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Responsibility in Practice: Hans Jonas as Environmental Political Theorist

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ABSTRACT

Hans Jonas’ philosophy of responsibility is a major contribution to environmental ethics and political theory, but aspects of it have proven controversial. Jonas’ critics, in particular Richard Wolin, have argued that his thought is deeply reactionary. By contrast, Nathan Dinneen has sought to show that Jonas’ apparent eco-authoritarianism is misunderstood. I argue here that Dinneen’s interpretation is too probably too generous, but also that Wolin’s wholesale critique is fundamentally misguided. Rather, the vast majority of Jonas’ thought is of enduring value, including a nascent ecological republicanism which has thus far been overlooked by commentators.

KEYWORDS

Hans Jonas; environmental political theory; environmental ethics; civic republicanism; precautionary principle

1. Introduction

Hans Jonas (1903–1993) is largely unknown in the English-speaking world, despite having had a significant influence on continental European environmentalism in the 1980s. It is to be welcomed, then, that in a series of articles Nathan Dinneen (2013, 2014, 2017) has sought to show how Jonas’ philosophy remains strikingly relevant to key issues in environmental political theory. For the most part I am in agreement with Dinneen, but part ways over the theory of the state Jonas arrives at in The Imperative of Responsibility. This emerges from what Dinneen calls Jonas’ ‘regime analysis’ (2017, p. 2): the question of which political system is best suited to tackle the ecological crisis by acting on long-range, scientifically-informed predictions about the environmental consequences of our collective activity. It is an undoubtedly urgent question, one which he was right to raise. Jonas’ answer, however – which we shall look at in detail below – has had a generally hostile reception. The model of governance he thought necessary, though not desirable, has been variously characterised as ‘antihumanist’ (Ferry, 1992/1995, p. 81), ‘paternalistic’ (Bernstein, 1995, p. 17), even an ‘eco-tyranny’ (Furnari, 2006, p. 152). Arguably the fiercest critique comes from Richard Wolin (2015, pp. 119–129), who interprets Jonas as a reactionary thinker hostile to modernity, in the vein of his teacher and key influence, Martin Heidegger.

According to Dinneen, however, these criticisms are the result of a basic interpretative error, as Jonas’ suggestion that authoritarianism is best placed to forestall ecological ruin is not at all to be taken literally. In this article I set out Jonas’ political theory and resolve this issue, using a range of sources rather than just The Imperative of Responsibility. I conclude – with no small amount of regret – that Dinneen is wrong in
this respect: Jonas probably was sincere in his suggestion that authoritarianism repre-
sents the best chance of survival. However, I also argue, contrary to Wolin’s misguided
critique, that this does not invalidate Jonas’ significant contributions to environmental
philosophy. On the contrary, I show that his ethic of responsibility, ‘heuristic of fear’, and
precautionary principle are theoretical insights of real worth and ought not to be tainted
by association. Finally, I attempt to bolster Jonas’ reputation as a political theorist by
highlighting moments in his post-Imperative work which indicate that he was moving
towards a republican conception of citizenship and the state, thus far overlooked by
commentators.

2. The Ethic of Responsibility

Jonas’ political theory is tied to his moral philosophy, so much so that no account of the
former can be given without the latter. He argues that all previous ethical systems have
been essentially restricted to the polis: the public place where human beings conduct their
affairs in spatial and temporal proximity (1979/1984, pp. 3–4). For that purpose conven-
tional morality largely remains adequate, but the conditions which gave rise to it no
longer hold: the boundaries of human action have changed, a fact which places new
demands on ethics and politics (pp. 6–10). The change in action Jonas refers to is the vastly
increased power afforded by modern technology over our environment (particularly, but
not exclusively, through its industrial application). The reach of our actions has radically
extended both spatially and temporally, such that we now have the power to determine
not only the condition but even the existence of future generations and the biosphere.
The task of contemporary ethics, as Jonas conceives it, is to formulate a rationally-binding
obligation to ensure a future for both. The task of political theory is to devise institutions
which would ensure collective action was undertaken in accordance with that ethic.

To this end Jonas formulates a new categorical imperative: ‘Do not compromise the
conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth’ (p. 11). Or, in its positive
variant: ‘Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of
genuine human life [on earth]’ (p. 11).3 This rule forms the centre-piece of Jonas’ theory
of responsibility, which he claims is the appropriate ethic for our technological civilisa-
tion. Why? Because ‘the claims on responsibility grow proportionately with the deeds of
power’ (1982, p. 893), the one tracking the other. From the unprecedented power we
now possess follows ‘the novel expansion of responsibility to the condition of the

Jonas argues that for practical purposes both duties coalesce around responsibility
for the existence of humanity. The reason is as follows. He claims that the most
fundamental, incontrovertible, and ‘timeless archetype of all responsibility’ (p. 130) is
that of a parent for their child. When confronted with a vulnerable newborn we are
unconditionally called to care for it, and not simply as it is now, but for the duration of
its development. Crucially, the telos of this maturation is the coming-to-be of another
responsible being. Jonas claims that the particular value of this quality – the capacity for
morality – means that in any instance of responsibility for human life it is that to which
we are above all responsible:
The appearance of this value [i.e., morality] in the world does not simply add another value to the already value-rich landscape of being but surpasses all that has gone before with something that generically transcends it. This represents a qualitative intensification of the valuableness of Being as a whole, the ultimate object of our responsibility. Thereby [...] the capacity for responsibility as such [...] becomes its own object in that having it obligates us to perpetuate its presence in the world. (1996, p. 106).

For Jonas, then, regardless of humanity’s actual moral record the incontestable worth of its existence is accredited by its moral being, and the ever-present possibility for goodness this entails. Since this is an ideal, ‘we are, strictly speaking, not responsible to the future human individuals but to the idea of Man, which is such that it demands the presence of its embodiment in the world’ (1979/1984, p. 43).

In subsuming responsibility for future generations and the biosphere under responsibility for the ‘idea of Man’, Jonas’ ethic clearly has a humanist emphasis. However, he claims this does not collapse ‘into a narrow anthropocentric view’ (p. 136). The reason is that although ‘care for the future of all nature on this planet [is] a necessary condition of man’s own’ (p. 136), our obligations to the biosphere exceed this instrumentalist logic. Rather, ‘the common destiny of man and nature, newly discovered in the common danger, makes us rediscover nature’s own dignity and commands us to care for her integrity over and above the utilitarian aspect’ (p. 137). In other words, non-human life is an object of responsibility for its own sake, not just for ours, but humanity’s existence can unproblematically be the principal object of our responsibility since it now entails obligations to all life. As such, Jonas’ ethic is intended to walk a line between anthropocentrism and biocentrism, preserving a humanist impulse whilst also accounting for the intrinsic – and not simply instrumental – value of non-human life.

3. New Rules for Action

As the new dimensions of responsibility follow from the increased power of collective rather than individual action, Jonas attempts to bridge moral and political philosophy. To bring his future-oriented ethic to bear on the realm of public policy he calls for a ‘science of hypothetical prediction, a “comparative futurology”’ (p. 26) to underpin a ‘heuristics of fear’ (p. 202) which might guide our actions. In introducing such a dubious-sounding concept one should stress that Jonas’ heuristic is relevant only to credible, rather than arbitrary, fears. The empirical basis would consist of the ‘certain, probable, or possible outcome[s]’ (p. 26) of ‘presently recognizable trends in the technologic-industrial process’ (p. 30). These assessments would be provided by a range of experts, Jonas envisioning ‘the biologist, the agronomist, the chemist, the geologist, the meteorologist, [...] the economist and engineer’ pooling their knowledge to form a ‘global environmental science’ (p. 189). The end result might, perhaps, look something like a more ambitious version of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Of course, policy does not rest on scientific knowledge alone, but also concerns what is and what is not desirable. As such, Jonas claims that to bring these descriptive analyses to life we must devise ‘well informed thought-experiment[s]’ (p. 30) regarding what could follow from a particular course of action. The value of envisioning such futures, assuming they are scientifically grounded, is in ‘developing an attitude open to the stirrings of fear in the face of merely conjectural and distant forecasts – a new kind
of éducation sentimentale’ (p. 28). In imagining realistic future scenarios we are led to fear for the vulnerable good, that for which we are responsible. In the context of the ecological crisis this is the integrity of the biosphere and all that relies upon it, and since we are responsible for the biosphere to then let it come to harm would contravene the idea of Man. Hence we are not to be guided by a ‘pathological […] but rather a spiritual sort of fear’ (p. 28) for humanity as a responsible being. Having perceived the threat to an object of our responsibility we can then act so as to prevent that harm about. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, ‘[t]he prophecy of doom is made to avert its 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’ (p. 120).

Jonas admits that the ‘uncertainty of prognostications’ (p. 28) poses a problem for his heuristic. In short, when applied to hypothetical situations it only leads us to prohibit actions of which we can be certain, or more certain than not, of the consequences. For example, it is likely that unabated fossil fuel emissions will have severely detrimental effects on the biosphere for centuries to come (IPCC, 2014, p. 14), a course of action which clearly falls foul of his heuristic. However, there are technologies, such as geengineering, or the development of ‘strong’ artificial intelligence, which present us with great uncertainty as to the good or ill they might bring about. The problem is that we cannot at present say whether the optimistic or pessimistic assessment is more likely: the benefits and harms are at this stage too remote and conjectural. To deal with this impasse Jonas offers an early formulation of a rule to guide our collective action in the face of high-stakes and uncertainty: the precautionary principle.

In the event that a course of action or use of a particular technology poses the threat of catastrophe – however uncertain the threat, and benign the other possible outcomes – Jonas recommends that we give precedence to ‘the bad over the good prognosis’ (1979/1984, p. 31). The reason harks back to his categorical imperative: any action in which the existence of humanity as a responsible being is at stake is ruled out in advance. The logic of his theory is here reminiscent of Pascal’s wager, which famously holds that it is better to live a life according to God than not, as the cost of wrongly doing so is minimal compared to that of wrongly doubting God’s existence. Likewise, Jonas’ theory bids us to avoid catastrophe in the future by making a comparably minimal sacrifice now. Hence Jonas states – even coming close to using the phrase ‘precautionary principle’ – ‘we must bow to the command to allow, in matters of such capital eventualities, more weight to threat than to promise and to avoid apocalyptic prospects even at the price of thereby perhaps missing eschatological fulfilsments. It is the command of caution’ (p. 32, emphasis added).

Kerry Whiteside is one of the few English-language commentators to acknowledge Jonas’ influence on the precautionary principle, and raises key questions about his formulation of it. Above all, Whiteside observes that while the Kantian basis of Jonas’ formulation – the new categorical imperative – means that we are unconditionally barred from taking certain actions, these actions are in practice rare (2006, pp. 107–108). That is to say, what we gain in clarity we lose in breadth of application, as ‘it is made in such a way that it almost never applies’ (p. 108). Whiteside is correct: certain technologies often seen as paramount cases for a precautionary approach do not fall under the remit of Jonas’ version of the principle. Take agricultural genetic engineering: opponents claim that a proliferation of genetically modified crops and livestock
could be damaging for biodiversity and the global food supply. Crucially, such effects could be irreversible as the modifications are designed to be hereditary. But nothing suggests that genetically modified organisms alone would risk the integrity of the biosphere as a whole, as Jonas’ principle would require for a precautionary veto.

Does this pose a fundamental problem for Jonas’ theory? I would argue not. Firstly, it is simply not the case that ‘critics are right to dismiss versions [of the precautionary principle] that follow a logic analogous to Pascal’s wager, because that argument requires the assumption of an infinite catastrophe, which is seldom, if ever, the case in environmental decisions’ (Johnson, 2012, p. 9). We might be justified in dismissing a principle if it never applied in real-world scenarios, but why should we do so if it does apply in some cases, albeit rarely? Secondly, remember the scope of Jonas’ imperative of responsibility: to supplement, rather than replace, traditional morality. Conventional consequentialist reasoning can justify a broader but weaker version of the precautionary principle, whereas Jonas’ version categorically tells us what we must not put at stake; the two are complementary, not mutually exclusive. Finally, recall that Jonas’ version was intended for not just individual technologies, but general practices and courses of action. The fact that our global technological civilisation is on course for ecological ruin raises the critical question of how to avert it – bringing us to Jonas’ theory of the state.

4. Farewell to Utopia

Jonas’ theory of responsibility has thus far yielded some valuable insights – enough, I would suggest, to merit serious consideration of his work by environmental ethicists and political philosophers. Unfortunately these risk being tainted by association with Jonas’ theory of the state, which I argue collapses into eco-authoritarianism. After setting out his arguments and rejecting Dinneen’s interpretation of them, I shall show that Jonas later changed course, moving shortly before his death toward a form of ecological republicanism. Both theories are attempts at answering a legitimate and pressing question: which political system ‘offers the greatest likelihood of meeting successfully the completely new challenge confronting human society: how we can live with nature – or how nature can survive together with us’ (2008, p. 210). In other words: how can we best politically implement the precautionary approach recommended by the heuristic of fear?

Jonas begins with a rejection of productionism: the prioritisation of material production, consumption, and economic growth. Productionism is characterised, he argues, by the Enlightenment ‘Baconian ideal’ of relieving humanity’s estate through the technological mastery of nature. Whilst Bacon himself could not have known it, we have for decades now been aware that such a vision has sown the seeds of ecological ruin, and what was originally ‘Promethean arrogance’ (1603/1984, p. 143) has become a wilfully blind utopianism. Although a productionist tendency belongs to both of the political systems he examines – the capitalist West and the then-communist East – he regarded it as stronger in the former, indeed, as almost synonymous with capitalism, which is characterised (or perhaps caricatured) as ‘the unrestrained use of the world’s resources, of the environment, of nature, impelled by the pocket-motive and competition’ (1992, p. 217). As such, Jonas is sceptical on a priori grounds that it could rise to the challenge, demanded by his imperative, of averting the course of disaster (1979/1984, pp. 145–146).
What of Soviet communism, the only readily available alternative at that time? Jonas notes that the moral force of Marxist-Leninism is that it ‘proposes to bring the fruits of the Baconian revolution under the rule of the best interests of man’ (p. 143). Of course, this once again poses a fundamental problem since productionism is precisely the source of our ecological predicament. The fact that the techno-utopian drive is here inspired by a sense of distributive justice is commendable, but little help regarding the question of ecological limits. If the earth cannot withstand continued capitalist production, then neither can it contain an ‘onslaught on resources’ (p. 187) in the name of utopian communism. Hence the ‘dawning truth of ecology puts a hitherto unknown damper on progressivist faith, socialist no less than capitalist’ (p. 189).

The virtues of the Soviet communist system, if any are to be found, will be in its ability to constrain rather than promote the Baconian ideal. Jonas argues, again on a priori grounds, that Marxist-Leninism holds the ‘promise of a greater rationality in the management of the Baconian heritage’ (p. 145). Empirically, of course, this has to contend with a record of bureaucratic inefficiency and the fact that “socialism in one country” – finding itself in competition with actively, or at least ideologically, hostile foreign powers – is driven to raise production accordingly. Even if we suppose that there were a communist world state, centralisation of the sort associated with a command economy would require vast infrastructure and bureaucracy, and this alone could be sufficient impetus for technological development and economic growth (1979b, p. 36). To this we must add that following the collapse of the Soviet Union its unprecedented degree of environmental mismanagement became clear – this being, for Jonas, ‘one of the great disappointments’ (2001, p. 29) of the communist experiment. Prior to the emergence of this latter evidence, however, he regarded it as better able to act in line with ecological limits than a capitalist economy.

Jonas’ central political claim in The Imperative of Responsibility, then, is that our best hope is a Marxist-Leninist economy shorn of its productionism. However, with these means must go the utopian end: namely, a communist society composed of ‘true’ (i.e., emancipated) individuals, this being the theory’s ‘noblest and hence most dangerous temptation’ (1979/1984, p. 156). Why dangerous? Precisely because it bids us to risk what is of ultimate value – the existence and essence of humanity – for a ‘perfected’ form of that being. If protecting the idea of Man is the central duty of a politics of responsibility, then it necessitates the abandonment of radical material emancipation, leading Jonas to advocate a ‘post-Marxist’ (p. 127), or anti-utopian form of Marxist-Leninist economics.

5. The Statesman and Tyranny

Jonas’ argument for an ecological command economy over the free market is, I would argue, forgivable in itself. Although he takes the Soviet Union as his paradigm case, there is no necessary connection between production for need and totalitarianism, and so nothing said in praise of an austere form of Marxist-Leninist economics should entail acceptance of its political model. Unfortunately this is not a distinction Jonas upholds. As Walter Weisskopf notes (2014, p. 32), by framing his discussion in terms of the central Cold War belligerents Jonas pairs capitalism with democracy and communism with dictatorship. And, since he is here concerned with the relationship between humanity
and the natural world, rather than with human beings alone, Marxist-Leninism appears to offer better prospects. But there is a second reason that Jonas arrives at this unhappy conclusion, which is that he takes his theory of responsibility to entail, almost by logical extension, a paternalistic form of government. We shall see if this really stands to reason, and how it feeds into his acquiescence to an authoritarian politics.

Jonas draws a parallel between private and public responsibility, between the paradigm case of the parent’s responsibility for the infant and that of the statesman for their citizens. The basis of his comparison is as follows: firstly, both have other humans as their object. Secondly, both pertain to the ‘totality’, ‘continuity’, and ‘future’ of those beings (1979/1984, p. 98). The quality of totality refers to ‘all aspects’ of the object of responsibility, ‘from naked existence to highest interests’ (p. 101). In the case of the infant this makes sense, but regarding citizens is a disconcertingly strong claim. In defence of it Jonas cites Aristotle, who argued that the state ‘came into being so that human life would be possible, and continues in being so that the good life is possible’, from which Jonas concludes that this ‘is also the object of the true statesman’ (p. 101). Clearly, however, the fact that the state exists to make the good life possible does not entail that it is concerned with every aspect of citizens’ lives. Perhaps the most we can say is that in securing the body politic from outside threats, ensuring law and order, and providing access to education and the arts, the statesman has some – not total – responsibility for citizens’ lives.

The next quality was continuity. As with the above, this follows from the vulnerability of the body politic: ‘the insistent knowledge that the res publica too exists precariously’ (p. 104). For this reason it ‘cannot allow itself a vacation or pause, for the life of the object continues without intermission’ (p. 105). Here Jonas’ comparison appears sound, as in neither case is the responsibility periodic. Regarding the final quality, however – the future of the object of responsibility – it is again questionable. The parent’s responsibility for the infant is continuous only up to the point of maturity, and in accordance with this immanent telos must gradually relinquish its claim to totality, as Jonas actually points out (p. 108). Responsibility for the body politic, by contrast, is unending – though, as I say, never total – and passed on from one administration to the next.

We have seen, then, that Jonas was wrong when comparing parental and political responsibility to claim that ‘common traits make them blend into […] the primordial phenomenon of responsibility’ (p. 98). The one arises in witnessing the vulnerable infant while the other follows from an allocation of power over the collective of which one is a part. This distinction goes to the heart of their difference: responsibility for the infant rests on a fundamental asymmetry of power and vulnerability between the two parties (at least initially), whereas the statesman emerges from a group of equals to which they return in due course. It is thanks to this pre-existing equality that the statesman’s responsibility lacks totality, and should instead be understood only as a temporary suspension of previous relations. As discussed above, however, Jonas does not fully acknowledge this crucial distinction and is happy to more or less draw an equivalence. Even though his premises do not support it, there can be no doubt that Jonas finds a paternalistic form of government at least palatable.

The combination of tolerance of paternalism and the endorsement of a parsimonious Marxist-Leninist command economy leads Jonas’ political theory to a distasteful conclusion. Considering again the advantages of the Soviet system to reign in Baconian productionism, he counts ‘total government power’ amongst them – the only stipulations
being that it must be ‘well-intentioned’ and ‘well-informed’ (pp. 146–147). The reason given is that ‘decisions from the top, which can be made without prior assent from below, meet with no resistance (except perhaps passive) in the social body and […] are assured of implementation’ (p. 146). Such decisions could include, crucially, those of productive and consumptive austerity which run counter to the immediate self-interest of citizens, and would therefore ‘be difficult to get adopted in the democratic process’ (p. 146). In his defence, Jonas regards this power as advantageous only if we can trust an authoritarian government to take the right course of action (p. 151). He acknowledges that failure to use such power wisely risks far worse outcomes than capitalism is capable of (p. 145), but unfortunately does not recognise that such failure is, in fact, the overwhelming likelihood in an illiberal form of government, as John Stuart Mill long ago taught us.

If this were not concerning enough, Jonas asks how loyalty to such a government might be managed. As stated, the sorts of policies he regards as necessary for the survival of human and non-human life are unlikely to be popular with the general public – at least without immediate evidence before our eyes of the consequences of our productionist form of life, by which point it will be too late. Hence, for Jonas, the Soviet communist system once again appears advantageous, as ‘a maximum of politically imposed social discipline can ensure the subordination of present advantages to the long-term exigencies of the future’ (p. 142). The sort of ‘social discipline’ Jonas has in mind is not that of violent repression, but rather the ideological cultivation of a public ‘spirit of frugality’ (p. 147). And if the propagated truth of our ecological predicament fails to inspire the right sentiments, then Jonas claims that government would be required to engage in a sort of political mythology, convincing citizens that the ascetic society is the path to utopia. He speculates that ‘[p]erhaps this dangerous game of mass deception (Plato’s “noble lie”) is all that politics will eventually have to offer’ (p. 149).

Jonas thereby arrives at authoritarianism as the most plausible way to prevent ecological ruin. It cannot be said forcefully enough that he does not regard such a politics as ordinarily desirable; on the contrary, when considering what would otherwise constitute the best state for human beings Jonas points to democratic government, civil liberties, public ownership of industries, and a welfare state – i.e., European social democracy (pp. 174–175). Unfortunately, since he is comfortable with the notion of paternalistic governance, and concerned above all with how to rein in productionism and thereby ensure that there be a good future for human beings, democracy appears in that light as an acceptable, if regrettable, sacrifice.

6. The Heuristic Interpretation

Can Jonas’ theory of the state be saved, and if so, how? As stated earlier, Dineen offers an original way of doing so. He stresses the role played by the heuristic of fear in Jonas’ thought, and argues that the subsequent analysis of tyranny can only be understood in light of it. He specifically points to a passage which precedes the discussion of Marxist-Leninism’s advantages over capitalism, where Jonas says: ‘[a]ll this holds on the assumption made here that we live in an apocalyptic situation, that is, under the threat of a universal catastrophe if we let things take their present course’ (p. 140). For Dineen this reveals Jonas’ true and much-misunderstood intention: that if we fail to prevent ecological collapse then tyranny will force itself upon us by necessity, and it is therefore our
duty to envision this possible outcome precisely to avert it. In this way Jonas can be understood not as endorsing authoritarianism, but in fact the very opposite: engaging in the kind of well-informed thought experiment that his heuristic demanded so as to alert us to the likely terrible outcome of our present course of action. In Dineen’s words: ‘Jonas uses political dystopianism to counter the possibility of a political dystopia from coming into being’ (2014, p. 18).

Dineen’s interpretative twist finds support in a late lecture (which he does not cite) where Jonas says the following:

My dire prognosis that not only our material standard of living but also our democratic freedoms would fall victim to the growing pressure of a worldwide ecological crisis, until finally there would remain only some form of tyranny that would try to save the situation, has led to the accusation that I am defending dictatorship as a solution to our problems. I shall ignore what is a confusion between warning and recommendation. [...] This is, I want to emphasize, a worst-case scenario, and it is the foremost task of responsibility at this particular moment in world history to prevent it from happening. (1996, pp. 111–112, emphasis added).

We could also point to an interview in which Jonas suggests that ‘[i]n a lifeboat situation all rules cease to apply, and therefore ‘we must prevent that lifeboat situation from coming about’ (Jonas & Scodel, 2003, p. 367). It appears, then, that Dineen is correct to say that Jonas’ analysis of authoritarianism is in fact an application of his heuristic of fear to the domain of environmental political theory.

The suspicion lingers, however, that Jonas’ explanation above may be an ex post facto excuse in response to the heavy criticism he received. The main reason for thinking so is the absence of evidence in The Imperative that his arguments are not serious. The sole passage Dineen points to could easily be read as meaning that since we live in an ‘apocalyptic situation’ right now the political recommendations are meant accordingly. Then there is Jonas’ admission that he does not ‘stand aghast at the thought’ (p. 149) of using a noble lie to lead the population into austerity. This does not sound like part of an elaborate thought experiment, but very much sincere, which brings us to a connected problem with Dineen’s reading: it then becomes unclear when we can take Jonas at face value and when we must assume he is seeking to provoke. The discussion of the statesman’s responsibility – which as we have shown is clearly paternalistic and paves the way for authoritarianism – is presented as following on principle from his theory of responsibility. At what point in this chain does Jonas’ argument cease to be literal? For these reasons it seems more likely that Jonas’ arguments in The Imperative are meant to be taken at face value.

Drawing together various remarks, his post-Imperative position on the necessity of authoritarianism appears to be as follows. Ecological collapse is one possible future but not yet a certainty: for one thing, preliminary ecological shocks may well spur us on to act before it is too late. Harking back to the heuristic of fear, Jonas speculates that this might be enough to prevent the worst case scenario: ‘[w]hat I can imagine [...] readily is an outbreak of dire events leading to compromise among economic, political, and social power groups who would then reach an arrangement that is relatively acceptable in terms of people and planet’ (2001, p. 25). In the event that we should fail to take such action, however, Jonas is willing to make the ‘terrible concession’ that ‘tyranny would still be better than total ruin’ (1996, pp. 111–112). It would in those circumstances alone
be acceptable for states to ‘employ such means, which we now abhor or at least deplore, in order to save their own existence’ (Jonas & Scodel, 2003, p. 366). Such a system is therefore now conceived of as a last resort following the failure of democratic means, and preferable only to an alternative of ecological collapse precipitating a new ‘stage of primitivism’, of ‘mass poverty, mass death and mass murder, the loss of all treasures that spirit has produced’ (2001, p. 22).

Jonas’ final caveat is that if authoritarianism should prove necessary, he hopes this will be a temporary measure only, holding freedom in trust until such a time as it might be allowed to flourish once more:

We can make a terrible concession to the primacy of physical survival in the conviction that the ontological capacity for freedom, inseparable as it is from man’s being, cannot really be extinguished, only temporarily banished from the public realm. […] Given this faith, we have reason to hope that, as long as there are human beings who survive, the image of God will continue to exist along with them and will wait in concealment for its new hour. (1996, p. 112).

With this remark – bleak partly because it resorts to eschatology – Jonas’ theory of the state is still unlikely to satisfy many.

7. The Vitalist Interpretation

If, as I suggest, Jonas initially regarded authoritarianism as our best chance of survival, does it follow that his underlying theoretical framework – the ethic of responsibility, heuristic of fear, and precautionary principle – is also objectionable, his thought having revealed its true face? Richard Wolin argues as much in his book Heidegger’s Children (2015, pp. 101–133), an interpretation we shall now consider as an alternative to Dinneen’s.

Wolin argues that Jonas’ ethical, political, and metaphysical commitments all place him in the tradition of German vitalism, or Lebensphilosophie (p. 124–125), the life-oriented school of thought whose representatives include Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, Ludwig Klages, Ernst Jünger, and – in some respects – Heidegger. One immediately notes a political commonality amongst these thinkers in their proximity to fascism, either through intellectual association or (as in Heidegger’s case) active engagement. The explanation for this is a shared hostility to the modern epoch. According to the Lebensphilosophen, modernity’s rejection of life, quality, and Seele in favour of materialism, equality, and Geist has brought on the demise of Western humanity. The charge levelled by Wolin is that Jonas’ analysis – that modern technology imperils the existence and essence of humanity – amounts to more or less the same.

In support of this claim Wolin cites Jonas’ ethical foundations, which as we saw involve a recognition of the intrinsic value of non-human life, in turn accounting for our responsibility toward the biosphere. For Wolin, a ‘risk entailed by Jonas’s insistence on life as an absolute value is that our conception of the human good is devalued. Instead of setting our sights high and aiming at a notion of the good […] Jonas’s metaphysical vitalism tends to privilege “mere life” or survival’ (p. 121). According to Wolin, this ‘quasi-Darwinian’ (p. 124) tendency explains Jonas’ indulgence of authoritarianism, preserving life even at the cost of the good life. The underlying motivation is a ‘resolutely antimodern epistemological
orientation’ (p. 125) and ‘a disconsolate, Spenglerian sensibility’ (p. 129). As final proof Wolin points to an interview in which Jonas rhetorically asks:

Was modernity perhaps a mistake that needs to be corrected? Are we on the right path with this combination of scientific/technological progress and increased individual freedom? Has the modern age put us in certain respects on the wrong track, which must not be pursued further? (2001, p. 26).

Jonas offers no answer to these questions, but a critic might be able to divine one via his heuristic of fear. If we retrospectively apply it to our form of socio-economic life then presumably the entire modern epoch, which eventually gave rise to the ecological crisis, was indeed an error which ought to have been avoided – liberal democracy included.

However, the charge of anti-modernism only holds if one ignores key moments in Jonas’ thinking. Yes, he bases his politics on his ethics, and his ethics emerge from his philosophy of life. But one can only arrive at Wolin’s conclusion by overlooking the all-important idea of Man as a moral being, which tells us both why and how humanity must continue to be. Then there is Jonas’ heuristic of fear which does not, in fact, entail that modernity was an error. The heuristic requires that we extrapolate ‘from presently recognizable trends in the technologic-industrial process’. It goes without saying that Jonas does not believe early modern Europeans should have envisaged, and acted to prevent, the ecological destruction which would eventually follow from the scientific and industrial revolutions, since it was not at those times conceivable as an empirically-informed prediction. It is true that he suggested we not ‘be too modern’ (HJ 1–10–5e, p. 20), but this was precisely a matter of rejecting ‘certain developments which are ominous, which are dangerous, or which are undesirable’, not that ‘modernity as such was somehow a mistake’ (HJ 17–12–2, p. 3).

Finally there is the charge of a reactionary politics. Now, it certainly cannot be denied that Jonas’s theory of the state leads to an authoritarian conclusion, and to that extent I share Wolin’s deep distaste. But it is not the case, as Wolin claims, that social democracy ‘fails to make an impression’ on Jonas (2015, p. 126) – quite the opposite. And we must also note that Jonas’ political thought owes nothing to a social-Darwinian hierarchy of the fittest, or indeed any comparison with the natural world of the sort favoured by the Lebensphilosophen. On the contrary, he discusses at length the overwhelming dissimilarities between non-human life and the open-ended constitution of society (2016, pp. 22–41). Therefore Jonas’ theory of the state, however objectionable, does not truly resemble that of a Lebensphilosoph like Spengler.

8. The Republican Alternative

One might ask: how is Dinneen right to say that Jonas’ ethic of responsibility, heuristic of fear, and precautionary principle are of genuine and ongoing value, at the same time as Wolin is right that Jonas’ theory of the state is authoritarian, given that the latter is meant to follow from the former? The answer is that both are wrong to think that Jonas’ theory of the state properly follows from his ethic of responsibility. We recall, from the discussion above, that Jonas’ comparison of the statesman’s and the parent’s responsibility all too easily collapsed into paternalism. But this was
precisely because political responsibility is not analogous to parental responsibility, but different in kind.

Political responsibility, I suggest, emerges from civil society, and an environmental political theory generated on that basis may also make the necessary room for freedom and democracy. Indeed, such a theory can even draw on Jonas’ post-Imperative work. As he retreated from viewing authoritarianism as the best hope for survival, Jonas began to sketch out something like an ecological republicanism as the ideal political embodiment of responsibility. When we synthesise his various suggestions we shall see that it offers a sadly incomplete alternative to his earlier theory of the state, and a way of redeeming Jonas as a political theorist.

Such a theory might start with his analysis of ancient Greek civilisation. Jonas characterises the freedom of the citizen afforded by the polis as bound up with political and legal obligations: ‘to be a citizen of the Greek polis means to be a lawgiver and to be a lawgiver means to institute orders that bind others as well as oneself’ – therefore ‘this is a freedom which acknowledges voluntary restrictions’ (2010, p. 263). The reason Jonas regards such voluntary restrictions as desirable is that ‘[t]he unlimited freedom of the individual destroys itself because it is incompatible with the freedoms of the many’ (2001, p. 25). In other words, freedom can only exist for all if each citizen consents to public obligations. Of course, in ancient Greece the status of citizen was restricted to propertied men. The slave, by contrast, is unfree since ‘deprived of making use of [his] will through the overpowering condition of a social order in which the sanctions imposed on his opposing the will of his master are overwhelming’ (2010, p. 257). Both the freedom of the Greek citizen and the captivity of the slave are therefore to be understood as relational, resting on a ‘power-condition’ which is ‘embodied in a legal order’ (p. 257).

This depiction of freedom is neither positive nor negative, but closer to the republican variety: freedom understood as non-domination. According to Philip Pettit, republican freedom ‘is negative to the extent that it requires the absence of domination by others’ and ‘positive to the extent that, at least in one respect, it needs something more than the absence of interference; it requires security against […] interference on an arbitrary basis’ (1997, p. 51, emphasis added). Jonas’ presentation of the polis broadly aligns with this definition: the slave is unfree not because they are interfered with per se, but because they are dominated – interfered with totally and arbitrarily – whereas the citizen’s freedom from domination is secured by the legal order they are obliged to participate in constituting. It goes without saying that the restriction of free citizenship to propertied males is reprehensible, but this classical feature is by no means inherent to the civic republican tradition. In an ideal polis all adults would partake in what Jonas’ good friend Hannah Arendt saw as the highest dimension of the human condition: the discursive constitution of our collective life in political action (1958, pp. 7–9).

Jonas was initially highly sceptical of the possibility of recovering the Greek polis or Roman res publica for our times. Speaking of Arendt’s nostalgia for antiquity he says:

To be sure, the memory of those times […] is […] essential for our not getting lost in the necessities and compulsions and pushes of our modern age, which certainly has the danger of estranging us entirely from these eternal origins. But to hark back to them as a still available option is an anachronism, an escapism. (HJ 17-12-2, p. 3).
Nevertheless, Jonas later drew on the republican ideal of citizenship as a way to cultivate new ecologically-appropriate virtues. Speaking shortly before the end of his life, he says that ‘the one thing that keeps alive in me a modest hope’ is the power of ‘sustained reflexion on the human good, on what is a worthy life for man, individually and collectively, and what we owe to it’ (1992, p. 217). Far from authoritarianism, we have here a reference to citizens’ cultivation of the common good, which he elsewhere suggests might then be ‘raised by the power of custom to a social norm’ (1985, p. 75). Drawing on other late remarks I will attempt to develop this line of thought.

Responsibility could again morally underpin the political establishment of new norms and laws, but this time not of the parent-child paradigm which proved so problematic when transposed to the political domain. Instead we would point to a different sort, already mentioned above: that of responsibility amongst equals. At first glance this appears incompatible with Jonas’ account of responsibility which draws its moral force from precisely the inequality of power between the moral agent and the vulnerable good. This is indeed true of the private sphere of parent and infant – however, we might derive a public responsibility of the collective for each individual by virtue of the vulnerability and dependency constitutive of the human condition. The ‘nonautarky of man’ (1979/1984, p. 98), in addition to being the ontological ground of the polis, is the basis of a pre-contractual responsibility amongst equals precisely because each belongs to a wider group which has greater power than any one member. Here we have an alternative form of public responsibility which might prove to be a more desirable foundation for a theory of the state than the parent-child template.

While the collective cannot exist without the individual, the individual’s existence cannot be safeguarded without the collective. This entails a responsibility for all citizens to defend the existence and integrity of the polis for the sake of each member. In antiquity such methods included personal and property rights, provocatio (in the Roman Republic, at least), military service, and a range of other institutions to guard against internal chaos and external threats. Whichever of these we deemed necessary to preserve, contemporary republicanism would also have to consider the sustainability of the polis, since its existence is now ecologically imperilled through technological civilisation. In other words, our responsibility to guarantee the survival of the polis for the sake of each member means collectively imposing limits on technological and economic activity. We have here a public manifestation of responsibility for the idea of Man, but one belonging to all of us as active citizens rather than just the paternalistic statesman.

Jonas offers three suggestions regarding institutions which might cultivate and formalise the norms guaranteeing such sustainability, which I shall briefly outline. The first is education, which ‘can have an influence on the forming of our consumption habits and make a certain frugality, a greater modesty, part of the social climate’ (1992, p. 217). This appears to refer to education’s capacity to cultivate virtue, which it already exercises, but updated to acknowledge our new ecological responsibilities. The second institution is public law. Here Jonas explicitly takes inspiration from antiquity: ‘[i]n ancient Rome [. . .] there were laws limiting private ostentation. [. . .] This was a major infringement of personal freedom, but it was done specifically in the name of a self-governing citizenry’ (2001, p. 26). Although restoring such limitations would clearly violate negative freedom from interference, it would nevertheless be compatible with republican freedom from domination if endorsed by the citizenship to safeguard the polis for the idea of Man.
Jonas’ final suggestion pertains to international law. Clearly, given the global nature of the ecological crisis the solution must be comparably wide-reaching. Ideally, a ‘peaceably united humanity’ (1985, p. 71) would establish laws and treaties which bind individual polities: ‘bodies must be established which address these issues and enjoy a sort of international authority which governments and corporations cannot easily escape. [...] This would be a step on the road to a real Kosmopoliteia’ (2005, p. 118). Through such a system – a United Nations with real authority, perhaps – the polis would be situated within a cosmopolis, and citizens could thereby legislate on the global workings of technological civilisation. Jonas admits that this goal may well be utopian, but he ended life hoping that on such a basis the ecological crisis might be averted, and with it the necessity of tyranny (p. 119).

9. Conclusion

Jonas’ theory of the state in the Imperative is quite clearly objectionable, and to this extent Wolin is right and Dinneen wrong. However, Wolin is incorrect to argue that rejecting it entails jettisoning the valuable aspects of Jonas’ wider political thought: the grounding in an ethic of responsibility, the heuristic of fear, and the precautionary principle. All are separable from his account of authoritarianism, which he even began to replace with civic republicanism, albeit too late to fully develop the theory.

It might be argued that my presentation of the last recasts Jonas as the type of thinker he mocked for nostalgically harking back to antiquity. But in a sense Jonas’ political philosophy in The Imperative already demonstrates this tendency – the only the difference is that whereas Arendt sought to revive the highest aspects of classical political theory, Jonas there echoed the most dangerous. I have in mind the dictatorial powers which the Roman Senate would temporarily grant a chosen magistrate to tackle an existential threat. Jonas’ suggestion that a suspension of democracy was best placed to confront the ecological crisis – a suspension which he later specified should be only temporary – is curiously reminiscent of this constitutional practice. As such, my attempt to develop an ecological republicanism from his last works neatly aligns with the normal conditions of the Roman Republic, a clearly preferable source of inspiration. It also conforms to a principle which Jonas himself advocated: ‘to keep watch over the humaneness of the measures by means of which we are trying to avert catastrophe. For these measures could be such that the whole thing we are trying to save goes to the devil’ (2001, p. 29).

Notes

1. For accounts of this influence see Schmidt (2013) and Schütze (1995).
2. Antipathy toward Jonas’ politics may have also cost him the Theodor-W.-Adorno-Preis: Jürgen Habermas allegedly overruled Jonas’ nomination for it on the grounds that his ‘conservative spirit’ (Jonas, 2008, p. 204) sat at odds with that of the award.
3. I add the qualification ‘on earth’ so as to complete the translation from the German original: ‘Handle so, daß die Wirkungen deiner Handlung verträglich sind mit der Permanenz echten menschlichen Lebens auf Erden’ (1979a, p. 36).
4. The original German for the precautionary principle is ‘Vorsorgeprinzip’. Nowhere, to my knowledge, does Jonas use this precise formulation, but his great work is Das Prinzip Verantwortung (literally, the responsibility principle), in which he repeatedly refers to
Vorsorge (1979a, pp. 85, 90, 218–219). In the English translation Jonas and Herr render Vorsorge as ‘farsighted providence’ (Jonas, 1979/1984, p. 39) and ‘promotional care’ (p. 121).

5. Jan Schmidt (2014) and Nathalie Frognieux (2014), from the German and French traditions respectively, insightfully discuss Jonas’ thinking in this regard.

6. For the clearest expressions of this aspect of Bacon’s vision, see the New Organon (1620/2000, p. 6), and Valerius Terminus (1603/1984, p. 42).

7. Although Jonas uses the terms Marxism, socialism, and communism interchangeably, by all of them he really means the ideology and political economy of the USSR, which I here call Marxist-Leninism or Soviet communism.

8. Jonas does, it must be said, here overlook figures such as André Gorz (1977/1980) who sought to reconcile utopian Marxism with environmentalism.


10. My translation. In my view, this essay – ‘Auf der Schwelle der Zukunft’ – represents the turning point in Jonas’ political thought.

11. One might object that there is a danger here insofar as any public intrusion in the sphere of the individual could then be justified in the name of the polis and the idea of Man. This problem does apply to the kind of republicanism developed by Rousseau, but not to the Anglo-American tradition (Locke, Harrington, Madison, Jefferson) which stresses institutional safeguards to protect individuals and ensure contestability of legislation.


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