

Responsibility for Life: A Descriptive View on Hans Jonas' Ethics

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Among the few philosophers who dedicated philosophical reflection on the problem of technology, Hans Jonas would be the leading one. Still in a close affinity with Martin Heidegger, his teacher, Jonas argued that modern technology bore some annoying characters. In line of this anxiety, Jonas suggested the importance of protecting life as an integral part of the ethical project he intended to build. Departing from his basic notion that human life is never separated from other organic life, Jonas has opened a wider space for ethical responsibilities towards life of the whole cosmos. In what sense is his notion of the responsibility towards the whole life should be understood is one of the aim of this paper. Baring in mind that Jonas developed his concept on life and human responsibility towards it as an argumentation against the development of technology, the social context in which modern technology finds its root is worth to be discussed. It is concluded that separating ethics from ontology as many theorists and philosophers did so far has strengthened the old notion of human autonomy with its defects, and by that, the destruction of life seemed to be accepted as a consequence of it.

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1. The Four Characters of Modern Technology

In contrast to modern technology, the traditional one is always designed as a tool to meet a specific purpose. Plow, for example, has no other meaning than a tool for plowing the field by agricultural community. The nature of traditional technology is so different not only in kind but also in its finality from modern one in which knowledge and skills to exploit the nature have been predominantly accepted as its nature (Zimmerman 1990, 203). Modern technology is characterized by a constant innovation due to the belief that there are no limits to innovation and new findings.

Jonas has depicted four characters of modern technology as follow (Verwer 2011, 15-22). *First*, the limitless nature of modern technology either in innovation or in new findings has caused dissatisfaction on its achievements. Jonas called it as lacking of saturation point (*Fehlen eines Saettigungspunktes*) (Jonas 1987, 22). With such a character, technology leads to being unpredictable in terms of the output or product, and with that it closes the door for an ethical scrutiny. *Second*, the development of communication technology and the market has speeded up the growth of modern technology. Web-based communication has accelerated the spread of the technique to the borderless world and by consequence, encouraging people to make use of new technical achievements. With the pressure of market system, many companies find themselves in a place where coping

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with the rapid spread of information is a highly demand for the survival. Modern technology then embeds the faster spread nature of technology into its internal rule: to reach the people within seconds or to decay. *Third*, there is a circular character in relation of techniques as means and ends. Regarding this relation, Jonas said, "The aim, which was not previously considered, has become an obligation for the development of techniques" (Jonas 1987, 19). This means in the technological frame the goals can predetermine the direction of the development of the technique. *Fourth*, the primary concern of modern technology is no other than advancement. Jonas realized that this character is not just a "decoration" in technological development, but rather a "breakthrough" (Jonas 1987, 20) that has been made sterile from the demands of moral justification. The technological progress only wants to deal with "the planned fact" (Jonas 1987, 41).

Those characters of technology have further consequences. *First*, for its development, technology highlights the importance of findings the new materials that can be achieved through the development of mechanics, chemistry, and electricity. Jonas contended that the technical progress is largely determined by the findings in the mechanics, chemistry, and electricity. They have functioned as basis for the development of techniques. A high dependence on the material basis will put technology as an artifact which is not easily understood (Jonas 1987, 36). *Second*, the technology can easily be transformed into a new power with all its destructive nature. This consequence has become the ultimate reason for Jonas' critique to biotechnology. For him, biotechnology can easily put human being as a direct object of technology (Jonas 1987, 164). Jonas acknowledged that the introduction of genome "text" has led to a possibility for human being to "rewrite the text" (Jonas 1987, 39). But he also predicted that in that process of re-writing, the danger of losing the instruction is present at hand. It is because any technical intervention techniques into human life can cause people to do what Jonas called an act of "metaphysical neutralization over men." Jonas wrote, "Biotechnology has stripped the original picture of human being from us" (Jonas 1987, 39).

Jonas penned it as a despotic tendency of the development of modern technology in his book *Toward a Philosophy of Technology* (Jonas 1979, 29). For him, metaphysical neutralization over men in fact cannot be responded by abiding the traditional ethical principles (Magnis-Suseno 2000, 172-3). Traditional ethics has lost its prey in front of the fast growing of modern technology by then putting it simply as a "melancholy science" (Adorno 2005, 15). To respond this, Jonas suggested the importance of incorporating different ethical approaches as a way to deal with the hardheadedness of technology, and with this, to save lives. The various ethical disciplines and approaches are bound by one main principle called responsibility.

2. The Ontology of Life

Jonas' harsh critique to technology has drawn him at the pole of the defender of human dignity as being the master of technology. It is prompted clearly in Jonas' work entitled *The Phenomenon of Life*, through which he tried to restore the role of man as beings with dignity facing the fast development of science and technology. Still in line with his work entitled *Technik, Medizin, und Ethik*, Jonas depicted how science with rational-quantitative character tends to degenerate life as a fundamental reality. In contrast to the traditional view of the West and East which position life as a fundamental feature of nature (Jonas 1966, 7-9), modern cosmology tends to reduce nature as mere matter, mass, and force which are controlled by the laws of nature. In this modern perspective, the richness of life has been sterilized from human understanding (Jonas 1966, 9-10).

Jonas viewed it clearly that providing a special attention and placing life in a dignified space does not mean that one has defended the position of pan-psychism in the debate regarding life in nature. Instead of

defending pan-psychism that everything has an aspect of *psyche* or mind, Jonas perceived life as a basic phenomenon of nature (Jonas 1966, 7). It is through the study of the history of thought, especially the debate between idealism versus materialism that placed nature as brute facts without consciousness and spirit that Jonas initiated an ontological synthesis as a proper way to understand the material and consciousness more adequately. For him, matter and consciousness are two essential elements for life which cannot be either contradicted or separated. By doing this, Jonas introduced what he called "ontological surprise" (Jonas 1966, 79) as a concept to defend the idea that the body and the soul are united in all different forms of organic life. He called it as a "psychophysical unity" (Jonas 1966, 18). Organic life is supposed to be a unifying element of spiritual and the material in which life and its freedom has its roots in the material elements (Jonas 1966, 1-3).

Explaining what he means by "ontological surprise," Jonas referred to the thought of Martin Heidegger and Aristotle in three aspects as follows (Lindberg 2005). *First*, since its existence is always in tension between the pole of life and death, life is viewed as an ontological category. As to "is" is comprehended through the existence of "nothing," life always expresses itself in "polarity" between "is and nothing," "self and the world," "form and matter," "freedom and necessity" (Jonas 1966, 4). The existence of life is transitive in the sense that it has been a process of continuous struggle with the opposing facts. Jonas called this process as an auto-affirmation through which the existence of life is perceived as battling all possibilities to be nothing. For Jonas, life is an interpretation of being. Following Heidegger, the reality of life owned its action as a way to be where birth and death is the temporal dimension of life itself (Jonas 1966, 5).

Second, life means being oneself. Influenced by Heidegger's notion on "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger 1960, 78ff), Jonas argued that reflection on oneself is always followed by questions about the world. The connection of the two lies on the conception that life is depicted as being in the world or having the world. For Jonas, ontological character of "having the world" underlines the importance of building relationships with the world which existence is assumed in order to maintain human's existence. It seemed to be clear that Jonas maintained a position that every form of life that having the world does not necessarily mean that life forms merge with the world. It is in the world and yet does not merge itself in it in such a way that every form of life gets closer but at the same time keeps a distance from the world. In other words, being in the world does not absorb itself into the world and with that it confines itself "to be individual centered to himself" (Jonas 1966, 79).

This thought has led Jonas to the thinking that contrasted him with Heidegger and by that brought him closer to Aristotelian thinking on organic life. Aristotle himself has differentiated organic life into three levels, namely the vegetative life of the plant, instinctual life of animal, and human rational life (Aristotle 1995, 656-60). Through this lens of Aristotelian perspective on ontology of life, Jonas offered three levels of relations of form of life with the world, i.e., metabolism in plants; perception, movement, and feelings in animals; and the ability to paint in humans. Each unit is a form of life that has the freedom to be for itself in relation with the world.

Metabolism is the most basic level of the form of life. Unlike popular perception which viewed metabolism as the process of absorption and wastes, Jonas defined metabolism as the ability to synthesize inorganic material to organic component (Jonas 1966, 103). Metabolism in Jonas's view has gained a philosophical status as the first ontological manifestation of the freedom of life. For Jonas, the metabolic activity shows an organic capacity for the freedom to change the material. Such freedom demands what Jonas called as "needful freedom" (Jonas 1966, 80) which he perceived as the existence of surrounding world. In that sense, freedom for Jonas cannot be separated from inevitable existence of material world.

The dependence on the world around does not mean to remove his freedom. Instead, this relation indicates that life orients itself out into the world. Every form of life embraces its own freedom, since form of life in metabolism is not merely an object of external influences, but relates actively with environment. Even at the simplest level, the metabolism is creative when such activity brings with it the options and opportunities to be dealt with (Jonas 1966, 84). In other words, the form of life is an ecstasy. Every form of life bases its existence on the *exposure* to the world (Jonas 1966, 85), on something outside itself. For Jonas, interiority is an exposition of the exterior world. The form of life is separated from but at the same time opened to the world.

For Jonas, life does not just have the metabolism with its freedom, but also a character of adventure. The last is evident in the lives of animal which has the ability of movement, perception, and emotion (Jonas 1966, 99). Through perception and movement, animals show openness to the world and at the same time increase its individuation. Dependence on the world as it is experienced by plants has been transformed by moving ability and perception into freedom (Jonas 1966, 100). Thus, the relationship with the world is characterized by the distance by which the perception creates spatial by moving towards or keeping the distance from the object. Aside from the ability of movement and perception, animals also are granted with emotions. Constituted with such abilities and entitled with desire, animals are able to create temporal distance to the object of desire since there is space between needs and satisfaction in desire. With this, it can be concluded that through perception, movement, and emotion, the organic self has a certain distance to the world, i.e., the distance between subject and object (Jonas 1966, 102). If the relationship between the self and environment in the kingdom of plants has a nature of metabolic and automatic relation without desire, the relationship between animal with the world is characterized by the distance between itself and the world as well as between the needs and its satisfaction.

The distance of the subject from the object is not static one. Jonas suggested that the concept of distance enables us to understand the actions of animals responding its desire in freedom. In response to the desires, animal demonstrates the ability of self transcendence which indicates that it has a final goal to be achieved. The instinctual nature has caused the achievement of objectives to be occurred never in a conscious and willing manner. Again, the instinctual power in turn has the ability to move animal towards achieving its desire that is its world and itself (Jonas 1966, 105-6).

Taken that metabolism shows life as a boundary in the world, animal life precisely indicates the extension of the limit. The extended limit creates an absolute chasm that must be passed by animals. Animal world is a world of sentiments. Animals feel the world and themselves while at the same time acting in the direction towards its existence in the world. Within this realm, the animals are enabled to find themselves as isolated subjects in which they feel pain and suffering. Animal life is indicated by solitariness with survival impulse accompanied by hunger, fear, and anxiety at stake. This whole experience shows that animals have greater freedom than plants (Jonas 1966, 106-7). The ability to feel pain and suffering then has been the basis of its existence (Singer 2015).

The relationship between the self and the world can be found in trans-animality of the experience of human being. Unlike previous philosophers who tried to picture man from the perspective of reason and language, Jonas concluded that the ability to paint is the specific difference between humans and animals (Jonas 1966, 158). Jonas treated paintings found in caves as the clearest evidence that human being is granted with the ability that exceeds animals. There is no other being than humans that can speak, think, and discover the world. The ability to paint indicates his ability to expand the world beyond the world of animals. Each painting shows the likeness of the world. Yet, the similarities seen by the birds are different as by men. The first

is the result of the sharpness of the eyes, while people see beyond what can be captured by eye (Jonas 1966, 166). Only in man that his ability to reason has allowed him to vision, to understand values, memories, or aims that can be communicated to others (Jonas 1966, 167-71).

Third, following Aristotle, Jonas argued that life has a teleological dimension. In discussing evolution, for example, Jonas rejected mechanistic explanations that understand evolution solely as one of the implications of the law of causation and Darwinism by which evolution is reduced only as a process of species adaptation to challenges put forward by environment. Jonas argued that classical evolutionary theory has undermined the ability of life being to respond creatively various external circumstances (Jonas 1966, 46). For Jonas, motion, emotion, and perception of animals, for example, cannot be accepted merely as animal adaptation to environment. These activities bore with them the teleological dimension that related to the ability to survive (Jonas 1966, 116).

In Jonas' thought, teleological dimension indicates the existence of freedom facing the evolution. Facing multi faceted challenges put forward by the environment, every form of life tries to achieve or conquer it, but also has an emotional or desire to do so. Jonas saw the realization of this ability as an endless process of transcendence and at the same time also the core of teleological action. Having the world is a way of saying that life has a teleological dimension. It is taken to be true provided that in every action there is contact with and at the same time distanciation from the world. For Jonas, teleology is a typical experience of every form of life, because on the one hand, teleology is the ability to determine the destination and at the same time achieve the goal, while on the other hand is an act of any form of life to exist. As far as life is goodness in itself, it will always be the ultimate goal to be realized.

Process of self-giving and at the same time self-creating is internally part of the process of teleology. It is what Jonas called as fundamental character of the freedom of the ontology of life. Internally, the purpose of life is not meant to be reproducing itself from the same root, rather it is event of a dynamic-freedom to be, to move, to feel, or to paint. It leads to the realization of the ability to invent, to live, to metabolize, to feel, to move, or to paint to be the form of an internal teleology. In those acts, life has been set to be the end of the process.

Giving a special attention to human being, Jonas insisted that we have to preserve well human image. Provided that the nature of life is freedom, and if human freedom is no other than the capacity of auto-transformation, why should we put freedom into certain limitation? For Jonas, organic freedom embeds in itself its primordial limitations due to the necessities and requirements. Within this frame of thinking that Jonas wrote, "Every form of life is a creation of need" (Jonas 1966, 126). If it has the freedom, it is never being absolute. Absolute freedom is not necessarily needed, nor the restriction of freedom, but the process of "self-renewal" well organized in society.

3. Responsibility for Life

As highlighted by Jonas, the ontology of life brings forward great implications. He recognized that the concept has its implications for understanding human being, the existence of God, and ethics. Specific attention can be given to ethics when he wrote,

We opened this volume with the proposition that philosophy of life comprises the philosophy of organism and philosophy of mind. At its end, and in the light of what we have learned, we may add a further proposition... a philosophy of mind comprises ethics—and through the continuity of mind and organism, and of organism with nature, ethics becomes part of the philosophy of nature. (Jonas 1966, 282)

The statements are intended to emphasize that ethics should be founded upon the understanding of ontology of life (Jonas 1966, 283). By this, Jonas depicted his position as something different with the modern ethics drawn a strong line between subjective and objective reality. With this intention, Jonas brought ethics from the realm of self autonomy or community to the role of realizing various tasks given by the nature and the life. Grounded on the understanding of ontology of nature and life, Jonas prepared himself to found a new ethics which he called the principle of responsibility. Ethics, as he emphasized, is founded not on divine authority but on a principle discoverable in the nature of things in order not to be fallen into subjectivism or other forms of relativity. The three following considerations may help to understand this notion more comprehensively.

Firstly, given that life problems must be the object of ethics, it is timely to end the anthropocentric nature of ethics (Jonas 2003, 22). The last has been the main reason of the destruction of nature. In the case of natural disaster, it can be concluded that anthropocentric ethics has a great contribution to it. One cannot deny that the needs for food and energy are the reason why human defends thoroughly his interests of exploiting the nature. Giving serious attention to the life, for Jonas, cannot but redefining ethics that ethics has to equip itself with what he coined as the principle of responsibility. Unlike the principle of autonomy that highly respected in Kantian ethics (Steigleder 2002, 109) yet may lead to the possibility of destructing the nature, the principle of the responsibility has positioned man as a responsible subject in preserving the entire universe. At the same time, principle of responsibility liberates human being from solacing the damage of the nature without any efforts to overcome them. By then, man can confirm himself as part of nature while at the same time take the responsibility to maintain and preserve his own life.

In *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, Jonas identified the principle of responsibility into for imperatives, i.e.: (1) Act so such that the effects of your actions can be reconciled with the permanence human life; (2) Act so that the result of your actions do not hinder the possibilities of life in the future; (3) Do not jeopardize the permanence preservation of man on earth; and (4) In your choices let it be that the future of human wholeness must be part of the purpose of your will (Jonas 2003, 36). Under these imperatives, Jonas stood in a different position from Kant. Unlike Kantian imperative which founded on the basis of logic, Jonas based his moral imperative on ontology. By then, we can understand why Jonas granted human being a very special place in his ethics. It is not just because the ability of trans-animality in picturing that man has, but mostly because of human capabilities in realizing his duties responsibly.

Secondly, the *telos* of the ethical responsibility is nature, kindness, and duties (Jonas 2003, 150). Unlike modern philosophy which reduces human being to his subjective intention, Jonas described the goal of ethical responsibility in ontological categories. In such point, Jonas revived the focal message of the *Phenomenon of Life* in his *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* that life is a "basic value of any values" (Jonas 2003, 155). Life that can be experienced in nature itself becomes a value that must be maintained. "By giving birth, the nature at least tell a specific purpose, namely life itself" (Jonas 2003, 142-3). Life itself is valuable. It can be respected as an objective value of Being (Jonas 2003, 154) which cannot be automatically controlled by human being.

Jonas acknowledged that man has free will to destroy or preserve life. But what is important is that man has to be aware that he has an obligation toward values and goodness (Jonas 2003, 159). Jonas went on to stress that the good is a basic value for responsibility. Jonas depicted it as unconditional responsibility as it is clear in one's responsibility of taking care for the baby. Upon hearing the baby crying, one feels called to protect it and not to let it die (Jonas 2003, 234). The notion of responsibility bears in itself the concept of duty, especially the

duty towards being. Thus, the concept of responsibility has its roots in the ontology, precisely the ontology of goals.

Thirdly, it seems that responsibility without future perspectives will be meaningless. It is the future responsibility that allows us to evaluate the success or failure of a duty. For this purpose, Jonas utilized the model of responsibility of the parents towards the children or the statesman towards the citizens. It is unarguably that responsibility of parents to children must be total. That kind of total responsibility is also a continuous one in the sense that parents have strong duty to provide a qualified education for their development and future. The children in turn will be the subjects of responsibility continuing what has been done by the parents (Jonas 2003, 198). As free persons, the children are responsible for their life, the life of other, and the whole universe.

The statesmen also have a total responsibility. Although the responsibility is not directly related to the dependence of the people, there is no state without the statesmen. However, Jonas did not treat political responsibility without warning. According to Jonas, the responsibility of the state cannot be understood from the perspective of future goals. Jonas highlighted that "The process of becoming" a country has different meaning from "the process of becoming an individual" (Jonas 2003, 201). The future of a country is different from the future of mankind. Human history has no purpose that could be established with certainty beforehand (Jonas 2003, 212). Regarding this issue, Jonas was adamant to defend the future and freedom.

4. Conclusion

Isolating ethics from ontology will only let modern ethics boast for its exclusive role in prioritizing the autonomy of man against non human subject as objects. The separation of human as subject and non human as object as it is known today is said to be the consequence of shallow epistemology. Following its logic, ethics pretends to deal only with subjective moral consciousness, whereas ontology is concerned with objective reality.

By putting ontology as the basis for ethics, Hans Jonas has laid down an ethics embedded with a broader orientation towards life in natural and organic world. To emphasize this position, Jonas wrote, "If one can lay down ethical principles that are not rooted in self autonomy or the needs of the community, but on the objective task of nature (what is theologically termed as *ordo creationis*)" (Jonas 1966, 283). Jonas coined this principle as responsibility towards nature. Embarking from this ontological assumption in his ethics of responsibility, Jonas has initiated a deeper discussion on environmental ethics which has been dominated by the thoughts of contemporary philosophers like Peter Singer, Arne Naess, or Skolimowski. But as he warned us, the development of technology is still the critical problem in ethics. He warned us that technological intervention upon the natural may lead to a kind of fear. Yet, it does not hinder him to be confident on the future of technology as means to solve human problems. Technology has the capacity to create human life more enjoyable. In the perspective of ontology of life, Jonas seemed to defend the freedom as something integral with human dignity. In line with this perspective, preserving the nature is the *conditio sine qua non* for the existence of human being in the front of technology.

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