

HANS JONAS'S NOBLE 'HEURISTICS OF FEAR': NEITHER THE GOOD LIE NOR THE TERRIBLE TRUTH

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ABSTRACT: In this essay, Jonas's political teaching is discussed through examining his judicious use of the natural sciences, especially evolutionary theory and scientific ecology, in developing a new ontology and a new ethic. His ontological and ethical arguments are considered in terms of their public communication via his "heuristics of fear," with particular attention to his claim that an ontological axiom that he makes use of is an *argumentum ad hominem*. I also make the case that the accusations against him as being an ecoauthoritarian fail to consider that his suggestions regarding the necessity of tyranny and the use of the noble lie to halt an ecological crisis are themselves expressions of the heuristics of fear, which is intended to foster willful change now before change of a forced sort becomes the only option. With this interpretation in mind, one sees the ennobling character of his heuristics of fear.

KEYWORDS: Hans Jonas; heuristics of fear; ecology; philosophical biology; public communication

INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that Hans Jonas lays the theoretical foundation for the precautionary principle in his *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (IR), which was originally published in German in 1979 and translated into English in 1984.¹ While he never explicitly speaks of the precautionary principle, his articulation of the "imperative of responsibility" is meant to put us on guard as to the risks that certain technological advances present to future generations and to life

¹ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984. Citations to this work will appear in parentheses as IR.

on earth as we know it; as such, it acts as a check on unfettered growth and blind innovation. Accordingly, the application of the imperative, principally through the “heuristics of fear,” issues in a call for austerity measures in response to the numerous crises that modernity could quite possibly summon forth (IR, 148-149). Yet what this dynamic entails needs to be more carefully deciphered, and thus the task of this essay is to address Jonas’s thoughts on the “heuristics of fear” and the “imperative of responsibility” as they pertain to the art of politics and public communication.

To begin with, we must ask, what does Jonas mean by the possible need of “a new Machiavelli” among “the practitioners of political science,” “who would, however, have to propound his teaching in strict esotericism”? Would this strict esotericism come in the form of the “dangerous game of mass deception (Plato’s ‘noble lie’)” (IR, 149)? These questions as they pertain to Jonas’s *Imperative of Responsibility* and his thoughts on what he calls “public communication” have yet to be thoroughly considered, which perhaps is due to the brevity and incompleteness of their expression.

Richard Wolin notes how the political chapters of *The Imperative of Responsibility* remain “entirely neglected,” which is where Jonas speaks of a “new Machiavelli” and “Plato’s noble lie.” He draws our attention to Jonas’s thoughts on the possible need of a tyrannical regime, albeit benign, to curtail our deleterious habits that pay no mind to the limits of nature. A remedy for this neglect may require recourse to a noble lie.² Vittorio Hösle homes in on the section where Machiavelli and Plato are mentioned, regarding it as a “grandiose blend of Platonism and Machiavellianism” and as “one of the most subtle texts in political philosophy of the last century.”³ In Jonas’s criticism of liberal democracy, Pier Paolo Portinaro hears “echoes of Straussian tones (Leo Strauss was after all, let’s not forget it, the great authority in American political philosophy after the war).” Portinaro, nonetheless, mentions nothing regarding Jonas’s call for a “new Machiavelli” or the use of a noble lie, although perhaps these are implied. He, however, makes a comment suggesting that Plato’s relation to the tyrant of Syracuse is in the background of Jonas’s thought: “His observations on tyranny seem to retain the ambiguity of Plato’s relationship with the tyrant of

² Richard Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 125-128; and Richard Wolin, ‘Ethics After Auschwitz: Hans Jonas’s Notion of Responsibility in a Technological Age’, *The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Christian Wiese, Boston: Brill, 2008, pp. 12-13.

³ Vittorio Hösle, ‘Hans Jonas’s Position in the History of Germany Philosophy’, *The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Christian Wiese, Boston: Brill, 2008, pp. 21.

Syracuse.”⁴ Lawrence Vogel, also, passes up the chance to mention Jonas’s thoughts on the use of deception in an article on Strauss and Jonas, where the topic of esotericism is discussed but only in relation to the former.⁵ And lastly, Marianna Gensabella Furnari discusses Jonas’s appeal to Plato’s noble lie but finds that such an appeal is a “self-contradictory solution” since it makes use of coercion to impose responsibility that should arise from freedom.⁶

Despite these comments and comparisons, the secondary literature on this topic has yet to midwife into being the life that the subject matter bears. Granted, the scholars just mentioned only treat in passing what I intend to treat more fully. Nonetheless, their brief thoughts on the topic lead me to believe that thinking through some of Jonas’s ideas in relation to his digression or invocation of a “new Machiavelli” and “Plato’s noble lie” would be fruitful for contributing to a broader discussion of Jonas’s political thought. With this in mind, I proceed with an appreciation for the difficult task of unraveling some of what Höslé considers to be Jonas’s subtlety.

I begin with a sketch of Jonas’s “philosophic biology” in order to demonstrate how Jonas takes his initial bearings from the theory we have inherited from the sciences. The main purpose of this section is to draw attention to Jonas’s use of evolutionary theory as his axiomatic starting point in articulating his new ontology and, moreover, to give a brief overview of his ontology. In the next section, I demonstrate how Jonas makes use of the science of ecology in *The Imperative of Responsibility* as a secular starting point for reflections on a new ethic, which builds upon his new ontology. In both circumstances, Jonas’s political teaching gradually begins to appear when one examines his judicious use of the natural sciences for elaborating a new ontology and a new ethic. The last part of this essay thus considers how his ontological and ethical arguments relate to the art of politics. Any attempt to write Jonas off as a supporter of tyranny has to at least confront his use of axioms, both ontological and ethical, in the political chapters of *The Imperative of Responsibility*. That he singles one of his axioms out as an *argumentum ad hominem*, which is not a

⁴ Pier Paolo Portinaro, ‘The Prophet and the Tyrant: Considerations of Hans Jonas’ Philosophical Proposition’, *From the Twilight of Probability*, eds. William R. Shea and Antonio Spadafora, Canton, MA: Science History Publications, 1992, p. 80. Cf. with Hans Jonas, *Memoirs*, ed. Christian Wiese, trans. Krishna Winston, Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2008, p. 208.

⁵ Lawrence Vogel, ‘Overcoming Heidegger’s Nihilism: Leo Strauss versus Hans Jonas,’ *Heidegger’s Jewish Followers: Essays on Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Hans Jonas, and Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Samuel Fleischacker Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008.

⁶ Marianna Gensabella Furnari, ‘From the Ontology of Temporality to the Ethics of the Future: Care and Responsibility in Hans Jonas’, *Philosophy and Ethics: New Research*, Laura V. Siegal (ed), New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2006, p. 152.

fallacy but a manner of presenting an argument, has to be considered in terms of the public communication of his new ethic, which via his “heuristics of fear” favors the prophecy of doom over that of hope when it comes to potential biotechnological and environmental problems.

I. PHILOSOPHICAL BIOLOGY

In *The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology* (PL),⁷ Jonas demonstrates his willingness and capacity to engage scientific biology with a mind to articulate a philosophy of life or a philosophical biology. He doesn’t lay claim to being the first to carry out such a project; rather, he holds that Aristotle’s “*De anima* is the first treatise in philosophical biology” (PL, 2). Yet over centuries the marriage between philosophy and biology has unraveled. In the case of existentialism the emphasis was solely on man, highlighting the inward nature of consciousness, and in the realm of natural science the emphasis was placed on the “physical, outward facts, [ignoring] the dimension of inwardness that belongs to life.” Jonas saw his task as offering a “new reading of the biological record” with the hope of recovering “the inner dimension—that which we know best—for the understanding of things organic and so reclaim for the psychological unity of life that place in the theoretical scheme which it had lost through the divorce of the material and mental since Descartes” (PL, xxiii).

Jonas considered *The Phenomenon of Life* to be his “most important philosophical work, because it contains the elements of a new ontology.”⁸ In containing the “elements of a new ontology,” Jonas believed that he had achieved something “new” and thus a return to Aristotelian philosophical biology was unnecessary. This element of novelty does not mean, however, that Jonas held that modern natural science had rendered Aristotle’s biology irrelevant. Rather, Jonas’s stance was one that sought to move beyond “the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns” (PL, 1). Yet to make this move concessions to each would have to be made, where revisions made by a “nondogmatic thinker” to the “conventional model of reality” based upon modern natural science could be attempted without wholly returning to Aristotle, as witnessed by the example Whitehead set (PL, 2). Jonas aligned the importance of his own work with the same motivation and themes that Whitehead displayed in his *Process and Reality*. Like Whitehead, Jonas understood himself to be “going to the heart of things and inquiring into the nature of being.”⁹

⁷ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001. Citations to this work will appear in parentheses as *PL*.

⁸ Jonas, *Memoirs*, pp.197-198

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

In *The Phenomenon of Life*, Jonas displays all the virtues of a “nondogmatic thinker.” In summation of his work, Jonas argues that his goal in articulating a philosophical biology is to join the philosophy of the organism with the philosophy mind. This goal, however, implies a “further proposition” that issues in a “new task: a philosophy of mind comprises ethics—and through the continuity of mind with organism and of organism with nature, ethics becomes part of the philosophy of nature” (PL, 282). For Jonas, the grounding of ethics in ontology is “the original tenet of philosophy”; he argues that the divorce between ethics and ontology has in modern terms rendered the former a matter of subjectivity and the latter a matter of objectivity. To bridge the divide between ethics and ontology, Jonas believes that such a reunion can only be made possible through a “revision of the idea of nature,” one that rests on nature as becoming (PL, 283). And thus it only makes sense that evolutionism would be the starting point for his philosophic biology.

This direction of Jonas’s thought is revealed early on in *The Phenomenon of Life*. He claims that materialism offers the only means by which a “fruitful discourse” can occur (PL, 20). Three stages of interpreting being enter into Jonas’s account of the nature of things: 1) primordial monism, 2) dualism, and 3) materialist monism. Briefly stated, the stage of primordial monism held that spirit and life pervaded being; animism thus held sway. Dualism’s arrival, on the other hand, which found expression in Orphism, Christianity, and Gnosticism, along with Cartesianism, posited the otherworldly nature of the human soul, which was imprisoned within the inanimate body. The emphasis was the soul’s “incommensurability with anything in nature” (PL, 13-14). Challenging this divide materialist monism emerged, where death or inanimate matter, not life, was emphasized in ontology: “If dualism was the first great correction of the animistic-monistic one-sidedness, materialist monism which remained as its residue is then the no less one-sided, total triumph of the death experience over the life experience” (PL, 15). Modern materialism won out against the other modern monism, Berkeleyian idealism (PL, 16, see also 55). As for the predualistic monism, dualism exposed the “separate spheres of spirit and matter, which split primeval monism asunder, [and] created forever a new theoretical situation” (PL, 16). With this in mind, Jonas claims that there is “no returning” to predualistic monism. Modern idealism, moreover, offers a monism that evades the problem of ontology, because it can through the “secure standpoint of pure consciousness,” where the body is treated as an idea and the “corporeality of the self” is disregarded (PL, 20). In order to think through the ontology of life and death, a withdrawal to the level of pure consciousness was a dead end. With self-preservation, or the fear of death, being understood in terms of “the original essence of life” and as

an “absolute” (PL, 46, 58), the only route open toward understanding ontology lay with a serious consideration of corporeality. And thus the “true counterpart to the predualistic ontology of panvitalism” is materialist monism and “with it must be our discourse” (PL, 20).

The task for Jonas thus centered upon giving an account of the philosophy of life within the ontological framework of materialist monism. With materialist monism being the counterpart to animistic monism, the emphasis is upon inanimate matter where an ontology of death is privileged over one of life. Under a mechanistic view of nature, teleology was reduced to mechanical causality (PL, 25), and consequently with the rejection of final causality, that is, “the great struggle with Aristotelianism,” the birth of modern science arrived on the intellectual stage (PL, 34). While final causes could for a time under dualism be attributed solely to human beings and not to nature, “the doctrine of evolution, now inseparable from modern monism, obliterates any vestige of the dividing line on which the whole argument of contrasting ‘nature’ and ‘man’ rests” (PL, 37).

In siding with materialist monism, Jonas seems to be more modern than anything else. Yet his reflections on evolutionism enable him to introduce an element of teleology while not merely returning to Aristotle. To be sure, however, Jonas’s new ontology arguably recovers only elements of Aristotle’s teleological understanding of nature within an evolutionary account of biology (PL, 86, see also IR, 71). A recovery of this sort, moreover, leads to “a reversal of the classical formula” of teleology, that is, “one would have to say that the developed is for the sake of the undeveloped, the tree for the sake of the seed” (PL, 53). Yet siding with evolutionary thought meant an overcoming of the Cartesian dualism of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Nevertheless, Jonas warns of the nihilism that evolutionism can bring with it, recognizing that reason is reduced to a “means among means, to be judged by the efficiency of its instrumental role in the survival issue: as a merely formal skill—the extension of animal cunning—it does not set but serve aims, is not itself standard but measured by standards outside its jurisdiction” (PL, 47).

Despite this caveat, evolutionism proved for Jonas to be the way in which the ontology of death, or materialist monism, would have to make room for the realm of life. In accepting the materialist premise that rejects the realm of the spirit, materialism would have to give an account of the origins of mind from the material realm. Evolutionism provided the crucial logic. The continuity of descent reveals how complexity can arise from what is simple through gradual changes (PL, 44, 57). With purpose being shorn from the materialist perspective and understood merely within the terms of subjectivity, chance mutations and natural selection explained the origins

of higher life forms (PL, 44). To know what is more complex, or that which is deemed to be higher, one must study the antecedent cause, which would be simpler and lower. This genetic deduction of the modern mind inverted the classical attitude of understanding the lower in light of the higher (PL, 41, see also note 3).

Yet such a genetic analysis can only go back so far. In its attempt to reach the point of when life was originated from inanimate matter, it can only offer hypotheses as divining the “mystery of origins...is closed to us” (PL, 3). Nonetheless, Jonas persuades himself of the possibility that all-pervasive inanimate matter housed the “genuine potency” for “organizing itself for life.” The realization of this potency suggests “a tendency in the depth of being toward the very modes of freedom to which this transition opened the gate” (PL, 1-4, see also IR, 71, 74-75). If inanimate matter contains its own overcoming through producing animate matter, then one can understand Jonas’s claim that “the triumph which materialism achieved in Darwinism contains the germ of its own overcoming” (PL, 53).

According to Jonas, early philosophers of modern science, save for Hobbes and Gassendi, followed a “conveniently dualistic view” until the advantages of such a view were exchanged for the “materialistic monism in the doctrine of universal evolution” (PL, 53). In a note, Jonas even suspects that Descartes’ isolating of *res cogitans* was for the sake of *res extensa*, especially if one considers his “preoccupation with the metaphysical and methodological foundation of a science of nature” (PL, 54, n. 7). With materialistic monism finding expression in evolutionism, the mental attributes came to be explained as “sports” that had been “thrown up in the mechanics of organic mutation” (PL, 53), and thus not as being produced in the manner of “an abrupt ingression of an ontologically foreign principle” (PL, 57).

Based upon the principle of the continuity of descent, mind was not solely the attribute of man, since gradualism entailed that through proportionate degrees the human mind evolved from a prehuman evolutionary history. The evolved human mind, however, exhibits an inwardness that a mechanistic account of things cannot adequately grasp. Life thus poses a problem in that its inwardness is not measureable as the outward properties of *res extensa* are. For this reason, Jonas sees that within the “hour of the final triumph of materialism, the very instrument of it, ‘evolution,’ implicitly transcended the terms of materialism and posed the ontological question anew—when it just seemed settled.” At this juncture, Jonas shows that within evolutionism he can develop a “new ontology” and thus forgo the rehearsing of a traditional ontology. To be sure, such a return for Jonas would be unfruitful, since “all contemporary revisions of traditional ontology indeed start, almost axiomatically, from the conception of being as becoming, and in the phenomenon of cosmic

evolution look for the key to a possible stand beyond the old alternatives” (PL, 58). I pause here only to point out that for Jonas evolutionism, for the most part, has become the axiomatic starting point for a new ontology. Furthermore, this statement recalls Jonas’s desire to stand beyond the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. In understanding “being as becoming” Jonas believes that with the origins of life teleology is objectively expressed in the world. Throughout evolutionary history, new purposes appear in the community of descent, entailing that purpose is not first born in the realm of human subjectivity.

With the philosophy of the mind being linked to the philosophy of the organism, Jonas arrives at a logically consistent account of the philosophy of life. Understanding how he arrived at this account is a laborious undertaking. Suffice it to say that for Jonas the emergence of life from inanimate matter marked an “ontological revolution” that was achieved “by means of metabolism” (PL, 81). Metabolism made possible the “basic freedom” of the organism, and the form of the organism was independent from its very own matter (PL, 81). Only through the process of metabolism did the organism maintain its distinctness from matter. Metabolism, then, “is itself the first form of freedom” (PL, 3). With the continued threat of its negative, that is, death, living form must affirm itself and “existence affirmed is existence as a concern” (PL, 4). In affirming itself and moving beyond mere matter, life nevertheless remains in need of it (PL, 5). In becoming distinct from mere matter, purposiveness finds expression in the organism and its desire to continue its life. Purposiveness can be found at all levels of life, in the “irritability of lowly organisms,” in the “urge and effort and anguish of animal life endowed with motility and sense-organs,” and in the “consciousness, will and thought of man.” Teleology is not to be replaced with mechanical causality but is rather another process within the nature of things. And thus, for Jonas, “there is no organism without teleology; there is no teleology without inwardness; and: life can be known only by life” (PL, 90-91).

II. THE DAWNING TRUTH OF ECOLOGY

Finding purpose within nature, for Jonas, was crucial to the possibility of articulating an objective ethic. In the “Epilogue: Nature and Ethics” of *the Phenomenon of Life*, Jonas envisioned that beyond the horizon his philosophical biology enables the search for an ethic that would ultimately be founded on his new ontology. Such a vision found form in his *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. Where evolutionism was the starting point for Jonas’s own philosophical biology in his *Phenomenon of Life*, the offspring of evolutionary theory, namely the science of ecology, would be his starting point in *The Imperative of Responsibility*. It is not so much that Jonas

inquires into the ontological import of ecological theory, but rather he is much more interested in the predictions of ecology and even then in the general clamor that accompanies them. Yet to be precise, the clamor arose from modern technology's excess of power, which still threatens to overwhelm the limits of nature or at the very least to expose vulnerabilities through "damage already done." This shock, according to Jonas, led to "the concept and nascent science of ecology" (IR, 6).

Ecology appears almost as a stand in for religion in eliciting thoughts on the transgression of limits (IR, 137,141,146, 152,183-184, 185, 188-189). Jonas's calls for "austerity" or "retrenchment" or a "spirit of asceticism" are premised on the exclusion from all appraisals of the "unpredictable intervention of a new religion," which leaves scientific ecology as the only real option for grounding demands for austerity to check the "frenzy of material success" (IR, 147). For Jonas, the "dawning truth of ecology" has the political effect of placing a "hitherto unknown damper on progressivist faith, socialist no less than capitalist" (IR, 189). To be sure, the benefits of technology dim when noticeable side effects on a detrimental or catastrophic scale are unleashed: the "equilibrium laws of ecology...will assert their right all the more terribly the more they have been bullied to the extreme of their tolerance" (IR, 188). Instead of a violent grace issuing forth from a divine entity, transgression of natural limits issues in catastrophes that, if they don't lead to a sudden end for humanity, will leave a "ravaged earth" where the "remnant of mankind" will have to start anew (IR, 141).

Where, then, do the limits of nature lie? This question and others pertaining to the proximity to these limits is fielded in the "domain of the infant science of ecology, and as to particulars in the fields of the biologist, the agronomist, the chemist, the geologist, the meteorologist, and so forth...it also ropes in the economist and engineer, the city planner and transportation specialist, and so forth. Only the interdisciplinary pooling and integration of all these will lead to the global environmental science that is needed." As for the philosopher, Jonas himself, he "has nothing to say, only to listen." And in listening, Jonas comments, that the philosopher "cannot borrow firm results for his purposes from the present state of the art. All quantitative predictions and extrapolations, even in single disciplines, are at this time still uncertain, let alone their integration into the ecological whole, if such should ever be computationally feasible at all" (IR, 189).

What then, according to Jonas, are the philosopher's purposes in light of what he or she hears from the realm of science? First, what is heard? For Jonas, the concern is not with a "sudden catastrophe" brought on by a "suicidal atomic holocaust" but rather the concern is with the slow, "gradual catastrophe" that is precipitated when the thresholds have been transgressed through "rising production, consumption, and

sheer population growth” and “processes initiated by us will run away from us on their own momentum, and toward disaster.” Jonas comments that the threat of a nuclear war can be avoided, for the most part, by “sane” or “naked” fear, which readily comes to the aid of reason (IR, ix, 191). In the Hobbesian sense, fear of a violent death is known or readily perceived and “its potential ever present,” which is elicited by our desire for self-preservation. In contemplating the well-being of future generations and the accompanying state of the earth, such fear barely, if at all, informs our feeling about the “imagined fate,” principally because we do not have an attachment to future generations nor will share their fate. Jonas thus distinguishes his use of fear from Hobbes’s, which is worth quoting extensively:

The fear in question then cannot be, as in Hobbes, of the ‘pathological’ sort (to use Kant’s term), which compulsively overcomes us in the face of its object, but rather a spiritual sort of fear which is, in a sense, the work of our own deliberative attitude. Such an attitude must be cultivated; we must educate our soul to a willingness to let itself be affected by the mere thought of possible fortunes and calamities of future generations, so that the projections of futurology will not remain mere food for idle curiosity or equally idle pessimism. Therefore, bringing ourselves to the emotional readiness, developing an attitude open to the stirrings of fear in the face of merely conjectural and distant forecasts concerning man’s destiny—a new kind of *éducation sentimentale*—is the second, preliminary duty of the ethic we are seeking, subsequent to the first duty to bring about that mere thought itself. Informed by this thinking, we are obliged to lay ourselves open to the appropriate fear. (IR, 28)

And thus the fear that Jonas seeks to employ is an educated or cultivated one. Yet, as noted, the duty to cultivate a fear of that which has not happened requires first the duty to conjure up through both “reason and imagination” scenarios that can “instill in us the fear whose guidance we need” (IR, 27). In other words, fantasies in the context of possible future catastrophes are not idle but are instead obligatory (IR, 34). Perhaps in this context, Jonas’s “new Machiavelli” would have to reconceive how fear could be cultivated in order to imaginatively discover an extreme situation. Whereas Machiavelli’s political thought takes its bearings by extreme conditions either known or not foreign to history, the new Machiavelli will have to envision future, unknown, circumstances of dire extremity.

To achieve this task, Jonas looks to a “science of hypothetical prediction, a ‘comparative futurology,’” to establish the outlook to which an *éducation sentimentale* will have to refer so as to instill the fear that is needed for guidance (IR, 26). The goal of “scientific futurology” is to offer “lengthened foresight”; yet such foresight will necessarily “fall short of the causal pregnancy of our technological deeds.” And as a result, Jonas says,

Consequently, an imaginative “heuristics of fear,” replacing the former projections of hope, must tell us what is possibly at stake and what we must beware of. The magnitude of those stakes, taken together with the insufficiency of our predictive knowledge, leads to the pragmatic rule to give the prophecy of doom priority over the prophecy of bliss. (IR, x)

While Jonas speaks of the “philosophical knowledge” concerning the “‘ideal’ truth about principles” as taking “precedence before everything else,” he goes on to say how scientific knowledge, which is not philosophic knowledge, is “*heuristically* already needed” within “the doctrine of principles.” Science, it seems, while not taking precedence over philosophy, nevertheless provides initially through predictions a “heuristics of fear.” These predictions inform philosophy of what is at stake through contemplating possible distortions of humanity via advances in biotechnology or barely surviving in a depleted environment, which thus enable “us to detect that in the normative conception of man which is to be preserved from it.... We know the thing at stake only when we know that it is at stake.” And thus, for Jonas, when the “image of man” comes under threat, we learn “his true image” by what we find ourselves recoiling from (IR, 26-27). An “imaginative ‘heuristics of fear’” thus concerns itself with *malum* in order to better discern a *bonum*, since the evil of a certain action can be experienced without complete awareness of its opposite: “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” (IR, 27). And with this conclusion, it appears that science is charged with the duty of envisioning what is woefully possible as opposed to what is wishfully so. That said, it is difficult to discern whether science summoned forth this outlook with the “dawning truth of ecology” and thus informed philosophy, or if philosophy, perhaps in the form of German romanticism, influenced ecology early on.

Be that as it may, in granting scientific knowledge the duty of envisioning what is to come is, for Jonas, “little more than a truism” (IR, 28), and there needs to be a “still higher degree” of science for prognosticating on the consequences of modern technology, even though there is no possibility of foreknowledge, but only at best hindsight (IR, 29). Foresight, implicitly, is distinct from foreknowledge, and the former necessarily has a imaginative quality when offering projections of what is probable: “the mere knowledge of *possibilities*, though certainly insufficient for cogent prediction, is fully adequate for the purposes of a *heuristic* casuistry that is to help in the spotting of ethical principles” (IR, 29). Scientific futurology is enlisted then in the search for a new ethic in the age of technology.

Heuristic casuistry makes use of thought experiments that are hypothetical in both the assumption of the premises and the inferences from them. Although the

consequent of the hypothetical is contingent, it has the task of revealing new moral principles through the imagination of a possible situation. According to Jonas,

The perceived possibility can now take the place of the actual occasion; and reflection on the possible, fully unfolded in the imagination, gives access to new moral truth. But *this* truth belongs to the sphere of ideas, that is, it is just as much a matter of a *philosophical* knowledge as is the truth of that grounding first principle we have yet to supply. Accordingly, *its* certainty is not dependent upon the degree of certainty of the factual, scientific projections which provided paradigmatic material for it. Whatever the ultimate accreditation for this kind of truth—be it the self-evidence of reason, and *a priori* of faith, or a metaphysical decision of the will—its pronouncements are apodictic, whereas those of the hypothetical thought experiments can at best be probabilistic. This is enough where they are meant to serve not as proofs but as illustrations. What is here contemplated, therefore, is a casuistry of the imagination which, unlike the customary casuistries of law and morality that serve the trying out of principles already known, assists in the tracking and discovering of principles still unknown. (IR, 29-30)

Jonas, then, has inverted the customary practice of casuistry. Instead of trying out known principles in new circumstances, heuristic casuistry invents imagined circumstances through making use of the best possible science, and then these circumstances are enlisted in the search for unknown principles. While the heuristic starting point is uncertain, the unknown principle once revealed becomes certain. The certainty arises as a result of an awareness of what is at stake in the imagined circumstance. Such an awareness brings with it axiomatic claims.

Jonas's new principle focuses on what is at stake in the imagined circumstances regarding the image of man. His imperative is as follows:

“Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine life”; or expressed negatively: “Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life”; or simply: “Do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth”; or, again turned positive: “In your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will. (IR, 11; quotes in the original)

Following this formulation, Jonas notes that at this stage in his thinking his argument is without proof, as an axiom, in positing the obligation that we cannot risk the future existence of humanity (IR,12). Or it could be affirmed as a “persuasive desirability of speculative imagination (as persuasive and as undemonstrable as the proposition that there being a world at all is ‘better’ than there being none)” (IR, 10). Why a heuristics of fear is to be encouraged is justified by this imperative: “The ethical axiom which validates the rule [i.e., to give the bad prognosis precedence over the good] is

therefore as follows: Never must the existence or the essence of man as a whole be made a stake in the hazards of action” (IR, 37). This imperative is a result of the growth of modern technology, in that now it is conceivable that we can do ourselves in, whereas in the past this was not imaginable since we lacked any such capability to erase humanity from the face of the earth (IR, 9).

Jonas’s axiomatic argument squares off with the axioms emanating from what he calls the “two dogmas”: 1) metaphysical truth does not exist, and 2) an “ought” cannot be derived from being (IR, 44). For Jonas, the latter relies upon an understanding of being that has been neutralized in terms of being “value free”: “To expand this trivial conclusion into a general axiom is equivalent to asserting that no other concept of being is possible,” which he sees as being “borrowed from the natural sciences” (IR, 44; cf. with 8, 23, 71, 77). Recall that Jonas’s own ontology expressed through his philosophical biology rests upon evolutionism as being an axiomatic starting point, and moreover, the discovery of his own ethical axiom has been initiated through his thoughts on the prognoses of scientific ecology. So it would appear that borrowing from science is not what is at issue here, but rather the blind acceptance of what was borrowed could prove to be problematic. A careful reading of Jonas’s political teaching thus suggests that one of his aims is to demonstrate how to judiciously use the natural sciences.

III. THE ART OF POLITICS AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

At this juncture, Jonas shows explicitly how his philosophical biology coincides with his imperative of responsibility. Recalling from above, Jonas reintroduces teleology into the discussion of evolutionary theory. In his *Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas makes an argument that in having ends nature also displays values: “We can regard the mere capacity to have any purposes at all as a good-in-itself, of which we grasp with intuitive certainty that it is infinitely superior to any purposelessness of being.” Thus follows the “ontological axiom” that purpose is its “own accreditation within being” (IR, 80). The goal-directedness of life stands out against the indifference of inanimate matter, and through living creatures, the act of self-preservation is testimony to the “self-affirmation of being [which] becomes emphatic in the opposition of life to death” (IR, 81-82). The existence of human beings in the evolution of nature brings forth a being, despite “if initially by blind chance,” capable of responsibility and is thus “a member of the moral order, that is, one who can be moral or immoral” (IR, 99-100). The first duty is to preserve this natural heritage that has been granted to human beings in the “idea of man.” But this should not lead to narrow anthropocentrism, since, for Jonas, “Every living thing is its own end which needs no further justification. In this sense man has nothing over other living beings—except

that he alone can have responsibility also for them, that is, for guarding their self-purpose” (IR, 98-99).

What is crucial to follow here is that in repeating the initial “intuitive certainty” as the “first axiomatic intuition,” Jonas brings to our attention that “granting it the dignity of an axiom (at first an act of pure theory)” is perhaps a “matter of ultimate metaphysical choice.” Yet if one reads the endnote following the phrase “*ontological axiom*” (IR, 80), Jonas has tucked away this comment: “This is somewhat of an *argumentum ad hominem*, insofar as it exploits a spontaneous preference for one of two logically possible alternatives. But perhaps with this very bias it restores the balance to a matter which, in the preemptive course that philosophical theory has taken in its long seclusion with nature science and itself, has not had its proper say for most of the time” (IR, 235, note 1). Jonas thus consciously “exploits a spontaneous preference” with his ontological axiom, which is a hint that he recognizes another logically possible alternative that is less salutary in the realm of politics. In connecting an axiomatic argument with an *argumentum ad hominem*, the reader must be careful not to associate Jonas’s use of the *argumentum ad hominem* with it being a logical fallacy, such as one would find described in a introductory textbook on logic. His expression of the *argumentum ad hominem* rules out such an interpretation. It is linked instead to public communication, or more specifically, it is a technique of political rhetoric.

Jonas perhaps learned about the *argumentum ad hominem* from Spinoza. Moreover, one is inclined to wonder if Jonas learned a thing or two from Spinoza’s approach to ethics in invoking axioms to further one’s argument. However that may be, the clearest example that I know of an *argumentum ad hominem* is in Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*, where *ad hominem* is understood as the act of accommodating a speech or an argument “to suit someone’s grasp”.¹⁰ Leo Strauss, who for much of his life was a friend of Jonas, interprets Spinoza as calling this type of communication “‘*ad captum vulgi*’ or, more frequently, ‘*ad captum alicuius*.’ For to speak with a view to the capacity of the vulgar necessarily means to argue *ad hominem*, or to accommodate oneself to the particular prejudices of the particular vulgar group or individual whom one happens to address.”¹¹ The connection of this understanding to Jonas’s own use of the argument is difficult to see, but it should be considered until perhaps a better understanding of the argument is presented. Worth keeping in mind, however, is the

¹⁰ Benedict Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, ed., trans., and an interpretive essay by Martin. D. Yaffe, Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2004, 2.10.9. See also John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A. D. Woolzley, New York: Meridian Books, 1964, p. 423. For a general discussion of the variety of *ad hominem* arguments, see Douglas Walton, *Ad Hominem Arguments*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998.

¹¹ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 178.

possibility in reading Spinoza's *Ethics* the rule of *ad captum vulgi loqui* cannot be disregarded simply because of the geometric approach of the work, since *ad captum vulgi loqui* could also mean to argue "*ad hominem* or *ex concessis*, i.e., from a covered position," which can hide rather than reveal one's true starting point.¹²

What the careful reader is to make of Jonas's endnote again is difficult to say. It does, however, lead us to the thought that Jonas's axiomatic arguments, both ethical and ontological, are paraded around on "untrodden ground" out of a sense of political urgency, not from philosophical certainty. Theory seems to serve political practice in Jonas's thought. Given the "broadening consensus" regarding the ecological challenges with which we are faced Jonas simply says: "Novel conditions and perils demand novel answers." Despite being written more than three decades ago, the novelty of Jonas's response still has a freshness that all subsequent philosophic responses do not even approach when it comes to addressing the ecological crisis. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, for Jonas, "A veritable *terra incognita* waits to be charted, and 'practical reason' in the Kantian sense, that is, moral reason, is bidden to seek its way by its own uncertain light" (IR, xi). Suffice it to say that if he, like Spinoza, argues from a covered position it may simply be due to the uncertain terrain that he treads upon. It would be difficult, moreover, for one to surmise that his new ontology and especially his new ethics were merely meant to accommodate his argument to the prejudices of his audience. Weren't they meant to challenge such prejudices? If so, then his *argumentum ad hominem* could be understood as having the sole purpose of "confutation of the opponent, in pursuance of the rabbinic injunction 'to learn what answer to give to a disbeliever'."¹³

It should be noted in passing that *The Imperative of Responsibility* grew out of a 1959 lecture (IR, xi), "The Practical Uses of Theory," which was included in *The Phenomenon of Life*. In the audience was Leo Strauss, who Jonas reports as having said,

"That's the most philosophical observation you've ever offered." "And besides," he added "it was so dense and concentrated that even I couldn't follow completely. No question, you have to work out these ideas further." This address represented a sort of milestone in my theoretical work.¹⁴

And surely it did in that it led Jonas to seek out a new ethic. We should keep in mind that the subtitle of Jonas's book is "In Search of An Ethics for the Technological Age." The most obvious place where Jonas fleshes out the argument of his lecture in

¹² Ibid., pp. 186, 189.

¹³ Harry Wolfson, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977, p. 57.

¹⁴ Jonas, *Memoirs*, p. 197.

The Imperative of Responsibility is in the section called “Man’s Disturbance of the Symbiotic Balance” (IR, 138-139). Here one finds the conventional distinction between the ancient philosophers’ use of *theoretical* reason, in which human beings employ reason for the sake of contemplating nature, and the modern philosophers’ use of reason to manipulate nature. He adds further in his argument: “Science, the life of theory, would be much better suited for the role of end-in-itself, but it can be this only for the small band of its devotees” (IR, 168). This understanding of science is viewed through Aristotelian eyes, and Jonas, moreover, believes that science is morally edifying in that “dedication to knowledge is an ethical good in itself...science—as generally a life of thought firmly committed to truth—*can* have a moralizing, ennobling influence on its practitioners, making them better persons, not only better scientists.... The ethics and psychology of the courtship of truth are timelessly the same. Also, their inward gains do not affect the general public.” Technological advances, however, affect the general public in an ambivalent way through having either moralizing or demoralizing effects (IR, 169).

Jonas, like the moderns, however, finds theory to be practically useful. While his notion of theoretical reason and science as a life of theory belong to an Aristotelian pedigree, he also courts the modern understanding of theory in that it is for the sake of practical use. In his *Memoirs* he appears to go against his Aristotelian understanding of theoretical reason: “Philosophy has probably always aspired to have a political impact (since politics is the realm, after all, in which ideas are converted into practice), and thereby to affect the human condition, to the extent this condition is shaped by the provisions of communal life.... How the secret effects of philosophy on the practice of government manifest themselves is hard for me to judge, but even without having studied political philosophy in detail I know that since the Renaissance philosophy has repeatedly chimed in when it was a question of identifying the best form of government.”¹⁵ Regardless of Jonas’s apparently conflicting statements, in *The Imperative of Responsibility* he chimes in on the best regime and thus uses theory for the sake of seeking the best practical regime given a catastrophic scenario.

In thinking through the best regime, Jonas’s premises his thought in the following manner: “All this holds on the assumption made here that we live in an apocalyptic situation, that is, under the treat of a universal catastrophe if we let things take their present course” (IR, 140). This assumption leads to the concern of imposing some

¹⁵ Jonas, *Memoirs*, pp. 208-209. For a discussion that considers Aristotle’s work on physics as having a salutary character, see David Bolotin, *An Approach to Aristotle’s Physics: With Particular Attention to the Role of His Manner of Writing*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. The work also moves beyond the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns in an unconventional manner.

type of “self-limitation” upon our technological prowess, consumption, and population growth before the “barriers of nature” are transgressed (IR, 141-142). One can readily see how Jonas’s imaginative heuristics of fear is dependent upon scientific projections from the science of ecology and related fields and how these taken together were crucial in the search for an imperative of responsibility, as they helped to provide the scenarios where an imperative of responsibility could be ascertained. With the imperative in hand, the task is to relate it to politics, where Jonas wonders whether a modified Marxist regime is better suited to meet the ecological challenges ahead than one that is liberal and capitalist (IR, 142).

On this aspect of the text, Kerry Whiteside’s interpretation of *The Imperative of Responsibility* ties together Jonas’s reliance upon a “global environmental science” with authoritarian politics, and moreover, faults Jonas’s comparison of actual democratic regimes with an idealized communist regime. He says, “The natural sciences are hard for most people to understand, and anyway, the public is disinclined to limit its ecologically destructive practices voluntarily. So again, ecoauthoritarianism follows from Jonas’s reasoning about the nature of nature.”¹⁶ Yet, in the section “Examining the Abstract Chances in the Concrete,” it is hard to evince that Jonas does not consider the difficulties a communist state would encounter in practice. He even offers specific examples of real regimes (IR, 151-160). In moving away from the assertion that Jonas is an ecoauthoritarian, my interpretation of Jonas’s thought on the possible need for a “well-intentioned, well-informed tyranny possessed of the right insights” is that his argument is a manifestation of the heuristics of fear. In making a case on behalf of the merits of authoritarianism in times of an ecological crisis, Jonas puts us on guard against enabling an extreme situation where the resort to such a regime becomes necessary. In order to voluntarily reduce our consumption and take up the practice of austerity, an argument that threatens the possible recourse to force in such a scenario might persuade one freely to take measures beforehand. Jonas, after all, says “I believe that the solution lies in this direction—freely if possible, compelled if necessary” (IR, 184). It should go without saying that compulsion, unfortunately, would become requisite if certain thresholds of nature were transgressed. Jonas thus envisions an extreme situation in order to try to persuade the present generation to take measures to ensure that tyranny does not become the most practical regime. In a sense one could say that he does something similar to Plato in *The Republic*, where it has been argued that Plato makes use of political idealism to counter political

¹⁶ Kerry Whiteside, *Precautionary Politics: Principle and Practice in Confronting Environmental Risk*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006, pp. 98-101.

idealism.¹⁷ In a similar spirit, Jonas uses political dystopianism to counter the possibility of a political dystopia from coming into being. That this might be the case is perhaps suggested by his comment that Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* serves a "heuristic function" in seeking an imperative of responsibility (IR, 30).

What needs to occur regarding the state is the inspiring of austerity within its functions and among its people. Yet since Machiavelli, however, Jonas notes that the state as a "moral institution" has vanished. This transformation has carried over into the "liberal view of the state," which has become "a utilitarian institution which should protect the safety of the individuals, but within bounds leave the widest room to the free play of forces and, especially, interfere as little as possible in citizen's private lives. The concepts of rights to be assured overshadows that of duties to be demanded" (IR, 173). What is needed according to Jonas is a state that can enact public policies guided by the imperative of responsibility (IR, 12), and if matters become dire, compel or deceive people into adopting a stricter lifestyle.

For Jonas, Marxism has the merit of preaching a moralism that fosters "a spirit of frugality, alien to capitalist society" (IR, 147). Despite its utopian shortcomings, Jonas is impressed with Marxism's ability to inspire enthusiasm for sacrifice, which capitalism seems to be unable and even unwilling to accomplish (IR, 148). After moderating Marxism's utopian, Promethean dreams, Jonas offers up his version of a sobered Marxism as the best possible political framework should a tyranny become necessary, one that hopefully lacks the vices of fear (IR, 170).

To encourage people to become enthusiastic about "humanity tightening its belt," however, may require the use of mass deception or "Plato's noble lie" (IR, 149), which he finds to be a "good stiffener against liberal naiveté" (IR, 239). Jonas notes that this tactic will be perhaps "all that politics will eventually have to offer" (IR, 149). Surely, it would be noble to lie with the thought of curtailing the present generations wastefulness, if it meant that the future of humanity would remain possible. Nonetheless, it is difficult to conceive how such a lie could be pulled off. Yet might Jonas's contemplation of the necessity of a noble lie be similar to his thoughts on the necessity of necessity of tyranny in an ecological crisis? They appear to be both a clever and noble use of heuristics in order to make humanity think about how our actions will force such means of ruling upon us. Jonas, moreover, flirts with the thought of giving "effect to the principle of fear under the mask of the principle of hope" (IR, 149). To achieve this one might make use of the ideal of utopianism and

¹⁷ Seth Benardete, *The Archaeology of the Soul: Platonic Readings of Ancient Poetry and Philosophy*, eds. Ronna Burger and Michael Davis, South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2012, p. 360.

the principle of equality, which he deems to be useful fictions if directed toward generating enthusiasm and trust. The closer that human affairs measures up to egalitarian justice the better, but when it cannot, for Jonas, “it must look that way”; whereas the ideal of utopia is useful even though it is false, which Jonas takes to mean: “if the truth is too hard to bear then the good lie must do service” (IR, 151). While Jonas admittedly holds that the noble lie may simply become necessary as a last resort, he does wonder, however, if the recourse to the noble lie underestimates people: “Perhaps the grim truth can also inspire, and not just the few but eventually the many as well. This is the better hope in dark times” (IR, 151). While he doesn’t come out and say it, Jonas’s heuristics of fear appears to be one step removed from the noble lie. Given the uncertainty of global environmental science, moreover, the heuristics of fear doesn’t even offer the “grim truth” but rather a grim, possible scenario. It appears, then, that a heuristics of fear is between the good lie and the grim truth, and it is intended to make us contemplate the worst-case scenario and the type of politics that will become requisite in such a setting. With this vision before us, it becomes possible to envision a reorientation where choice, not necessity, guides human action in the present. With this interpretation of Jonas’s political thought, Jonas is viewed not as a champion of ecotyranny but shows how this might become necessary if our policies are not shaped to some degree by a “prophecy of doom”.

Given Jonas’s emphasis on survival and the use of fear in politics, Jonas himself might qualify as a “new Machiavelli” with many esoteric features to his thought. Even Jonas’s own cynicism doubts that people within a privileged position will be able to renounce voluntarily their excessive ways of living on behalf of future generations and for nations less well off (IR, 149). While his “heuristics of fear” and his thoughts on a “well-intentioned, well informed tyranny possessed of the right insights” might be meant to spur us into action, the latter in the end has the sound of a modest utopian hope should an ecological necessity upset our comfortable lives (IR, 149). Has there ever been a “well-intentioned, well informed tyranny” in human history? Regardless, supposing the grim truth or the worst-case scenario could inspire enthusiasm for austerity, Jonas believes that maturity requires leaders to choose “selfless fear instead of selfless hope” based upon “moral-intellectual freedom.” Thus to be acquainted with Jonas’s philosophic arguments is something that mature leaders should seek. Yet Jonas leaves it to the “art of politics and not to philosophy” to shape the “public communication of the sobering truth” (IR, 162). Such a delegation of responsibility hints at the blurring in public discourse of the distinction between the worst-case scenario and the grim truth for the sake of a noble, political purpose. After all, the “grim truth” and the “sobering truth” are not truth simply. And here enters the call

for a “new Machiavelli” among the “practitioners of political science” “who would, however, have to propound his teaching in strict esotericism” (IR, 149). Could it be that Jonas himself was a “new Machiavelli” of sorts in that he sought to educate the practitioners of political science while not counting himself as being among them?

For much of *The Imperative of Responsibility* Jonas was concerned with the urgent task of the “quest for foundations: establishing them as best we can is (theoretical interest aside) of practical importance” (IR, 25). Jonas’s ontological argument, moreover, is made for the sake of ethics (IR, 71), or at least, he leads us to believe that. Should in the end Jonas’s regime analysis, ontology, and ethics meet with problems, it would be good to recall that his arguments, or at least one of them, are those of an *argumentum ad hominem*, where one logically possible alternative is chosen over another in order to restore a sort of balance and, more importantly, for the salutary effects that they have on human affairs. In fact, Jonas ends his book on an Aristotelian note, conceding the charge of being one-sided in privileging a heuristics of fear over one of hope. It is not that he is anti-technological or antisience; he certainly is not (see IR, 184, 189). Rather, he says, “In thus paying tribute to the present state of things, our one-sidedness follows the ancient ethical council of Aristotle that, in the pursuit of virtue as the ‘mean’ between two extremes of excess and deficiency, one should fight that fault more which one is more prone to and therefore more likely to commit, and rather lean over in the opposite direction, toward the side less favored by inclination or circumstances” (IR, 204). This advice is the ethical council Jonas gives to all human beings, and moreover, it is the advice one must heed and keep in mind in order to grasp the ennobling aspects of an “imaginative heuristics of fear.”

CONCLUSION

If the “hard order of ecology” (IR, 137) and the tyranny born of necessity are to be evaded freely, then giving voice to the “imaginative ‘heuristics of fear’” appears to be one way in which a politician through political rhetoric could inspire “enthusiasm for austerity” with the purpose of surviving or averting any real or potential crisis (IR, 148). Regardless of the state of a “global environmental science” today, in 1979 Jonas notes how all scientific predictions and extrapolations are uncertain (IR, 189). With this in mind, we have to think through how the uncertainty of this knowledge encouraged Jonas to develop a new ethic grounded in a new ontology in order to prevent any looming or potential catastrophe, which is what I have sought to do in this essay. For Jonas, the public communication of this new ethic, however, must take its cue from the heuristics of fear, which could prove to be ennobling through making the predictions that are the basis for such a heuristics false. Jonas aptly states, “The prophecy of doom is made to avert [a disaster from] coming, and it would be the

height of injustice later to deride the ‘alarmists’ because ‘it did not turn out so bad after all.’ To have been wrong may be their merit” (IR, 120). And thus the resulting falsehood for Jonas would be a price worth paying for heeding the call of a noble heuristics of fear, especially if the alternative would have been a terrible truth.

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