

Back to Nature: A Jonasian Approach to the Problem of Mankind's Excessive Exploitation of the Natural Environment

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Abstract: This article, informed by the current situation of technological advancements, analyzes and discusses solutions to it as presented by the Jewish Philosopher, Hans Jonas, who is believed to have “prophesied” ahead of his time. In this paper, I argue that what Jonas concurred in his days is more binding at the moment and will continue to reverberate for ages to come. In an attempt to discuss the Jonasian contribution to the issue of environmental protection and preservation, which touches on the ethics of responsibility, sandwiched by other contemporary thoughts that matter, I add another voice to the palaver of environmental protection. I argue primarily for the need for a conscious use of the environment, for an ethics and for the positive involvement of policy makers on the issue. I strongly stress the importance of implementing the Jonasian categorical imperative; “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life”. My conclusion is that without an ethics of responsibility the future of mankind and of the whole biosphere is at stake. It is an ethical call to individual consciences – an ethics of the “first person.”

Keywords: Jonas, Environment, Environmental Ethics, Technology, Responsibility, Nature, Categorical Imperative.

I. PRELUDE

Man's activities on our planet have recently evolved to a level of putting the eco-system in chaos: while gaseous molecules from the fuming engines of aircrafts descend to collide with the toxic gases emitted by industries into the atmosphere, sewage is widespread by the explosions of deep-sea mining; while mining explosives disturb the peace of the earth's crust, the bombs of war and the noise of aircrafts compete for audibility; yet mankind's claims of dominion over the universe does not rule out the reality that man is but one among millions of living species that co-exist in the universe. As Johan Rockström rightly observed in a startling January 2015 paper in science, the rapid change of climate, the rapid extinction of species, the addition of more nutrients like nitrogen to our ecosystem, and deforestation, among other human activities, are eloquent testimonies to the fact that mankind has raced past four of the nine boundaries keeping our planet hospitable to humanity, and thus we are inching towards crossing the remaining five boundaries.

In recent decades, the exigency of catering for the environment has been a call for common concern. Nevertheless, the reorientation of modern societies towards

the biological limits of the planet will not be achieved without a related quest for justice and the common good in human affairs. Man needs to rethink his use of the environment and enliven his concerns to its care. It is no wonder that the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro proclaimed that “human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development.” There is need for quick action in order to arrest the global environmental crises, otherwise present humanity will be sowing the seeds of disaster not only for future generations, but also for the present generation.

Hans Jonas, in response to this clarion call, operates an environmental philosophy which at once embraces philosophical and Theological groundings, harped with scientific overtones and an environmental ethics. This blend results in his outstanding contribution to the problem of the environment: a “prophetic” voice that challenges the way we live.¹ Hans Jonas intimates in the preface to the English edition of his *The Imperative of Responsibility* that:

Modern technology, informed by an ever-deeper penetration of nature, and propelled by the forces of market and politics, has enhanced human power beyond anything known or even dreamed of before. It is a power over matter, over life on earth, and over man himself.²

This power, on a positive note, has indeed enhanced human life, but then the difficulties posed by such advancements in technological standards to the environment are overwhelming and need special attention. This is because of the minor threats advanced to the environment, the net total of which is “the overtaxing of nature, environmental and (perhaps) human as well.”³ Viewed from this background, it is Jonas' conviction that such advancements, even apart from the hazards caused on the environment, raise moral issues which traditional ethics never foresaw as its scope was only limited to the “direct dealings of man with his fellowmen within narrow horizons of

¹ Lawrence Troster, “‘Caretaker or Citizen: Hans Jonas, Aldo Leopold, and the Development of Jewish Environmental Ethics’, in Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Christian Wiese (eds.), *The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life*, (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 374.

² Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), VI.

³ Ibid.

space and time.”⁴ This necessitates a new reflection on ethical principles and on the scientific side, a sort of a “lengthened foresight, that is, scientific futurology.”⁵ Again, it further entails an intuitive spirit that is a development of an “imaginative ‘heuristics of fear,’ replacing the former projection of hope,” which must tell one what is possibly at stake and what one must beware of.⁶ Furthermore, Jonas intimates that what one must avoid at all cost is determined by what one must preserve at all cost, which in itself is “predicated on the ‘image of man’ we entertain.”⁷ This immediately leads to another, the necessity for the metaphysical understanding of the nature of man which at once embraces an understanding of man’s duties towards himself, his distant posterity, and the plenitude of terrestrial life under his control.⁸ With all these put into place, there is nothing but a pragmatic stand towards a responsible appreciation of nature by man.

The herein stated Jonasian corpus, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, is the main work in which his ideas on environmental protection are outlined and categorized. *The Imperative of Responsibility* (German 1979, English 1984) centers on social and ethical problems created by [technology](#). Herein, Jonas insists that human survival depends on our efforts to care for our planet and its future. He formulates 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. Thus, “we begin this Jonasian operation towards a responsible utilization of nature by looking more fundamentally at its *raison d’être*.”

II. THE RAISON D’ÊTRE FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

As already presupposed in the forgoing explications, human inventiveness is a threat to the environment. For Jonas, there is a heuristic of fear resulting from the destructive power of modern technology. He personally experienced this during Hitler’s Germany and as a combat soldier in World War II, and from the horrendous loss of his mother during the Auschwitz debacle.⁹ These events clearly present a message to Jonas of the entropy that the human fauna is undergoing and why not crying for attention Jonas’ last public words in his, *The Outcry of Mute Things*, also quoted by Lawrence Troster¹⁰ from *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, expresses this view in the following manner:

It was once religion which told us that we are all sinners, because of original sin. It is now the ecology of our planet

which pronounces us all to be sinners because of the excessive exploits of human inventiveness. It was once religion which threatened us with a last judgment at the end of days. It is now our tortured planet which predicts the arrival of such a day without any heavenly intervention. The latest revelation – from no Mount Sinai, from no Mount of the Sermon, from no Bo (tree of Buddha) – is the outcry of mute things themselves that we must heed by curbing our powers over creation, lest we perish together on a wasteland of what was creation.¹¹

Nature itself is crying on man to control the way he uses her. Nature operates with well-defined principles, and as shall be seen, man is part of nature, which means that using nature responsibly, means, in other words, preserving his very nature as man, who is even under the threat of extinction.

From the above, one immediately sees why in Jonas’ *The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice*, it becomes evident that maintaining and using nature responsibly is also helping to safeguard the image of God. This is capsulated in a mythical fashion in the form of the relationship between God, human beings and the cosmos. In this work, Jonas insinuates that God’s decision to give up his omnipotence makes room for a *possibility*, namely the existence of the cosmos as an autonomous being. He writes:

In order that the world might be, and be for itself, God renounced his own being, divesting himself of his deity—to receive it back from the Odyssey of time weighted with the chance harvest of unforeseeable temporal experience: transfigured or possibly even disfigured by it. In such self-forfeiture of divine integrity for the sake of unprejudiced becoming, no other foreknowledge can be admitted than that of *possibilities* which cosmic being offers in its own terms: to these, God committed his cause in effacing himself for the world.¹²

The entire dramatic exchange between God and his creation, according to Jonas, which is championed by man, becomes that of total dependence of God on man. Jonas thinks that man has to help the creator, by taking responsibility for his vulnerable affairs. In fact, as expressed in one of his writings, *Immortality and the Modern Temper*, man must take his life into his own hands; he must mend the world for the sake of a caring, suffering and becoming God, who is powerless to realize the promise of his creation on his own.¹³ For, bringing the world into being, God puts at risk not his own existence but the fulfillment of his purpose in granting to creation a portion of the autonomy that is originally His own. A heavy responsibility is thus placed on man as the being vested with

⁴ Ibid., x.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lawrence Troster, “‘Caretaker or Citizen: Hans Jonas, Aldo Leopold, and the Development of Jewish Environmental Ethics,’” 377.

¹⁰ Ibid., 373.

¹¹ Hans. Jonas, “The Outcry of Mute Things,” in L. VOGEL (ed.), *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, (Evanston: Northern University Press, 1996), 198-202.

¹² Hans Jonas, “The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice,” in L. Vogel (ed.), *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, 134.

¹³ Cfr. H. JONAS, “Immortality and the Modern Temper,” in L. Vogel (ed.), *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz* 129.

this autonomy, with all the risks that it may entail. Vittorio Hösle expresses this Jonasian view as follows:

For him [Jonas] the evolution of the world is at the same time the realization of God - a God who, with creation, has limited his omnipotence and renounced intervention in the course of the world. The actualization of the moral law contributes to his becoming while the self-destruction of humankind would maim God himself, whose purposes can be realized, only with the help of man ... in any case whether humanity will act responsibly toward future generations, God's fate itself is at stake.¹⁴

It is important to highlight, from Jonas' perspective, the fact that from this background, God's worldly adventure comes to a crucial turning point with the advent of human beings, through their knowledge and freedom – that is, the double-edged gift of working for the accomplishment of good *or* evil. The question here is that man is fully aware of a task he has to accomplish which is the rebuilding of the image of God. Because of his freedom, he is, ethically speaking, responsible for all his doings. Again, because he is responsible it goes without saying that he is an intelligent being. All these gifts to man from a God who “renounces his omnipotence” are for man to think and act responsibly. This doesn't make man supreme over God, but makes him aware of the reality that his life has transcendental overtones and that all his actions must bear this in mind. Then and only then will man fully collaborate with his environment of which he forms a substantial part.¹⁵

One is at the level of assertions intimating that man must take responsibility for his vulnerable affairs. For the question that arises is what this responsible use of the environment consists in. To carry out this journey, it is important to examine the central premise of Jonas' environmental responsibility.

III. ON THE CENTRAL PREMISE FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND MANKIND'S PLACE IN NATURE

The central premise of an environmental ethics becomes, for Jonas, the assessment and the limiting of human power over the natural world and the expansion of the human ethical concern to the non-human world.¹⁶

That human beings should be capable of doing and knowing this important role, motions the necessity for the comprehension and acceptance on the part of humans of the intrinsic link between humanity and the rest of creation, a true comprehension of which can only occur if one is fully aware

of the nature of nature and more precisely the nature of human nature.¹⁷

The Jonasian cry to save the environment implies not a concentration of man upon that which is extrinsic to himself, but also considers man as part and parcel of the environment. This reveals as a sordid consequence both an extrinsic and intrinsic dimension in Jonas' ethics of the environment. One is also led at once to philosophically contemplate first and foremost the special position that man is the being entrusted with this noble responsibility.

Jonas is truly and deeply convinced that human beings have the will and obligation to act with responsibility as the caretakers of the rest of life. That this fact is true of humankind is a pointer to the fact that nature, of which humankind is part, has an intrinsic value and truth. In this regard Jonas avers:

In the truly human aspect, nature retains her dignity, which confronts the arbitrariness of our might. Ourselves being among her children, we owe allegiance to the kindred total of her creations, of which the allegiance to our own existence is only the highest summit. This summit, rightly understood, comprises the rest under its obligation.¹⁸

Jonas in this regard wants to let one know that “the raping of nature and the civilizing of man go hand in hand.”¹⁹ For, nature and man are same. This is in a bid to sound a note of change to previous ethics which was somehow one-sided.

Man is capable of using nature at will to fit his demands but then, there is only one aspect of nature itself that he is incapable of curing no matter the level of his technology. This is “mortality” which, according to Jonas, does not bow to man's cunning. Man is helpless when faced with death, for death is a great equalizer and a human condition that abides. This leads to a distinction between that which abides and that which does not. Nature in and by itself is abiding. What undergoes change are the various works carried out by man on nature, yet, nature retains its identity. From the point of view of previous ethics, this understanding of the changing and the abiding made nature not an object of human responsibility.²⁰ Thus, for previous ethics, no matter what man does, his abiding nature or better still, his state prevails, in such fashion that there will eminently be no need of being responsible for that which can by its very nature take care of itself. Any casualties were left to chance, fate or providence. The important point to note from the bearings of this previous ethics is that it was circumstantial, that is to say, in Jonasian

¹⁴Vittorio Hösle, “Ontology and Ethics in Hans Jonas” in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 23 (2001), 39.

¹⁵We shall have occasion to question the Jonasian concept of God in our subsequent write-up. Our attention in this paper is focused on Jonas' ethics of the environment.

¹⁶Lawrence Troster, “Caretaker or Citizen: Hans Jonas, Aldo Leopold, and the Development of Jewish Environmental Ethics,” 375

¹⁷Frederick Ferré “On making Persons: Philosophy of Nature and Ethics”, in Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Christian Wiese (eds.) *The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life*, 493.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹H. JONAS, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, 2.

²⁰Ibid., 4.

terminology that “the agent and the ‘other’ of his actions are sharers of a common present.”²¹

With these previous groundings, Jonas avers that with the present situation of human inventiveness wherein the doer, deed and effect are no longer the same as they were in the proximate sphere, there is need for a new dimension of responsibility. A turn which must begin by knowing contrary to the former that nature is vulnerable. This is not to go against previous ethics, but just to add a new dimension to it; which is making the preservation of nature a moral concern.²²

True enough, the fate of man is affected by the condition of nature which in itself is disposed by man’s irreversible and cumulative actions on it. The cumulativeness does not reside solely on his actions but most seriously, on the effects of man’s actions, which abound with time and causes unforeseeable and unhealthy consequences. Herein, Jonas immediately brings one to a gnoseological appreciation of the spirit of ‘predictivity,’ or being able to foretell the far-off future consequences of our immediate actions.²³

But then, why all this drama of foretelling the future and being responsible for nature on the part of humankind? Part of the answer, we have seen, is that the condition of nature determines the fate of man and it is man who disposes nature to operate differently through his actions on it. Now, a more fundamental reason to explore is Jonas’ conviction that nature also has rights.²⁴ Nature as nature operates according to defined principles in the form of checks and balances. These governing laws must operate for its own stability. Failure to respect this uniqueness of nature we meet with negative effects when we force it to take a different course. We need therefore to operate on nature responsibly. This leads us, at this juncture, to explore Jonas’ commandment of human responsibility.

IV. THE COMMANDMENT OF HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

This takes root from Jonas’ ethical imperative of considering humankind as the central focus of creation. Stated thus: “the *existence* of mankind comes first,” since “the possibility of there being responsibility in the world, which is bound to the existence of men, is of all objects of responsibility the first.”²⁵ With this central emphasis given to man, the binding imperative of the environment immediately follows, since as earlier echoed, humankind is not alone in the world. Humankind, in other words, is interactional and in consequence, the natural world immediately falls within the domain of its responsibility, since it is a condition *sine qua non* for its “Living well”. One is therefore, like Jonas, saying that humankind not only has to survive, but has to “live well”,

which makes for Jonas’ command of environmental responsibility. One is thus, bound to understand as a “necessary condition” of man’s own existence the necessity of preserving the environment by using its resources responsibly.²⁶ We note here the Jonasian humanistic approach to nature which stands in sharp contrast to today’s anti-human tendency.

To say that humankind should be responsible for the environment, doesn’t involve, for Jonas, on its part, adopting some sort of anthropocentric attitude towards the environment, but rather putting itself “at its service, free of all appetites for appropriation.”²⁷ Presenting this novelty in a coherent fashion entails a lot, with many actors coming into play.

Public Involvement: For Jonas, having indulged in the drama of making, which has invaded the space of essential action with its adverse effects on mankind, there is need, as already seen, of morality invading the realm of making, which can only be done through public policy.²⁸ All politics has to be geared towards the responsible use of nature, for the “changed nature of human action changes the very nature of politics.”²⁹ This can well be appreciated when one considers man as a political being or a political animal as described by Aristotle. Man by his very nature is political, if nature, of which man is part, is the substance which man must use responsibly, it follows that what he makes also flows from his very nature. For, as a being is, so it acts. Again, this very much coincides with the thoughts of John Paul II who, in *Laborem Exercens*, defines the human person as an independent being, fully in control of himself and all that is around him. “Man...is a person, that is to say, a subjective being, capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization.”³⁰ Thus considered, the definition of who a human being is cannot be divorced from the environment in which he forms a substantial unit. Hence, it is interestingly important to observe that man is a being whose beingness cannot be explained without making a succinct reference to his environmental circumscription, an idea which merits ulterior reflection.

Inevitably, man occupies a unique place in creation and this is universally accepted for “believers and unbelievers

²¹ Ibid., 5.

²² Ibid., 7.

²³ Ibid., 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 99.

²⁶ Ibid., 100

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 9.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, (14 September 1981), n. 6. As a Personalistic Philosopher, the Pope had defined a person as one who is at once the one who governs and the one who is governed by himself, the one who possesses and the one who is his own possession. He is also the one responsible as well as the one for whom he is responsible. See Karol Wojtyla., *The Acting Person*, trans. By A. Potocki, (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 173

agree almost unanimously that all things on earth should be ordained to man as to their center and summit.”³¹

It becomes evident that all politics must not only be sort of theoretical in the sense of remaining at the level of man-to-man relationship, but must involve all that is man. In other words, it must be holistic and not partial. The immediate implication of the foregoing explication is the active involvement of all governments and authorities in promoting the responsible use of the environment. From all these we meet with another implication which is the view that active involvement in environmental protection entails a communal dimension.

The Communalty of Environmental Protection: That this is true is immediately evident from the very fact of man’s sociality, a view which implies, according to Jonas, that man is not only sociable to the extent of relating man-to-man, but also of relating with the rest of creation. Expressing this view Jonas writes:

The presence of man in the world had been a first and unquestionable given, from which all idea of obligation in human conduct started out. Now it has itself become an object of obligation, that is, the foothold for a moral universe in the physical world – the existence of mere candidature for a moral order.³²

This relation entails “taking care” of creation, in the sense of having “the duty to preserve the physical world in such a state that the conditions for that presence remain intact; which in turn means protecting the world’s vulnerability from what could imperil those very conditions.”³³

Now, this communal dimension does not only hold for the “now”, but takes into consideration the future, and this at once adds an element of saintliness in Jonas’ cry to save nature. Environmental protection does not only mean taking care of life that is endangered in the present moment but life that is still to come. This is fully explicated when we consider the futuristic dimension of environmental responsibility, which I think animates what I have considered as the central premise for environmental responsibility and the commandment for environmental responsibility.

The Futuristic Dimension of Environmental Responsibility: This may be adequately stated as: “act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life.”³⁴ This principle, stated simplistically, has many overtones. First and foremost, is the immediate restating of the principle itself which asserts that one should act in such fashion that the effects of one’s action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life; or again, “do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation

of humanity on earth;”³⁵ or still, “in your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will.”³⁶ We are thus, not allowed by this Jonasian postulate to risk the nonexistence for future generations on account of a better life for the present one.

Jonas’ Ethics of the environment is therefore, an Ethics for the future, which means a contemporary ethics concerned with the protection of the future for our descendants, which can ultimately be attained, if we act very well in the present, amidst technological advancements. This is particularly because technology threatens not only the now but the future and as such, “moral responsibility demands that we take into consideration the welfare of those who, without being consulted, will later be affected by what we are doing now.”³⁷ In his *Redemptoris Hominis* John Paul II asserts: “The man of today seems ever to be under threats from what he produces.” (*Redemptoris Hominis*, n.15). In the same light he continues that: “The essential meaning of the kingship and domination of man over the visible world, which the creator himself gave for his task, consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and in the supremacy of the spirit over matter.” (*Redemptoris Hominis*, n.16)

As seen already, one needs to be aware of the transcendentality of his actions, which immediately harmonizes with the spirit of “predictivity” and “a heuristic of fear” vouched for by Jonas as a necessary disposition of any serious human being who wishes to take environmental protection to the heart.

That this ethics is futuristic means that it is trans-generational, since our actions have long term effects. Worst of all, added to the scope of the long-term effects of our actions, is their irreversibility. Taking the example of thermonuclear war fares, McDonald, W.J., succinctly notes:

It is characteristic of thermonuclear warfare that it’s use against or near a major concentration of population entails the automatic slaughter of everyone in the area...regardless of the degree of their participation or nonparticipation in the war. Further, the long-range effects of exposure to radioactivity would very likely have serious consequences for neutrals, for future generations of all mankind and for the very earth itself.³⁸

Truly, the effects are trans-generational. Such is the case with the effects of the atomic bomb explosion over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The population is still suffering till date. In addition to the millions of people who were killed, the genetic

³⁵ Ibid., 11.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Hans Jonas, “Toward an ontological Grounding of an Ethics for the Future,” in Lawrence Vogel (ed.), *Mortality and Morality*, 99.

³⁸ W. J., McDonald, et alii (eds), *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14 (U.S.A., 1967), p. 799

³¹ Vatican II Ecumenical Council *Gaudium et Spes*, (7 December 1965), n. 16.

³² H. JONAS, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 10.

³³ Ibid., 10.

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

make-up of some survivors was distorted so much so that presently, offspring given birth to are already incapacitated.

Predictivity and Heuristics of Fear: These categories bind modern technology so much that whatever experiment is carried out, the future consequences and positive effects of the experiment must be carefully analyzed and agreed upon. If the future proves dark on the cosmos in whatever form, then, such an experiment should not be conducted. A certain kind of fear to preserve mankind and creation must reign. This fear which is intuitive must prevent any attempts by man to disrupt the smooth functioning of nature. This fear therefore stimulates the imagination and anticipates the possible effects of the refusal to recognize the good.

To describe the Jonasian “heuristics of fear,” as intuitive is sort of describing it as a “revulsion of feeling, which acts ahead of knowledge to apprehend the value whose antithesis so affects us. *We know the thing at stake only when we know that it is at stake.*” “We know much sooner what we do not want than what we want. Therefore, moral philosophy must consult our fears prior to our wishes to learn what we really cherish.” Jonas further explains that these heuristics of fear ought only to recover an adequate *emotional motive* for acting responsibly in the face of current ethical dilemmas.³⁹

What is at stake is for one to observe that the drama of environmental responsibility, involves emotional factors such as fear, hope, shame and guilt. This resembles Pascal, who, when read between the lines, shows that man is not only made of the mind but that the heart plays a central role in man’s life; for, the heart has its own reasons which reason itself does not know. Any technological increments must get to the heart to feel its intuitive calls which are definitely these categories of shame, guilt, hope and fear.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that fear should not grow to the extent that it paralyzes action. A correct interpretation of fear, according to Jonas, ought to inspire the “courage of responsibility,” which *takes care* of an object whose existence depends on the human being’s ability to act with wisdom, resoluteness, promptness, moderation, and circumspection.⁴⁰ Again, guilt is a feeling that, in Jonas’ view, does not primarily express regret for something a person has done, but that identifies a feeling of *predictive repentance*, which can preemptively illuminate human behaviour. To fully put all these into practice there is need for a spirit of sacrifice and repentance.

The Spirit of Sacrifice and Repentance: The enhancement of responsibility requires the empowerment of freedom’s capacity for *self-restraint* and *sacrifice* and calls for the aptitude to resist the seductions of power and for the self-control of the human being’s “consciously exercised

power.”⁴¹ *Sacrifice* and *repentance* are essential moral values for the technological epoch, since these moral values may play an active role in limiting the excesses of freedom and enhancing responsibility.

The End and the Means: The above considerations notwithstanding, Jonas’ ethics of responsibility seems to make the principle of responsibility paramount. It is what safeguards the existence of life that is important. However, we think that responsibility has to carry with it the duty to cultivate the numerous virtues necessary for good moral life. In the Jonasian ethics, the virtuous life does not present itself as an end. Jonas treats virtues rather as means to the continual existence of humanity in a world similar to our own. In fact, virtues are not only necessary for the existence of humanity, but they also constitute its dignity.⁴² By focusing attention on what people should do or how they should act, more important issues are neglected, such as, what people should be. In fact, a person who has developed virtues will be naturally disposed to act in ways that are consistent with moral principles. In morality, we cannot stop at indicating or determining the aims or ends, even the most noble, such as guaranteeing the existence of humanity and of the planet. The means are of equal importance.

If we accept Jonas’ new imperative of responsibility, as stated above, we can immediately note that there are many ways of preserving the conditions of life. Some of these means, however, are morally questionable. One of the most serious threats to the continuation of genuine human life, for Jonas, is overpopulation. Through his unilateral emphasis on responsibility for the sake of the future existence of life, he justifies behaviours that are contrary to nature as well as to the essence of the medical profession, whose aim is to save lives. He encourages actions such as birth control. This is what he states when asked a question by a German newspaper journalist on May 11, 1992, concerning the Pope’s stand on birth control: “This is a crime against global responsibility. It is incomprehensible to me how someone can take such a position. But it shows the forces, the irrationality, habits, inertia, and unreasonableness with which every political entity ever devised by human beings has had to reckon.”⁴³ This is a consequentialist approach which is aimed at producing the right kind of overall consequences. Jonas’ ethical approach leads him to recognize only the public, planetary dimension of behaviour and not the personal dimension. If we take seriously the metaphysical foundation of ethics proposed by Jonas, and the inalienability of certain human rights, then his objective of the existence of the human identity that is worthy

⁴¹ Ibid., 129.

⁴² Aldo Vendemiati, *La Specificita’ bio-etica*, (Roma: Rubbettino, 2002) 226.

⁴³ Hans Jonas, “Closer to the Bitter End”(An Interview with Hans Jonas Conducted by Matthias Matussek and Wolfgang Kaden of *Der Spiegel* on May 11, 1992), in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 23 (2001), 27.

³⁹ H. JONAS, *The Imperative of Responsibility* 31-34.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 204.

of the name cannot be obtained by betraying that same identity.⁴⁴

The Subordination of Divine Intelligence under Creation: In advancing reasons for the “ought-to-be” of being, Jonas insists that the divine creator willed the existence of man because he found that it ought to be and that the perception of value in the world is one of the motives for inferring a divine originator rather than the presupposition of the originator being the reason for according value to his creation.⁴⁵ According to him, God created man because he found him good.⁴⁶ In fact, this poses a problem as to who accords value. God who knows the essence of all things and who are the effects of his efficient causality⁴⁷ cannot be subordinated to creation in this way. God, who is the necessary Being, the First Cause, the Subsistent *Esse*, the *Ens Realissimum*, *Ens a Se*, *Ens cause sui*⁴⁸ cannot be subordinate to contingent creation and creatures whose act of being is his proper effect. From this perspective, we see that Jonas accords an unwarranted position to creation which we cannot comfortably glide over.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Storming the environmental palaver, Jonas writes as a teacher, an informed witness and as an ardent defender of human dignity, emphasizing the need to safeguard it and a fuller, integral development of the human person. This goes without saying that Jonas vouches for a strong formation of consciences which is particular, useful and necessary for our present era; most especially of those in the medico-scientific, technological and economical fields. Inevitably, the true exercise of freedom rests in obedience to the dictates of the conscience. God created man a rational being with the dignity of one who can initiate and control his own actions.

Unfortunately, the reverse is true as man's gifts and activities instead of enhancing his dignity, pose a serious threat to it. There is no doubt that man has been outstandingly successful in recent years especially in the development of science and technology, which in itself is a sign of man's greatness, exercised by his *genius and his initiative*. But then this greatness is becoming somewhat of a threat to man as Jonas saw and rightly so, for John Paul II writes:

The man of today seems ever to be under threat from what he produces, that is to say, the result of the work of his hands and, even more so, of the work of his intellect and the tendencies of his will. All too soon, and often in an unforeseeable way, what this manifold activity of man yields is not only subjected to ‘alienation’ in the sense that it is simply taken away from the person who produces it, but rather

it turns against man himself, at least in part, through the indirect consequences of its effects returning on himself.⁴⁹

A deep solidarity exists between man, his actions and his environment. As such, an abuse of the environment is an abuse of man himself. Certain phenomena, such as the threat of pollution of the natural environment in areas of rapid industrialization only help to show how man destroys himself. If man becomes aggressive to nature, he is indirectly aggressive to himself and his dignity is tampered with. Admittedly, he must guard his relationship with his environment. Unfortunately, the present-day situation is different. Man's relationship with his environment is grossly selfish and controlled by the desire to consume and to produce without the equal balancing of the natural elements.

This crisis in the relationship between man and the environment is as a result of an ill-considered exploitation of nature's resources.⁵⁰ This exploitation is not devoid of the uncontrolled development of technology outside the framework of a true humanistic plan. This threatens the natural environment, alienates man in his relation with nature and removes him from it.⁵¹ In this regard, the Roman Catholic Church observes:

A correct understanding of the environment prevents the utilitarian reduction of nature to a mere object to be manipulated and exploited. At the same time, it must not absolutize nature and place it above the dignity of the human person himself. In this latter case, one can go so far as to divinize nature or the earth, as can readily be seen in certain ecological movements that seek to gain an internationally guaranteed institutional status for their beliefs.⁵²

This flows from the fact that man turns to see the natural world in mechanistic terms and development in terms of consumerism. Doubtlessly, primacy is given to doing and having rather than to being, and this causes serious forms of human alienation.⁵³

Truly, it is remarkable that the modern era has witnessed man's growing capacity for transformative intervention. The aspect of the conquest and exploitation of resources has become predominant and invasive and today it has even reached the point of threatening the environment's

⁴⁹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, (4 March 1979), n. 15. This is as a result of a distorted notion of freedom by various systems and individuals who separate freedom from truth.

⁵⁰ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), n.461

⁵¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 15

⁵² Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 463. This uncontrolled exploitation leads to deforestation, loss of precious topsoil, loss of biodiversity, atmospheric and water pollution and global warming. These have adverse effects on the human being (See also Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, (1971), n.42).

⁵³ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, (30 December 1987), n.28,

⁴⁴ Aldo Vendemiati, *La Specificita' bio-etica*, 228-229.

⁴⁵ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 48.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Tomas. Alvira et alii, *Metaphysics*, trans. By L. Supan, (Manila: Sinag-Tala Publishers, 1991), 138.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

hospitable aspect. As such, the environment as ‘resource’ risks threatening the environment as ‘home’ and resultantly produce harmful long-term effects both on man and his environment. This has led to the painful realization that we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations.⁵⁴

Therefore, in dealing with the natural environment, man must not make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose which man can develop but not betray.⁵⁵ And so, economic development programmes must respect the integrity and cycles of nature since natural resources are limited and some are not renewable.

We must acknowledge the vastness of technological advancement and the positive aspects it has contributed to life, as far as making it easier is concerned. Technology for John Paul II is an ally of work which is the product of the human mind in the interaction between the subject and the object of work.⁵⁶ Thus understood, technology is a whole set of instruments man uses in his work to facilitate, perfect, accelerate and augment his wellbeing.⁵⁷ However, it is a proven fact that in some instances, it ceases to be man’s ally and becomes his enemy.

The eternal relevance of philosophy animates Jonas’s solution to the environmental crisis. Someone with a rightly shaped philosophical orientation can clarify issues at stake arising from some of the ad hoc decisions that man makes and on which the future of our mother-earth depend. Humankind needs to continuously reflect on its being or essence, if not, it will remain fundamentally lacking, with obvious consequences of meaninglessness, frustration, depression and defeat.

In light of the above, and without downplaying the role of concerted efforts to curb the destruction of the environment, individual consciences should be formed to be practically involved by taking care of their immediate natural surroundings. Our response to environmental hazards should not be motivated by a certain “intellectual appreciation or economic calculus.” We should learn to care for everything that exists. We are called upon not just to be mere consumers, but must exercise a certain level of sobriety that sets limits on our consumption.⁵⁸

This also calls for an environmental “conversion” and “reverence” for nature, which is common among many indigenous Africans. In some of these cultures, for example,

trees have meaning and place in the landscape and in human habitation.⁵⁹ It is possible to copy something from these traditions in our resolve to solve the environmental crisis.

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⁵⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, (1 May 1991), n.37.

⁵⁶ John Paul, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, n. 6.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

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