Sacrifice and Repentance as Self-Restraint. Hans Jonas' Ethics for a Technological Epoch

Abstract

The present article tries to analyze the role played in Hans Jonas' ethical reflection by religious—namely, Jewish—tradition. Jonas goes in search of an ultimate foundation for his ethics and his theory of the good in order to face the challenges currently posed by technology's nihilistic attitude towards life and ethics. Jonas' ethical investigation enters into the domain of metaphysics, which offers an incomparable contribution to the philosophical endeavour, without undermining its overall independence. In this way, Jewish categories—such as remorse, shame, sacrifice, repentance, and self-restraint—strengthen the philosopher's ethical reflection, since he considers them to be essential moral values for the technological epoch. Yet the reference to the Jewish tradition supplies Jonas' ethical endeavour with a powerful but only hypothetical insight into transcendence.

Keywords: Hans Jonas, ethics of responsibility, freedom, Jewish tradition, Kabbalah, criticism of Modernity, future generations, metaphysics, myth, matter and spirit, creation.

Introduction

Against the recurring temptation to despise the world and act irresponsibly that is evidenced by the mainstream of Modernity, the ethical thinking of the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas (1903-1993) insists on the intrinsic value of life and on the moral duty to preserve it. However, today's technological progress puts dramatically in evidence that the fulfilment of this task requires an overall reconsideration of the hendiadys of freedom and responsibility.

Hans Jonas believes that such an endeavour ought to be carried out *in primis* by philosophy. However, he also claims that this philosophical meditation cannot avoid entering into the domain of metaphysics by inquiring into the concept of God and clarifying His relationship to the being of world and humankind. In this respect, the Jewish tradition is a relevant source of inspiration for Hans Jonas' ethical thinking.

However, the peculiarity of this relationship between philosophy and religion gives rise to the following questions: What role do Jewish categories play in Jonas' ethical reflection? Does the latter depend on the author's religious beliefs and, subsequently, lose its independence? Or do religious categories—such as sacrifice, repentance, shame, and self-restraint—just supply appropriate and significant symbols for his philosophical inquiry into the foundations of our existence?

The ambivalent essence of human nature

In an interesting and well-known thought experiment, Jonas tries to express "mythically" the relationship between God, human beings and the cosmos.[1] (#_ftn1) On this occasion, he draws inspiration from the Jewish tradition and specifically from Isaac Luria's *Kabbalah*, and from his idea of *tzimtzum* (contraction, withdrawal, self-limitation):

> In the beginning, for unknowable reasons, the ground of being, or the Divine, chose to give itself over to the chance and risk and endless variety of becoming. And wholly so: entering into the adventure of space and time, the deity held back nothing of itself: no uncommitted or unimpaired part remained to direct, correct, and ultimately guarantee the devious working-out of its destiny in creation.[2] (#_ftn2)

In other words, the creation of the cosmos comes about through God's forswearing of omnipotence. We do not know why God limits Himself. Yet His decision makes room for a *possibility*, namely the existence of the cosmos as an autonomous being:

> In order that the world might be, and be for itself, God renounced his own being, divesting himself of his deity—to receive it back from the Odyssey of time weighted with the chance harvest of unforeseeable temporal experience: transfigured or possibly even disfigured by it. In such self-forfeiture of divine integrity for the sake of unprejudiced becoming, no other foreknowledge can be admitted than that of *possibilities* which cosmic being offers in its own terms: to these, God committed his cause in effacing himself for the world.[3] (#_ftn3)

The central idea in this passage is that God's worldly adventure comes to a crucial turning point with the advent of human beings, through their knowledge and freedom—that is, the double-edged gift of working for the accomplishment of good *or* evil. On the one hand, with the "appearance of man, transcendence awakened to itself."[4] (#_ftn4) Indeed, human freedom is the clearest sign of the deep relationship between God and the world. God's primeval renunciation of omnipotence was—of course—absolute and irrevocable, yet it expressed the hope that in the future the creation could somehow *awaken*—that is, become aware of its divine and transcendent essence. This is precisely what happens thanks to humankind. On the other hand, the destiny of this awakening relies uncertainly on human actions and decisions:

> As transcendence grows with the terribly ambiguous harvest of deeds, our impact on eternity is for good *and* for evil: we can build and we can destroy, we can heal and we can hurt, we can nourish and we can starve divinity, we can perfect and we can disfigure its image: and the scars of one are as enduring as the lustre of the other.[5] (#_ftn5)

In this sense, each human being is responsible for God's destiny, which manifests itself in his/her heart. Therefore—according to Jonas—human existence as such may be understood as a cosmic and divine adventure of liberty *and* responsibility, which takes place thanks to God and His primordial decision, and in front of Him. Through their deeds human beings play an active and self-conscious role in this divine enterprise, since humanity bears witness to the awakening of transcendence to itself. This means that each human act is like a tile in a mosaic that represents the history of the relationship between God, human beings, and the world. Moreover, since God has opted for impotence, human freedom and responsibility gain cosmic relevance, in an ambivalent sense: thanks to human beings, God's creation may continue its worldly adventure, or this worldly adventure may be ruined. Human beings have the liberty to be faithful to God's moral obligation, which is testified by life, or they may decide to refuse this obligation.

However, from a historical point of view good and evil do not seem to have equal opportunities. Jonas believes that the advance of modern technology has had an enormous impact on human freedom and increased its propensity for irresponsibility. Jonas warns that the "shadow of the Bomb"[6] (#_ftn6) and the damage to the Earth's environment caused by Promethean technological progress[7] (#_ftn7) show that "we literally hold in our faltering hands the future of the divine adventure and must not fail Him, even if we would fail ourselves."[8] (#_ftn8)

Hence—in Jonas' view—the mythical hypothesis concerning the role played by God in the cosmic creation evidences the difficult task that the human hendiadys of freedom and responsibility currently has to face. However, before continuing our investigation, we must clarify why Jonas' appeal to God's creative role does not undermine the independence of his philosophical investigation.

As we shall see in more detail, a central theme of Jonas' philosophical reflection is his penetrating criticism of modern thought. The modern scientific method, its gnoseological claim to simplicity and abstraction, and the shift in its ontological framework from dualism (Descartes) to materialism led to the following two commitments: the *thorough investigation* of reality by means of physics and its *ontological reducibility* to physical properties. As a consequence, any topic claiming to go beyond the sphere of physics was considered no more than *flatus vocis* and banned from the modern conception of knowledge and rationality.

However, in Jonas' view this reductive process has dire consequences. Firstly, the abovementioned commitments do not seem to be aware that their conclusions cannot but be arbitrary, supposed, and partial. In fact, the demand to reduce reality to physics and to physical properties does not arise through scientific inquiry but is instead the result of a preliminary decision on and selection of gnoseological parameters. Secondly, there is an observable fact—namely, the phenomenon of life—that fails to be completely understood by modern physics.[9] (#_ftn9) Because of these difficulties, Jonas comes to affirm the "*possibility* of a rational metaphysics, despite Kant's contrary verdict, if the rational is not preemptively determined by the standards of positive science."[10] (#_ftn10)

So, there is no incompatibility between rationality and metaphysical inquiry, especially because the latter is to be understood as a "conjecture on ultimate and undemonstrable (but by no means, therefore, meaningless) matters."[11] (#_ftn11) Nevertheless—we may ask—why does the *possibility* of metaphysics become a *necessity* for Jonas' philosophical reflection, as evidenced by the myth concerning the creation of the cosmos? And why is such an investigation given a mythical form? Jonas answers as follows:

> Myth may happen to adumbrate a truth which of necessity is unknowable and even, in direct concepts, ineffable, yet which, by intimations to our deepest experience, lays claim upon our powers of giving indirect account of it in revocable, anthropomorphic images. In the great pause of metaphysics in which we are, and before it has found its own speech again, we must entrust ourselves to this, admittedly treacherous, medium at our risk. The myth, if only it is conscious of its experimental and provisional nature and does not pose as doctrine, can from the necessity of that pause bridge the vacuum with its fleeting span.[12] (#_ftn12)

In sum, metaphysics and myth (which—thanks to their powerful images and symbols—also play a central role in religious thinking) do not belong to the domain of *irrationality*, but form the complex mosaic of human *rationality*, in addition to philosophy and science. Strictly speaking, philosophy and religion are independent from each another.[13] (#_ftn13) Nevertheless, myth may supply both with a provisional and hypothetical insight into transcendence.

The irresponsibility of Modernity: the downfall of remorse, shame, and sacrifice

It is now time to take a closer look at Jonas' criticism of Modernity. He asks what distinguishes the modern knowledge of nature and quotes F. Bacon's view that "knowledge must deliver man from the yoke of necessity by meeting necessity on its ground, and achieves freedom for him by delivering the things into his power."[14] (#_ftn14) This is precisely what modern science and technology have tried to attain through their quantitative interpretation of being. As a result, "the modern knowledge of nature, very unlike the classical one, is a 'know-how' and not a 'know-what,' and on this basis it makes good Bacon's contention that knowledge is power."[15] (#_ftn15) Any question concerning the *meaning* or the *value* of things is—therefore—considered irrelevant. All that matters is to gain power over reality and to dominate it with science and technology. But in Jonas' view this has alarming consequences:

> If ever we entrust or resign ourselves wholly to the self-corrective mechanics of the interplay of science and technology, we shall have lost the battle for man. For science, with its application governed solely by its own logic, does not really leave the meaning of happiness open: it has prejudged the issue, in spite of its own value-freedom. The automatism of its use—insofar as this use carries beyond the recurrent meeting of the recurrent emergency created by itself—has set the goal of happiness in principle: indulgence in the use of things. Between the two poles of emergency and indulgence, of resourcefulness and hedonism, set up by the ever-expanding power over things, the direction of all effort and thereby the issue of

> the good tends to be predecided. But we must not let that issue be decided by default.[16] (#_ftn16)

In other words, this daughter of Modernity called technology only aims at its self-perpetuation. The only acknowledged value is the development of technology's competence and, as a result, the human pursuit of happiness is reduced to the achievement of technological goals. This is precisely what Max Weber referred to as the *reversal* of the means-end relationship:[17] (#_ftn17) the production of means itself becomes an end—in other words, *happiness* loses its rank of autonomous moral value and is reduced to a motivational incentive for human beings to perform more efficiently their technological duties.

According to Jonas, the trouble with Modernity is that it reduces the idea of human freedom to the achievement of technical goals and unrestrained power over nature.[18] (#_ftn18) As a consequence, the modern conception of freedom implies the negation of the *ambivalent* essence of human nature: there is no need to temper freedom with responsibility, since there is supposedly no need to set limits on human freedom. Technology is the magic wand, which can successfully solve any problem. This is the ultimate outcome of technology: it has deeply altered the very nature of human action.[19] (#_ftn19)

What are the further consequences of modern technology for the idea of human existence? The most important is the subversion of fundamental notions, such as *meaning* and *value*: "Meaning is no longer found but is 'conferred'. Values are no longer beheld in the vision of objective reality, but are posited as feats of valuation."[20] (#_ftn20) A further change affects the modern notion of human action and its relationship to reality:

> A world reduced to a mere manifestation of power also admits toward itself—once the transcendent reference has fallen away and man is left with it and himself alone—nothing but the relation of power, that is, of mastery.[21] (#_ftn21)

In brief, Modernity culminates in Nietzsche's nihilism. The human being suffers from an existential loss of meaning, which deposes the images and metaphors traditionally used to express his/her specific identity.[22] (#_ftn22) Indeed, the most significant achievement of modern anthropology is—according to the nineteenth century Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi—the human being's "somma conformabilità" [remarkable adaptability].[23] (#_ftn23) This means that it is virtually impossible to find an answer to the question concerning the human being's essence. There is really no such essence, since the human being *is* what he *performs* and *produces* technologically: as Hannah Arendt had already stated, the outcome of Modernity is the reduction of the *homo sapiens* to the *homo faber*.[24] (#_ftn24) Hence, the human being has lost its own identity and image.

Touching on the political aspect of the problem, Jonas adds that none of the twentieth century's major political ideologies are capable of restoring any such image or identity. To be sure, both Marxism and Capitalism are nothing else but executors of the Baconian ideal of Modernity.[25] (#_ftn25) That is, they both aim at the pursuit of individual and social happiness with the help of technology, but they uncritically believe in the idea of progress and in technology as a vehicle for progress. For this reason they fail to see that the employment of technology has reversed the means-end relationship. Their belief in happiness as the goal of human existence is nothing but a means to the real end of technology: its self-perpetuation and its increase of power.

So—to recapitulate briefly—Modernity depreciates the complexity of human nature. Indeed, Modernity ignores that responsibility and freedom are interwoven in human nature, and it ignores that freedom may give rise to a twofold outcome—namely, good or evil. In other words, the modern *Weltanschauung* erases completely the difference between good and evil, for—in a sense—the human technological being—Nietzsche's *Übermensch*—cannot act badly or commit anything wrong: he/she is simply *beyond good and evil*. Since modern *freedom* is unchained from its counterbalance—namely, *responsibility*—, there is no place for morality, moral sense, remorse, self-sacrifice, or shame, notions that appear to be relics of the past. In such circumstances, the human being is simply not capable of perceiving the difference between good and evil. And—even worse—the human being is not capable of going beyond self-concern, since there is no other value than the efficient enhancement of one's own freedom. But freedom alone leads humankind to despair and vacuity, and to the nihilistic belief in the pure unrelatedness of human existence to others and nature.[26] (#_ftn26)

The need for responsibility

Many of Modernity's consequences are undoubtedly problematic, yet an entire epoch cannot be overcome or erased as a mere mistake. Jonas insists that one of the major philosophical tasks that should be undertaken is a widespread evaluation of Modernity's positive *and* negative aspects. After all, modern technology certainly appears to be the full expression of humankind's essential desire to enhance its own freedom and give shape to the world. And the Baconian modern ideal of progress—which originated technology—offers a far more realistic and effective philosophical background than the static and dualistic one (including Descartes') that produced a distorted understanding of human essence as completely separated from the dynamics of the physical and biological world.[27] (#_ftn27)

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

> The crucial point in all this is that the nature of human action has changed and with it the focus of ethical theory. For, reflecting on everything—on the magnitude of our novel powers

> and the novelty of their products, their impact on the human condition everywhere, and the dynamism they let lose into indefinite future—we must see that *responsibility* with a never known burden and range has moved into the center of political morality. This is why we make the present effort to clarify the phenomenon of responsibility as such.[28] (#_ftn28)

Interesting, Jonas' idea of responsibility reverberates with images and symbols of religious—namely, Jewish—derivation. According to Jonas, the idea of "res-ponsibility" (in German "Ver-antwortung") encapsulates the basic conception of religion as the effort to connect the human being with God. Therefore, religion consists in the human disposition to search for an appropriate relationship with the divine, which is mostly understood as the absolute Other or pure Otherness. According to the Jewish tradition, God Himself desires to enter into a relationship with humankind and calls upon each human being during the event of revelation. A peculiar dialogue may then ensue between JHWH and the human being, who experiences his/her own commitment to *listen* and *answer* (in Latin "respondēre", in German "antworten") to God's *call*.[29] (#_ftn29) Thanks to God's primeval decision-revelation, the human being has the possibility to *freely answer* to such a call. Hence, according to Jonas, God ultimately seems to provide the foundation for the human hendiadys of freedom and responsibility. This means that it is impossible for philosophy fully to explain freedom and responsibility. On the other hand, we shall also see that the philosophical endeavour to do so does not lose its meaning because of that impossibility.

A second Jewish echo in Jonas' idea of responsibility is the so-called *Book of Life*, which he explicitly mentions in *The Phenomenon of Life*.[30] (#_ftn30) However, in order to comprehend the relevance of this religious reference to Jonas' ethics, we have to briefly revisit the origins of Jonas' hypothetical myth. What motivates Jonas to develop his thinking mythically is the following profound intuition:

> And yet—we feel, temporality cannot be the whole story, because in man it has an inherently self-surpassing quality, of which the very fact and fumbling of our idea of eternity is a cryptic signal. If everlastingness is a wrong concept, "eternity" may have other meanings—and a reference to the temporal of which our mortal experience, transcending its mere transience in the stream of events, may sometimes bear witness.[31] (#_ftn31)

Thus, Jonas' myth serves two purposes: firstly, it tries to describe by means of symbols the human being's capacity to transcend reality in space and time; secondly, it hopes to answer the question of the origin of reality as such. So, in a sense, the myth provides a symbolic explanation for the philosophical issues raised by the human experience of "transcending" in which—Jonas may now state—we witness something "eternal."

The same happens to the actions performed by human beings. Such actions not only generate consequences in space and time, but simultaneously gain transcendent relevance, as exactly suggested by the Jewish tradition:

> We may say, for instance, that what we do now will make an indelible entry in the "Book of Life," or leave an indelible mark in a transcendent order; that it will affect that order, if not our own destiny, for good or for evil; that we shall be accountable for it before a timeless seat of justice, or—if we are not there for the accounting, because we have flowed down the river of time—that our eternal image is determined by our present deed, and that through what we do to that image of ours here and now, we are responsible for the spiritual totality of images that evergrowingly sums up the record of being and will be different for our deed.[32] (#_ftn32)

In other words, Jonas is entertaining the possibility "that deeds inscribe themselves in an eternal memoir of time; that whatever is here enacted somehow registers [...] in a transcendent realm."[33] (#_ftn33) So human beings are responsible not only for the earthly consequences of their actions, but also for the transcendent and eternal ones, which may somehow affect the "stake which an undetermined and vulnerable eternity has in us."[34] (#_ftn34) This is indeed a heavy burden for humanity to carry, one that has to be discussed and justified both from a theological and a philosophical perspective.

"What" are we responsible "for"?

The philosophical justification for Jonas' theory of responsibility is the core subject of the well-known *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* [*The Imperative of Responsibility*], published in 1979. Jonas' argument may be summarized as follows: first, the phenomenon of *life* is a *purpose* of nature, which becomes self-evident in the human being's capacity to set and achieve aims and goals;[35] (#_ftn35) second, the *purposiveness* evidenced by life is "a fundamental self-affirmation of being, which posits it *absolutely* as the better over against nonbeing;"[36] (#_ftn36) third, there is an "ontological axiom," according to which purposiveness is a "good-in-itself, of which we grasp with intuitive certainty that it is infinitely superior to any purposelessness of being;"[37] (#_ftn37) fourth, the ontological axiom has an *obligating force* on human liberty, which "is no longer its automatic executor but, with the power obtained from knowledge, can become its destroyer as well;"[38] (#_ftn38) fifth, the human being has the ethical duty to offset *responsibility* against indiscriminate freedom.

So, properly speaking, *what* are we responsible *for*? Jonas answers by means of the *first commandment* of his ethics: "the *existence* of mankind comes first," since "the possibility of there being responsibility in the world, which is bound to the existence of men, is of all objects of responsibility the first."[39] (#_ftn39) There is, however, a second commandment: humankind not only has to survive, but to "live well" too. This second commandment implies that the organic world also has to be included within the domain of responsibility, since it represents a "necessary condition" of man's own existence.[40] (#_ftn40) However, being responsible for the natural world does not at all mean that humankind is entitled to adopt an anthropocentric stance towards nature. On the contrary, any human being must put him/herself "at its service, free of all appetite for appropriation."[41] (#_ftn41) To be sure, this is responsibility, the only conduct that it is possible to adopt if we are to recognize and respect nature's intrinsic *value* and *truth*:

> In the truly human aspect, nature retains her dignity, which confronts the arbitrariness of our might. Ourselves being among her children, we owe allegiance to the kindred total of her creations, of which the allegiance to our own existence is only the highest summit. This summit, rightly understood, comprises the rest under its obligation.[42] (#_ftn42)

In the end, Jonas identifies the ontological evidence of the above-mentioned axiom—according to which purposiveness is a good-in-itself—as the basis of his theory of responsibility. It may seem surprising that this axiom is a presupposition of Jonas' ethics, whose aim is to provide a rational and convincing foundation for ethical obligation. Yet Jonas is aware that it is impossible to provide an ultimate justification:

> Groundless itself [...], brought about with all the opaque contingency of brute fact, the ontological imperative institutes on its own authority the primordial "cause in the world" to which a mankind once in existence, even if initially by blind chance, is henceforth committed. It is the prior cause of all causes that can ever become the object of collective and even individual human responsibility.[43 (#_ftn43)]

However, an investigation into the ultimate basis of ethics and being is a task that ought to be carried out; otherwise the theory of responsibility will lack complete justification. Once more, Jonas' *hypothetical myth* concerning the creation of the cosmos offers an interesting insight into problem: "By foregoing its own inviolateness the eternal ground allowed the world to be,"[44 (#_ftn44)] together with its distinguishing features. Among these, the most relevant is the manifestation of humankind, together with the typically human experiences of freedom and responsibility.

What is the myth's relevance to Jonas' conception of responsibility? By referring to key religious concepts (the Jewish *Book of Life* and the Gnostic theory of the "transcendent 'Image' filled in, feature by feature, by our temporal deeds")[45 (#_ftn45)] and in accord with the *Kabbalah*'s conception of the relationship between human beings and God, Jonas comes to a powerful conclusion, which highlights the deep ambivalence of freedom and responsibility: in a sense, humankind is even responsible *for* God. Precisely because of our technological development, God's image is in serious danger:

> The image of God is in danger as never before, and on most unequivocal, terrestrial terms. That in these terms an eternal issue is at stake together with the temporal one—this aspect of our responsibility can be our guard against the temptation of fatalistic acquiescence or the worse treason of *après nous le deluge*.[46 (#_ftn46)]

Hence, the combination of *fragility* and *divinity* within the object of responsibility—according to Jonas' myth, God renounced His own being and omnipotence in order to let the world be for itself—is precisely what human freedom must learn to respect and preserve. How can this duty of preservation be effectively fulfilled?

The heuristics of feelings

There is no way of being assured *a priori* that human behaviour, whether individual or collective, will succeed in respecting the ontological axiom. Since freedom is an essentially *open*, *risky*, and *unforeseeable* adventure, there is no guarantee that the power of human freedom will actually protect and take care of the object of responsibility represented by the worldly adventure of life. Quite the contrary, through the employment of technology, human power easily and quickly generates ambivalent effects, or produces consequences that may bring humanity to ruin.

According to Jonas, the technological threat to the adventure of life is real and tangible. Because the stakes are so high, Jonas believes that the only way of effectively dealing with this problem is to set limits on technology by giving priority to "the Bad over the Good Prognosis." In other words, "the prophecy of doom is to be given greater heed than the prophecy of bliss."[47 (#_ftn47)] The recurring temptation to irresponsibly and uncritically adopt technology as a device for fulfilling positive aims (in politics, economics, society, etc.) must be prevented by the growing awareness of the fragility of the object of responsibility.

At this point in the discussion Jonas introduces the expression: the "heuristics of fear," with which he states the amplified relevance for ethics of the "revulsion of feeling, which acts ahead of knowledge to apprehend the value whose antithesis so affects us. *We know the thing at stake only when we know that it is at stake*." And he continues as follows: "We know much sooner what we do not want than what we want. Therefore, moral philosophy must consult our fears prior to our wishes to learn what we really cherish." However, Jonas adds that the heuristics of fear ought only to recover an adequate *emotional motive* for acting responsibly in the face of current ethical dilemmas: "although, in consequence, the heuristics of fear is surely not the last word in the search for goodness, it is at least an extremely useful first word."[48 (#_ftn48)]

In other words, the modern demand for technological progress has made it extremely difficult for humankind to be sufficiently aware of what is at stake—namely, that technology puts at risk the possibility of worldly and human life as such. For this reason, the re-activation of responsibility is no automatic process, but a philosophical and pedagogical endeavour concerning individual and collective freedom. In this effort to reactivate a sense of responsibility, emotional factors and feelings—such as fear, hope, shame, and guilt—play a central role.

Jonas warns that humankind should not wait for a utopian improvement, unlike those ideologies and utopias that claim to fight for anthropological betterment.[49 (#_ftn49)] The ethics of responsibility offers a different kind of *hope*. Indeed, "hope is a condition for action"[50 (#_ftn50)] and a heuristics of *fear* ought to be used "in counterbalance to a heuristics of hope."[51 (#_ftn51)] However, the ethics of responsibility gives fear "its rightful place":[52 (#_ftn52)] "There are times—continues Jonas—when the drive needs moral encouragement, when hope and daring rather than fear and caution should lead. Ours is not one of them."[53 (#_ftn53)] On the other hand, fear should not grow to the extent that it paralyzes action. A correct interpretation of fear—states Jonas—ought to inspire the "courage of responsibility," which *takes care* of an object whose existence depends on the human being's ability to act with wisdom, resoluteness, promptness, moderation, and circumspection.[54 (#_ftn54)] The phenomenon of terrestrial life—in which human life is rooted—is such an object, and its perpetuation needs the human being's

attentive and active care.

According to Jonas, caring for terrestrial life means more than the mere prohibition of certain actions. More than just this, human freedom ought to reflect positively that the object of responsibility is both *valuable* and a *good-in-itself*. Therefore, from an ethical point of view, this object—namely, the terrestrial phenomenon of life and its human development—

Cannot compel the free will to make it its purpose, but it can extort from it the recognition that this would be its duty. If not in obeying, this recognition manifests itself in the feeling of guilt: we failed to give the good its due.[55] (#_ftn55)

In brief—according to Jonas—the tangible *fear* for the future of terrestrial life is a *productive feeling* that may help us anticipate undesirable scenarios. The same can be said of *guilt*, a feeling that in Jonas' view does not primarily express regret for something a person has done, but that identifies a feeling of *predictive repentance*, which can preemptively illuminate human behaviour. Indeed, this form of repentance is able to stimulate the imagination and anticipate the possible effects of the refusal to recognize the good. Human behaviour gains ethical self-awareness by facing up to the unpleasant probability that what is valuable and a *good-in-itself* could be rejected or destroyed.

Freedom as self-restraint

The fragile object of responsibility calls for care. Yet what should human beings do, precisely, if they are to act responsibly? Jonas answers that we ought to preserve "the *idea* of Man, which is such that it demands the presence of its embodiment in the world."[56] (#_ftn56) This idea personifies one of the main ontological characteristics of life, namely its dynamic and self-transcending development.[57] (#_ftn57) At the same time human life highlights a highly specific feature: its self-transcending movement leads to transcendence *as such*, that is, to the metaphysical supposition of God and creation, as shown by the hypothetical myth concerning the creation of the cosmos. Once again, Jonas refers to religious—and specifically Jewish—concepts in order to give a full account of the close *liaison* connecting the human being's specificity to the phenomenon of life and to the role played by God in the creation of the universe. In this respect we can quote the following wonderful passage of *Materie, Geist und Schöpfung* [*Matter, Mind, and Creation*] (1988), in which Jonas explicitly recalls the sacredness of both terrestrial and human life, and implicitly affirms that the comprehension of life and ethics cannot but lead to their metaphysical complement:

> Therefore, the creative source, if it willed mind, also had to will life. And this it says in the beautiful attribute ascribed to God that we Jews so often recite in prayer: *rozeh bachajim*, "he who wills life": not only "the living God", but "the God who wills life", both for its own sake and, by means of the soul, as a cradle for the mind. Thus to a certain degree we might speak of the sacredness of life, although life can be a wasteland, as can mind.[58] (#_ftn58)

Jonas ends *The Imperative of Responsibility* with a similar appeal to preserve the *integrity of the human being's essence*, since "something sacred" discloses itself through humankind, something "inviolable under no circumstances (and which can be perceived independently from religion)."[59] (#_ftn59) Against the triumphalism of utopian ideologies, Jonas affirms that humanity courageously has to accept its demanding task of humbly fulfilling freedom and responsibility:

> The time for the headlong race of progress is over, not of course for guarded progress itself. Humbled we may feel, but not humiliated. Man's mandate remains exacting enough outside of paradise. To preserve the integrity of his essence, which implies that of his natural environment; to save this trust unstunted through the perils of the times, mostly the perils of his own overmighty deeds—this is not a utopian goal, but not so very modest a task of responsibility for the future of man on earth.[60] (#_ftn60)

This modest task of responsibility consists in a "power over power"[61] (#_ftn61) and requires the empowerment of freedom's capacity for *self-restraint* and *sacrifice*—two traditional moral values. The enhancement of responsibility calls for the aptitude to resist the seductions of power and for the self-control of the human being's "consciously exercised power."[62] (#_ftn62) So *sacrifice* and *repentance* are essential moral values for the technological epoch, since these moral values may play an active role in limiting the excesses of freedom and enhancing responsibility. Indeed, the most hopeful way to preserve earthly life for future generations is to make an effort to control the negative consequences of humankind's collective actions.

This is the basic justification for believing that an *ought* filters through the *being* of human life: any performed deed *ought* to respect the *fact* that life always manifests more than what—strictly speaking—is currently there. Individual and collective *freedom* ought never to put at stake this *promise of a future* evidenced by humanity, which highlights life's overall ontological feature—namely, its transcending dynamics of freedom beyond the modern idea of *res extensa*. And *responsibility* ought to guarantee the fulfilment of that promise through the existence of future generations. This is the nature of the human being's responsibility towards *history*. Significantly, the Jewish term for "history" (*toledot*) explicitly refers to the idea of "continuity among generations."[63] (#_ftn63)

In conclusion, Jonas goes in search of an ultimate foundation for his ethical reflection and his theory of the good, in order to face the challenges currently posed by technological development. This investigation leads, however, to a cosmological hypothesis about the origins of the cosmos as such. The fulfilment of this endeavour requires entering the domain of metaphysics and answering with the help of myth questions concerning the role played by God in the creation of the cosmos. According to Jonas, this itinerary into metaphysics does not undermine the independence of rational and ethical reflection, but provides a wider and deeper understanding of the human being's place in the world. In this respect, one of the results of Jonas' hypothetical myth concerning the origins of the cosmos is the complexity and twofoldness of human freedom, which can work for the accomplishment of good *or* evil, and finds in responsibility its essential counterpart. In this respect, Modernity evidences a radical and problematic change: incited by modern technological development, freedom believes wrongly in the possibility of getting rid of its own limits and responsibility. This, however, may cause the destruction of the worldly adventure of human freedom and life. In

order to avert such disaster, Jonas' ethical reflection aims at redressing the balance between freedom and responsibility. Indeed, concepts and images borrowed from the Jewish tradition offer an incomparable contribution to this philosophical endeavour.

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[1] (#_ftnref) See Hans Jonas, "Immortality and the Modern Temper," *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 1–20; then in *The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 262–81. See also "The Concept of God after Auschwitz," in *Out of the Whirlwind*, ed. A. H. Friedlander (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1968), 465–76; see also Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. L. Vogel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 131–43.

[2] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 275. See also Hans Hermann Henrix, "Machtentsagung Gottes? Eine kritische Würdigung des Gottesverständnisses von Hans Jonas," in *Prinzip Zukunft: Im Dialog mit Hans Jonas*, ed. R. Seidel et al. (Paderborn: Mentis, 2007), 93 ff.; Ron Margolin, "Hans Jonas and Secular Religiosity," in *The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life*, ed. S. Tirosh-Samuelson et al. (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008), 241; Christian Wiese, "'God's Adventure with the World' and 'Sanctity of Life': Theological Speculations and Ethical Reflections in Jonas's Philosophy after Auschwitz," in *The Legacy of Hans Jonas*, 419 ff.

[3] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 275.

[4] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 277.

[5] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 278.

[6] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 281.

[7] (#_ftnref) See Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1979). Eng. tr. *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[8] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 281.

[9] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*

[10] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 45. See also Hans Jonas, *Materie, Geist und Schöpfung: Kosmologischer Befund und kosmogonische Vermutung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988). Eng. tr. *Matter, Mind, and Creation: Cosmological Evidence and Cosmogonic Speculation*, in *Mortality and Morality*, § 17.

[11] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, X.

[12] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 278. See also Hans Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology," in *The Review of Metaphysics* 18 (1964); see also Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 259–61.

[13] (#_ftnref) See Hans Jonas, "Wie können wir unsere Pflicht gegen die Nachwelt und die Erde unabhängig vom Glauben begründen?" in *Orientierung und Verantwortung: Begegnungen und Auseinandersetzungen mit Hans Jonas*, ed. D. Böhler et al. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004), 71–84. See also Christian Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England Press, 2007); Wiese, "'God's Adventure with the World' and 'Sanctity of Life'."

[14] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 192.

[15] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 204.

[16] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 208–209.

[17] (#_ftnref) See Maarten T. Coolen, "Philosophical Anthropology and the Problem of Responsibility in Technology," in *Technology and Responsibility*, ed. P. Durbin (Dordrecht-Boston-Lancaster-Tokyo: Reidel, 1987), 47.

[18] (#_ftnref) See Hans Jonas, "Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective," *Central Conference American Rabbis Journal* 15 (1968): 27–39, then in *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 168–82.

[19] (#_ftnref) See Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 1–24.

[20] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 215.

[21] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 216.

[22] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 271–74.

[23] (#_ftnref) Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone: a selection* (New York: Lang, 1992). However, on this topic see also the attainments of the twentieth century anthropological philosophy (especially Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen).

[24] (#_ftnref) See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

[25] (#_ftnref) See Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 142 ff.

[26] (#_ftnref) See Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 211–234. See also Hans Jonas, "The Abyss of the Will: Philosophical Meditation on the Seventh Chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans," in *Philosophical Essays*, 335–48. On such topics, consider also the reflections of other Jewish writers and philosophers, such as Günther Anders and Vasilij Grossman. See Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen, I: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (München: Beck, 1956); as well as *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen, II: Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution* (München: Beck, 1980); Vasilij Grossman, *Life and Fate* (New York: New York Review Books, 2006); Vasilij Grossman, "The Hell of Treblinka" and "The Sistine Madonna," in *The Road: Stories, Journalism, and Essays* (New York: New York Review

Books, 2010), 116–74.

[27] (#_ftnref) See Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 37, 56–58; Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 117–30.

[28] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 122.

[29] (#_ftnref) See Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology". For the etymological analysis of the notion of responsibility, see Roberto Franzini Tibaldeo, "Un'idea di responsabilità. L'etica jonasiana e le sue prospettive" (PhD diss., University of Turin, 2011), 5–9.

[30] (#_ftnref) See Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 271 ff. The *Book of Life* is defined as follows: "In Jewish tradition it means a kind of heavenly ledger wherein our 'names' shall be inscribed according to our deserts: we shall qualify by our deeds to be inscribed 'for life', namely ours" (Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 271–72).

[31] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 268.

[32] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 269.

[33] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 272.

[34] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 272.

[35] (#_ftnref) See also Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*.

[36] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 81.

[37] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 80.

[38] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 82.

[39] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 99.

[40] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 136.

[41] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 87.

[42] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 137.

[43] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 100.

[44] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 279.

[45] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 272. Jonas refers to his former works on Gnosticism and explains that, according to this idea of a "transcendent image," "everyone seems to have his alter ego, 'kept safe' in the upper world while he labours down below, yet as to its state ultimately entrusted to his responsibility: symbolizing the eternal self of the person, it grows with his trials and deeds, and its form is perfected by his toils—perfected or else, we must add, remembering *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, spoiled and defiled by them [...]. However, beside this individualized there is a collective version of the image symbolism, which connects our deeds not with a perpetuity of our separate selves but with the consummation of the divine self" (Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 273). The latter version takes us back to the idea of *tzimtzum* and to its relevance to Jonas' myth of creation.

[46] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 280–81. See also Jonas, *Matter, Mind, and Creation*.

[47] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 31 ff.

[48] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 27.

[49] (#_ftnref) See Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 200–201; Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, 383–84.

[50] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 391 (my translation).

[51] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 203.

[52] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 201.

[53] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 203.

[54] (#_ftnref) See *Ibid.*, 204; Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, 391.

[55] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 84.

[56] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 43.

[57] (#_ftnref) See Jonas' "Biological Philosophy," in Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*.

[58] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *Matter, Mind, and Creation*, 190.

[59] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, 393 (my translation).

[60] (#_ftnref) Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 201–202.

[61] (#_ftnref) *Ibid.*, 142.

[62] (#_ftnref) *Ibid*., 129.

[63] (#_ftnref) Moni Ovadia, *Speriamo che tenga: viaggio di un saltimbanco sospeso tra cielo e terra* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001).

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