

## **Editorial Note**

(translation by Raffaele Ariano)

«The hand that inflicts the wound is the same that heals», wrote Marcuse in the 1960 edition of *Reason and Revolution*. His remark concerns the relationship between reason and civilization, but the «Critical Journal of History of Ideas» too, in his own small way, is guilty of inflicting a wound: alas, its issues have so far utterly forgotten the name of Hans Jonas. And it is not that occasions for such a notice have totally lacked.

It is then with extreme pleasure that we heal the wound we have unwillingly opened, by publishing the proceedings of the conference «Hans Jonas und die klassische Philosophie», which was held in December 2014 in Mönchengladbach, Jonas's home town. The circumstance is propitious not only to mend our shortcoming, but also to solicit a reflection on one of the major European intellectuals of the Twentieth Century. Almost an emblem of critical thinking as we conceive it, Hans Jonas came of age intellectually at the University of Marburg, under the influence of leading figures of Twentieth Century European culture such as Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger. His philosophical path could have seemed straight, but was affected by the dramatic events of the age. The tragedy of the Jewish people following the election of Hitler in 1933, to whom intellectuals such as Heidegger not only failed to oppose but actively participated (and with a personal, as well as intellectual and moral – we could say “philosophical” - agreement, that went far beyond what can be taken for granted in the historical circumstances); the outbreak of the military conflict, which casted the shadow of a seemingly endless night on mankind; the unprecedented capacity to destroy both humanity and nature showed by the techno-scientific apparatus: all this transformed Jonas's perspective, who left his juvenile Heidegger-based inquiries on ancient gnosticism and converted to the study of the relationship between man and nature. He came therefore to his «philosophical biology» and *The Phenomenon of Life* that concerns it, and to the idea of the responsibility that is needed in the present stage of technological development.

Hans Jonas was a “topical” philosopher, if with this word we mean a thinker that is able to meet the most urgent problems of his time. It is good and deeply instructive, to notice that this task doesn't inevitably involve the peculiar giddiness, the peculiar absent-mindedness, let us say the intellectual inconstancy that the prevailing vain of journalism seems to connect with actuality.

First and foremost, Jonas concerns history of ideas because of his ability to listen to the provocations of his time without losing in consistency and without withdrawing into the ivory tower chosen by many of his peer intellectuals. The conference proceedings here published try to show the continuity of this critical effort, from the research on gnosticism and late-ancient philosophy carried out in the late Twenties and early Thirties (and renewed after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library), to his reflections on bioethics and the responsibility principle, which has been his major concern from the Sixties on. It is not hard to discover the continuity between his early inquiries on gnostic anti-cosmism (and its revivescence in Twentieth Century

existentialism) and problems such as the relationship between spirit and nature, nature and freedom, and the various conjugations of the responsibility principle.

We should not indulge, nevertheless, in a one-sided celebration of the continuity of Jonas's thought. By doing so, indeed, we would be slighting a peculiar quality of his, his humility, his capacity to adjust the focus and concepts of his research in order to attain the closest possible critical understanding of his time. These are the topics this volume is going to dwell upon. We know no better way to end this introductory note than quoting the words that the Jew Jonas uttered in a lecture on racism, which was held in Percoto, Udine, in January of 1993: «It was once religion which told us that we all are 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 (three 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». Words such as these strike us not only for their insight in the deep movements of our time, but also for what they imply of his capacity of criticism and self-criticism, providing a bright example of what the *Critical Journal of History of Ideas* thinks of as the sole responsible intellectual attitude.

For these reasons, we are glad to host these conference proceedings, edited by Cinzia Arruzza, Christoph Horn, Dmitri Nikulin ed Emidio Spinelli. We hope they will both enlarge the scholarship on this author and suggest a mode of intellectual research whose core is a critically examined concept of responsibility.