

Summary

The Negative Teleology of Hans Jonas

An Ethics for the Technological Society

Thirty years ago the concept of sustainability was still unknown, and its applicability in matters of technological development and care for the environment was but a distant prospect. Today it is a strong guiding principle in global politics and economic affairs. In spite of its frequent use and the normative weight attached to it, however, a consensus on its meaning and application is lacking. People still hold different opinions on what a sustainable society might look like, and which means and measures might be adequate or demanded to reach this future goal. The central role of the concept of sustainability indicates the undiminished relevance of Hans Jonas's ethics for the technological age in the twenty-first century. For even though he never uses the word, we yet have to understand his major work 'The Imperative of Responsibility' as a philosophical inquiry into the concept of sustainability. Just as we recognize Jonas's formula of the "prevalence of the bad over the good prognosis" (IR 31) as the precursor of what is now commonly known as *the precautionary principle*, so we have to approach his critique of utopia not merely as a disapproval of the means and goals of modern technology, but as a quest for an alternative to the belief in progress. At the end of the book he presents the virtue of "modesty" (IR 201), together with hope and fear, as one of the prime admonitions of an ethics of responsibility. In retrospect, we may call modesty a key virtue in what has since become appreciated as the ideal of sustainability.

Jonas's contribution will prove to be of crucial importance in the political debate on technological development that lies ahead, because the current tendency to *fix* the actual energy crisis and the problems of climate change by technological innovations creates a relapse into utopian thinking and reduces sustainability to a purely technological problem. Sustainability should not be

taken as a predicate of a highly efficient car engine running on bio fuels and equipped with a soot filter. Although urgently needed such kinds of environment friendly technological innovations still approach nature as our adversary. Instead, according to Jonas, our technologies will only become sustainable when we resign ourselves to the present, which he terms “the genuine *present* of man” (IR 200). His general message may be summed up in the moral principle *primum non nocere*; the use of technology should never run counter to its final goal, which is the survival of the moral community or, as Jonas puts it, “the existence of mere *candidates* for a moral order.” (IR 10) So sustainability is not a property of certain kinds of technologies, but the quality of a moral community that is capable to reconcile itself with the limits of nature and the limitedness of life. A community that knows how to say “No” to insatiable demands for more safety, better health and less poverty and that will save its trusted heritage “unstunted through the perils of the times” (IR 202), because its citizens are able to discuss, discern and decide what really are violations of, or threats to, the integrity of man or living nature. The moral community will survive when it is, on the one hand, divided by positive ideals, but, on the other hand, reunited by a negative consensus.

In chapter one, I explain that ‘The Imperative of Responsibility’ needs to be viewed as a bundle of essays, just like Jonas’s other main publications, aside from his two volume study on the Gnosis. I summarize its contents by discussing the original, earlier published essays from which the book is composed.

In chapter two, I focus on three main points of critique which arise from secondary literature, indicating obstacles to a clear understanding of Jonas’s ethics for the technological age. These concern the topics of anthropocentrism (“Why ought mankind to exist indefinitely into the future?”), justice (“Which conditions of humanity and what kind of society are demanded or acceptable for the survival of mankind?”) and rights (“Will Jonas honour or renounce principles of liberal democracy?”).

The third chapter deals with Jonas’s philosophy of nature. First an overview is presented of his interpretation of metabolism as the molecular interaction of mind and matter. In ‘The Phenomenon of Life’ he describes the single-celled organism as a minimum unit of dependency and self-sufficiency. As the organism gains more abilities to move and to feel, a world of space and time unfolds. Through a phenomenological interpretation of evolution, Jonas develops an immanent theory of creation. In the third and fourth chapter of ‘The Imperative of Responsibility’ Jonas defends the thesis that the philosophical return to a teleological idea of nature supports the attribution of objective value to living nature. I assess this claim and draw the conclusion that he does not commit a naturalistic fallacy because he does not place moral value on any particular end in nature, but only on the general capacity of nature to generate value at all. However, this theoretical foundation of the moral integrity of liv-

ing nature is so abstract and general that it seems too far removed from a practically relevant ethics of technology.

In chapter four, I approach the practical morality of Hans Jonas from the opposite direction, by looking for a common ground in his medical ethical case studies. First, I investigate his verdict on the use of patients in medical experiments, second, his rejection of the redefinition of death as brain death, third, his ban on the cloning of humans, and fourth, his nuanced stance on eugenics. As the central moral rule in these four cases, I discern the prohibition to define the value of a human life. In the essay 'Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective', Jonas relates this prohibition directly to the biblical proposition that man was made in God's image. By exception, this essay was addressed to a Jewish audience. Thereafter, however, I point out some passages in 'The Imperative of Responsibility', most explicitly in his critique of utopia, where we find the same motive.

In chapter five, the missing link between the foundations and the applications of Jonas's ethics is addressed. The unifying element is the concept of responsibility. The end (goal) of responsibility is the continuity of responsibility and the object of responsibility is the integrity of man and living nature. Because, according to Jonas, responsibility has arisen from nature and is concerned with vulnerable nature, his ethics is teleological. However, it is a negative teleology, because the object of his ethics, the vulnerable integrity of nature, remains largely unspecified: only a threat to the integrity of man or living nature reveals to us a particular image of integrity, which tells us what to do, what to rescue and preserve. As the concept of integrity is just as wide and open as the concept of responsibility, a supplementary procedure is needed to specify the normative content of Jonas's ethics. In 'The Imperative of Responsibility', he shows two ways to do so. First, I discuss the future-oriented responsibility of the statesman, which Jonas formulates as a kind of sustainability test, and second, the heuristics of fear. Neither, however, proves capable of delivering conclusive evidence. The participants in the political debate over controversial technologies will have to decide somehow for themselves whether a certain presumed threat of a violation of integrity really needs to be taken seriously or not. According to Jonas, every individual carries the intuitive knowledge of integrity in his heart. However, for lack of an externalizable criterion, the heuristics of fear turns the political debate into a free market of fear and trembling.

In chapter six, the question is raised what the theological essays of Hans Jonas contribute to his ethics of technology. I present the metaphysical foundations of his ethics as a secular equivalent to the Jewish-Christian doctrine of creation. As we see there, Jonas returns to the early rationalist metaphysical models of Thomas Aquinas and Maimonides. I draw comparisons between the negative teleology of Hans Jonas and the negative theology of Maimonides. Partly because of the fact that Jonas's good friend Leo Strauss was the most

renowned Maimonides scholar of the twentieth century, we may assume that the remarkable similarities found are not coincidental. As Jonas defends the moral thesis that living nature is not indifferent, but carries objective value as a manifestation of (self-)creation, he has to explain why the limitedness of life is good as well, which implies that he finally has to come up with an answer to the classical metaphysical question of why God created illness, death and evil. Jonas reaches back to the metaphysics of Maimonides, but in the crucial part of his theodicy, his reflections about Auschwitz, he departs from the traditional answer and changes theodicy into anthropodicy: not God, but man has to carry the burden of responsibility. Finally, we look upon his eschatology as an alternative to the modern belief in progress. According to Jonas, the result of history will be an eternal present, the transcendent present of God in the sum total of human responsibility.

The last chapter includes an evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of Jonas's ethics for the technological age. I refute the rather one-dimensional, lamenting tone of his analysis of the autonomous, cumulative dynamics of technological development. An ethicist should always take arguments seriously, and accusing your opponents of "nihilism" (IR 23) is not in accordance with that basic rule. Alerting and warning people is all right however. Next I explain his rejection of the belief in technological progress as a quest for a new ideal of sustainability, and the free market of fear and trembling as the social forum where the philosophical discussion on the human essence is restored to its proper place. Further, I discuss the historical dimension of Jonas's teleological ethics. The sensitivity of responsibility for the integrity of man and living nature, of which 'The Imperative of Responsibility' is more a sign than a cause, has already since the fifties of the late twentieth century been a remarkable trait of the technological age. I show that Jonas, in spite of his clear reluctance towards a Hegelian and Marxist positive historical teleology, still has to acknowledge the discovery of responsibility and the revelation of the integrity of man and living nature that was mediated by the ecological crisis as a new phase in Western history. Finally, I add that handing over responsibility from one generation to the next is impossible without giving up power, like in an act of *kenosis*, and that such a deliverance of responsibility requires trust in others.