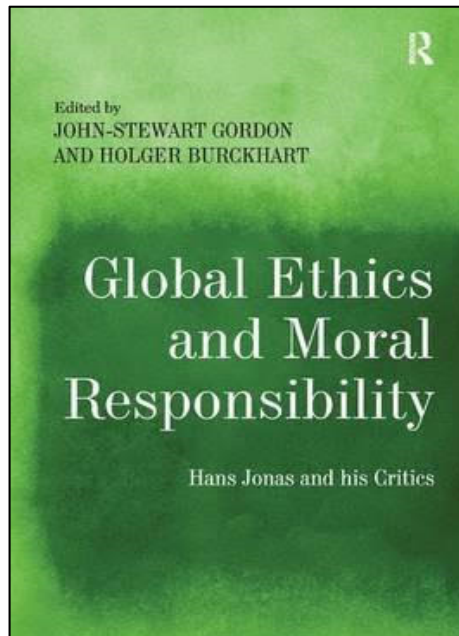


Book Review

**John-Stewart Gordon and Holger Burckhart (editors),
*Global Ethics and Moral Responsibility. Hans Jonas and his
Critics*, Burckhart, Ashgate, United Kingdom, 2014**



The volume *Global Ethics and Moral responsibility* includes eleven articles – some already published as independent papers. The opening essay belongs to Hans Jonas to whom this anthology is dedicated. As the editors' intent is to devote the influence of the German-Jewish philosopher's work on the debates between 1980 and 1990 regarding the responsibility in the context of the risk societies. The volume has four chapters, emphasizing a different dimension of the Hans Jonas' thinking – starting with his own philosophy, next chapters propose an applied approach on Jonas' work by debating topics like: the connection between the human nature and the imperative of responsibility; ethics and natural philosophy; the ethics of technology and moral responsibility. At a first glance upon this anthology, it will bring into our attention the plurality of the applied approaches on the Hans Jonas's philosophy. Therefore, the following paragraphs will give an insight about the focus of each paper in the present volume.

We still have to mention the most important work of the thinker, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung – Prinzip einer Ethik für eine technologische Zivilisation*. Its impact is due to taking into discussion the dangers of the rapid progress of the technology with possible negative consequences on the humanity and nature, aspects that represent a particular importance for the actual debates. Jonas focused on the ethical issues brought by the rapid progress of technology through the cumulative aspects of factors such as: global exploitation of natural resources, deforestation, the use of nuclear energy and the possibility of accidents, energy consumption, global warming, biotechnologies, the explosion and population aging, the decline of biodiversity. All these aspects, in their beginnings, seemed to have insignificant negative effects. However, when the consequences become significant, redeeming the situation involves signified costs, if this is still possible.

The first section of the volume focuses on the philosopher's fundamental concerns: ethical aspects of a future full of dangers. The ethical principle and possible dangers are presented in the opening article of Hans Jonas "*Responsibility Today: The Ethics of an Endangered Future*" (1979). The author's approach on this problem emphasizes not only the human's biological preservation who is ready to sacrifice the entire nature for his own supposed needs, but also the idea of maintaining the dignity of the human being. Caring for nature is a part of the humanistic duty. However, due to the technological progress, the present projects us in an apocalyptic context in which both nature and humankind must be protected by man. The management of this kind of context may come with one of the two political ideologies existent at Jonas' times. Living in an apocalyptic situation that create the context for deprivation of freedom and control over nature and man, leading to a superimposition of third degree of limiting powers: the Baconian ideal of power over nature through knowledge that subjugates man, instead of giving the hope of liberation. This perspective concerns the political imposition of social discipline, as in the case of Marxist socialism with the equal distribution of goods, rather than their concentration in the hands of a few. For a release from this destructive tension created, Hans Jonas proposes a principle contrary to the Cartesian doubt for the decision-making process: taking every possibility as a certainty for future decisions. It is man's duty to exist and there is no right to suicide for anyone. Because of this reason, some possible experiments through technology are forbidden: "Never must the existence or the essence of man as a whole be made a stake in the hazards of action" (p. 19). Decisions must be made by taking into account their possible consequences. Or, the existence in the future of human beings, who depend on procreation, impose the specific duties on today's people. The individual's interests cannot endanger the future existence of the others. The chapter is continued by the article – "*Moral Responsibility for the preservation of Humankind*" by Walter A. Weisskopf, an exegetical work on Hans Jonas' thinking,

explaining and analyzing the ideas found in the first article of the volume. The first section is closed by the Holger Burckhart's paper "*Ethics of responsibility: Discourse-ethical perspective of the Justification Problem*". Here is explained the potential of Hans Jonas' vision in providing an ethical theory valid for the actual context, but whose applicability, according to the author's considerations, is limited to the ontological-metaphysical perspective on the responsibility. However, it is noted that the philosopher's theory provides us an ethic of universal co-responsibility at the dialogical and discursive level, "We are constantly co-responsible for this dimension of the current and future biological, socio-ecological and economic environment." (p. 50)

The second chapter is closer to the actual bioethical issues, the authors giving an applicative character to the naturalist thinking of Hans Jonas. Therefore, in Lawrence Vogel's article "*Is Ageing a Gift? Bioconservatorism and the Ethics of Gratitude*" it addresses the ethical issues of the posthumanist era, when the biotechnologies allow us to transcend the human boundaries: aging or mortality. The author starts from Hans Jonas' perspective on the human being as a psychosomatic whole. Thus, death is a blessing both as a common good and on the individual level. On the other hand, the responsibility towards future generations also takes into account the mortal character of the human being: "for the dying of the old makes room for the young" (p. 65). Nathalie Frogneux in "*Some Paradoxes Linked to Risk Moderation*", the second article of the section, analyzes Jonas' philosophical speech by highlighting the paradoxes of his philosophy in relation to the actual circumstances. The aim of his speech about the small biotechnical catastrophes was that, by observing and becoming aware about his impact on the ecosystem's stability, the man can change his attitude. Human experimentation is one of the aspects in which the principle of precaution and responsibility regarding the next generations can be engaged in developing an answer to the question: "Can certain individuals be sacrificed in the name of a common good?" (p. 85). In this context, the humanity is not in a competitive relationship with the future generations, but it forms a continuum in which those generations are partially contemporary. Thus, the perspective proposed by Hans Jonas has a role, fully assumed by the thinker himself, of warning and motivating for the action. The section ends with an article of the editors Holger Burckhart and John-Stewart Gordon, "*Inclusion – a Moral Imperative, but Also Socially Desired? An Essay in the Ethics of Responsibility*" where are mentioned some moments in the evolution of the philosophical discourse that bring rationality as justification for exclusion. Therefore, it is highlighted that the persons with mental disorders are not referred as subjects in the ethical debate, but as "objects" or as "arguments". The authors evoke, on this topic, the Jonas's conception of responsibility, arguing the inclusion of the persons with mental disorders as passive participants in the ethical speech.

The third section of the volume, unlike the others, has only one article "*God in the World of Man: Hans Jonas' Philosophy of Religion*" signed by Michael Bongardt. The author presents the philosopher's report to some religious and philosophical topics, assuming the premise that: "He questioned religious texts according to their philosophical content, but also examined philosophical texts in terms of their hidden metaphysical premises and allusions." (p. 105) In order to argue his position regarding the apocalyptic possibilities of human actions, Jonas "regarded a religion committed to life as a welcome ally." (p. 123)

The article of Micha H. Werner "*What is Natural about Natural Functioning? Examining an Indirect Argument in Favor of Teleological Naturalism*" opens the last chapter by taking in debate the (meta-) ethical vision of Hans Jonas called *teleological naturalism*. This approach can be applied even in the construction of a philosophical interpretation of the medical practice. "After all, Jonas suggests that the 'living human organism' itself has *intrinsic goals* and the physician have the *duty* to help the organism in attaining these goals" (p. 133). These are not given instantly, but the goals are constituted by the way of seeing nature and individuals as biological organisms, through a deliberative process. In consequence they could not be the independent basis of values or normativity. In "*Ethics for the Technoscific Age: On Hans Jonas' Argumentation and His Public Philosophy Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries*", Jan C Schmidt talks about Jonas' interest not only in creating a pure academically philosophical speech, but taking serious the technological reality and engaging his philosophy in shaping the perception of this problem and in the methods of solving it: "Ethics serves to improve praxis; it is praxis in the original sense" (p. 161). The following article, "*Ethics and Responsibility in a Technological Age*", belongs to David J. Levy who highlights the reference work of Hans Jonas – *The Imperative of Responsibility: In search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (1984 – describing it as being not just "profoundly moral in seeking to respond, rightly, to the troubles of his age, but also that it integrates the diversity of his concerns in a single, unified philosophical project that is both inclusive and coherent" (p. 172). The final work of this chapter and, in the same time, of the volume, "*Refined Marxism and Moral Enhancement*", belongs to John-Stewart Gordon. The publisher present the philosopher's non-utopian perspective on the Marxism, "the real executor of Bacon's ideal" (p. 191), as the 'preventer of the disasters' where the goal is not anymore an abundant way of living, in accord with the personal needs, in a communist classless society. From this perspective, the goal is, therefore, found in "restraining its exploitative and reckless use of modern technology regarding nature; 'for one can live without the supreme good, but not with the supreme evil' (Jonas 1976, 92)." (p. 187). Marxism, in Jonas' reinterpretation, proves to have higher potential than Capitalism in an attempt to prevent a disaster. It is

about a global power that redistributes the resources, imposing certain austerity measures and diminishing exploitation, prudent technological development and reduction of use and development of those potentially dangerous technologies. Despite all of the mentioned methods, the one that could really prevent the disaster is the moral enhancement of the mankind. For attaining this objective, both biomedical and traditional methods could be used. Even if Jonas is against the alteration of the human nature, he admits that the imminence of global destruction is due to its shortcomings. In his view, this intervention would be against God, nature itself and it would undermine human dignity and rights. Nevertheless, the editor believes that Jonas would accept the use of the biotechnology “to calm down aggressive human nature once there was a safe and successful way of achieving the goal(s) of moral enhancement” (p. 206).

Hans Jonas’ ethical approach established the principle of responsibility and of prudence, taking into account the care for future generation and respect for the human essence, as well as for the nature, to which human existence is dependent. Therefore, the thinker is concerned with both ecological aspects and the use of biomedical technologies. Beyond the ontological-metaphysical understanding, rejected by many of his exegetes, assuming the co-responsibility attitude can contribute to a significant improvement of the debates and speeches on (bio)ethical topics. Or, this is precisely one of the aspects the *Global Ethics and Moral Responsibility* volume manages to bring to attention: the applied approach on Jonas’s ethical perspective gets a better understanding on the impact of his work in the last decade’s debates on the ethical aspects involved by the responsibility of living in a risk society.

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