

Identity, Freedom and Relationships of Responsibility in Hans Jonas' Philosophy

Identidade, liberdade e relações de responsabilidade na filosofia de Hans Jonas

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Abstract:

“In spite of everything, my hope ultimately rests on human reason”, Hans Jonas has written. He never lost faith in the sublime notion of humans sharing a common sentiment, perception, rationale and love, the signs of a shared human experience which expresses itself in the universality of logos. Individual experience and universal aspiration come together in the “concept”, which uses words to express what is encountered, die Sache. The fact that we can share this reminds us of the profound meaning of brotherhood, equality and creativity. Furthermore, Jonas attempts to highlight the links between matter and spirit, body and soul, and the participatory relationship between man and nature, renewing the image of man’s most fitting role – that of wise, sage custodian of the entity that we are all part of. When the future is uncertain, analyzing the present as the offspring of the past and trying to find somewhere, even transfigured, that can give us some guiding references to start out with, can be a solution.
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1. The Crucial Questions of Our Time

The challenges of the third millennium, such as the globalization of the markets without the globalization of rights, religious struggles for cultural supremacy, and the environmental crisis, to name but a few of the main ones, cannot be solved – as it presently appears - purely by applying the neo liberal vision, which reduces the world and human

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beings to their exchange value, to a question of money. Our complicated current situation is already starting to prove that the model of unfettered capitalism cannot be exported all over the world, above all because there are simply not enough resources to turn the whole of the earth into one giant celebration of consumerism, sustaining the constant production of goods that characterizes capitalist, industrialized countries.

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

Philosophy cannot remain indifferent to these challenges, because philosophy is exactly the kind of knowledge we need today. Philosophy enables us to interpret individual experience from a wider perspective, going beyond the immediate and forging essential connections between the various voices in order to find common solutions we can use to design and create a better world for everyone. This is where the power of human thinking lies, the power that has given rise to the civilizations that value life. Much has been done in history, sometimes too much, and it is now necessary to restore some balance, first and foremost by taking responsibility for life – the force common to both the human race and the whole of nature, and work to ensure its continuation.

Environmental catastrophes are indeed the most serious threat we face in the near future. Global warming, the shrinking of the ozone layer and climate change, glaciers melting, ground erosion, water and air pollution, the reduction in biodiversity, ongoing deforestation, food shortages, declining supplies of fossil fuels, and the exponential population increase are just the tip of the iceberg.

So how did we become a threat to our planet, our home? The *oikos*, that inseparable union of natural and cultural elements that makes us who we are. How can we envision and implement sustainable progress? How can we educate the masses towards quality rather than quantity, towards a more ascetic approach, which is necessary for a more equitable and ecological distribution of resources? How can we return to focus on the natural, primary human need for freedom and solidarity, which is above and beyond all other needs and the key to restoring human dignity in the face of the money god?

These are the crucial questions of our time and our future depends on our ability to answer them and come up with effective strategies of thought and action.

Hans Jonas, who devoted much of his life to theoretical reflections on the demanding practical issues of our time, tackles these very questions in his work. He was aware that his was not a complete theory¹, but rather an analysis of a series of crucial matters, identifying a range of possible solutions with the whole of humanity in mind. Yet he never shirked ‘the labour of the concept’, aware that the concept, namely the ability universalize, drawing abstract notions from experience, was man’s utmost achievement. «In spite of all, in the last analysis my hope rests on human reason»², he has written. He never lost faith in the sublime notion of humans sharing a common sentiment, perception, rationale and love, the signs of a shared human experience which expresses itself in the universality of *logos*. Individual experience and universal aspiration come together in the concept, which through the word presents what is encountered, *die Sache*, with the possibility for sharing reminding us of the profound meaning of brotherhood, equality and creativity.

He asserts that even the corrections needed to prevent us from charging headlong, as we presently are, into a major catastrophe in environmental terms, continuously call for

renewed endeavours of the technical and scientific mind³. This calls for a renewed effort of both reason and sentiment, namely paying attention to the consequences of the application of scientific and technological knowledge on the individual, societies and nature. Unlike his teacher Heidegger, he comprehended that modern science could not be set aside when implementing this change of direction. Scientific research and its applications are indispensable when it comes to transforming the predominant economic culture of individualistic capitalism into an economic culture based on the ecology of the planet as a whole. Indeed, when used with wisdom and caution, research offers us knowledge that can help us find our way and tackle challenges positively. Practical action draws cohesion and coherence from the theoretical ideas that guide it, which are in turn the result of intellectual and contemplative reflection.

The technical-economical approach that began to take hold in Europe in the 17th century, and then initially in North America in particular, is based on theoretical support for modern metaphysics. This awareness was masterfully revealed by Heidegger⁴. Although he eventually came to reject Western metaphysics, science and technology, which part of humanity employed in a major push for self knowledge, on one hand, and on the other, in one of the most wonderful adventures of knowledge, communication and the use of knowledge to interact with the environment. Jonas takes a different stance: he believes in the positivity of reason, metaphysics and science, which have granted us extraordinary power over nature, but we cannot now shirk responsibility for guiding and limiting this power.

Ethical and political engagement are therefore needed, but first of all we must agree on what we should be committed to. We need to establish a new shared imperative, which does not necessarily need to be categorical, merely hypothetical, if we can just agree on the aim.

Can saving life on planet Earth in its various forms, as far as this depends on us and our actions, be a sufficient aim? Can an apocalyptic scenario be the catalyst we need to forge a common synergy of intentions and actions, based on respect for life? Can our fear of a catastrophe motivate us to call a halt to the weakening of social cohesion and the degeneration it entails - which not coincidentally appears and spreads in the final stages of every civilization - and that nowadays is reaching its apex in the countries undergoing the third industrial revolution?

2. The Answers of the Past

When the future is uncertain, analyzing the present as the offspring of the past and at the same time trying to find somewhere, even transfigured, that can give us some guiding references to start out with, can be a solution.

Hans Jonas sees the rigid contraposition of subject and object - the outcome of the dualistic Cartesian contraposition between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* - the kernel of which was present in gnostic cosmogony, as the theoretical idea upon which the modern science of nature is based. He was well aware of the importance of this kind of knowledge and its applications, but he asserted that changes were necessary in order to limit some of its harmful effects and strengthen other, more fruitful ones, in a long-term, extended perspective. With this in mind he sought new guidelines with which to interpret the world, and focused his attention in particular on the miracle of life, the essential phenomena of which are common to both man and nature, and set about formulating a philosophy of biology.

Looking back over the history of human thinking and action, we can see that the conception of man's relationship with nature as an opposition, is a transformation of the more

ancient concept of inclusion.

In *The Gnostic Religion* Jonas writes that when comparing the old and new worlds, the most meaningful symbol, in so far as it reveals the essence of each, is the concept of “cosmos”⁵. While in the new world “cosmos” is framed as a rigid, inimical order, an oppressive, iniquitous law, alien to human aims and the inner essence⁶ of man, in Greek philosophy this term had a lengthy tradition of the utmost dignity. The literal meaning of the word conveys a positive interpretation of the object it describes: *kosmos* means “order” in general, of the world, of the family, of a state, of a person: it is a term of praise and admiration.

Over time the term became linked to the concept of universe, but this did not monopolize its meaning. Indeed it continued to be applied to various everyday objects and situations, from the general to the particular, the ethical to the ascetic, the interior to the exterior, the material to the spiritual⁷.

The universe was seen as the broadest and most perfect example of order, and at the same time the underlying cause of the order encountered in specific situations, which only resemble the whole to varying extents. And since beauty is the tangible aspect of order, the *kosmos*, as perfect order, possessed absolute beauty and rationality. It was considered a divine entity and called god, even God. It was therefore viewed as more than a “physical” system; it was considered a living, intelligent whole in possession of “wisdom” of some kind.

Plato called the cosmos the highest sentient being, a god and in truth a living creature like soul and reason⁸.

Aristotle asserted that in view of their substance and the purity and steadiness of the intelligence moving them, the bodies that made up the heavens were more divine than man himself⁹.

Subsequently, stoic monism led to the cosmos being identified with the divine, the universe and God, as Cicero

described in the second book of *De natura deorum*¹⁰.

As Jonas perceptively observes, stoic pantheism, and the natural theology of post-Aristotelian thought in general, replaced the relationship between citizens and city with that between the individual and the cosmos. Man's relationship with the cosmos was a specific example of the relationship between a part and the whole, which was viewed as central in classical thought.

According to classical doctrine, the whole is prior to the parts, is better than the parts, and therefore that for the sake of which the parts are and wherein they have not only the cause but also the meaning of their existence. The living example of such a whole had been a classical polis, the city-state, whose citizens had a share in the whole and could affirm its superior status in the knowledge that they the parts, however passing and exchangeable, not only were dependent on the whole for their being but also maintained that whole with their being: just as the condition of the whole made a difference to the being and possible perfection of the parts, so their conduct made a difference to the being and perfection of the whole. Thus this whole, making possible first the very life and then the good life of the individual, was at the same time entrusted to the individual's care, and in surpassing and outlasting him was also his supreme achievement¹¹.

In late antiquity the cosmos was framed as the great "city of gods and men", although it was more difficult to relate one's interior self, one's *logos*, to the *logos* of the whole, as a reflection of man's actual situation, without the near reality of the *polis*. However the continuing vision of man as integrated into the whole and his affinity with it, saved human dignity and fostered positive ethics. Jonas states that this sentiment, which replaced that previously inspired by the ideal of civic virtue, actually represented a heroic attempt undertaken by the intellectual class to convey the vital power of that ideal in basically changed conditions¹². The masses scattered throughout the wide Empire had never known or experienced the noble

tradition of *aretè*, and now found themselves passively involved in a situation in which the parts were meaningless for the whole, and the whole was foreign to the parts¹³.

According to Jonas, the cultural situation of the Greek-Roman world in the early Christian period presents considerable parallels with the modern situation. He quotes Spengler that went so far as to assert that the two ages are “contemporary”, in the sense that they are identical stages in the life cycle of their respective civilizations¹⁴. And indeed we can acknowledge that many elements in late antiquity, in the period of the first Caesars, present similarities with the current situation.

Gnosticism is one of those elements, though it might not be instantly recognisable as such due to the complicated elaboration of symbols. In the aforementioned centuries the gnostic movement, like Christianity, was boosted by a widespread situation of crisis in the previous civilizations, that affected many places, in many forms and many languages.

The essentially dualistic attitude that underpins gnosticism and unifies a range of different expressions, arose from a reflection on a deeply felt human experience. It was the end of the era of the perceived affinity between the *logos* of man and the *logos* of the cosmos, with man occupying a place in the order of the whole. That place now looked more like an irrational accident, and the sentiment that arose in man's innermost was one of division between man and the world. These nascent forms of dualism - man vs. the world and the world vs. God - were now framed in terms of opposing, rather than complementary forces. Jonas underlines that in this conception of the terms man, world and God, man and God stand together against the world, but in spite of this basic “togetherness”, they are essentially separated from the world.

In its theological aspect this doctrine states that the Divine is alien to the world and has neither part nor concern in the

physical universe; that the true god, strictly transmundane, is not revealed or even indicated by the world, and is therefore the Unknown, the totally Other, unknowable in terms of any worldly analogies. Correspondingly, in its cosmological aspect it states that the world is the creation not of God but of some inferior principle whose law it executes; and, in its anthropological aspect, that man's inner self, the pneuma ('spirit' in contrast to 'soul' = psyche) is not part of the world, of nature's creation and domain, but is, within that world, as totally transcendent and as unknown by all worldly categories as is its transmundane counterpart, the unknown God without¹⁵.

The world was created by the hand of a lesser god moved by ignorance and passion, and therefore embodying the negative of *knowledge*. It is a force that lacks enlightenment and is therefore evil, that arises with the spirit of a power imposing itself, from a blind desire for supremacy and constraint, without empathy and love. The laws of universe turn out to be laws of domination and not of divine wisdom. *Power* becomes the pivotal element of the cosmos and its interior essence is ignorance (*agnosia*). This is set against the essence of man, interpreted as knowledge, knowledge of oneself and of God: knowledge in the midst of non-knowledge, light in the midst of darkness, and this relationship is what underpins man's essential alienation in the dark expanse of the universe.

That universe has none of the venerability of the Greek cosmos. Contemptuous epithets are applied to it: 'these miserable elements' (*paupertina haec elementa*), 'this puny cell of the creator' (*haec cellula creatoris*)¹⁶. Yet it is still *kosmos*, an order – but order with a vengeance, alien to man's aspirations. Its recognition is compounded of fear and disrespect, of trembling and defiance. The blemish of nature lies not in any deficiency of order, but in the all too pervading completeness of it. Far from being chaos, the creation of the demiurge, unenlightened as it is, is still a system of law. But cosmic law, once worshipped as the expression of a reason with which man's reason can communicate in the act of cognition, is now seen only in its aspect of compulsion which thwarts man's freedom. The cosmic *logos* of the Stoics, which

was identified with providence, is replaced by heimarmene, oppressive cosmic fate¹⁷.

Faced with this vision of the world, the soul's response to its being-in-the-world is the loneliness and fear of the stateless – a familiar feature of gnostic literature. Furthermore, the human being discovers that he is not actually his own master, but rather the involuntary executant of cosmic designs.

Man can break free of this slavery through knowledge, but the salvation offered by *gnosis* does not strive for integration into the cosmos, unlike the stoic vision of wisdom, which sought freedom by knowingly consenting to the needs of the whole.

For the Gnostics, on the contrary, man's alienation from the world is to be deepened and brought to a head, for the extrication of the inner self which only thus can gain itself. The world (not the alienation from it) must be overcome; and a world degraded to a power system can only be overcome through power. The overpowering here in question is, of course, anything but technological mastery. The power of the world is overcome, on the one hand, by the power of the Saviour who breaks into its closed system from without, and, on the other hand, through the power of the "knowledge" brought by him, which as a magical weapon defeats the force of the planets and opens to the soul a path through their impeding orders.¹⁸

Thus the only relationship man can have with nature is framed as this clash between two opposing powers – a vision that contains embryonic similarities with the condition of modern man.

Indeed in modernity, as the relationship with God is gradually left out of explanations of the universe, the latter no longer reveals the hand of the Creator, His design, order and beauty, but merely its own sheer size and strength; attributes that evoke power relationships. In the modern vision of nature, basically conceived in quantitative terms, based on relationships

of cause and effect, the idea of an aim or purpose appears superfluous. According to Jonas, the exclusion of teleology from the system of natural causes means that the idea of nature no longer figures as a model or sanction for human aims. Without ontological support the human race is abandoned to itself in its search for meaning and value. Meanings are attributed, values are postulated through evaluation attempts, and aims are created as functions of will.

Will replaced contemplation and the temporality of the act was no longer inspired by the eternal time-frame of “good in itself”. Thus favourable conditions developed for the appearance of European nihilism: man found himself alone, in a situation of contingency, depending on an inscrutable will, and without a reason for his existence.

Techno-scientism and nihilism thus charted parallel paths that eventually found a point of contact.

The deus absconditus, of whom nothing but will and power can be predicated, leaves behind as his legacy, upon leaving the scene, the homo absconditus, a concept of man characterized solely by will and power – the will for power, the will to will. For such a will even indifferent nature is more an occasion for its exercise than a true object¹⁹.

In late modernity, intellectuals like Sartre, pondering the conditions of existence, deduced from the silence of the transcendent in the world that man, abandoned and left to himself, was nothing more than his own design and that he was therefore free to think and act as if all was permitted²⁰. It is obvious that this freedom, with its intrinsic creative discontinuity, not only progressively alienated man from the cosmos, from other men and eventually from himself, but also had a whiff of desperation about it, and being an engagement with no purpose it inspires fear instead of exultation, as Jonas states²¹.

Yet, it is nature itself, relegated to oblivion as “indifferent” and confined to the arena of “usable” things, that now rebels, reacting to our illusion of wielding limitless power by asserting its presence with the threat of environmental catastrophe.

3. Rediscovering the Notion of “Participatory Nature”

In view of the pressing questions that the contemporary age can no longer ignore, Jonas, aware of the path that led to the current situation, returns to the ancient triad of God-man-world. He starts from the central role of nature, an issue that, after “the death of God”, the loss of ontologically based shared values and the monopolization of nature by the positive sciences, appeared to have lost its significance. He resumed his reflections on the relationship – viewed as fundamental in antiquity - between the parts and the whole, striving to go beyond the anthropocentric limits of idealist and existentialist philosophy on one hand, and the materialistic ones of the natural science on the other²².

Aware that life, the force common to human beings and natural beings, continues to possess concealed nodes of meaning, Jonas undertakes an ontological interpretation of biological phenomena, mainly using the tools of critical analysis and phenomenological description, while not avoiding metaphysical speculation over the ultimate questions.

Based on his biological knowledge, he intuited that the great contradictions that man finds within himself - between freedom and necessity, autonomy and dependency, self and world, relationship and isolation, creativity and mortality - can also be found at an embryonic stage in primitive forms of life. Like more complex life forms, including man, these life forms are characterized by a precarious balance between being and

non-being, constantly referring to a horizon of “transcendancy”. A non-dogmatic thinker, as Jonas considers himself, cannot ignore the testimony of life itself, and in the *Introduction to The Phenomenon of Life*, he enlightens us on the direction of his research:

The organic even in its lowest forms prefigures mind, and [...] mind even on its highest reaches remains part of the organic. The latter half in the contention, but not the former, is in tune with modern belief; the former, but not the latter, was in tune with ancient belief: that both are valid and inseparable is the hypothesis of a philosophy which tries for a stand beyond the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns²³.

With the increase in scientific knowledge, it becomes clear that the organism in its extended substance is a particularly problematic form. We can assert that in the organism we find what Descartes termed *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, the “thinking” and the “extended” being, split into two ontological spheres. The meeting of these two spheres in the living organism becomes an unsolvable enigma.

Jonas underlines that today, paradoxically, the corpse is the most comprehensible of the body’s conditions: in death the body gets rid of enigmas: in it the body returns from the enigmatic and non-orthodox attitude of vitality to the non-ambiguous and “familiar” condition of a body inside the whole corporeal world, whose universal laws are the canon of all comprehensibility²⁴. This suggests that human thinking submits to the ontological predominance of death.

Dualism is the theoretical idea which historically mediated between two extremes: the vitalistic monism of ancient times and the materialistic monism of current times. According to Jonas, while dualism was the first great correction of monistic-animistic unilaterality, materialistic monism, which was left as a residue of this, is the no less unilateral triumph of the experience of death over that of life.

'Evolution' in the modern sense made it possible to credit unaided matter more plausibly with the production of the living kingdom, and thus to advance the materialistic monism of science by a decisive step. It did so by abandoning the original meaning of the term 'evolution', derived from the growth process of individual organisms: the idea of preformation and unfolding was abandoned and replaced by the quasi-mechanical picture of an unplanned, undirected, yet progressive sequence whose beginnings, unlike the germ, adumbrate nothing of the outcome or of the successive steps²⁵.

Darwin's theory of evolution, with its combination of casual variations or mutations and natural selection, completed the expulsion of the teleology from nature, making the idea of an "aim" or "purpose" superfluous even to the story of life and consigning it to realm of human subjectivity. This also eliminated the ideas of immutable essences from reality.

Jonas asserts that this specifically modern conception of life as an open-ended adventure without design, the corollary of the disappearance of immutable essences, is an important philosophical consequence of the scientific theory of evolution.

In relating evolutionism to the Copernican revolution, we have especially in mind the fact that it extends to the realm of life that combination of natural necessity with radical contingency which the Newtonian-Laplacean cosmology resulting from that revolution had universally proclaimed.[...] 'Necessity plus contingency' can be most simply expressed here by saying that there is the complete concurrence of causes but no reason for the system as it happens to exist²⁶.

The result is the paradox of progress through chance, with "enrichment" being "a proliferating excrescence" upon an originally simple form. And we are left with the enigma according to which this process simulates creativity.

Nevertheless, the triumph of materialism contained in Darwinism contained its own downfall. The success of Darwinism consisted in explaining the creation of all the

branched, ascending forms of life purely in terms of automatic processes of the natural world. This explanation removed dualistic necessity, but ended up burdening matter with all the weight that dualism had relieved it of, namely the task of dealing with the origin of the spirit too. Jonas argues:

Evolution precisely abolished the special position of man which had warranted the Cartesian treatment of all the remainder. The continuity of descent now established between man and the animal world made it impossible any longer to regard his mind, and mental phenomena as such, as the abrupt ingression of an ontologically foreign principle at just this point of the total flow. [...] Thus evolutionism undid Descartes' work more effectively than any metaphysical critique had managed to do. In the hue and cry over the indignity done to man's metaphysical status in the doctrine of his animal descent, it was overlooked that by the same token some dignity had been restored to the realm of life as a whole. [...] Thus after the contraction brought about by Christian transcendentalism and Cartesian dualism, the province of 'soul', with feeling, striving, suffering, enjoyment, extended again, by the principle of continuous gradation, from man over the kingdom of life²⁷.

The highest degree of evolution was reached through intermediate stages. So at what point can we say that the phenomenon of interiority starts? Is there any further dividing line or does it start in some way with life, even in the simplest organisms?

If «inwardness» in its basic forms is «coextensive » with life, then a mechanistic explanation of life, an interpretation through pure concepts of exteriority, «in outward terms alone», is not sufficient²⁸. Darwinism was a basically dialectic event: the coherence of the theory of evolution takes us beyond materialism, reasserting the ontological issue which had previously appeared to be resolved.

According to Jonas, the very metabolism of every organism proves that the living being, although made up of

matter, enjoys «a sort of freedom with respect to its own substance»²⁹: its constant need to exchange matter with the outside world puts it in a continuous state of transformation, naturally emancipating it from its own basic needs, making it Other. Jonas goes so far as to assert that metabolism itself is the first form of freedom, and that therefore the concept of freedom is relevant to ontological description, from the most elementary dynamics, showing a clear distinction from pure matter.

The privilege of freedom, which enabled the living substance to detach itself from the universal integration of inanimate things by an act of isolation and identity construction, is undoubtedly burdened with the weight of need and the danger of survival, constantly hovering between being and non-being.

In each organism, characterized by the dual aspect of metabolism and need, non-being becomes an alternative that is contained in being; threatened by its own negation, being must continuously assert itself, and this effort is a manifestation of interest in continuation - it is existence as interest - and that entails the acquisition of identity.

Nevertheless this kind of existence, suspended between possible antitheses such as being and non-being, the self and the world, form and matter, freedom and necessity, is inevitably and inherently based on a relational rapport; a rapport that confirms, reinforces and also energises the identity, which is transformed and exalted by the encounter. As Jonas commendably puts it:

Of all the polarities mentioned, most basic is that of being and not-being. From it, identity is wrested in a supreme, protracted effort of delay whose end is foredoomed: for not-being has generality, or the equality of all things, on its side. Its defiance by the organism must end in ultimate compliance, in which selfhood vanishes and as this unique one can never be retrieved. That life is mortal may be its basic self-contradiction, but it belongs to its nature and cannot be separated from it even in thought: life carries death in itself, not in spite of, but because of, its being life, for of such a revocable, unassured kind is the relation of form and matter

upon which it rests. Its reality, paradoxical and a constant challenge to mechanical nature, is at bottom continual crisis whose momentary resolution is never safe and only gives rise to crisis renewed. [...] The fear of death with which the hazard of this existence is charged is a never-ending comment on the audacity of the original venture upon which substance embarked in turning organic³⁰.

Progressively higher forms of freedom develop in animals, up to its highest expression in nature - the human being - where the arrival of self awareness is intrinsically linked to responsibility for the order of the living. Life, which at the apex of evolution is capable of thinking about itself, cannot but feel part of a whole that has to be preserved and looked after. This is its first identity.

One salient characteristic of the human being is the ability to independently acknowledge the relationship of responsibility that links him to other beings, due to intrinsically participating in the relational dynamism of the common phenomenon of life.

Human responsibility can be grounded and conveyed by going back to the “objective” side of a renewed idea of nature, that history itself demands for the survival of mankind, after several industrial and techno-scientific revolutions, and nihilisms. In view of a power which extends to the ability to intervene inside nature, initiating artificial processes with largely unforeseeable and probably irreversible consequences, it is now becoming increasingly impossible to avoid considering possible approaches to implement in the chiefly political issue of taking responsibility for nature and humanity.

4. The Sense of Corporeity

The way proposed by Jonas passes *in primis* through a re-appropriation of the sense of corporeity of man-as-organism, as

a renewed medium with the world. In the essay *Is God a Mathematician?* he writes:

On the strength of the immediate testimony of our bodies we are able to say what no disembodied onlooker would have a cause for saying: that the mathematical God in his homogeneous analytical view misses the decisive point – the point of life itself: its being self-centered individuality, being for itself and in contraposition to all the rest of the world, with an essential boundary dividing “inside” and “outside” – notwithstanding, nay, on the very basis of the actual exchange³¹.

For all other kinds of aggregation, Jonas observes how their evident unity, which makes them seem whole, is merely the product of sensory perception, implying a purely phenomenological status. Using the example of the stone and the drop of water, he explains that their identity is actually based on the relative persistency of aggregation and can ultimately be reduced to their primary components. In comparison, living beings represent a genuine ontological surprise in nature.

The world-accident of terrestrial conditions brings to light an entirely new possibility of being: systems of matter that are unities of a manifold, not in virtue of a synthesizing perception whose object they happen to be, nor by the mere concurrence of the forces that bind their parts together, but in virtue of themselves, for the sake of themselves, and continually sustained by themselves. Here wholeness is self-integrating in active performance, and form for once is the cause rather than the result of the material collections in which it successively subsists. Unity here is self-unifying, by means of changing multiplicity³².

According to Jonas, this constant process of self-renewal in the flow of the ever new and different, which he calls the active self-integration of life or «self-integrating in active performance», can provide the ontological concept of the

individual as well as its phenomenological counterpart.

The existence in every moment of the ontological individual, and the enduring presence of elements of identity as time passes are essentially due to the individual's own function, interest and continued performance. Therefore this functional identity coincides with the individual's substantial identity and the fact of being engaged in a continuous process of self-preservation: the organic form stays in a relationship of *needing freedom* toward the matter. Jonas argues:

It is only with life that the difference of matter and form, in respect to lifeless things, an abstract distinction, emerges as a concrete reality. And the ontological relationship is reversed: form becomes the essence, matter the accident. In the realm of the lifeless, form is no more than a changing composite state, an accident, of enduring matter. And viewed from the fixed identities of the changing material contents, as the inventory of each moment would record them, the living form too is only a region of local and temporal transit in their own movements, its apparent unity a passing, configurative state of their multiplicity³³.

Life lies in its dynamic continuation, in such a way that the snapshot of an organism, however complete, cannot reproduce what is most peculiar to the organism: life itself, whose form consists exactly in the totality of its functions and in the temporal dimension. «*Its duration*» is what gives it unity in concrete terms and hence identity, as productive fulfilment, and not as a merely logical attribute, since the identity of $A=A$, in its closed tautology, remains an empty category for the living. In its necessary activity the living being is ontologically inclined toward the otherness of the matter.

Nevertheless the autonomy of the living form is evident in the fact that its material consistency is not fixed, but changes constantly, in a continuous relationship of assimilation and expulsion with the surrounding environment, without ever losing its own identity, as long as it lives. This material

consistency is its very function.

From the point of view of the immutable identity of what is material, as would result from the recording of the consistency of every moment, the living form is merely a region of temporal passage for matter, which remains within its confines only temporarily and according to its own laws, and their apparent unity is nothing but a state of momentary configuration of the multiplicity of all that passes through. But from the point of view of the dynamic identity of form, the living being is what is real in the relationship; it does not merely let the matter of the world pass passively through it, but rather pulls it actively inside itself, then expels it and develops from it.³⁴

Indeed, Jonas argues, in view of the fact that in inanimate matter form is actually an accident of the enduring material substance, while in living beings the material contents are states of existence that are kept the same thanks to an active, organizing form, we can thus assert that the material contents which make up a living being at any given time are stages in the process by which the living being establishes itself. This is the vision he prefers to a description of the living being merely as a topos for the passage of matter.

According to the concepts of physics, only exterior principles of identity exist, starting from the *principia individuationis* of space and time. Interior principles of identity, such as recollecting the past or the impulse to envisage the continuation of the "self" are not identified as mere units of matter. Even a simple observation yields an entirely different picture of the organic identity: it is involuntarily induced by its exterior morphological testimony, as the salient characteristic of the adventure of the living form. And Jonas wonders:

But what kind of inference is this? And by whom? How can the unprepared observer infer what no mere analysis of the

physical record will ever yield? The unprepared observer indeed cannot: indeed the observer must be prepared, as the hypothetical 'pure Mathematician' is not. The observer of life must be prepared by life. In other words, organic existence with its own experience is required of himself for his being able to make that inference, which he does make all the time, and this is the advantage – perennially disowned or slandered in the history of epistemology – of our 'having', that is, being, bodies. Thus we are prepared by what we are. It is by this interpolation of an internal identity alone that the mere morphological (and as such meaningless) fact of metabolic continuity is comprehended as incessant act; that is, continuity is comprehended as self-continuation³⁵.

Even when describing the most elementary form of life, it is necessary to introduce the concept of the "self": thanks to life the interior identity manifests itself in the world, along with, as a consequence, the separation of its form from the rest of reality. It never fully breaks with reality though, as this relation is an integral part of it. The result is an identity that creates itself from moment to moment and continually reasserts itself, defying the levelling forces of physical sameness around it; it, the identity, lives in a state of tension with all the rest of reality. There is a dangerous, «hazardous», polarization which on one hand is of resemblance, of relationship, but on the other is of absolute diversity and extraneousness. The world is something in which, by which and against which the living form must preserve itself, as selfhood. And it is exactly «in this polarity of self and world, of internal and external», which integrates that of form and matter, that the fundamental situation of freedom, with all its risks and difficulties, is potentially placed, Jonas reiterates³⁶.

He maintains that in this way we can also see where the real evolutionary progress of developed animality lies, where the non-immediacy of its relationship with the world is an increase of the «mediacy» which is peculiar to organic existence at the earliest stages. This condition of «mediacy» affords greater scope, both internal and external, and a more

pronounced self.

The progressive nervous centralization of the animal organism emphasizes the former, while correspondingly the environment becomes open space in which the free-moving sentient has to fend for itself. In its greater exposure and the pitch of awareness that goes with it, its own possible annihilations become an object of dread just as its possible satisfactions become objects of desire. Its enjoyment has suffering as its shadow side, its loneliness the compensation of communication: the gain lies not on either side of the balance sheet but in the togetherness of both, i.e., in the enhancement of that selfhood with which 'organism' originally dared indifferent nature³⁷.

Obviously, since the outset, the price has been mortality, and every further stage of development presents a new bill, but it is exactly this that lends new fulfilment to the vital form, in a state of continuous hazard.

The rift between subject and object which long-range perception and motility opened and which the keenness of appetite and fear, of satisfaction and disappointment, of pleasure and pain, reflect, was never to be closed again. But in its widening expanse the freedom of life found room for all those modes of relation – perspective, active, and emotional – which in spanning the rift justify it and by indirection redeem the lost unity³⁸.

Jonas attempts once more to highlight the links between matter and spirit, body and soul, the participatory relationship between man and nature, to renew the image of man's most fitting role – that of wise, sage custodian of the being we are all part of.

Being conscious of this task and taking it on is the first datum, the first indication, for our material and spiritual salvation, in terms of both ontogenesis and phylogenesis; and this is true independently of the creeds or ideologies we base our actions on.

It is the common denominator, the new universal.

Notes

- 1 Cfr. H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966, p. 6.
- 2 Cfr. H. Jonas, *Wissenschaft als persönliches Erlebnis*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987, pp. 45-46.
- 3 Cfr. *Ibidem*.
- 4 Cfr. M. Heidegger, *Holzwege*, Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950; Id., *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1954.
- 5 Cfr. H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1958, p. 241
- 6 Cfr. *Ibi*, 250.
- 7 *Ibi*, p. 241, Jonas explains: «Here are some of these. For things of all kinds: arrangement, structure, rule; conformity to rule, i.e., regularity. In the public sphere: political or legal constitution; conformity to that, i.e., regularity. In the public sphere: political or legal constitution; conformity to that, i.e., lawful conduct or condition. In the military sphere: discipline, battle order. In the private sphere: decency, propriety, decorum (the adjective *cosmos* means well-behaved, its negative, unruly). As the social reflection of quality: honor, fame. As form of convention: etiquette, ceremonial. As form of display: ornament, decoration, especially in dress-hence, finery».
- 8 *Ibi*, p. 242, Jonas quotes passages from Plato: *Timaeus*, 30 b; 34 a; 29 d-30 c. «[The creator] was good; and in the good no jealousy in any matter can ever arise. So, being without jealousy, he desired that all things should come as near as possible to being like himself [...] Desiring, then, that all things should be good and, so far as might be, nothing imperfect, the god took over all that is visible [...] and brought it from disorder into order, since he judged that order was in every way the better [...] He found that [...] no work that is without intelligence will ever be better than one that has intelligence [...] and moreover that intelligence cannot be present in anything apart from soul. In virtue of this reasoning, when he framed the universe, he fashioned reason within soul and soul within body, to the end that the work he accomplished might be by nature as excellent and perfect as possible. This, then, is how we must say [...] that this world came to be, by god's providence, in very truth, a living creature with soul and reason».
- 9 *Ibi*, p. 243, Jonas quotes Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.*, vi, 7, 1141 a 21-22, 33-34: «It would be strange to think that the art of politics, or practical wisdom, is the best knowledge, since man is not the best thing in the world [...] But if the argument be that man is the best of the animals, this makes no difference; for there are other things much more divine in their nature even than man, e.g., most conspicuously, the bodies of which the heavens

are framed» .

- 10 *Ibidem*, Jonas quotes Cicero in full, *De natura deorum*, ii, 11-14. Here is the opening part (*General statement*): «There is then a nature [the heat] which holds together and sustains the universe, and it possesses both sensibility and reason. For everything which is not separated and simple but joined and connected with other things must have within it some governing principle. In man it is mind, in beasts something similar to mind [sense], from which the appetites arise [...] In each class of things nothing can be or ought to be more excellent than this its governing principle. Hence that element wherein resides the governing principle of Nature as a whole must be best of all things and most worthy of power and dominion over all things. Now we see that in certain parts of the cosmos – and there is nothing anywhere in the cosmos which is not a *part of the whole* – sensibility and reason abide. In that part, therefore, in which the governing principle of the cosmos resides, these same qualities must of necessity be present – only keener and on a grander scale. Therefore the cosmos must also be wise, for that substance which encompasses and holds all things must excel in the perfection of its reason; and this means that cosmos is God and that all its particular powers are contained in the divine nature [...]» .
- 11 H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1958, p. 248.
- 12 Cfr. *ibi*, p. 249.
- 13 Cfr. *Ibidem*.
- 14 Cfr. *ibi*, p. 326.
- 15 *Ibi*, p. 327.
- 16 Tertullianus, *Contra Marcionem*, i, 14.
- 17 H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 328.
- 18 *Ibi*, p. 329.
- 19 *Ibi*, pp. 324-325.
- 20 Cfr. J.-P. Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris: Les editions Nagel, 1946.
- 21 Cfr. H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 332.
- 22 Cfr. H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. xxiii
- 23 *Ibi*, p. 1.
- 24 Cfr. *ibi*, p. 12.
- 25 *Ibi*, p. 43.
- 26 *Ibi*, pp. 48-49.v
- 27 *Ibi*, p. 57.
- 28 Cfr. *Ibidem*.
- 29 H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice-Hall, 1974, p. 191.
- 30 H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 5.
- 31 *Ibi*, p. 79.
- 32 *Ibidem*.
- 33 *Ibi*, p. 80.
- 34 Cfr. H. Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit. Ansätze zu einer philosophischen Biologie*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973, pp. 126-127. Here

the passage is more exhaustive than in Id., *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 80.

35 H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 82.

36 Cfr. ibi, p. 83

37 H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 107.

38 *Ibidem*