



The Transcendental Structure of Hans Jonas' Philosophy*

di

ROBERTO FRANZINI TIBALDEO

ABSTRACT: In this article I endeavour to shed light on Hans Jonas' peculiar use of two notions, namely *transcendental* and *image*, whose mutual connection has not yet been sufficiently analysed by scholars. My overall aim is to underline that Jonas' ethics of responsibility relies on an ontological-transcendental structure, which is the «eidetic» and «reflective» correlation between the human being and the world. This structure evidences a twofold process of subjectification and objectification and is at the origins of the human being's ethical experience, including its ambiguity. Consequently, responsibility involves acquiring the ability to surf this twofold dynamic consciously and successfully.

KEYWORDS: Hans Jonas, Transcendental, Image of the Human Being, Ontology, Responsibility

ABSTRACT: Questo articolo cerca di far luce sull'uso peculiare di due nozioni centrali nella riflessione di Hans Jonas, vale a dire *trascendentale* e *immagine*, la cui reciproca connessione non è stata ancora sufficientemente analizzata dalla letteratura critica. L'obiettivo complessivo è mostrare come l'etica della responsabilità di Jonas si fondi su una struttura ontologico-trascendentale costituita dalla correlazione «eidetica» e «riflessiva» tra essere umano e mondo. Questa struttura evidenzia un duplice processo di soggettivazione e oggettivazione ed è all'origine tanto dell'esperienza etica dell'essere umano, quanto della sua ambiguità. Di conseguenza, la responsabilità implica l'acquisizione della capacità di conoscere e governare con successo questa duplice dinamica.

KEYWORDS: Hans Jonas, trascendentale, immagine dell'essere umano, ontologia, responsabilità

* I wish to express my gratitude to Nathalie Frogneux and Fabio Fossa, with whom in these last years I have enjoyed many profound and inspiring Jonasian conversations. This text owes a great deal to these dialogues.

1. Introduction

It is well known that one of the core aspects of Jonas' thinking is the so-called ontological foundation of his ethical proposal. This is indeed a controversial issue because Jonas contravenes «the veto of reigning analytical theory against all attempts of this kind»¹. Jonas knows perfectly well that his position runs thoroughly against the stream. Moreover, his proposal has given rise to much discussion and debate among his commentators, who share his very concern about the irresponsible employ of present day technology, and strive to find effective ways of coping with this issue in order to assure the preservation of terrestrial life.

To be sure, Jonas' ethical reflection exhibits the philosopher's advocacy of environmental conservation. The author of *The Imperative of Responsibility* recalls the centrality of the «core phenomenon of our humanity, which is to be preserved in its integrity at all costs»². He also adds that the care for the future of humankind «must obviously include care for the future of all nature on this planet as a necessary condition of man's own»³.

In my article I endeavour to shed light on these statements by underlining Jonas' peculiar use of two notions, namely *transcendental* and *image*, whose mutual connection in Jonas' philosophy has not yet been sufficiently analysed by commentators. My overall aim is to sketch the centrality of this connection to Jonas' ethics.

In order to achieve these goals, I will carry out the following tasks. First, I will analyse the centrality of the so-called «object of responsibility»⁴ to Jonas' ethics. Second, I will try to clarify the *ontological* and *transcendental* meaning of the correlation between the human being and the world, which is the object of responsibility. Finally, I endeavour to shed light on the abovementioned correlation by analysing the human being's «eidetic» and «reflective»⁵ constitution.

¹ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984, p. x.

² Ivi, p. 34.

³ Ivi, p. 136.

⁴ Ivi, p. 87.

⁵ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Harper & Row, New York 1966, pp. 172-173, 184-187.

2. The «object of responsibility» and its ethical centrality

Let me first recall an important passage of *The Imperative of Responsibility*, where Jonas summarises the new duty of responsibility in times of technological development:

Born of danger, its first urging is necessarily an ethics of preservation and prevention, not of progress and perfection. [...] [W]hat now matters most is not to perpetuate or bring about a particular image of man, but first of all to keep open the horizon of *possibilities* which in the case of man is given with the existence of the species as such and – as we must hope from the promise of the *imago Dei* – will always offer a new chance to the human essence. This means that the “No to Not-Being” – and first to that of man – is at this moment and for some time to come the primal mode in which an emergency ethics of the endangered future must translate into collective action the “Yes to Being” demanded of man by the totality of things⁶.

As we know, the fulfilment of this first duty («that there be a mankind», «that there be *human beings*, with the accent equally on the *that* and the *what* of obligatory existence»⁷) implies also the inclusion of the organic world as a whole within the domain of responsibility, since it represents a necessary condition of man's own existence. Yet, being responsible does not at all mean that humankind is entitled to adopt a strictly anthropocentric or a merely utilitarian⁸ stance towards nature (which includes the human being's own biological-bodily constitution). Rather, responsibility has to do with being at the service-of and caretaking its own vulnerable object, and not dominating it:

the object of *responsibility* is emphatically the perishable *qua* perishable. Yet in spite of this condition which it shares with myself, it is more unsharably an “other” to me than any of the transcendent objects of classical ethics; “other” not as the surpassing better, but as nothing-but-itself in its own right, and without *this* otherness being meant to be bridged by a qualitative assimilation on my part or on its part. Precisely this other-

⁶ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, cit., pp. 139-140.

⁷ Ivi, p. 43.

⁸ See ivi, pp. 136-137.

ness takes possession of my responsibility, and no appropriation is intended here⁹.

In other words, the object of responsibility's «otherness» emphasises the object's *own* vulnerability. And its vulnerable value turns to be the ontological feature underpinning the object's otherness and dignity, namely its capacity to exert in itself – states Jonas – an obligating force on the subject's (viz. the human being's) liberty¹⁰, who has the duty to care and take care of it. As a result, Jonas' ethics is – strictly speaking – neither anthropocentric nor biocentric: on the one hand, it is not anthropocentric, since its core is indeed the object of responsibility's *own, intrinsic, inner, essential* vulnerability (and dignity); on the other hand, it is not biocentric, since human beings occupy a special place in nature and they *alone* are endowed with ethical capabilities (ethical sensitivity, ethical consciousness, ethical awareness, ethical freedom, ethical accountability, etc.). Or, expressed the other way around: from a certain point of view, Jonas' ethics *is* anthropocentric, while from another point of view it *is not*. Indeed, any kind of ethic, entailing a “reflection/discourse on behaviour”, is *ipso facto* aimed at and directed to human understanding uniquely (it would indeed be grotesque, say, to hold animals responsible based on such discourse or reflection). The sole responsible agents are (and can be) humans, and it is in this sense that any ethics (including Jonas' own) is somehow bound to an anthropocentric stance. However, on the side of its *object*, Jonas underlines that the ethical reflection has to overcome and go beyond anthropocentrism, and ought to somehow attain biocentric sensitivity¹¹.

⁹ Ivi, p. 87.

¹⁰ See especially H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, cit., chapters 3 and 4, which rely on his previous biological-philosophical analyses (H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit.; Id., *Organismus und Freiheit. Ansätze zu einer philosophischen Biologie* [German modified version of *The Phenomenon of Life*], in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Hans Jonas*, Band I/1, hrsg. v. H. Gronke, Rombach, Freiburg i. Br.-Berlin-Wien 2010).

¹¹ In this regard, Lewis Coyne comments that «Jonas's philosophy is axiologically biocentric, yet ethically weakly anthropocentric» (L. Coyne, *Hans Jonas. Life, Technology and the Horizons of Responsibility*, Bloomsbury, London-New York 2021, p. 143). See Jonas' recurrent criticism of anthropocentric ethical perspectives in *The Imperative of Responsibility* (H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, cit., pp. 4, 7, 8, 45-46, 136, 156). Worth noting is that already in *The Phenomenon of Life* Jonas criticises the anthropocentric stance of religious and philosophical traditions, like

3. *The ontological and transcendental meaning of the correlation between human being and world*

At a first, superficial glance Jonas' ethics of preservation seems to rely on the utter confrontation between subjects endowed with freedom, and an object, which poses limits to that freedom on a purely heteronomous basis. However, that this is not the case of Jonas' thinking is evidenced by what follows.

As pointed out by *The Phenomenon of Life's* (viz. *Organismus und Freiheit's*) biological-philosophical enquiry, the subject-object split is not to be understood in mere dualistic terms, as if subject and object were ontologically independent of one another. Quite the contrary, what life shows is the dialectic, processual relationship existing between subject and object. The purposive process through which the living subject constitutes itself and reaches a certain degree of independence/freedom from its surroundings is and remains essentially related-to and dependent-from the self's dynamic relationship to its «other», that is the «world»¹² (in this regard, we all recall Jonas' definition of life as «*needful freedom to matter*»¹³). Moreover, according to Jonas, this relationship is itself endowed with ontological relevance – to say, far from being a characteristic of life among others, the abovementioned dialectics expresses *the* essence of life, whose (purposive, teleological) development over time may be additionally understood in evolutive terms. Therefore, when it comes to the human being, who integrally belongs to life and nature¹⁴, his/her subjectivity too ought not to be regarded as simply separated and independent from the world.

At the same time, according to Jonas, human subjectivity *does*

Christianism, Stoicism, Cartesianism, Idealism and Existentialism (H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., pp. ix, 34, 60). There are indeed interesting similarities between Jonas' composite attitude towards anthropocentrism and the environmental-ethical notion of «weak anthropocentrism» coined a decade later by Eugene C. Hargrove, who makes no reference to Jonas (E. C. Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs 1989, pp. 10-11).

¹² «The challenge of "selfhood" qualifies everything beyond the boundaries of the organism as foreign and somehow opposite: as "world", within which, by which, and against which it is committed to maintain itself. Without this universal counterpart of "other", there would be no "self"» (H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs 1974, p. 196).

¹³ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 80.

¹⁴ See especially the *Introduction* to H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., pp. 1-6.

manifest something unique in the adventure of life, namely the fact that in the human being life has achieved self-awareness and an unprecedented degree of independence/freedom from the world (I shall detail this feature in section 4). To be sure, thanks to this degree of freedom both self and world can be regarded “as another” – that is, in themselves, as if they were reciprocally independent-of and separated-from one another. However – warns Jonas – the basic dialectic of self and world, dependence and independence, freedom and necessity etc. still applies to this kind of freedom, although in a more indirect way – a way which ultimately opens to ethics and where, despite their *seeming independence* from one another, the object of responsibility and the subject are in fact ontologically conjoined:

In the truly human aspect, nature retains her dignity, which confronts the arbitrariness of our might. Ourselves being among her children, we owe allegiance to the kindred total of her creations, of which the allegiance to our own existence is only the highest summit. This summit, rightly understood, comprises the rest under its obligation¹⁵.

What I find interesting here is precisely that the object of responsibility's normative claim is not only compatible with the human being's importance, but – so to say – finds accomplishment in the human being, as well as in the related imperative («the only one which – states Jonas – really fits the Kantian sense of the categorical, that is, the unconditional»¹⁶), the imperative which commands «*that* there be *human beings*» – human beings whose existence (*Dasein*) and capability of being responsible (*Sosein*) ought to be first and foremost preserved¹⁷.

I believe the previous sketch of Jonas' thorough ontological and ethical enquiries gains further clarification thanks to the notion of *transcendental*, which highlights a core aspect of Jonas' philosophy. In a striking passage of that crucial, albeit preliminary work where Jonas

¹⁵ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, cit., p. 137. The human «summit» – warns Jonas – has to be «rightly understood», in order to avert its understanding in strictly anthropocentric terms, as already evidenced at the end of section 2.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 137.

¹⁷ Ivi, pp. 40-44; H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (1979), in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Hans Jonas*, Band 1/2, hrsg. v. D. Böhler-B. Herrmann, Rombach, Freiburg i. Br.-Berlin-Wien 2015, pp. 91-98. See also R. Franzini Tibaldeo-N. Frogneux, *The Dialectical Dynamic of Life's Self-preservation in Hans Jonas' Philosophical Biology*, «Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal» 41/2 (2020), pp. 1-31.

exposes for the first time his reflections on the relationship between the ontology of life, anthropology, and ethics – namely the *Lehrbriefe* (*Didactic Letters*, 1944-1945), in order to clarify the anthropological constitution Jonas employs the very notion of «transcendental». As already mentioned, the human being and his/her freedom ought to be understood in the light of the same basic, dialectic correlation between subjectification and objectification, which appears to be an ontological feature of life. However, human beings show a peculiar way of arranging this pattern – a way, which gives ultimately rise to ethics. For instance, Jonas underlines that:

This is in its way a universal law, that the degree of distinctiveness and thingliness [*Dinglichkeit*] of the impression of the external world stands in direct proportion to the development of a central selfhood, which the subject of such objectivity has to be. Up the long stepladder of freely moving animals gifted with special senses (both the attributes characterize the correlation of both these sides: greater constitution of selfhood = greater distinctiveness of perception; or: more individuality = more individualization of objectivity), as the heretofore most complete actualization of ontological individuality, this correlation in human spirit leads to what Kant called the “transcendental (or: ‘synthetic’) unity of apperception”, the subjective correlate of the fully crystallized “object” of human world-sight¹⁸.

Moreover, Jonas underlines that the human being is essentially characterised by «his extreme self-individuation» and «his transcendental faculty of objectivity»¹⁹, where – if I understand correctly – the *transcendental* expresses the specifically human way of correlating subjectivity and objectivity: how is this specificity to be detailed? I wish to add some remarks which not only help clarify further this issue, but also lead to the final step of my contribution, namely the human being's «eidetic» and «reflective» freedom – namely, his/her ontological specificity.

In his early essay on *Husserl and the Ontological Question* (1938)²⁰,

¹⁸ H. Jonas, *Memoirs*, Brandeis University Press, Lebanon (NH) 2008, p. 245.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ German version in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Hans Jonas*, Band III/2, hrsg. v. S. Lalla-F. Preußger-D. Böhler, Rombach, Freiburg i. Br.-Berlin-Wien 2013, pp. 183 ff. My quotes are from the English version in H. Jonas, *Edmund Husserl and the Ontological Question*, «Études phénoménologiques» 17/33-34 (2001), pp. 5-20.

Jonas states that the focus of Husserl's thinking is precisely the above-mentioned correlation between subjectivity and objectivity. That is, «the basic question of the *relationship between thought and being*»²¹ in times when this conjunction has become «the conundrum of conundrums»²² and when the «question of the objectivity of thought» has «been transmuted into the question of the relationship between interior and exterior»²³. In other words – states Jonas – it is the «transcendental nature of consciousness in itself, that is, the ability of the interior to picture to itself a kind of exterior within its own realm» that has «now become a problem»²⁴. And the path followed by Husserl to overcome this problem is a «philosophy of consciousness» pivoted on the notion of «intentionality»²⁵ – a philosophy capable of regaining the «unity of thought and being»²⁶, although of course «one cannot speak of “being” in any sense whatever other than that of being *for* consciousness»²⁷. Anyway, when read in the light of this ontological reflection on Husserl's transcendental thinking, the abovementioned excerpt from the *Lehrbriefe* acquires a slightly different meaning – one that evidences Jonas' attempt to go beyond the sole epistemological use of the «transcendental» proposed by Kant. In other words, although «transcendental» undeniably refers to the conditions of the possibility of experience, the very meaning of “condition of possibility” seems to claim for an ontological-correlational status, which Jonas will eventually clarify.

Another evidence of Jonas' transcendental meditation is his previous enquiry into *Pistis und Gnosis*²⁸, which he developed in his first publications: *Der Begriff der Gnosis* (1930), *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem* (1930), and *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* (vol. I: 1934; vol. II.1: 1954)²⁹. What I find interesting here is Jonas' overall interpretation

²¹ Ivi, p. 7.

²² Ivi, p. 10.

²³ Ivi, p. 11.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 13.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 14.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ This project stems from Jonas' intervention in the *Seminar* held by Rudolf Bultmann at the University of Marburg in 1925. The manuscript is preserved in Jonas' *Nachlass* at the University of Konstanz (HJ-2-17-43). See C. Bonaldi, *Hans Jonas e il mito. Tra orizzonte trascendentale di senso e apertura alla trascendenza*, Mercurio, Vercelli 2007, p. 23.

²⁹ H. Jonas, *Der Begriff der Gnosis. Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde*

of human existence in terms of «the transcendental (the “Spirit”）」³⁰ in a historical-ontological sense – namely as a «historical-spiritual a priori»³¹ endowed with a different and broader meaning as compared to Heidegger's existential *Dasein*, notwithstanding the *Dasein*'s own ontological-temporal structure³². As a result, Jonas develops the Heideggerian ontological-existential correlation between “self” and “world” into a broader modality of interrogating historical-epochal forms of existence³³. This will eventually lead to the question regarding the possibility of any historical understanding and to Jonas' hypothesis of the paradoxical conjunction of change and permanence, historical and extra-historical elements, which is the focus of his later essay on *Wandel und Bestand* (*Change and Permanence*, 1969)³⁴. Indeed, worth noting is the seemingly paradoxical nature of the transcendental as a «historical-spiritual a priori», since it seems to transcend history and historical research as their permanent precondition (or condition of possibility), while at the same time constantly relying on history and historical mutability as regards its possibility and existence³⁵.

En passant, it is worth underlining that in these very works on

der Hohen Philosophischen Fakultät der Philipps-Universität zu Marburg, Hubert, Göttingen 1930; Id., *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem. Eine philosophische Studie zum pelagianischen Streit*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1965² (first ed. 1930); Id., *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, vol. I, *Die mythologische Gnosis. Mit einer Einleitung “Zur Geschichte und Methodologie der Forschung”*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1988⁴ (first ed. 1934); Id., *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, vol. II.1: *Von der Mythologie zur mystischen Philosophie*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1954.

³⁰ «das Transzendente (der “Geist”）」 (H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, cit., vol. I, p. 64).

³¹ *Ivi*, § 9, p. 13.

³² See *ivi*, § 10, p. 14. For an interesting analysis of the complex and dynamic relationship between time and history in Jonas' thinking, see above (pp. 147-167) F. Fossa, *Tra eternità e storia. L'immagine dell'essere umano nell'etica di Hans Jonas*.

³³ H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, cit., vol. I, § 10, p. 14.

³⁴ H. Jonas, *Wandel und Bestand. Vom Grunde der Verstehbarkeit des Geschichtlichen*, Klostermann, Frankfurt a. M. 1970. Previously published in V. Klostermann (ed.), *Durchblicke: Martin Heidegger zum 80. Geburtstag*, Klostermann, Frankfurt a. M. 1969, pp. 1-26 (Engl. trans. by H. Jonas *Change and Permanence: On the Possibility of Understanding History*, in H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 237-260). On this topic, see above (pp. 147-167) also F. Fossa, *Tra eternità e storia*, cit.

³⁵ Indeed, the «transcendental constitutive element» is always «embedded in a fundamental historical-factual constitution “of *Dasein*”» (H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, cit., vol. I, § 9, p. 13).

late-antique Gnosis Jonas mentions an aspect of the anthropological constitution related to this transcendental enquiry. In the following decades this aspect proves to be central to both his ontological analysis of life and his ethics: namely, the explanation of the human existence (*Dasein*) essentially in terms of a motility and an «original movement of objectification», through which the *Dasein* «knows intuitively its own ontological condition in a scheme of “worldly”-ontological structures»³⁶. What is remarkable is that this movement reveals itself through an indirect «symbolic mode of expression» (in a Cassirerian sense)³⁷, which I shall clarify shortly.

Finally, the abovementioned references to *history* and *symbol* find themselves conjoined to *will*, as the constitutive «Grund der totalen Seinshaltung» (the «foundation of the overall ontological attitude»)³⁸. In what sense is this to be understood? Jonas answers by reviving the abovementioned paradoxical aspect of the transcendental, and by making it even more challenging:

This constitutive foundation is, thus, nothing static, but essentially historical; and again, nothing merely intellectual, let alone simply emotional: one could speak of a transcendental function of the *will*, provided that it is not to be understood as a component or an act of the psyche, but as the overall mode of being of the human *Dasein*³⁹.

Shortly afterwards, Jonas refers to this historical or “processual” ground as something related to «freedom [...], which, as a projecting feature in a transcendental sense, is the complement of necessity»⁴⁰.

³⁶ H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, cit., vol. II.1, pp. 5-6.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 4. Cassirer is explicitly mentioned at pp. 5 and 8. See also H. Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, cit., pp. 81-82. See D. Böhler, *Verstehen und Verantworten. Hans Jonas' Einsichten für die Gegenwart der Zukunft – Kontexte und Probleme*, in H. Jonas, *Fatalismus wäre Todsünde*, Lit, Münster 2005, pp. 3-46.

³⁸ H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, cit., vol. I, p. 63.

³⁹ «Dieser Konstitutionsgrund ist also selber nichts Statisches, sondern wesentlich geschichtlich; und wiederum nichts bloß Intellektuelles, so wenig wie bloß Emotionales: man könnte von einer transzendentalen Funktion des *Willens* sprechen, wenn man diesen nicht als speziellen Teil oder Akt der Seele, sondern als totale Seinsweise des menschlichen Daseins faßt» (*ibidem*). Analogously, in the *Lehrbriefe* Jonas states that: «Historicality is for us a door and often a labyrinthine path to the world. Its being a door, taken together with its errors, belongs to the essence of spirit» (H. Jonas, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 234).

⁴⁰ «Freiheit [...], das als transzendental entwerfender Faktor das Komplement jeder

How is this early, albeit crucial reference to will and freedom in Jonas' thinking to be understood? Moreover, what about the entanglement of these concepts with the notion of transcendental, which – as I pointed out earlier – seems to be quite paradoxical, at least in Jonas' interpretation? In other words, how can we understand the peculiar capacity of the transcendental to transcend historical and ontological change, while at the same time pivoting and relying on it? The human being is – according to Jonas – the one who reveals the paradox and experiences it in the first person. Moreover, in the end, s/he is the one who has the duty to clarify it and bear the consequences of this process. Therefore, let me now turn to the human specificity and see how its clarification sheds light on the abovementioned paradox.

4. The human being's «eidetic» and «reflective» constitution

I believe that in his later works (*The Phenomenon of Life/Organismus und Freiheit* and *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*) Jonas employs the previously analysed aspects of the *transcendental* (in the previously analysed meanings of correlation, historical-ontological-spiritual *a priori*, symbol, will, and freedom) to clarify the human condition and his/her paradoxical nature. In order to shed light on these statements, I shall now deal with the following topics: first, the human condition, namely the specifically human way of correlating subjectivity and objectivity; second, how this specificity gives rise to ethics and in particular to responsibility.

When it comes to the human being, Jonas in *The Phenomenon of Life* underlines the centrality of the «image»:

Man models, experiences, and judges his own inner state and outward conduct after the image of what is man's. Willingly or not he lives the idea of man – in agreement or in conflict, in acceptance or in defiance, in compliance or in repudiation, with good or with bad conscience. The image of man never leaves him, however much he may wish at times to revert to the bliss of animality. To be created in the image of God means to have to live with the image of man⁴¹.

Notwendigkeit ist» (H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, vol. I, cit., p. 63).

⁴¹ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 185. It is worth underlining that, notwithstanding their difference, «image» and «idea» also evidence a similarity, given their

Let me provisionally set aside the question as regards the meaning of the «image of man» in order to address a wider issue: why is the image so important? Why does it play such a central role? My tentative answer is the following: within the dialectics of subjectification and objectification characterising life as such, the image (both its perception and internal/external [re]production) embodies the specific way through which the human subject attains a certain distance from the world and, thanks to this, a higher degree of freedom. Jonas clarifies this achievement in the following evolutive terms: already in «some higher animals»⁴² image perceiving gives rise to representation, abstraction and symbolism⁴³; this opens to human «eidetic freedom», which entails interpretation, imagination, expectations, deception, decision and action; however, «true man» appears only when «eidetic freedom» finds full accomplishment in «reflection», whose connection with action evidences a qualitative turn of the *dialectic duality* of life into *ambiguity*, thus calling for ethics. In Jonas' own words:

In the image-faculty of man a further degree of mediacy is reached, and the distance between organism and environment widened by a further step [...]. This new degree lies in the ideative extension of *perception* [...]. The new mediacy consists in the interposition of the abstracted and mentally manipulable *eidos* between sense and actual object, just as on the level of animal mediacy the perception of objects was interposed between the organism and its primary environment-relation. Imaging and speaking man ceases to see things directly: he sees them through the screen of representations of which he has become possessed by his own previous dealings with objects, and which are evoked by the present perceptual content, impregnating it with their *symbolic* charge, and added to by the new experience itself. Their greatest role, however, lies in between experiences, when the actual object is not present for direct perception: then the abstracted images that are at the command of the subject provide in themselves the material for an “experience” at a re-

common reference to the *eidos*, which means «appearance», «form» (ivi, p. 167). Indeed, this relationship is a core aspect of Jonas' phenomenology of perception and anthropology (as related to the overall philosophical-biological account, where the “living form” plays a role of paramount importance).

⁴² H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 170.

⁴³ See ivi, pp. 166-167, 170. See also H. Jonas, *Tool, Image, and Grave: On What is Beyond the Animal in Man* (1985-6), in Id., *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. by L. Vogel, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1996, pp. 75-86.

move – symbolic experience, in which the world is taken hold of without imposing its presence. The very phenomenon of truth, as that of falsehood, is located in this mediacy of the third degree. Yet even this is the threshold to a further mediation. The fateful freedom of objectification, which confronts the self with the potential sum total of the “other”, the “world”, as an indefinite realm for possible understanding and action, can and eventually must turn back, with its burden of mediacy, upon the subject itself and make *it* in turn the object of a relation which again takes the detour via the *eidōs*. The “form” here involved is different in kind from those of the whole realm of outwardness, for it concerns the self’s *relation* to all outwardness. The new dimension of *reflection* unfolds, where the *subject* of all objectification appears *as such* to itself and becomes objectified for a new and ever more self-mediating kind of relation. With the first asking of the question, What is man’s, what is my place and part in the scheme of things?, the self becomes engulfed in the distantness in which all things are kept by man and from which they have to be retrieved in acts of eidetic intentionality. Although this is another exercise of the eidetic faculty, it is by no means automatically given with its outward exercise exemplified by pictorial representation. True man emerges when the painter of the bull and even of its hunter turns to concerning himself with the unpaintable image of his own conduct and the state of his self. Over the distance of this wondering, searching, and comparing perception there is constituted the new entity, “I”. This is of all the greatest venture in mediacy and objectification⁴⁴.

In what sense is the image the key to understanding the uniqueness of the human level of life? The image plays indeed a twofold role: on the one hand, thanks to its power to transcend actual reality, the image enables the distantiation of the human being’s «eidetic freedom»⁴⁵ from the world; however, on the other hand, the image relies on the givenness of the worldly/bodily experience or at least maintains a connection to the latter in the form of an intention or decision – «*adaequatio imaginis ad rem*» states in this regard Jonas: this is the realistic, practical basis of his image theory⁴⁶. This dynamic-di-

⁴⁴ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., pp. 184-185.

⁴⁵ As evidenced by the previous quote, «eidetic freedom» originates from representation, abstraction and symbolic experience, and finally culminates in reflection.

⁴⁶ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., pp. 171-172. The *Lehrbriefe* as well connect human intentionality, worldly «matters of fact» (to which the spirit must always return), and truth (H. Jonas, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 233). See also the following essays by

alectic interplay between distance/freedom and *adaequatio* reveals the human being's uniqueness, along with his/her creative potentiality to make «new things» by departing from the original, namely from what is simply given or experienced⁴⁷, and even achieve a broad detachment from actual reality thanks to «reflection», as shown by the previous quote. So far so good.

However, a problem then occurs, since – as already mentioned – this dynamic interplay shows an essential *ambiguity*, which Jonas details with the expressions «irremovable ambiguity of all free will»⁴⁸ and «Schwindel der Freiheit» («giddiness of freedom»)⁴⁹. Why «irremovable ambiguity»? Why «giddiness»? Because when the image-empowered human freedom gains distance and experiences its detachment from the world, instead of bearing in mind the dialectical and worldly-related process upon which it relies, it tends to become “absolute”, and consequently fails⁵⁰. To be entangled in this structural paradox, which unavoidably gives rise to ambiguity, is indeed the fate of the human being's freedom and an unsurpassable characteristic of his/her existence – an essential feature that, expressed in ethical terms, can by no means be disposed of.

Worth recalling however is that, although freely neglected and

Jonas: *Causality and Perception, Sight and Movement, On the Origins of the Experience of Truth, The Practical Use of Theory*, all collected in H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., pp. 26-33, 152-156, 175-182, 188-210 respectively.

⁴⁷ See *ivi*, p. 172.

⁴⁸ H. Jonas, *Matter, Mind and Creation* (1988), in *Id.*, *Mortality and Morality*, cit., p. 177. See also H. Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, cit., pp. 80-89.

⁴⁹ H. Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit*, cit., p. 323 (*The Phenomenon of Life* omits this expression); *Id.*, *Philosophical Essays*, cit., p. 344. See also U. Lenzig, *Das Wagnis der Freiheit. Der Freiheitsbegriff im philosophischen Werk von Hans Jonas aus theologischer Perspektive*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2006, pp. 26, 36; M. Bongardt, *God in the World of Man: Hans Jonas' Philosophy of Religion*, in J. S. Gordon-H. Burckhart (eds.), *Global Ethics and Moral Responsibility: Hans Jonas and his Critics*, Ashgate, Farnham 2014, p. 109.

⁵⁰ H. Jonas, *Problemi di libertà*, a cura di E. Spinelli, con la collaborazione di A. Michelis, Aragno, Torino 2010, p. 259. And, as a result, the human spirit «loses the relationship to truth» (H. Jonas, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 233). It is since his first enquiries into Gnosticism that Jonas somehow connects the ambiguity of the human condition with the process of subjectification and objectification: the more humanity strives for subjectification and reflects, the more s/he deals with an objective reality, which tends to hypostatise itself and ends in disguising the very dialectic dynamic of subjectification and objectification (N. Frogneux, *Présentation*, in H. Jonas, *La Gnose et l'esprit de l'Antiquité tardive. Histoire et méthodologie de la recherche*, ed. by N. Frogneux, Mimésis, Milano 2017, p. 102).

transcended, the relationship with actual reality is nevertheless the source of human freedom⁵¹, which thus has to be understood as a dual and dialectical *process* of objectification *and* subjectification (see again the previous, long quote by Jonas⁵²). The image and the image-faculty's uniqueness (relying on eidetic/symbolic detachment, imagination, and ultimately leading to free will), along with their charge of ambiguity, shows with great precision and thoroughly confirms the anthropological centrality of the correlation between objectification and subjectification, along with its previously detailed *ontological* and *transcendental* meaning.

5. Conclusions

Let me now propose some concluding remarks. I believe that when Jonas attends to his ethical perspective in the light of the current technological civilisation, the abovementioned reflections on the human being's peculiar and ambiguous correlation with the world play an important role: indeed, his aim is to deal ethically with this ambiguity without having pretensions to erase it or eliminate its source, namely human freedom. It is in order to achieve this goal that Jonas focuses on responsibility and shows that, far from representing a purely heteronomous normative source, responsibility is indeed freedom's intrinsic requirement and demand. How does Jonas achieve this goal? By underlining that the very relationship between freedom and responsibility relies on the previously analysed ontological-transcendental structure, namely the specificity of the «eidetic» and «reflective» correlation between the human being and the world.

This structure finds expression in the correlative process of subjectification and objectification. On the side of subjectification, this process results in the «Geist» or the human «transcendental» capacity to apprehend/contemplate what is ontological, in the sense that it constitutes the very meaning of being. However, this capacity ought

⁵¹ In addition, this is true for organic freedom *tout court* (independence and dependence of organic form from matter). Of particular importance is the following *memento*, which – is true – refers to sight, but can as well be extended to the image: «The evidence of sight does not falsify reality when supplemented by that of underlying strata of experience, notably of motility and touch: when arrogantly rejecting it sight becomes barren of truth» (H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 149).

⁵² See *ivi*, pp. 184-185.

not to be understood in the static and essentialist terms of an actual separation from materiality and the world, although the human being seems quite inclined in this sense. Rather, to comprehend correctly this dynamic of transcendence, it is always necessary to bear in mind the following: first, the irreducibility of the dynamic to its processual and historical results; and, second, the claim not to abandon objectivity (namely, the material, concrete, bodily reality), which is the other half of the correlative dynamic, whence the process of subjectification stemmed, and upon which it ultimately relies.

This, however, is not enough to achieve a full ethics, and Jonas is aware of that. The clarification of the human being's ontological-transcendental structure is only the first step. What still has to be shown is that this ontological feature is associated with normative *value*, detailing for instance, *why* this being should be protected and preserved. Jonas deals with this issue in the well-known fourth chapter of *The Imperative of Responsibility*, after having summarized in the previous chapter his comprehensive and profound enquiry into the ontology of life. However, one of the most remarkable passages testifying the conjunction between Jonas' early historical-transcendental enquiries and the future bio-anthropological and ethical ones is, once again, to be found in the *Lehrbriefe*, where the philosopher clarifies the essential relationship between spirit and reality in a way that recalls the dynamic of subjectivation and objectivation. Indeed – he states – «Gegenständlichkeit» («objectivity») is the «law of all spiritual deeds»⁵³, and adds that:

In this infinite task, which spirit takes upon itself over against reality, the human being attains one of his determinations, if not his determination. Spirit is prepared for this from its depths in the history of being and becomes visible for the first time in the appearance of life, when matter for the first time feels itself in the most dark sensation of stimuli of living substance⁵⁴.

Far from being a mere intellectualistic activity, human spiritual life finds clarification in terms of an «intellectual intuition of being», which «is a part of the infinite love with which the divine loves itself»⁵⁵, a «wisdom» which evidences a practical-ethical intentionali-

⁵³ H. Jonas, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 236.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

ty⁵⁶. Indeed, it reveals itself as «an ideal – the anthropological imperative»⁵⁷, which is characterized by goals of increasing ethical awareness: «First, therefore to attain being and to intuit; then to fathom and love it; finally to reflect and testify»⁵⁸.

As I see it, this «ideal» or «anthropological imperative» corresponds to the previously analysed «transcendental function of *will*» endowed with historical and extra-historical paradoxicality. This summarises the basic structure of Jonas' philosophy, as well as the reason why his reflections eventually culminate in ethics.

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná, Curitiba (Brazil)
roberto.tibaldeo@pucpr.br

⁵⁶ It is worth noting that Jonas will later develop this idea in the essay *The Practical Uses of Theory* (originally published in H. Jonas, *The Practical Uses of Theory*, «Social Research» 26/2 (1959), pp. 127-166 and then included in H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., pp. 188-210).

⁵⁷ H. Jonas, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 236.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

