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Science and the Imperative of Responsibility. Reflections on the Ethics of Science and Technology according to Hans Jonas

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CPNSS, Copenhagen, November 9, 2006



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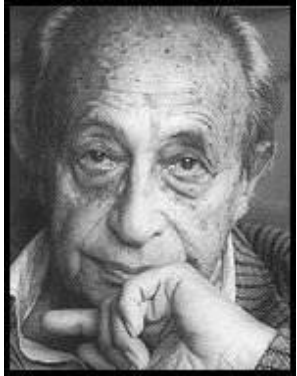
Hans Jonas



- Born 1903, Germany. Studies under Husserl, Heidegger, Bultmann. Thesis on gnosticism.
- England 1933, Palestine 1935, Canada 1949 (McGill University, Carleton University), USA 1955 (New School for Social Research, New York)
- Participates in WWII (UK army), war in Palestine 1948-9
- 1987 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, 1993 Premio Nonino, many Dr. h.c. in USA, Germany
- Dies February, 1993 in New York.



Works used here



- Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation 1979, English: The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age 1984, på dansk: Answarets princip: udkast til en etik for den teknologiske civilisation (København: Reitzel 1999)
- Technik, Medizin und Ethik. Zur Praxis des Prinzip Verantwortung 1985, på norsk: Teknikk, medisin og etik: ansvarsprincippet i praksis (Oslo, Cappelen 1997)



The neighbourhood ethics of yesterday

- Good and evil immediate consequences of actions
- Moral rules concern relations to “neighbours”
- Limited reach in time and space
- Long-time developments (“destiny”) out of reach



Ethics in a technological age 1

- Technology (and the science that made this technology possible) gives us powers that require a new dimension of responsibility. The consequences of our actions can reach far in time and space. New moral rules have to be added to the “neighbourhood ethics”. *“Modern technology and its products spread all over the globe; their cumulative effects reach possibly an unlimited number of future generations. What we do here and now, mostly only thinking about ourselves, affects in a massive way the life of millions elsewhere and in the future, millions that did not have any say about our doings.”*



Ethics in a technological age 2

- *“We mortgage future life for present short-term gains and needs – indeed needs we have mostly created ourselves. Perhaps we could not entirely avoid doing this or something similar, but in that case we have to use extreme caution so that we do this in all fairness towards our descendants – namely so that their capacity to pay back the mortgage is not compromised from the start.”*
- We have applied our new powers ubiquitously – hence we have a *responsibility* for everything, including the full biosphere. *“The crucial point here is that the penetration of distant, future and global dimensions into our everyday, worldly-practical decisions in an ethical novum which technology has foisted upon us; and the ethical category that above all is called into play, is responsibility.”*



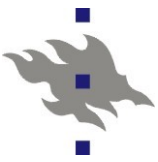
Ethics in a technological age 3

- The good life is impossible if we do not abandon an anthropocentric ethics. We have to seek the good for and in all what is outside the human sphere. *“This extended viewpoint connects the human good with the cause of life as a whole, instead of confronting it with hostility, and guarantees non-human life rights of its own.”*
- To know the consequences of our actions becomes a duty, but since we can never predict them with certainty, recognition of our lack of knowledge is also a duty. (A form of the precautionary principle.)
- For ethical actions to exist in the future, ethical human beings have to exist in the future, hence it is our duty to ensure the continuing existence of the world.



The four imperatives

- Act so that the consequences of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life on Earth.
- Act so that the consequences of your actions are not destructive for the future possibilities of human life.
- Do not jeopardize the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humankind.
- Include in your present choices as object for your wishes the future integrity of human beings. (Every time you have a choice include the future of humankind in what you want to achieve.)



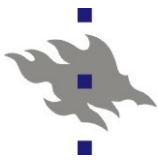
How do we fulfill the imperative of responsibility? The stewardship.

- Our arrogance has to be replaced by a humility stemming from the discrepancy between our potential powers to harm and destroy on one side and our incapacity of predicting and take responsibility for the consequences on the other side. We have to learn prudence, we have to feel fear.
- We have a duty to seek knowledge about the future, not only using scientific methods, but also using intuition, insight and compassion. Imagine what the world would be like for those not yet born if we now and here do something.



The stewardship 2

- A rule of thumb for treating uncertainty: *In dubio pro malo* – when in doubt, prefer the worse prediction. The stakes have become too high for playing.
- The reciprocity between rights and duties has to be extended into the unlimited future, to those who do not yet exist and hence cannot claim their rights. The question “What has the future done for me?” is meaningless. We have to unilaterally accept responsibilities for which we cannot expect reciprocity.
- Protect and take care
- Obvious links to professional ethics



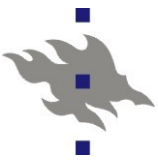
The scientist and the imperative of responsibility 1

- The distinction between pure science and applied science/technology is becoming blurred: Pure science needs technology and vice versa.
- The freedom of research traditionally claimed for pure science cannot be maintained.
- Questions the existence of value-neutral science today. The tasks of science are increasingly determined by external interests rather than the internal logic of science itself. This makes science a social activity where each actor has to answer for his doings. It is still true that someone can be a good scientist without being a good human being, but it is no longer true that for a scientist, “being good” begins only outside his scientific activity – thus moral questions enter the sanctum of science.



The scientist and the imperative of responsibility 2

- The present ways of financing research do also diminish the freedom of research and imposes values.
- From the side of society, there are attempts at an unselfish and farsighted policy for guiding research taking its autonomy, without which science cannot prosper, into account. On the other hand, science has to open itself to influences from communities. Within science could a voluntary self-censorship on research topics be effective.
- Strong opinions on genetical engineering, cloning, experimenting on humans.



The scientist and the imperative of responsibility 3

- *“We have to admit that the problem of how the immense responsibility should be met, which the irresistible scientific-technological progress places on the shoulders of both its practitioners and the public which enjoys or suffers from its gifts, is still completely unsolved, and the ways of solving it are hidden in darkness. Only the beginnings of a new consciousness, recently awakened from the euphoria of the big victories to the harsh daylight of the dangers, learning again to know fear and trembling, give us hope that we shall voluntarily impose on us the barriers of responsibility and not allow our power, which has grown so large, to finally overwhelm ourselves or those who will follow us.”*



Hans Jonas today

- Views on the human predicament still highly relevant.
- Foreshadows gender ethics, deep ecology.
- Strong influence on modern professional ethical codes.
- Well worth reading.

