

Death as a global annihilation of life in the perspective of Hans Jonas's ethics of responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of death is an issue which was very frequent in philosophy. However, almost all reflections on this subject were usually from the anthropocentric perspective. In the cognitive horizon, for example, the issue of the essence of death was investigated, human helplessness was discussed in its face, models of existential attitude towards inevitability were constructed. This anthropocentric attitude changed only in the second half of the twentieth century in the result of the ecological crisis. From then on, in the philosophical debate, not only is discussed the death of a man but also death in the sense of total annihilation of life on Earth. According to the concept of global death, the passing ceases to be accidental. It loses

connotations close to the metaphor of further life. It also ceases to be identical with the cosmic metamorphosis. Instead, it becomes a synonym of evil, which delivers the final blow to everything that lives in the biosphere. In this vision, one can grasp death cognitively and oppose its physical abandonment. Man, regarding global death, can remain a causative agent. One of the philosophical versions of stopping the invasion of death was proposed by Hans Jonas. He called his strategy the ethics of responsibility. Fear heuristics, new axiology and the ideal of human attitudes play a key role in it.

Keywords: Global death, ethics of liability, fear heuristics, canon, anthropocentrism

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Death as a synonym of the irreversible destruction of life has always intrigued the most outstanding minds. Also today it occupies the attention of thinkers, writers, poets, composers, artists, doctors. From the prevalence of interest in this issue, the philosophy of death emerged in the second half of the last century. Within its framework research is carried out on many levels. The axis of the anthropological aspect are the investigations aimed at explaining the mystery of the human phenomenon from the perspective of finitude. The limits of the ethical dimension of death define the moral dilemmas associated with making a decision on how to end life at its different stages. Aesthetic threads focus on attempts to establish the criteria of the beauty of death and its ugliness. In the cognitive area, in turn, one looks for sources of human confidence about one's own mortality and formulate definitions of death. In-depth studies in this field prove that regardless of the orbit of exploration, it is saturated with the spirit of anthropocentrism.

Death, meanwhile, is not a phenomenon concerning humans only. It occurs everywhere where there are living organisms and shows itself in all sorts of ways. Narrowing the discourse to the anthropocentric horizon is almost a matter of generic selfishness. Therefore, favoring such an attitude requires a reorientation of thinking and developing a new language for it. Ergo, it is reasonable to venture beyond the circle of anthropocentrism and look at death through the prism of global annihilation.

The view of the progressive annihilation of the biosphere allows to state that of all the global threats the greatest one is the risk of complete disappearance of life on Earth. Expert reports are the argument justifying the inferred assumption. They clearly show that the progressing degradation of the biosphere eliminates the functioning of mechanisms that maintain equilibrium in nature, interferes with biochemical cycles, and reduces the biodiversity of the environment. It will become the main cause of disasters with an all-encompassing range. In relation to human being, it results in deterioration of the biological quality of life, causes numerous civilization diseases and contributes to the increase of mortality. In turn, in the political and social dimension, it results, inter alia, in the contradiction of economic interests and in military conflicts caused by the desire to take control over the distribution of natural resources [1]. From this point of view, death is no longer merely an accidental fact, which falls on an individual suddenly and in a blink of an eye deprives it of all possibilities, intentions, and hopes, or the end of an individual being encoded in its structure and gradually realizing itself [2]. Nor does it have to be associated with the metaphor of life or the cosmic metamorphosis. The global dimension of death includes associations related to devastating evil, which is a real force gradually

conquering life. The onslaught of devastating evil breaks down life from itself and gives it the final blow. The externalization of devastation is turning the reality of every life form into nothingness. This death, unlike others, is not a mysterious event of unknown extraction. To some extent, it can be captured cognitively. It is also not difficult to indicate the source of its origin. The cradle of global death is the moment of violation of the state of homeostasis between man and the natural environment.

In view of this concept of death, a man is not completely helpless and can oppose it because in the continuum of devastation he remains a causative subject. One of the philosophical versions of actively facing the devastating evil on the global scale was proposed by Hans Jonas. The work in which Jonas laid out his views is *The Imperative of Responsibility*. The framework of this discourse, however, does not allow a summary of the entire treatise. It is enough for the purpose of exposing the general meaning of the *Imperative* to recall a few basic categories of thought and a polemic with traditional ethics. Jonas claims that current ethics, whether in the form of direct recommendations or setting rules for these guidelines, was anthropocentrically inclined. All dealing with non-human world remained ethically neutral. Actions on non-human things were not within the sphere of ethical matters [3]. Only the direct relation of man to man, including his reference to himself, had ethical validity. In previous ethics, good and evil were close to human action.

This proximity of ends – persuades Jonas – pertained to time as well as space. The effective range of action was small, the time span of foresight, goal-setting, and accountability was short, control of circumstances limited. Proper conduct had its immediate criteria and almost immediate consummation. The long run of consequences beyond was left to chance, fate, or providence. Ethics accordingly was of here and now, of occasions as they arise between men, of the recurrent, typical situations of private and public life. The good man was the one who met these contingencies with virtue and wisdom, cultivating these powers in himself, and for the rest resigning himself to the unknown [3].

According to the type of time perspective and the spatial horizons of old ethics, ethical maxims were formed. All of them, regardless of the content differentiation, are characterized by a narrowing to the immediate and present circumstances of the activity. He sees this restriction even in the commandment of love and categorical imperatives of I. Kant. Without going into a detailed assessment of the legitimacy of Jonas's opinion on the narrow nature of these maxims, it is worth pointing out that Jonas's view can be accused of one-sidedness, whose

task is to confirm the rightness of the assumptions made by them. After all, neither in the new commandment nor in the content of categorical imperatives, there is no way to love our neighbor today, or to treat another person as an end in itself twice a year, and not necessarily on the remaining days.

After revoking the validity of the old maxims, Jonas introduces new ones in their place. From now on, the action should take place under the dictate of imperatives in the stronger and weaker version. In a stronger variant, the order takes the form of: „Act only in such a way that the effects of your actions can agree with the continuity of authentic life”. The milder variant is expressed in the sentence: „Act only in such a way that the effects of your actions are not destructive to the possibility of such a life in future” [3]. Jonas's imperatives clearly prohibit putting at risk the life on Earth in general. The current generation has no right to endanger future ones and destroy the biosphere because of the desire to improve its present conditions. In Jonas's opinion, the approval of the imperatives he defined will be synonymous with overcoming the anthropocentrism of traditional ethics and the chance for the ethics of tomorrow, the quintessence of which is far-reaching responsibility.

The author of the *Imperative* singles out two types of responsibility. One is of formal nature [3]. Usually, it is a moral and civil law responsibility. In the second edition, it is called “positive”. This kind of responsibility does not apply to hold a man accountable for something *ex post facto* but is intertwined with what is yet to be done in the future [4]. In such an optic, someone feels responsible not for their conduct and its consequences, but for a matter that brings certain claims against him [3].

If I understand Jonas's somewhat intricate thought structure correctly, then he is concerned with responsibility not so much in the sense of feeling guilty because of some evil, but more about feeling capable of custody over the well-being of a human-dependent good [5]. Responsibility for good Jonas derives from the feelings such as concern, dread, fear, kindness, compassion, interest, concern for existence in every existing form. This group of feelings is a part of the heuristics of fear [3]. The text of the *Imperative* gives grounds for concluding that in the heuristic of fear, in addition to the idea of the threat of existence of all that is weak, the primary ability of man to quickly perceive evil and the nature of evil also play a significant role [3]. According to Jonas, *malum* is an invasive, overbearing and imposing element. Evil is usually direct and obtrusive. It reckons with no one and nothing. Its ruthlessness attracts the attention of the man and entangles him in itself. When *malum* comes our way, says Jonas, then we know what we are dealing with [3].

Bonum, on the other hand, is far from being ostentatious with its charm. It is characterized by discreet beauty, subtlety, gentle harmony. The attractiveness of good does not bother anyone. It is generally hidden in the shadow and remains unnoticed. According to Jonas, until an individual can distinguish between good and evil, and is not afraid of it, he will not know what he really should protect and why he should do it. *We know the thing at stake* – Jonas writes – *only when we know that it is at stake* [3].

Knowing evil is, therefore, a prerequisite for doing good. In fear heuristics, this requirement seems to be the aftermath of Socratic ethical intellectualism. According to Socrates, knowledge is good and includes not only knowledge of this or that, but also the ability to make important distinctions and take appropriate actions. No one who follows this attitude chooses anything that would not be good for him. The doctrine of the Athenian master thus conceals the assumption that it is impossible to disconnect what is good for a given man, from what is good in general [6]. The Socratic note that resounds in the hermeneutics of fear gives it a normative meaning. It is summed up in two moral maxims of duty.

The first one recommends visualizing the effects of evil. A man's duty is to take the intellectual toil and effort of the imagination to indicate evil. The work of thoughts and the hardships of the imagination are supposed to instill in people the fear of evil, which has not yet happened and perhaps does not have an analogy in the past or present experience. *The creatively imagined malum* – Jonas writes – *has to take over the role of the experienced malum* [3]. In order for the imagined evil to become a part of the feeling, it is necessary to present it intentionally. It cannot be a derivative of a coincidence.

The second rule, on the other hand, requires the induction of a feeling, proportional with the self-evident evil. The emergence of a proper emotion towards this malignity is also not a creation of blind luck. Just as the conceived *malum*, it is to be induced intentionally. From the psychological point of view, an accurate explanation of the genesis of this emotion towards evil is not an easy matter as it was in the case of Thomas Hobbes, who made the starting point of the ethical considerations not love for *summum bonum*, but fear of *summum malum* [7]. In order to make the contrast between the concept of fear in Hobbes's approach and the theory of Jonas, it is worth mentioning that the British thinker had in mind mainly the fear of a man of his own death. In *Elementorum Philosophiae* Hobbes wrote that this is the evil that most people know well. The possibility of experiencing it is always present in them, and the threat is real. This fear comes from the innate instinct of self-preservation [7].

Thus, it is not absurd or reprehensible, contrary to sound reason, if someone puts all his efforts to protect his body and its members from death and suffering and to preserve its existence. And what does not contradict healthy reason is that everyone considers it right and lawful [8].

Jonas, in turn, in his fear doctrine places the emphasis differently and makes it clear that the fear he is concerned with has nothing to do with the involuntary predisposition. It derives primarily from the conscious attitude of man. This attitude must be cultivated in order to develop emotional readiness to foster concern by the very thought of the tragedy of future generations. Forming an open attitude focused on fueling fear only in the face of alleged and distant expectations related to the fate of life on earth is a new kind of *éducation sentimentale* and at the same time an obligation of ethics. Guided by Jonas's logic, a man is obliged to be opened and aware, proportionally to the strength of anxiety aroused.

A careful view of fear heuristics shows the rank of the subjective factor in the ethics of responsibility. The philosopher partly shares the well-known view of voluntarists' saying that ethics can lead a person to act, but only if he first moves his will, not reason. It is in the bosom of emotion that the question of taking responsibility is resolved. According to Jonas, the emotion is the motor force that drives the will. However, this is not tantamount to completely marginalizing the functions of reason. Reason completes the will and cooperates with it.

In the opinion of some researchers, the heuristic of fear is to lead to the belief that man is able to prevent evil and has the choice between two mutually exclusive possibilities [9]. Either he will speak for doing evil or for giving it up. One does not need much insight to understand that this preference of action cannot be realized in the axiological vacuum. It must be oriented towards a certain universe of values and gravitate towards it. The privileged place is occupied by ideal patterns of *a statesman* and *a parent* [3]. A lot of publications have already been written about the effects of the first paradigm, so one can feel free from the obligation to discuss it. Somewhat different looks the case of the parent's pattern. In this case, it is necessary to comment it briefly. As it results from *The Imperative*, the reasoning of Jonas, focused on the parent's paradigm, aims to visualize his strength of being, total power of attorney and a number of obligations towards a helpless child.

The radical dependence of the born child as such carries with it a mandate towards the parents to reverse its re-immersion in nothingness and care for its becoming. The commitment to this was in the act of birth. Its fulfillment (even by others) becomes an inalienable duty to being, existing now under its own authentic law and in complete dependence on this fulfillment [3].

Quoting this statement *in extenso* allows avoiding simplifications in the interpretation of Jonas's parent pattern and its moral aspect. Important in it is the belief in the unique situation of the child, which appeals for care and unconditional vigilance over his fate. An adequate response of the parent to the child's appeal is to show it a total concern that optimally protects his or her existence exposed to harm and sometimes even to extermination [10].

Under the concept of total care, Jonas seems to understand the overall care of the child. The parent's total care takes into account not only the elementary needs of the child in the early phase of its ontogenesis but also cares for upbringing, education, stimulating development and the ability to exercise control over it. Holistic care also involves providing the child with conditions for self-realization and, if possible, achieving happiness. Such care should bring out the potential inherent in it and make it the best being possible [3].

According to Jonas, the development of the child's optimum potential cannot be done without maintaining a continuity of care. Care must not be interrupted at any time or forgotten. Care for a child must be continuous because its life continues each time puts new demands on parents. That is why Jonas acknowledged the permanence of care as a constitutive attribute of responsibility. The continuity is maintained over time and only in it is possible to build the child's historical identity [3].

In the parent's paradigm, Jonas distinguishes two temporal horizons of responsibility. The first is linked with the child's present. In this area, the parent here and now creates the "history" of the child and works to deepen its identity. The second horizon mainly concerns its future. The parent, in a way, thinks ahead not to let the child reduce or take something from his or her existence. On the contrary, the parent steps ahead of the child in order to secure the foundations of a moral attitude towards the phenomenon of life on the globe in general. To this prospective aspect of responsibility, Jonas acknowledged the attribute of the guardian of being. The parent, as the guardian of being, looks after the emergence of humanity. At the same time, it protects mankind from actions that have destructive consequences for its future [3]. Parental responsibility, therefore, appears in Jonas's research as a prototype of all responsibility.

CONCLUSION

In the course of the reflection of the eminent paradigm of ethics of responsibility, it is easy to come to the conclusion that we have to do with one of the most interesting proposals of attitude towards the spectrum of global death. The concept is not only

a philosophical manifesto but also a call for involvement. It is a call to transform your own and collective way of being in the world. The call of the philosopher is clearly heard especially in the verbs that dynamize his statement. They include: the awakening of anxiety, bringing about an emotional attitude, perceiving, wanting, caring, etc. Jonas's vision is also saturated with good energy and exudes a desire for change. an innovative understanding of the duty to prevent global death and the obligation to promote attitudes aimed at protecting existence in all its forms gains recognition.

These aspects undoubtedly constitute a strong asset to Jonas's concept. However, they cannot cover the weaker sides of the parent's paradigm. A careful reading of *The Imperative* reveals, for example, the lack of any mention of the diversity of this figure in terms of gender. It is not known whether there is a mother or father under the "parent" category. It would seem that the philosopher refers the aforementioned term to both parents. Meanwhile, as it is known, the mother's responsibility has different shades than the color of the father's responsibility. The parent's paradigm for bonding with own child also raises doubts. After all, with such an assumption, the pattern is understandable only in the situation of biological parents. It does not have to be clear for social parents or guardians who are not connected to children with blood ties. The story also clearly showed that even biological parents who love their offspring turned out to be degenerate torturers for other children [11].

Moreover, many parents commit wickedness not by accident or because of weakness. On the contrary, they make it out of the cool calculation and reject any moral scruples on the path to violence. It is not on the side of the helpless child that evil is lurking, but in the parent, certain of his reasons. Contrary to Jonas, the parent's archetype is not so unambiguously positive. The assumption that only the ethical premises are in a perfect parent pattern is very doubtful. In light of the above, it is difficult to raise this paradigm to the rank of a universal norm and an absolute point of reference for the ethics of responsibility.

Conflicts of interest

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