

Nature, Environment, and Human Being: Hans Jonas on the Principle of Responsibility¹

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1 Nature as Environment

A kind of tension is included in the theme "Nature as Environment", on which we hold this symposium today. While the idea of nature means the universe including everything and is therefore never relativistic, the idea of environment presupposes an entity which stands at the center of it. We call this entity a subject of environment. Environment is only the perspective of its subject. The former is a piece of nature cut down relative to the interest of the latter. Uexküll, a biologist who produced the idea of environment (Umwelt), describes how the environment of mites is shrunk according to the needs for their survival (1). The environment of human beings as living things is no more than a more or less shrunk piece of nature.

We, human beings, however, get a possibility to regard the whole nature as our environment. When since 1920s philosophical anthropology has begun to recapture scientific knowledge of human beings as living things into philosophy, the idea of environment has not only belonged to biology, but also to philosophy. Plessner, one of founders of philosophical anthropology, asserts that the specific nature of human beings consists in their capacity of detaching themselves from their bodies. Plessner called this characteristic excentricity. Human beings can objectify their bodies, their environment around them, and the relation between it and themselves (2). Scheler also points out the same condition expressing that human being is opened to the world (3).

The capacity to objectify the own environment leads to the capacity to operate and arrange it voluntarily. The arrangement of it by means of sciences and technology by human beings is going ahead globally and is eventually changing the form of life irreversibly. It has become real that the whole nature is regarded as the environment of human beings interactive to their activities.

Yet the environment of human beings overlaps ones of other living beings because of

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the unity of the nature. The arrangement of environment by human beings cannot but influence the survival of each species, which have its own environment as subject. Therefore an ethical problem occurs if the subject in question should be respected. Now what do we think should be respected? After all, is the destruction of environment wrong because it harms human beings? Or is it wrong because it harms all subjects of environment besides human beings? If you prefer the former question to the latter, you would support anthropocentrism, while if otherwise, you would support non-anthropocentrism or biocentrism.

Leopold's land ethic and Naess' deep ecology appeal to biocentrism. They assert that ecosystem is maintained by interdependence of various kinds of living things. Therefore not only mankind but also any species of living thing should be equally respected as an essential member of the ecosystem and the varieties as well as symbiosis of various kinds of species should be defended.

Anthropocentrism criticizes biocentrism. At first, a transcendent criticism is that human beings are originally anti-natural entities. Or pursuing long-range interest of human beings, they can defend the existence of various kinds of living things and their environments effectively (7). One type of this argument is called stewardship environmental ethic, because it regards human beings as the steward whom the God the nature to (8). Secondly comes an immanent criticism: we are compelled to discard biocentrism and think anthropocentrically. The reason is that only human beings can take over the moral task, although biocentrism recognizes human beings and other living things equally as a member of moral community (9) (10).

But this immanent criticism commits an error, because it fails to distinguish human beings as subjects of interest from ones as moral agents. For it is not excluded in principle that human beings as moral agents may choose the norms of action against their interest (11). The point of issue of biocentrism does not consisted in it, but rather in the failure to recognize the specific status of human beings as moral agents because it emphasizes the equality of mankind and other species from the moral point of view. It can no longer take a symmetrical position to other living things because it has gotten the capacity to arrange its environment. So mankind should be possibly accused relative to its capacity.

Should we then support anthropocentrism? But can the interest and desire of human beings be entitled to be the ground of ethic? This is criticized by biocentrism. Biocentrism itself, however, may be criticized likewise, so long as it only enlarges the scope of subject of interest to cover non-human living things. Indeed they may desire to continue their lives. But if we say "Protect ecosystem, if you desire to go on to live",

this imperative does not rely -- a la Kant -- on morality, but on cleverness. Therefore if the survival of mankind and the existence of life or nature should be respected from the authentic ethical point of view, other grounds will be required than the desire of human beings (anthropocentrism) or the desire of living things (biocentrism).

Can cultural regionalism produce good grounds? The idea of environment is combined with regional specialty because of its original meaning of 'surroundings'. One of claims of deep ecology is to maintain the specialty of each region so that man could preserve the variety of ecosystem in the whole nature. Further the nature in a given region is closely intertwined with the life of human beings there. We can read Watuji's philosophy of Fudo (milieu) as an approach to defend both nature and culture because of their unfolded intertwinement. After Watuji has dwelled on the condition of the milieu of Japan, he advocates the love for Japanese milieu suddenly (12). Here Tosaka finds Watuji's disgust at Marxism's day in the beginnings of the Showa period in Japan (13). But it is plausible that Watuji is to go on for such a love after all, because he emphasizes norms appropriate to the specialty of the milieu. Nonetheless he would not claim cultural relativism. The reason is that he regards the specialty of milieu as expression of the generality of humanity. Thus the arguments for specialty of the regional environment presuppose doubtlessly the existence of the whole nature and the survival of mankind. Yet should not even this presupposition be founded at first?

The foundation of survival of mankind and existence of nature -- these two commands seem to be extravagant and indifferent to each other. However so long as human beings can objectify the nature as their environment, it is up to human freedom whether it will be destroyed or conserved and, accordingly, whether mankind will perish or not. Therefore the foundation of mankind and the existence of nature or life are most fundamental and are yoked to each other. By the way the permissibility of perishment of mankind has already been questioned in philosophy. This question appeared in a field of vision, when Kant inquired about permissibility of suicide in the light of the general moral law.

Now I will take up Hans Jonas' *Principle of Responsibility* which investigated the foundation of survival of mankind and existence of nature. (The numbers mentioned in [] indicate the page of references cited from Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 1984.)

2 Hans Jonas' *Principle of Responsibility*

Ethics has dealt with action on the basis of face-to-face relation. And it has expected

that the good for the present human generations would be also applied to the future ones. Therefore its scope does not go beyond the present, even if it could acquire universal validity among the present moral agents. Owing to sciences and technology, however, human activities can influence the far future and threaten to alter the global environment irreversibly. It is Jonas' principle of responsibility that evolves a forthcoming ethic considering the influence of human activities upon future and the whole nature [224-226].

Entities which we can be responsible for meet the following three conditions [166, 175]. At first the entities does not belong to me. Secondly they are threatened to vanish in time, i.e. they are vulnerable. Thirdly it relies upon my power whether they will continue to be or vanish actually. Now we should bear two points in mind. (i) Jonas' concept of responsibility means one for the continued existence, i.e. future, while man usually applies the concept only to our previous action. (ii) His concept of responsibility is based upon asymmetry of power so that it is established in unequal and nonreciprocal relations as contrast with the concepts of justice and right.

Jonas finds the paradigm of responsibility in one for newborns [235]. Only breathing, they impose irrefutably obligations to care for them upon us. Why should we care for them? We do not always love them. The reason is not that they have potentiality to be person afterwards. Some bioethicists such as Tooley disclaim the right to live of newborn (14). But, according to Jonas, we do not see newborns, so long as we see them as aggregate of cells. "*Ihn* [Säugling] bekommt der analytische Blick des mathematischen Physikers gar nicht zu Gesicht, sondern mit Absicht nur einen äußersten Rand seine im übrigen abgeblendeten Wirklichkeit. Und selbstverständlich verlangt noch die hellste Sichtbarkeit den Gebrauch des Sehvermögens, für das sie da ist. An dieses richtete sich unser » Sieh hin und du weißt « "[236]. If I do not care for the newborn, what will happen upon it? [391]. This feeling imposes responsibility for it upon me.

However I could reject to care for it. Jonas deliberately did not say 'irresistibly', but 'irrefutably'. Indeed human beings feel responsibility, but they do not necessarily fulfill it. Even if they fail to do it, they are nevertheless ethical beings, because they do aware of responsibility. The foundation of moral is found no other than here. The reason for human beings to continue to be does neither lie in human desire nor in right to live nor in reason: it lies simply in the idea of human beings as foundation of ethics. They are always and already responsible and at once it is not settled yet whether they fulfill their responsibility in fact. This temporal structure of "being already and not yet" accompanies with the idea of human beings forever. Jonas

vehemently rejects the utopian thought which expects the arrival of ideal human beings without this ambiguity.

However ecological crisis owing to human beings threatens the continued existence of mankind no less than one of the other living creatures. Jonas' argument is as follows: the continued existence of mankind is hardly sustained, if we reckon up the balance sheet whether it is delightful or awful for the whole world. Independent of the balance sheet, nevertheless, mankind should continue to be. The reason is that the first responsibility is for possibility for responsibility in general to be [186]. It is up to the present generation how man deals with ecological crisis. Because it has the existence of future generations in its hands, it is responsible for them.

Thus Jonas has established care for future, which is one of necessary conditions for a forthcoming ethic. But there is another condition for it: it should care for the nature. If man only realizes our description so far, man might possibly think that the nature should be respected as instrument for the continued existence of mankind. We must add Jonas' philosophy of nature which requires that the nature should be respected in itself.

Human action accompanies with intentional purpose. However purpose is found not only in conscious beings, but also in any function of organisms: for example, stomach has a function to digest. Each part of body contributes the purpose for the organism to live [130]. When has this ability to have purpose appeared in history? Has it appeared emergently from substances void of purpose by mutation and natural selection? Jonas does not adopt such an explanation. If we reduced to substances void of purpose, we would commit *assumptio non probata* because it must presuppose that there is originally no purpose in the nature. According to Jonas, we can infer that natural process ensures potentiality of existence of purpose from the obvious fact of appearance organism in the nature [136-138] (15).

Now the good is no other than fulfillment of purpose of purposeful entities [154]. Purpose requires that they should be what they are as realization of their purpose. It also commands the other entities not to prevent its realization [234]. Indeed purpose of one organism might have instrumental value, be neutral or against for other organisms. But while value is only relevant to a specific entity, the good is not relative [160]. If value for human beings were the good itself, the good would be created by human intention so that it could not restrict human will. Jonas supposed in the nature the good itself which does not rely on evaluation by human beings. Independent of human desire, therefore, he could establish the responsibility which requires that human beings should abstain from preventing purposes of other species,

which are threatened by human will and power [185, 232].

I have summarized Jonas' principle of responsibility and his philosophy of nature so far [245-246] (16). Contrary to anthropocentrism, he does not justify human desire. And contrary to biocentrism, he makes clear the special status of human beings as moral agents belonging to the nature. Could we now get a forthcoming ethic which is fully founded upon the principle of responsibility? However Jonas has been criticized by discourse ethics, which is very keen of the problem of foundation. Let us deal with this criticism at last.

3 The criticism upon Jonas by discourse ethics

Proponents of discourse ethics claim the deficiency of Jonas' foundation, because it only appeals to intuition. Jonas refers to the situation of newborns as paradigm of responsibility and claims "See, then you know it." How could he deal with someone who does not feel responsibility to care for it at all? Jonas cannot but shut out refutation, as Hume finished his argument against the people who denied sympathy. On the contrary, discourse ethics claims that it can deal with such a refutation. A community of communication has been already constructed by responsible agents. It is the necessary presupposition which man could not go far beyond, because we cannot but appeal to this community whenever we would claim the recognition and possible acceptance of our arguments. In the community it would be discussed whether the responsibility for newborns should be established. Once it had been established in the process of discourse, someone who discards his responsibility would be in conflict between himself and the consensus which he had participated in. This performative self-contradiction argument compels him to fulfill his obligation. On the contrary, in the principle of responsibility someone who cannot 'see' his obligation to care for the newborn cannot be compelled to fulfill it. As Werner points it out, there is no court of instance where the moral agent should be questioned no other than his intuition towards objects he might be responsible for (17).

Discourse ethics approves Jonas' appeal to continue the existence of mankind and to care for environment. According to discourse ethics, community of communication is the foundation of ethics. Following generations of mankind must be commanded, because they are to be forthcoming members of the community of communication and it should be ensured. Care for environment is a necessary condition for it. And if someone argues for care for nature now, his chance for it is ensured by discourse ethics, because community of communication should be open to any argument. Therefore the conflict between discourse ethics and Jonas does not consist in the

conclusion, but in the problem of foundation.

However I dare to say that Jonas has not only brought an intuitionist foundation. His argument could be based on referring to so-called performative self-contradiction. Jonas' question does not lie in a factual problem whether mankind can continue to be, but an ethical problem whether it should do so. If man gave a negative answer to it, man would deny the basis of ethics on which the question "should / should not" could be raised: the negative answer would make the question as such nonsense. Thus we must give the answer that mankind should continue to be. Therefore the existence of responsibility is inevitably derived as the first responsibility.

But this type of argument appealing to performative self-contradiction can be applied only to the approval of continued existence of mankind. It does not prescribe what we should do to ensure to make mankind continue. Our actual activities would be morally judged in community of communication and members of it would be committed to the discourse. As told above, Jonas' foundation is void of such efficiency. Therefore it cannot give us a concrete diagnose. This is also criticized by discourse ethics.

Man should not, however, fail to be aware that the continued existence of mankind in the principle of responsibility corresponds to one of community of communication in discourse ethics. The principle of responsibility builds up the base on which any ethic can be established and makes sure our ethical attitude i.e. our ethical being above all. According to discourse ethics, it would require to establish community of communication. Which principle precedes in order to be ethical, the principle of responsibility or the principle of justice on which discourse ethics is based? Each party would give different answer. But man should have it in mind: In discourse ethics man *calls and makes claim* (Anspruch) and *make a response to and is responsible for* (Verantwortung) the members who are equal because of their reason or ability to communicate, while responsibility derives from asymmetry of power in Jonas. Therefore discourse ethics cast a doubt on the responsibility in Jonas' sense, because it is sometimes called forth when man need not to respond, i.e. supererogation (18). However the responsibility in such a sense makes us respond just to call from other entities than us.

Now my argument which might be against the criticism from discourse ethics has focused upon the continued existence of mankind so far. It might possibly mislead readers to recapture the issue into affairs of human beings. Now I must refer to the other aspect of Jonas i.e. his philosophy of nature again.

However even proponents of Jonas would hesitate to abide by it. Could man conclude

that purpose exists objectively because life is not to be explained without purpose? When Apel says that Jonas' philosophy of nature is no other than dogmatism before Kant, this criticism is justified under the framework of modern philosophy after Kant (19). On the contrary, if we stand by Jonas, Kant seems to ascribe the obvious fact that organism is part of the nature because of its living body to the problem of human cognitive ability. Jonas' philosophy of nature has been also criticized repeatedly as naturalistic fallacy. On the contrary, according to Jonas, the modern philosophy is a version of ontology or metaphysics that abstracts purpose, value and norms from the nature [92]. However this refute would entail that Jonas' philosophy of nature is no less than an alternative or a version of metaphysics. By the way it should be referred that Jonas tried coherently to argue without appeal to God at least in the *Principle of Responsibility*, although it is natural that we expect his theological thought in the background [90].

Care for the nature except human beings, i.e. a necessary condition for the forthcoming ethic is derived from this philosophy of the nature. Many critics claim that care for the nature should be founded ethically against environmental crisis. But it is hardly accepted within the framework of the orthodox modern ethical theories. Anthropocentrism takes the nature for mere instrument. Discourse ethics ensures the opportunity to argue for care for the nature. But it requires someone who has ability to communicate, i.e. human beings, to represent it. Man cannot find positive motivation for it within discourse ethics. Needless to say, the nature stands initially out of community of communication. On the contrary, Jonas' philosophy of nature which finds 'should' in the nature could be a motive for introducing this outside into debate.

However man might claim that biocentrism also could be a motive. For example, Leopold's land ethic respects each species as member essential to maintain ecosystem. This respect is based on the principle of justice, according to which each species should not proliferate beyond its due portion in the ecosystem. Therefore land ethic could answer in principle to the question about the appropriate population of deer in the given region. But it must presuppose how the ecosystem should be. On the contrary, Jonas' philosophy of nature goes far so that it tries to found that man could conceive of 'should' in the nature in general.

4 Conclusion

Entities which we can be responsible for meet the following three conditions. At first the entities does not belong to me. Secondly they are threatened to vanish in time, i.e.

they are vulnerable. Thirdly it relies upon my power whether they will continue to be or vanish actually. Care for future generations and care for the nature are requisite for the forthcoming ethic. The principle of responsibility derives them from existence or furthermore possible existence of other entities than us. Therefore it needs not to be directly committed in the aporia whether rights could be entitled to the entities that do not exist yet, while this enigma must be settled up by the approach which founds the continued existence of mankind in right of live of future generations. The nature in the sense of the principle of responsibility is the outside of subject in the given environment as well as the nature as environment which it can influence upon. Indeed as discourse ethics points out, this principle might sometimes command us supererogation. But at once it can build up ethical attitude initially. Therefore Jonas could open ethical thinking towards the outside of it, i.e. future generations and the nature. In this sense Jonas could indicate us an approach to the forthcoming ethic at least.

Notes

- (1) Jacob von Uexküll and Georg Kriszat, *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen Bedeutungslehre*, translated by HIDAKA, Toshitaka and NODA, Yasuyuki, Shinshisakusha, 1984, p.22
- (2) Helmuth Plessner, „Der Mensch als Lebewesen für Adolf Portmann“, in *Philosophische Anthropologie heute*, C.H.Beck, 1972, S.56
- (3) Max Scheler, „Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos“, in *Gesamte Werke*, Bd. 9, Bouvier, S.32
- (4) Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, Oxford University Press, 1949
- (5) Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summery”, in *Inquiry*, vol.16, 1973
- (6) Richard A. Watson, “A Critique of Anti-Anthropocentric Biocentrism”, in *Environmental Ethics*, Environmental Philosophy, Inc. And the University of Georgia, vol.5, 1983, p.135
- (7) Some critics distinguish strong anthropocentrism from weak anthropocentrism and appeal the latter. The former approves the appropriation of the nature in correspondence to preferences of individuals. The former restricts it from the long-range interest. For example, Bryan G. Norton, “Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism”, in *Environmental Ethics*, vol.6, 1984, p.135
- (8) J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights*, University of California Press, 1994, p.16

- (9) R.A. Watson, *op. cit.*, p.253
- (10) "If people are but 'plain members and citizens of the biotic community' as in the Aldo Leopold land ethic, and this membership and citizenship generates ethical obligations on our part to the other members and citizens of the biotic community and to the community as such, then we must explain why the similar membership and citizenship of other forms of life generates no corresponding ethical obligations on their part to us and the one another." (J. Baird Callicott, *op. cit.*, p.22)
- (11) Arne Naess, "A Defense of the Deep Ecology Movement", in *Environmental Ethics*, vol.6, 1984, p.279,p.270
- (12) WATSUJI, Tetsuro, *Fudo [Milieux], Works*, vol.8, Iwanami Shoten, 1962, p.138
- (13) TOSAKA, Jun, "Doctor Watsuji, Fudo, and Japan", in *Collected Papers*, vol.5, Ito Shoten, 1948, p.156
- (14) Michael Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide", in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol.2, n.1 1972, Princeton University Press
- (15) Hans Jonas,"Geist, Nature, und Schöpfung", in *Geist und Natur*, W.Ch.Zimmeri and H=P Dürr (Hrsg.), Schez Verlag Bern, 1989, trans. by OGATA Keiji, Bokutakusha, 1993, p.65
- (16) „Während ich mich von einzelnen Zwecken distanzieren kann, kann ich mich nicht von dem Prinzip distanzieren, Zwecke zu haben. Zwecke zu haben, ist eine Struktur, die axiologisch allen Entitäten überlegen ist, die keine Zwecke haben: Dies ist Jonas' grundlegendes Axiom, und daher wäre die Zerstörung einer Welt mit Entitäten, die nach Zwecken streben (Organismen) oder gar über Zwecke nachdenken können (Menschen), das größte moralische Verbrechen.“, Vittorio Hösle, „Ontologie und Ethik“, in *Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas*, Dietrich Böhler (Hrsg.), C.H.Beck, 1994, S.114
- (17) Micha H. Werner, „Dimension der Verantwortung: Ein Wertstattbericht zur Zukunftsethik von Hans Jonas“, in *Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas*, S.311
- (18) Wolfgang Kuhlmann, „<Prinzip Verantwortung> versus Diskursethik“, in *Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas*, S.299
- (19) Karl-Otto Apel, „Die ökologische Krise als Herausforderung für die Diskursethik“, in *Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas*, S.389