

Hans Jonas: Responsibility for the Biosphere

“The principle, that a world suitable for human habitation should be preserved for all future times, is widely acknowledged as a general axiom.”

(Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung – Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Frankfurt/Main 1984, p. 33)

“Concretely, it is Hans Jonas who brings the notion of a global ethic to the point, for he extends responsibility to include the whole biosphere and the whole future of mankind. We shall only be able successfully to live together, when we include the future generations in our community, which means that we must pass on to them an inhabitable planet. The German-American philosopher Hans Jonas, who was born in Mönchengladbach in 1903 and died in New York in 1993, came forward as one of the century’s most important admonishers, calling attention to the worldwide dangers of environmental destruction and modern technology. With his book *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (1979; *The imperative of responsibility*, 1984), he undertook what amounts to the most wide-reaching essay to date – so the subtitle – *In search of an ethics for the technological age.*”¹

“Because the outreach of human action has so dramatically expanded in our times, Hans Jonas calls for a profound reorientation of ethics, in effect, he calls for a new ethic that abandons the anthropocentric standpoint that has been adopted by all ethical systems since the Sophists. When technological possibilities make possible the complete destruction of all living things on this planet, then it is imperative to preserve the biosphere, for its own sake indeed, as also for the sake of mankind, though no longer solely on anthropocentric grounds. In this way, the responsibility of mankind extends to include nature as a whole. ‘At the very least, it is no longer meaningless to ask whether the wellbeing of non-human nature – the biosphere as a whole and in all its parts, which has now come within our power to influence – has not in effect become a trust for mankind, something that lays a moral claim on us – not for our sake, but for its own sake and in its own right?’²

¹ Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann, *Weltethos in philosophischer Perspektive*, Munich 2008, p. 118.

² Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung – Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Frankfurt/Main 1984, p. 29.

Till now, man has always stood at the centre of ethics. Man was permitted to dominate nature as best he could. This led to an extremely threatening situation. No longer – so Jonas – should man regard himself as the only measure of his actions. In this way, it will be possible to overcome the anthropocentric standpoint that has hitherto prevailed in ethics.”³

“Does Jonas then teach us to cooperate under pluralistic conditions? Not exactly. Not through his diverse attempts to ground his principle of responsibility and not through his concentration on the state and the statesman in a time when, in view of the numerous processes of individualization, one can hardly dispense with civil society and thus cannot get along without responsibility being taken by all persons. Likewise not alone by the fact that the dangerous developments of modern technologies and the destruction of the environment increasingly attract attention.

Nonetheless, Jonas has not just put his stamp on environmental awareness. Especially with his basic principle – that, in view of the increasing spread of modern civilization, we become responsible not only for our contemporaries but also for future generations and for the future of nature on our planet –, he has helped lay the groundwork for a global ethic worthy of the name and has expanded the notion of responsibility to include important new dimensions. Nevertheless, responsibility, as Sartre and Lévinas have shown, cannot be restricted to leading politicians and to government institutions; it involves all persons individually. Only when this is taken into account will it truly merit the name global ethic.

On the other hand, Jonas has transformed Nietzsche’s proposition that ‘God is dead’ into the assertion ‘God is distant’, so distant that in the clash of civilizations one cannot impose one’s own notion of God and one’s own set of values as an argument upon persons with other worldviews. To do so does not lead to peace; but instead it sharpens the diverse social and global conflicts.”⁴

³ Schönherr-Mann, *Weltethos in philosophischer Perspektive*, p. 120.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.