*, then, man is an animal symbolicum¹⁷. Indeed, man shares with animal, or better with life in general, a relationship between the self and the environment, the so-called *Mittelbarkeit*. More precisely, vision connects higher animals to mankind, by which is knowingly assumed and exercised the symbolic function at work in vision as an unconscious automatism. Nevertheless, this natural continuity ought not be thought as being totally uniform, whereas different levels of mediacy mean different potentialities, freedoms, abilities; in short, different beings regarding to their essence.

Nonetheless, aesthetical themes occupy a certain role in Jonas' reflection. Human aesthetical abilities, Jonas argues, represent the field in which something about man may be revealed, but not the very truth they communicate. This truth rests somewhere else, i.e., in the human availability of symbolic utterance. This very peculiar act determines human essence, the degree of freedom in respect to the «importunity of environment» (Jonas [2001]: 170) that characterizes human life. The act of understanding and making images discloses the essence of humanity in the simplest, most unmistakable and brightest possible way. The study of the relationship between man and image inevitably leads to some thesis of aesthetical sort. The most interesting among them may be the thorough analysis of sense perception, that is to say, whether aesthetics can be understood in line with its Greek etymology (*aisthesis*). Perhaps, Jonas' work can represent a solid starting point from which the traditional claim of aesthetics as

¹⁷ Cfr. Halawa (2011); Ulama (2011).

*gnoseologia inferior*¹⁸ can be reconsidered. Moreover, the interpretation of image, and the odd absence of any reference to beauty, may offer some ideas concerning the status of beauty and its meaning in the work of art. Nevertheless, Jonas' attention to aesthetic themes is evidently poor, or at least totally indirect. Jonas considers aesthetics as a means towards something else. In his theory of man, he tries to reach an end that has very little to do with aesthetics, if nothing at all¹⁹.

By means of this new theory of man, in fact, Jonas is aiming at two results. First of all, as previously mentioned, his comparison between ancient Gnosticism and modern philosophy of existence has guided him to the need of an anthropology that could satisfy an ontological interpretation based on a natural monism respectful of man's peculiarity. Secondly, Jonas seizes here the opportunity to further expand a theory of cultural products that made his great synthesis of Gnosticism possible. The signs on this subject are too evident to be ignored. As previously remarked, Jonas describes the symbolizing process as an objectification [*Objectivierung*], and the theory of cultural products he sketches in Appendix I of *Augustine und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, and in *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* is indeed founded on the concept of Objectivation²⁰. The symbolic essence of human beings, as indicated by the image faculty, provides his speculation about the origin and the development of human cultural expressions with an anthropological basis which is in turn strictly connected to an ontological perspective. The methodological premises, on which Jonas worked since the late twenties, allowed him firstly to approach Gnosticism as a set of expressions kept together by a single existential principle. These premises gain now a systematic foundation through an original interpretation of life and being that is finally able to settle with Heidegger's philosophy of existence and stand by itself. So, if this interpretation looks acceptable, attention should probably focus on the connections between the essay on the *homo pictor* and the theory of Objectivation, with particular emphasis on the shifting from the

¹⁸ Cfr. Baumgarten, Kant (2008): 38: «Obi. 5) confusio mater erroris. Rsp. a) sed conditio, sine qua non, inveniendae veritatis, ubi natura non facit saltum ex obscuritate in distinctionem. Ex nocte per auroram meridies. b) Ideo curanda est confusio, ne inde errores, quot e quanti penes incuriosos, c) non commendatur confusio, sed cognitio emendatur, quatenus illi necessario admixtum est aliquid confusionis». On Baumgarten's aesthetics, see Amoroso (2000). Under these regards see also Yaffe (2008); Campo (2011).

¹⁹ Cfr. Jonas (2001): 181: Aesthetic considerations upon images are evidently left aside, for the benefit of epistemological and theoretical perspectives. Nonetheless, several match points may be found between Jonas' philosophy and aesthetics or theory of contemporary art: See Hohnsträter (2007).

²⁰ For further information about the theory of cultural products, cfr. Bonaldi (2007).

heideggerian framework to an independent way of thinking based on the analysis of the phenomenon of life. However, this does not exclude the fact that aesthetics may find in his works a very interesting and stimulating interlocutor. Although aesthetical themes do not play an extraordinary role in Jonas' philosophy, his reflections could recommend new suggestions in order to conceive the exact contribution that sense perception and the act of making symbols might offer to the clarification of aesthetical experiences. Additionally, aesthetical thinkers could find in Jonas' work an opportunity to further reflect on the different meanings of the discipline, particularly as concerns its connection with other fields of knowledge such as anthropology, epistemology and ontology²¹.

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²¹ Cfr. Garelli (1999); and, for a reflection upon language moving from these themes, see Schirra, Sachs-Hombach (2010).

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