

Life and Anthropology: A Discussion between Kantian Criticism and Jonasian Ontology

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The relationship shared by the philosophy of Hans Jonas and that of Emmanuel Kant is ambiguous. On the one hand, we can say that Hans Jonas criticizes quite vigorously the Kantian conception of causality in *the Phenomenon of Life* and the anthropocentric dimension of his morals in *das Prinzip Verantwortung* but, on the other hand, we are obliged to recognize that the type of questions that Hans Jonas tackles and the way with which he answers to them are rather Kantian. Then we could say that Jonas deals with Kantian topics but, as we will see, with his own instruments.

Nevertheless, to justify the rapprochement between both philosophers which gives this article its meaning, it is necessary to identify a common ground of investigation. And I think that anthropology is such a ground. Kant and Jonas both focus on what the human being can know, what he must do and what he can hope for¹. Both authors try to fix the extent of our knowledge, to define the nature of our duty and to evaluate the possibility of the immortality *from the human structure*. The answers to such questions help them determine what mankind is from a radical point of view. Indeed, Kant and Jonas share a common concern for the *human finitude*. Both pretend, to a certain extent, to break with a metaphysical feature, that is to say, its tendency to define the human being from the perspective of a certain conception of the absolute. For them, for example, Man must not be defined from God's point of view but God from the point of view of the human subject as an Idea for Kant and as a coherent myth for Jonas (Jonas 2001. 275-281, Lories Danielle 2010. Pommier Eric 2013. 89-117)

But it is also necessary to cast light on the difference between both philosophies to evaluate the originality of the Jonasian approach. I would like to propose the following hypothesis. It is because Kant does not see *the true root of our finitude* that Jonas criticizes him from a theoretical and practical point of view. Indeed, human finitude is due to the finitude of life according to Jonas and that is the reason why morals and epistemology have to be founded in an ontology of life that reveals its mode of being.

The Jonas' critique of Kant does not mean however that we have to forget the lessons of criticism about the limits of our knowledge and the possibility to found the morals. On the contrary, it deals with the necessity to justify in a radical way our limitations thanks to an ontological thought which does not fall into dogmatism as it tries to take into account the lessons of criticism. Then Jonas'

¹ But we won't tackle this ultimate point. See: Lories 2010.

philosophy is an attempt to found Kantian criticism and, at the same time, to transcend it towards an ontology of life which makes possible both morals and epistemology.

To try to prove such a hypothesis, I would like to remind us very briefly the Kantian project, only to be in position to understand the peculiarity of the Jonasian project. Secondly, I will reconstruct the Jonasian critique of Kant from a theoretical and practical point of view. Then, I will indicate the solutions that Jonas offers to overtake the Kantian limitations, that is to say, to justify ontologically these limitations and to try to overcome them.

The Kantian project.

As we know, Kant wants to break with dogmatic metaphysics, which leads to indifferentism on account of the contradictions between the opposite theories which do not succeed in proving their assessments against the other. Reason must criticize itself to circumscribe the ground of what it can know and to stop itself at the limits of the knowable. We will know if metaphysics can be a science only if we can determine the conditions of possibility of such a knowledge in order to check the ability of metaphysics to fulfill these conditions. Therefore, Kant starts from the fact of the science and looks for the conditions of its possibility. He will find these conditions of the synthetic *a priori* judgments in the very structure of the transcendental ego by shining the categories of the understanding and the forms of pure sensibility. This discovery is the confirmation that we cannot know the thing in itself, that the knowledge is a non-arbitrary construction of our subjectivity, an objectification of what there is. It is also the direct proof that metaphysics as a science is impossible since it exceeds the conditions of the knowledge, whereas the existence of a transcendental dialectics, in particular the system of the antinomies, is an indirect proof of such an impossibility. Metaphysics though, conserves a meaning as a natural tendency of the reason, as an irrepressible desire that requires a type of satisfaction in the form of Ideas that are guidelines for the constitution of knowledge without being knowledge. Ideas are a sort of methodology that gives a direction to such a constitution because it conveys the hope of a possible unity of all that can be known. As we can see such a system of thought supposes the opposition between the subject and the object and leads to the rejection of ontology: we can't know the being as such.

We could think that such a rejection of the ontology prevents us from forever founding morals, by condemning us to relativism. Besides, we do not see what kind of bridge could be built between the objective knowledge of reality and the realm of duty. There is no link between the "is" and the "ought to be", as it is well known. Nevertheless, Kant does not abandon the aim of founding morals, that is to say, of displaying the conditions of possibility of the moral judgment. Indeed, moral conscience is a fact. We can't define Good and Evil, but when we act we all are conscious that we act in a good or a bad way. This finding is the starting point of a reasoning which establishes the subjective conditions of the moral conscience. Kant starts with the conscience of our duty and reveals the origin of such a conscience, that is, the moral law which is a *fact* of universal reason.

Here we can make two comments. First, the moral law is the condition of the categorical imperative. As our sensibility pertains to the realm of the nature which is determined by the

scientific laws, all our actions are mechanically explainable so that the only way to escape from egoism consists in extracting oneself from this nature thanks to an imperative that does not take into account the circumstances of the action but that only considers the commandment of the reason. We could object that the moral action would not be possible without a sensible motivation and that is the reason why Kant gives an important role to the respect. But, as we know this sentiment is very particular since it is produced by reason.

Second of all, we could be astonished to see that Kant asserts the possibility of morals although he emphasizes the mechanism of the nature. How can we talk of a moral behavior if we don't have the liberty to choose it? In fact, moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom which is its *ratio essendi*. We can postulate freedom because we are conscious of our duty and we are obliged to postulate it because, without it, morality wouldn't be possible. Freedom can't be an object of experience. We can't know if we are free because all reality is built from the frame of the ego transcendental, which imposes the category of causality according to which every effect has a necessary cause, which prevents us from thinking about the possibility of a cause that would not be the effect of another cause, which is the definition of freedom. That is the reason why freedom can't be proved, experienced or known. It is only a postulate.

To conclude this brief and basic recall, we can draw attention to the Kantian way of conceiving the presence of mankind in the world. On the one hand, as a nature, the human being pertains to the reality described by the different sciences. Inside the phenomenal world, he is determined: He is a mere thing. On the other hand, first, as transcendental ego he builds this reality from which he is the condition (on the basis of a primordial matter that he can't know). Second of all, as a pure practical reason, he pertains to a non-sensible world in which freedom is possible. He can think of himself as a free-will and for that reason he is responsible for what he does. Thus mankind must be defined by his *autonomy*. Indeed, mankind is the measure of its own possibility of knowing and of what it has to do. He does not receive the guarantee of truth from the structure of the universe or from God and he does not receive the law of his behavior from an absolute or an authority outside his own structure.

We could assert that this new importance given to the autonomy is tied to the radicalization by Kant of the notion of human finitude, as Alain Renaud puts it (Renaud Alain 1989. 260). In the first place, we could say that the human subject is not conceived from an absolute that gives him a sense. Indeed, for Kant sensibility is not finite in relation to an absolute. It is *in itself* a condition of representation. The finitude of the sensibility is the condition of the opening of the subject to other things that limit it necessarily. It is thus the finitude that is the true absolute. In the second place, we could think that the practical autonomy of the subject also derives from such a finitude (Renaud Alain 1989. 288), unless we consider there is an inconsistency in the Kantian system, as if the theoretical subject would be finite and not the practical subject on account of the auto-activity of the reason which produces the law (Renaud Alain 1989.264.) Indeed, in that case we could draw the conclusion that Kant exceeds the finitude of the subject, since he is able to conceive a good end that he will try to inscribe in the being (Renaud Alain 1989. 266.) Nevertheless, ethics is not a transgression of the limits of subjectivity. Autonomy is not the opposite of the finitude. On the contrary, autonomy must be thought as an Idea (Renaud Alain 1989. 296) in order to take into

account the essential finitude of the subject according to Alain Renaut. Subject can't think his action ethical without *aiming at* autonomy and the necessity of this aim is the sign of our finitude, the only condition on which autonomy is possible.

Jonasian critique of the criticism.

After this short and basic presentation of the Kantian doctrine, I would like to indicate the reasons why Jonas considers we need to go further into the conception of a finite subject, not only from a theoretical point of view but also from the practical one.

Theoretical aspects

To begin with the Jonasian critique of the Kantian conception of knowledge, let's have a look at the appendix of *The Phenomenon of Life* dedicated to causality and perception (Jonas 2000, 26-33). Here Jonas argues that the Kantian conception of causality (essential to understand the possibility of knowledge) doesn't allow us to think not only the causal relation between the objects of the world but also the influence of the subject on the things and the influence of the things on the subject.

But what is the argument of Jonas? According to him, the Kantian conception of knowledge is tied to that of perception. Perception is our first contact with reality and the causality is a relation which connects sensitive representations between them. This dynamic conception of causality presupposes a merely passive conception of perception. We have to connect the representations between them because perception is passive, because there is no activity in the receptivity thanks to which the world can be given to us. Such an approach is common to Hume and Kant and the only difference between them lies on the origin of the causality, empirical in one case, transcendental in the other case. Indeed, Kant wants to justify the universality of our knowledge, of the laws of nature and it implies the dimension a priori of the causal category, which can't be reduced to an effect of habit.

Nevertheless, according to Jonas, such an explanation is merely logical and Kant would confuse two types of necessity, that of a rule and that of a force. Indeed, it is not possible to account for the dynamic dimension of causality from a relation between representations that are deprived of such a dynamism. As perception is conceived in a mere passive way, it is not possible to rebuild a causal dynamism from it. That is the reason why the categorial necessity of Kant is a mere construction that does not explain the true causality between things. Nevertheless, such a logical necessity presupposes, to a certain extent, an experience of necessity. The categorial necessity is an abstraction from the real necessity: It is a necessity of necessity as Jonas says. This original experience of necessity stems from our body, which perceives and moves, which interacts with the world, which can feel his pressure and resist it. But, instead of recognizing this active dimension of our body and therefore of our perception which is a bodily function, Kant has a passive conception of perception and is obliged to introduce an abstract notion of causality to account for the phenomenon of scientific explanation. Thus, Kant is not only blind to the very causal relation

between things, but also to our bodily activity since he conceives it objectively from passive representations articulated by the abstract causal category.

Consequently, the question that has to be raised is not: “How can one articulate passive representations thanks to the category of causality to produce a knowledge?”, but: “Why is Kant led to forget the true necessity? Why has he got a passive conception of perception which obliges him to build an abstract conception of causality instead of referring to the true one?”

To answer this question, Jonas offers a double explanation. In the first place, he presents a genetic and materialistic analysis of perception that puts light on the reason why causality tends to disappear during the process of this perception (Jonas 2000, 29-30). We can't reconstruct here this analysis. Let us simply note that there is a disproportion between the size of the organism and the size of the particles which take part in the process of the perception. On account of this disproportion, the impact implied by the physical phenomenon of perception is absorbed by the organism so that we don't pay attention to the force that makes this phenomenon possible. We can have though the experience of such a force during the perception when the excitement provoked by an exterior stimulus is too high. In that specific case, we can experiment the causality of the world.

In second place, Jonas presents a phenomenological comparison between all our senses to show that sight is the more “objective” sense (Jonas 2000, 135-156; Jonas 1974, 224-236). On account of its supremacy on other senses, it contributes to make us forget the presence of the force in the world so that the causality can't be known thanks to the sight. Sight does not produce an effect on the world perceived and I am not influenced by the world I perceive. There is a certain indifference between us, a neutralization of the dynamic causality. That is what Jonas argues from a phenomenological point of view.

It is necessary to make some comments about this double analysis (materialistic and phenomenological) to explain why causality disappears during the process of perception.

First, we could consider that they contradict each other. Phenomenology presupposes the *epochè* which suspends the belief in an independent and substantial world and for that reason it is not possible to accept a materialistic explanation that asserts the substantial existence of matter as a universal principal of explanation. Nevertheless, Jonas considers that both explanations don't exclude each other, although I believe he is not very explicit about this compatibility. I think we could say that the materialistic explanation plays the role of a mediation. Its function consists of “desidealizing” the perception. Indeed, as the perception appears as being purely passive, it is necessary to recall that this neutrality can be materially explained. But, for all that, we don't have to conclude that matter is the very substance of the world. On the contrary, Jonas turns towards the phenomenological testimony of life to reveal the dynamic dimension of the world and the presence of the force in the process of perception. Phenomenology will complement the materialistic point of view by revealing the very nature of our world.

Second of all, the genetic explanation and the phenomenological description help us understand the suppression of the causality between the subject and the object and, consequently, between the objects. As we forget the testimony of our own body about the meaning of the causal relation between us and the world, we can't truly understand the causal relation between the things. The

disappearance of this causality makes us lose an entry towards the being as such, but this forgetting is the condition to build objectivity and therefore the scientific knowledge. Indeed, the subject is released from the pressure of things and can build abstract images, conserve them in memory and compare them. He opens himself to the possibility of the essence. He can separate the object from its context, eternize it in the form of an idea. It is obvious that he loses the true being, but the subject can build scientific theories.

To conclude this point, we can say that Jonas criticizes Kant about his conception of causality that makes us lose an entry to the being and that prevents us from understanding ourselves as a bodily subject.

Nevertheless, this critics of the criticism does not lead Jonas to fall in a new dogmatism since he justifies the Kantian criticism. He does not reject the transcendental precaution. He tries to explain why we are necessarily led to miss the being on account of the objective tendency of our senses. This failure stems from the structure of our bodily subjectivity.

But, it also means that if we really want to know the being as such, we have to come back to the testimony of our body in order to examine the very conditions by which we can open ourselves to the being from our lives.

To tell it another way, Kant doesn't see that the finitude of our knowledge, which leads us to objectify the being, doesn't simply come from our subjectivity, but from the human body, which stems from the finite process of life. It is the finitude of life itself that seems to lead us to objectify things. We can't now anticipate this point, but Jonas will show that it is *because a living organism is mortal* that animal life will develop the perception, which can be deceitful in the case of man. However, such a theory presupposes that we already know how we can know life, how we can build an ontology of life, which is premature. Let's conclude by saying that this critique of Kant is an invitation to develop an ontology of (finite) life in order to understand in what measure we are condemned to miss the being and to discover how we can overcome such obstacles. The Kantian epistemological question leads us to the ontological question of life.

Practical aspects.

Nevertheless, before tackling such an aspect, we have to prove that the Kantian theory is also disappointing from the practical point of view on account of its forgetting of the finitude of life. Would it be possible to say that also in the frame of the practical philosophy we have to focus on the finitude of life to found ethics? Would it be likely that the mere transcendental subjectivity does not allow to found morality?

When we tackle the chapter of the relationship between Jonas and the practical philosophy of Kant, I think we must immediately point out a double ambiguity. First of all, Jonas brings our attention about the character irrelevant of the Kantian theory for our times. This theory may be pertinent to solve traditional problems of moral theory, but not to face contemporary problems of mankind, such as the hyper development of technology that puts in danger this mankind. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Jonas goes on using Kantian concepts such as the categorical imperative. Although he criticizes him, he still refers to him to build positively his own practical philosophy. That is the reason why it will be important for us to identify the core of his criticism

to understand better to what extent Jonas considers that it is still possible to appropriate oneself some of the Kantian concepts.

But, there is a second ambiguity. On the one hand, Jonas considers that the Kantian theory is still valid in his own field of questioning. It is useless to face problems of the technological civilizations but, at least, it is still useful to settle the problems linked to the moral consciousness. However, on the other hand, Jonas asserts that the notion of categorical imperative does not have a meaning except if we modify it in an ontological way. Jonas also adds that the Kantian notion of dignity is too abstract, except if we can base it on an ontology of organism. Therefore, these critical remarks mean that even in his own field the Kantian theory is inadequate because the justification of his foundation is insufficient.

That is why I would like to show why *The Critique of Practical Reason* is not convenient to solve contemporary problems, but also to found an ethics of respect for the person.

The reasons why Jonas rejects the practical doctrine of Kant are well known. This is an anthropocentric doctrine which doesn't care for the long-term and which focuses on the purity of the intention instead of taking into account the consequences of our actions. Indeed, Kant formulates a law that stems from the human reason and that applies to other human beings, but not to animals or nature. It is true that we have indirect obligations towards them, but only because mankind is respectful. By torturing an animal or polluting an ecosystem, we lack respect towards mankind because we don't behave as human beings have to. This is an anthropocentric morality.

It is also a philosophy that does not take into account the long-term. We just have to avoid rational auto-contradictions in order to have a moral behavior. We just have to check that we can instantaneously universalize the maxim of our behavior. But the problem lies precisely in the fact that a sum of such moral actions can lead to a global disaster if we take into account the consequences of such actions. A good father can drive to drop off his son at school. From the point of view of the moral of intention, it is good. But, if all the human beings act similarly, it will be very problematic for the survival of mankind. Then we need an ethics which cares for the consequences (and for the consequences in the long-term) of the action independently of the quality of our intentions². To sum up, Kant doesn't take the value of living beings into consideration and doesn't think that mankind could disappear in the long term. He presupposes its permanence without considering that mankind could be mortal and, therefore, without paying attention to the incarnation of mankind thanks to which it is mortal. Kant evades the true finitude of humanity. For those reasons, Jonas considers that we need an ethics that can face the dangers of technology thanks to a moral evaluation of the consequences of our actions on the future generations and on the living beings.

² Karl-Otto Apel, as Hans Jonas, considers that the Kantian ethics is not relevant from this point of view, but he will reject the ontological foundation of the ethics by Hans Jonas. He will propose a pragmatic-transcendental foundation. (Apel 1986 and 1994.)

A new foundations of the practical kantism ?

But, we can also insist on the reason why according to Jonas the Kantian formulation of morality is not satisfactory if we take into account the very purpose of Kant. Indeed, Jonas agrees with Kant to give a place to sensitivity in the moral action. The reason must determine the true ends we must follow but sensitivity is necessary to act. However, I must not be moved by a particular object which would be contradictory with the requirement of universality of the law. That is the reason why the moral sentiment must be a sentiment of respect for the law. The reason produces an effect on my sensitivity and that is the reason that I respect. I don't have respect for some object, but for the form of my decision. The content of the categorical imperative is such a form. Nevertheless, Jonas considers that such an imperative is merely impossible and has no sense. Firstly, the criterion of the universalization of the maxim of my action can't be the principle of a concrete action according to him. The purpose of our actions can't be the limitation of our freedom in the name of the coherence with ourselves. Indeed, we will always and only be determined by a concrete object. Secondly, and above all, the law of reason can't produce a sentiment. It would be to make up for the formal aspect of his morals, according to Jonas, that Kant would have complemented it by the material principle of the respect of the dignity of persons who are their own end (Jonas 1984. 167-170.)

Nevertheless such a notion must be justified. We have to tell why a person, who is its own purpose, is respectable. This justification requires the intuition of self that freely acts in the world and that convinces our sense of values. To put it another way, we have to describe the phenomenon of the value applied to another human being. As the origin of value finds itself in life for Hans Jonas, it is required to develop an ontology of life to justify why the human being as a person has an essential value.

Such a critique of the categorical imperative of Kant doesn't lead Jonas to reject it but to justify it in another way. Indeed, an ontological principle and not a formal principle is required to account for this kind of imperative because only an object can determine the moral subject to act. Morality must be heteronomous and not autonomous. Only an object which has a value can oblige us to act with responsibility, that is to say, taking into account the positive and negative consequences of our action. Again, our practical finitude not only comes from our own vulnerability, but also from our responsibility for a vulnerable object. Considering that our autonomy is an Idea, as Alain Renaut put it, is not sufficient to take into account our finitude. Indeed even as an Idea, the primacy of autonomy still leads us to think that the subject could produce morality alone, as if he could limit himself. In fact he can be moral only because he stands in front of a vulnerable object. That is the reason why morality obliges us to refer to the vulnerable structure of life. However, it is obvious that such a justification is not sufficient to found a categorical imperative. We have to distinguish it from the hypothetical imperative. It is necessary to discriminate the contingent value of an object and its intrinsic value. Again, such a discrimination requires a reflexion about the source of value, that is to say, about life. An ontology of life seems to be necessary to found the ethics of dignity of Kant.

To conclude this moment dedicated to the critical presentation of Kant's philosophy, I think we could insist on three points.

First of all, from a theoretical point of view, we must criticize our faculties of knowledge even more radically than Kant, by showing that the limits of our understanding, due to the structure of our perception, stem from the finitude of life. It is because life tries to transcend itself on account of its internal limitation that perception is possible but also condemned to prepare the objectification of the being. We will deepen this thesis.

Second of all, from the practical point of view, Kant has not seen the radical finitude of mankind. Its technological power can be the cause of its own disappearing. *The Critique of Practical Reason* was an openness towards the infinity with the reign of the ends. There is a fact of the reason we can "experiment" and for that reason we can escape from our finitude. Even if we consider with Alain Renaut that autonomy, respect of the law, is an Idea, Kant does not see that the *ideal* apprehension of autonomy is not sufficient to account for the human finitude. Jonas wants to show that mankind must be conceived as being mortal. Indeed, its mode of being, and as we will see the duty imposed by his ontological structure, is commanded by the possibility of its suppression as mankind. This mortality has got a sense only if it is referred to life. Only human beings that are alive can die³. That is the reason why again we have to take into account the finitude of life to develop an ethics that cares for such a vulnerable life and, in particular, for human life.

Third of all, we have tried to indicate that the Kantian morals were not able to justify their own principles according to Jonas and that it required an ontological foundation. Therefore, would it be possible that the Jonasian principle responsibility ontologically grounded would not only be the key to an ethics not limited to the needs of the present time and to specific objects –the responsibility for the future generations and for living beings – but also an ethics with a more fundamental ambition, that of being an ethics truly universal, valid for all the times, and likely to found an ethics of the person?

But, before going further into these topics thanks to a presentation of the ontology of life of Hans Jonas that will help us to understand better his relationship with the Kantian system, we could notice that such a meditation on life, or at least on organism, already exists in Kant, particularly in the *Critique of Judgment*. Like Jonas, Kant criticizes the purely mechanistic point of view about organisms but also the vitalist view⁴. In fact, as we will try to show, Jonas pretends that life is a mere phenomenon. Anyway, Kant is also convinced that mechanism can't explain the organism. A Newton of Biology is impossible. But, instead of turning himself towards an ontology of life, he considers that we have to describe it thanks to the faculty of reflective judgment. We don't have to subsume the particular case under a law, but to search the law for each particular case. Organism can't be explained with a mere mechanistic view so that we are obliged to postulate a teleological

³ But life is not only "present." It is also a promise, a future, a possibility.

⁴ For Kant as for Jonas, life is not a principle...The title of his book "*das Prinzip Leben*"⁴ was chosen by the editor to produce an effect of symmetry with the successful book "*das Prinzip Verantwortung*" for marketing reasons.

principle which has a meaning only from the point of view of our judgment and not in the thing itself.

But, we could wonder if it is not precisely because Kant maintains the opposition of the subject and the object that he is unable to consider that we can have a mode of knowledge of life. The reflective judgment is the only means of thinking organism if we don't want to break with the dualism of the subject and the object. Therefore, we are obliged to tell that it is an object from the point of view of the determinative judgment and a type of subject from the point of view of the reflective judgment. But, what if the experience of life was precisely the experience that denies this dualism of subject and object? Organism is neither a mere object nor a subject since it is a subject-object. Why would we reject the possibility of knowing life since we ourselves are alive? The Jonas' challenge consists in believing that we can build such an ontology of life.

Ontology of Life.

I am going to insist on the constitution of such an ontology and then tackle the ethical theme from this ultimate point of view.

We could assert that Hans Jonas' method comes under the method of phenomenology⁵. Indeed, we could follow the Heideggerian definition of phenomenology, as he puts it in the introduction of *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Heidegger Martin 1988), which consists in operations of *destruction, reduction* and *construction* to determine the method of Hans Jonas. He intends to free our thinking from the "ontology of death" which encloses the theme of life in the jail of the substantial and dualistic scheme of mind and body. Thus, we could say that he operates a *destruction* of the tradition, that is to say a new appropriation of it, in order to forge a new access to the phenomenon of being. (Pommier 2013, 31-40.) But above all, as we have seen, he criticizes our dependence to the data of perception and he invites us to defer our faith in such a restricted perception to open ourselves to a new kind of experience, that is, an experience of opening to the world inscribed in our living body which implies, first of all, to take into account the phenomenon of our possible death and, secondly, to give his faith in the testimony of the touch and of the sensations of proprioception. Indeed, as we have seen the testimony of sight is not relevant since it tends to erase the being in aid of objectivity. Nevertheless, this is not the case with the experience of the touch and the movement. Thanks to them, we can know the forces that moves things in the world. I think that such a description of the phenomenon of the world from the existential structure of body may be named a *reduction* since Jonas will explains how the world appears on the basis of such a conception of the body.

⁵ I use the mode of quoting of the Archives of Konstanz where we can find original material by Jonas: HJ 11-5-18, "A certain proximity to thinkers like Bergson and Whitehead is inevitable in any modern attempt of this kind, but the present one rests on different philosophical foundations and, for what it is worth, will have to stand on its own merits. The method of approach owes much to the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger", *Letter of Hans Jonas to the University of Chicago Press* (30/11/1954.)

In fact, as Andreas Weber and Francisco Varela suggest (Weber Andreas and Varela Francisco, 2002.), the position of Kant in his *Opus Posthumum* is quite close to that of Jonas. Even if the apriori categories are still the conditions of knowledge, Kant recognizes that it is the lived body that can give us an experience of the moving forces of the matter. As Kant tells it: “The moving forces of matter are what the moving subject himself does with his body on other bodies. – The counter-effects corresponding to these forces are contained in the simple acts by which we perceive the bodies themselves” (Kant Emmanuel 1910, 326) Then both authors comment by saying that the apriori categories are an experience of an embodied existence. Indeed the forces of matter, “prime subject of natural science”- are the underlying experience of the categories without which we could know nothing. I am not sure that such a position is coherent since the body appears to be, on the one hand, as an object of experience that the categories of the disincarnated transcendental subject constitute but, on the other hand, as the subject of experience thanks to which categories are possible. The body seems to be a kind of experience of the transcendental, which is the condition of all experiences. Such a problematic and conclusive result in Kant’s philosophy is the starting point of Hans Jonas’ philosophy of biology. Jonas begins his meditation on life with the recognition of the ambiguity of our body, which is an extensive object but also a subject of which we can have an inner experience.

That is the reason why we can interpret the body not only as being a material thing, but also, and above all, as a capacity for auto-renovation. We, as a body, are a part of the extension of the world but also what opens this world since we know that we have to renew our components to go on living. Our own experience of life helps us to understand the scientific structure of metabolism. It is a structure that renews itself, but only thanks to exchanges with the environment. What determines such a change is the desire to resist to death. Because life can die, it tries to avoid this death, thanks to a permanent activity of auto-reconstitution and the openness of new possibilities. (Jonas, 1994. 86)

We can’t develop this point here, but according to Jonas it is possible to explain the evolution of life from such a finitude of life. Each new form of life (those of plant, animal and human being) appears as a new play of life with death. The animal mode of life is more adventurous than that of the plant, because it can’t find its food on the spot. Then it is obliged to move, to perceive and to feel to meet its food and to survive. This risky life is the condition of the development of new faculties that open a larger world, with more possibilities. Consequently, we can describe life as a transcendence which opens a world (Jonas 2001. 64-92). Such a *reduction* to the living experience of death and to the non-substantial perception of the subject reveals that our *precarious and “knowing”* body which is alive is the place of an experience of life which can guide us towards the *construction* of “*what is life*” or, to be more rigorous, of *how* life appears to us. We can distinguish the movement of a mere thing from that of a living being on account of our own experience of the move.

Thanks to our experience of life, we can describe it as being an activity of auto-renovation which implies death. Life can be defined by its essential finitude that explains the rise of new possibilities of living, the emergence of perception with its deceptive dimension. Life opens perceptive horizons to survive and, as sight is particularly useful to fulfil this function of survival thanks to its

power of objectification (Jonas 2001. 151), it contributes to make us forget the original openness of life. Thus Jonas justifies ontologically the limits of our knowledge but provides us also with the means of overcoming them.

Now we've got the means of tackling the practical aspect of Jonas' philosophy. Indeed, as it is well known, the struggle of life against death is a way for life to assert oneself, to choose oneself through possibilities that it opens and between which it chooses. Since life opens possibilities and expresses preferences, it gives rise to values. As all these possibilities are a means of asserting oneself, we can say that the organism is its own value. It is also legitimate to add that this choice of oneself is a way to subscribe to the metabolic structure of life and to recognize the absolute value of it. As Jonas puts it, we could choose to reject life, to live by condemning the finalized structure of life, but even such a life, which exists by rejecting the value of existence, would recognize this value simply by living in this negative way. This is the finitude of life that explains that it exists as an absolute value and this is also the case for the human life. This implies that human life, as all life, is a risky life that asserts itself thanks to development of possibilities, that is to say in the case of man, thanks to the imagination which is the condition of the technique.

Here is a problem. We have suggested that man could be in danger on account of the development of the technique. But why would it be necessary and legitimate to found a duty that commands us to limit the vital possibilities of human development from which the technique derives? Why not the pure risk which seems to be the essence of the liberty of life? Why do we have to found a duty of preservation of the existence of mankind?

First of all, we could consider that such a limitation is not legitimate since the value of life imposes it to develop itself as far as it can. Second of all, we do not need to refer to a moral duty to preserve human life. Indeed, there is a natural tendency in mankind to reproduce oneself. We just have to be cautious about the consequences of our present actions, so that they do not undermine the conditions of life of the future generations. They would have the right to accuse us of having neglected such conditions. Then we could anticipate their *rights* to have a good life to recognize oneself as having an obligation to ensure them good conditions of life.

But, such a reasoning can't be sufficient to take care of human life. Indeed, in the first place, we can't identify the absolute value of mankind with its factual conditions of life. We can't renounce giving birth to new people because their conditions of life could be damaged according to Jonas. In the second place, the reasoning according to which mankind must exist only if it has good conditions runs the risk of relativism. The future victims could agree with their new conditions of life without considering they are a damaging for them. In fact, both arguments refer to the rejection of the hypothetical imperative. The duty of existence of mankind does not depend on certain conditions. It is absolute. The norm is not the happiness of mankind, but its duty. Mankind has to exist whatever the conditions may be. It is a categorical imperative that must be enounced and justified (Jonas 1984. 86-91.)

But, as we have seen, such a categorical imperative can't be abstract. Jonas has rejected such a Kantian imperative. We have to give it another meaning. To understand such a meaning, we need to turn ourselves towards the heuristics of fear. I think we could say that the anticipation of the risks run by humanity on account of the hyper-development of technology reveals a new duty of

man. He discovers that his possibility of development could compromise the life and his own survival. That is why he has to limit such development. Such a limitation is not a violation of his own value, as if the value of life consisted in a blind development. On the contrary, thanks to the new danger, our new technical power reveals a new dimension of our life, that is to say, the necessity of respecting our own source of development. What we must protect is not an abstract conception of mankind, but the source of its historicity. When Hans Jonas speaks of a respect for the ontological idea of man, he wants to tell that mankind exists only through its concrete and individual incarnations. This does not mean that we have to respect individuals as such, that is to say, as individuals. That means that we have to respect mankind as a source of indetermination, of possibilities, as a projection towards the future which implies giving birth to new individuals and to control our technical development. It is because mankind is mortal, that we have to protect it, that is to say, that we have to take care of future generations. It is obvious that the future individuals do not exist yet. But future generations do. Indeed, the future does have a sense because mankind exists only thanks to projects, through indetermination and its direction towards the future. That is why we have to preserve it and it implies new births and an ethical control of the technique.

Such a categorical imperative is not abstract because we have a sentiment of responsibility for a concrete thing and not a law, that is to say, for future generations. I think we could also add that such an approach could help us to justify the ethics of dignity of Kant. In the first place, it would be necessary to show how an incarnate subject can recognize another incarnate subject. As I have the experience of the value of life, it would be possible to recognize the value of other subject thanks to the identification of its metabolic renewal which is a struggle against death. We could draw an ethical conclusion of such a reasoning by showing that the respect for the person supposes the Jonasian biological philosophy. In the second place, we could add that such an ethics requires a reference to the respect for future generations. The other man is respectable because he is, as *historical* man opened to various possibilities, an incarnation of the future of the humanity but also because he has to respect it, because he is the condition of the transmission of our duty.

To conclude, I would say that I wanted to give some hints in this article that could give us an idea of the main critique of Jonas towards Kant, a critique that helps him to determine his own project. It is necessary to think the finitude of mankind in a more radical way than Kant which requires making the vital origin of mankind appear. On that condition, the ontological and ethical project might become possible again.

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