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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
PHI2015-1538**

**The New Challenges and the Role of
Philosophy according to
Hans Jonas**

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Michelis, A.M. (2015). "The New Challenges and the Role of Philosophy according to Hans Jonas", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: PHI2015-1538.

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URL: www.atiner.gr
URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm
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ISSN: **2241-2891**
29/07/2015

The New Challenges and the Role of Philosophy According to Hans Jonas

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Abstract

“In spite of everything, my hope ultimately rests on human reason”, Hans Jonas wrote. Philosophy enables us to interpret individual experience from a wider perspective, going beyond the immediate and forging essential connections between the various voices in order to find common solutions we can use to design and create a better world for everyone. This is where the power of human thinking lies, the power that has given rise to the civilizations that value life. The challenges of the third millennium, such as the globalization of the markets without the globalization of rights, religious struggles for cultural supremacy, and the environmental crisis, to name but a few of the main ones, cannot be solved – as it presently appears - purely by applying the vision that reduces the world and human beings to their exchange value, to a question of money.

Faced with this situation it appears that we need to return to a vision of politics based on serving the common good and to fortify the political arena with the awareness that the destiny of the individual cannot be regarded as separate from that of the society he or she lives in, the nation and, today, the international context; above all, it cannot be separated from the health of the planet we inhabit.

Keywords: Ethics, Mankind, Nature, Freedom, Responsibility.

Acknowledgements: Our thanks to Professor Patricia Hanna.

The Issues of Our Times

The history of philosophical theory shows that the greatest minds of every age never shied away from seeking answers to the great questions of their times. Paradoxically, metaphysicians, seekers of the supreme principles, tried to provide positive guidelines to shape the destiny of their people and humanity. Their answers, which have raised human awareness, contain both historical truths and eternal truths that have always been part of our being.¹

In the mystery of what we call ‘classicism’, current and past events intertwine to such an extent that the words of classical authors have struck both the minds and the hearts of mankind over years, centuries, and down through the millennia, continuing to be relevant and surprising for their acuteness and profundity. Even while dealing with more specific tasks, such thinkers knew how to transcend the topic to reach a universal message and comfort us with the possibility of finding once again the path to the renewal of our ancient and, in part, decaying civilization faced with the decline of Modernity.²

The challenges of the third millennium: the globalization of markets without the globalization of human rights, the struggle between religions for domination, and the environmental crisis, to mention but the most apparent problems, cannot be solved, as the complex present state of the world shows us, purely by relying on the neo-liberal view of the world, which reduces the world and human beings to mere goods, to a monetary value. It is already more than evident that the capitalist system with no limitations is not applicable worldwide, since global resources simply are not enough to transform the whole world into a consumer society, nor to support the constant output of consumer goods typical of industrialized countries.

Faced with these simple facts, the time has come to return to politics, understood as the search for the common good, giving it strength and vigor based on the consideration that individuals cannot do without the society in which they live, the nation, and, nowadays, the international community, and above all, ignoring the state of health of the earth upon which we live.

Philosophy cannot keep aloof from such challenges, as it holds the true knowledge, which is essential for the present task. Philosophy is the instrument that can transform the individual’s experience into wider views, going beyond the here and now; pulling together the threads of the problem and providing a common framework to outline a project to make this world a better place for all. This has always been the strength of human thought, which gave rise to human civilization. Much has been done in history, too much at times, and now the situation needs rebalancing, the priority being to take care of all human life and of nature as a whole, committing ourselves to its continuation.

At a closer look, it can be seen that environmental disasters represent the most serious threat to humanity in the near future. Global warming, the destruction of the ozone layer, the resulting climate change, the melting polar

¹ See Jonas H. 2010, *Problems of Freedom / Problemi di Libertà*, edited by E. Spinelli in collaboration with A. Michelis, tr. by A. Michelis, Torino: Nino Aragno Editore.

² See Mori M. 2001, *Libertà, necessità, determinismo*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

icecaps, land erosion, water and air pollution, the dangers due to loss of biodiversity, excessive deforestation, food and energy shortages, and exponential population growth are all signs of the ecological time-bomb waiting to explode.

How did we become to such a threat to the very existence of the planet on which we live, the *oikos*, this indivisible unit of natural and cultural elements without which we could never be what we are? How can ecologically sustainable development be defined and encouraged? How can the mass of people be educated to appreciate quality and not quantity, promoting the ascetic view necessary for a more equitable and sustainable distribution of the available resources? How does one learn to listen to the call for freedom and solidarity, natural and peculiar to human beings? Such questions overcome the simple gratification of all our needs, and are the key to reaffirming the dignity of the person over mammon.

Such are the crucial issues of our time.¹ Our ability to solve them, finding new avenues of thinking and suggesting courses of action to propose, will decide our future.

A Renewed Engagement in Science and Technology

Hans Jonas addressed these problems, and devoted a large part of his life to a theoretical reflection on the solutions to the practical problems of our days. He was aware that he could not provide a definitive or complete answer, but a series of analyses of crucial problems,² together with the identification of potential corrective courses, always with humankind in mind. Despite the near impossibility of his task, he never lost heart before the fatigue of conceptualization.³ He was well aware that the concept is the fruit of the greatest human capacity: the ability to extrapolate from experience and make it universal, “in spite of everything, in the final analysis my hope is based on human reason”,⁴ he wrote. He never lost faith in the sublime hypothesis of finding a common source of feeling, perception, reasoning, and love in human

¹ See Höhle V. 1991, *Philosophie der ökologischen Krise*, München: C.H. Beck; Sachs W. 1999, *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development*, Halifax: Fernwood; McNeil J.R. 2001, *Something New under the Sun: an Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*, London: Penguin; Sunstein C. R. 2003, *Why Society Needs Dissent*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) – London (England): Harvard University Press; Isenburg T. (edited by) 2004, *Il cambiamento climatico. Ultima chiamata?*, Torino: Claudiana; Scalon R. (edited by) 2006, *Le radici storico-filosofiche della democrazia. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi. Savigliano, 30 settembre 2004 – Torino 1-2 ottobre 2004*, Torino: Trauben.

² See Jonas H. 1973, *Über die Thematik einer Philosophie des Lebens*, in *Organismus und Freiheit. Ansätze zur einer philosophischen Biologie*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp. 17-18.

³ See Michelis A. 2013, “Identity, Freedom and Relationships of Responsibility in Hans Jonas’ Philosophy”, in *Problemata. International Journal of Philosophy*, Universidade Federal Da Paraíba, João Pessoa – PB, Brasil, Vol. 04, n. 01, 2013, pp. 13-37.

⁴ Jonas H. 1987, *Technik und Pflicht*, in *Wissenschaft als persönliches Erlebnis*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp. 45-46.

beings, signs of the human essence, which are expressed in the universal nature of the *logos*. Individual experience and the universal meaning merge in the concept, which through the word presents the encountered thing, *die Sache*, and the capacity to share these ideas recalls the meaning of brotherhood, equality, and creativity from the depths of our human being.

He argues that the corrective action needed to prevent the collective race towards the great environmental catastrophe “continually demands a new commitment to scientific and technical innovation”.¹ Therefore, a renewed effort to apply reason and love must be characterized primarily by attention to the consequences of the application of scientific knowledge and technology to the individual, society, and nature.² He, unlike his mentor Heidegger, understands that modern science is, in any case, indispensable even to carry out this change of course.³

Scientific research and its applications are essential to transform the prevailing capitalist culture of individual gain into an economic culture for the ecosystem of the planet as a whole. Indeed, such research provides us with the relevant data, which increase our capacity to shape our own views, and to positively face challenges, if they are used wisely and prudently. Practical actions, however, depend for their coherency and cohesion on the theoretical idea that guides them; this, in turn, is the result of wise and contemplative reflection.

The wave of technological and economic change, starting from the XVII century, initially spread throughout Europe and then to other Countries, and was supported at the beginning by modern metaphysics theories. Heidegger⁴ masterfully demonstrated so, although he later rejected metaphysics, science and technology. In a different way from Heidegger,⁵ Jonas’ attitude stresses the value of reason, metaphysics, and science, which have all proved extraordinarily effective in our effort to dominate nature; now, however, they cannot but take responsibility for guiding that power, limiting it. Anyway, it is thanks to metaphysics, science and technology that a part of the human race undertook, on the one hand, one of the greatest attempts at self-clarification

¹ *Ibidem*

² See Michelis A. 2014, “The Extended, Uncertain Confine of Human Freedom and Hans Jonas’ Point of View”, in *Problemata. International Journal of Philosophy*, Universidade Federal Da Paraíba, GP Hermes/PPGF/UFPB/CNPq, João Pessoa – PB, Brasil, Vol. 05, n. 02 2, 2014, pp. 99-124.

³ See Michelis A. 2011, “La questione della tecnica: evoluzioni di matrici heideggeriane nel pensiero di Hannah Arendt e di Hans Jonas”, in *Problemata. International Journal of Philosophy*, Universidade Federal Da Paraíba, João Pessoa – PB, Brasil, Vol. 02, n. 01, 2011, pp. 27-51.

⁴ See Heidegger M. (1950) 1963, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*, in *Holzwege*, Frankfurt a/M: Vittorio Klostermann, pp. 69-104.

See Heidegger M. 1954, *Die Frage nach der Technik*, in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Tübingen: Günther Neske Pfullingen, pp. 13-44.

⁵ See Anders G. – Arendt H. – Jonas H. – Löwith K. – Strauss L. 1988, *Su Heidegger. Cinque voci ebraiche*, edited by Volpi F., Roma: Donzelli; Wolin R. 2003, *Heidegger’s Children. Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas and Herbert Marcuse*, Princeton (New Jersey): Princeton University Press.

and, on the other hand, one of the most marvelous adventures of knowledge, communication, and the use of knowledge in the interaction with the environment.

What is needed then is an ethical and political commitment, but above all an agreement on what this commitment must concern itself with.¹ We need a new shared imperative that may no longer be a categorical absolute, perhaps even hypothetical, as long as we can agree on the goal.

Is saving life on earth in all its forms, insomuch as it depends on our behavior, a sufficient goal? Would an apocalyptic scenario force us to find a synergy of intent and action to respect life? Can the fear of the impending catastrophe shore up our disintegrating social cohesion and prevent its consequences, which, not by chance, appear in the final phases of every civilization and are now observable in our societies?

Rethinking Practical Philosophy

Science and modern technology have extended their capacity for action to the interior of nature, in dimensions that traditional ethics are no longer able to govern. The amazing artificial processes that human beings are capable of setting in motion and producing even in a cumulative way come forward with consequences that are still largely unpredictable and in some cases, perhaps, irreversible, and they make the issue of the taking on of a politically adequate responsibility in the face of these new scenarios of freedom a priority. Jonas writes:

“Once it could be said *Fiat justitia, pereat mundus*, ‘Let justice be done, and may the world perish’ – where ‘world’, of course, meant the renewable enclave in the imperishable whole. Not even rhetorically can the like be said anymore when the perishing of the whole through the doings of man – be they just or unjust – has become a real possibility. Issues never legislated come into the purview of the laws which the total city must give itself so that there will be a world for the generations of man to come”.²

The unexpected vulnerability of nature – which manifested itself through the consequences that we are experiencing in the damage caused by technological development and by demographic expansion – has modified the very perception that we have of ourselves as causal factors, not only in the

¹ See Höslé V. 2001/2002, “Ontology and Ethics in Hans Jonas”, in *The Philosophy of Hans Jonas*, special issue, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 23, n. 1, New York: New School for Social Research, pp. 31-50.

² Jonas H. 1979, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Frankfurt a/M: Insel Verlag, p. 33; Id. 1984, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, tr. by Jonas H. – Herr D., Chicago: The University of Chicago, p. 10.

urban environment, which we have built, but also in the natural environment that surrounds us. Thus, ecology was born on the basis of the acquired awareness that the biosphere, partially subjected to our power, is in our care, and nature has become the object of human responsibility. And this is even more important since the applied technology of human beings has become capable of controlling human genetics.¹ In fact, human beings have reached the point of being able to manipulate evolutionary processes according to their own projects of amelioration and transformation.² Jonas warns:

“Whether we have the right to do it, whether we are qualified for the creative role, is the most serious question that can be posed to man finding himself suddenly in possession of such fateful powers. Who will be the image-makers, by what standards, and on the basis of what knowledge? Also, the question of the moral right to experiment on future human beings must be asked. These and similar questions, which demand an answer before we embark on a journey into the unknown, show most vividly how far our powers to act are pushing us beyond the terms of all former ethics”.³

He affirms that a moral theory that wishes to respond to such questions cannot exempt itself from coming up with practical obligations, not only to other human beings, near and far in space, but to our descendants, near and far in time.⁴ Today, rather than an anthropocentric ethic, it is necessary to produce a planetarian ethic and an ethic of our descendants rather than just our neighbours: an ethic that governs the unprecedented range of our knowledge and action. Jonas holds that the prospect of natural disasters as a result of unregulated technological utopianism can help bring forth a sort of heuristic of fear, leading us to wisely re-appropriate the ancient virtue of prudence.⁵ What is needed above all is to be aware that we find ourselves in an era in which great power is united with an ethical vacuum, and our great capacities are accompanied by scant knowledge of purpose. With such an awareness, it is necessary to search for an ethic of foresight and responsibility in proportion to the expanded realities with which we must deal today and in the near future.

¹ See Jonas H. 1974, I.5 *Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects*, I.6 *Against the Stream: Comments on the Definition and Redefinition of Death*, I.7 *Biological Engineering – A Preview*, in *Philosophical Essays. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice-Hall, pp. 105-167.

² See Jonas H. 1985, *Technik, Medizin und Ethik. Zur Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung*, Frankfurt a/M: Insel Verlag.

³ Jonas H. 1979, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, cit., pp. 52-53; Id. 1984, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, cit., p. 21.

⁴ See Jonas H. 1979, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, cit. pp. 84-91; Id. 1984, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, cit., pp. 38-43.

⁵ See Jonas H. 1979, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, cit. pp. 70-71; Id. 1984, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, cit., pp. 31-32.

The necessity of the continuation of the earth and of nature, on which and in which we live, and of a human race worthy of such a name, must be recognized as a general axiom, or an auspicious condition, capable of gathering unanimous consent.

“The *presence of man in the world* had been a first and unquestionable given, from which all idea of obligation in human conduct started out. Now it has itself become an *object* of obligation: the obligation namely to ensure the very premise of all obligation, that is, the *foothold* for a moral universe in the physical world – the existence of mere *candidates* for a moral order. This entails, among other things, the duty to preserve this physical world in such a state that the conditions for that presence remain intact; which in turn means protecting the world’s vulnerability from what could imperil those very conditions”.¹

Of course – Jonas observes – the sacrifice of the future in favour of the present on a merely logical plane is no more confutable than that of the present in favour of the future, but only in this latter case does the possibility of continuation exist. Kant’s categorical imperative to “act in such a way that your greatest will may be always valid in every time as a principle of universal legislation”² invokes an agreement of reason with itself as a test of the private choice of the individual in the present without necessarily considering its consequences.³ This no longer suffices today: human power has grown so much, and it is impossible to disregard the consequences of action.⁴ Today a different principle is required: that of the act, with its effects, in relation to the very continuation of human activity in the future. In this way, Jonas formulates a guideline that is suitable for our times:

“Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life’; or expressed negatively: ‘Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life’; or simply: ‘Do not compromise the

¹ Jonas H. 1979, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, cit., p. 34; Id. 1984, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, cit. p. 10.

² Kant I. (1785 -1788) 2000, *Der Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, erster Teil: *Elementarlehre der reinen praktischen Vernunft*, erstes Buch: *Die Analytik der reinen praktischen Vernunft*, erstes Hauptstück, § 7, in *Werkausgabe in 12 Bänden: VII*, herausgegeben von Weischedel W., Frankfurt a/M - Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.

³ See Mori M. (edited by) 1990, *La filosofia di Kant*, Torino: Loescher; Id. 2008, *La pace e la ragione. Kant e le relazioni internazionali: diritto, politica, storia*, Bologna: il Mulino 2008; Id. 2013, “Kant and Historical Knowledge”, in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 34, n. 1, New York: New School for Social Research, pp. 21–42.

⁴ See Roviello A.M. 1993, *L’impératif kantien face aux technologies nouvelles*, in Hottois G.-Pinsart M. G. (coord. sc.) *Hans Jonas. Nature et responsabilité* [Annales de l’Institut de Philosophie de l’Université de Bruxelles], Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, pp. 49-68.

conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth'; or, again turned positive: 'In your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will'".¹

Conclusion

The shared destinies of human beings and nature – both in danger – require us to deal with the preservation of their integrity, and to rediscover the proper dignity of nature and the role of humans as 'custodians' of being. An ethic which seeks to take on such terribly urgent problems for our times can only be nourished – with the aim of being able to find effective responses – on the one hand, by hope, which is in any case the condition of every action, and on the other hand, by fear, as an urgent stimulus which leads us to prudence in the use of our power and not to the relinquishment, renouncement, of it.²

In the present circumstances of late modern times, which, on the one hand, feature the starkness and sterility of nihilism and, on the other, the irrational terror of fanaticism, it is up to ethics – without the help of the category of the sacred– to take on the arduous task of laying out rational, and new, universally communicable pathways. History asks ethics to provide guiding indications, which can be predictive and useful for the behaviour of the individual, for the community, and for nature as a whole, by taking the continuation of the world and of its life forms into account.

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¹ Jonas H. 1979, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, cit. p. 36; Id. 1984, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, cit., p. 11.

² See Michelis A. 2007, *Libertà e Responsabilità, la filosofia di Hans Jonas*, Roma: Città Nuova.

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