

Ethics of hans jonas philosophy essay



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Science and philosophy though are separate disciplines they co-exist with each other. Hans Jonas a prominent thinker not only has succeeded in bridging the gap of science and philosophy but also has taken science especially the Biology to the realm of philosophy. He has constructed “Philosophical Biology”. He is also known for his ethics of responsibility. As, one of the most prominent thinkers of 20th century, he has written on diverse topics such as the philosophy of biology, ethics, social philosophy, cosmology, and Jewish theology with a view to understand morality as the root of our moral responsibility to safeguard humanity’s future. Jonas’s greatest work, “ The Phenomenon of Life” sets forth a systematic and comprehensive philosophy of phenomenology and existentialism. In this paper I have tried to adumbrate his thought on life philosophy rather thematically with a special reference to “ Phenomenon of Life.” I have also touched upon his most celebrated ethics of responsibility briefly followed by my own reflections.

1. Life and Biography

Hans Jonas was a well-known Jewish thinker, an early and influential biomedical ethicist, and an equally early and influential philosopher of technology. Jonas was born in 1904 in Monchengladbach, studied under Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiburg before Hitler came to power and Heidegger became chancellor of the university. He received his doctorate in 1928 from the University of Marburg. In 1933 he fled Germany and, in 1964, publicly repudiated Heidegger because of his Nazi connections. Jonas taught in Jerusalem and Canada before becoming a professor at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1955, where he was chair of

the philosophy department (1957–63) and Johnson Professor of Philosophy (from 1966 until his retirement in 1976).[1]He Died in February, 1993 in New York. Jonas's career is generally divided into three periods defined by the three works just mentioned, but in reverse order: studies of Gnosticism, studies of philosophical biology, and ethical studies.[2]Jonas's major works in English include: *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (1958), *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (1966), and *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age* (1979).[3]

2. Philosophical Biology in “ The Phenomenon of Life”

“ The Phenomenon of Life” is a collection of essays, written over a period of more than fifteen years. The book covers topics ranging from the metabolism of an amoeba to the meaning of immortality. There are discussions of Orphic religion, natural selection, gnosticism, DNA, ancient versus modern mathematics, cybernetics, the relative strengths and weaknesses of seeing, hearing, and tactile-feeling, the being of images, theory versus practice, the images of man and the image of God. In this book he critiques the fundamental assumptions underlying modern philosophy since Descartes, primarily dualism. Jonas is exactly right to argue that “ life” does need a distinct ontological category, and that the neglect of “ life” in the Cartesian dichotomy of “ matter” and “ mind” is an important element in the historical path that leads to modern nihilism.[4]The book deals with organic facts of life and self-interpretation of life in human being. The themes dealt are not only of organic world such as metabolism, sentience,

motility, emotion, perception, imagination, mind etc. but also moral and metaphysical themes.[5]

In the preface of “ The Phenomenon of Life”, Jonas identifies the work as an “ existential interpretation of the biological facts.” This description is significant: Jonas would attempt to carry what was valuable in the existentialist approach forward to interpret an area that philosophers had long neglected: the world of facts about living things; about hunger, about nourishment, about growth and about death. The very proposition that philosophy ought to “ interpret” facts demonstrates Jonas’s unorthodox orientation. For Jonas, the old division of labor between the natural sciences, on the one hand, which deal in facts about nature, and the humanities, on the other, which concern themselves with values and concepts salient to the mind or spirit-this old division of labor is precisely the problem that must be overcome in order to get nature right.

3. Life, Death and the Body of Being and Philosophical Aspects of Darwinism

Jonas says that when human being began to interpret the nature of things he found life everywhere. It means the primitive man found life in everything.

Jonas calls for the construction of a philosophy of nature as the Greek philosopher Aristotle did long ago. By this he means that every philosopher must return to fields or to the working land. In this context his questions are: What is the difference between a human being, alive, and a corpse? What is there in man besides chemicals that constitute the human body? Some might be quick to answer, “ a human being is not just a body; he has a soul.” But what is meant by this? Is the soul something to be opposed to the body-a

sort of spiritual substance that inhabits a body and lives out its own destiny apart from that body? This was neither Jonas's view nor Aristotle's before him.[6]The position of these philosophers is closer to that which Friedrich Nietzsche expressed with his usual eloquence when he wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "Body am I, and soul" – so speaks a child.[7]And why should one not speak like children? But the awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body." Nietzsche says that the soul is a word for "something about the body," we have an idea what that something is-its mortality, its relationship to death. An easy but significant answer to the question "what is a living thing?" is this: "A living thing is something that can and will die." Unlike non-living matter-including the nonliving matter that makes up living bodies-the whole living body has a provisional sort of being. When death arrives, the extinction of an existing thing occurs. What is clearly gone in death is the body's organization. Extinction of organism equals loss of organization. When the organism is alive, first, it is not a static thing, like the organization of marble into a statue or of wood and iron into a hammer. It is rather, a never ceasing, ongoing process. Biological science calls this process as "metabolism."

Jonas describes metabolism philosophically: "In this remarkable mode of being, the material parts of which the organism consists at a given instant are to the penetrating observer only temporary, passing contents whose joint material identity does not coincide with the identity of the whole which they enter and leave, and which sustains its own identity by the very act of foreign matter passing through its spatial system, the living form. It is never

the same materially and yet persists as its same self, by not remaining the same matter.”[8]Aristotle’s thought that all living beings nourish themselves, struck the idea of the mode of being as discovered by Jonas. A living thing does not simply exist-it exists by being constantly active, constantly reaching out into the world to capture those material parts it needs to preserve itself. Out of these captured elements, the organism builds itself anew or generates the energy needed for this building. Plants employ roots and leaves, animals employ gills, lungs, teeth, stomach-and also, on the hunt, legs and arms, eyes and ears, attention and memory. As Jonas conceives it, life, from the most simple to the most complex, is active and purposeful.[9]Organism and environment together form a system which determines the basic concept of life. Jonas remarks that “ the triumph which materialism achieved in Darwinism contains the germ of its own overcoming.” Though by proving Darwin’s evolutionism it seems that man’s metaphysical status is reduced due to his animal descent, in the realm of life as a whole man’s dignity is restored. If man was the relative of animals, then animals were the relatives of man, and in degrees bearers of that inwardness of which man, the most advanced of their kin, is conscious in himself.[10]But man remains distinct, because of self-consciousness.

4. Is God a Mathematician?

The third essay in “ The Phenomenon of Life” considers the meaning of metabolism using the quote of Sir James Jeans. Jonas notes that a living being is one that is never the same from one moment to the next “ perpetual self-renewal through process”. James remarks, “ From the intrinsic evidence of his creation, the Great Architect of the Universe now begins to appear as a

pure mathematician.”[11]Two questions can be asked on this statement: What does it mean and is it true? The question regarding the truth gives rise to another question namely, is the great architect of the universe is also the architect of amoeba. He must be both, or he is neither. For the amoeba is part of the universe and must be accountable for by its creative principle. The observation of James is the continuation of the long tradition from Plato’s Timaeus to Leibniz. Leibniz observes, “ Thus it is wonderfully made known to us how in the very origination of things a certain Divine mathematics or metaphysical mechanics is employed and the determination of the greatest quantity takes place.”[12]“ When God calculates and employs thought, the world is made.”[13]Kepler deeply imbued with the Pythagorean faith in the mathematical essence of things and the consequent harmony in the world, said that God, “ too kind to remain idle, began to play the game of signatures, signing his likeness into the world,” with the result that “ all nature and the graceful sky are symbolized in the art of geometry.” Galileo believed that the great book of the universe is written in mathematical language, using symbols such as triangles, circles and other geometrical figures. Philosophy is written in the book of the universe.[14]The final answer to the question, “ Is God a Mathematician?” is a distinct “ No.”

5. Animal vs. Plants

Jonas considers what differs from animal to plant i. e., motility, perception and emotion. The ability to move using the evidence of perception leads to the idea of freedom. Plants possess immediacy in life between environment and the organism; animals are more separated than this being required to treat the environment as different from them to some degree at least. For

the animal the environment is always at a distance, but for plants the adjacent surroundings in one permanent context forms the environment. Motility, perception, and emotion make it possible for animals to have a genuine relation to a genuinely articulated world. These powers are, in fact, all manifestations of a common principle, tied to a common fact about animal life. The common fact is that the mobile animals live at greater distance from their relevant environments; therefore—the common principle—animal life is mediated life, animal life is rooted in the gap between subject and object, which gap is spanned by the distance-disclosing and distance-bridging powers of perception, locomotion, and appetite. Jonas argues, persuasively, that appetite is the heart of animality, prior to the more externally recognizable powers of perception and locomotion.

Distance is requisite for desire, but it is desire which drives motion, guided by perception, to turn the “over there” into “here” and the “not yet” into “now.” It is desire which, while seeking to efface the spatial and temporal gaps, paradoxically, maintains the gaps (and the objects across them) as matters of interest”, even as the gaps are spanned under its spur. Jonas concludes: “The great secret of animal life lies precisely in the gap which it is able to maintain between immediate concern and mediate satisfaction.”[15] Wakefulness and effort, want and fear, suffering and enjoyment give depth to the animal soul.

6. Cybernetics and Purpose

According to cybernetics, society is communication network for the transmitting, exchanging, and pooling of information. Jonas analyses the ideas of cybernetics and some differences between machines and organisms

noting that machines act by feedback mechanisms whereas organism is “concerned in existing”, this applies also to society where the cybernetic idea of information is empty. He draws out a crucial implication of the passionate nature of animal life. He shows the error in the efforts of cyberneticians and behaviorists to explain away the apparent goal-directed behavior of animals in terms of mechanical inputs and outputs and self-regulating feedback mechanisms. Exploiting the distinction between “serving a purpose and “having purpose,” and using a marvelous example which compares a so-called self-steering torpedo and the same torpedo “manned” by a human pilot, he shows that all machine models of purposiveness fail because, unlike living things, machines are not creatures of need. It is the concern of life with its own continued existence that qualifies incoming data as “messages,” and then only if they are relevant to the organism’s purpose; it is only such self-concern that energizes the active “response” as an action fit to the organic purpose. Concern, or, in the higher animals, desire, appetite, and emotion, is more basic than the outward-looking functions of perception and locomotion which it holds together. Animals, no less than man, are teleological beings; animals, no less than man, aim at their own good.[16]

7. Image-making and the Freedom of Man

Hans Jonas sheds light on philosophical anthropology where he shows the “specific difference” of human being in the animal kingdom. He deliberates on the properties of an object which determines the image. According to him the properties of image include:[17]

1. The most obvious property is that of “likeness. An image is an object that bears a plainly recognizable likeness to another object.

2. The likeness is produced with intent. It is not the natural resemblances like mirror images, shadows, and the like.

3. The likeness is not complete. It is not duplication. The incompleteness of the likeness must be perceptible.

4. The incompleteness of image-likeness includes omission and selection.

5. Incompleteness also involves dissimilarity and alteration of selected features.

6. The object of representation is visual shape. Vision grants the greatest freedom to the mediacy of representation.

7. The image is inactive and at rest, though it may depict movement and action. There is static presence because the represented, the representation, and the vehicle of representation are different strata in the ontological constitution of the image.

The properties required in a subject for the making or beholding of images involve the ability to behold something as an image; and to behold something as an image and not merely as an object means also to be able to produce one. The requirement seems to be the ability to perceive the likeness. Animals perceive either sameness or otherness, but not both in one. Human persons have the apprehension of similitude.

8. Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism

The similarity and difference between two positions or movements of thought is: one is conceptual, sophisticated and eminently modern i. e.,

existentialism and another from misty past, mythological, crude i. e., Gnosticism. Jonas wrote on “ Gnosticism” which was a widespread movement in late antiquity in the early era of Christianity. The Gnostics, often understood to be Christian heretics, held the view that the cosmos is a prison for the human soul; that the world is not God’s creation, but the work of lesser deities intent on keeping the soul imprisoned and apart from God; that all attachments between a human being and the world, his appetites, aspirations and conscience, are expressions of ignorance that must be overcome through true knowledge; and that this knowledge only comes as a gift from the savior beyond the world who can show the soul the way out.

[18]

The movement of modern knowledge called science has by a necessary complementarity eroded the foundations from which norms could be derived; it has destroyed the very idea of norm as such.” To make his point fully emphatic, Jonas writes: “ Now we shiver in the nakedness of a nihilism, in which near-omnipotence is paired with near-emptiness, greatest capacity with knowing least for what ends to use it.”[19]

9. Heidegger and Theology

This essay deals with how Martin Heidegger understands of Theology as interpreted by Jonas. Originally the Biblical word was equalized with the Greek logos. Philo Judaeus gives a reflection on Christian Theology through the etymology of the Biblical name “ Israel.” It means “ He who sees God” and Jacob’s acquiring this name is said to represent the God-seeker’s progress from the stage of hearing to that of seeing, made possible by the miraculous conversion of ears into eyes. Philo’s views on “ knowing God”

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rests on the Platonic supposition the truest relation to being is intuition, beholding. This eminence of sight gazed from the religious perspective enhances one's relation to God and also to the word of God. Philo quoting Exodus, " All the people saw the voice" (20: 18) comments: " Highly significant, for human voice is to be heard, but God's voice is in truth to be seen. Why? Because that which God speaks is not words but works, which the eye discriminates better than the ear" (De Decalogo, 47).[20]After Philo the Christian Theology underwent a turn from the original hearing to the call of the living in other words the " conversion of ears into eyes" When we speak of Heidegger there is much secularized Christianity in his thought. The concepts like guilt, care, anxiety, call of conscience, resolution, authenticity-inauthenticity have a purely ontological meaning. Theology is also a " primal" thinking though it is derived from a revelation. But for Heidegger Revelation is self-unveiling of being. Heidegger adopts many Judeo-Christian vocabularies in his philosophy such as guilt and conscience and call and voice and hearing and response and mission and shepherd and revelation and thanksgiving etc. He says: " Only from the truth of being can essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of deity to be thought. Only in the light in the essence of deity can that be thought and said which the word ' God' should name." [21]Heidegger's formulation can be put in this way, " philosophical thinking is to being as theological thinking is to the self-revealing God." Hence theology should be primal thinking concerning God.[22]

10. Jonas's Thought on Biology

Organisms are, of course, as much a part of the physical universe as atoms and planets and cosmic nebulae. An organism is a whole and not just a collection of simpler parts. Nature is not a place of purposes but rather of bodies filling the void of empty space.[23]A living organism including human being-is a being that must always be at-work in order to stay the whole that it is. What Jonas adds to this account is an existentialist philosopher's emphasis on the role of death. The existentialists, including Heidegger, think only about the consciousness of death, the anticipation of death that characterizes mankind's existence. But Jonas thought about death as a biological event. Mankind is not the only creature who walks in the valley of the shadow of death. All life is fragile and provisional; all life is wrested moment by moment from the threat of non-being. The key ontological divide is not between human beings and the rest of nature-it is between living nature and that which does not live and, so, cannot die. The essential feature of all life, then, is, first, the primacy of form over matter-the ontological persistence of an individual through material change-and, second, the purposeful action of the living individual to keep itself in being against the threat of non-being. The imputation of purpose to all life processes is perhaps the core of Jonas's heresy. It is essential, for Jonas, those categories which modern philosophers and scientists have consistently applied only to mankind-purpose, intention, interest, care-should be seen as present throughout the organic world. To be alive is to exhibit an interest in continuing to be. Jonas formulates this at one point by saying that, through metabolism, life " says yes to itself." [24]Jonas characterizes the essential

property of all living things as a kind of freedom. Living things are free in that they exist independent of, though not apart from, their material.[25]

11. The Imperative of Responsibility

Jonas is best known for his neo-Kantian ethics of responsible caution in the face of the awesome power of modern technology, especially the power of modern biotechnology, including genetic engineering. He offers answer to the question “ what makes mankind unique?”, “ Man is the only being known to us who can assume responsibility. The fact that he can assume it means that he is liable to it. This capacity for taking responsibility already signifies that human being is subject to its imperative: the ability itself brings moral obligation with it. But the capacity for taking responsibility, an ethical capacity, lies in man’s ontological capability to choose knowingly and willingly between alternative actions. Responsibility, therefore, is complimentary to freedom; it is an acting subject’s burden of freedom.”[26]Jonas tells us: “ Responsibility exists with or without God and, naturally even more so, with or without an earthly court of justice.”

Responsibility is sown into the fabric of Being. Jonas argues that it does and that we must learn how to think of the planet that sustains our being and the God-like nature that evolution has-wondrously and mysteriously-realized in our species as vulnerable things that must stay our hand and constrain our choices.[27]According to Jonas, we must consult our fears and not our hopes when understanding technological ventures that can have a potentially devastating impact on what it means to be human (and therefore ethical).

The Imperative of Responsibility centres on social and ethical problems created by technology. Jonas insists that human survival depends on our

efforts to care for our planet and its future. He formulated a new and distinctive supreme principle of morality: “ Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life”.

[28]Francis Bacon states that nature can be commanded only by being obeyed.[29]

Critical Remarks and Conclusion

Hans Jonas, a pupil of Heidegger, departs from his mentor’s work and reaches out into the depths of the deeply thinking man’s way of understanding “ The Phenomenon of Life “. The philosophy of Jonas is more than challenging in this technological era. I found it relevant for many reasons.

a. His division of living and non-living beings is a new thinking which goes beyond anthropocentric division of man and rest of nature. This new aspect brings in the terrain of plants and animals to human life. They are nothing less in terms of living beings. Only non-living beings have neither birth nor death. This thinking paves the way for new ethical imperatives, respect for life and deep ecological concerns.

b. His application of philosophy to science especially to biology is relevant. He tries to interpret nature in a holistic sense which upholds the meaning to life, proper use of technology etc. He acknowledges that human existence cannot be grasped without acknowledging radically different kinds of relation.

c. The philosophy of Hans Jonas found in The Phenomenon of Life is a hard reading and bit complicated to understand in a first attempt. But as one goes

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or digs deep there are gems of thought and concrete experiences. The life and thought is worth studying for a present student of philosophy. His philosophy is a clarion call to study and do philosophy as well. It places humans as responsible citizens of cosmos to safeguard nature and surroundings. Thanks to his thought.