

The "Imperative of Responsibility" According to Hans Jonas

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In his book "The Imperative of Responsibility," published in 1979, the German philosopher Hans Jonas pleads for the extreme emergency to give ourselves an ethics for technological civilization based on "the imperative of responsibility." His theory starts from the finding that the promise of modern technology has turned into a threat of disaster: science confers to man previously unknown forces, the economy constantly pushes forward in an unbridled impulse.

Economic achievements have amplified the mass production of possessions while reducing the quantity of human work required, leading to overconsumption and an immensely increased metabolic interaction with the natural environment.

At the source of the current threats is the old idea of dominating nature to improve human fate. However, success in the submission of nature has achieved excessive proportions and has spread to the very nature of man. According to Jonas, power has become its own master, whereas its promise has turned into threat and its perspective of salvation into apocalypse. A single form of life, man, is now in a position to endanger all forms of life (his own included). Added to the scope of the long-term effects of human action, is their irreversibility. What man can do today has no equivalent in past experience.

We need an ethics of the state of crisis, an ethics of responsibility, of conservation, of preservation. Traditional ethics, which govern relationships among human beings, can no longer inform us on the norms of "good" and "evil" to which we must submit. In this ethics, nature does not constitute an object of human responsibility. It takes care of itself as well as of man. Now that our power is undermining the natural balances, our responsibility spreads beyond interhuman relations to the biosphere and should incorporate long-term effects in any forecast.

Just as humankind's very future is threatened, the ethics of responsibility results in an imperative to human existence: man imperative is to be, and to lead a life worthy of being called human. The future of nature is understood as an essential condition for this obligation: man's interest coincides with that of the rest of life, which is his Earth home in the most sublime sense of the word. The preservation of nature is the condition of our own survival. Thus, we can speak of "man's imperative" in reference to two imperatives - to man and to nature - that are intrinsically linked. Further yet, the solidarity of man's and nature's destinies (of which we have become aware through danger) also makes us rediscover the autonomy of the dignity of nature and commands us to respect its integrity beyond its utilitarian dimension.

Jonas meticulously demonstrates the internal contradictions and the limits of the Utopian dream of man's emancipation from the servitude of needs, pursued with the same dedication as much by the proponents of the supremacy of economic, technological, and scientific "progress," as by the Marxist current. Thus, a good part of this book is devoted to a critique of Utopias. As highlighted by the author, this critique is not so much meant to refute an error in thinking as to build a foundation for its alternative, which is nothing else than an ethics of responsibility.

Jonas reviews man's current attacks on nature (such as genetic manipulation) as well as

the ecological challenges of our times that are the fruits of our technological choices: the question of food for a world population increasing exponentially, the plundering of non-renewable natural reserves, the chemical contamination water, the salinization of soils, erosion, climate change. His analysis leads to the question of energy, the basis of all human activities, and arrives at the question of the danger represented by global warming. Jonas thus explains that Utopia comes up against physics: the question is therefore not to know how much man will still be able to do, but to know what nature can support. No one doubts today that there are limits to tolerance... Twenty-five years after this finding, we see that the questions raised by Jonas are still current.

As early as the 1970s, Jonas was already the precursor of the "principle of precaution," which has lately been appearing in supranational legislation (resolutions and other European Union documents), as well as in a variety of texts (the Charter of Human Responsibilities, the Earth Charter). Jonas notices that, as far as the relationship between humankind and nature is concerned, the enormous complexity of interdependences makes uncertainty become our permanent destiny. Science cannot offer any firm results. Facing this uncertainty and considering the irreversibility of some of the processes triggered by technological choices, the voice of long-term prudence is the primary imperative of responsibility. Jonas thus argues substantially for the adoption of a "principle of precaution."

Jonas evaluates the chances of controlling technological dangers and the aptitude of the political systems of his time to prevent a disaster for humankind caused by the domination of the technological thrust. The question is to know how humankind can be preserved in an era of imminent crisis. How can material well-being be served while saving the natural reserves more and avoiding environmental deterioration (or even disaster)? The idea would be to reduce the standard of living in the most economically developed societies, so as to restore the international balance of distribution of resources. This is necessary, considering the global dimension of the problems and the territorial inequality of natural wealth. The idea is to break away from life in abundance (based on demented waste), on which industrialized societies were built and which is currently the objective of emerging societies such as China's.

We could imagine that a new mass religious movement might perhaps bring about this change in mentalities. However, even in the absence of a religion to exercise an influence on society, there should be an ethics. Or we could also imagine, if the point is to avoid disaster, that a totalitarian government might have some advantages, given that the measures required for the common good require deprivations and sacrifices that individuals would never impose on themselves spontaneously. Of course, any political action project in this sense depends on that which has the value of need: is it public education, the restoration of degraded sites, armament? Jonas expresses doubt as to the capacity of a representative government to face these challenges by applying its usual principles and procedures. These principles and procedures only take current interests into account. It is to these interests that public authorities account to: that which does not exist has no lobby and those who are not yet born have no power. Jonas does not provide an answer to the question of knowing how we could succeed in facing these serious problems through a democratic project. He concentrates on explaining why Marxist thought (as well as the Communist states of the time) cannot offer a solution.

The question for us is to know how we could bring about the emergence of this new ethics of responsibility, an ethics of prudence, renouncement, and solidarity. Hans Jonas, although indicating the only possible way to solving the global challenges, ethics, does not tell us how to get there. We would say that awareness raising and becoming aware,

therefore an educational effort, could provide the foundations for the indispensable change in attitudes and behavior. However, the emergency of the challenges we are facing today requires **setting up a democratic political project, yet to be invented.**

Written in the 1970s, Hans Jonas's theory on the need of an ethics based on the principle of responsibility is more than ever current. The threats weighing upon humankind - in particular as far as the relationship between humankind and nature is concerned - have gotten worse. Becoming aware of these threats and the irreversible character of the implications of certain technological choices can only give birth to fear. But, as highlighted by Jonas, *fear itself is the preliminary "imperative" of an ethics of responsibility.* It is fear that underlies the question with which taking responsibility starts: What it will happen to him if I don't take care of him? It is a fear that invites to act and comes with hope: I am prepared to do whatever necessary to avoid the worst. It is about the courage to assume responsibility by transforming your own fear into a duty to act.

Reference: Jonas, Hans (1979), The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.