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# The Roots of Hans Jonas' Ethics of the Future, and Precaution

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## Abstract

It is sometimes asserted that Hans Jonas would have formulated the precautionary principle because of his awareness of the involuntary consequences of human activity as well as his profound respect for nature. Returning to the origins of the arguments regarding his contribution to 20th century ecological thought, I identify two principal themes in the philosophical enterprise of the German-born American Jewish philosopher. One is a critique of technology and a practical philosophy, i.e. an ethics, regarding mankind and nature. The other is linked to the phenomenology of life and the fundamental ontology of its evolution according to a specific view. In line with this genealogy, I discuss the initial assertion that Jonas' thinking actually articulates the precautionary principle. Qualifying the two kinds of precaution we are dealing with, I finally offer an analysis of their differences in a strong sustainability framework from the point of view of epistemology.

Keywords: ontology, ethics, life, future, precaution

In her preface to a collected edition of works by academics from various disciplines (historians, theologians, biologists, philosophers, etc.), which offers the first complete English overview of the philosophy of Hans Jonas, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson writes that the author of *The Imperative of Responsibility* would have formulated the precautionary principle because of his awareness of the involuntary consequences of human activity as well as his profound respect for nature (Tirosh-Samuelson 2008: xxviii).

Before discussing this assertion, and qualifying what precaution we are talking about, it is necessary to return to the origins of the arguments claimed regarding Hans Jonas' contribution to 20<sup>th</sup> century ecological thought. With this perspective, we seem obliged to identify two principal themes in the philosophical enterprise of the German-born American Jewish philosopher. The first deals with a critique of technology and a practical philosophy, i.e. an ethics, regarding mankind and nature; the second is linked to the phenomenology of life and the fundamental ontology of its evolution as Jonas understands it.

Chronologically, it is more appropriate to invert

the terms of the proposition, in the sense that after his 'journeyman's project' on Gnosticism in late Antiquity (Jonas 2008: 65), he studied successively, in a progression that he himself explicitly admits, first the ontology of life, and then the ethics of responsibility.<sup>1</sup> It is true that this question of technology accompanied his main reflections on history, ethics and medicine during the 1970s, and the titles of his major works reveal this (*Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* in 1974; *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* in 1979; *Technik, Medizin und Ethik* in 1985), as Marie-Geneviève Pinsart so rightly underlines (Pinsart 2003: 187). But, before this technological 'moment,' Jonas had devoted himself to a study of the philosophy of the phenomenon of life, starting in the 1950s. The meaning

<sup>1</sup> Note nevertheless that Jonas chose to comment, from Goethe's poetry, on the theme of man's responsibilities ('Pflichten') based on Kant's moral teaching, as part of his graduation exam subject (Jonas 1921). From this point of view, the ethical question infuses his thinking from beginning to end.

and the originality of Jonas' philosophical contribution to ecological thought must be understood in this context, that is by the measure of his reflections on the natural sciences, and its articulation with his previous studies on the history of religion, which began in the 1920s.

### 1a. From the Study of Gnosis to an Ontology of Life

It was in fact as an historian of religion that Jonas came to take an interest in the philosophy of biology, then the ethics of nature. His philosophy must be approached from this angle to take the measure of the unity of his thinking, and to respect its fundamental concepts (Pommier 2013a).

Coming from a German Jewish family, from the summer of 1921 Jonas studied philosophy with Edmund Husserl at Freiburg, but more importantly attended the first seminars of Martin Heidegger, whom he would accompany, after studying philosophy and religion for two years in Berlin and back in Freiburg, to Marburg in the Fall of 1924.<sup>2</sup> There he also attended the theology seminars of Rudolf Bultmann, who had just obtained a Chair in the Theology Faculty, and who opened up the New Testament to him.<sup>3</sup>

Jonas would undertake the work of an historian, then of a philosopher, influenced by this double tutoring. Bultmann offered him the opportunity to interpret the gospels (particularly the Johannine text) opening up to him the Gnosticism of late Antiquity, while Heidegger provided him, from his philosophy of Being and existential analysis, a method which allowed him to establish the unity of these doctrines, and to develop an original interpretation. In this framework, beginning with his thesis on the concept of Gnosis, Jonas makes two fundamental discoveries (see Jonas 1934, 1954).

Firstly, while Heidegger's philosophy allows him to produce a historical analysis applicable to the 'distant lands' of Gnosis in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions of the Roman Empire in the first centuries of Christianity, these same 'lands' help him to understand better the stature and profound significance of the thinking of his own times (Jonas 1966: 211-234). In particular, he realizes that existentialism, far from its pretensions to explain the basis of human existence 'as it is,' is a contingent philosophical experiment, which depends on an epoch and results from a crisis. In another time and space, he finds an echo of another nihilism, one which is familiar to him in spite of a difference of

degree: In late Gnosis, Man is already solitary, in exile, abandoned in a pitiless world, prey to anguish, but at least that world is hostile and antagonistic to Man, and not completely indifferent.

Secondly, the shared metaphysical roots of the two thought systems which are evident from the intersecting hermeneutics of Gnosis approached through existentialism and existentialism approached through Gnosis, that is to say a vision of nature containing a certain dualism between man and nature, which Jonas calls a 'cosmic nihilism' (Jonas 1958: 323), constitute an 'ontology of death' which could well mark the entire history of western philosophy (Jonas 1966: 7-37). Radical and obvious in the Gnosis of late Antiquity, this dualism is subtler in Heidegger's thinking, but despite this, Jonas shows that one can find there, in the background, a metaphysical rupture between the spirit and the body, between man and nature.<sup>4</sup>

The Heideggerian *Dasein*, because it is always threatened by the imminence of death and therefore is a question of existence in itself, is certainly much closer to our vital dependence on nature than Husserl's pure consciousness. But it remains, in a sense, the offspring of German idealism, according to Jonas, in as much as the mortality which it takes into account is in fact abstract and discarnate; in particular, the *Dasein* ignores the material foundation of existence, its biological imperatives such as its concrete connection to the world we live in, and the fundamental mode of its being, the *Sorge* ('care'), is never linked to the material, physical needs of the body or its nourishment (Jonas 1996: 41-55).

Jonas expands this further than Heidegger in two directions: to establish a veritable ontology of being, which is in line with life and its evolution; and to break new ground from such an ontology towards a behavioral ethics, to which end the threats implied by the development of technological power provide him with an additional motive.

### 1b. Rehabilitation of the Life and Philosophy of the Organism

Jonas looks at exploring the possibility of a relational duality between man and nature at the heart of a new integrated theory of being (after prehistoric animism, primitive panpsychism or panvitalism, or ancient hylozoism) which goes beyond the dualistic metaphysics of Orphic, Christian and Gnostic religions as well as the partial monism represented in parallel by modern materialism and idealism. Therefore, he undertakes the development of a biological philosophy, which would

2 Autobiographical elements regarding Jonas are available in English, notably in the first part of *Memoirs* (Jonas, 2008: 3-183).

3 On the relationship between Bultmann and Jonas, see Jonas 1996: 144-64 and Courtine-Denamy 1996: 12.

4 Concerning this association and synthesis of the two nihilisms, see Zafrani 2013.

allow to take a new approach to the problem and to think about subjectivity and the world, spirit and matter, soul and nature together.

Here Jonas' reflection on life is not ontic, in Heidegger's sense of the specific reality of concrete beings, but truly ontological, that is relative to being in general. There can be no question of suspended judgment, relative to separated objects, where idealism would be the method used for the phenomena of consciousness and materialism, in complement, would deal with the physical realities. Rather it consists, precisely, of facing directly the question of understanding how these two points of view can agree concretely on the unity and totality of reality (Jonas 1966: 17).

Even if the undertaking itself is not particularly original (after all it involves basically reconceptualizing a 'first philosophy,' or a metaphysics), his aims and method are, to the extent that Jonas undertakes to rethink being starting from life itself, and around the organic body which had destroyed through death the ancient beliefs of a concrete unity of being at the heart of a living cosmos.

For Jonas, it is the obvious and inevitable 'bi-unity' of our body which imposes and allows us to go beyond dualism and its dislocation of the unity of being at the heart of reality, as much as beyond the partial monisms which flow from it historically and conceptually and which diminish the unity of being to a single mode held as essential, either matter or mind. From there is it necessary to think, by reduction, starting from the totality of the effective psychophysics of the living body (at the same time spatiality and sensitivity, determination and willingness, matter and freedom), of a monist anatomy of being with which life would exist coextensively. Before depending, in a certain manner, on epistemology, Jonas first of all makes it an ontological question, for the elementary reason that *'the living body is the archetype of the concrete, and being my body it is, in its immediacy of inwardness and outwardness in one, the only fully given concrete of experience in general'* (Jonas, 1966: 24).

To determine the specificity of being of life in general, Jonas' boldness consists of extrapolating to nature universally this immediate evidence of the unity of the human body in particular, where authentic interiority (the self for himself) and exteriority (the self for the world) effectively collide, as opposed to the artificial and abstract opposition of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. But this daring gesture of assumed anthropomorphism in the direction of nature requires, to gain access to the fundamental phenomenon of life, thinking philosophically of a vital continuity of being which can justify man's interpretation of life such as it expresses itself and culminates in him. Jonas devotes himself to this idea by means of a philosophy of the organism

coupled with a philosophy of freedom, as representing, respectively, all life in the world, and the progression of the subjective horizon of being in the history of evolution.

More precisely, Jonas approaches and characterizes the organic phenomenon through the idea of metabolism (from natural science), which allows him to define the essence of the being of life as a precarious becoming. Metabolism is what mediates the relation of the organism with the environment, which makes it possible for the former to have, in its physical exchanges with the latter, an effect on external objects and, simultaneously, its own perpetual renewal, in as much as it maintains itself as a living being on the edge of non-being in a dynamic paradoxical identity, a fragile and changing continuity, which is precisely what distinguishes it from dead matter (Jonas 1996: 87-98).

The decisive point in Jonas' analysis is that metabolism itself is 'mediated identity and continuity' (Jonas 1966: 183), from primitive life forms whose rudimentary metabolism already contains the germ of a tendency toward subjectivity (in as much as it will become progressively more tangible in biological evolution), to human life, where the latent potentialities of thought express themselves in the most elevated reflective forms, without ever being separated from the substrate of matter.

In doing this, Jonas criticizes Darwinian theory in that it excludes all form of finality and transcendence, preferring an explanation of evolution solely in terms of blind variability and natural selection. It thus fails to integrate its (materialist) description of the different organic forms into an enlarged (teleological) understanding of the essence of life and the human being in it, whereas the very appearance of mankind alongside plants and animals in biological continuity should have led to a reinterpretation of the foundations of the genealogy of life in light of the unique peculiarities of its highest form (Jonas 1966: 38-63; Pinsart 2002: 84). More than an explanation, it is actually an interpretation of organic development, such that it is recognized retrospectively not only as progressive, but also as oriented in the direction of an ever greater opening onto the world as life evolved from a critical stage of mediation with the environment, to another more complex and distanced stage (Jonas 1966: 64-98). The existential analysis that Jonas makes of this process, until life auto-interprets itself in man, stems from an immanent philosophy of nature, where the underlying idea is that of a finalized dynamic of being, which aims to maintain its precarious existence and establish itself relentlessly in the face of non-being, in the form of gradual elevation of its level of 'mediacy' in relation to the environment within the continuity of life. Biological evolution is the history of this auto-extension of freedom in the world,

which reunites man and nature in the same significance under the growing mode of 'care' (Jonas 1966: 99-107).

Having measured the degree to which life has been forgotten in modern thought, by establishing the proximity between the underlying basis of Gnosticism and existential analysis, Jonas therefore proposes, in contrast to ancient and modern nihilisms, an ontology of life at the intersection of an interpretation of the functioning of metabolism (the question of the organism) and the activity of mind (the question of freedom). On this basis, man is destined for a new task, which consists of taking charge, by means of an ethics of responsibility, certain challenges that technology poses to life.

## 2a. Moral Imperative and a Critical View of Technology

With mankind, the potential for freedom manifests itself in a critical stage at the highest level: when history replaces evolution in the phenomenology of life. From that point, it belongs to man to determine himself, insofar as he has the hitherto unavailable means to do so thanks to the possibility of moral choice, with reference to his own humanity and to that which has made it possible, i.e. living nature. Man's subjectivity establishes simultaneously his freedom, his power and his responsibility, and precisely because nature culminates in him (with the capabilities of imagination and reflexivity), he has the duty to preserve it, since he is at the same time the concrete continuity and the highest product of the evolution of life in the face of death. From this inheritance springs a new ethical imperative, which orders him to obey a moral obligation with regard to life and its essential horizon, that is to say the future (Jonas 1966: 282-84; Jonas 1984).

The first element necessary to this progression is that the ultimate end for life, intrinsic to nature, is also a value in itself and a good thing, i.e., grounding *bonum in esse*. The reasoning that seeks to establish that life and value can be unified in this way so as to finally order an obligation is subtle (Thorens 2001: 143-44; Pinsart 2002: 146-52). It requires recognizing the ultimate end of nature towards life, in the sense that the cause (nature) shall not be far removed from its effect (the production of ends in being); to establish the value of such a 'purposiveness' as good-in-itself, since the objective preeminence of being over non-being in the phenomenon of life establishes *ipso facto* that something 'ought to' exist, rather than nothing; and to conclude that humanity has a duty to respond to this call of being (Jonas 1984: 25-50; 51-78; 79-135).

If his demonstration of an 'ought-to-be' in being is problematic, it is not because Jonas' reasoning slides accidentally from the descriptive to the normative, but because, at the risk of being tautological, it is entirely

normative. The weakness comes rather from the fact that Jonas, refusing to solve the question by the means of religion, elaborates all his thinking on the hypothesis that a rational metaphysics is possible, although he does not really succeed in establishing this. Indeed religious thinking profoundly marks his metaphysics of life when he evokes, for example, the idea of a diffuse (divine?) 'Psyche' in all matter, 'a scattering of germinal appetitive inwardness through myriads of individual particles,' long before it attains crystallization in organized, individuated life forms. (Jonas 1984: 73).

A second element necessary to Jonas' argument is that nature, both outside ourselves and within, is now under threat with the magnitude of our powers (although we can still act and it is not too late). Here there is a much more substantial thesis, because both our planet, ecologically, as well as ourselves, genetically, are *empirically* altered by technology, which plays a central role in Jonas' practical philosophy. Even if it only represents a process of life embodied in man, a calling of humanity resulting from its practical use of the specific faculty of 'image-making' and 'eidetic control' (Jonas 1966: 157-82), technology has changed with modernity, both in its modality and in its extent. The unprecedented range of human action, once circumscribed in time and space, and the frenzied irresistibility of technological developments now threaten at one and the same time the biological substrate of humanity and the natural environment which sustains and conditions its existence (Jonas 1984: 1-24). But in doing this, technology has opened a whole new dimension and has distanced itself from life. Is there not here a contradiction with everything that the analysis of the phenomenon of life was seeking to demonstrate?

The response to this question can be broken down into two parts. On the one hand, technology possesses a duality in that it can lead to either good or evil, but that it tends to turn into evil simply by growing. The global and potentially catastrophic impacts of technology on the biosphere are clear indicators of this fact, in that their orders of magnitude in the long term, and their frequent irreversibility, illustrate the impact of the disproportionate success of Promethean power on the distant future.

But, on the other hand, there is the duality of man and his freedom. By the eidetic control that this duality supposes, man's own 'mediacy' to the environment in the phenomenology of life includes the possibility that he can rely on technology to the detriment of the 'ideas' of morality and metaphysics, but also that, for example, he can submit the power of his action to some ethical imperative. Man is free to destroy or to create, to act or to contemplate, provided that for Jonas there is a hierarchy in these 'trans-animality' modes of man (Pinsart 2002: 129-130).

Thus, the perpetuation of nature, in and around us, is now in question. But precisely for the reason that, with mankind, self-produced ends exist, the *dictum* that life itself makes on us (in that it matters that living nature is preserved, along with man at his eminent place in it) can assuredly rest on a power of its own, which is the ethical mastery of our technological power and its excesses. However, old ethics are not able to gain control over these new threats and traditional moral precepts can no longer contain human actions of such a novel scale, according to Jonas. The situation calls for a practical philosophical extension towards an ethic of responsibility (a solicitude recognized as a duty) in the direction of the future, which is the horizon of all existence.

## 2b. Responsibility for the Future, the Ethics of Fear, and Precaution

Because what matters is that the extraordinary gamble of being in the world, and in the first place its ultimate expression in mankind, should not be a failure, one of Jonas' formulations of the ethics of the future takes the following categorical imperative form: '*Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life.*' (Jonas 1984: 11) We must preserve the essence of humanity and the integrity of the world by exercising a 'power over power,' capable of maintaining, against our Promethean technology which has been blindly unleashed, the horizon of life and all its possibilities (Jonas 1984: 136-77).

At the basis of this new moral obligation, there must be, according to Jonas, a radical 'care' replacing the projections of hope, a 'heuristics of fear,' and the anticipation of the threat by the awareness that the worst is possible (Sève 1993). Not only does today's technology confer on us a previously unknown power, but it carries with it an excessive expansion of effects regarding the foreseeable future, and therefore outstrips what we are capable of predicting. As much as it depends on chains of causes and effects initiated by our actions, this is exactly the reason we ought to assume our new responsibility and an ethics of the future, an ethics *for* the future.

The heuristics of fear, as an instrument in the quest for goodness –insofar as the survival and the genuineness of being are at stake, invites us '*in the case of varying prognoses, to give ear to those that warn catastrophe*' (Jonas 1996: 111), but it may also take the form of a 'material metaphysics' which allows us to judge in advance, in a categorical mode, certain questions of technology by normatively outlining the 'image of man' we must preserve at all cost. The reach of these warnings, and so to speak their substance, is inscribed in their descriptions by a new science, which Jonas calls for in order to ground responsibility in the context of the

(probably irreducible) uncertainty of macro-technology. In his criticism of hope as the norm for our activities (Löwy 2008; Zafrani 2014), Jonas suggests that the modesty of goals that such a futurology, inscribed in responsibility, obliges in the first instance, as opposed to the immodesty of utopia, would permit genuine progress with 'caution.' (Jonas 1984: 178-204) For this reason, notably, it is possible to draw a parallel line between Jonas' thinking and the precautionary principle (Pinsart 2002; Pinsart 2007).

Thus does the imperative of responsibility, or 'responsibility principle', echo the precautionary principle, the former being a simple variation of the latter, or does it offer it a philosophical foundation for an application in the political and juridical sphere, in the framework of Jonasian thinking as a critique of technology and an ethics of nature? (Guéry and Lepage 2001; Ewald 1997). It is also true that the two 'principles' apply to public policy. In addition, the etymology of the German legal term *Vorsorgeprinzip* can offer an indication of the proximity between the spirit of environmental precaution and the responsibility principle, being a principle of 'care beforehand', referring to concern in advance for a person or a thing that is valued, but also for a particular interest, a moral attention, a solicitude.<sup>5</sup>

But the question of whether Jonas' thinking actually articulates the precautionary principle must rather be approached from the epistemology of risk. From this point of view, the two principles are far from close (Guillaume 2012). Regarding first of all the content, Jonas puts forward an ethics which gives profound substance to the spirit of precaution, making it a new and asymmetric responsibility which comes from the future and confronts us with the potential (of the) effects of contemporary actions. Instead of manifesting itself in a juridical and political principle of *risk management* in certain contexts, pre-caution constitutes a *general ethics* of the future, an absolute moral obligation today regarding tomorrow. Then, at the level of means, Jonas perceived that uncertainty could never be resolved, in contrast with the precautionary principle, which holds that its provisional measures will be reasonably adjusted in line with further scientific knowledge.

The solution Jonas proposes to guide action then consists of combining a full emotional vision of the future with the anticipation of limited intellectual knowledge, subsuming the uncertainty of science into the certainty of metaphysics by means of a 'heuristics of fear'. What we cannot know, we must imagine and fear (Sève 1990). This solution points out, on the one hand,

5 However, Jonas never uses the term *Vorsorgeprinzip*, but the term *Vorsicht*, translated as 'caution' in the American edition, and *précaution* or *prudence* in the French edition.

the political weakness of the Jonasian responsibility principle, whose democratic incarnation in the public space appropriate for its ethics to be effective is a question still to be thought through (Pommier 2013b) and, on the other hand, the substantive weakness of the actual content of the precautionary principle in as far as it is moderated by economics (Guillaume, 2012).

The precautionary principle accounts for political attempts of industrial societies to prevent certain environmental risks, according to an incremental and balanced logic which is peculiar to law, without waiting for beyond-doubt scientific knowledge (Bourg and Papaux 2015). The responsibility principle calls more firmly for a radical ethics. In focusing on worst-case scenarios (whose probability is not decisive being based, eventually, on absolute images of the future), the perspective of what is merely possible becomes sufficient.

The precautionary principle, in contrasting only the rational with the reasonable, is too weak from this point of view, and under the pretense of a flexible approach, its criticism of progress ends up marginalized, and only influences change to a relative degree. Human progress remains at the core of Jonas' thinking and of his responsibility ethics, but the paradigm rupture is more marked there because the precautionary principle, instead of completely illustrating the lesson of the pretense of the mastery of nature it is criticizing, is indeed a subtle version of it.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, if the well-intentioned attempt at a precautionary principle works on the political level, in that it allows more inclusive forms of government to explore the future, it is destined to fail in the Anthropocene because of the weakness of its content compared with the stakes involved (Guillaume 2015).

Inversely, because it is based on a genuine axiology theory which rests on a profound metaphysics, the responsibility principle supposes a much more substantial 'spirit of precaution', at the price, it is true, of a theological ontology wishing to be rational and of a practical heuristics which can complicate the putting in place of democratic procedures.

Drawing from a genuine critique of technology and a profound phenomenology of life, the Jonasian responsibility ethics is the daughter of ecological thought. It is also the expression of a superior form of freedom (which is in fact the only one), which is to say a self-limitation by the endurance of will. It thus provides to the 'finally unbound Prometheus' (Jonas 1984: 185) the basis of an ethics of compelling self-restraint 'in the face of the quasi-eschatological potentials of

our technological processes' (Jonas 1974: 18). By his mediation, Jonas allows us, perhaps, to respond to this imperative of being that we must 'help' living nature, and in this way, according to a certain view of the sacred, probably not to fail God.

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<sup>6</sup> For an assessment relative to the 'baconian-cartesian activism' of the precautionary principle, see Goffi 2000.

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