

*Giulia Battistoni**

A Biocentric Ontology at the Basis of an Anthropocentric Concept of Co-Responsibility to Non-Human World

Abstract

Starting from the Australian case *Sharma v. Minister for the Environment* this paper discusses the concept of responsibility in the face of current environmental challenges, showing that the traditional concept of a retrospective, causal, individual responsibility is not able to account for secondary consequences of human actions on future generations and on the environment. This leads to the urgent elaboration of a wider concept of responsibility, which the paper sets out to discuss and to which it offers suggestions.

Keywords

Duty of care; Jonas; Responsibility; Biocentrism; Anthropocentrism

1. Towards the overcoming of the traditional concept of individual, retrospective responsibility

The present ecological crisis produces challenges that show the limits of a traditional conception of individual, retrospective responsibility, based on the causal link between human action and its consequences. Technological progress has extended human being's power of action and with this, the proximity between action and its effects has been lost, as the latter expand in a future that is difficult to foresee; moreover, the vulnerability of nature, as the ecosystem in which human beings live, has become increasingly evident, in particular after the pandemic experience that the world has faced in the last few years.

A concrete example of this, which raises questions of environmental justice and ethics, is the Australian “*Sharma v. Minister for the Environment*” case. In 2020, eight teenagers, represented by a nun, filed a

* Università di Verona/Boston University

class action in the Australian Federal Court to block a coal mine extension project on the basis of the Minister for the Environment's duty to care for young people. Indeed, approving such a project would have exacerbated climate change and produced serious harm to future generations: these were the arguments of the young people. Under the Australian *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*, the plaintiffs therefore sought an injunction to prevent the Minister from approving the project. While initially recognizing, in 2021, a duty of care designed to prevent personal harm to children, the Federal Court did not issue the injunction. After various legal vicissitudes, the project was approved: at the end, the Minister was recognized as having no duty of care, due to the absence of her proximity to the children and the unpredictability of the consequences of approving the project, that is, the lack of certainty that the extension of the coal mine would cause actual personal harm to the children.

The "Sharma case" shows a normative, legal, and sociopolitical vacuum in environmental issues, because of the lack of an adequate conceptualization by which to ground justice in this field. This is derived from the arguments at the basis of the rejection of the claim that the Minister bears a duty of care to the children, namely 1. the absence of sufficient closeness and directness between the Minister and the Australian children, which can be generalized as absence of proximity between human beings, living at the present moment, and future generations; 2. the indeterminacy of the duty itself; 3. the impossibility to foresee the distant consequences of an action which is linked to the absence of direct causal link between human actions and their secondary consequences. All these arguments exclude a kind of responsibility towards nature and future generations, if understood in a traditional way, that is based on the causal nexus.

The question arises of how we should ground responsibility, legal and political decision and possibly also punishment in these cases. There is the need to philosophically ground a *wide*, meaning *collective* and *proactive*, *concept of responsibility* able to account for such cases.

What in my view serves as a starting motivating point toward a change of paradigm in this sense is the increase in human vulnerability and the corresponding awareness and fear related to the deleterious impact of climate change. I take "vulnerability" to be a crucial concept to motivate a sense of responsibility towards nature and future generations, which emerges from the *fear* to perish, together with the awareness of one's own and others' vulnerability¹. Hans Jonas, the anticipator of major issues

¹ On this, see E. Pulcini, *La cura del mondo. Paura e responsabilità nell'età globale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2009, pp. 220–262.

related to human responsibility, develops in his masterwork *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (1979) an interesting *heuristics of fear*, which is fruitful in this sense². In his view, fear makes the human being aware of that which is important to her. Far from paralyzing us and blocking us from action, fear may be very useful, leading to a sense of responsibility and supplying a first motive for responsible action: “*We know the thing at stake only when we know that it is at stake*”³. At his time, this could still be a kind of “imagined fear” of the future devastation of both humankind and planet, so a kind of fear produced by imagination, which in Jonas’ view could motivate human beings better than optimistic representations of how the future might be if we behaved the right way. Today, the situation has changed and gotten worse: the “imagined fear” has become an “actual fear”, based on concrete natural disasters that bring the risk of feeling overwhelmed. It is upon the human being to recover a kind of fear which might still be productive and serve as a positive, transformative motivation to change the situation⁴.

Nature and future generations, as well as human beings currently living on earth are vulnerable in the same way, faced by the same threat, that is the possible end of life on this planet and destruction of the ecosystem. It seems that in particular the unexpected and shocking event that has affected humanity since the end of the year 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic, has been decisive in bringing attention back to nature and the environment, making the human being develop a new awareness on issues that have always been present, but that perhaps only now can be truly “felt” in a situation of *general fear*: humanity has proved itself to be *vulnerable*. Exactly when, out of necessity, human beings were deprived of contact with the natural environment, through several lockdowns, they realized the physical and psychological benefits produced by nature and taken for granted under “normal” life conditions, enabling the development of the awareness of the fundamental role played by the natural environment in the survival of humanity itself. Consequently, it has beco-

² See H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 1984 [1 ed.: 1979], p. 26 f.

³ Ivi, p. 27.

⁴ Jonas also argues for the need of an education toward this feeling of fear. Note that fear plays an important role as a motivating factor in some of the positions of new materialisms, too, like in Timothy Morton’s or Bruno Latour’s thought. This cannot be further analyzed in the context of this discussion but let me just point something about Morton’s position. In his *Ecology without nature. Rethinking environmental Aesthetics*, Morton writes: “In ecological lament, we fear that we will go on living, while the environment disappears around us. Ultimately, imagine the very air we breathe vanishing—we will literally be unable to have any more elegies, because we will all be dead”. T. Morton, *Ecology without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) and London (England) 2007, p. 186.

me evident that a sustainable development, capable of preserving human beings from possible future pandemics and cataclysms, is only possible by acknowledging the profound continuity between human beings and nature, the environment in which they live and of which they are a part. And this precisely offers the basis of a new concept of proactive and collective responsibility towards the environment.

The issue of a redefinition of human responsibility also raises a question of meta-responsibility: Who is responsible to conceptualize a new kind of responsibility which can face current challenges and on what basis? Scientists, philosophers and in general theorists have this kind of responsibility because they bear *knowledge* to change things, meaning the understanding of what is at stake as well as a knowledge of a better set of tools for articulating and addressing the challenges: this is power of transformative thought.

But knowledge seems not enough to activate a responsible behavior. The parameters at the basis of a wider concept of responsibility identified by Iris Young⁵ are particularly relevant in this respect. They can be reduced to two principles: power and interest. On the one hand, it might seem that allocating responsibility on the basis of power (that is: those are responsible who have more power to change things) or of interest (that is: those are responsible who have more interest in changing things) can bring to an insoluble opposition, since people who have the power to change things often are not interested in doing this and those who are interested, because they are the most damaged, have not the power to do anything. This problem might be overcome by developing the awareness that it is in *everyone's interest* to preserve life in itself: meaning her own life and living nature as its presupposition.

Consequently, a wider kind of responsibility cannot be elaborated without taking into consideration the human being's entanglement with the more-than-human living world, in the awareness that the patriarchal, capitalistic model of exploitation of the environment is strongly deficient and dangerous. As far as the *power* is concerned, Jonas had again an important insight: the more the power we have, the greater our responsibility. In his view human beings have the power both to destroy or to preserve themselves and nature. Based on this power and on the fact that life has a value, a purpose in itself that makes the being better than not-being, they have the responsibility to take care of nature and future generations⁶. They *ought* to.

This would be a kind of productive weak anthropocentrism based on

⁵ I. M. Young, *Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model*, in "Social Philosophy and Policy" 23/1 2006, pp. 102-130.

⁶ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, cit., p. 129.

a biocentric ontology⁷, putting together both the claims of anthropocentric ethics and those of environmental ethics, based on the recognition of nature's intrinsic value⁸. In a positive sense – as the faculty of a rational, thinking self-determination – individual, human autonomy still seems to be an inescapable basis of responsibility. Consequently, giving up the anthropocentrism does not seem the right solution if anthropocentrism is understood as the basis for the attribution of responsibility. What I am proposing here is, in other terms, a position that claims that human beings have a peculiar moral standing, in the sense that only human beings are rational, autonomous beings able to act upon laws that they give themselves: they are persons, in a Kantian sense, capable of self-determining themselves in the strict sense of the term, meaning, capable of bearing responsibility for their actions⁹. This does not mean, however,

⁷ This raises the question of the moral considerability of non-human entities, like nature, in Western thought. Even if nature and non-human animals might not be considered as “moral subjects”, in a Kantian sense, this does not exclude that they can become object of ethical inquiry and with this “moral objects”, which human agents *have the duty to take care of*. Although animals do not count for Kant as rational moral beings, he develops a view according to which human beings should treat animals properly, because treating them badly would be a sign of human corruption. In line with this, Kant recognizes indirect duties towards nature and non-rational beings. See Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). On this thought, interpreters have developed insights that seem particularly fruitful in the field of environmental ethics. See A. Wood, O. O'Neill, *Kant on Duties Regarding Nonrational Nature*, in “Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society”, 72, 1998, pp. 189-228; J.M. Gillroy, *Kantian Ethics and Environmental Policy Argument: Autonomy, Ecosystem Integrity, and Our Duties to Nature*, in “Ethics and the Environment”, 3/2, 1998, pp. 131-155, and more recently N.D. Müller, *Kantianism for Animals. A Radical Kantian Animal Ethic*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2022; M. Consenso Tonetto, *Kant's concept of indirect duties and environmental ethics*, in “ethic@”, 16/3, 2017, pp. 519-532; T. Svoboda, *Duties Regarding Nature. A Kantian Environmental Ethic*. Routledge, London 2015. The idea that also non-human entities might become “moral objects”, namely objects of human moral consideration, is the position developed by some revisionists of the discourse ethics, which *per se* seems to be deaf to the mute call of nature, since it presupposes rational beings, with linguistic capacities, as members of a discourse in which norms are defined for the universal interest of everybody. However, this does not exclude that nature and future generations can become object of ethical reflection and their interest be represented as interest of the real community of arguing people themselves. On this debate, see at least R. Eckersley, *The discourse ethic and the problem of representing nature*, in “Environmental Politics”, 8/2, 1999, pp. 24-49 and N. Morar, *The Limits of Discourse Ethics Concerning the Responsibility toward Nature, Nonhuman Animals, and Future Generations*, in B. Olaru (ed.), *Autonomy, Responsibility, and Health Care*. Critical Reflections, Zeta Books 2008, pp. 129-158.

⁸ For an overview of the different positions in environmental ethics, see at least: S. Bartolomei, *Etica ambientale: alternativa a confronto*, in “Global Bioethics” 6/4 1993, pp. 249-253 and K. McShane, *Environmental Ethics: An Overview*, in “Philosophy Compass” 4/3 2009, pp. 407-420.

⁹ Self-determination and the possibility of alternative choices are the very basis of responsibility and imputation: this is Kant's pivotal lesson in the modernity. Things are not

that human beings are the only beings worthy of moral consideration: here biocentric claims play their crucial role. It would be fruitful to manage to reconcile and bring together the biocentric with the anthropocentric claims. To this end, the following part of the paper will briefly deal with Jonas' philosophical biology, interpreting and presenting it as a biocentric ontology which can serve in this sense as the basis of an anthropocentric concept of co-responsibility to the non-human world¹⁰.

2. Hans Jonas' philosophical biology: a philosophy of nature at the basis of an ethics of responsibility

Hans Jonas' thought falls within the ontological turns in philosophy with regard to environmental issues and provides interesting insights to face some problematic aspects previously mentioned. To expand the concept of responsibility and to find who can be held responsible and to whom responsibility is owed, the foundational approach of Jonas proves its relevance, being probably the first attempt of the 20th century to ontologically ground collective responsibility towards nature and future generations, an attempt which has been maybe too quickly forgotten¹¹.

Jonas puts a philosophy of nature – a philosophical biology, in his words – at the basis of his ethics of responsibility. This was quite an

capable of acting, and with this of being responsible and imputable. Moreover, the same action caused by an adult, a child, a mentally deranged person and an animal has a different meaning: only the first one, namely the adult – as a rational, free being – can be held morally and legally responsible for her actions, while the child and the mentally deranged person need a legal tutoring, since they cannot be considered as rational, responsible beings in their entirety; the animal, on the other side, does not have volitional and cognitive faculties that make it responsible in a way that a human being can be. The Kantian view, in this sense, still applies. On Kant's concepts of imputation, guilt, person and action, see C. Blöser, *Zurechnung bei Kant: Zum Zusammenhang von Person und Handlung in Kants praktischer Philosophie*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2014.

¹⁰ This is, according to Paolo Becchi and Roberto Franzini Tibaldeo, the innovative path taken by Jonas. See P. Becchi, R. Franzini Tibaldeo, *Principio umanità e ambiente. Una riflessione su Hans Jonas*, in "Diritti umani e ambiente", 2017, pp. 115-139. For some interpreters, this is a kind of "weak" anthropocentrism. Cfr. J. Ballet/D. Bazin, *Hans Jonas: Bridging the Gap between Environmental Justice and Environmental Ethics?*, in "Environmental Ethics", 39/2, 2017, pp. 175-191.

¹¹ This is because, as the Kantian ethical approach, Jonas' one is based on metaphysics, and today this might seem outdated. As Vittorio Hösle underlines, the central insights of Jonas' ethics are Kantian, indeed, although many interpreters would not admit that. They can be recognized in having stressed, first, the objectivity of moral obligations and, second, their irreducibility to the well-known self-interest. See V. Hösle, *Hans Jonas's position in the history of German Philosophy*, in H. Tirosh-Samuelson, C. Wiese (eds.), *The Legacy of Hans Jonas. Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life*, Brill, Leiden/Boston 2010, pp. 19-37.

original move for that time, in which the Aristotelian teleological view of nature had given way to the mechanistic one, producing a view of nature as characterized by dead matter, open to human exploitation. In the lecture he gave in Munich in 1993 on *Philosophie. Rückschau und Vorschau am Ende des Jahrhunderts*, Jonas identified as a profound deficiency of twentieth-century philosophies precisely the absence of a philosophy of nature¹².

Contrary to the philosophical trends of the time, Jonas puts the concept of the living being at the center of his ontological analysis. In *Organismus und Freiheit*, the book in which he develops his philosophical biology, Jonas stresses freedom as the fundamental ontological character of life, as well as the principle of its progression to higher degrees, which build on lower ones. In his view, a philosophical biology has thus the task of analyzing the emergence and development of freedom from its germinal level of the simplest living organism to its higher levels¹³. As Paolo Becchi argues, one would be tempted to explain Jonas' philosophical biology in terms of a *phenomenology of life*, a reconstruction of the evolution of organic life and its degrees, guided by the principle of freedom, in a way that goes even beyond Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*¹⁴. This allows him to go beyond the limits of every dualism and monism, since the living organism cannot be reduced to either mere nature or to mere spirituality¹⁵.

Even in the simplest living organism, a first kind of freedom emerges, which is related to an intrinsic teleology and *subjectivity*, aiming at self-preservation: this counts as a first kind of self-determination. The organ-

¹² See H. Jonas, *Philosophie. Rückschau und Vorschau am Ende des Jahrhunderts. Vortrag im Prinzregententheater München 1993*, in D. Böhler, B. Herrmann (eds.), *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Erster Teilband: Grundlegung*, in D. Böhler, M. Bongardt, et al. (eds.), *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Hans Jonas, Philosophische Hauptwerke*, vol. 1,2 Erster Teilband, Rombach, Freiburg 2015, pp. 561-575.

¹³ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1966. This book was later published in German with the title: *Organismus und Freiheit. Ansätze zu einer philosophischen Biologie* (1973). The two editions do not perfectly match.

¹⁴ P. Becchi, 'Presentazione', in H. Jonas, *Organismo e libertà. Verso una biologia filosofica*, a cura di Paolo Becchi, Einaudi, Torino 1999. Vittorio Hösle, too, recognizes the legacy of Hegel's thought in Jonas' theory of the organism. See V. Hösle, *Hans Jonas's position in the history of German Philosophy*, cit. More recently, Giulia Battistoni, *Ambiente e responsabilità. Verso una riattualizzazione delle filosofie della natura di Hegel e di Jonas*, in C. Chiurco (ed.), *Il contagio e la cura. Il mondo dopo il virus*, QuiEdit, Verona 2023, pp. 111-135..

¹⁵ However, Jonas still distinguishes between living and non-living beings, thus reproducing a kind of dualism. On the contrary, Alfred Whitehead's philosophy of the organism and process philosophy, which on the one hand Jonas is inspired by and which on the other he criticizes, recognizes life as the principle of all reality: in this way, he really manages to overcome forms of dualisms, also better than Jonas himself. See A.N. Whitehead, *Process and reality: an essay in cosmology*, Macmillan, NY 1929.

ism relates actively to the environment, has the ability to enact a continuous turnover of its matter, which is necessary for its survival and reveals the dialectical nature of organic freedom itself¹⁶. Life is in itself dialectical in that it is characterized by both ontological freedom and biological necessity (dependence on matter). The organism's relationship with matter is thus for Jonas a relationship of *needful freedom*, meaning that the living organism needs the external world in order to survive, in a process in which it feels its deficiency.

This makes it possible to develop an important awareness of the human being's relationship with the environment that surrounds her: a relationship that is, at the same time, one of belonging, dependence, and reciprocity. In this way, Jonas opposes a view that defends discontinuity between nature and human beings, as well as a view of nature as a mere exteriority without freedom.

However, despite the ontological continuity between nature and human being, Jonas does not deny the human being's peculiarity, which is precisely what enables her to be morally responsible, as opposed to other living beings. Anthropologically, human beings are natural beings with their own corporeality. But, at the same time, they exceed nature, insofar as they have the faculty of representation and imagination, the ability of reflection and a moral freedom: only human beings can plan their actions on a large scale, can foresee the consequences of their actions, and create images of them. Again, this is a Kantian root at the basis of the peculiar autonomy and capacity for self-determination as characterizing human beings only, among all living beings.

Only the human being enjoys for Jonas a form of self-conscious freedom, which, as the ultimate result of the teleological work of nature, is no longer limited to merely performing that work but is also able to destroy it. It is only in the human being, again, that

there arises out of the willing itself the "ought" as the self-control of his consciously exercised power: and first of all with reference to his own being. Since in him the principle of purposiveness has reached its highest and self-jeopardizing peak through the freedom to set himself ends and the power to carry them out, he himself becomes, in the name of that principle, the first object of his obligation, which we expressed in our "first imperative": not to ruin (as he well *can do*) what nature has achieved in him by the way of his using it¹⁷.

¹⁶ This emerges in a clear way in the metabolism, as a process that constantly renews the composition of the organism, thus differentiating the living being from a machine: the functioning of metabolism shows that the living being is not an inert object, passively placed under external influences. See H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, cit., third essay (Is God a Mathematician? The Meaning of Metabolism), p. 64 ff.

¹⁷ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, cit., pp. 129-130.

With this, Jonas elaborates a metaphysical foundation of responsibility based on the self-assertion of being (which in his argument is preferable to non-being) and the derivation of “ought to be” (*Sollen*) from being (*Sein*) itself¹⁸, that is and cannot not be: life, which includes within itself the command of its preservation. This is at the basis of the “new imperatives” that Jonas elaborates and that inevitably take into consideration the dimension of the future: 1) “Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life”; 2) “Do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth”; 3) “In your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will”¹⁹.

The result of the combination of Jonas’ philosophical biology and his ethics of responsibility is a biocentric ontology, which understands the human being as a part of nature²⁰, thus bridging the gap between human beings and environment and stating their ontological continuity, but that at the same time understands the human being as the highest point of the natural development as development of subjectivity and

¹⁸ As is well known, the derivation of “ought to be” from “being” has been regarded in the past as a “naturalistic fallacy”, as an undue derivation of values from facts. However, as A. Porciello in *Filosofia dell’ambiente. Ontologia, etica, diritto*, Carocci, Roma 2022, pp. 27-28 has recently rightly underlined, this fallacy encounters problems in the field of environmental ethics. Here, it is possible, as Jonas argues, to ground values exactly on the ontology of nature, on its very structure in a way that avoids the naturalistic fallacy because “ought to be” is already entailed in “being”, and it is in turn intrinsically prescriptive and motivating. In modern words, this is a kind of objectivist metaethics. This is achieved by Jonas through the concept of purpose, which intrinsically characterizes life in itself and gives it an essential value. The idea that nature, when properly observed, can offer clear ethical indications regarding how it should be treated is also proper to the Deep ecology. The father of this environmental movement, Arne Naess, would agree with Jonas in the necessity of a change of paradigm in the understanding of nature, the human being and the environmental issue, starting from the intrinsic value of nature. They both refuse the view of the human living being as isolated from the natural environment in which she lives and develop an ontological foundation of ethics. However, there are important differences between the two authors, like the fact that Naess develops a “Gestalt Ontology”, a multidimensional and relational conception of reality which is not present in Jonas. Nonetheless, Naess too moves from the being to the ought, from ontology to ethics (that has been defined a “psychological connection”, meaning that values are what facts may arouse in us: W. Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY 1995) and defends the identity of the human being with nature. He also recognizes life as an intrinsic value. On this, see A. Porciello, *Filosofia dell’ambiente. Ontologia, etica, diritto*, cit., p. 37 ff., 69 ff.

¹⁹ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, cit., p. 11.

²⁰ This reminds of some elements of the Romantic philosophy of nature, of Schellingian imprint. I cannot go into depth in this but see J.L. Rasmussen, *Hans Jonas’ philosophische Biologie und Friedrich W. J. Schellings Naturphilosophie. Einleitende Bemerkungen zu einer Affinität*, in “Res Cogitans” 11/1, 2016, pp. 63-93.

freedom – which have their roots in nature itself: this leads to a weak anthropocentric ethical view, in the sense that the human being is the only one who is capable of being responsible for her actions and has the duty to preserve future humankind and the environment, as both having intrinsic value.

To conclude, it seems that a collective responsibility towards nature and future generations can be fruitfully founded starting from the elaboration of a concept of nature and its relation to humanity capable of explaining, on the one hand, the value of nature and life in themselves and with this the ontological continuity between nature and the human being; on the other hand, the primary responsibility of the human being for her actions, linked to her individual autonomy, in a Kantian sense. As shown, the anthropocentric perspective does not rule out the possibility that humans can (and, indeed, ought to!) cultivate a non-anthropocentric consciousness, based on the ontological continuity between humans and nature, recognizing the latter's intrinsic value.²¹

²¹ This essay is part of the project *Collective Responsibility towards Nature and Future Generations (ReNa)*, that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie. Grant agreement No 101064728. Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.