



Responsibility to Others in the Future

The Foundation of the Imperative of Responsibility in Hans Jonas

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Hans Jonas (1903–1993) was a philosopher who examined the basis of the responsibility to future generations. In Imperative of Responsibility (1979), Jonas warned against the dangers of a scientific and technological civilization and laid the foundation for the responsibility to future generations. This book was the first to provide a comprehensive theory of environmental ethics and bioethics and is recognized as the most widely read ethics book of the 20th century. Its impact extends beyond academia to a variety of areas and has contributed to the development of conceptual guidelines for public policy, such as the “precautionary principle.” Nevertheless, this book is known to be difficult to understand in spite of its great influence, and Jonas’ ethics has been criticized in previous studies as having no systematic basis. However, Jonas insists on the necessity of rationally establishing the responsibility to future generations. From this point of view, this paper reconstructs Jonas’ argument, with particular attention to fundamentals and with reference to Philosophical Exploration and Metaphysical Speculation (1992), in which the structure of its foundations is discussed more clearly. This paper seeks to clarify the

theoretical structure of Jonas' ethics and to lay the ground for correctly evaluating its significance and limitations.

Introduction

In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published a special report predicting that if we continue to emit CO₂ at our current scale, the global average temperature will rise significantly in 100 years, leading to serious damage. However, if we can reduce CO₂ emissions rapidly, we can keep the temperature rise to 1.5 °C. Based on these projections, the report calls for global action to reduce CO₂. (1) In response to the report, environmental activist Greta Thunberg gave a speech at the U.S. Climate Action Summit, in which the following words underscored our responsibility to future generations: “The eyes of all future generations are upon you”. (2)

Our present actions will affect future generations. Therefore, the present generation is responsible for the future generation. But basing this intuitively self-evident responsibility faces great difficulties. Individuals from the future generation do not yet exist and thus cannot voice their opinions or concerns. We do not even know what the future generation will be like in the first place. Responsibility for future generations is responsibility for what does not exist, and in the most extreme sense, responsibility for others outside our community.

Hans Jonas (1903–1993) was a philosopher who examined the basis of this responsibility to future generations. In *Imperative of Responsibility* (1979), Jonas warned against the dangers of a scientific and technological civilization and laid the foundation for the responsibility to future generations. This book was the first to provide a comprehensive theory of environmental ethics and bioethics and is recognized as the most widely read ethics book of the 20th century. Its impact extends beyond academia to a variety of areas and has contributed to the development of conceptual guidelines for public policy, such as the “precautionary principle.” Nevertheless, this book is known to be difficult to understand in spite of its great influence, and Jonas’ ethics has been criticized in previous studies as having no systematic basis. (3)

However, Jonas insists on the necessity of rationally establishing the responsibility to future generations. From this point of view, this paper reconstructs Jonas’ argument, with particular attention to fundamentals

and with reference to *Philosophical Exploration and Metaphysical Speculation* (1992), in which the structure of its foundations is discussed more clearly. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the theoretical structure of Jonas' ethics and to lay the ground for correctly evaluating its significance and limitations.

Problem setting of Imperative of Responsibility

The aim of *Imperative of Responsibility* is to lay the foundations for responsibility to future generations. One of the theoretical difficulties associated with this problem is that future generations do not yet exist at the present time, and the relationship between present and future generations is asymmetric. According to Jonas, traditional ethics has assumed that people live at the same time and can interact with each other. Such contemporary reciprocity is a condition for respecting the rights of others. However, the serious impact of scientific and technological civilization on future generations will overturn this assumption. Therefore, the foundation of responsibility "must be independent of any idea of a right and therefore also of a reciprocity". (4) That is, responsibility for future generations cannot be explained by the application of traditional ethics, but must be explained by the construction of entirely new principles.

From this point of view, Jonas goes back to the metaphysical question of whether human beings should exist in the world in the first place. The term "human being" is used here to refer to "The Idea of Man", (5) without limitations to any particular generation or place. If humans should exist in this world, we can, following the same argument, draw the conclusion that future generations should also exist. Based on these assumptions, Jonas first seeks to deduce the responsibility to future generations by providing a metaphysical base for the responsibility to the Idea of Man, thereby trying to establish the basis on the premise of the non-reciprocity between present and future generations.

Against this foundation of ethics based on metaphysics, Jonas addresses two possible objections. First, one might object that the proposition that humans should exist confuses the concept of being with the concept of value. Second, as metaphysics transcends scientific positivism, the knowledge obtained by it has no truth. In order to ensure the validity of his approach, Jonas rebuts these two objections.

Regarding the first objection, according to Jonas, the premise that the concept of being and the concept of value should be separated is only a metaphysical ontology formed after the beginning of the modern era. In this ontology, being is essentially worthless and is not regarded as something good or bad in itself. However, this worthless ontology is by no means the only ontology that is impossible otherwise, as it is itself a metaphysical theory. To that extent, it is also possible to construct a new ontology in which the concept of being and the concept of value can be linked.

Turning to the second objection, Jonas contends that the very idea that knowledge based on scientific positivism is the truth and that other knowledge is not the truth is a metaphysical view of knowledge. Therefore, even if metaphysical analysis is adopted as a method in the basis of responsibility for future generations, the choice of this method does not by this fact lose validity. From this viewpoint, Jonas insists that “a rational metaphysics”, (6) is acceptable as a method.

On the basis of this discussion, Jonas constructs a new ontology in which the concept of being and the concept of value are linked as a precondition for a foundation for responsibility to “The Idea of Man”. (7) The analysis of this ontology is the immediate issue.

Ontology of the good

Jonas conducted the following thought experiment in order to examine the ontology in which the concept of being and the concept of value can be linked. The concept of being has two possibilities: being and nonbeing. If a concept of value can be attributed to a concept of being, it is either attributed to being or to nonbeing. According to Jonas, it can be only being, because nonbeing can be attributed to nothing. However, just as there is being and nonbeing in the possibility of the concept of being, there is value and “antivalue” in the possibility of the concept of value. Therefore, the attribution of the concept of value to being alone means that antivalue belongs only to being and never to nonbeing. Even so, however, Jonas maintains that being has absolute significance for nonbeing.

The capacity for value (worth) is itself a value, the value of all values, and so is even the capacity for antivalue (worthlessness), insofar as the mere openness to the difference for worth and worthlessness would alone secure to being its absolute preferability to nothingness. Thus, not only this or that determinate value, when its occasion comes along, has a claim to being, but already the abstract possibility for value in general, as itself a value, has that claim to being and imparts it to the reality harboring such a potential—that is, to the word. (8)

According to Jonas, the attribution of value is “capacity for value,” and even if value does not actually exist now, it does not exclude the possibility that value may exist. Therefore, being is superior to nonbeing in that the probability that value can actually exist is attributed. At the same time, it becomes clear that the potential of value, as long as it is value, should be realized, and that it has such “claim to being.” In this analysis, the aspect of the concept of value is distinguished between possibility and reality. The concept of value entails not merely descriptive concepts for evaluating actions or events, but dynamic concepts that try to move from possible to practical. From this point of view, Jonas explains the moral justification from the “claim to being.”

For the good or valuable, if it is by itself and not by the grace of a desire, need or choice, is by its very concept a thing whose being possible entails the demand for its being or becoming actual and thus into an “ought” when a will is present which can hear the demand and translate it into action. (9)

Good is a value concept, and its potential “entails the demand for its being or becoming actual.” When this demand is externally expressed and the “will” of the other responds to it, the demand functions as an “ought.” In other words, the justification is an “intrinsic requirement for the realization of good itself” and not a subjective tendency such as “a desire, need or choice.”

Jonas analyzes the concept of responsibility on the basis of these structures for moral ought. As far as this structure is concerned, it becomes clear that the concept of responsibility consists of the following two opportunities. The first is the expression of a requirement for its own existence, that is, the object of responsibility, and the obligation to respond to that requirement—that is, the subject of responsibility. In the following, we will confirm Jonas’ analysis of each concept.

Object of responsibility

What we have examined so far is logical possibility derived from ontology if there is any ontology in which the concept of being and the concept of value are connected. It did not matter to this argument whether or not the ontology corresponded to the real world. As a result, it was clarified that the concept of responsibility was segmented into an object of responsibility and a subject of responsibility. Jonas goes a step further and tries to show that this ontology is not only a logical possibility, but also a correspondence with the existence of the real world.

The object of responsibility is the good that requires its own being. How does this good exist in the real world? Asking for its own existence means that it is aimed at oneself. Therefore, it has a self-serving existence. According to Jonas, life is the only existence in this world that is truly self-serving. In *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, a book preceding *Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas analyzed purposefulness as an essential aspect of life in clarifying the ontological difference between life and non-life. (10) However, this does not mean the purposiveness of the organs of an organism as Kant described in *Criticism of Judgment* but a dynamic mode of existence that will choose existence in the face of the possibility of death. “Life as such, in the inherited co-present danger of not-being, is an expression of this choice”. (11) Life is therefore an entity that requires its own existence, as good does. From this point of view, Jonas interprets the life as “Good-in-Itself”. (12)

The prerequisite for the object of responsibility is life. The demand for one's own existence by the object of responsibility is explained as the expression of one's existence by life threatened with death. In *Philosophical Exploration and Metaphysical Speculation*, Jonas explains the situation in which the object of responsibility evokes responsibility as follows:

But the claim of being of value to me as a practical subject becomes concrete when (a) this being is a vulnerable one, as is living being in its essential decay; and (b) as such falls within my scope of action, is exposed to my power - be it by accident or, all the more binding, by my own choice. (13)

Here Jonas explains the situation in which responsibility arises from two perspectives. First, it is a "vulnerable one" and second, it is "exposed to my power." In other words, those who have no room to be hurt, or who do not belong to the "the sphere of my conduct" in the first place, are not the objects of responsibility. Anyone who is "vulnerable" and belongs to the "the sphere of my conduct" can be the object of responsibility; whether the vulnerable one is useful or whether the vulnerable one can communicate with me has no influence on whether the object can be the object of responsibility.

This analysis reveals that the targets of responsibility correspond to real existence, that is, to life. It means that the existence of life is good in itself, and that when there is an injured life before others, it invites responsibility to others. Jonas cites the responsibility for a new-born as an empirical example that reinforces the intuitive clarity of such arguments. "The new-born, who were breathing uncontradictably addresses a thought to the world around, namely, to take care of him. Look and you know". (14) According to Jonas, new-borns are good in their own right as life and are the weakest and most vulnerable beings. Because they express most forcefully the need for others to be responsible, they are also the archetype of the object of responsibility. New-borns cannot do anything by themselves, and they die quickly if they are not cared for. In the face of such beings, those around them are forced to face the responsibility aroused by their "breathing." Jonas argues that as long as these intuitions are evident, the ontology linking the concepts of existence and value is persuasive as an ontology that can reasonably explain them.

Subject of responsibility

Next, we examine the concept of the entity of responsibility. The subject of responsibility is an entity with capacity for responsibility. It is the ability to respond to the demands of good for its own existence and to consider the vulnerability of life. Jonas envisions a human being as an existent who has a capacity for responsibility.

It is indeed of the very meaning of the normative principle that its call is addressed to recipients so constituted that they are by nature receptive to it (which does not, of course, already insure its being heeded). One may well say that there would be no “thou shalt” if there were no one to hear it and on his own attuned to its message, even straining toward its voice. This is the same as saying that men already are potentially “moral beings” by possessing that affectability, and only thereby can they also be immoral. (15)

Here, Jonas refers to the subject of responsibility as “an entity capable of receiving calls” and assumes human beings as such. However, this does not mean that human beings always take responsible actions. It is possible for human beings to ignore a “call” or to act against it. Such acts are judged to be “immoral.” However, if the “call” were not heard from the beginning, then an act contrary to the voice would not be regarded as immoral. Therefore, being able to listen to a “call” opens up the possibility of being moral or anti-moral to humans. Jonas finds in these possibilities the morality of human beings as subjects of responsibility.

Life that expresses a “call” is good in its existence, but not because of the preference of those who hear it. Therefore, listening to a “call” means going beyond the criterion of whether it is useful and acknowledging the goodness of the life that produced the “call.” According to Jonas, “what *is* worth my effort does not of itself coincide with what just *appeals to me* as worth my effort”. (16) Therefore, having responsibility is based on the assumption that subject of responsibility is not conditioned by its personal interests and has freedom in that sense.

According to Jonas, human beings are the only creatures in the world with responsibility. Therefore, the capacity for responsibility is super animal. In *Philosophical Exploration and Metaphysical Speculation*, Jonas explains:

Man is the only being known to us who *can* have responsibility. We immediately recognize this “can” as more than a mere empirical finding. We recognize it as a distinguishing and decisive characteristic of the human being in his endowment. (17)

The fact that only human beings have responsibility means that other animals cannot hear the “call” of life. In other words, it means that only human beings can be free from their personal interests; animals cannot. In this sense, Jonas interprets human beings as having an exclusive monopoly on responsibility to other animals.

Metaphysical deduction

This paper has examined Jonas’ concept of the object and subject of responsibility, clarifying thereby that the object of responsibility is life and the subject of the responsibility is human beings. However, since

human beings are also life, they are both the object and the subject of responsibility, and there is no existent other than human beings with such duality.

According to Jonas, responsibility cannot be established unless the subject and the object exist. Thus, the presence of these agents is a condition for the possibility of responsibility. Human beings are the only species that have the capacity for responsibility, so their survival is a condition of possible responsibility. If so, the responsibility for the survival of human beings is understood not only as a responsibility to a normal object, but also as a responsibility for the possibility of responsibility. From this point of view, Jonas says “the possibility of there being responsibility in the world, which is bound to the existence of men, is of all objects of responsibility the first”. (18) Therefore, responsibility for the survival of the human being should take precedence over responsibility to other species.

This ontological superiority of human beings as the subject of responsibility is emphasized more in *Philosophical Exploration and Metaphysical Speculation*. Jonas explains in the book that responsibility as such becomes “its own object, in that its possession obliges them to continue their presence in the world”.(19) and from this he lays the foundation for responsibility to future generations.

This presence is tied to the existence of such capable creatures. So responsibility in itself obliges its respective bearer to enable the existence of future bearers. So that responsibility does not disappear from the world, so its immanent command says, people should also be in the future. (20)

As stated here, future generations are required to continue as “future bearers” of responsibility. According to Jonas, “with this imperative we are, strictly speaking, not responsible to the future human individuals but to the *Idea* of Man”. (21) With this Argumentation, Jonas’ approach of laying the foundation for responsibility to future generations by mediating responsibility for human ideals is complete.

These foundations also reveal the characteristics that responsibility for future generations has. Responsibility to future generations is not based on agreement with them, nor is it about achieving what they want. So the responsibility is not dealing with “the right of future men, namely, their right to happiness, which, given the uncertain concept of happiness, would be a precarious criterion to be truly human”. (22) Rather, it is the responsibility of future generations to exist as the subject of responsibility. Therefore, future generations must exist not merely as living creatures, but in a way that keeps them free to go beyond their own personal interests. The responsibility for future generations must be taken into consideration not only in terms of the existence of future generations, but also in terms of how they exist.

Jonas thus does not base responsibility to future generations on the relationship between present and future generations, but on “the phenomenon of responsibility itself”. (23) This will allow us to justify responsibility to future generations while avoiding the problem that present and future generations are not interrelated and that future generations still have no right to be considered. This series of reasoning is called “metaphysical reduction”. (24)

Conclusion

This paper has restructured the basis for Jonas’ responsibility to future generations. We conclude this paper by critically reviewing the validity of this argument.

Jonas’ ethics has at least two weak points. The first concerns its universal validity. Jonas first envisions a new ontology in which concepts of existence and value can be linked, and bases his responsibility to the Idea of Man as an inevitable consequence of adopting this ontology. There is no necessity to adopt this ontology except the intuition that it can better explain reality. (25) Jonas points to the responsibility to a new-born as an example of this intuition. However, there is no explanation for the universality of this intuition. Some people may not feel responsible in front of a new-born. If only one such person existed, Jonas’ ontology has no universal validity. Therefore, this intuition cannot be used as a basis for the validity of ontology, and the new ontology proposed by Jonas has no universal validity. This ontology is thus one of various ontologies that can exist elsewhere, and there is no necessity that the ontology should be adopted. With these objections, the responsibility to future generations is ultimately relativistic. (26)

The second problem concerns humanism. Jonas divided the concept of responsibility into the object and the subject, and limited the former to life and the latter to human beings. The reason why only human beings are the subject of responsibility is that only human beings are responsible and free from private interests. There is no explanation of why non-human living things do not have such freedom. Of course, in order to establish Jonas’ metaphysical deduction, the exclusive identity of man as the subject of responsibility is essential. But that could lead to a dogmatic humanism in Jonas’ argument. (27)

Therefore, Jonas cannot be considered to have fully laid the foundation for responsibility to future generations. However, it cannot be doubted that Jonas’ ethics has certain advantages over intergenerational ethics or other arguments for future ethics. By bypassing responsibility to the Idea of Man, Jonas can explain our responsibility to future generations, assuming the non-reciprocity of present and future generations. While the responsibilities to future generations described by John Rawls (28) and Karl Otto Apel (29) are based solely on the assumption of quasi-interconnectedness between present and future generations, Jonas’ approach can defend the otherness of future generations. The

responsibility to future generations is responsibility to those whom we cannot meet, discuss, or even become acquainted with, which is why future generations are easily forgotten. Jonas' ethics is nothing but a call for responsibility as such to future generations.

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NOTES

1. IPCC, special report: Global Warming of 1.5 °C, (<https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>)
2. NPR, Transcript: Greta Thunberg's Speech at The U.N. Climate Action Summit, (<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>)
3. See, Hösle, 1994, S.122; Werner, 2003, S. 41.
4. Jonas, 2003, p. 84; Jonas, 1984, p. 39.
5. Ibid., p. 91; *ibid.*, p. 43.
6. Ibid., p. 94; *ibid.*, p. 45.
7. In this sense, as Hadron points out, the basis for Jonas' responsibility to future generations rests on an "ontological concept of responsibility." See, Hadorn, 2000, p. 218.
8. Jonas, 2003, S. 100; Jonas, 1984, p. 49.
9. Ibid., p. 153; *ibid.*, p. 79.
10. Jonas, 1997, p. 163; Jonas, 2001, p. 86.
11. Jonas, 2003, p. 157; Jonas, 1984, p. 82.
12. Ibid., p. 154; *ibid.*, p. 80.
13. Jonas, 1992, p. 132.
14. Ibid., p. 235; *ibid.*, p. 131.
15. Ibid. p. 164; *ibid.*, p. 86.
16. Ibid., p. 161; *ibid.*, p. 84.

17. Jonas, 1992, p. 137.
18. Jonas, 2003, p. 186; Jonas, 1984, p. 98.
19. Jonas, 1992, pp. 137–138.
20. Ibid., pp. 137–138.
21. 21. Jonas, 2003, p. 91; Jonas, 1984, p. 43. Birnbacher criticizes the concept of human ideology for its lack of clarity (See Birnbacher, 1983, p. 147). According to the interpretation of this paper, it can be explained as an idea that it exists as a responsible entity.
22. Jonas, 2003, p. 87; Jonas, 1984, p. 42.
23. Jonas, 1992, p. 138.
24. Ibid., p. 138.
25. See, Jakob, 1996, p. 343.
26. The question of universal validity has been repeatedly criticized and reviewed by the Berlin Discourse Ethics School, represented by Dietrich Böehler. Major prior studies include the following. See, Werner, 1994; Böehler, 2004.
27. Werner, 2008, p. 141.
28. cf., Rawls, 1999.
29. See, Apel, 1990.

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