

HUMANITY'S RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD NATURE

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As a philosopher, I have tried to find those arguments in contemporary philosophy that can justify humanity's responsibility towards nature, and I think I have found a few valid ones in Hans Jonas' book *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (original German edition: *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, Frankfurt a. M. 1979; English translation: Chicago University Press, 1984). Born in Germany in 1903, Jonas was Heidegger's philosophy student and Bultmann's theology student at Marburg. There he met Hannah Arendt, with whom he remained in touch his whole life. Being Jewish, he left Germany in 1933 for England, where he enlisted in the Jewish Brigade of the British army and took part in the Second World War; he then went to Palestine, where he took part in the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. Finally, he moved to Canada but took up residence in the United States, where he died in 1993.

Like other German philosophers who studied under Heidegger (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Joachim Ritter, Hannah Arendt), Jonas was inspired by Aristotle. However, unlike them, he did not focus on practical philosophy (ethics and politics), but on ontology and metaphysics, intended essentially as teleological ontology, which is different from the one cultivated by the Thomists, for example, because it is not interested in determining the ultimate foundation of reality. In Aristotelian terms we should speak of physics or philosophy of nature rather than metaphysics intended as a search for first causes, that is as theology, though of a rational nature. This is undoubtedly an original aspect of Jonas' book, which makes it stand out from all the other treatises on philosophical ethics circulating today.

Thanks to the competence Jonas acquired during his previous biology studies, his book, whose title controversially contrasts with the one by Marxist Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (The Principle of Hope), focuses primarily on the fact that progress in science and technology has made each individual interdependent on all others, so that humanity's behaviour today will have enormous consequences even for future humanity. For these reasons, Jonas points to the current insufficiency of a purely individualistic ethics, which only addresses the analysis of individual behaviour, as did most traditional ethics, and Kant's in particular. He states the need for an "ethics of the future",

based on rational principles and therefore capable of being demonstrated to everyone. The only possible foundation of this new ethics is – according to Jonas – the existence of finalism in nature, both at the human and at the infra-human level, i.e. of a living world in general, from which it follows that the actions of individuals are indeed oriented to a finality.

In general, this finality is the preservation of life, that is, the protection of the species. According to Jonas, this is also a value, it is good, because being is preferable to nothingness (since the latter can't be assessed), and for this reason is an "ought to be", i.e. a compelling norm also from the moral point of view. Thus we are in the presence of a passage from "is" to "ought", which however does not violate "Hume's law", because "ought" is implicitly accepted in the premises of reasoning and therefore immediately justifies the normative nature of the conclusions. At first glance, this may seem like a re-edition of the traditional demonstration, which dates back to scholastic philosophy, that *ens et bonum convertuntur*, but in actual fact Jonas uses some very effective considerations, such as when he writes, «For when asked for a single instance [...] where the coincidence of "is" and "ought" occurs, we can point at the most familiar sight. The newborn, whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an "ought" to the world around, namely, to take care of him» (p. 131 of the English translation).

Of course, the proposal of a metaphysical foundation of ethics is destined to meet with, and in fact already has, the preconditional reservations of those who consider any form of finalism the expression of an ingenuous anthropomorphism, exchanging, as it had already happened to Descartes and Spinoza, the intrinsic finalism inspired by Aristotle with the extrinsic finalism inspired by the Stoics or by Christianity, and by those who consider any kind of metaphysics unacceptable, dreading possible theological, authoritarian and intolerant consequences. In my opinion, however, this shows the importance of Jonas' book, which demonstrates that environmental and bioethical problems can be solved only by an ethics based on metaphysics (intended as ontology), which is a sort of demonstration a posteriori, i.e. starting from the ethical consequences, of the need for a metaphysics.

To this end, it is worth noting a few particular arguments developed by the author, such as the one according to which the negation of metaphysics presupposes the absolutisation of scientific knowledge, which is, in turn, a metaphysical conception (from bad metaphysics) of knowledge, or the one according to which the exclusion of each passage from "is" to "ought" presupposes a neutralization and a reduction of the concept of being, which is every bit as metaphysical. Moreover, worthy of note is Jonas' refusal to turn to religious faith as a foundation of ethics, a refusal motivated by the fact

that «Faith is not there on command [...] metaphysics on the other hand has always been a business of reason, and reason can be set to work upon demand». Therefore, «the worldly philosopher struggling for an ethics, must first of all hypothetically allow the *possibility* of a rational metaphysics, despite Kant's contrary verdict, if the rational is not pre-emptively determined by the standards of positive science» (p. 45 of the English translation). This seems to me a good example of layman's ethics.

Another reason that makes Jonas' book interesting is the fact that, as well as being a meta-ethics book, it is also a treatise of applied ethics, as most moral philosophy books tend to be now that the tragic practical problems posed by the new technologies have given back to philosophers the role of counsellors that scientists and politicians listen to and sometimes consult. Indeed, the compulsory conservation of life is placed by Jonas on the grounds of an ethics of responsibility, which goes beyond (to use the well-known distinction introduced by Max Weber) any ethics of simple conviction, considered by Jonas as purely individualistic, formalistic and, all things considered, egoistic.

According to Jonas, present humanity is obliged to respond to the above-mentioned obligation especially vis-à-vis future generations, whose possibility of survival it can endanger through science and technology (destruction of the environment and genetic engineering). In actual fact, responsibility is elevated to a new ethical principle, called "Principle of Responsibility", analogous to Bloch's "Principle of Hope". Jonas, however, believes that the former is more valid than the latter, because the Principle of Hope, in the intent of ensuring future humanity's happiness, leads to the sacrifice of present humanity, as is proper of all revolutionary utopias, whereas the Principle of Responsibility, which is content to guarantee the physical survival both of present and of future humanity, does not favour any moment of history over others, i.e. it envisages not only the "not yet" but also the "already always".

Although these theses might seem akin to political conservatism – as it was pointed out several times – what Jonas really wants to preserve is not a specific political or economic and social structure, but, to put it simply, life itself. And although controversy against Bloch and utopism in general may now seem dated, especially after what happened in 1989 (even though the fall of the Soviet Empire contradicted "real" socialism rather than Bloch's utopistic socialism), there is no doubt that only an ethics of responsibility, such as Jonas', can justify "caring" (a term which clearly originates with Heidegger) for future generations. Indeed, on the basis of a utilitarian ethics, only inspired by the criterion of reciprocity, what is the point of worrying about future generations? On the basis of a similar ethics, does it make sense

to ask – as comedian Groucho Marx apparently did – “what have future generations done for me?” But also on the basis of a Kantian ethics, how can future generations aspire today to the dignity of “people”, that is, of rational subjects that one has to answer for?

However, Jonas’ reference to the responsibility of parents as an emblematic example of the Responsibility Principle, instead of being paternalistic, as it may seem, suits the problem of future generations perfectly. Indeed, for those of us who are still young, future generations are made up of our children (who exist already, and therefore are people) and, in any case, by our children’s children. The reference to the responsibility of politicians is also appropriate. Let us hope that the principle of *dum fiat iustitia, pereat mundus* (as long as one acts fairly, the world can go to ruin) that Kant referred to, without fully approving it, has no value for them. This is a typical expression of an individualist ethics, of which Kant himself can be taken as an example, as a celibate university professor and “private citizen”, i.e. without family, social or political responsibilities.

Jonas’ book, however, also has its limits, which are clearly identified and probably derive from his education under Heidegger, i.e. essentially late Romantic, pessimistic, naturalistic, aesthetic, inclined to “let the being be”, not to intervene, not to transform, not to try and improve things for fear of making them worse. The signs of this tendency can be recognised clearly in the fact that he reduces the goal of nature and of man to pure survival, intended in an almost exclusively biological sense. In this case, however, Jonas is not at all Aristotelian, because Aristotle considered that the goal of man and of the *polis* (which is the “perfect society”), is not just “living”, that is, surviving (which is the goal of the family and of the village, i.e. of imperfect communities), but it is “living well”, which is what nowadays we would call a good quality of life. For Aristotle, this consists in the fulfilment of oneself and of one’s own full capabilities, first of all the most specifically human ones (taking for granted, however, health, sufficient financial means, good looks, a good family and good friends, i.e. conditions for survival).

Those who accuse Jonas of biologism, naturalism and conservatism thus have it easy, although pacifists at all costs should not have the right to do so, because they place the conservation of life above any other value, and neither should the advocates of a “thin” theory of ethics, for example the ethics of simple justice (by John Rawls), who consider it the only task of politics to guarantee purely negative conditions, such as a minimum wage (survival) and freedom, leaving each person to choose what his or her happiness should consist in (without considering that those who ignore their capabilities cannot even wish to achieve them).

From this point of view an economist such as Amartya K. Sen is certainly more progressive and “Aristotelian” when he suggests a “thicker” theory of ethics, that is not just an ethics of justice or survival, but an ethics of “good”, where “good” is meant as the complete achievement of all of man’s capabilities, his complete “fulfilment”. This of course implies the willingness to transform the existing (not only letting him be), a political commitment in favour of emancipation (not only of conservation), a certain dose of optimism and, perhaps, also of utopia (without which history cannot be made). In this sense, even the Constitution of the United States of America is Aristotelian when it lists “the pursuit of happiness” among the rights of man that must be guaranteed by the political society. This concept, in fact, derives from Aristotle’s *Politics* and reached Thomas Jefferson through his correspondence with Joseph Priestley, a “Unitarian” philosopher who had received it by the Sozzini brothers, “Unitarians” who lived in Poland in the XVI century, who in turn had learned it from the Aristotelian masters of Padua University.¹

¹ Cfr. A. Stella, *Influssi dell’aristolismo veneto nella genesi del socinanesimo*, in L. Olivieri (ed.), *Aristotelismo veneto e scienza moderna*, Padova, Antenore, 1983, pp. 993-1007; Id., *Influssi sociniani nella genesi della costituzione americana: Joseph Priestley e Thomas Jefferson*, in «Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rendiconti della classe di Scienze morali», s.VIII, vol. XXXVIII, nn. 5-6, maggio-giugno 1988, pp. 231-249.