

# Existence and Ethical Responsibility at H. Jonas: Necessity and Contingency

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**Abstract:-** For Jonas, existence is the necessary condition for accountability. Before assuming any responsibility, you must exist. But this necessary condition is not sufficient; hence the contingency of existence as a condition of being responsible. Through this, we show that there are other conditions besides the mere fact of existence that make one responsible or not.

According to Mr. Jonas's words as revealed in *The Principle of Responsibility*, it is clear that one of the important or even necessary conditions for being responsible is the fact of existing. Only the one who exists, that is, the one who acts on himself, on the surrounding world, on other beings, and whose actions have consequences that can ensure that responsibility is assigned to him, can claim responsibility.

Reading Jonas reveals that responsibility or being responsible also requires something other than the mere fact of existence. To be sure, existence is a necessary fact, a prerequisite for liability, but it is not a sufficient condition for holding someone accountable. If so, what are the other conditions that make one liable and what makes one so that despite the fact that one exists, one is under the responsibility of another person or one is deprived of responsibility?

In this context, we wish to set out two facts that indelibly mark the fact of being responsible in the Jonassian conception. The first is the one that deals with the necessity of existence as a condition of being responsible. The second shows that the mere fact of existing, although necessary, is not sufficient for us to be said to be responsible; that is why we are talking about contingency. For, although we exist, becoming responsible or being responsible requires fulfilling other conditions. Mere existence is no longer the only condition for being called responsible.

To exist as a necessity of being responsible is revealed in four ways, namely the awareness of existing as a condition of responsibility, the importance of taking into account all aspects of reality for a global responsibility, the imperative of existence as the guarantor of accepting responsibility and the pre-eminence of the idea of being on nothing and the individual as the basis of the relationship of existence and responsibility.

After the first bullet points out the need to exist to be responsible, the second bullet points to being struck by the minority, whether it is in the infant or in the people, as a cause that prevents someone from being responsible despite the fact of existing. As a result, this cause renders existence not sufficient to be responsible.

**Having said that, there are two points. The first point shows that responsibility is linked to existence. The second reveals the conditions that deprive someone of responsibility, when they are not fulfilled.**

**Keywords:-** Existence, responsibility, ethics, necessity, contingency, minority.

## I. EXISTENCE AS A CONDITION OF LIABILITY

This first point, presented in four parts, divided into a, b, c and d, forms the first part of our presentation. It is here, through points a, b, c and d which represent the various components, that we show what makes the existence necessary in the act of being responsible or in the act of being said responsible.

### A. *The awareness of being a condition of responsibility*

Its purpose and meaning are intrinsic to existence. The projection at the center of the Jonassian theory of responsibility makes clear the truth that, consciousness of existence is a condition of responsibility as existence is nothing but the space of time lived within the biosphere, which separates birth from death. Anyone who exists by interacting with others, the other, and the environment is unconditionally responsible. For the actions he takes towards others, towards others and towards the environment have consequences that make him the one to whom responsibility is assigned.

It is from this perspective, moreover, that humanity's right to exist finds its source. By the way, the obligation to act, that is to say to take action, is what makes humanity exist. This obligation is the basis for the right to exist.

To exist for a human being means an active act on oneself, on others and on others (namely the environment). Humans do not exist in the way that objects do. The objects exist only when they land there. On the other hand, with regard to human existence, which is an active act, there is an undeniable and permanent link between existence and responsibility. To exist as an active act implies a certain sense of responsibility in itself. For, when someone says "I am," that statement mediates a trade-off that cannot be divorced from a potential capacity for freedom, creativity, willpower, and responsibility for all of one's actions around the world voluntarily and freely. In the world, the person is there as Dasein, as he is, but also as a person who acts. Its existence is not a passive fact, it does not just put the world through it, it acts and makes the world subject to it.

What do we mean? If our existence were merely an appearance in the world that resembled objects to the point of lacking the capacity to say, "I am," we would be mere objects, not acting, that is, beings without responsibility. We could not

be responsible for acts that we did not do and, what is more, would have consequences that we did not intend or intended. We would have no advice that could be taken into account. Such an image of human existence in the manner of objects reifies the human being and renders it an object, to the point where the human being has neither the will nor the freedom nor the responsibility, let alone the capacity for inventiveness. And yet, when we consider existentialist philosophies, like that of Jean Paul Sartre<sup>1</sup>, the meaning of ontological difference between being-in-yourself and being-for-yourself becomes apparent. Indeed, Jean Paul Sartre says: "It is therefore for us now to consult this phenomenon and to try to determine by this means the meaning of being. It should be noted, however: "I° that this elucidation of the meaning of being applies only to the being of the phenomenon. Since the being of consciousness is radically different, its meaning will require a particular elucidation from the revelation-revealed of another type of being, the being for oneself, which we will define later and which opposes the being itself of the phenomenon<sup>2</sup>."

One of the relationships between for-self and self, according to Jean Paul Sartre, is knowledge. In fact, he said, "But we had established that self-awareness could never be present. The being-present, indeed, is a mode of being ek-static of the for-itself<sup>3</sup>." Being for one self, being able to say "I am", does not appear in the world as an object being that only occupies space, that is to say as an object be-in-themselves who do not act and are deprived of responsibility. Indeed, Jean Paul Sartre continues the differentiation of these two beings, writing: "The negation then becomes a bond of being essential, since at least one of the beings on which it relates is such that it indicates to the other, that it bears the other in its heart as an absence. It is clear, however, that this type of denial cannot apply to the being itself. It is inherently pro-self. Only for one self can be determined in one's being by a being that one is not<sup>4</sup>." For-yourself is the only one capable of determining himself in his being, he has the power to say "i am" and to say other beings: the being itself. And in saying, "I am," there's an awareness of who you are, which makes sure that you also take into account the world around you, the world in which you are acting.

It is through consciousness that Jean Paul Sartre circumscribes the affinity between existence and responsibility. In fact, consciousness accompanies man for as long as he lives and inevitably leads him to erect new projects to fill the void he has in him. So man, being committed voluntarily to the path of responsibility, will continue to struggle.

In space as well as in time, the emergence of the individual into existence has a purpose. It is to bring light to a situation that shows how consciousness was built. On the horizon of how consciousness is constructed is the hope of destroying the closeness that exists between the knowing

subject and the object. The state of the building of consciousness that we are talking about is obtained in the relationship between freedom and giving.

It is true that the current period is rich in fortuitous or unpredictable events. But Jonas still divided ethics into two parts, subject ethics and object ethics. Reasonably, that is to say, fairly, Hans Jonas admits that "the form or spirit of the act itself is the theme of the norm and where the external object that the situation provides is more the occasion than the real purpose of the action<sup>5</sup>."

In this context, the subject-matter of the action is irrelevant as is the manner in which it is taken. For Hans Jonas, this ethic of subjective intention has, as its modern paroxysm, existentialism; this is the case, he believes, of Frederic Nietzsche's will to want, of Martin Heidegger's authenticity and resolve, of Jean Paul Sartre's authentic decision, and so on. We are not concerned here with Frédéric Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, but with the authentic decision of Jean Paul Sartre<sup>6</sup>, which is the expression of autonomy. This (authentic decision) guides or directs the actions through which man takes the resolution not only for himself, but also for others, about the future of all men.

The nature of individuals is not what requires authenticity. On the contrary, the latter is required in the creative acts of everyone. Thus, to attain authenticity would mean that everyone would have understood his obligation to create and be the creation to which he is bound. Moreover, Jean Paul Sartre says: "Originally, authenticity consists in refusing the quest to be one, because I am never nothing<sup>7</sup>." It is when you exist and feel responsible for a small detail, which reveals itself to any meaning, that you notice intimacy. Therefore, intimacy means never being nothing or always being something. This situation brings us back to the one in which human responsibility is tied to existence. Liability as a condition of existence becomes an obligation to act. We are responsible because, by existing, we act, and action has the consequences that impute responsibility to a world whose perpetual construction is our duty.

#### *B. Perceive reality in all its aspects for a global responsibility*

When we consider what Hans Jonas said, it turns out that human responsibility has a dual obligation, that of taking account of all humanity and that of safeguarding nature. In this regard, Hans Jonas states: "But what we are trying to preserve and protect is not our own life, but the life of all that in the future - that extraordinarily distant and at the same time near future of which technology alone provides us with the idea - appears to be essentially fragile and threatened, that this is the case, either future generations, not yet born, or nature itself<sup>8</sup>." Indeed, humans have an obligation not only to sustain humanity into the future, but also to safeguard the entire biosphere, thereby protecting nature.

<sup>1</sup> cf. J. P. SARTRE, *L'être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1943.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 213.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>5</sup> H. JONAS, *Le principe responsabilité*, p. 126-127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*., p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> J.-P. SARTRE, *Cahier pour une morale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983, p. 185.

<sup>8</sup> H. JONAS, *Le principe responsabilité*, p. 11.

The responsibility in question is that which arises from the vulnerability or fragility of others, it does not come from the heart of me. That is how it becomes a duty. The self is called to care about others because they are precarious, fragile, or perishable.

Essono writes: "The duty to act attributable to the duty to exist therefore places the apprehension of responsibility in a logic which means that it is only brought to oneself in the implication of the non-de facto separation of all possible existence within the natural environment<sup>9</sup>." From this quotation emerges the idea that responsibility lies only with those who are not limited or compartmentalized in their view of reality. But, on the contrary, he who has a global vision of all the beings and aspects concerned by reality. True responsibility is not lived by remaining compartmentalized or compartmentalized in its vision of reality. The totality of reality must be taken into account in order to ensure that the responsibility arising from it is comprehensive.

In the world of life, in which the self-interacts with its environment, responsibility only acquires a sense of total commitment when there is no separation between the actions of me and what is in its environment. Overall or total responsibility only emerges where the subject-environment relationship is taken into account. The subject's actions affect what's in his or her environment, and vice versa. The living world, which is a place where morality is lived, forms a whole in which beings interact. Within this unit, the responsibility that comes with it also has a moral dimension. This places the onus or responsibility on the responsible party to account for the consequences of their actions. This situation has as a training fact, the fact that one can only be responsible in relation to a duty to be.

In addressing the question of the duty to be, Hans Jonas questions human existence and whether or not man should be. In order to answer this question, prior knowledge of the meaning, which emerges from the words "must be<sup>10</sup>", is important.

It is clear from what has just been said that Hans Jonas is repeating Leibniz's metaphysical question, namely, "Why is there something rather than nothing?<sup>11</sup>" To this question, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz believes that the answer can be given because there can be only the one who has the possibility. That is why the pretense of being, which is the passage from the possibility of existing to its manifestation, is the measure of its liquidity, when it is considered as the ultimate reason perceived by the being in the divine being, which possesses a nature that determines its mode of existence.

<sup>9</sup> G. NDONG ESSONO, *L'heuristique de la peur et la responsabilité éthique du milieu naturel chez Hans Jonas. Ethique environnementale*, Thèse de doctorat en philosophie, Nantes, Université de Nantes, juin 2010, p. 205, <https://www.theses.fr/s51357>.

<sup>10</sup> H. JONAS, *Le principe responsabilité*, p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> Nous faisons ici référence à la question de Leibniz telle que reprise par Hans Jonas dans *Le principe responsabilité*, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> H. JONAS, *Le principe responsabilité*, p. 76.

In the question "why is there something?", when "why" is taken in the sense of causal provenance, the question becomes meaningless and foolish to be so in its entirety. According to Hans Jonas, the "why" must be understood in the sense of a justifying standard, even if it is questionable whether it is important or even necessary to ask such a question. This reconfiguration of the question of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz by Hans Jonas not only made the question meaningful, but also made it, in several respects, so impersonal that it is not attached to any faith<sup>12</sup>. For Hans Jonas, this is "the question of a possible duty-to-be must be resolved regardless of religion<sup>13</sup>." In his argument, Hans Jonas said, "Why is there something and not nothing?" must mean, "Why should something be better than nothing, whatever the cause is that causes it to happen<sup>14</sup>?" What is important when we say "shall be" is our understanding of the word "shall" and not the origin or source of what is happening, let alone the hope that it will happen.

Whether faith is present or not, the question concerning a possible duty to be, hypothetically, can become what must be accomplished by a judgment not dependent on anything; this means that it will become the matter of philosophy<sup>15</sup>. This is the place where the question of value as value joins with that of consciousness, or even with the question of evaluation. This is true to the extent that Hans Jonas asserts that "value or "good," assuming that such a thing exists, is the only thing whose mere possibility already requires the existence (or whose existence, once given, legitimately requires the continuation of its existence) - which therefore has a claim to be, a duty to be, and makes it an obligation where being depends on an act of free choice<sup>16</sup>."

After transforming the above question, Hans Jonas' thesis leads to the metaphysics of the good. Because it is impartial, it constrains discernment. However, according to Hans Jonas, what is truly the subject of morality is command<sup>17</sup>.

When one is available to the call of good, one is receptive to the commands arising from the categorical imperative. The latter becomes a bell that resonates within the action that is taken<sup>18</sup>. The role of moral law is to constrain to realities that, in themselves, are clearly necessary and categorically clear, in order to read themselves as such through a lucidity that establishes the solicitation of my action. Indeed, "the good or thing which has value, insofar as it is of its own fact and not of desire, need or choice, is precisely, according to its concept, what the possibility contains the requirement of its reality and what thus becomes

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 123.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem*,

a duty provided that there is a will to perceive the requirement and to translate it into action<sup>19</sup>”.

*C. The imperative of existence as a guarantor of accepting responsibility*

By continuing to analyze Japanese thought, he has revealed his willingness to answer the question: why should someone take responsibility? The answer to such a question is essentially aimed at providing a rational basis for taking responsibility for the future. A priori, for Hans Jonas, the obligation to exist offers a guarantee of having responsibility. In other words, responsibility can lie only with the one that exists.

How can we be responsible without being someone who exists, that is, who acts on the world, who acts for which we are responsible? In fact, when Hans Jonas talks about one-sided responsibility, it is a responsibility to those who do not currently exist, those who do not yet exist and who have only rights without obligations or responsibilities, because they only have a virtual existence. Goodwill, much less positive motivation, cannot ensure acceptance of responsibility without the person's prior existence.

For Hans Jonas, the ontological idea of humanity is what leads to humanity's duty to exist. There is an obligation for this theory to lay down the standards that currently define our actions. That is true in so far as that duty has the function of an obligation which first expresses a credit which is offered to life within the biosphere, then the insight that man is obliged to accept the natural destiny of that credit by preserving life, of the biosphere as a whole.

Hans Jonas takes the value concept into consideration in the light of its purpose. When something is useful for its end, it is valid. He says: "I set myself some purpose, because it is of value to me or it is of value to me because it has already established itself as an end to my nature to be in need, prior to any choice<sup>20</sup>." If the value of a thing is measured only by the utility of its purpose, then the value has only descriptive and non-normative content; that is, "value means the objective utility of a thing according to a certain intention or purpose<sup>21</sup>". Good is the only thing that has the capacity to validly ground the obligation or command to be.

*D. The preeminence of the idea of being on nothing and the individual as the basis of the relationship between existence and responsibility.*

Hans Jonas' approach leads to the placing of responsibility directly in man, which, moreover, implies the concept of the duty to be. Chronologically, the concept of the duty to be something is in the first stage. In the second stage comes the concept of one's duty to act. As it turns out, the primacy of the idea of being over nothing and the individual is the bedrock that underpins Jonas's ethic of existence and responsibility.

<sup>19</sup> H. JONAS, *Le principe responsabilité*, p. 115.

<sup>20</sup> H. JONAS, *Le principe responsabilité*, p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> M. RATH, « *La triple signification du mot « valeur » dans H. JONAS, Nature et responsabilité*, p. 132.

In this regard, he writes: "I say that instead of all the alternatives of being one can choose not being, unless there is recognized absolute pre-eminence of being over non-being<sup>22</sup>." Moreover, he supports the idea that "*the first principle of this ethics is not found in ethics itself as a doctrine of doing (of which all obligations towards future generations are moreover part), but in metaphysics as a doctrine of being, of which the idea of man forms a part*<sup>23</sup>". Responsibility is inherent to the human being, so it is unwise to deprive him of it, for to do so would be rather foolish. In fact, to take away his responsibility would be tantamount to denying him the very fact of living, of doing acts; hence his revocation as an object. In other words, responsibility can lie only with the human being who lives because he exists and is capable of ethical behavior.

Indeed, because it exists, the being arises, exposes itself and imposes itself. For humans, what is more, it acts ethically. All his acts freely and voluntarily make him responsible, because they imply responsibility. Therefore, to want to take away responsibility from the human being would be to deny his ability to behave ethically.

That said, it is not appropriate to separate responsibility from living or existing in the manner of the human being who lives, acts and his actions have consequences, which entail his responsibility. It is in action that respect - which reflects the natural order - is achieved and maintained. For Jonas, the motivating source of a sense of responsibility is action. In fact, with man's consent to the good in himself, it is self-imposed to become a goal. It is this Jonassian view or vision that makes accountability the cornerstone of its ethics.

All of the above makes it clear that being responsible requires the fact that you exist in the first place. In fact, in blaming the current generation for future generations, Jonas argues that the current generation, because it exists, is uniquely empowered to affect itself and nature to the extent that acts done to itself or nature can have consequences that make it responsible. But future generations, through their non-existence or virtual existence, have no real action that could make them responsible for anything.

At this point, a question arises: is existence enough to be considered responsible? If this is enough, what about the Jonassian responsibility that emerges in the ontological aspect, that is to say how to explain that despite their existence, the infant and the people are more the object of responsibility instead of being responsible?

## II. EXISTENCE AS AN INSUFFICIENT CONDITION OF LIABILITY

An analysis of the ontological aspect of Jonassian responsibility, namely the parenting and political models, reveals the limits of existence as a sufficient condition of responsibility. Indeed, while it is true that being responsible necessarily requires existing in the manner of humans, it is

<sup>22</sup> H. JONAS, *Le principe responsabilité*, p. 73.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 70.

also true that existing is not a sufficient condition for being responsible.

There are other conditions that make someone liable. Hans Jonas talks about knowledge and power. As far as we are concerned, starting from analyzes of Jungian thought, we summarize the inadequacy of the capacity to be responsible by the concept of minority<sup>24</sup>.

When discussing the convergences between the two models of responsibility which form the ontological aspect, Hans Jonas states the following: "From this are, we said, two species of responsibility, parental responsibility and that of the statesman who have in common certain properties in which the essence of responsibility is presented in the most complete way and which place them above all others. Let's review these properties. First of all, we mention the totality. By this we mean that these responsibilities encompass the whole being of their objects, that is to say all aspects of them, from mere existence to the highest interests<sup>25</sup>."

For a better understanding of this thinking, our analysis requires treating each model separately. For the parenting model, the infant who is the object of the parenting model is fully responsible. This is remarkable because he exists, but he is overwhelmed by the minority, who make him incapable of using his understanding. This minority, due to its natural state, which the infant does not want but experiences, means that the infant does not have the knowledge and power to act on his or her policy, as far as political matters are concerned. The minority, in this case, "is not the result of a lack of understanding (due to a natural state), but of a lack of resolution and courage." The people, in political matters, leave the political discretion to govern it. He does not use his own understanding. The statesman bears in him the total responsibility of the people, who voluntarily have proved unable, in political matters, to make use of their understanding. Since he resolved to be led out of a lack of courage, his resignation politically deprives him of knowledge and power. The politician, to whom the people leave the direction of public affairs, thus becomes possessor and holder of knowledge and political power; therefore, possessor and holder of sufficient conditions to be responsible for his own, his people.

In the model of political responsibility or statesmanship, it is the people who are the object of responsibility. These are really the mature people who make up the existing community. These people, although mature, have made the free decision to be taken over by politics, as far as political matters are concerned. The minority, in this case, "is not the result of a lack of understanding (due to a natural state), but of a lack of resolution and courage<sup>26</sup>." The people, in political matters, leave the political discretion to govern it. He does not

use his own understanding. The statesman bears in him the total responsibility of the people, who voluntarily have proved unable, in political matters, to make use of their understanding. Since he resolved to be led out of a lack of courage, his resignation politically deprives him of knowledge and power. The politician, to whom the people leave the direction of public affairs, thus becomes possessor and holder of knowledge and political power; therefore, possessor and holder of sufficient conditions to be responsible for his own, his people.

From these analyzes, it emerges that the infant as well as the people, although they exist, do not fulfill the conditions sufficient for them to be said to be responsible. Instead, they are under the parental responsibility for the infant, and the responsibility of the statesman for the people. Whether as infants or as a people, both are overwhelmed by the minority. But, while it is true that the minority for the infant is a natural fact, for he is not in a position to make use of his understanding by his immaturity, for the people on the other hand, which is the whole of the existing community, the minority is due to a lack of resolve and courage.

### III. CONCLUSION

In this context, we wanted to highlight the relationship that Hans Jonas established between existence and responsibility. In fact, according to Hans Jonas, responsibility can only be said to lie with the person who exists; that is, the person who acts on himself, on others and on nature to such an extent that his actions lead to consequences that can impute responsibility to him. This condition, that of existence, appears to be necessary.

But, by putting responsibility in its ontological context that highlights parental and political responsibility, existence, while necessary, has been insufficient. Because of their minorities, infants and people are the objects of parental responsibility and of the statesman. And yet they exist. The mere fact of existing is no longer sufficient for them to be said to be responsible.

The question that had to be answered was: what were the additional conditions to existence for someone to be said to be responsible, or what is it that, despite existence, one is under the responsibility of others? It is here that after showing the four components of existence that make one responsible, namely the consciousness of existence, the perception of reality in all its aspects, the imperative of existence and the pre-eminence of the idea of being over nothing and the individual, that we have exposed the conditions without which, although one exists, one cannot be said to be responsible.

German by Alexander J.-L. Delamarre and Ali, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. 497.

<sup>24</sup> H. JONAS, *Le principe responsabilité*, p. 145.

<sup>26</sup> E. KANT, *Critique de la faculté de juger*, Traduit de l'allemand par Alexandre J.-L. Delamarre et Ali, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. 497.

<sup>24</sup> Speaking of the majority, we are referring here to what Immanuel Kant said when he answered the question: what is enlightenment? "The Enlightenment," he wrote, "is defined as man's escape from the minority state, where he holds on by his own fault. The minority is the inability to use one's own understanding without being directed by another." E. KANT, *Critic of the Ability to Judge*, Translated from

Here we have talked about the minority, knowledge and power as complementary conditions to existing for assured and assumed responsibility. The infant and the people, although they exist, because they are struck by the minority, cannot be said to be responsible. They are deprived of knowledge and power as a result of this minority. The mere fact of existence, which, though necessary but insufficient, is being overridden by understanding. Being unable to use his hearing because of his immaturity, which makes him a minor, the infant remains under the responsibility of the parents.

In the model of political responsibility or statesmanship, it is the people who are the object of responsibility. These are really the mature people who make up the existing community. These people, although mature, have made the free decision to be taken care of by the Possession of knowledge and power; that is, by reaching majority.

From the above, there is an undeniable but insufficient necessary link between existence and that of being said to be liable; that is, between existence and liability. However, in order for this undeniable necessary link to be sufficient to be said to be responsible, the one who exists must leave the minority and reach the majority. That means having the knowledge and the power to allow it to take responsibility for its actions and consequences.

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