

Questions to Professor William R. LaFleur's "Peripheralized in America: Hans Jonas as Philosopher and Bioethicist"

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I am very grateful to you, Professor LaFleur, for your illuminating lecture. You make it clear how Hans Jonas have been received and understood in USA. When I read Leon Kass' article "Appreciating *Phenomen of Life*" in *the Legacy of Hans Jonas*, the Special Issue of Hastings Center Report (1) and his book *Beyond Therapy* (2), I was afraid that his praise of Jonas might possibly hamper a right respect for Jonas: Kass' argument seems to be religious and political rather than a logical foundation. I am pleased about your reference to Kass, because my suspicion would be endorsed by it. You also pick flaw in the one-sidedness of Wolin's interpretation of Jonas as one of Heidegger's children and show that this image could keep Jewish bioethicists in USA away from studying him. Your interpretation is a precious clue to solve why the honor due to him has not been given in America. I believe that "Heidegger and Theology"(3), a lecture he gave in 1964, should be more read. It should be now read again especially under the progress since 1980s of study about Heidegger's cooperation with Nazism.

However, it is partly due to Jonas himself that he has been peripherized. I shall raise three questions, which do not aim to criticize him, but to get a more consistent interpretation of his ethics and philosophy. At first, you focus on his contribution to bioethics and show that his "deep admiration for the ethical stance of the ancient Jewish prophet" lies in the background of his argument on brain death. So I would like to ask what we should find the ground of his bioethical arguments and how we should connect it with a, if any, consistent interpretation of his whole texts. Secondly, although I believe that his philosophy of life or organism after the World War II was prompted by his alienation from his Doktor-Vater Heidegger, a question remains yet: how should we deal with his ongoing commitment to ontology? Thirdly, what are the difference and the (possible) connection between him and Habermas, whose book is

referred by you today?

First. You point out that Jonas had a deep admiration for the role of Jewish prophet. I agree. Man could find him as a prophet in his warning to the global crisis of ecosystem in *the Imperative of Responsibility* (4) and the pamphlet, "Unsere Teilnahme an diesem Kriege. Ein Wort an jüdische Männer" ("Our commitment in this war: A word to Jewish men") (5), which he wrote in 1939 to advocate for participating in the war against Nazi-Germany. In fact, he himself cites a comment for him of an old woman, one of his mother's friends, in his biography, "Ihr Sohn hat recht gehabt, der war der wahre Prophet." ("Your son was right. He was the true prophet.") (6). Her remark arose from his swift reaction to the peril lurked in Nazism. If it is possible, however, that his argument of brain death is connected with the Jewish tradition, what Jewish norms did he appeal to as the substantial grounds for it besides the admiration for Jewish prophet? Israel was late in adopting brain death as the definition of death. It was naturally influenced by Judaism. Could Jonas, however, appeal to it as a philosopher, e.g. a philosopher who had a tension of being at once philosopher and Jewish" (7) ?

Where does man find the grounds for his bioethical arguments? Many of his articles on bioethics are included in the book *Technik, Medizin und Ethik (Technology, Medicine, and Ethics)*, the subtitle of which is *Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung (Practice of the Imperative of Responsibility)* (8). But it is not so clear to see the logical relation between his bioethical arguments and the principle of responsibility. Therefore some critics such as Paolo Becchi, a legal philosopher in Italy, interpret that it is enough to appeal to Kantian principle, e.g. the idea of human dignity, for the foundation for Jonas' arguments on bioethics without referring to his ontology (9). Although I cannot assure that his arguments have nothing to do with his ontology nor with his theology (10), it remains several questions. How is his contribution to bioethics, which evolved between *the Phenomen of Life* (11) and *the Imperative of Responsibility*, related to his philosophy of life or organism, in which he finds teleology in life? How is it related to his principle of responsibility, which advocates the responsibility of present generation for survival of future generation and ecosystems,

because the former has the power capable to annihilate the latter? Or should we conclude that his arguments are founded on ad-hoc grounds?

Second. My interpretation of his intellectual life is thus (12). At first, he found something in common between Gnoticism and modern existential philosophy: it is alienation of human being from the cosmos or nature (as shown in Pascal's idea of solitude of human being in the universe and in Heidegger's idea of thrownness, e.g. *Geworfenheit*). But after his farewell from Heidegger who contributed to Nazism, he endeavored to establish a philosophy contrary to Gnoticism and Heidegger. It was the philosophy of life or organism. Its purpose consisted in finding norms in nature. It requires that the ends inherent to nature should be respected. The principle of responsibility is supported on the one hand by this idea and on the other hand by the specific nature of human being as the only possible subject of responsibility. Closely before his death, he wrote about the God who created the cosmos or nature and does no longer interfere in it in favor of autonomy of the creature and he called our attention to the responsibility of mankind because of its power to transform nature.

It is very precise that you, Professor LaFleur, points out the one-sidedness of Wolin's interpretation of Jonas. However, Jonas also seeks the ethic by which "even the last one of a dying mankind could abide in his last solitude." ("noch der Letzte einer sterbenden Menschheit ... in seiner letzten Einsamkeit die Treue halten könnte") (13) and does not, therefore, appeal to the consensus among people, but to ontology in order to found his ethical theory. A serious aporia followed from it is that man might deal Auschwitz as well as the global crisis of ecosystem under the same ontological or theological argument. The suspicion is supported by the structural and substantial affinity between his two articles, e.g. "Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz" ("the concept of God after Auschwitz") und "Materie, Geist, und Schöpfung" ("Material, spirit, and creation") (14). Christian Wiese describes in this way too (15). Although I place trust in him as one of the biographers of Jonas, I do not agree him in this point. This interpretation might bring Jonas, however, into the same failure as Heidegger, who explicated totalitarianism and technology under the same idea of "Gestell" or "Geschick (the fate of the times). On the other hand, we can also find a distinguishing

claim of Jonas from Heidegger in his texts: “Man: the shepherd of being – not, mind you, of beings! ... it is hard to hear man hailed as the shepherd of being when he has just so dismally failed to be his brother’s keeper.” (16) Sticking fast to this position requires to pursue who are responsible to Auschwitz and the global crisis of ecosystem respectively, and how responsible as well as how much. (17) But it leads us to interpret Jonas’ whole argument under the principle of responsibility (established among human beings) rather than under his ontology. Needless to say, we already find these two principles in Jonas, but this interpretation is not necessarily justified in the ambiguity of Jonas’ texts. So we would have to discern between the one we can succeed and the one we had better give up in his arguments. I think that it is necessary to avoid the interpretation that would only take Jonas for one of Heidegger’s children. How do you, Professor LaFleur, think about this?

Third. I am encouraged by your description, “There are hints of a change in process. The degree to which Habermas is citing Jonas may eventually even has an impact in America.” At once we find the hint of change of Habermas himself in his book *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur. Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?* (*The Future of human nature*). I refer to his appeal to the idea of “dignity of human life” as well as “human dignity”. Human dignity is advocated by discourse ethics and Kant, one of ancestor of it – because the communication community is no other than the kingdom of ends itself after the linguistic turn of philosophy. But we can hardly assume that they can support the idea of dignity of human life at once. Habermas, however, has gone forward to this point. The reason for it is, I think, that he acknowledges that defending dignity of person requires defending the natural base for existence of person, e.g. its body. (18) He cites in his book, therefore, Jonas, and Robert Spaemann (whose background is Catholicism). It sounds strange, because a discourse ethical theorist such as Habermas thinks that in a multi-cultural society it is futile for foundation of moral to refer to a specific metaphysics or ontology. In fact Jonas’ commitment to ontology has been repeatedly accused by discourse ethical theorists. (19)

What does Habermas adopt from Jonas? He only cites from Jonas’ article on cloning.

Habermas argues that it is not allowed to interfere in the genome so long as it violates the authorship of person developed from the embryo, because everyone should make up her life under her autonomy. (20) It corresponds to Jonas' description of the life of each individual as "das Neue" (the new). (21) However, the reason for Habermas' argument is to make sure the authenticity of all members of communication community, while the reason for Jonas' argument might be that he acknowledges a form (eidos) in each individual organism. It is perhaps better to emphasize the affinity between Jonas and Arendt's idea of natality (which Habermas also cites), the significance of birth as arrival of a totally new human being. If so, we might seek the Jewish background of this idea, including Levinas' concept of children as forthcoming one of the third person.

But the difference between Habermas and Jonas remains. I once classified the four types of reception of Jonas. (22) At first, some esteem him including his ontology: for example, Spaemann, Löw, and Höhle etc. (23) Secondly, some substitute the other (for example, Kantian) foundation for his ontology and are interested in his warnings in bioethics and environmental ethics: for example, Becchi and Lenk etc. (24) Thirdly, some accuse his ontological foundation, although being interested in his future ethics: for example, discourse ethical theorists (25). At last, my stance is to make contrast between the orthodox theories of modern ethics based on the reciprocal relation or the norms such as justice and rights and Jonas who found his ethics upon the asymmetrical relation of power or the norm of responsibility. But under this classification, some aspects of Jonas such as researcher of Gnosticism or theological thinker fade away, while other aspects such as his principle of responsibility and his philosophy of life or ontology are focused on.

Professor LaFleur, you repeatedly refer to the relation between Jonas and the Jewish tradition. Which aspects of him would you like to evaluate positively? And why? This is my last question.

Notes

(1) Leon R. Kass, "Appreciating Phenomenon of Life", in *the Legacy of Hans Jonas*, *Hastings Center Report*, vol.25, n.7, 1995, pp.3-12

- (2) Leon R. Kass, *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness, A Report of the President's Council on Bioethics*, Dana Press, 2003
- (3) Hans Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology", in *the Review of Metaphysics*, vol. XVIII, no.2, 1964.
- (4) Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Suhrkamp, 1979
- (5) Hans Jonas, *Erinnerungen*, Insel Verlag, 2003, S.186-S.199
- (6) *ibid.* S.73
- (7) Herlinde Koelbl (ed.), *Jüdische Portraits: Photographien und Interviews von Herlinde Koelbl*, S. Fisher, 1989, S.123. [Jonas said in this interview, „Dass man zusammen Philosoph und Jude ist – darin liegt eine gewisse Spannung.“ (That man at once philosopher and Jewish – there is a certain tension in it.)
- (8) Hans Jonas, *Technik, Medizin und Ethik. Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung*, Suhrkamp, 1987
- (9) Paolo Becchi, "Theorie und Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung bei Hans Jonas", the manuscript for the lecture at Shibaura Kougyou Daigaku in Tokyo on October 31 2004
- (10) Tetsuhiko Shinagawa, *What borders Justice; the principle of responsibility and the ethic of care*, (in Japanese) Nakanishiya shuppa, 2007, pp.121-127
- (11) Hans Jonas, *The Phenomen of Life. Toward a philosophical Biology*, Northwestern University Press, 2001
- (12) Tetsuhiko Shinagawa, "Hans Jonas concept of God after Auschwitz (1): being at once Jewish and philosopher", (in Japanese) in *Essays and Papers*, vol.58, no.2, Kansai Daigaku Bungakukai, 2008, pp.1-23
- (13) Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Leben. Ansätze zu einer philosophischen Biologie*, Suhrkamp, 1997, S.403
- (14) Hans Jonas, "Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz" und "Materie, Geist, und Schöpfung", in *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen*, Insel Verlag, 1992 (These articles will be translated into Japanese by Tetsuhiko Shinagawa and be published under the title of Auschwitz igo no kami (*Der Gott nach Auschwitz*) by Housei University Press in 2009.)

- (15) Christian Wiese, "Nachwort", in Hans Jonas, *Erinnerungen*, Insel Verlag, 2003, S.422.
- (16) Hans Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology", p.229
- (17) Tetsuhiko Shinagawa, "Hans Jonas concept of God after Auschwitz (2): non-omnipotent God and human responsibility", (in Japanese) in *Essays and Papers*, vol.58, no.4, Kansai Daigaku Bungakukai, 2008, pp.1-24,
- (18) Tetsuhiko Shinagawa *What borders Justice; the principle of responsibility and the ethic of care*, p.90, pp.107-108
- (19) *ibid.* chap. 2, 5 and 6
- (20) Jürgen Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur. Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?*, Suhrkamp, 2002, S.103
- (21) Hans Jonas, "Lasst uns einen Menschen klonieren", in *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen* S.188
- (22) Tetsuhiko Shinagawa *What borders Justice; the principle of responsibility and the ethic of care*, chapter 6
- (23) Robert Spaemann und Reinhold Löw, *Natürliche Ziele. Geschichte und Wiederentdeckung des teleologischen Denkens*, Klett-Cotta, 2005: Vittorio Hösle, „Ontologie und Ethik“, in *Ethik für die Zukunft. Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas*, Dietrich Böhler (hrsg.), Verlag C.H. Beck, 1994, derselben, „Zum Verhältnis von Metaphysik des Lebendigen und allgemeine Metaphysik. Betrachtungen in kritischen Anschluss an Schopenhauer“, in *Herausforderungen und Möglichkeiten*, Hösle (hrsg.) Frommann-Holzboog Verlag, 2002
- (24) Hans Lenk, „Macht und Verantwortung“, in *Ethik für die Zukunft. Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas.*
- (25) Karl-Otto Apel, „Die ökologische Krisis als Herausforderung für Diskursethik“, in *Ethik für die Zukunft. Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas*: Holger Burckhart, „Überwindung der metaphysisch-heuristischen Grundlegung der Verantwortungsethik bei Hans Jonas“, in *Gendai no seimeikan to sizenkan ni taisuru tetugakuteki rinrigakuteki saikentou (A Philosophical and ethical rethinking of the concepts of life and nature in the present)*, Akihiro Sakai (ed.), Hokkaidou University, 2002: Wolfgang

Kuhlmann, „Prinzip Verantwortung versus Diskursethik“, in *Ethik für die Zukunft. Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas*: Micha H. Werner, „Dimension der Verantwortung: Ein Werkstattbericht zur Zukunftsethik von Hans Jonas“, in demselben.