



The Imminence of the Future, the Time of the Living in Hans Jonas

di

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ABSTRACT: This article describes imminence, the specific temporality of metabolism as an ontological form that is central to Jonas's biocentrism. Imminence is, on the one hand, the time that characterizes the precarious metabolic continuity of the organic form. On the other hand, it characterizes what threatens the organism and what is about to happen. It is therefore both the time of the living being's sensitivity to a very close peril and the present time that has a hold on the future. The term *imminent* appears quite rarely in Jonas's writings, but it always signals decisive moments. The imminent time is that by which the living transcends the present, but also the time of the living as it is threatened by death. Imminence is thus the temporal form of the living and its relationship with the world, for the living form is not substantial, but functional, that is to say, active. It inscribes itself in duration by unceasingly exceeding the material punctuality which composes it. Being imminent, organic existence appears as a dialectic matter by opposition to the inert matter which is composed of discrete elements and juxtaposed synchronously. But imminence becomes problematic with the human possibility to interrupt the teleological character of life.

KEYWORDS: Imminence, Threat, Future, Vitality, Teleology

ABSTRACT: Questo articolo descrive l'imminenza, la temporalità specifica del metabolismo come forma ontologica che è centrale nel biocentrismo di Jonas. L'imminenza è, da un lato, il tempo che caratterizza la precaria continuità metabolica della forma organica, dall'altro, caratterizza ciò che minaccia l'organismo e ciò che è sul punto di accadere. È dunque sia il tempo della sensibilità dell'essere vivente a un pericolo molto vicino, sia il tempo presente che ha una presa sul futuro. Il termine *imminente* appare abbastanza raramente negli scritti di Jonas, ma segnala sempre momenti decisivi. Il tempo imminente è quello in cui il vivente trascende il presente, ma anche il tempo del vivente in quanto minacciato dalla morte. L'imminenza è dunque la forma temporale del vivente e della sua relazione

con il mondo, poiché la forma vivente non è sostanziale, ma funzionale, cioè attiva. Essa si iscrive nella durata superando incessantemente la puntualità materiale che la compone. Essendo imminente, l'esistenza organica appare come una materia dialettica in opposizione alla materia inerte che è composta da elementi discreti e giustapposti in modo sincrono. Tuttavia l'imminenza diventa problematica con la possibilità umana di interrompere il carattere teleologico della vita.

KEYWORDS: imminenza, minaccia, futuro, vitalità, teleologia

1. *The transcendence of punctuality and permanence*

Descriptions of life are numerous in Jonas's writings, from the *Didactic Letters to Lore Jonas*¹ of 1944 and 1945, which are like the germ of his great research on the *Phenomenon of life*², to late works such as *Evolution and Freedom* (1983-1984)³. Forty years separate these texts which affirm the time of the ongoing activity of the living being, that is to say of its concern with its own life and consequently of vigilance, which is the constant answer. And it is precisely in this latter text that Jonas summarizes again the nature of life in the following way: a dialectical existence of organic freedom which is also necessity or need, the spatial dialectic of metabolism, which exchanges the matter that it finds outside of itself to make it its own, the interiority and the subjectivity which appear with the sensitive *ipse* and the open temporal horizon.

For Jonas, organic identity, i.e. living identity, is not static, but dynamic, which is to say that it is not limited to the matter that constitutes it or to the addition of its material states, but is a process by which time develops and unfolds: the «existence's course of time»⁴ (*Zeitverlauf der Existenz*).

Organic identity thus opens up the horizon of time, and more precisely a temporal horizon toward the future and a spatial horizon toward the outside. It opens up a double horizon from a spatial coin-

¹ H. Jonas, *Didactic Letters to Lore Jonas*, transl. A. Allred, in H. Jonas, *Memoirs*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham (MA) 2006, pp. 220-245.

² H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Harper & Row, New York 1974.

³ H. Jonas, *Evolution and Freedom*, in Id., *Mortality and Morality. A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. by L. Vogel, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1996, pp. 59-74.

⁴ H. Jonas, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 225.

cidence, what Jonas calls simultaneous space. In this sense, inert matter only knows contemporaneity: its identity is punctual, «point-identity»⁵, whereas the opening toward a spatial horizon and toward a temporal horizon coincides with the possible extension of time as duration i.e. «the organism's cross-sectional now»⁶.

Now, this horizon is not neutral, it is subjectively anchored as time in the “first person”, i.e. the point of view of the living in the world, the point from which its activity takes place. Lived time is not a fact for human subjects alone, but also for that living being which experiences a subjectivity that is at first without subject: this is the time of the living which is self-concerned and it is the condition of phenomenological time. Now, this time includes a bias toward the future (which prevails with respect to the past), because life always has a grip on the future, it is essentially what it is going to be and what it is about to become. Imminence is therefore the internal time that can be experienced as more or less distressing, depending on the quality of one's relationship to the future.

The opening of the horizon is the first mark of a form of transcendence, the self-transcendence of organic life, within matter itself: «when we refer to ‘transcendence’ of life, we mean that it has a horizon beyond its discrete identity»⁷.

From the outset, the self-transcendence of the living being appears as a set of horizons which are as many openings: spatial and temporal horizons, each being both interior and exterior. Spatial transcendence allows the organism to overflow the framework of its material form, and thus to leave pure passivity through a dialectic between passivity and metabolic activity.

Self-concern driven by need, likewise opens up a horizon of *time*, which encompasses inner imminence instead of outer presence: the imminence of that immediate future toward which organic continuity moves at every moment in order to satisfy that moment's want. Life thus faces forward as well as outward: just as its Here extends into There, its Now extends into Not Yet, and life exists “beyond” its own immediacy in both horizons at once. Indeed, it faces outward only because it faces forward due to the necessity of its freedom, with the result that spatial presence is

⁵ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 85.

⁶ H. Jonas, *Didactic Letters to Lore Jonas*, in Id., *Memoirs*, cit., p. 255.

⁷ H. Jonas, *Evolution and Freedom*, cit., p. 70.

illuminated, so to speak, by temporal imminence⁸.

The temporal opening of horizons appears in the crucial text *Is God a Mathematician?* (1951)⁹, in the English edition of Jonas's work on philosophical biology, *The Phenomenon of Life*. The 1966 edition of the same text also briefly addresses the question, but it is the expanded and revised German one of 1973, *Organismus und Freiheit*¹⁰, that develops in particular the essential article of 1951. In the German translation of the text, Jonas added titles that are very interesting for us, most notably: VIII.3 *The dimension of interiority* and VIII.4 *The horizon of time*. Jonas therefore pays particular attention to the time horizon and argues that imminence is at the same time a way for metabolism to open up an internal and an external horizons for the organism.

The internal direction toward the next impending phase of a being that has to continue itself constitutes biological time; the external direction toward the co-present not-itself which holds the stuff relevant to its continuation constitutes biological space¹¹.

Inner imminence creates a presence to oneself and radically modifies presence to the world, since it becomes concern for living interiority. For the organism endowed with metabolism this presence no longer designates the pure coincidence of space and time, but is transformed into actuality, that is to say into an actualization of oneself which must be effective at each moment in order to constantly open up the future by means of need and desire. «The imminence of that future into which organic continuity is each moment about to extend by satisfaction of that moment's want»¹².

2. *The opening of temporal and spatial horizons*

With concern for oneself, four horizons open up: two spatial ones,

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ H. Jonas, *Is God a Mathematician? (The Meaning of Metabolism)*, in Id., *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., pp. 64-92.

¹⁰ H. Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit. Ansätze zu einer philosophischen Biologie*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1973, pp. 134-135.

¹¹ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 86.

¹² Ivi, p. 85.

with the vigilance of interiority and exteriority, and two temporal ones, with the duration that makes the present overflow toward the past and toward the future.

However, these four horizons are not symmetrical: the temporal horizon of the future and the spatial one of exteriority appear to be preponderant: «the anticipation of imminent future in appetite is more fundamental than the retention of past in memory»¹³.

Imminence thus carries a double dimension as, on the one hand, the near future and, on the other, a danger. But Jonas adds an additional meaning of imminence: as the time toward which the living being is turned or, more exactly, toward which it turns – a time felt to be near because it concerns us, the time by which the living relates to the future as the time that must be opened up it is to maintain itself. Indeed, the organism must open up a future, for otherwise it will be unable to maintain itself in duration; and this act of maintaining oneself constitutes a transcendence of the present moment toward the future. «The individual is whole and its complete self in each of its successive ‘materializations’, *so long as the succession goes on*»¹⁴. Indeed, for want of being able to take up the challenge of non-being, the living being undergoes it like an immediate threat, like a close danger.

It is only on this condition that duration can open up, in contrast to simple permanence. Indeed, duration is the observation that an external observer can establish with regard to inert matter or to a living being that has remained identical for those who compare it to previous states (sameness), but this supposes this living capacity of the observer to transcend the instants that thus acquire a continuity.

Therefore, by designating inert matter as a simultaneous space that accumulates discrete instants, Jonas reserves true temporality for the living. Temporality only exists through the test of duration while continuity as permanence is a pure present, that is to say a spatial contiguity that can only appear as a temporal extent and continuity to an external observer. On the other hand, imminence opens up duration in the strict sense, since it allows one to experience the passage from one moment to the next and thus articulates the instants that reveal themselves by contrast and, so to speak, retrospectively as “discrete” and “discontinuous”.

¹³ Ivi, p. 86.

¹⁴ H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs (NJ) 1974, p. 191.

Being the correlative of a relation to oneself, imminence constitutes an opening onto the future which transforms the pure juxtaposition of discrete moments into a grasp on the future: «as the here expands into the there, so the now expands into the future»¹⁵. Now, this grasp on the future is always the fact of a metabolizing living being, the fact of a body that lasts by maintaining itself because it is concerned with its being.

Only those entities are individuals [...] Entities, therefore, which in there being are exposed to the alternative of not-being as potentially imminent, and achieve being in answer to this constant imminence; entities therefore, that are temporal in their innermost nature, that have being only by ever becoming, with each moment posing a new issue in their history, whose *identity* over time is thus not the inert one of permanence¹⁶.

Self-affirmative, living identity is thus ontological in the sense that its continuity does not depend on any extrinsic and external identification, but on its own realization from one moment to the next. Consequently, the burden that falls upon the individual may seem quite light, since he has always already won as he experiences this threat.

In an even later text, *The Burden and Blessing of Mortality*¹⁷, Jonas underlines an opposition. On the one hand, for the discrete time of inorganic entities, duration is either the fact established by an observer who condenses successive perceptions into a sequence or time as an instantaneous moment, i.e. the pure maintenance of coincidence with matter, a time that is thus essentially spatial and composed of successive juxtaposed presents. These entities know pure permanence, even when it is matter of a probabilistic continuity which is also based on an external reference¹⁸. On the other hand, duration is the time of a lived continuity, of a duration which is the outcome of the agent himself, the fact of an ontological identity, which always transcends the punctual coincidence of the materiality which composes it. Time therefore only appears within the living: either because the living is able to attribute time to what it perceives, or because it experiences time internally. Henceforth the external spatial horizon and

¹⁵ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 86.

¹⁶ H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, cit., p. 187.

¹⁷ H. Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, cit., pp. 87-98.

¹⁸ See H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 188-189.

the future temporal horizon appear preponderant compared, respectively, to the internal horizon and the past one. The spatial opening toward the outside is the correlative of a temporal opening toward the future, which makes it possible to stand in front of it, before what one senses – i.e. what one has in sight – occurs.

This temporal opening is also a spatial opening toward exteriority and is inevitably an opening toward the immediate future, like a physical grip on it through the transformation of external matter into itself. Imminence thus appears as an inner horizon of time opened toward the future by life, that is to say by the organism. In German, this way of standing in front of the future that is happening is precisely imminence: *Bevorstehen*. We can distinguish this way of standing ready in front of the future and from exteriority of space and time, which coincide within the inert matter that Jonas calls «self-sufficient permanence»¹⁹. Indeed, the constant dependence of metabolism makes it vulnerable to exteriority, forcing the precariousness of existence to navigate on the «troubled waters of mortality»²⁰.

3. *Mediacy replaces immediacy*

Imminence as a constant overflow of the material form toward the exterior and toward the future contrasts with the punctual immediacy of the discrete instants of the inert matter that appears as the pure material form. Opened up by organic needs, imminence allows Jonas to free lived time from pure consciousness and to locate it within organic experience. He thereby distances himself from two of his masters with regard to this question: Augustine and Heidegger. Organic retention and protention, as well as bodily intentionality, follow naturally from the metabolism that they contribute to constituting. Through metabolism, which exchanges matter (*Stoffwechsel*), the lived time of duration and of a dynamic relation with oneself opens up. This mediation of matter is thus also a temporal mediation between *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (oneself), since subjective lived experience is unceasingly measured against the objectivity of the world, for lived time must be inserted into an objective world. To affirm the mediation of the relation to oneself is to affirm the time of

¹⁹ H. Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, cit., p. 90.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

the relation to the world as the shortest way to oneself, which supposes the duration of this risky return. One's relation to the world becomes prior for dynamic subjective identities, which distinguish themselves from discrete, separate and juxtaposed identities, «fixed identity»²¹, because their metabolism imposes a certain coexistence between subjective (human) temporalities and proto-subjective ones (i.e. those of the non-human living), on one hand, and the permanence (of the inert matter), on the other. (Here I will leave aside the question of non-metabolic evolutionary entities like robots, AIs and Cyborgs). Could we not speak, then, of an imminent subjectivity, at the same time forthcoming and risked in this relation to the worlds to which it must adjust itself in order to exist? Temporal (and spatial) mediacy is already the fact of a first and necessary commensurability with a given world of objects and processes objectifications in two respects: knowledge and action. But commensurability and adjustment remain a major challenge for individuals and what we can call “transcontinuity”, a dynamic continuity through relationships and forms of mediation.

On the level of action, the constant interaction with the world belies the understanding of a strictly subjective present correlative to freedom as pure uprooting. Jonas addressed this issue in his article *Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism*, where a time devoid of world – as in the Gnostics or Heidegger – turns out to be purely subjective and ultimately empty: a pure crisis between past and future. For Jonas, the «breathless dynamism»²² is the sign not of a pure present, but of an empty present, i.e. purely projected toward its end, it can only *project values that have no objectivity and thus no relevance* («Zeitlichkeit ohne Gegenwart»²³). Living existence is not acquired or assured at any moment, in contrast to the immediate being to itself of the merely inert persistence of primitive substance, «merely inert persistence»²⁴. The link between *Change and Permanence*²⁵, i.e. the fact that history is relative to permanence, thus finds its biological roots in the fact that the most primitive and inchoate interiority is confronted from the outset with the objectivity of other temporalities that sometimes

²¹ H. Jonas, *Didactic Letters to Lore*, cit., p. 224.

²² H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 231.

²³ H. Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit*, cit., p. 310.

²⁴ H. Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, cit., p. 90.

²⁵ See H. Jonas, *Change and Permanence*, in Id., *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 237-260.

threaten it, sometimes stabilize it. And it is on the basis of lived imminence that a narrative can be unfold which will be relayed by the story of nature and of life told by human observers.

On the level of knowledge too, Jonas insists on the fact that only a relationship to eternity, that is to say, to a dimension against which becoming is measured, can stabilize the present and give it authenticity. «Thus it is eternity, not time, that grants a present and gives it a status of its own in the flux of time; and it is the loss of eternity which accounts for the loss of a genuine present»²⁶. Imminence does not mean a projection into the future but a constant encounter and exchange in view of oneself.

From then on, what makes it possible to reconcile dynamism and duration, or the instant and temporality, is indeed the organic temporality that experiences a constant confrontation with what threatens it.

4. *The acting form*

For individuals, that is to say for living beings who do not possess their identity by individualizing themselves through their own activity, persistence is not the fact of an external observer, nor even of the persistence of its components, but the result of its dynamic form. An individual is more than a singular form. It is the dynamic form which constitutes the internal identity of the living being by maintaining it in time beyond material changes. And this active form consists in constantly renewing the coordination of the elements that keep failing and disappearing while the individual maintains itself.

The persistence of the collective “label” in defiance of the impersistence of the component ones is to him not a deception but the truth. [...] In short, it is a real, not an ideal character of it. The testimony of the “label” is true precisely *in conjunction* with that of the elements, for the latter testimony tells the *story* of the identity which the former proclaims²⁷.

The risk for him is to cease being because of the threat from his environment and his context; in facing this threat, the choice of oneself always takes place in a dialectic which is also the rejection of the

²⁶ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 232.

²⁷ H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 189-191.

other simply as the non-self or as potentially destructive. The imminence of the self thus underlines the transcendent dimension of a temporal form which, by overflowing toward the future, reveals its secondariness, its reactive and responsive character, even toward that which could threaten it.

Committed to itself, put at the mercy of its own performance, life must depend on conditions over which it has no control and may deny themselves at any time. Thus dependent on the favor or disfavor of outer reality, life is exposed to the world from which it has set itself off and by means of which it must yet maintain itself. [...] In its process, which must not cease, liable to interference: in the straining of its temporality always facing the imminent no-more: thus does the living form carry on its separatist existence in matter – paradoxical, unstable, precarious, finite, and in intimate company with death²⁸.

Most often, the positive response occurs naturally with the support of the environment and the context, and it is only to the extent that the context is lacking, hostile or threatening that this near future reveals its threatening character.

This acting form capable of centralizing and coordinating the higher material parts and successive material states of the living offers a centralization that becomes more explicit, the more complex forms of life is. But this centralization does not coincide with that of a central nervous system; and even if Jonas may seem to be interested in higher animal forms endowed with a central nervous system (such as higher domestic mammals), he does not fall into “primatocentrism”. Indeed, it is advisable not to confuse the centralizing form, an active and dynamic form, which allows the emergence of living individuals (sometimes not very centralized in certain plant examples) with the individuals endowed with a central nervous system. «This is the root of the teleological nature of life: finalism is in the first place a dynamic character of a certain mode of existence [...] and only in the second place a fact of structure or physical organization»²⁹.

While, in the explanation of inert matter, the past prevails as a cause, life reverses this temporality and turns toward the future, which from this point onward will be its measure, while the past

²⁸ H. Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, cit., p. 90.

²⁹ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 86.

fades away to the benefit of continuous metabolic exchanges. Indeed, the succession of the instants and temporary materialities which compose the living organism make it turn toward the future, rather than keeping it in the past.

Teleology comes in where the continuous identity of being is not assured by mere inertial persistence of a substance, but is continually executed by something *done*, and by something which *has* to be done in order to stay on at all. [...] Now to an entity that carries on its existence by way of constant regenerative activity we impute *concern*³⁰.

Here again Jonas finds the conditions of human knowledge and thought in biological existence. This immanent teleology designates a movement of oneself toward the future and toward otherness. Indeed, the temporality of the living is teleological and intensive, which is to say that it is experienced qualitatively: as rather indifferent and routine moments, but also decisive or extremely striking ones, which present seized or missed opportunities, modes in which the living enjoys itself or, on the contrary, struggles and suffers.

In *The right to die*, Jonas assesses the threat in another way, in relation to the fact that temporal finitude is not only a spur for the maintenance of oneself through the choice of one's own life, but also that death as an end makes each moment that precedes it precious. Thus, for Jonas, if our days count, it is because they are counted. But it is especially because we do not know the number of days we have left to live – meaning that our life is not limited to a statistically established average number of days – that each day appears so precious to the one who lives it. And this unknown ensures the *intensity* of time, whereas if the number of days to live were known, it would be enough to manage time in a linear way.

Without referring to Greek notions of time, Jonas nevertheless shows their common biological roots in the imminent time of the organism. The intensive and teleological time of the living organism establishes a link between the duration (*chronos*) and the opportunities (*kairos*) of the given context which exceeds it (*aion*). The living organism is indeed disposed to encounters, that is to say to the presence of the other, which it cannot determine and in relation to which

³⁰ H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, cit., p. 197.

it does not have the initiative, although it is able to respond positively or negatively to the circumstances. Imminence thus characterizes both the organism and what it faces.

«[For living beings] the requisite doing depends not on themselves alone, but also on the compliance of an environment that can either be granted or denied»³¹. It is thus always a more or less happy trade that needs to be carried out in order to connect the moments within moments. And this time allows selectivity as much as choice, and thus a space for freedom and the exercising of one's will. Indeed, only living beings, because they are not indifferent to themselves, find opportunities to increase their vitality or to decrease it in their relation with the world. Only organisms know qualitative differences in their being that result from the mediacy and transitivity of the world. Jonas speaks of the urgency that the organism experiences, as it is always threatened in its encounter and exchange with the world: it is forced to make the right choices, forced to find adequate ways of expressing what are always elective relations. Each time, it is a question for the organism of crossing the qualitative abyss that separates it from the world.

5. *The vitality of the living*

In the section of his essay devoted to the time horizon, Jonas underlines that the self-transcendence of life, insofar as the latter is turned toward the exterior, can no longer be understood as being-in-relation in a "simultaneous space" («gleichzeitigen Raum»³²) of inert entities. And even though he has devoted the preceding pages to the question of interiority, it is in this section about the temporal horizon that he addresses "inner imminence" («inneres Bevorstehen»³³). But this interior imminence has hardly been affirmed when it seems to be translated again into a relation to the outside: that of the next future instants which it will be necessary to reach by fulfilling needs, which are as many chasms to be crossed, in order to maintain oneself in being. Imminence is therefore the time of the relationship with the world. As for vitality, it refers to the quality of this relationship.

³¹ H. Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, cit., p. 88.

³² H. Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit*, cit., p. 136.

³³ Ivi, p. 136.

While the analysis of temporality as imminence is particularly interesting and precise in Jonas, we would like to note a blind spot in his text. Jonas indeed avoids translating vigilance which is turned toward the exterior and the future into authentically intensive temporality and more or less vital interiority. The question is stated without being developed. In the increasingly higher degrees of life, however, there is an ever-greater difficulty of reaching a point of inner equilibrium via the integration of the dimensions of the self: «higher and more comprehensive stages»³⁴ of subjectivity face an increasing tension between the subjective pole and the objective one. The always precarious inner balance thus becomes more and more complex to achieve and maintain, because of the multiplicity and refinement of the experiences of higher organisms, which can enter into various forms of competition (relational, bodily, psychic, and – in the case of humans – symbolic). But Jonas hardly dwells on the inner imbalances that are always possible, whether they be psychic or metabolic, whether they be due to mental illness or to auto-immune diseases, to anarchic forms of cellular proliferation like cancer, etc. His work in bioethics is more focused on technological choices and environmental threats than on responses to tragic situations as such. Thus the difficult synthesis of the self for humans is conceived as the constant task of their own objectification within representation, which is why he speaks of «continuous synthesis and integration into a total image»³⁵.

Indeed, Jonas translates the question of the inner horizon into representative and reflexive terms, even if for complex organic individuals the threats are no longer exclusively on the external borders. For them, it is no longer sufficient to be concerned with oneself in response or reply to exteriority. The living form must indeed coordinate and unify the parts which compose the organism, as well as its own levels of organization, which are more or less stable (cellular renewal), voluntary and involuntary (for subjectivities endowed with a central nervous system, for example), conscious and unconscious (for human subjects). Indeed, the asserting of oneself also presupposes the unification of oneself and a certain point of agreement in the process of subjectivation which generates an objectivation, that is to say a relation to the world. Undoubtedly, the acting form knows

³⁴ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 84.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 187.

more or less harmonious balances. So within life there is as an inner horizon of balances which allow life to be more or less unifying and thus vital, which will give it more or less grip on the future, i.e. the depth and breadth of the future thus opened will be proportional to the vitality of the living. Being alive does not only mean asserting oneself in a defensive way. Now, even if Jonas mentions the correlation between inner and outer horizons, he seems to devote himself almost exclusively to the latter, even if inner imminence also faces a permanent danger: that of perversion, of internal tearing, of incoherence or collapse.

Therefore, Jonas translates intensity into a reflexive relationship with oneself and sensitivity to the external environment, rather than in terms of temporal and spatial vitality. Wouldn't vitality be the temporal and spatial amplitude over which an organism has control? Jonas hardly explores the creative force that is hidden in this vitality as a unification of the horizons thus opened. Of course, he does deal with this question of the paralysis of subjectivity in a text that is remarkable for its depth, *The Abyss of the Will*³⁶, but he does so by addressing the entanglement of the will in itself in its self-mirroring. Thus, the moral bias of Jonas's reading is very clearly expressed: the will always underlies everything, like an appetite for life that disappears only by denying itself. The opposites of the will and the absence of will are thus asymmetrical. And this primacy of the will as unconditional living action corresponds to an «obduration of temporality»³⁷. For Jonas, who reads Saint Paul in such terms, the only way out of the intrinsic trap of the will is to find an external solution: either a return to action in the world, or, for believers, salvation via divine grace.

Similarly, in *The Right to Die*, he refers to madness as mortal sin in "the literal sense" («die Buchstäbliche Todsünde»³⁸), which is to say as a dead end in the etymological sense, again attributing a quasi-moral dimension to it. In *The Phenomenon of Life*³⁹, he addresses the question of the division that leads to despair (*Verzweiflung*), which may result from the ideal self-objectification of the self.

³⁶ H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 335-348.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 341.

³⁸ H. Jonas, *Technik, Medizin und Ethik. Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung*, Insel, Frankfurt a. M. 1985, p. 10.

³⁹ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 194.

Adopting a spatial and visual perspective, Jonas describes the processes of objectivation and subjectivation as potential factors of self-destruction. It is therefore in a roundabout and unsystematic way that he approaches the question of vitality, which nevertheless is linked to the capacity to assume metabolic continuity and to overcome the dimension of threat in order to make the imminent future one's own, which seem to be more and more problematic with the appearance of new levels of mediacy.

Indeed, metabolism knows a kind of constancy and evidence by which life chooses itself continuously. «The basic clue is that life says “yes” to itself. [...] Life has in the sting of death that perpetually lies in wait, ever again to be staved off, and precisely the challenge of the “no” stirs and powers the “yes”»⁴⁰. The *no* opposed to death is so evident at the plant level that it is equivalent to a first affirmation, insofar as it immediately satisfies the organism's needs in the contiguous environment. With the animal level, the time of desire and the deferred character of satisfaction expand the metabolic process. Thus the «continued metabolism»⁴¹ presents the constraint of need, and makes a positive response prevail. A bias exists for the *yes* of life itself over the individual *no*, as an ontological choice of life for itself as a prior tendency with respect to the conscious and deliberate alternative of living individuals. Indeed, life has almost automatically integrated the activities related to its basic physiological functions that are essential to it. The living individual's continuous and unremitting preoccupation with his own needy existence makes him a concerned and worried individual insofar as he is the guardian of himself: he cannot at any moment ignore or neglect the imperative to act that torment him – «[t]he primeval restlessness of metabolizing substance»⁴². For the animal organism, the world is at a greater distance than for the plant organism and the adjustment between them becomes more complex. Since the context is no longer immediate and contiguous, the relationship with it requires a «recombination in a secondary relationship»⁴³. From animal's metabolism onwards, the world is reached through desire and perception. With man, when objectivity becomes ideal, the dialectic of being and non-being definitively loses its met-

⁴⁰ H. Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, cit., p. 90.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Ivi, p. 70.

⁴³ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 184.

abolic evidence and need loses its force of need: the dialectic then potentially makes way for an alternative at the mental and ethical level. Then another time appears, marked by ideal interruptions and questions that suspend metabolic imminence. With this third-degree mediation, the time of life can be suspended.

The time thus marked by a potential discontinuity is that of human life, which must reassert itself by thwarting at each moment the threat of non-being. However, the latter may now present itself as a temptation. So, paradoxically, if life is indeed self-affirmation, the way in which it asserts itself entails the repeated and increasingly explicit refusal in the face of this threat also more or less explicit.

For humans, imminence becomes problematic because it has lost its continuous character. And it is with this possible discontinuity that the temporality specific to responsibility manifests itself. Correlatively, a form of imminence linked to human action appears: knowledge will have to identify the threat – the feeling – in order to establish the continuity between knowledge and action, thwarting the intrinsic traps of freedom and the will.

6. *The imminence of catastrophe*

The imminent time of life is that of the crisis: in other words, it is the time of the challenge – always taken up – to affirm one's own existence in becoming and to have a hold on the immediate future from near and far. We must now distinguish two types of imminence when it comes to the imminence of life that overflows into the future, on the one hand, and the imminence of catastrophe as an unnoticed near future, on the other. In both cases, imminence designates a threatening future that lies ahead of us. And yet, it is not the same temporality.

On the one hand, imminence as a time of teleological life consists in standing within the polarity between being and non-being and in always leaving the dynamic alternative open, while knowing that life affirms itself in relation to what threatens it. Jonas distinguishes two meanings of mortality: on the one hand, mortality as a possibility within life, «mortality as the possibility of death lurking in all life at all times»⁴⁴ and therefore as a constant threat; on the other hand, mortality as the end of life. The former, mortality as an ever-pres-

⁴⁴ H. Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, cit., p. 94.

ent possibility that can burst into individual life at any moment, is a burden; whereas the latter, death correlative to the appearance of newcomers who renew the individuals in the community, is a gift, a blessing⁴⁵. Jonas thus distinguishes between the interruption and the end of life, that is to say between premature death and death at the end of existence (*eschaton*). Here the profound meaning of imminence appears as the time of human life i.e. the ever-presence of the possibility of cessation and the certainty of the end by maintaining the enigma of the day and instant at which this end will occur⁴⁶.

Reality of certain kinds – of which the life-death spectrum is perhaps one – may be imprecise in itself, or the knowledge obtainable of it may be. To acknowledge such a state of affairs is more adequate to it than a precise definition, which does violence to it⁴⁷.

And to give him an end would constitute an additional violence.

On the other hand, in *The Imperative Responsibility*, imminence also designates the time of the ecological catastrophe that threatens the very being of humanity and the entire biosphere. Now, this threat is not perceived or known as such and it risks happening precisely for this reason. The whole ethical challenge of the *Imperative of Responsibility* is to become aware of this threat and to confront it in the near future. Paradoxically, then, the imminence of the catastrophe comes from the disproportionate and discontinuous character of the threat in relation to the time close to life, since it is constructed and projected (by technological civilization) rather than encountered by the living. Thus, the modern utopia of progress has excessively prolonged the time of action by extending it toward the future and reducing the present to a simple means of reaching an extrinsic and idealized end in a distant future. Thus, the time of vital and dialectical imminence, that is to say of immanent teleology, has given way to the time of transcendent and extrinsic teleology. And in the modern age, since we apply the Baconian program, all seems to indicate that

⁴⁵ See H. Jonas, *The Burden and Blessing of Mortality*, in Id., *Mortality and Morality*, cit., pp. 87-98.

⁴⁶ See also H. Jonas, *The Right to Die*, «Hastings Center Report» 8 (1978), pp. 31-36; H. Jonas, *Against the Stream: Comments on the Definition and Redefinition of Death*, in Id., *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 132-140.

⁴⁷ H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, cit., p. 134.

utopian temporality, rather than being articulated by superimposing itself upon the temporality of the living, has ousted it. Indeed, since the beginning of modernity, the utopian time of progress justifies temporary sacrifices in view of a future end, thereby breaking the logic of inclusive finality to the benefit of a logic of dominant finality and of an instrumental logic.

For want of being apprehended as an imminent threat, the catastrophe announced in *The Imperative Responsibility* is a matter of time suffered as an end time: an apocalyptic time. Indeed, in this imminence, life seems to have renounced itself, that is to say the vigilance and the opening on the future which constitute it. The future then closes itself to any attempt to grasp it and can become exclusively threatening. But its radically open character constitutes a call for responsibility on our part. In *Wissenschaft as Personal Experience*, Jonas again describes the time of responsibility as imminence: «[...] the *future* in the light of our caring about it, as something threatening and that must be averted, as threatened and that must be protected»⁴⁸.

The *Didactic Letters to Lore Jonas* reproduced in *Memoirs* provide a description of the time of life as a time of crisis, because life is never certain of being able to overcome the challenge of the threat, to ensure the continuity of moments and thus to continue. «Its actuality [...] is at bottom a constant crisis, which never securely copes with, each time only as the continuation of the crisis»⁴⁹. Apocalypse also designates a crisis, but in a completely different sense. Indeed, the time of the apocalypse is the time of the announced end, that which no longer knows the uncertain opening of tomorrow. In this respect, we must distinguish between eschatology as a terminal finality and apocalypse, which designates a future end as a temporal closure. This distinction applies as much to individual life as to collective life. Thus, insofar as the time of life is that of uncertainty and possibility, Jonas prophesies the catastrophe in order to avoid it, but does not predict it: he is opposed to the idea that one can fix an end to life in a heteronomous way, because this would be to renounce human freedom and creativity, which always escape prediction. On the collective level, to hold the end and the catastrophe as certain is equivalent to committing a *mortal sin*. This religious vocabulary that Jonas uses

⁴⁸ H. Jonas, *Wissenschaft as Personal Experience*, «The Hastings Center Report» 32/4 (2002), pp. 27-35, p. 35.

⁴⁹ H. Jonas, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 230.

sometimes risks misleading his readers, if it is not understood in a philosophical sense: a sin is an error and if it is mortal, it is because it is a fatal error, that is to say tragic and with no way out⁵⁰.

Jonas's position, then, is quite different from that of collapsologists: on the one hand, individual human life knows an end (*eschaton*), which is a good thing for it; on the other hand, humanity in the generic sense is threatened today by an extrinsic end (the apocalypse), so to speak, even if man has caused it himself by developing extrinsic ends to life (*telos*) that have prevailed over the vital dynamic that includes means to ends.

In this case, if Jonas affirms that we are living together in an apocalyptic situation, it is not to describe the end as close and certain, but to describe a situation of progressive destruction into which humanity has dragged the biosphere, an act of degradation committed through repeated crises which themselves mark the imminence of a catastrophe on a global and universal scale: «the threat of a universal catastrophe if we let things take their present course»⁵¹. Jonas first envisages this progressive character of the catastrophe pedagogically, in terms of the possibility of drawing a lesson from it, in order to stop the process. But then he is forced to admit that the dangers are not understood as enduring systemic threats, but as independent accidents. Threats weigh radically differently in different parts of the world and are experienced very differently according to economic, cultural and social forces, and yet these differences appear against the background of a common ontological threat that unites us as one humanity.

Indeed, in *The Imperative Responsibility*, Jonas speaks of the imminent end of authentic humanity, but ecological catastrophes are presented as plural and serial. His hope, then, is that the continuity of the future will immunize us against more serious catastrophes. However, renouncing the pedagogy of disasters at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, he recognized that it is impossible to avoid disasters and that they follow one another before we are able

⁵⁰ To this extent, the strategy of dissuasion proposed by Jean-Pierre Dupuy, which consists in envisaging the catastrophe as certain and the future as closed, in order to make them play a dissuasive role, is quite different from Jonasian hope. For Jonas, the worst is never certain because of the open character of the temporality of the living and the constitutive uncertainty of freedom (particularly human freedom). See J.-P. Dupuy, *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé*, Seuil, Paris 2002.

⁵¹ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, transl. by H. Jonas with the collaboration of D. Herr, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984, p. 140.

to change our way of living, which is anchored in consumerist habits. It is a matter, then, of understanding that disasters are already our present reality and that we should not speak of a single, radical disaster in the future, but rather of a long process in which we return to a point of equilibrium at the end of a shrinking process. «Given that this situation carries with it an accumulation of catastrophes, today we are even closer to the fatal outcome than we were ten years ago»⁵².

7. Conclusion: Imminence as a time of responsibility

The time of lived imminence is indeed that of the meeting with the world and thus of the ontological freedom of the living, that is to say the time which is situated between two external boundaries, one lower and the other higher: that of inert matter and that of the possible self-negation of freedom (a possible self-negation which can occur through the negation of freedom, through indecision and impotence, or through perversion). Below the lower boundary, no encounter takes place. Beyond the upper boundary, the encounter may fail. While inorganic matter cannot affirm life, human freedom can deny itself and thus deny life by breaking the continuous thread of metabolic imminence. Such are the afflictions of freedom and of the will that refuse to opt for the continuation of themselves. For Jonas, while individual suicide can be understood as the ultimate act of individual freedom, collective suicide is a perversion of ontological freedom. He thus conceives of the organism as a model for the living human being, because it presents much greater vitality than human freedom, which undergoes internal processes of devitalization. In *Dem Böse Ende Näher*, he writes: «I hope for self-healing processes in the organism of mankind»⁵³.

It is thus necessary to distinguish between the time of the imminent life, for which the organic affirmation of oneself meets the possibility of non-being, and the moment where human freedom of the image introduces discontinuity between the present and the future. With the third degree of mediacy, the alternative becomes explicit through the representational objectification of the self. From this

⁵² H. Jonas, *Dem bösen Ende näher. Gespräche über das Verhältnis des Menschen zur Natur*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1993, p. 10. My translation.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 83. My translation.

evolutionary turning point onwards, the negation of the self becomes a positive choice, the fruit of human freedom. While the time of the organism is that of the polarity between the self and the world, human time introduces a problematic discontinuity between instants and an explicit choice between the affirmation and the negation of the self, that is to say a potential dualistic opposition which is in itself dangerous. The explicit choice of one of the two poles will be the fact of human freedom: this is the reason why the philosophy of the organism must lead to a form of ethics. «A new integral, *i.e.*, philosophical monism cannot undo the polarity: it must absorb it into a higher unity of existence from which the opposites issue as faces of its being or faces of its becoming»⁵⁴.

Imminence thus appears as the time of life that assumes this balanced tension between two poles, the possibility of self and the threat of death, whether it be natural or caused by man. The imminence of death is what must inhabit life until the end, which is why Jonas claims the right to own his own death, in a way, by having the constant awareness of its imminence.

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⁵⁴ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., p. 17.

