

Franzini Tibaldeo, Roberto (2009): *La rivoluzione ontologica di Hans Jonas. La genesi e il significato di "Organismo e libertà"*. Milano: Mimesis. 432 pp.

Detailed summary

“But this is *an* axiom of my ethics: that knowledge of being, which began with the knowledge of *meaning*, represents an ethical realization of man [...]. So the foundation of ethics is nothing but the whole metaphysics”.

from a letter to Lore Jonas, February 2nd 1945¹

Summary of Part 1 (pp. 15-75)

Hans Jonas' philosophical works are all deeply engaged, although not immediately in a political sense, because in his youth Jonas actually was a Zionist. His philosophical engagement consists in the relevance with which his reflections invest in the core of existence.

As he confessed, his works not only represent an effort to understand specific theoretical topics, but also they highlight two main characteristics. First, they put in evidence the will of a resolute man to measure himself with the real and complex problems of the contemporary age. But also, they emphasize a lively spirit that is ethically involved in the philosophical search of a foundation of being.

Even in undertaking historical research, Jonas was always interested in actualizing problems and in analysing them in a contemporary perspective (*Der Begriff der Gnosis*, 1930; *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, 1930; *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, 1934, 1954; *Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism*, 1952). He first tried to interpret antiquity with lenses taken from his contemporary age; he then was able to find in the past ages existential and eternal questions, experimented also by the humanity of the twentieth century. Such philosophical issues have become quite urgent because of the technical development, thanks to which humanity seems to achieve absolute domination over nature, mankind and life. Jonas endeavoured philosophically to face these challenges.

His partaking in the Second World War forced him, however, to extend his engagement in an ontological direction (*Philosophical Essays*, 1974; *Erinnerungen*, 2003). The experiences of death, destruction and sufferance persuaded Jonas to examine the foundations of existence, the same which mankind shares with other living beings (*Lehrbriefe*, 1944-1945). Jonas was intuitively sure that human beings could no longer live without assuming direct and precise responsibilities towards the phenomenon of life as a whole. In this way, Jonas' previous philosophical project of seeking a foundation to ethics becomes an ontological research (*The Phenomenon of Life/Organismus und Freiheit*, 1966/1973).

Jonas believed that the aim of this research was to overcome the mistakes of the reductionist attitude towards life, which characterizes the modern age. Secondly, he insisted on showing that human reason ought to go beyond the boundaries set by modern sciences and that it should have to tackle the profound and ultimate mystery of being. Jonas was aware that his research on the ontological foundation of ethics ultimately entered the domain of metaphysics (*The Phenomenon of Life/Organismus und Freiheit*, 1966/1973).

Jonas was aware that this choice was at odds with the contemporary age. Nevertheless, he believed firmly that the main mistake of Western philosophy consists in having abandoned its specific and metaphysical task (*The Phenomenon of Life/Organismus und Freiheit*, 1966/1973; *Technology and Responsibility*, 1973; *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, 1979).

¹ A copy of this letter can be found in Hans Jonas' *Nachlass*, classification HJ-2-1-5 (see also HJ-2-2-5). Quotation is from pp. 7-8.

As a pupil of Martin Heidegger during the 1920s, Jonas learned the rigour of philosophical investigation; he also learned how philosophy is deeply engaged in the comprehension of the meaning of being and in trying to understand why these questions were progressively set aside in the modern era.

Jonas applied the philosophical categories achieved from Heidegger to a new field of research, namely the phenomenon of life. Indeed, the modern age has fundamentally misunderstood the latter and has intentionally reduced the ontological idea of life to non-life (*Materialism and the Theory of Organism*, 1951; *Is God a Mathematician?*, 1951; *Organism and Freedom*, 1954, unpublished essay; *Life, Death, and the Body in the Theory of Being*, 1965). What is more, the thinking of Heidegger himself was, according to Jonas, responsible for this mistake, since according to Heidegger life in its natural dimension has no philosophical relevance. Thus, Heidegger's thinking falls completely within modernity and shares the latter's problematic metaphysical, ontological, and ethical background (*Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism*, 1952; *Heidegger and Theology*, 1964).

With regard to the interpretation of living beings, Jonas emphasized that Western categories failed at their goal. Modernity was unable properly to address the issue of the meaning of life. Additionally, this weakness seems to have had ontological roots: Modern science failed to understand life because the ontology it believed in was an ontology of death. And death, of course, is unable to feel and comprehend life. Modern ontology mistook its scientific and methodological abstraction with reality. Nineteenth century idealism seemed to be the beginning of a new turn in philosophy against this modern abstraction. Yet, this attempt failed as well because of the success of the modern, materialistic, and technological view of things (*Lehrbriefe*, 1944-45; *Materialism and the Theory of Organism*, 1951; *Is God a Mathematician?*, 1951; *The Practical Uses of Theory*, 1959; *Life, Death, and the Body in the Theory of Being*, 1965).

Nevertheless, Jonas believed that ontology primarily has to do with life, not death. At the outset of Western thought, life – not dead matter – is the original evidence of being, and life alone is the aim and object of thinking. Thus death, not life, is the first philosophical problem, while death is nothing but an unaccountable event taking place in an essentially living universe.

Therefore, according to Jonas, the topic of life is endowed with ontological meaning. Secondly, Jonas did not indulge in any sort of fatalistic temptation by considering the modern ontology of death as the only answer to the issues related to life. On the contrary, he believed that philosophy ought to fight this modern attitude (which belief is also supported by contemporary existentialism and by Heidegger's fateful thinking). But Jonas was aware of the fact that modernity cannot be simply overcome by reversing time and by turning back to an "original" thought. On the contrary, the ontological comprehension of living/being must pass through modernity and yet go beyond the achieved results.

There are some preliminary difficulties: First, the conceptual devices for understanding the phenomenon of life rely on categories, methods, and hermeneutical systems set by modernity. That is, they misrepresent the phenomenon to be studied. Second, the researcher as a human being falls within the phenomenon he or she studies and actually interacts with it. For this reason, anthropomorphism is a real threat.

Overcoming this problem will involve overcoming the modern custom to consider the (human) subject as isolated from nature and other living beings. According to Jonas, the first thing to be done is to gain awareness that the quantitative-ontological paradigm of modern age is abstract, partial, and one-sided. The specificity of the phenomenon of life is such that it requires further analysis, an analysis which reaches a deeper comprehension of the same phenomenon. In Modernity, people have forgotten this ulterior dimension. On the contrary, phenomenology is a method adequately able to interpret the phenomenon of life and to put in evidence the ulterior and irreducible dimension of being.

In spite of its anti-dualistic intentions, modern reductionism unintentionally reproduces a dualistic form, which separates phenomenology and ontology. In Modernity, people are under the illusion of having achieved a complete ontology, while the truth is that it has only achieved a partial and deceiving phenomenology. It is curious to notice that after having fought against dualism (especially psycho-physical one), the modern *Weltanschauung* finally falls quite within dualism.

For what reason, Jonas asked, does this happen? Moreover, why is it inevitable for human beings to fall within dualistic interpretations of reality? Indeed, according to Jonas, dualism cannot be confined to a philosophical mistake only. Dualism, Jonas admitted, must have some other secret origin and legacy.

Dualism must have its origins in being itself, which is *intrinsically* dual, articulated, and polar. Living beings especially highlight this *duality*, which turns into dualism in some of the philosophical attempts to comprehend it (*Life, Death, and the Body in the Theory of Being*, 1965).

In Jonas' previous studies on Gnosticism, the existentialist key used to comprehend the dualistic essence of the ancient religion becomes an object of study itself, something to be comprehended and interpreted by that same key (*Der Begriff der Gnosis*, 1930; *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, 1934, 1954; *The Gnostic Religion*, 1958). Here something analogous happens: Jonas asks himself if the living being/organism which resists against dualistic interpretations can also be used as a hermeneutical guide to understand the essence of being. In other words, can phenomenology assume ontological relevance?

Jonas believed that a being who is endowed with life expresses and manifests its own transcendence, something which has ontological relevance. Life evidences, as a matter of fact, something simply twofold (quantitative and qualitative, material and formal, exterior and interior, etc.). On the other hand, life expresses its transcendent movement beyond simple matter and world, without which living beings could not even exist (*Lehrbriefe*, 1944-45; *Is God a Mathematician?*, 1951).

Moreover, Jonas aimed at carrying out an overall renewal (in his words a “revolution”) of categories, concepts, and methods of the broad ontological investigation. Thanks to this renewal, Jonas is able more deeply to comprehend the twofoldedness and polarity of being without falling into dualism or reductionism. The “ontological revolution” is the *conditio sine qua* for comprehending the specificity and essence of life within the overall being.

To summarize, Jonas, in his way of studying the phenomenon of life, aimed at justifying and recognizing the ontological specificity of life, and at comprehending the intrinsic dynamic and twofoldedness of being. Hence Jonas distinguished his own position from other Western-philosophical interpretations of ontology and the ontology of life, such as Cartesianism, mechanical reductionism, and vitalism (*Comment on von Bertalanffy's General System Theory*, 1951; *A Critique of Cybernetics*, 1953; *Bemerkungen zum Systembegriff und seiner Anwendung auf Lebendiges*, 1957; *Spinoza and the Theory of Organism*, 1965; *The Scientific and Technological Revolutions*, 1971).

Summary of Part 2 (pp. 77-291)

The main feature of Jonas' “ontological revolution” is the central role played by the *evidence of life*. As a *genitivus obiectivus*, this evidence assumes phenomenological meaning because it presents to the researcher a phenomenon to be carefully analysed. Nevertheless, at the same time and in the sole case of the phenomenon of life, the evidence is also a *genitivus subjectivus*, since the content of what appears is objective and natural data of a particular kind and requires the researcher to go beyond mere phenomenological research in order to be understood. Indeed, the peculiar essence of living beings, along with the actions by which they perform their existence, can be interpreted as a centre of *subjectivity*. In order to comprehend this subjectivity, the investigation ought to go beyond the phenomenon and enter ontology.

This result is for some aspects circular. This means that what we find at the end of the investigation can be suspected of being anthropomorphic. But Jonas said that this is not anthropomorphism at all; rather, it is a form of methodological and phenomenological anthropocentrism: life, within which each human being is rooted, is indeed the only way we have to come to a unique philosophical vision of being. Being and life can, therefore, be understood by only starting to investigate from our own experience of life, i.e. from the specific life of each researcher.

The second characteristic of the above-mentioned “ontological revolution” is the discovery of the central role played by the investigating being (i.e. human being with its body). This centrality evidences several meanings (methodological, phenomenological, and ontological), which are closely related to one another. While studying the gnoseological relation that opens the possibility to comprehend the phenomenon of life, the researcher cannot put aside the fact that he or she *has* a body (*Körper*) and, moreover, *is* a body (*Leib*), which evidences already an ontological connection with the research object. Moreover, the theoretical concepts and categories by which life is understandable make sense only within the practical relationship between a researcher and the phenomenon of life. Hence, the methodological guide for investigating the phenomenon of life is the living being itself.

As a consequence, the comprehension of the phenomenon of life entails a reflection upon a specific praxis (i.e. any living being itself), within a concrete and dynamic relationship between subject and object. Thanks to the notion of “ontological revolution” (which promotes a form of relational and practical-dynamical realism) a renewal of traditional philosophical categories can be actually accomplished, and risks such as substantialism, formalism, hypostatization, “nominalism”, abstract one-sidedness, and reductionism can be defeated. In this effort, Jonas was close to thinkers such as Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Whitehead.

Through Jonas’ philosophical enquiry into the notion of life, he achieved a thorough understanding of the latter’s fundamental features. First of all, life is self-interested. This is evidenced by every act through which life manifests itself. Moreover, self-interest can be understood as what confers unity and continuity to the phenomenon of life as a whole. But along with continuity, life is also characterized by discontinuity. The coexistence of these opposites can be understood only by adopting dynamic and complex categories.

Nevertheless, this is not the only hendiadys of life. Other polarities are quantity vs. quality, exteriority vs. interiority, and freedom vs. necessity. Above all, the latter highlights the peculiar relationship between matter and form of the living organism (*Is God a Mathematician?*, 1951). This is, indeed, one of Jonas’ most important philosophical contributions since he emphasized the relevance of the above-mentioned “ontological revolution” in order to understand the phenomenon of life. Any organism is something peculiar since its identity does not immediately coincide with its own matter and, at the same time, needs a continuous renewal of matter coming from the environment. Thus, organic life (which includes human life) is not a way of *being*, but of *acting*. Yet, at the human level, life presents a qualitative novelty since it requires biology to turn into ethics. As a result, life is not pure self-interest because some of its achievements transcend life as so-defined. The ontology of life can be summed up by saying that life is one with its *beyond*. This is precisely the meaning of the statement according to which life’s ontological *Leitbegriff* is *freedom*.

Jonas aimed at recovering both the specificity of life and the centrality of philosophical enquiry. For this reason, he carried out a deep revision of anthropology as well (*The Nobility of Sight*, 1953-54; *Homo pictor und die “differentia” des Menschen*, 1957/1961; *Immortality and the Modern Temper*, 1962; *The Anthropological Foundation of the Experience of Truth*, 1964; *Biological Foundations of Individuality*, 1968). The latter is indeed *the* issue within which the others actually take place. Jonas challenged the modern ban on anthropomorphism and cared not to be accused of rehabilitating an anthropocentric methodology.

Yet, anthropology raises other issues, such as the place of human beings within nature and within life in general, and his specificity towards other living beings. Here as well Jonas aimed at avoiding both dualistic interpretations and reductionist solutions. The “third way” he embraced assumes that the human specificity, i.e. the “spirit”, is something real, not just an illusion, and is deeply rooted in matter and organic life. Second, in order to be effective, the spirit must be able to influence its biological basis; yet, the spirit’s essence and identity is such that it cannot be reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of matter. Spirit is, therefore, a reality that is qualitatively different from its material and natural basis (*Macht oder Ohnmacht der Subjektivität? Das Leib-Seele-Problem im Vorfeld des Prinzips Verantwortung*, 1981).

Also at the human level, life highlights the same dialectics of the previous stages, which is a polar dynamism which cannot be reduced to a mere materialistic affair, and which is able to keep together the continuity of the phenomenon of life with its qualitative discontinuity. In addition, Jonas stressed the metaphysical meaning of the qualitative gap separating human beings and other beings. Does this mean that, despite its efforts, Jonas’ philosophical biology failed to give a non-dualistic account of life?

I do believe that Jonas’ philosophy presents no bipartition, nor do I perceive in his philosophical biology any “idealistic” turn willing somehow to defend the human specificity on a dualistic basis. I do not agree with those who criticize Jonas’ anthropology because of its supposed substantial lacks, on condition that the anthropological question is placed within the above-mentioned “ontological revolution”. Jonas’ reflections upon the ontological status of the human being can be adequately understood only in the light of the above-mentioned renewal of the adopted concepts and categories. The metaphysical novelty within the

human being's potentiality to transcend matter and to realize its spiritual freedom seems particularly convincing, provided that notions as "matter" and "spirit" are renovated in their meaning as regards traditional ontology and metaphysics (in this respect, the same Heidegger belongs to this tradition).

At the same time, thanks to the human being's metaphysical potentiality, Jonas' "ontological revolution" extends itself – although only hypothetically – to the broad domain of being. Jonas extended teleology beyond the sphere of human subjectivity and recognized the reality of subjective ends within living beings. Then, he emphasized that ends, purposes, and their causality are relevant characteristics not only of natural living beings, but also, hypothetically, of cosmic being in itself (*Materie, Geist und Schöpfung. Kosmologischer Befund und kosmogonische Vermutung*, 1988; *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen*, 1992).

Summary of Part 3 (pp. 293-358)

Thanks to the "ontological revolution," the specificity of man finds its place within the polar and dynamic continuity of life, and needs no more to be dualistically confined somewhere else. Second, the human specificity consists of a dynamic relation to the world, a relationship which is at the same time able to transcend the latter's mere presence. Human specificity is a process of self-realization, by which a qualitatively new form of freedom manifests itself within the reign of life. Moreover, the notion of freedom ultimately appears to be the broad essence of life.

Each level of life is characterized by a specific form of freedom towards the world, that is of a certain capacity to transcend the *hic et nunc*. The same happens with human beings. However, due to the above-mentioned metaphysical implications of their freedom, human beings achieve a unique way of self-transcendence. This, of course, leads us to ethical reflections.

On the objective side, among the ends in nature, some human beings perceive them as obligations. These ends address the human capacity to answer to their call. This means that some of the purposes in nature are *values*. Moreover, one of these seems even to be a Value-in-Itself (or a Good-in-Itself), i.e. the *being's capacity to have purposes* (*Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, 1979).

In this way, Jonas put together both sides of ontology (the subjective and the objective) and showed the meaning of this re-joining. The clue is to consider the concepts of subject and object within the ontological novelty of their polar and dynamic relationship. At the human level, the latter develops into a theory of responsibility, which, by the way, is ontologically founded. Several objections have been raised against this aspect of Jonas' thought, and I discuss them specifically. Yet, the problem is that most of them seem not to be aware of the radical novelty of Jonas' reflections. I believe, for example, that the classical objections raised against attempts to found metaphysically or ontologically ethics cannot be applied to Jonas' thought. Indeed, Jonas' ontology and metaphysics have undergone a deep revision and are, therefore, different from traditional ontology and metaphysics. In Jonas' thinking, for instance, the relationship between freedom and the ethical norm can be understood in terms of neither autonomy nor heteronomy since it highlights something deeply different—the novelty of the dynamic and relational structure of freedom *and* responsibility.

In conclusion, I believe that Jonas' main aim in his ontology was to show how the phenomenon of life considered in an anthropological perspective is ethically oriented. According to Jonas' intentions, this is how to overcome the inadequacies of the modern interpretation of the relationship between man and world. In this sense, the foundation of ethics in a deeply renewed ontology is one with the overcoming of dualism, reductionism, and the temptations of technological nihilism.