



A Reading of the conception of man in Hans Jonas' works: Between Nature and Responsibility. An Environmental Ethics Approach

By/Par

Dr. Damien Bazin

University of Versailles Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines
(C3ED / CNRS). * France.
damienbazin@yahoo.fr

ABSTRACT.

Hans Jonas is considered one of the principal leaders of the ecological doctrine that fights against the hegemony of technical power upon society. We will study the conception of man in Jonas' ideology through the lens of nature and of responsibility. He brandishes the specter of disaster ("heuristics of fear") as a guard against technological excesses. He appeals to a prospective, universal and categorical responsibility to protect nature and to save future generations. Jonas considers responsibility as a method of anticipating the threat to that which is vulnerable, ephemeral, and perishable. Thus, the responsibility that Jonas decrees implies an ethics of conservation. Jonas' writings aim to procure a new dimension of acting, which necessitates an ethics of foresight and responsibility.

Key words: Ecology – Ethics – Nature – Ontology – Responsibility – Technique (Technology)

* C3ED: Center for Economics and Ethics in the Environment and Development; CNRS: National Center for Scholarly Research.

INTRODUCTION

“Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life” or “Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of future possibility of such life,” (Jonas 1984, 11). With this imperative, Jonas wants to conform to the new dimension of responsibility. He states that the value of something is only noticed when it is threatened with extinction. Thus, this potential extinction motivates Jonas to use threats (the heuristics of fear), which he considers as enlightened catastrophism. Indeed, in his opinion we must *track down the danger before it's too late*. If not, the potential disappearance of the human species will become a real and irreversible destruction. Numerous disciplines such as philosophy and ecology have taken up Jonas' ideology in order to adapt it to the object of their study. In ecology, the place of the human is fundamental; it is therefore necessary to have a clear vision of Jonas' conception of man.

This reading of Jonas' philosophy is undertaken in relation to the analysis of the environment. In fact, environmental science relies on Jonas' analyses for the essential elements of its work concerning nature and responsibility. However, most of the time, Jonas is frequently cited, but misinterpreted. The stakes of his philosophy thus remain unexploited. The theme of nature in environmental studies comes up fairly frequently, for the stakes are consequential. On the other hand, the theme of responsibility has long been kept out of environmental theories because of its moral character and because of the influence of welfare policies. The rare environmental writings dealing with responsibility are only concerned with the individual aspect.¹ The global point of view has not yet been meaningfully studied. Jonas' originality is thus to have proposed that individual responsibility be widened to collective responsibility, and that this responsibility be further extended out to future generations. The positive benefit of this revision resides in the integration of ecological preoccupations and of social and political ethics. Jonas thus brings an element of response to environmental science by associating the two themes of nature and responsibility. Jonas considers responsibility as an infinite, societal *long relationship*.² Having read his works, environmentalists can no longer underestimate the scope of responsibility.

The object of this article is therefore to synthetically uncover the philosophical and environmental scope of Hans Jonas. We will start from a philosophical base, and later adopt a societal point of view. Our principal task will be to analyze the place of humanity in Jonas' universe. To do so, we will adopt two readings, through the spectrum of nature and of responsibility. We will show that man in Jonas' system is torn between two sides of his destiny (he is a being of nature and a responsible being). The question that we will try to resolve is: how can responsible behavior save a finite nature? In this regard, Jonas formulates an imperative placing nature under man's responsibility. He perceives nature as fragile and

¹ Individuals use allocated resources by taking advantage of offered opportunities. Cf. Arneson [1989, 77-93], Dworkin (1981), Cohen (1989, 906-44), Rawls (1972, 1982), Røemer (1985, 151-187) and Sen (1985).

² The expression is taken from Ricœur.

vulnerable³ in relation to the human being. In his most influential work, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas sees responsibility as a *tractatus technologico-ethicus*. In so doing, he questions technical interventions that man brought upon himself because technology modifies and alters his moral situation. For the first time in humanity's history, human activities are in a position to radically transform – and compromise – the conditions of life on earth.

In part 1 (I. Nature), we will see how Jonas understands nature (1.1), looking next at a conceptualization of nature as a means of behavior modification through the Responsibility Principle (1.2). This part could be interpreted as an ethics of responsibility towards the environment (1.3).

In part 2 (II. Prospective responsibility), we will consider responsibility as a definition of the person (2.1). Next, we will study the place of the human in Jonas' universe (2.2), as well as the technical world in which it evolves (2.3). Finally, responsibility will be analyzed as the means of avoiding an ecological and human catastrophe (2.4).

I. NATURE

Jonas considers nature as a non-homogeneous whole. Indeed, the animal and plant kingdoms are distinct from each other but they evolve toward a common goal (a process of emancipation of form with respect to matter). Nature can then be globally defined as a differential categorization of beings.

1.1 Jonas' conception of nature: between vulnerability and finality.

In *The Responsibility Principle*, Jonas' concept of nature is oriented toward that nature which is principally earthly, and he willingly abandons what he calls *cosmic* nature, since man cannot threaten this nature. Permit us to discuss this point. Considering nature uniquely from an earthly point of view is at very least reductionistic. Humanity, as well as earthly nature, acts and interacts with the universe. Meteoritic impacts, or the extinguishing of the sun are real threats of planetary destruction. Even though the probability of a meteor shower (or of the sun's implosion) is as small as that of the detonation of an atomic bomb, it is no less true that the extinguishing of the sun will inevitably bring about the end of the world (even if the temporal scale is on the order of 8 billion years). We can then reproach Jonas for his narrow view of nature. He would have been more judicious (as we will see later in our argumentation) to consider a wider nature (on the scale of the universe, for example).

Jonas affirms that irresponsible economic and technological growth threatens to destroy the resources of this earthly nature, since these resources are by definition limited. Here, we find

³ See Jonas (1984, 6-8).

the preoccupations of the environmentalist movement.⁴ More precisely, Jonas is considered as the principal reference for the *Deep Ecology* movement. While *Deep Ecology* stakes a claim to Jonas' thought, the inverse, however, is not necessarily true. Jonas and *Deep Ecology* agree on the necessity to reject anthropocentrism as a dominant doctrine, yet Jonas remains very critical of "biospheric egalitarianism."⁵ This concept is even contrary to his philosophy. Indeed, he advances the idea of a responsible human being who is therefore ethical. However, to accord the same value to all living beings excludes, *de facto*, all responsibility. From a global viewpoint, to save nature, Jonas picks up the debate of Von Schelling against science and resurrects the old Neo-Platonic theme of the "soul of the world"⁶. Without recognizing that nature has a soul, Jonas admits that nature has a right to life just as much as does man. Concerning the position of nature with respect to man, Jonas does not take on the dichotomous approach between man and nature which gives man autonomy and hierarchy with respect to nature. On the contrary, instead of establishing a separation, he establishes a continuum of which the common point is the organism (as it continues its own existence).

If nothing differentiates humanity from the rest of living creatures, what then is its place in the world? Biospheric egalitarianism necessarily excludes its moral position. What then is the status of humanity with respect to nature? Humanity, in Jonas' opinion, is the only species capable of producing images, a *sine qua non* condition for access to freedom and scientific knowledge. The man that Jonas depicts is therefore distinct in its basis from the humanistic approach, but because of his eidetic ability to make images, he remains fundamentally an ethical being *in fine*. If man is superior to nature as a moral being because of his pictorial capacity, Jonas nevertheless adopts a positive attitude toward nature. In fact, humanity does not lower itself to nature, but nature progressively rises to meet man. Jonas' major preoccupation remains, however, nature's vulnerability. To that end, he clearly denounces technological power as the source of this vulnerability. Technological man wishes to be independent and detached from his roots. As a result, he can do what he wishes with

⁴ We refer to ecological economics in general Boulding (1964) and Georgescu-Roegen (1971) and to *deep ecology* Daly (1977), Devall and Sessions (1985), Naess (1976) in particular. Even if the position of this movement is not necessarily pertinent when it rejects industrial, laissez-faire society, we cannot deny the truth of its observations about the fragility and the finite state of human life. Ricœur reconsiders, in his way, Jonas' responsibility principle, writing that it only asks to preserve the condition of human existence, or better, existence as a condition of the possibility of humanity. Concerning deep ecology, see Ferry's violent critique (1995). He accuses the movement of being irrational and dangerous because nature becomes a fetish; nature endangers human rights in giving a morality of "guests of the planet." Ferry's critiques also raise the problem of technical competence. This approach (typically French) proposes that the environmental crisis is not a crisis of man/nature relations but rather, is rooted in the problematic concord between politicians and scientists mediated by the role of the expert. Finally then, the environmental crisis finds its origins more in politics than in ethics.

⁵ The concept of "biospheric egalitarianism" implies that the notion of individuality is erased to the benefit of globality. Man is no longer in the moral domain but in the domain of life.

⁶ Plato defends the old thesis that the world is alive because it possesses a soul similar to the one that humans have, whence comes the idea the world (as an earthly entity) can suffer and be affected by too much technology. This conception is also found in Kant when he evokes the problem of the finality of nature in the 72nd paragraph of *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment* (1790).

himself. This attitude is very dangerous for the lifespan of humanity (and of nature). To counteract this tendency, Jonas appeals to a collective consciousness-raising in an ethical jumpstart of responsibility. The goal is to awaken man's responsibility so as to save existence itself.

Jonas perceives nature as fragile, perishable, and indispensable to the conservation of the human species. Man, as the guarantor of Being, has a moral duty toward nature. The consideration of nature by man makes it necessary that man take responsible steps. Let us see in what way responsibility can influence a behavioral ethics. For this, a reading of *The Responsibility Principle* is necessary.

1.2 The responsibility principle: between opening and limitation.

Jonas uses Bloch's argument (1945) in his own to expose a paradox. Man reconstructed nature to make it a means to an end, and this instrumentalization of nature has a boomerang effect. Put differently, the "overnaturalization"⁷ induces a double movement: both humanity and nature are alienated from each other. The paradoxical effect is therefore that the so-called savage element, which "speaks" to man, is "human nature"; that nature which is totally dominated by him is then necessarily inhuman (or humanized) nature. This reflection pushes Jonas to conceive of nature as a movement in time whose origin remains fuzzy but whose end point (humanity) is clearly perceptible. This genealogy of finality shows, even in the most elementary or primitive forms of life, the traces of an intentionality that culminates in human beings, who are highly finalized, and are free producers of finality (producers of images). As a being with the status of "finalized being," Jonas assigns to man, under the form of a "thou shalt" commandment, the obligation to recognize and respect absolute values, given independently of human judgment.

This argumentation can be understood according to two aspects: opening and limitation. First, it is an opening, because it gives an intrinsic value to the entire living kingdom.⁸ In a general sense, the defenders of intrinsic value argue their point of view by saying that living beings enact adaptive strategies (for the conservation and reproduction of the species) that are perceived as ends. Thus, plants and animals leave their purely instrumental status to become objects of human responsibility. "Thus, to repeat, only what is alive, in its constitutive indigence and fragility, *can* be an object of responsibility."⁹ Yet, living creatures are not responsible beings just for this reason. Only man can be, which implies a duty of responsibility towards other potential subjects of responsibility. The second aspect of nature (after opening) is limitation. In fact, Jonas studies throughout his works an essentially earthly nature. According to Jonas, the resources of this earthly nature are threatened by a

⁷ Our term, to designate an excess of anthropized nature.

⁸ On this point see Callicott (1999) and Nash (1982). Moore (1998) is the first to speak of an intrinsic value concerning nature. Muir (1981, 98-139) develops this idea in his posthumous work called "A Thousand-mile Walk to the Gulf." Especially see the chapters "Florida Swamps and Forests" and "Cedar Keys."

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

(destructive¹⁰) economic growth, because we're dealing with a limited nature. This conception is the basis for all the "ecologically" inspired arguments, principles, and instructions of the Responsibility Principle. Jonas is opposed to Marx (1894) by way of Bloch's interpretation of the notion of limitation: he reproaches Bloch for too personal a reading and he calls Bloch's reading utopian for this reason. In fact, according to Jonas, the ideal Marxist society presupposes a rich society where energy and primary resources would be consumed without moderation. Jonas thus comes to the conclusion that humanity will be forced by a vicious circle to "pillage the planet until such time as the planet passes judgment on humanity and saves itself from overexploitation."¹¹ Finally, Jonas has tried, throughout his philosophical journey, to demonstrate that Nihilism is worthless. For this, he gave evidence that in nature, there are finalities given *a priori* (neo-finalism). We can understand these as finalities that have not come from human will but rather from finalized evolution. These finalities are to be considered as such because they represent values that call to and impose themselves upon humanity. On the question of objective finality of nature, Jonas agrees with Kant, which could seem surprising if one is familiar with their opposition concerning rationalism. In fact, Kant admits a finality in the scientific understanding of that which is alive without, however, conceding it an ontological dimension: "We have on transcendental principles good ground to assume to a subjective purposiveness in nature, in its particular laws, in reference to its comprehensibility by human judgment [...]" (Kant 1790). Jonas modernizes the debate and inscribes it in a more pragmatic approach. In fact, he conceives of a fragile nature, towards which humanity has a moral duty. He tries to draw moral consequences of our actions on nature. Science and technology give us new powers over nature, and it is precisely the extent of these powers that requires us to modify our moral obligations, to think of ourselves as responsible for nature. Bioethical debates illustrate this point perfectly.

Having studied Jonas' conception of nature through *The Responsibility Principle*, let us now turn to see how he conceives of human nature in particular.

1.3 Jonas' conception of human nature: between organism and responsibility.

Jonas limits the notion of individuality to the specific manner of existence of beings that are alive by metabolism. Their identity is therefore synonymous with self-creation, with continuous accomplishment that supposes an opening to the "Other" (the environment, the world outside themselves). This metabolic process thus immediately and simultaneously implies a differentiation with respect to the Other. This biological foundation of identity specific to the living realm integrates human beings into the organic whole, but highlights at the same time a duality opposing man and matter.

Jonas says that the organism is not a physical identity, as it is dependent on the passage of the matter that goes through it and keeps it alive. The identity of the organism should not be

¹⁰ Jonas undeniably considers economic growth as destructive of nature, for man misuses it. He makes an implicit value judgment toward economic growth and stays philosophically close to the ecological economics movement, which advocates zero growth.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

confused with the presence of a “soul;” for, in that case, the soul would be alive and not the body. The identity of the organism is not associated with persistence of form, but with its own finalism. If we adopt a positive attitude about the organism’s identity, we can use Jonas’ expression that everything goes back to the “image of man.” This aspect leads Jonas (1974, 141) to write that, “Biological control of the human being, and particularly genetic control, calls forth ethical questions of a totally new kind, for which no earlier thought or practice had prepared us. Indeed, nothing less is at stake than the very nature and image of man.” In this context, the use of the term “image” is meaningful and sends us undeniably to Judeo-Christian spirituality. This continuum between image and God clearly appears in *Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects*¹²: “Socially, each can be sacrificed in a relative manner, that is, to different degrees; religiously, no one can be sacrificed absolutely. The “image of God” is present in each human being.” On this point, Jonas thinks that the nature of man must absolutely be respected. For this, he uses two distinct procedures. First, he uses a metaphysico-religious approach, symbolized by the *imago Dei* man must not behave as nature’s handyman. Secondly, he looks at the “negative” approach, emphasizing the inescapable utopian drift of technology. In the last part of “*Homo pictor* and the Differentia of Man”, Jonas compares the symbolic impact of “making images” and of “naming objects.” According to Genesis,¹³ the first task assigned to man is that of giving a name to every animated thing, which gives humanity superiority over nature and the possibility to dominate it. Humanity is therefore defined by its faculty to picture things, to make images, which reveals the capacity to artificially reproduce resemblance and meaning. Yet, a name is in reality nothing more than an abbreviation, a shortened version of the image. “Making images reproduces the creative act which is hidden in the residual name: the symbolic, incessant re-fashioning of the world,” (Jonas 1961, 219).

Once the organic stage is passed, the human nature of man is defined by his ability to put himself in the place of the Other (taking the other into account). The integration of that which is outside of him (especially future generations) into moral constraints passes by a valorization of nature. Jonas expressly places the Other in a place and in a temporal space. The environment is therefore a space to protect, for on it depends the survival and maintenance of humanity in its integrity. This positive approach to nature imposes a radical change in human behavior. Jonas therefore considers that taking the Other (as a person) into account passes by nature.

Human nature categorically obliges humanity to make decisions about what it will become. Once the theological notion is set aside, humanity must face its destiny, which is nothing other than accepting its own responsibility.

¹² *Ibid.*: 219-245.

¹³ Genesis 2:19-20.

II. PROSPECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility is seen as responsibility with respect to others (contemporary and future generations). The concept of the other is at the center of Jonas' philosophy (and that of Levinas).¹⁴ Depending on the point of view that one adopts – especially the economic one –, responsibility takes on a different meaning. Jonas adopts an extremely strong responsibility toward future generations, whereas Levinas advances a ubiquitous responsibility to present generations.

2.1. Responsibility, a definition of the person: between consideration of nature and respect of the other.

Having undertaken a semantic analysis of the term, Paul Ricœur (1994) thinks that responsibility is fundamentally modern. Historically, it refers to the notion of sin. This implies a form of responsibility, understood as a capacity of imputability. Ricœur is therefore particularly interested in the classic doctrine of *imputation*, in the sense of “ability of imputation.” It is only with Jonas (1984), Habermas (1970), and Levinas (1998), that responsibility becomes the object of contemporary debates and philosophical discussions.¹⁵ An initial definition can be sketched out using the trilogy that Ricœur proposes:¹⁶ Powers, Harms, Responsibility. Technological power is considered from only one dimension,¹⁷ that which *inescapably* brings about the capacity for harm (to the environment and therefore to man). These harmful elements must be replaced by a repair or compensation in accordance with the responsibility principle. Jonas affirms that such a principle of compensation cannot be equitably applied toward our direct descendants whom we will never know. The consideration of the future by Jonas is inscribed in a continuity of Levinas' ethics.¹⁸ Although the contemporary idea of responsibility has become a dispersed concept,¹⁹ we can

¹⁴ These authors adopt an extremist vision of responsibility, which poses a problem of coherence. Currently, a consensus, suggesting a reasonable calculation that imposes a less severe responsibility, is accepted.

¹⁵ The premises of the debate are to be found in Kant. Jonas and Habermas bring a new point of view to the question.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Ricœur (1994).

¹⁷ Another direction that Jonas excludes from the outset consists in saying that an absence of power can also bring about harm (for example: illegal dumping). Absence of power and of rules often brings about irresponsible behaviors.

¹⁸ Jonas (1984) and Levinas (1987, 1998) accord lexicographical priority to the Other. Levinas places the Other in the present (cf. *the face of the other*), while Jonas uses the future as point of reference (cf. *future generations*). Jonas thereby completes Levinas' philosophy, considering the Other through a universal perspective.

¹⁹ Concerning the heterogeneity of interpretations of the concept of responsibility, see Derrida (1978). He adopts an antagonistic reading between *Greek responsibility* advanced by Rømer and *Talmudic responsibility* represented by Jonas, Levinas, and Ricœur. The advantage of this distinction between these two types of responsibility (assimilated from altruism) is that they bring a synthetic vision. The major disadvantage, on the other hand, is that of a cultural anthropology, which cannot easily be supported on an ethical level.

apprehend it in our framework (Jonas' perception of it) as a method of anticipating threats (cf. the heuristics of fear). For this method to be efficient, one must clearly identify the object of responsibility. The object of responsibility comes from that which is vulnerable, ephemeral, and perishable: "Only for the changeable and perishable can one be responsible, for what is threatened by corruption, for the mortal in its mortality [...]," (Jonas 1984, 125-126). Thus, the obligation of responsibility decreed by Jonas directs an ethics of preservation, of conservation, and of prevention. This new ethics will force Jonas to be interested not in a retroactive responsibility but in a prospective responsibility,²⁰ that is, for which the power of action is relative to its sphere of influence. Jonas frequently illustrates this in his writings by the example of parental responsibility, which represents a total responsibility, continuous in time, absolute and irrefutable as "the timeless archetype of all responsibility," (Jonas 1984, 130). By identifying the father of the family and the statesman as supreme representatives of responsibility, Jonas directly criticizes Kantian formalism. "Not duty itself is the object; not the moral law motivates moral action, but the appeal of a possible good-in-itself in the world [...]," (Jonas 1984, 85). We think that Jonas puts the independence of the moral conscience into question, in giving a higher responsibility to the head of the household. In effect, the fact of recognizing a person as "having authority" annihilates the concept of equality and of liberty (in the sense of free will). As such, Jonas overthrows Kant's egalitarian, rationalist moral position (from the *Aufklärung*). In Kant's writings,²¹ respect is reciprocal. Jonas' idea of responsibility implies, on the contrary, non-reciprocity, a basic dissymmetry, because it is brought to bear on that which is not yet (duty to children newborn and yet to be born). "Here is the prototype of all responsible action, which fortunately requires no deduction from a principle, because it is powerfully implanted in us by nature or at least in the childbearing part of humanity," (Jonas 1984, 39).

Jonas' responsibility therefore includes an intergenerational sacrifice, from present generations for future generations. The degree of sacrifice to which the present generation must consent cannot be discussed, for it must respond to a moral imperative (a lexicographical principle)²² so that humanity can be maintained (*That there be a mankind*).

How can this responsibility be defined practically? Concretely, at the political level, the application of the responsibility principle is defined by unpopular measures with the goal of distributive justice. For this, Jonas adopts a system of meta-norms to institute a hierarchy of priorities.²³ This vision essentially implies that we must rethink our relationship with nature,

²⁰ The difference between these two notions is fundamental, for one (retrospection) represents a Kantian system founded on the concepts of liberty and of duty with respect to past acts, while Jonas' notion of prospectation refers to an ethics which directly depends on the actions that "are left to do". This distinction leads indirectly on to consideration of rationality, independent of emotional motivations (Kant's vision) and to the natural ability *to be affected* by another's distress (parental responsibility).

²¹ Kant (1790).

²² The lexicographical principle designates the second degree of analysis of altruism (reason). This principle requires giving priority of property to others. Substituability remains but the domain of action is limited. In Jonas' works, the Kantian-type categorical principle is assimilated to a lexicographical principle.

²³ Jonas uses the criterion of *least utility* (priorities to people who have the most amount of available resources (in the extreme case of a deep and irreversible coma)).

because the responsibility principle takes its essence and its meaning from it. Thus, faced with all this, we must state that Jonas' analysis reverses the relationship between man and nature. In Aristotle's time²⁴, man was in nature. With the rise of technology, he has become the master of nature. From this technological power comes responsibility. Man, in Jonas' philosophy, is a responsible being, no longer having nature as a guide, evolving in a world of radical uncertainty, therefore also a world of necessary decision. Put differently, action is at the heart of responsibility. Having the ability to act and to make images, man is thrown headlong into a moral dimension. In Jonas' universe, man is the only one responsible for responsibility. From this flows an asymmetric responsibility (we pass from a weak individual responsibility to a "strong" mass responsibility). Jonas' proposals have as their goal to procure a new dimension of action, which requires an ethics of foresight and responsibility: "The capacity for responsibility – a capacity of an ethical order – rests on the ontological faculty of man to choose, consciously and deliberately, between alternative actions," (Jonas 1992, 76). Transformations of human action imply that we must rethink our relationship to technology. To that end, Jonas launches an offensive against technological civilization. Jonas thus introduces a Kantian categorical imperative meant to guide technical and scientific action and to inform political decisions. To avoid the alteration or the disappearance of nature and of humanity, ethics must rely on a universally recognized demand. This demand can be understood as absolute existence (life), which, as an end in and of itself, imposes upon the human being a responsibility towards it. Thus, the necessity of being of existence implies a necessity of action on the part of humanity. This leads us, then, to propose that man is responsible toward man and toward other living beings. "Responsibility is first and foremost of men for men, and this is the archetype of all responsibility," (Jonas 1984, 98). Jonas wishes therefore to ground the ethics of responsibility in the pragmatic goal of convincing politicians to enact demanding measures that would control technical and scientific activities. In this regard, Jonas founded a doctrine wherein power would be in the hands of elected officials. This democratic foundation is not without danger. In fact, politicians can give their approval, in the name of the people, to the worst atrocities. To avoid such an uncontrolled relapse, Jonas founds his political conception on a fear of the apocalypse and on the current state of urgency. The difficulty with this approach is that it imposes a self-saving behavior, which the people do not necessarily want, even though Jonas is persuaded "that such a tyranny would always be preferable to disaster," (Jonas 1992, 113). Thus, the main criticism that one can make is that, without falling into eco-fascism, Jonas is tempted to propose an imposition, through politics, upon the human community of truth, beauty, and good as transcendent values. This vision remains very disputed.

Responsibility necessarily induces a questioning of the position and role of man inside and outside of humanity. With Jonas' commandment "That there be a mankind," the debate is open.

²⁴ In fact, Aristotle considers that man is a part of the family of the vivipara on the same level as other animals. At the same time, man is the first representative of this family: "The Vivipara, [...], as for instance, human beings, horses, dogs and all haired animals."

2.2 The place of the human in Jonas' universe: between the refusal of an anthropocentric ethic and recognition of human (ontological) value.

We have treated responsibility in a global sense, it would be interesting to analyze, in a second part, the place of the human in Jonas' universe.

In his works, and particularly in his principal work, *The Responsibility Principle*, Jonas criticizes the anthropocentric dimension of old ethical systems. The anthropocentric dimension is not central here. In fact, considering nature's point of view is to propose from the outset a human interest. Given this, and that man conceives or tries to conceive values of life, he must be responsible for it. This responsibility implies a positioning of man with respect to nature. At first glance, the place of the human in Jonas' system seems problematic. In fact, Jonas, on one hand, rejects any Kantian anthropocentric ethics²⁵ and, on the other hand, puts the human being at the center of his imperative, "That there be a mankind." This contradiction declines if we make a distinction between anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. Jonas claims that the human body represents the highest degree of ontological completeness. This means that while anthropocentrism is the point of departure for his ontological process, his ontology does not constitute anthropocentrism. Metabolism, the act of exchange indispensable to the maintenance of life, is at the center of being, not the human itself, closed in upon itself. Put differently, if Jonas allows a certain anthropocentrism, it is only as a means to an end: a necessary but not a sufficient condition: "...the ethic that may possibly be erected on this ground must not remain bound to the ruthless anthropocentrism which characterizes traditional ethics, in particular the Hellenic-Judaic-Christian ethic of the West," (Jonas 1984, 45). We must then redefine the ethical and ontological place of the human being in Jonas' system with respect to nature. We must study three works to understand this phenomenon: first, *The Responsibility Principle* for an ethical approach and, then, *The Phenomenon of Life*²⁶ and *The Burden and Blessing of Mortality* for an ontological analysis.²⁷ Jonas positions his ontology as coming from an Aristotelian point of view and rejects Platonic ontology, which consists of considering being and thought as similar (cf. *ideas*). Jonas therefore establishes an ontology of that which is concrete (thing, living being, and person), establishing an analogical continuum between the being as ontological being and the first Being of theology. With science, the ontological interrogation becomes epistemological. Being here is brought back to the real (*critical realism*). In *The Phenomenon of Life*, Jonas describes Being as heterogeneous and adds that the aims of humanity are inscribed in it. *The Burden and Blessing of Mortality* completes this work and goes farther, proposing a monist ontology based on Darwin's theory of evolution.

²⁵ In particular, Jonas discusses four points. He rejects the idea that the relation man/nature is ethically neutral. Second, anthropocentrism must be, in his terms, reexamined. Man is not himself an object of *techné*. Finally, human action resigns itself in proximity. This reading schema is found in Heidegger's *Über den Humanismus*.

²⁶ See especially *Philosophical Aspects of Darwinism*.

²⁷ Authors such as Derrida (1978), Heidegger (1927), and Levinas (1979) will go, in a certain sense, farther than Jonas by proposing something beyond ontology. To this end, in his last works, Heidegger writes Being with a *Sein* crossed out. Levinas brings the notion of Being back to that of totality, while Derrida tries to find its roots in writing and difference.

In *The Responsibility Principle*, the author emphasizes the position of man in Being that permits him to perceive values. This vision recalls the Judeo-Christian tradition where death and life are interwoven: man is considered as life and death, life in death and death in life. In general, life passes by the body to express itself ontologically. Jonas is persuaded that only in passing by the body will it be possible to respond to the fundamental ontological question of "What is being?" For Jonas, every living thing is forced to constantly absorb matter, merely to expel it after taking, and transforming, what it needs. Matter exchanges with matter in the aim of keeping itself alive. It is therefore possible to start from the bodily experience of our own being to describe Being in general without placing ourselves at the center. Again, in Jonas' works, metabolism is at the center of Being and humanity is not.²⁸ Thus, the (naturalist) ethic of responsibility is not centered on man, given that it is founded on a metabolism-centered ontology (to be is to act, and the action of beings is metabolism).

The place and the role of humanity in Jonas' thought remain ambiguous. However, the originality of man resides in his acts, responsibility being considered as an integral part of his moral actions. To avoid irreversible natural (and human) catastrophes, Jonas uses fear. We consider Jonas' idea of fear as a universal historical means, without weakness, to orient the collective conscience and to oppose technoscientific abuses that can put nature in peril.

2.3. The critique of the technical world: between technical advance and simultaneous retreat of human control.

Jonas considers that the mass of individual actions, each one committed to a good cause and without malicious intent, is what provokes the accumulation of disastrous consequences.²⁹ We are confronted here with the paroxysm of destructive technologies. This devastating and destructive aspect of technology can be explained by man's abusive use of it. Taking technology into account, man emancipated himself definitively from nature to become its dominator (master and possessor of nature). Nature is revealed, she no longer frightens by irrational fears tinted by mysteries (myth) but becomes an object of knowledge; she can therefore be mastered. Nature is thus placed at man's service, losing its intrinsic value to become an instrumental value, the ultimate goal of which is to satisfy the needs and passions of man. This approach is clearly inspired by rational Enlightenment philosophy, in which the logic of human progress must pass through technical progress. This doctrine joins utilitarian thought: the goal of man's domination of nature is the search for happiness and pleasure. This comes back to the idea that modifying or destroying nature will, in the end, procure

²⁸ With respect to the role of metabolism, it is interesting to note that Jonas' and Heidegger's analyses differ from each other. In fact, Heidegger (1930) advocates an ontological dimension of being while Jonas opts for a metabolic approach.

²⁹ On this point, Jonas is close to Heidegger (1927, 30-32), who considers that technology "is in the process of ruining the illusion of human independence." He adds that there is "a non-anthropological base to technology (*Gestell*)," (cited in Bourg (1996, 59-61). Although Zimmerman (1983, 99-132) saw in Heidegger the precursor of the ecological movement, Jonas criticized and violently condemned his master's belonging to the German *Naturschutz* movement, which was reinterpreted as part of Nazi ideology. Jonas would speak of a "philosophical debacle." For this reason, Jonas broke with Heidegger for 35 years. For more detail, see Jonas (1970, 35).

pleasure for humanity. Yet, how can one take pleasure in destroying oneself³⁰ knowing that, in this frame, compensation is impossible? We run into a major contradiction which consists in seeing a direct link between the destruction of nature and an increase in well-being. From a moral viewpoint, such a proposition cannot be held. In this respect, Jonas refutes this entire analysis. Going against utilitarianism, the author sketches out a concept of “will of independent power”: Man needs technology for technology itself. This abstraction will become concretized in its global approach in the “second modernity. With the advent of technology we are watching a slide from ends toward means. It is in this way that Jonas thinks that technology destroys man. As a consequence, the instrumental world is of the same nature as instrumental reason, which signifies an intensification of means as such. The universalization of knowledge has made it easier to read nature. Natural science, just like physical science, dominates the new technological world. These last decades, we have seen a veritable revolution in science and in its relationship with nature. Thus, it is no longer nature that provokes major risks but science and scientific research. As a result, the object of man’s domination ought no longer be nature but science. With scientific risk (*Chernobyl effect*), man has for the first time in his humanity the possibility of his self-destruction.

To put a stop to the nefarious consequences of a mass technology, even though it is apparently pacifistic, Jonas proposes a new method of research: the heuristics of fear. His inspiration in this is history. In using this procedure, Jonas puts earlier rational philosophical movements into question. Descartes describes fear as an inhibitor, thus neutralizing all actions. Jonas counters this idea by establishing a positive relationship between responsibility and fear.

2.4. Heuristics of fear: between destruction of nature (by man) and destruction of humanity (by nature).

To counter rationalistic logic, Jonas suggests a return to the sacred, denouncing an *ethical void*: “It is moot whether, without restoring the category of the sacred, the category most thoroughly destroyed by the scientific enlightenment, we can have an ethics able to cope with the extreme powers which we possess today and constantly increase and are almost compelled to wield,” (Jonas 1984, 23). He considers that a threat is necessary to make man aware of the actions that he must take: “we need *threat* to the image of man,” (Jonas 1984, 26). Jonas shows that his heuristics of fear is a limit on expansion and growth, because it ends utopian expansion.³¹ Though conscious of this ideological drift, Jonas remains convinced that the consciousness-raising that humanity needs must come about with the aid of a scarecrow (fear). He agrees with Plato’s utopian thought, in which the people should be governed with a well-intentioned lie, when it cannot accept the truth. Hannah Arendt (1998) refines Jonas’ idea, in that she thinks that “the domain of public affairs is the sphere of opinion and persuasion” and not that of a constraining truth. Jonas’ approach definitively falls into an impasse because, even when one wishes to do what is good, evil can appear. Man’s responsibility is certainly exercised before nature, but especially before the Other and

³⁰ On this point, see the ethics of cruelty. Cf. Turbull (1972).

³¹ Here we find Jonas’ denunciation of the utopian idea of historical materialism.

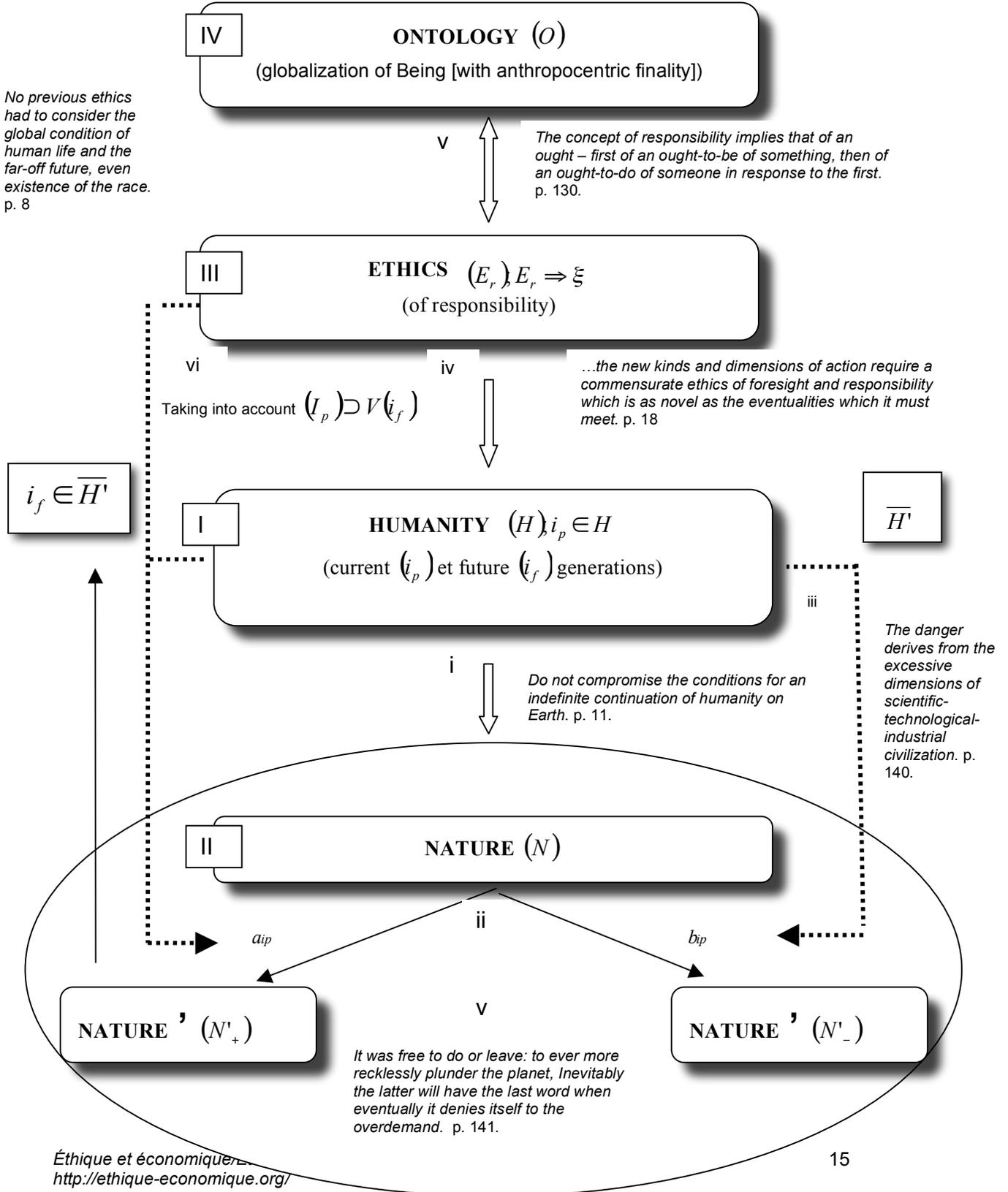
before God. On this point, Spinoza (1675) established the first consubstantial link between nature and God (*Naturing Nature* and *Natured Nature*).³² The heuristics of fear rests therefore on an excessive overestimation of humanity's destructive power. Nature as a whole, or more precisely, nature to the degree that it can be imagined as having existed before the emergence of humanity, is essentially sheltered from destructive human intervention (this is at least true of inorganic nature). A total annihilation of Earth's biosphere is thus quite improbable. We cannot thus annihilate nature. "Fear doesn't have to delay the veritable goal' (Jonas 1984). Thinking that Earth will continue to exist is part of geocentric, Gaïa-type vision. Earth is thus considered as an autonomous living organism, outside of man, able to self-regulate and react to exogenous problems. To summarize, when we speak of the fear of ecological (or environmental) crisis, we ought be afraid not of the destruction of nature by humankind, but of the swallowing of humanity and its predecessors by nature. This phenomenon can also be understood as revealing the crisis of modernity. If we think of it in this way, environmental crisis corresponds more to a crisis in our own representation of nature (changes in our normal ways of managing the living) than to a crisis of environmental resources, strictly speaking.

³² Particularly see proposition 30, and its remark, in *Ethics*.

Synthesis of Jonas' philosophy

Quotations are taken from *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 1984.

No previous ethics had to consider the global condition of human life and the far-off future, even existence of the race. p. 8



Legend:

I, II, III, IV; and i, ii, iii, iv, v, vi: Reading order.

—————▶ : Direct links.

.....▶ : Indirect links.

Reasoning:

- Humanity does not have mastery of the indirect effects of technology upon nature.(i)
- Because of this, Nature is modified and threatened (movement from NATURE to NATURE'). (ii)
- Nature's fragility implies *ipso facto* its annihilation in the long term, and as a result, the annihilation of humanity. (iii)
- Since nature and the lifespan of future generations are threatened by the new powers of action on the part of humanity, ethics must be rethought. It will be a new ethics of responsibility, sweeping away old ones, dogmatic, oriented to the future and to the attention of political leaders. It will no longer be an ethics exclusively of being, but of being in general (or of the potentiality of being for generations to come). (iv)
Ontology will therefore be the single global approach to being (from single-celled beings to humans). (v)
- Thus, with ontology, human action is no longer merely on the individual level, but acquires a collective dimension surpassing this level. (vi)

Put differently:

$i_p \in H$ (The acting individual is part of present humanity).

$a_{ip} : N \supset N'_+$ (Positive action of the individual i ; application of N toward N').

$b_{ip} : N \supset N'_-$ (Negative action of the individual i ; application of N toward N').

$b_{ip} \Rightarrow \overline{H} \cup \overline{H'}$ (Negative action implies the destruction of present humanity or (delayed effect) of humanity to come).

Interest: H'

$\square \xi \Rightarrow b_{ip} \Rightarrow \overline{H} \cup \overline{H'}$

As i_p is conscious of the vulnerability of i_f , $V(i_f)$ vulnerability imposes the necessity of existence of E_r

$\exists \xi \Rightarrow a_{ip} \Rightarrow N'_+ \square \overline{H'}$

yet

$\exists \xi \Rightarrow \exists O$

$O \Rightarrow \xi = E_r$ (Ontology implies a responsible ethics).

*
* *

CONCLUSION

This reading is not meant to decide between sides of the purely philosophical debates, but it brings an element of response concerning Jonas' conception of man. We have maintained Jonas' idea of man in its context (nature and responsibility). Man is the guardian of Being, and therefore, he must simultaneously be aware of his duties as "guest of the planet" and those he has toward his own perpetuation (future generations). Jonas' works have until recently remained under-appreciated by most political decision-makers as well as by scholars. With the global threats that weigh on the environment, Jonas' thought is necessary and unavoidable. Our objective was dual. First, we wanted to survey the literature treating this subject. Secondly, we've tried to emphasize the conception of man in Jonas' philosophy, something that has been too often neglected, and as such poorly interpreted. Jonas has been unfairly catalogued for too long as the father of *Deep Ecology* and of the concept of biospheric egalitarianism. Yet, adopting *Deep Ecology* goes radically against responsibility. To argue his viewpoint, Jonas systematically sweeps the ground between two notions: nature and responsibility.

Jonas' originality is therefore to definitively break with conventional anthropocentric ethics. A quick reading could lead one to consider that emphasizing humanity (cf. future generations), is, to a certain degree, an anthropocentric step. To affirm this is to stop short of a full understanding of Jonas' thought. The finality of responsibility does not reside in humanity and it is not for humanity, but it resides in the perennity of being, man only being one expression of this. Jonas brandishes the specter of apocalypse (the heuristics of fear) to force individuals to adopt a self-saving behavior, technology being considered as an absolute danger. In effect, technological logic digs a ditch, an effective separation between man and the object of his technical mastery (in this case, nature). From this process, there results a desacralization of human life, which, because of the destruction of the historical paternal relationship between man and nature, condemns nature to be nothing but the means to an end. The heuristics of fear, according to Jonas' reading of it, is above all an affirmation of the value of life (finality). In this respect, Jonas conceives that this finality can exist for itself. Thus, all living beings are useful for the ends of man and for the sole finality of life. Jonas thus submits the idea that it is preferable that something can become a value than stay without finality (an ontological axiom). The definition of intrinsic value, as seen before, does not furnish precise references of an environmental protection that would be aimed at species, not individuals, and would not put them on an equal footing. If the pertinence of intrinsic value is put into question, we must find another means to protect nature. Jonas proposes an ethics of responsibility. However, one can object that the responsibility presented by Jonas does not permit us to distinguish the extent of responsibility in a universal way, because this responsibility behaves, in most cases, paternalistically, where power is in the hands of those who know (politicians, scientific experts). Next, because of its dogmatic status, Jonas' responsibility sits on a moral base of non-reciprocity (the situations are asymmetrical, and asymmetry excludes compensation). Yet, reciprocity is a capital criterion of rationalist ethics (Rawls 1972). Thus, Jonas places himself squarely in an ethics of emotion and sentiment, where the notion of the person is central and indispensable to responsibility.