Responsibility and Hope

by *Dmitri Nikulin**

Abstract

The paper reconsiders the foundations of the ethics of responsibility in the work of Hans Jonas, who suggests that the radical modern change in both the scope and character of our action leads to the inability to control and predict its consequences. From this perspective, one should act morally and politically in such a way as to make the life of future generations of living beings possible. This means that the moral actors themselves have not only the right but also the duty to existence. The paper considers a number of challenges to the ethics of responsibility that arise from the demand of ensuring both the continuation of life and of good life.

Keywords: Responsibility, Hope, Heuristics of Fear, Paradox of Power, Utopia.

More than forty years after the publication of Hans Jonas' *magnum opus*, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, we live in that future of which he was warning us but that he could not imagine and hesitated to predict. His famous thesis is that the scale and the very nature of our power has changed so dramatically that we are no longer in control of it. Therefore, we have to fundamentally change our action toward nature in politics, toward ourselves in ethics, and toward the being itself in ontology. Jonas announced a radical break with the past modes of our action and its understanding in favor of action toward the future. I will try to follow Jonas' trajectory in an attempt see where it has led us today, which is the future of the past of 1984[1].

* The New School for Social Research; nikulind@newschool.edu.

[1] The German edition of Jonas' book came out as *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* in 1979. Parenthetical references are to his own 1984 English translation.

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1. Ontology and ethics

The novel character of our action is defined for Jonas not only – and not so much – by the action toward oneself or the other, but rather by the action toward the living nature, of which we are an integrative part. Our primacy among the living is not determined by evolution or the traditional understanding of humans as the "crown of creation" but by our capacity to change the environment in ways and to an extent that other living beings cannot match. Yet, Jonas does not simply postulate the importance of a new ethics and its imperative but attempts to provide a justification of his ethical insights by grounding them in what he calls «metaphysics» (Jonas, 1984, p. x) or what we would nowadays rather call ontology. On this interpretation, the nature of being and our changed attitude toward it is such that we have to act in a radically altered way, vastly different from how we acted before.

Jonas' main claim, then, is that axiology is an integral part of ontology, or that good and being are intimately connected in their worth or value. In attempting to ground moral action in being, Jonas' argument goes through a number of steps.

1. Value is the good (Jonas, 1984, p. 78). To the extent that a value is worth pursuing, it is a good. Jonas' strong claim here is that «value, or the "good" […] of itself urges the *existence* of its subject from its mere possibility […]. The capacity of value (worth) is itself a value, the value of all values» (Jonas, 1984, pp. 48-9). In other words, if something is of value, it is a good, and hence is worth pursuing. Hence, the good should become and be actual. Therefore, the good should be in things and not only in thought.

This is a peculiar version of the ontological argument, where the very *concept* of the good implies its existence. However, the existence of the good can only become actual if it is mediated by our action. *We* are those who make a good possible. However, one can raise a number of objections to this claim. Indeed, if we value something, it does not yet mean that it should exist. First of all, we might wish or desire something that could not, and perhaps should not, be realized. And second, somebody's good might be detrimental, and thus undesirable, to others. In either case, a good might not and should not be realized in actuality. Jonas' response to this objection is that there is a *plurality* of goods, in which the natural goods, those that harbor the objectively valuable in nature, take priority over artificial ones arbitrarily established by us. And it is one particular good, human life in its *continuous* existence, that commands the new ethics. Yet, since not only our social but also physical existence becomes increasingly intermingled with and defined by artificial means, methods,

and devices, the Aristotelian distinction between *physis* and *tekhne* is not as clear-cut as Jonas would like it to be.

2. Hence, good appears as purposiveness. To the extent that a purpose is worth pursuing, it constitutes a value (Jonas, 1984, p. 84). Jonas' strong «axiomatic intuition» is that of the «superiority of purpose as such over any purposelessness» (Jonas, 1984, p. 80). Purposiveness, as the capacity to have any purpose at all, is central to Jonas' overall argument, which is why he considers purposiveness as good-in-itself. Yet such an understanding depends on the existence of objective purposes in nature, thus suggesting a strongly teleological view of nature, in which life is considered *a* purpose.

Jonas indeed argues for a strong teleology, in which the natural in its capacity of having an objective purpose is opposed to artificial. In particular, in an *artificial* thing, the very concept of a thing, established by us, defines its purpose and precedes its existence. In the artificial, the «concept […] underlies the object» (Jonas, 1984, p. 52). The purpose is not located in the thing but in the maker. But in a *natural* thing, the thing itself defines its concept as well as its purpose. The essential purpose of natural things, therefore, is not *theirs* (*ibid*.).

The objective teleology becomes apparent for Jonas primarily in living beings, which are *organisms* in possession and use of organs: «Every organ in an organism serves a purpose and fulfills it by its functioning. The overarching purpose jointly served by all the special functions is the life of the organism as a whole» (Jonas, 1984, p. 65, see also p. 57). The gist of Jonas' argument is based here on another Aristotelian distinction between that of "having" or disposition (*hexis*) and the use (*khresis*) (Aristotle, *M. Mor.*, 1184b15). One can have a disposition but not use it (e.g., the disposition or capacity to play the flute). For Aristotle, use has ontological and axiological primacy over the possession of a faculty or capacity. Indeed, the organism has organs and it seems *not to have organs that it does not use*. In a sense, this could be a definition of the organism: it is that which uses every organ that it possesses. And yet, an objection might be that there is much redundancy in our DNA, which is apparently not used, or at least not in a way of which we are currently aware. Besides, the function of an organ might not necessarily be understood as its purpose, but rather as its role in the overall complex make-up of the organism. Or, finally, an organ might be used differently from its apparently teleological, natural function.

For Jonas, an organism thus has (bare) life *for a purpose*, and this purpose has an objective value that is not established by us. Moreover, life is *an* unconscious and involuntary purpose, although not *the* purpose of nature. Life is the end-purpose of the body (Jonas, 1984, pp. 74-5). Purpose for Jonas «is extended beyond all consciousness, human and

animal, into the physical world as an innate principle of it […]. That the world has values indeed follows directly from its having purposes» (Jonas, 1984, pp. 75-6). This is indeed a very strong understanding of nature as having intrinsic values: «Nature harbors values because it harbors ends and is thus anything but value-free» (Jonas, 1984, p. 78). And since nature has ends, it posits values and purposes, which, however, are confined to living beings (Jonas, 1984, pp. 98, 129, 132, 137 *et passim*). Therefore, life, for Jonas, is an objective value in and of nature.

3. Being affirms itself in purpose. This for Jonas justifies an *ontological axiom*: «purpose as such is its own accreditation within being» (Jonas, 1984, p. 80). Being is purposeful (Jonas, 1984, p. 81) to the extent that it is not made up by us as an artifice (which may or may not have a purpose, e.g., garbage) but belongs to (living) nature.

4. Being is existence. Being belongs to nature, or nature is all that which *is*, in and by itself. As such, being is opposed to artifice, technology, or *tekhne*. Technology, therefore, is outside of the good and hence contrary to being, and as such can be subversive to the good and destructive of being. One of the most salient features of modernity is the erasing of the difference between the artificial (which also includes cultural, social, and political institutions) and nature (Jonas, 1984, p. 10). In his entire project, Jonas is mostly concerned with the radical change to the scope of our action, caused by modern technology, which, created by us, can be abused and is thus the culprit and the source of menace for the continued existence of life.

5. Being coincides with a good. Hence, by transitivity, being is good, and good is being. Put otherwise, being is a value, or being is better than non-being. This means, again, that being *affirms* itself as good and as absolutely better in its purpose against non-being. In this way, Jonas blurs the distinction between axiology and ontology. Good *is* being. On this account, being *is* and thus confronts non-being as the privation of being and thus non-existence. Being is good and as such transpires in life, whereas non-being is death: «the self-affirmation of being becomes emphatic in the opposition of life to death» (Jonas, 1984, p. 81).

However, a major objection to such an ontology is that the good might be not considered as coinciding with being but as "beyond being", as a whole tradition originating in the famous Socratic claim (Plato, *Resp.*, 509b) asserts. This means that the good might never be fully extinguished, identified, defined, or realized, and that non-being could not be grasped either and be thus different from a mere privation of being.

6. The good implies being or existence in its very *concept*. The main thesis of the ontology that identifies good with being is that the *good must be*. Jonas modifies the ontological argument, applying it this time not to

being but to the good understood as objective purposiveness. The claim, then, is that the good (good-in-itself) is such that its very *concept*, or its very possibility, entails a *demand* for being to become actual, which is thus an "ought" that the will must translate into action (Jonas, 1984, p. 78). In other words, good should *be*, otherwise it is not a good, and it *ought* to direct the will in order to be actual. In this way, Jonas bridges the alleged Humean and Kantian gap between "is" and "ought".

7. The duty to exist exists. Since objective teleology implies the good that establishes itself as being, it must be. This means that we have a *duty* or *obligation* to safeguard being. We are being's shepherds, protecting it from death at our own hands. «Only from the objectivity of value could an objective "ought-to-be" in itself be derived, and hence for us a binding *obligation* to the guarding of being, that is, a responsibility toward it» (Jonas, 1984, p. 50). Once being and good are understood this way, each one «must adopt the "yes" into his will and impose the "no" to not-being on his power» (Jonas, 1984, p. 82).

8. Because being must be, it requires action on our part. Hence, as good, being becomes the goal of morality. The traditional Stoic claim that being tends to self-preservation (Jonas, 1984, p. 73) is amplified by Jonas in the suggestion that it is now our duty to assist in the self-preservation of ourselves and hopefully of the rest of the living world. We therefore have an unconditional duty imposed on us by being itself, which is a living, purposeful, and good being. Being should live in and through us. The ought-to-be of the object must be translated into the ought-to-do of the subject (Jonas, 1984, p. 93, see also p. 27). The negativity of human freedom, which always can say "no" to the world, should be self-rectified by the affirmation of being in its purposiveness, which is the «authentic […] affirmation by ourselves» (Jonas, 1984, p. 77)[2]. We must – and this is our moral and political duty – say "yes" to being and "no" to non-being (Jonas, 1984, pp. 139-40).

2. New ethics

Thus, the demand of this new ethics comes from our unprecedented power over the world, which changes not only the scope but also the very nature of our action. Guided, or rather misguided, by modern reason that

[2] In his lectures on the problem of freedom, Jonas distinguishes between negative and positive freedom, and follows to some extent Aristotle's distinction in the *Nicomachean Ethics* between voluntary and involuntary action. Negative freedom means not being a subject of any other will, and positive freedom is being the author of one's actions (Jonas, 2010, pp. XXI-XXV; 23-8).

is not contemplative any more but aggressive and manipulative (Jonas, 1984, p. 138), we need to rethink ourselves and the very ground of our action to be in charge of life as extending into further generations.

In order to provide a ground for ethics, Jonas has to revive a number of insights from Aristotle, which he does in his own original way. Three are important for the overall argument: (1) that being always has purpose; (2) that the natural and the artificial are always in stark opposition, in which the natural comes first; and (3) that being is opposed to non-being as its privation. Hence, being is natural being as existence or life, opposed to non-being as its privation or death. As purposive, being is good and thus *must be*. This puts an unconditional claim on us, because being is not guaranteed but must exist through us. We are the guardians of natural being, which can and must go and continue through us, who, as part of being, are endowed with an exceptional negative power to destroy being, but are also tasked with the obligation to maintain it.

Because the good as an objective value demands existence, the proposed ethics of survival cannot be but the ethics of responsibility, driven by the new imperative: «Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life» (Jonas, 1984, p. 11). Jonas stresses that we have the *duty*, and *not the right*, to existence. This further suggests two ethical commandments: firstly, we have a duty to ensure the *existence* of a future humankind, even if there be no descendants of our own («*that* […] [human beings] should *be*»: Jonas, 1984, p. 139); and secondly, we have a duty to ensure the quality or condition of such existence (Jonas, 1984, pp. 40-1). In other words, humankind not only needs to keep living but it needs to live *well* (Jonas, 1984, p. 99).

One might raise a number of questions at this point, which do not find an immediate answer in Jonas' discussion: how do we have to represent these effects, which we might not be able to know or imagine, because of the entanglement of our action and the complexity of nature, which we still do not understand and keep reducing to simple, mechanistic models? What kind of life is "genuine"? Why is human life set above the life of other living beings or other forms of life? What if the two commandments contradict each other, so the future existence might be ensured only as miserable? How can and should we hold responsible our predecessors who are no longer here for the quality of our (poor) existence?

Although Jonas' ethics is meant to be the ethics of being, it is still based on the recognition of non-being. So, despite the energetic effort at refuting the ethical stand of one of his main opponents, Ernst Bloch's ethics of the "not-yet" (Jonas, 1984, pp. 38-9), Jonas internalizes the appeal of the not-yet by delegating the scope of our action to the *never-yet*. Our ethics is radically delegated to a future that is never yet there and will

never be, but it is a feared future of being without us rather than a hoped-for one of being with us. In this sense, contra Jonas' claim, his ethics is an ethics of non-being, of "never-yet". Hence, its two most salient features are the invocation of the *future* and of *fear*.

3. Future

The responsible action ought to be taken now but is always directed into the future. Temporality is thus an integral part of our action. As Jonas explicitly says in recently digitized and deciphered tapes from a 1975 lecture course at the New School, ethics should be future-oriented[3]. So far, all ethics were of the present, but the future ethics should be that of the future: «responsibility […] is nothing else but the moral complement to the ontological constitution of our *temporality*» (Jonas, 1984, p. 107).

To be sure, there existed forms of ethics oriented toward the future, yet none of them was really such. In particular, Jonas mentions three such ethical approaches: (1) of the completion of life in the eternal salvation of the soul. This kind of ethics, however, presupposes no commensurability between the temporal and the eternal. (2) Such is also the ethics of the statesman responsible for the future of a polity. Yet, the politician's foresight consists in the wisdom devoted to the present. (3) And finally, such is the ethics of the modern utopia (Michelis, 2007, pp. 171-87). This, however, lives fully in and off the future, which, however, is already fully envisaged and predicted now in the ideal of the highest realizable good (Jonas, 1984, pp. 12 ff.). On the contrary, the ethics of responsibility is meant to act now but is directed beyond the horizon of the present into the future with a sole purpose to make the future extendable to the future of and for the human life, perpetuating it indefinitely.

There are further implications of the futurity for the proposed ethics of responsibility. In particular, despite the mentioned similarities with Aristotle in Jonas' acceptance of the objective teleology of living nature, there are some important differences. For Aristotle, *telos* can always be realized and thus become actual *now*. The future is the realm only of opinion and hope, perhaps, prophesy – but not of fear (Aristotle, *De mem.*, 449b). For Jonas, however, the *telos* lies always ahead in the future, beyond the horizon of existence, and can never be achieved but is always

[3] «Responsibility is distinct from certain other ethical or moral concerns, as it looks at its objects under the aspect of time and not under the aspect of eternity. […] In fact, responsibility has to do with something that is exposed to the vicissitudes of time, something that is mortal, corruptible, and endangered, and that therefore gives this feeling of responsibility this particular urgency. With responsibility, something is at stake that can either succeed or fail» (Jonas, 2020, pp. 509-10).

postponed, because we can never be sure of humankind's existence in the future. This also suggests a particular understanding of life: it lives itself out now, but is always directed into the future and takes care of its future existence through a duty that it imposes on us. For this reason, the future has to be considered the realm of a responsible action that stretches itself beyond the temporal horizon of the "now".

The future is thus «no less, but also no more, "itself" and for its own sake than was any portion of the past» (Jonas, 1984, p. 109). There is no clear identity to the future, no "itself", and it cannot be, since, similarly to the past, it is non-existent. Yet, in contradistinction to the past, there can be no knowledge, and thus no history, of the future. Even linguistically, expressing the future is always a problem in any language. While there are many different past tenses that convey different aspects and nuances of our relation to the past, when it comes to the future, language must invent unusual means to be able to speak about that which is not but could, might, or would be, using modal verbs to suggest the expectation or intention extended beyond the current state.

No wonder that the future is deeply *paradoxical*, for it has never been and will never be. What will be will be the future present. Today is only yesterday's tomorrow, as Ken Hensley has observed, in the past that has now become its future. The future cannot be known and thus cannot be anticipated. All prognostication is uncertain, so «[u]ncertainty may be our permanent fate» (Jonas, 1984, pp. 191; 28-9). This seems to entail what Jonas calls the *paradox of knowledge about the future*: we know both more and less about the future than our ancestors (Jonas, 1984, p. 119). Yet this is a paradox based on a false premise, since we really do not know anything about the future. We can only have expectations, oscillating between hopes and fears.

Jonas' way to address and incorporate the future into our knowledge is to come up with «a science of hypothetical prediction, a "comparative futurology"» based on hope and fear – even if he himself decidedly goes for the latter –, which would combine «the ideal knowledge of ethical principles and the practical knowledge of political application» (Jonas, 1984, p. 26). Yet, since the metaphysical foundation of the «ideal knowledge of ethical principles» is based on a shaky ground of objective teleology that intends to say "yes" to being but in fact says "yes" to the never-being, and since the «practical knowledge of political application» moves undecidedly between various political positions, such as conservatism, liberalism, and democratic socialism, the very project of «comparative futurology» remains a vestige of science fiction within a philosophical project.

As such, the future, which we have to predict "scientifically" and "hypothetically", can be minimally anticipated as allowing for life, which

is further narrowed down to the existence or survival of humankind. But maximally, the future is expected as allowing for *good* life, which is already very difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine. This suggests, again, that we should act in such a way as to make the existence of future generations possible. Yet, Jonas never tells us *how* precisely we should act, which is in fact impossible, since the future is opaque and unpredictable. But most importantly, the future generations *do not exist* and *will never exist*, precisely because they are *future* generations, and so the care for the never-yet as the never-to-be is itself utopian, contrary to Jonas' claim. Only the current generation and its current successors do exist. So, what we need to secure is a moral and sentimental (re)education of ourselves rather than a new ethics, to be able to educate our *immediate* successive generation already in existence, which, in turn, could educate its own immediate successive generation.

4. Future generations and children as the object of responsibility

Facing the question of how the unknown can be included in our duty, Jonas takes the duty to children as «the archetype of all responsible action» (Jonas, 1984, pp. 39; 107; 130). A child carries a «teleological promise» (Jonas, 1984, p. 134). Children put an unconditional demand of their survival and well-being on the parents. However, he realizes that the duty to children and to the future generations are not the same and not symmetrical: the former do exist, and the latter never-yet. For Jonas, the responsibility to children is instituted by nature, apart and prior to our volition, which makes it an *a priori* demand on us. It is this natural responsibility, then, that serves as the basis for contractual responsibility (Jonas, 1984, pp. 93-4).

Yet, the paradigm of responsibility based on the unconditional care for the other as a child is deeply problematic for several reasons. First of all, (1) it follows the patriarchal family model, and as such is patronizing and condescending. Furthermore, (2) it is non-reciprocal and non-symmetrical, thus hierarchical and "vertical", and hence non-egalitarian. Moreover, it is (3) a relation of utter dependence, that (4) of a "child" who stands for, and represents, not so much itself, but much more a future generation that never is and never grows up, remaining forever childish and helpless. Such a duty (5) is based on a non-reason or never-yet rationality, because we do not know what the future generations will need, think, or want. Besides, (6) there is a duty to be a good parent once one has children, but there is arguably no duty to be a parent or produce a child. Nor is it clear (7) how the responsibility to children can, and whether it at all should, be extended

to the other living beings or even non-living nature. And most importantly, (8) it remains unclarified how public, social, and political responsibility is, and can be, deduced from parental responsibility.

So in practical and political response to Jonas' top-down ethics of the responsible care for children as the embodiment of the future generations, the current generation raises its voice and *demands* from us, the previous generation(s), to take care of the future by not destroying the environment in which they will have to live[4]. Contrarily to Jonas, the demand for responsible action is exercised not top-down but from the bottom up, from the *current* generation of "children", and is in fact perceived by the "parents" as a demand that comes with a *threat*. This demand is not only moral but much more political and economic, and its source lies not in the morally responsible and legally legitimate adults but in the children – who do not even yet have the right to vote or be elected and thus influence the politics of the crisis –, protesting against the failure to provide a better future for them in a new global movement that tells parents that they have bitterly failed in their moral, political, and economic obligations. The child becomes an independent political actor who does not seek our approval or permission but undermines our authority and acts *against* the imperative of responsibility, which is that of the parents.

5. Fear

If there is objective teleology that should be taken into account by the ethics of responsibility, then there should be a mechanism for its implementation. Yet, Jonas does not say anything about it. This means that our action has to be concrete at every moment, normatively directed by the duty toward the never-yet or the future imagined existence. Because of the complexity and unpredictability of the future, our rational calculation of it is very limited and mostly misses its target. Hence, we should complement the rational prediction by a sentiment. We therefore need a kind of new *éducation sentimentale* (Jonas, 1984, pp. 27-8).

The future remains the «horizon of responsibility» (Jonas, 1984, p. 9) for the future-oriented ethics that regulates the new moral imperative. Responsibility is thus rethought as the answerability to and for the future

[4] Abe Hiroshi makes an interesting attempt to answer the question of why we have a duty to ensure the existence of the future generations with reference to both Confucius and Locke, arguing that the duty of each current generation to ensure the existence of future ones follows from our answerability to the previous generations (Hiroshi, 2017, pp. 47-56). This argument, however, implies a further discussion of the necessity of preserving the memory of the past generations as a moral obligation, which, then, has to be transmitted to the future generations.

that poses to us an indistinct question that demands our answer, which we can never clearly formulate. We are always semi-deaf to the calls of and from the future because of their faintness.

Strictly speaking, the future is nothing. As we know from Kierkegaard's elaborate discussion, the effect of nothing on us is anxiety or fear (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 41 *et passim*). Since in modernity our situation in the world is not – or at least should not be – defined by the accidental concreteness of our original placement in the world where we have to carve out our own place, fear is the psychologically and socially defining attitude to our action vis-à-vis others and the world. We are already born into and live in fear of the indeterminacy of the future. Because the future is utterly indefinite, its effect on our current action is reduced to the rational appeal of preferring being (existence) to non-being (the privation of existence), and to emotional motivation (feeling). And since Jonas demands that the ethics of responsibility be directed toward and into the future, the emotional motivation cannot but be regulated by fear. Since we cannot really predict the consequences of our actions and their danger for the future, we always ought to imagine the worst, which becomes a moral demand. We have to be afraid, and if we are not, we should take it as our *duty* to think responsibly and summon our feelings to visualize the danger of the utter destruction of our own being and the annihilation of nature, which, unlike in antiquity, becomes the object of our responsibility (Jonas, 1984, pp. 4; 27-8). And if rational and scientific means at predicting the future fail or are insufficient, we should turn to science-fiction for «well-informed thought experiments, whose vivid imaginary results may assume the heuristic function» (Jonas, 1984, p. 30). No doubt, we can imagine anything, and thus can imagine the worst results of our actions. Yet it remains ultimately unclear why an imaginary, fictional outcome should be valid for and within a rational inquiry or a scientific theory, and why a fanciful science-fiction depiction should play a central role in judging and planning our actions.

Fear thus becomes responsibility, and responsibility *is* fear. Hence, the ethics of responsibility should be driven by the «heuristics of fear» (Jonas, 1984, p. X), because apparently «this is the way we are made: the perception of the *malum* is infinitely easier to us than the perception of the *bonum*» (Jonas, 1984, p. 27). So, for Jonas, this is our "natural" make-up: we are "made" by nature to be afraid of the *malum* and know the *bonum* only from the experience of its opposite. For this reason, we need to weigh the chances of the «risk of infinite loss against chances of finite gains» (Jonas, 1984, p. 34). Perhaps, the "better" will never come (Jonas, 1984, p. 132). Perhaps, the future that we fear is already there and is worse than we could have imagined without our even noticing it. Therefore, that we should not strive to gain the good but avoid evil should become

the moral *principle* (Jonas, 1984, p. 36). This is indeed a strange way of justifying the normative by the appeal to the supposedly "factual", which, in fact, is utterly imaginary. Even if there be no gap between the "ought" and the "is", the "is" is meant to be the "will be" of the future existence of humankind and not the alleged constitution of our psyche, taken as a given and a fact. In this way, the ethics of responsibility does not bridge the "ought" and the "is" but rather the "ought" and the "will be".

Because of its utter indeterminacy, the future can entice not only fear but also hope. Yet, hope, for Jonas, is a dangerous feeling, which we need to abandon on moral grounds because it creates improper expectations and thus can detract us from our main moral task – saving future generations from nothing. The human condition that requires a responsible yet largely indeterminate action is thus utterly bleak and appears to be perennially so, with no hope of its overcoming. This modern condition is *tragic*: we are alone, entirely on our own, having voluntarily deprived ourselves of any hope, intentionally fearing the worst. This is our fate, which we ourselves have created and do not control anymore.

We have thus to «give the prophecy of doom priority over the prophecy of bliss» (Jonas, 1984, p. x). Sadly, prophesies of doom never work: if a prophesy comes true, we can never tell if it happened because of the prophesy or by chance. And if it doesn't, we can never know whether the non-fulfillment of the prophesy is due to our prudent listening to its warning or to its being utterly beside the point. But, for Jonas, our moral obligation consists in accepting the preference of the imaginary apocalypse over well-being, of sickness over health, of death over life – all in the name of a future well-being, health, and life, which are never yet there. Therefore, paradoxically, we have to fear hope, or fear the very overcoming of fear!

6. Caution and guilt

The ethics of responsibility is thus the ethics of caution, prudence, and circumspection. The imperative for the jumpy moral reason is ultimately «beware!» and «preserve!», with which Jonas ends his book (Jonas, 1984, p. 204).

Being happy, we need to expect evil, and therefore can never be happy. The worse is yet to come. But the worst is not there and is never there. Caution is prudent, but it never tells us how to act. We see signs of a universal decline and humanity's striving toward death in the global ecological crisis and environmental decay. Yet, we do not know what to do. And even if we know, or knew, we lack a concerted effort and political will to act.

Jonas explicitly suggests that we have to cultivate *guilt*, or that there should be an element of guilt in all actions (Jonas, 1984, p. 35). Caution

has to be accompanied by guilt, which modernity translates into responsibility[5]. We need to feel guilty for what we have not done but imagined or could have done. Yet we do not know what we should have done, even if knowledge is now a duty.

Thus, we need not only follow a moral imperative – we need to change our very moral practice, our everyday life driven by guilty caution, fear of the imagined worst, modesty and moderation, which now become imperative (Jonas, 1984, p. 191). An «ascetic morality» or the «spirit of frugality», which Jonas sees as the socialist ideal, is, however, also present in the (Protestant) ethics of early capitalism (Jonas, 1984, p. 147). Moreover, it is not altogether alien to the morality of the answerability to and for the future. There should be some room for "trimming", for curbing and shrinking our consumption, which should be self-compulsory or voluntarily imposed upon ourselves (Jonas, 1984, p. 184). Curiously enough, the same idea of anti-consumerism was energetically promoted by Herbert Marcuse in the 1960s, becoming a battle cry for the progressives and the Green Party; in this respect, they are very much on the same page with Jonas.

7. Between pessimism and optimism

As was said, the two "commandments" of the ethics of responsibility are survival and ensuring a good life for all of future humankind. Yet, these commandments might be mutually incompatible. Jonas's primary concern is not about human flourishing: bare survival is a necessary but not yet a sufficient condition for our flourishing. Our well-being is never guaranteed even if we survive, for we could still carry on living in an utterly miserable way, in mutual suspicion, hatred, discord, wars, and self-inflicted suffering. Or we could continue living in a way that satisfies our needs – and yet it will be utterly boring. In either case, is such a life worth living? Jonas suggests that it is, and so collective suicide is never an option (Jonas, 1984, p. 36), because being is a good and thus is worth keeping as being. But why? If we cannot hope for the best but should always dread the worst and thus live in constant fear and guilt, and if our life comes at the expense of other living beings, why should we value our living?

Does Jonas' appeal *ad pessimum* imply an overall pessimistic outlook on our future? Since, again, the future is opaque and cannot really be predicted, we can only exercise caution in our actions, so that our life

[5] Thus, Dostoevsky's claim that everyone is *guilty* before everyone for everyone and everything (Dostoevsky, 1976, p. 262) is translated as everyone is *responsible* to everyone in the inscription at the entrance to Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva, which runs: «Chacun est responsable de tout devant tous».

could be extended into the imagined future, when the future has become the future past yet is always beyond the horizon of our foresight. The mode of the ethics of responsibility can be thus taken as a moderate pessimism counterbalanced by the expectation of doom. Without moderation, pessimism would make our life unlivable, so the second commandment, that of a good life, will always be postponed beyond the horizon of the present, making it practically unreachable and turning it only into a regulative idea.

8. The fear of technology

The demand for action driven by responsibility, limited and highlighted by fear, comes from our unprecedented power over the world, which we still cannot quite manage, but are compelled to at least recognize. Yet, what Jonas considered technology at the time when he was writing his book is not what it has become: his paradigm of technology is still a complex mechanism, embodied in the nuclear bomb that would destroy us. Even then, Jonas' main concern comes from the «dynamics of technical civilization as such», which he takes to be not a quick destruction, but rather one that is caused by slowly accumulated changes of various forms of «too much» that are mediated and propelled by technological advancement and that might become irreversible (Jonas, 1984, p. 202). However, today we are immersed mostly into highly sophisticated electronic technology, much of which operates in virtual, expressly artificial substitution of nature, driven by powerful, mathematically based computer programming. Despite the fact that we ourselves have created it, this modern technology is frightening because of its sheer complexity, which goes beyond our individual and even collective understanding. Many of the codes that we use are already incomprehensible because either their programmers left, or forgot, their own programming algorithms, or the codes keep building on each other, so that none can see them in their entirety. Yet, the worst fear that modern technology instills in us, with the advent of the all-powerful, quasi-divine AI, is that it threatens to make us obsolete, if not physically then at least socially and especially cognitively, turning us into lazy consumers, destitute even of our own wishes and desires, all of which will be provided and decided for us.

9. The rape of nature and the paradox of power

Our power over nature is driven by the desire to quickly adapt the environment to our needs, rather than to slowly evolve and adapt ourselves to the environment. Jonas associates the new technological

power with the Baconian "knowledge is power" program that intends to establish our «power over nature, and to utilize power of nature for the improvement of the human lot» (Jonas, 1984, p. 140)[6]. Our domination over nature, then, amounts to the «raping of nature» (Jonas, 1984, p. 2), which we feel free to use any way we like, without considering it worthy or valuable in itself.

But in modernity, in implementing the Baconian program, we become *excessively* successful. What makes modern technology possible? The ideal of turning knowledge into power presupposes a radical change in the understanding of reason and its attitude toward the world. From contemplative, reason becomes aggressive and manipulative, turning the *homo sapiens* into the *homo faber*: we become the makers of life and the masters of the elements (Jonas, 1984, pp. 2-3; 9; 167-8). From now on, nature is seen as a Cartesian *res extensa* devoid of life and thus of any dignity or intrinsic value. The mechanical world, which becomes simple in its mathematically describable constituents, comes to substitute for vitalistic, premodern nature. The cognitive attitude toward the world is now driven by the *verum factum* principle, formulated by Vico (2010, p. 16), which becomes the attitude of modern science and is epitomized in Kant's *First Critique*. This principle states: only that can be admitted or known as true which is produced, willingly or unwillingly, by us and our cognitive faculties and actions. In this way, our cognitive and practical activity becomes transformative of the cognitive, social, and natural environment. This is the meaning of the scientific revolution, which gives us new knowledge, which is our own product, and arms us with technological devices for the reconstruction of that which is now always and only at hand for our use and consumption.

Based on the *verum factum* principle, modern technology radically changes not only the nature of which we are part – but also our own nature as thinking and acting beings. The fear of the imminent *nihil* that we should carefully cultivate in guilt comes from our changed attitude toward nature and is translated into the fear of technology – Jonas shares with his teacher, Heidegger, a deep suspicion of technology as *Gestell*.

Once the new reason turns to transforming nature, it adopts the attitude of scientific and technological progress meant for the betterment of human life, especially in its material aspect. Yet, such progress, in which the material "is" remains severed from the moral "ought", does not amount to moral and political progress (Jonas, 1984, pp. 162; 167-9).

[6] Jonas discerns three "degrees" of modern power: the power over nature; the power of nature over us that comes from the knowledge of nature; and the power over the second-degree power, that of "self-limitation" (Jonas, 1984, pp. 141-2).

Nature is now meant to be transformed by our new technological power and hence cannot be left alone, because it is considered not to have any "own" or "self". Everything that is in nature and makes nature is brought into it through being constructed by us. For this reason, Bloch speaks in his *Principle of Hope* about the «naturalization of man, humanization of nature» (Bloch, 1986, pp. 205; 209; 313). The naturalization of humans might be a worthy project, but the humanization of nature means molding nature into the image that we have determined for it without ever asking nature. We create nature in our own image.

Yet, taken by us as a repository of «food, raw materials, and energy» (Jonas, 1984, p. 189), nature fights back. As Jonas observes, the cognitive and technological control over nature implies a *paradox*, or rather a performative contradiction, because our unprecedented modern technological power leads both to *domination* over nature and the *subjugation* to it (Jonas, 1984, p. 141). Nature slips away, and our exhaustion of its resources means our own destruction.

Despite Jonas' admonition, it is only now, in the contemporary climate change and ecological crisis, that we begin to realize the scale of the depletion of nature that follows from the abuse of our modern technological power and the overuse of natural resources, which results in erasing whole environments and ecological niches (see Morris, 2013). Now, we've become acutely aware of the limits of nature's tolerance to our power and yet do not know how to react. The currently accepted measures against pollution and rising greenhouse gas emissions are welcome but apparently insufficient. Jonas stresses toward the end of his book: at this point, philosophers have nothing to say but only to listen carefully to what others – the citizens and the scientists – bring up in the debate (Jonas, 1984, pp. 188-9). And even if Jonas' ethics of responsible action toward nature is based on not always justifiable premises, his pointing at the danger of our living beyond the allowable means, which may quickly lead not only to our self-destruction but also to irreversible changes in the living nature, remains a somber and important warning that we need to listen to carefully. Whether it is too late to turn away from a human-made catastrophe, we do not know. But now is the time to act responsibly in the hope of giving a chance to future generations, not only of humans but also of all living things, to live and to flourish.

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