



CENTRAL ASIAN JOURNAL OF LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

eISSN: 2660-6828 | Volume: 03 Issue: 11 Nov 2022
<https://cajlp.centralasianstudies.org>

Hans Jonas on Deriving “Ought” from “Is” As a Pathway to an Objective Imperative in the Scheme of Things

Peter Takov

Catholic University of Cameroon (CATUC), Bamenda

Received 19th Aug 2022, Accepted 02th Oct 2022, Online 3rd Nov 2022

ANNOTATION

The “Is – Ought” distinction in Philosophy explicitly draws its roots from Hume and has since found fluidity among many thinkers. Hume is vehement that no “Ought” can be derived from the “Is”. This paper argues critically with Jonas that the “Ought” can effectively be derived from the “Is”. The “Is” refers to metaphysics while the “Ought” refers to ethics. It is thus understandable why Hume, who launched a book-burning campaign against metaphysics, would deny that ethical values can be derived from metaphysics. Thus, the fundamental problem addressed by Jonas here is that of basing ethical values on metaphysical principles. In a world characterized by the vehement rejection of metaphysics in favour of science, moral values are claimed to be socially constructed rather than having an ontological foundation. This paper, examines Jonas’ solution to the “Is-Ought” problem. It concludes that life is self-affirmative and therefore, must be allowed to be in an authentic fashion.

KEYWORDS: Hans Jonas, “Is – Ought”, responsibility, technology, metaphysics of life

Introduction

Hans Jonas forcefully argues that we live in an era in which “the plunder of nature has become part of our way of life, especially in the Western industrial society.”¹ Modern and contemporary technology has reached such unprecedented levels that its adverse effects are very destructive. Jonas saw threats coming “from the pervasive thoughtlessness with which human beings were pursuing goals, apparently good in themselves, but fatally disturbing to the balance of nature on which the survival of the species continued to depend.”² The consequences of this technology extend beyond the present horizon to an unforeseeable future and may produce situations where human beings are mere appendages to technological machinations. It is an observable fact that human beings have become objects of research, intervention and manipulation. The troubling fact is that technology has reached a point at which we cannot do without it. This is why it must form part of a philosophical reflection in order to guide man towards the proper use of technology in the service of life.

¹ H. JONAS, “Closer to the Bitter End,” in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 23, 1 (2001), 21. This article is the result of an interview with Hans Jonas conducted by Matthias Matussek and Wolfgang Kaden of *Der Spiegel* on May 11, 1992.

² D. J. LEVY, *Hans Jonas: The Integrity of Thinking*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia 2002, 8.

As much as technology has grown rapidly, it has also failed to uncover the inherent goodness of being as such and leaves the scientist open to a nihilistic world-view. Against this nihilistic background, Hans Jonas is of the opinion that the search for wisdom is still the burden as well as the opportunity of philosophy. To meet such challenges, therefore, he attempts to develop a comprehensive ethics of responsibility that is founded on the fundamental nature of things. Like Jonas, we are convinced of the important role of philosophy in posing objective and ultimate questions. We must not capitulate in the face of technological aggression. Insisting on this point, Jonas remarks:

Philosophy can help to educate people so that they develop an understanding of the long-term effect of human action on the very delicate balance in the relationship between human requirements and the carrying capacity of the earth. By means of reflection and articulation it can also play a role in bringing about initiatives to preserve and save the environment ... a task remains for philosophy: to keep watch over the humaneness of the measures by means of which we are trying to avert catastrophe. For those measures could be such that the whole thing we are trying to save goes to the devil ... This cruel evolutionary principle of the survival of the fittest must not become the principle of humanity's survival. For then our culture, the humanity of human beings, will really go to the devil.³

Jonas's proposal has an explicitly metaphysical tone. He offers a doctrine of Being, a metaphysics, which aims at uniting it with ethics. From this he derives an objective imperative for man in the nature of things. This means that ethics is to be founded on the natural order of things. Nature has ends and thus it is a value or a good; an approach which clearly reflects Aristotle's philosophical biology.

This brings us to the "is – ought" problem as elaborated by Hume. This problem arises when we make claims about what ought to be based solely on statements about what is. This paper situates the historical roots of the "is – ought" problem, examines Jonas' solution to the problem with his metaphysics of life and, finally, bridges the gap between the "is" and the "ought".

The Nature of the "Is – Ought" Problem In Ethics

The "is-ought" dichotomy which has come to stand as a central problem in moral philosophy revolves around the question of the relation between what "is" and what "ought" to be. Are there some facts from which certain moral obligations automatically flow? It is an age-old problem which has found echoes in many moral philosophical works.

The problem of deriving "ought" from "is" goes back to David Hume who in a notable passage in his *Treatise of Human Nature* observes:

In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be deduced from others, which are entirely different from it.⁴

³ H. JONAS, "Closer to the Bitter End," 29.

⁴ D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), III, I.1, Prometheus Books, Amherst NY 1992, 469.

Hume seems to imply here that statements concerning facts and statements concerning values belong to two different camps and cannot be related in any meaningful way. Moral values and natural facts belong to two different orders. It is fallacious, therefore, to infer a necessary conclusion from a contingent premise or to draw an “ought”- conclusion from a premise containing an “is”-statement. From statements of facts statements of value do not necessarily flow.

The first and most important echo of Hume’s thesis is found in Henri Poincaré who moves from the realization of the incompetence of the natural sciences in the field of morality to the negation of the legitimacy of the inference of imperative propositions from indicative propositions:

Si les prémisses d’un syllogisme sont toutes les deux à l’indicatif, la conclusion sera également à l’indicatif. Pour que la conclusion pût être mise à l’impératif, il faudrait que l’une des prémisses au moins fût elle-même à l’impératif. Or, les principes de science, les postulats de la géométrie sont et ne peuvent être qu’à l’indicatif; c’est encore à ce même mode que sont les vérités expérimentales, et à la base des sciences, il n’y a, il ne peut y avoir rien autre chose. Dès lors, le dialecticien le plus subtil peut jongler avec ces principes comme il voudra, les combiner, les échafauder les uns sur les autres; tout ce qu’il en tirera sera à l’indicatif. Il n’obtiendra jamais une proposition qui dira: fais ceci, ou ne fais pas cela; c’est à-dire une proposition qui confirme ou qui contredise la morale.⁵

Unlike Hume, Poincaré thinks that science can exert a certain influence on morality. It can have an educational function; it can awaken moral sentiments; it can mediate imperatives and judge the compatibility and the implications of various tendencies. It can also show that some ideals which seem to be in conflict are instead complementary and can be unified.⁶ There can also be a science of customs, which plays an observational and descriptive role. But, of course, such a science is not morality. This is because it cannot legislate on what ought to be done.

Poincaré’s concept of morality, like that of Hume, is reduced to sentiment. According to him, there can never be a scientific morality in the proper sense of the word.⁷ It cannot be demonstrated for example, that one ought to have pity on the poor, but when one suddenly finds himself in the presence of misery, he is immediately taken by a feeling of compassion or revolt. To love God is not demonstrable, but if one loves God, no demonstration is necessary, and obedience to him will flow naturally.⁸ The originality of Poincaré, as Carcaterra points out, lies in having found a syntactic impression of clear and immediate intelligibility - the indicative and imperative forms.⁹ These forms are more immediate and clearer than Hume’s syntax of “is” and “ought” which requires a certain level of interpretation. The problem, however, essentially remains that of Hume in all its ramifications. Science in itself cannot create morality: “La science ne peut donc à elle seule créer une morale,”¹⁰ says Poincaré. Morality and science, for him, are as wide apart as moral distinctions and reason are apart for Hume. It must be noted however that for Poincaré, science includes also theistic morality and metaphysical morality which engage us and which conform us to the general law of being which claims an ought, that is, every dogmatic and demonstrative morality.

⁵ H. POINCARÉ, *Dernières pensées*, Flammarion, Paris 1913, 225.

⁶ Cfr. H. POINCARÉ, *Dernières pensées*, 228-230

⁷ Cfr. H. POINCARÉ, *Dernières pensées*, 247.

⁸ Cfr. *Ibid.*, 226.

⁹ G. CARCATERRA, *Il problema della fallacia naturalistica*, 29.

¹⁰ H. POINCARÉ, *Dernières pensées*, 228.

In his *Principia Ethica*, G. E. Moore outlines views that have an affinity to Hume's. According to Moore, anyone who infers that something is good from any proposition about its natural properties is guilty of the naturalistic fallacy. Any attempt to define good in naturalistic terms is fallacious. He takes goodness to be the fundamental human value. It is a simple, indefinable quality. We know good when we encounter it, but it is impossible to analyse it further into any term more fundamental than itself. He states:

Good ... is incapable of any definition ... Good has no definition because it is simple and has no parts. It is one of those innumerable objects of thought which are themselves incapable of definition, because they are ultimate terms of reference which whatever *is* capable of definition must be defined.¹¹

We may have an experience of many good things, but that which is good about them is not to be found in their properties. Here Moore points out what he considers to be the errors of many philosophers in their attempt to define good.

Far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not 'other,' but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call 'the naturalistic fallacy.'¹²

In this wise, no description of natural properties can commit one to an ethical judgment. This is because he takes good to be a simple non-natural property. A 'natural' property for him is an empirical property, which can be "an object of experience," or be the subject-matter of the natural sciences and psychology.¹³ Moore focused mainly on goodness, but if his argument works for goodness, it can also be generalized to other moral properties. According to Moore, the basic judgements of value are self-evident. We just know that they are true.¹⁴ From this point of view, this aspect of Moore's philosophy has often been described as "intuitionist," although Moore himself does not make use of this term.¹⁵ The immediacy of ethical principles is the central point of Moore's *Principia Ethica*. Since spontaneity also implies the impossibility of deriving "ought" from "is," Hume and Moore can be thought of as having in common the idea of the autonomy of ethics.¹⁶ For Moore, however, it is autonomy in respect to other forms of knowledge, that is, to natural and psychological sciences and metaphysics, not with respect to knowing in general, as it is the case with Hume.¹⁷ According to Hume, judgments of value are not derived from any judgments of truth. This is because ethical propositions are imperatives and imperatives cannot be derived from indicatives. For Moore, instead, certain indicatives are not derived from certain indicatives.

One of the greatest contributors who have tried to bridge this gap is Hans Jonas, who justifies his ethics of responsibility by formulating a principle that is based on the way things are, and thus tries to refute what he calls the modern "dogma," which declares that "no path leads from 'is' to 'ought'."¹⁸ He shows that from the inherent value of life as a good in itself, there issues a corresponding responsibility to guard it. From the metaphysics of life, value judgments can be made. According to him it is possible to know what is true and

¹¹ G. E. MOORE, *Principia Ethica* (1902), Prometheus Books, Amherst NY 1988, I, b.10, 9-10.

¹² G. E. MOORE, *Principia Ethica*, I, b. 10, 10.

¹³ Cfr. *Ibid.*, II, 25- 27, 38 -40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, V, 86, 143.

¹⁵ Cfr. R. NORMAN, *The Moral Philosophers: An Introduction to Ethics*, 161.

¹⁶ Cfr. G. CARCATERA, *Il problema della fallacia naturalistica*, 24.

¹⁷ Cfr. *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ H. JONAS, *IR*, 44.

what is good. Jonas, whose lived experiences greatly shaped his philosophical endeavours grappled with the above problem and attempted a solution that has far-reaching positive consequences for philosophy.

The Metaphysics of Life as an Appropriate Theory of the relation between “Is” and “Ought”

In order to escape from the nihilistic character of modern and contemporary thought and to ground his ethics on what “is,” Jonas moves to what may be called the existential stage of his philosophical endeavors. This move involves overcoming dualism and its effects. In Jonas’s own words:

My ontological interpretation of the organism was intended to correct this error and to represent a contribution to a general concept of Being. In organic being’s essential unity of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, subjectivity and objectivity, free self and causally determined thing, the gulf between matter and mind closed for me. As part of the Cartesian legacy this gulf had forced modern thought into the either/or impasse of materialism on the one hand and idealism on the other – each incomplete when taken by itself. The evidence provided by the organism gave the lie to both positions.¹⁹

Therefore, for a proper appreciation of the relationship between the “Is,” which relates to Jonas’s ontology, and the “Ought to be” which points to his ethics, we need to analyze his development of the concept of being, through what he calls an “existential interpretation of biological facts.” We agree with Nicola Russo that we cannot set aside Jonas’s philosophy of nature which is not only the result of a metaphysical conjecture and subjective preference but also a system of the phenomenological analysis of living beings. Setting this aside would mean neglecting the core of Jonas’s thought, and would in turn, seriously affect his ethical endeavors.²⁰ Flowing from what he said at the beginning of *The Phenomenon of Life*, concerning the subject matter of a philosophy of life as comprising “the philosophy of the organism and the philosophy of mind,”²¹ Jonas thinks that at the end of this itinerary, it can also be drawn that “a philosophy of mind comprises ethics – and through the continuity of mind with organism and of organism with nature, ethics becomes part of the philosophy of nature.”²²

Ontology, as he says, “may yet relocate the foundation of ‘ought’ from the ego of man, to which it has been relegated, to the nature of being in general.”²³ It is an anti-dualistic philosophy of the organism which conceives nature as endowed with purpose and acts for an end. It is a system which shows that mind and purpose are already prefigured even in the lowest forms of organic existence, but in which the mind, even in its highest level, remains part and parcel of the organic.²⁴ The human agent shares with all life the principle of self-affirmation which is clearly manifested in the organism’s will to survive as evident from the metabolic basis of all life. What Jonas proposes, contrary to the views of modern natural science and nihilism, is a conception of organic existence that can be seen from the process of evolution as a “progressive scale of freedom and peril, culminating in man, who may understand his uniqueness anew when he no longer sees himself in metaphysical isolation,”²⁵ but as part of an inherently meaningful nature.²⁶ It is a kind of

¹⁹ H. JONAS, “Wissenschaft as Personal Experience,” 14.

²⁰ Cfr. N. RUSSO, *La biologia filosofica di Hans Jonas*, Alfredo Guida Editore, Napoli 2004, 15.

²¹ H. JONAS, *PL*, 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 282.

²³ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁴ Cfr. *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵ H. JONAS, *PL*, ix.

²⁶ Cfr. *Ibid.*

metaphysics which acts as a correction to the errors of a dualistic metaphysics of mind and matter which as Strachan Donnelley also affirms had contributed to an ethical disarray.²⁷

It is only after establishing a profound metaphysics for the objectivity of value inherent in life that Jonas moves to the next stage of his reflection which has to do with the ethical consequences of this affirmation. The answer to the question, why life has to be, coupled with the adverse effects of modern and contemporary technology, pushed him to the ethics of responsibility as its necessary consequence. This leads us to examine the philosophy of life as central to the relationship between “Is” and “Ought.”

Jonas takes the fact of life as the starting point for his metaphysics. From the outset then, we must try to understand what he is trying to propose and what this effort entails. We also need to understand why he limits it but to a metaphysics of life. The “existential interpretation of biological facts,” is a synthetic and reductive definition which Jonas gives to his metaphysical endeavor. Although *The Phenomenon of Life* consists of formerly published essays and conferences, Jonas organizes it systematically and offers a systematic interpretation of life, a fundamental ontology, which parallels that of his old teacher, Heidegger, in *Being and Time*. For our author, the fact of life is basic to an organism. It is an original phenomenon whose ontological description can thus furnish guidelines and basic concepts for any ontology.

Our reflections [are] intended to show in what sense the problem of life, and with it that of the body, ought to stand in the center of ontology and, to some extent, also of epistemology. Life means material life, i.e., living body, i.e., organic being ... The central position of the problem of life means not only that it must be accorded a decisive voice in judging any given ontology but also that any treatment of itself must summon the whole of ontology.²⁸

Jonas describes life in a manner that would bridge the gap between subjectivity and neutral nature.²⁹ He wants to enlarge our understanding of ontology so as to make provisions for an ontological grounding of value and purpose within nature. Nature, according to him, harbors values, purposes and ends. The most basic value inherent in organic life is a fundamental affirmative “yes” to life.³⁰ The reigning philosophies at the time of Jonas – “logical positivism, linguistic analysis, and pragmatism,”³¹ did not do justice to the wealth that lies at the basis of organic existence since they focused their attention mainly on the mental aspect of the organism. This gap has been furthered by contemporary existentialism which is “obsessed with man alone,” and scientific biology, which is “confined to the physical outward facts,” and thus ignores “the dimension of inwardness that belongs to life.”³² Through a critique of this Cartesian dualistic heritage, Jonas came to the conclusion that:

The organism with its insoluble fusion of inwardness and outwardness constituted the crucial counterevidence to the dualistic division and, by our privileged experiential access to it, the prime paradigm for philosophy of concrete, uncurtailed being – indeed the key to a reintegration of fragmented ontology into a uniform theory of being.³³

²⁷ Cfr. S. DONNELLEY, “Speculative Philosophy, the Troubled Middle, and the Ethics of Animal Experimentation,” in *Hastings Center Report* 25, 7 (1989), 17.

²⁸ H. JONAS, *PL*, 25.

²⁹ Cfr. H. JONAS, “Toward an Ontological Grounding of an Ethics for the Future,” in *MM*, 101-103.

³⁰ Cfr. H. JONAS, *IR*, 81.

³¹ R. WOLIN, *Heidegger's Children*, 107.

³² Cfr. H. JONAS, *PL*, xxiii.

³³ H. JONAS, *PE*, xiii.

The last clause of this quotation serves as a clue to understanding Jonas's philosophical preoccupation. More than just a critique of dualism and an understanding of the phenomenon of life, his attention is geared more towards developing a new non-dualistic ontology, a uniform theory of being, or a metaphysics that finds its echo in the phenomenon of life.

Through a critical-phenomenological description of the various forms of organic life, Jonas sees the living as an embodied material system. He stresses its active self-realization, its subjective value and its encounter with the world as indirect or mediated, which thus creates value. The fact that matter is self-organizing attests to the inherent organic tendencies which lie at the depth of its being. His critique of the Darwinian theory of evolution reveals the all-important fact of continuity among life forms.

Jonas makes an objective criticism of the evolutionary theory, especially the Darwinian form, in order to show its significance for the metaphysics of life that he is proposing. According to Darwin's theory of evolution, natural history is explained in terms of a mechanistic process in which higher and more complex species result from utterly contingent alterations in lower elements.³⁴ Darwinism evokes the mechanism of natural selection in which the more developed is the better. The theory gives a mechanistic explanation of how the various forms of organic life show a purposeful existence. What looks like purpose or design is a result of chance in which only the fittest survives.

Though according to Jonas, evolution is a philosophically ambivalent theory, it could serve a useful purpose in showing the continuity among life forms. Jonas however dissociates himself from the "evolutionary optimism" represented by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. For Jonas, "life is an experiment with mounting stakes and risks which in the fateful freedom of man may end in disaster as well as in success."³⁵ Evolution manifests the triumph of materialism, a doctrine which cannot explain the phenomenon of life. This is just where the preoccupation of our author lies. Commenting on this issue he adds:

Among other things it completes the liquidation of immutable essences, and thus signifies the final victory of nominalism over realism, which had had its last bulwark in the idea of natural species. This is a major philosophical event in that it powerfully confirms the anti-Platonism of the modern mind. If we add to this the absence of any teleological directedness, the evolutionary process presents itself as a sheer adventure with an entirely unforeseeable course. This specifically modern idea of the unplanned, open-ended adventurousness of life, the corollary of the absence of immutable essence, is again a major philosophical consequence of the scientific doctrine of evolution.³⁶

The denial of essence in organic beings, which is taken over by the conditions of existence, makes Darwinism to have a close affinity with existentialism, where "the encounter with 'nothingness' springs from the denial of 'essence' which blocked the recourse to an ideal 'nature' of man, once offered in his classical definition by reason (*homo animal rationale*)"³⁷

³⁴ Cfr. C. DARWIN, *The Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, J. Huxley (intro.), New American Libr. New York 1963.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

³⁶ H. JONAS, *PL*, 45-46.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

Jonas speaks of the emergence of life as marking an “ontological revolution in the history of matter.”³⁸ The specificity of the organism points to the fact that it cannot be reduced to the physicalist assumption of a materialist metaphysics as the *res extensa* side of Cartesian dualism had presumed. Such metaphysics interprets all being in terms derived from the properties of inorganic matter.

For Jonas, life “means spontaneous and teleological motion” and it is “encountered as a fact within the totality of physical facts.”³⁹ As earlier stated, Jonas relies heavily on Aristotle’s *De Anima*. The two Greek words which touch on the essence of life are *bios* and *zoe*. *Bios*, refers to the organic life of plants, animals and human beings. It is a life that is inseparable from a body. *Zoe* on the other hand, points to all kinds of life, which includes the most universal essence of life as well as its supreme form. From the remarks that he makes in the *Phenomenon of Life*, Jonas considers *bios* as the only form of life in human beings. This may be because apart from the “eternal image of the self” and a kind of “eternal fame,” he does not seem to recognize any real life after death.⁴⁰ In his article on *Immortality and the Modern Temper*, Jonas observes that human civilization on which these two concepts of immortality are based, is perishable, thus putting the concept of immortality in jeopardy. If human civilization is perishable, then it cannot be the vehicle of immortality. He notes:

With the dramatic sharpening which the generally modern awareness of the passing nature of cultures and societies has undergone more recently – to the point where the survival of the human race itself seems in jeopardy – our presumptive immortality, as well as that of the immortals before us, appears suddenly at the mercy of a moment’s miscalculation, failure, or folly by a handful of fallible men.⁴¹

The survival of persons after death, according to him, is even at greater odds with the modern temper, which does not see anything beyond the reality of the present human condition. The promise of an after-life then comes as “a counterfeit coin for what has been missed,” and which is lacking in moral worth.⁴² If the fact that living beings shun death is dismissed, the postulates of immortality fall simply under “justice and the distinction between appearance and reality.”⁴³ Commenting on these two, he observes:

Both have this in common that they accord to man the metaphysical status of moral subject and, as such, of belonging to a moral or “intelligible” order besides the sensible one. This should not be lightly dismissed. But the principle of justice, be it retributive or compensatory justice, does by its own criterion not support the claim of immortality. For the temporal merit of guilt calls for temporal, not eternal retribution and justice thus requires at most a finite afterlife for settling accounts, not an infinity of existence. And as to the compensation for undeserved suffering, or denied chances, or missed happiness here, there applies the additional consideration that a *claim* to happiness as such (how much of it?) is questionable to begin with; and the missed *fulfilment* could only be made up for *in its original terms*, that is, in terms of effort and obstacles and uncertainty and fallibility and unique occasion and limited time – in short: in terms of non-guaranteed attainment and possible miss. These are the very terms of self-fulfilment, and they are precisely the terms of the world.⁴⁴

³⁸ H. JONAS, “Evolution and Freedom: On the Continuity among Life-Forms,” in *MM*, 66.

³⁹ H. JONAS, *PL*, 74.

⁴⁰ Cfr. *Ibid.*, 262ff.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴² H. JONAS, *PL*, 267.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 266-267.

The conception of immortality and the modern temper, according to Jonas's interpretation calls us to take worldly life and existence seriously, "to view the world as left to itself, its laws as brooking no interference, and the rigor of our belonging to it as not softened by extramundane providence."⁴⁵ "Although the hereafter is not ours, nor the eternal recurrence of the here, we can have immortality at heart when in our brief span we serve our threatened mortal affairs and help the suffering immortal God."⁴⁶ This makes it clear that Jonas's concept of immortality stands in the eternal fame of deeds of man and in helping to enhance the image of God to whom all things are moving, and who suffers because in the act of creation he gave his powers to man, and not in the immortality of the soul.

Bridging the "Is-Ought" Dichotomy

Jonas argues that unless we can enlarge our understanding of ontology in such a manner as would provide an objective grounding for value and purpose within nature, there is no way to answer the challenges of ethical nihilism that are prevalent in the modern age. He criticizes the philosophical prejudice which denies a place in nature for value, purposes and ends. He argues that values and ends are objective modes of being. There is a basic value inherent in organic being. The clinging to life as we have seen is present to all metabolizing beings. Man as the highest of these beings has an obligatory duty towards life. It is an obligation which flows from the nature of his being.

According to Jonas, "our showing up to now that nature harbors value because it harbors ends and thus is anything but value-free has not yet answered the question of whether we are at pleasure or duty-bound to join in her 'value decisions.'"⁴⁷ Yet he admits that once the immanence of purpose in nature has been shown, "the decisive battle for ethical theory has already been won."⁴⁸ However, it is only from an objective reality of value as a good-in-itself that a binding responsibility to guard being can be derived. Our task, then, is to show how Jonas, from the objective reality of value inherent in purposive nature, draws a moral ought to guard being.

In the theory of the organism, Jonas shows that all organisms, not only humans, have "concern for their own being." Value and disvalue are not human inventions but are essential to life itself. Every living thing has a share in life's "needful freedom" and "has within itself an inner dimension of self-transcendence. Each organism has to reach out to its environment in order to continue living. Since matter organises itself for life, it points to the latent organic tendencies in the depth of being. It is an indication that an organism wants to stay alive. Life is then seen as a value for the organism. "That the world has values indeed follows directly from its having purposes (and this having been shown to be the case, there can in this sense no longer be talk of a "value-free" nature)."⁴⁹ The attainment of this end or purpose becomes a good, and on the other hand, failure to attain it, an evil. Insofar, then, as ends, including our own, are actually at play within nature, they seem to enjoy no other dignity than that of mere facts and would then have to be measured not by worth but

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁴⁷ H. JONAS, *IR*, 78.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁹ H. JONAS, *IR*, 76.

only by their motivating strength and perhaps by the pleasure yield of their achievement (or the pain of their denial).⁵⁰

This capacity for an organic being to have purpose is already a good in-itself in the ontological realm. This, according to Jonas, we grasp with intuitive certainty that it is infinitely superior to any purposelessness of being.⁵¹ However, this good is not relative to the already existing purposes in the various living organisms, rather it is good that there are purposes in nature. “The very capacity to have purposes at all is a good-in-itself”⁵² Thus being must be in nature because being is good and good is capable of purpose. A purpose of nature is life⁵³ and life is only life when it is existent. Being thus has to be recognized primarily as the being of a living entity, and human beings in its very notion – “the idea of man”, as Jonas puts it – “is an ontological idea,” which is such that it demands the presence of its embodiment in the world.⁵⁴ Being is thus not a mere given, but always brings an appeal to existence along with it. It is an appeal which moves towards an active concern with itself to remain in being. Being is not indifferent toward itself. “That being is concerned with something, at least with itself, is the first thing we can learn about it from the presence of purpose within it.”⁵⁵

In order to present an objective basis for his principle of responsibility, Jonas grounds the ontological goodness of the idea of man, before the relative goodness that pertains to concrete individuals. This means that man as such is an ontological idea and must not be allowed to perish. It is good in-itself that that “man” should be. Although our first responsibility is to the members of this present generation, we need to expand this responsibility for the sake of safeguarding future generations, in other words, the idea of man, should continue to be. Thus Jonas states that our first duty is then ontological. The capacity to be responsible is essential to the idea of humanity. The duty to ensure that mankind continues to exist in the future also includes the duty to preserve his essence. The conditions on which that essence needs to strive should not also be undermined.⁵⁶ Man has to be the executor of this trust because he alone has responsibility although he is not the creator. “We mirror being, but in doing so we mirror ourselves in it, and in recognizing our image there at last for what it is we find pride in our cosmic solitude. Whatever moral quality enters the relation of self and world can have its origin nowhere but in the self.”⁵⁷

This does not require that we abandon other forms of well-tried ethical reasoning and judgment, but a radical revision of our convictions so as to take account of the technological changes that have affected the human agency. Ultimately, the capacity for such a responsibility lies in the hands of man.

Conclusion

The post-modern philosophical orientation denies metaphysics, or does not think that it should serve as a foundation for ethics. This approach holds that what “is” does not imply what “ought to be.” It is a situation which, according to Jonas, has created an ethical vacuum in the world. Through an “existential interpretation of biological facts,” Jonas shows that it is not only possible but necessary to do metaphysics. He bases his ethics of responsibility on the metaphysical principle of life which says “yes to itself.” He thinks that life

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁵¹ Cfr. *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵³ Cfr. *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁴ Cfr. *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, IR, 81.

⁵⁶ Cfr. H. JONAS, IR, 43.

⁵⁷ H. JONAS, PL, 282.

ought to be an object of responsibility. Against the modern and contemporary nihilistic tendencies, he affirms that life is a value, a good, which ought to be especially for the future. He goes beyond the phenomena or what is merely given to an understanding of the essence of life. Commenting on such a bold step David Levy notes:

In an age of global technology that potentially threatens to undermine the humanly supporting order of nature, only such a recovery of a broader ethical perspective of Aristotelian thought, and classical thought in general, can be considered adequate to meeting the needs of the time.⁵⁸

Jonas's thoughts which never shied away from taking risks stand as a strong point against the myopic views of contemporary humanity which has undervalued the importance of metaphysics. Richard Wolin thinks that for Jonas, a humankind that cannot contemplate its own *raison d'être* is impoverished, disoriented, fundamentally lacking in its essentials.⁵⁹ Jonas was able to re-awaken the almost dying sense of philosophical wonder by a recall to ultimate principles.

Lawrence Vogel describes Jonas's philosophy as offering "one of the most systematic and challenging rejoinders to the legacy of Heidegger in particular, and to the spirit of the twentieth century as a whole."⁶⁰ This is because Jonas passes to a philosophical position based on a rational metaphysical account of the phenomenon of life, in whose intrinsic structure he finds a rational ethics of responsibility. In an appreciative note of this endeavour, Wendy C. Hamblet comments:

Jonas' metaphysics represents a radical overturning of traditional understandings of ontological gradation. In placing responsibility *within* being he attempts to discern the dangerous tendencies of metaphysical thinking, placing greatest responsibility in the hands of the powerful super-species that have fought their way to the top of the great chain of being. By placing greatest imperative at the top of the ontological chain, Jonas hopes to launch a new appeal to care for those below. The motivation is commendable.⁶¹

Such an ontologically grounded ethics insists that our conception of right and wrong is not a matter of subjective personal preferences but an objective property disclosed to reason as inherent in the structure of Being. Values are discovered present in the fact of life. They are not posited.⁶²

Jonas's move to ground his ethics of responsibility on metaphysics goes against the two modern dogmas that "there is no metaphysical truth," and that "no 'ought' can be derived from 'being.'"⁶³ It is an assertion which implies that value judgments cannot be derived from factual statements. Interpreting this position Wolin notes that "'the fact-value' distinction suggests that merely because things exist in a certain way does not mean that this was the way they were *meant* to be or that they should necessarily continue to be that way. Instead, 'ought' or 'right' are the province of human reason; they are not constants inscribed in the laws of nature."⁶⁴

The "is-ought" question is a task for philosophy which alone can make an independent judgment. Philosophy asks fundamental questions about value and whether it can be known as such. This is because "value, or the

⁵⁸ D. J. LEVY, *Hans Jonas: The Integrity of Thinking*, 89.

⁵⁹ Cfr. R. WOLIN, *Heidegger's Children*, 133.

⁶⁰ L. VOGEL, "Editor's Introduction, Hans Jonas's Exodus: From German Existentialism to Post-Holocaust Theology," in *MM*, 4.

⁶¹ W. C. HAMBLET, "To Being or not to Being? That is the Question for Ethics," in ANNA-TERESA TYMIENIECKA (ed.), *Phenomenology of Life: Meeting the Challenges of Present-Day World*, Vol. LXXXIV, Springer, Dordrecht 2005, 360.

⁶² D. J. LEVY, *Hans Jonas: The Integrity of Thinking*, 89.

⁶³ H. JONAS, *IR*, 44.

⁶⁴ R. WOLIN, *Heidegger's Children*, 119.

‘good,’ if there is such a thing, is surely the one thing that of itself urges the *existence* of its subjects from its mere possibility.”⁶⁵ The fact that value can be predicated of anything at all, serves as a proof for the superiority of being over non-being. Nothing can be predicated of non-being. The fact that a thing can have value is itself a value, and this is a value above all others.⁶⁶

Jonas’s rejection of Hume’s injunction that an “ought” does not follow from an “is” pushed him to insist on the necessity of a categorical imperative that would take into consideration the continued existence of life, and above all, human life, in the future. He paid more attention to man, because among all other beings, he is the only one capable of assuming responsibility. It is an imperative that is capable of positing in metaphysical terms the “ought to be” of life because it “is.” It is an imperative that is grounded on metaphysics, that is, a rational theory of being, to bridge the scientific factual “is” and the “ought” of morality. Such metaphysics, according to Jonas, is possible because of the centrality of life for the philosophy of the organism.

This conviction led him into an elaborate ontological interpretation of biological facts so as to bring out that thread which links the “is” and the “ought.” He interpreted the self-affirmation of life as the only way in which being may affirm its own value so that it can continue to be. This is because being is better than non-being, which is its negation. The question as to why there is something and not nothing, leads Jonas to its justification through which he shows that being is a value, thus granting it a superior status over non-being.⁶⁷ The rationality of this assertion lies in Jonas’s capacity to demonstrate the fundamental basis of purpose in nature. According to him, “we can regard the mere *capacity to have* any purposes at all as a good-in-itself, of which we grasp with intuitive certainty that it is infinitely superior to any purposelessness of being.”⁶⁸ This is an ontological self-evident axiom for Jonas from which flows a “self-affirmation of being in purpose” to which an emphatic “no” to nonbeing corresponds.⁶⁹ Through this, Jonas sought to re-establish the presence of teleology in the world that had almost vanished from the thoughts of most modern and contemporary philosophers. This purposeful or teleological existence of life is exemplified in metabolism, the ultimate source of organic freedom. An organism needs food in order to live, and it must be able to choose what serves as its food.

Bibliography

1. BERNSTEIN Richard J., “Rethinking Responsibility,” in *Social Research* 61 (1994), 833-852. (Reprinted in *Hastings Center Report*, 25 (1995), 13-20).
2. CARCATERRA Gaetano, *Il problema della fallacia naturalistica. La derivazione del dover essere*, A. Giuffrè, Milano 1969.
3. DARWIN Charles, *The Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, J. Huxley (intro.), New American Libr. New York 1963.
4. DONNELLEY Strachan, “Speculative Philosophy, the Troubled Middle, and the Ethics of Animal Experimentation,” in *Hastings Center Report*, 19, 2 (1989).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁶ Cfr. *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁷ Cfr. H. JONAS, *IR*, 48.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶⁹ Cfr. *Ibid.*

5. FERNANDO Alangaram S., *The Principle of Responsibility: The Proposals of Hans Jonas and its Critical Appraisal* (Extract of the Doctoral Dissertation), Salesianum, Rome 2004.
6. HAMBLET Wendy C., "To Being or not to Being? That is the Question for Ethics," in ANNA-TERESA TYMIENIECKA (ed.), *Phenomenology of Life: Meeting the Challenges of Present-Day World*, Vol. LXXXIV, Springer, Dordrecht 2005.
7. HÖSLE Vittorio, "Ontology and Ethics in Hans Jonas", *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 23, 1 (2001).
8. HUME David, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), III, I.1, Prometheus Books, Amherst NY 1992.
9. JONAS Hans, "Closer to the Bitter End," in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 23, 1 (2001).
10. JONAS Hans, "Toward an Ontological Grounding of an Ethics for the Future," in *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, L. VOGEL (ed. & Introd.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston Ill 1996.
11. JONAS Hans, "Evolution and Freedom: On the Continuity among Life-Forms," in *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, L. VOGEL (ed. & Introd.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston Ill 1996.
12. JONAS Hans, "Toward an Ontological Grounding of an Ethics for the Future," in *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, L. VOGEL (ed. & Introd.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston Ill 1996.
13. JONAS Hans, "Close to the Bitter End," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 23, 1 (2001).
14. JONAS Hans, "Philosophy at the End of the Century: Prospect and Retrospect, in *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, L. VOGEL (ed. & Introd.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston Ill 1996.
15. LEVY David, *Hans Jonas: The Integrity of Thinking*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia 2002.
16. MONALDI Marcello, *Tecnica, Vita, Responsabilità. Qualche Riflessione su Hans Jonas*, Guida, Napoli 2000.
17. MOORE George E., *Principia Ethica* (1902), Prometheus Books, Amherst NY 1988, I, b.10, 9-10.
18. NIKULIN Dimitri, "Reconsidering Responsibility: Hans Jonas' Imperative for a New Ethics," in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 23, 1 (2001).
19. NORMAN Richard, *The Moral Philosophers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford NY 1983.
20. POINCARÉ Henri, *Dernières pensées*, Flammarion, Paris 1913.
21. RUSSO, Nicola, *La biologia filosofica di Hans Jonas*, Alfredo Guida Editore, Napoli 2004.
22. VENDEMIATI Aldo, *Universalismo e relativismo nell'etica contemporanea*, Marietti S.p.A., Genova-Milano 2007.
23. VOGEL Lawrence, "Jewish Philosophy after Heidegger: Imagining a Dialogue between Jonas and Levinas," in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 23, 1 (2001).

24. VOGEL, "Editor's Introduction, Hans Jonas's Exodus: From German Existentialism to Post-Holocaust Theology," in *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, L. VOGEL (ed. & Introd.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston Ill 1996.
25. WOLIN Richard, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001.