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Hans Jonas' integrative philosophy of life as a foothold for integrative bioethics

ABSTRACT

European approach to bioethical problems emphasizes, among others, a need for the widened and deepened consideration of the very notion of *life*, which should be taken in account when speaking about ethical dimensions of manipulation with the life at different levels. This tendency could be traced in the works of Fritz Jahr, Albert Schweitzer, Georg Picht, Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich and especially Hans Jonas (1903–1993). In that sense, we should take into consideration not only Jonas' *ethics of responsibility*, developed in the late phase of his life, but also his long-term *research of Gnostic religion and thought*, as well as his attempt to establish the *philosophical biology* as a new philosophy of the human, nature and life. Jonas developed the *integrative philosophy of life* in which centre stands ethically connotated philosophy of nature, based both on the results of contemporary natural sciences and theological speculations. It shows us clearly what pluriperspectivity and integrativity in bioethics actually mean, because it is far from any reductionism and tries to include different scientific and non-scientific perspectives, offering at the same time a platform for their dialogical mediation.

Key words: Hans Jonas, integrative bioethics, life, nature, human, responsibility, philosophy, ethics, biology, theology

European bioethics and integrative bioethics

If we extract some basic features from "European bioethics" and "integrative bioethics", in order to consider what they are and what they ought to be, we could realize that these two concepts could be used almost synonymously. Namely, one of the basic features of European bioethics is that it is in a permanent dialogical relationship with or even rooted in philosophy, i.e. European philosophical tradition. In

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other words, if we try to distinguish European bioethics from "mainstream bioethics" as an Anglo-American "product", it would be easiest to do this by following the line of productive interlacement of bioethical reflection with philosophy. There are two tasks that arise from this fact. The first of them could be called the *philosophization of bioethics*. It does not mean that philosophy has "appropriated" bioethics, that bioethics is now to be treated as a mere sub-discipline of philosophical ethics, which would benefit neither philosophy nor bioethics. "Philosophization of bioethics" refers to the activation of the potentials of the Euro-continental ethical or philosophical thought within the bioethical framework, for bioethics to be able to fulfil its original ("Potterian", according to Van Rensselaer Potter, "the father of bioethics") mission that cannot be achieved exclusively with the help of an approach that rests on a reduced understanding of bioethics either in terms of its problems and topics or in terms of its methodology. The second task could be called the *bioethicization of philosophy*. This means bioethically reading the leading authors and works of the Euro-continental philosophical tradition for the purpose of identifying both the footholds of establishing and developing dialogue between bioethics and philosophy, and the incentives to reflect on bioethical problems in partnership. Both tasks imply the demand for *Europeanization of bioethics*, as well as the *wider concept of bioethics* which we call *integrative bioethics*. Integrative bioethics could be defined as an interdisciplinary and pluriperspective consideration of moral dilemmas arising from the new techno-scientific possibilities of manipulation with life: human and non-human life, living beings and life conditions; in other words, life as a whole and each of its parts, life in all its forms, shapes, degrees, stages and manifestations.¹

For this purpose, integrative bioethics emphasizes a need for the widened and deepened consideration of the very notion of *life*, which should be taken in account when speaking about ethical dimensions of manipulation with the life at different levels. The same demand and approach – which was developed before or parallel to the "official emergence" of bioethics in 1960s and 1970s – could be traced in the works of "founding fathers" of European bioethics such as Fritz Jahr and Albert Schweitzer, as well as in the works of very important European authors such as Georg Picht, Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich, and especially German-American philosopher Hans Jonas (1903–1993).

Before focusing on the main topic of this article – Hans Jonas' philosophy of life – I will say few words on the very notion of life, i.e. different approaches to it.

¹ For more detailed consideration of the topic presented in the first paragraph see Hrvoje Jurić, "Stützpunkte für eine integrative Bioethik im Werk Van Rensselaer Potters", in: Ante Čović and Thomas Sören Hoffmann (eds.), *Integrative Bioethik / Integrative Bioethics*, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2005, pp. 68-92.

Notion of life and different approaches to it

What do we think when we say "life"? Do we all think the same? Hardly. Therefore, one of the main tasks of bioethics is to re-think itself and its fundamental notion. The notion of life should not be used undifferentiatedly, especially in ethical discussions.

Hans Werner Ingensiep, in his article "Was ist Leben?" (What Is Life?), states the following:

"It is a fact that ambiguous and diverse notions of life are in use, be it on the purely descriptive or the evaluative level (...). There are divided discourses on life within these discussion areas. Meanings are often ripped out from context and transferred from one area to another, almost drowned between different metaphors, so that the philosophers (...) hold, with good reason, that the notion of life is 'unclear'. But in general we can live with that. Only within the bioethics we are dealing with a particular problem situation, if, for example, the terms 'life' and 'person' should be distinguished. However, the 'persons' also are living beings. Not only because of that, the biological notion of life must be connectable to bioethics. As the examples make clear, the question 'What is life?', which was posed more theoretically up to now, is highly controversial. Although we are dealing with different issues of life, we need the notion of life as a bridge between the separate discussion fields, as well as its integration and communication power, especially if there should be a continuous and constructive dialogue about the 'life' between scientists from natural sciences and humanities."²

The complexity of life, as well as complexity of dilemmas connected to it, requires therefore an equally complex approach. Discourse on life demands both inclusion of different approaches and dialogical mediation between them, because neither the multidimensionality nor the entirety of life can be embraced from the reductionist point of view.

There are three main traditional approaches to the phenomenon of life and the concept of life: *natural-scientific* approach, *philosophical* approach, and *theological* approach. Each of those approaches could be considered as reductionist if it is exclusive or practiced without taking other approaches into consideration.

Natural-scientific approach relies primarily on a biochemical understanding of life, understanding of life as a chemical and physiological structure or process, so that the natural-scientific definition of life offers only the list of separate characteristics

² Hans Werner Ingensiep, "Was ist Leben? – Grundfragen der Biophilosophie", in: *Jahrbuch Ökologie 2002*, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, Berlin 2002, pp. 92-93.

that differs living beings and systems from the non-living ones (e.g. organization, metabolism, growth, irritability, adaptation, reproduction, etc.). Due to these features, this approach could also be called a *materialistic* and *mechanistic* and it could be regarded as a reductionist, because it captures only what can be explored by the methods and apparatus of natural sciences, and expressed in terms of natural sciences. In other words, it captures only what fits in predetermined scientific and methodological framework of natural sciences, and thus can be objectified, explored and expressed exactly.

The second approach is the *philosophical approach*. I am not referring to various forms of "natural philosophy" or the philosophical trends such as vitalism or Diltheyian philosophy of life, but the approach which is dominant in modern philosophy and has subjectivist and existentialist features. It is also, in a sense, reductionist. Namely, such a philosophy deals with anthropo-logic of life, plunges into the depths of the human and insists on the specificities resulting from the rational structure of the human subject, and thus in a greater or lesser extent ignores human rootedness in the world of the living.

The third is the *theological approach*. The main features of this conception of life can be read out from the concept of "sanctity of life", whose primary horizon is the religious worldview and different theological conceptions. Life is a creation of divine instance, the godlike creation and reflection of god's existence, so that it implies the dignity of life, which, of course, primarily concerns human life. Therefore we can say that the biocentrism specific to the doctrine of the "sanctity of life" – witnessed by the religious myths and legends, as well as theological speculations – is on the one hand based on postulates of theocentrism, while it is on the other hand anthropocentrically founded. In this case we can also speak about a kind of reductionism, since the theological approach also abstracts from non-human life and the natural facts related to human existence.³

Anyway, a kind of reconciliation of these three approaches, or transcending their mutual confrontations and imperfections, we could find in the philosophy of Hans Jonas, which tried to embrace wide spectrum of topics relevant for the discussion on the notion of life, as well as bio-ethical problems.

³ Of course, the above made division and definitions are, like every other division and definition, imperfect. Namely, there are also many examples of "reflexive natural science", "holistic philosophy" or "biophilic theology".

Hans Jonas' philosophy of life

When talking about Jonas' contribution to bioethical discussions and the very foundation of bioethics, it is expected to take into consideration primarily his *ethics of responsibility*, developed in the late phase of his life and formulated in the philosophical bestseller *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (or, in English translation, *The Imperative of Responsibility*),⁴ whose intention was to develop an "ethics for the technological age". Nevertheless, Jonas' contribution to bioethics should be explored in other phases of his work, as well. In his long-term *research of late-ancient and early-Christian Gnostic religion and thought* we can find the very roots of world-views that have marked our Western tradition, including Western concepts of life and relationship to it.⁵ But it seems that, in the context of bioethical discussion, the most important part of his philosophy is his attempt to establish the *philosophical biology* as a new philosophy of the human, nature and life. In his work *The Phenomenon of Life* (or, in German translation, *Organismus und Freiheit*),⁶ Jonas tried to establish and develop "philosophical biology" as an *integrative philosophy of life* in whose centre stands ethically connotated philosophy of nature, based both on the results of contemporary natural sciences and theological speculations.

Jonas' intention was to establish the *philosophical biology* as an "'existential' reading of biological facts", or as "a new reading of biological record",⁷ i.e. a new *philosophical* reading of *biological* record. Its main scope is to abolish the "artificial split between spheres of the external and the internal, body and mind, the nature and the human".⁸ This kind of dualism seems to be unsustainable, first and foremost, in the case of *organism*. Organism "is the whole not only in the sense of functioning (...), but also in the sense of body-mind unity", which means that "the inner aspect or the subjectivity of organism is inevitable for the biological understanding as equally

⁴ Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a/M 1979; Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984. Here I am referring to the latter.

⁵ See for example: Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, Part 1: *Die mythologische Gnosis*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1934, Part 2: *Von der Mythologie zur mystischen Philosophie*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1954; Hans Jonas, "Gnosis, Existenzialismus und Nihilismus", in: Hans Jonas, *Zwischen Nichts und Ewigkeit. Drei Aufsätze zur Lehre vom Menschen*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1987, pp. 5-25; Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion. The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, Beacon Press, Boston 1958.

⁶ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Harper & Row, New York 1966; Hans Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit. Ansätze zu einer philosophischen Biologie*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1973. Here I am referring to later English edition: Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2001.

⁷ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. xxiii.

⁸ Hans Jonas, *Erkenntnis und Verantwortung. Gespräch mit Ingo Hermann in der Reihe "Zeugen des Jahrhunderts"*, Lamuv, Göttingen 1991, p. 105.

as the objectivity of organism".⁹ His anti-dualistic enterprise has been made in order "to break through the anthropocentric confines of idealist and existentialist philosophy as well as through materialist confines of natural science".¹⁰ Of course, Jonas promotes, at the same time, the dialogue between natural sciences and humanities, which are today complementary to each other, because none of them can comprise the phenomenon of life in its entirety.

Therefore, a new philosophy of life should embrace in its subject-field both "philosophy of the organism" and "philosophy of mind". According to Jonas, philosophy of the organism starts with the thesis that "the organic even in its lowest forms prefigures mind", while on the other hand, philosophy of mind starts with the thesis that "mind even on its highest reaches remains part of the organic".¹¹

Jonas thinks that everything we find in human has its "rudimentary traces in even the most primitive forms of life".¹² Key concept of Jonas' teleological philosophy of nature is the concept of *freedom*. Since the mind is, from the beginning, prefigured in the organic, this is also the case with the freedom. Freedom exists already at the basic level of organic existence, i.e. in the primal metabolism. Moreover, as Jonas says, metabolism itself is the "first form of freedom", which means that the principle of freedom can be found already in the "dark stirrings of primeval organic substance".¹³

The other key concept of Jonas' philosophy of life is *mediacy* in the relation of organism to environment, i.e. the distance between living being and its environment. It describes the progressive scale of the organic on whose peak stands the human. In addition to the principle of metabolism and the more advanced aspects of mediacy in the relation of living being to environment, in humans there is a wide range of specific human characteristics, in short: the mind. However, this does not imply that the human should be observed in the "metaphysical isolation" from the rest of the living world.

Jonas clearly indicates the ethical implications of his doctrine of life. In that sense, the aim of his philosophy of life is the *affirmation of inherent self-purpose and value of being, life and all living beings*. It is the task which asks for foundation of an explicitly non-anthropocentric ethics. Such an ethical conception has been presented in Jonas' ethics of responsibility, but it has been announced already in his philosophi-

⁹ Ibid., p. 105-106.

¹⁰ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. xxiii.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 1.

¹² Ibid., p. xxiii.

¹³ See *ibid.*, p. 3.

cal biology. It implies the following: all living beings and the nature, too, are not only the objects of our moral duties, which means that they deserve moral consideration not only on the basis of "human mercifulness". Our ethical "Ought" arises from the ontological "Is" of the living beings. The nature and the life establish the purposes and the values by themselves. Our moral duty is to recognize and to respect those purposes and values. The ethical formulation of it is – *the imperative of responsibility*. Whatever (or whoever) is exposed to our *power* should be embraced by our *responsibility*, because it is *entrusted* to us. It is the "ontological responsibility". The life itself delivers the purposes and values, which should be only recognized and respected by the human, because the human is "the executor of a trust which only he can see, but did not create".¹⁴

Gertrude Hirsch Hadorn briefly presents what the "ontological foundation of ethics" and "ontological ethics" actually means. There is the threefold connection between the *being* and *responsibility*: ability for responsibility as a characteristics of human way of being; being of the human as an object of responsibility; the whole of the being as an instance of responsibility, as well as an instance which makes the responsibility inevitable.¹⁵

The newly gained insight into the vulnerability of nature results with the new ethical demand. Jonas speaks about the "right of the nature", which is far more than anthropocentric and utilitarian interest of the human and humankind.¹⁶ Unlike in earlier epochs of humankind, we discover today that the nature is totally exposed to our (techno-scientific) power. Therefore, we should act according to this insight, i.e. we should respect nature's right to be sustained in this state and promote the duty to ensure a future, which both also imply the future existence of the human and humankind. Jonas' categorical imperative – "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life"¹⁷ – is not an anthropocentric one. However, "no previous ethics", says Jonas, "has prepared us for such a role of stewardship".¹⁸ That is the reason why we need a new ethics, which would be based on the principle of responsibility. Neither traditional scientific worldview nor traditional ethics can tell us what we should do in order to protect the nature as a basis of human existence, as well as future existence of life in general. Moreover,

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 283.

¹⁵ See Gertrude Hirsch Hadorn, "Verantwortungsbegriff und kategorischer Imperativ der Zukunftsethik von Hans Jonas", in: Wolfgang Erich Müller (ed.), *Hans Jonas – von der Gnosisforschung zur Verantwortungsethik*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2003, pp. 109-110.

¹⁶ See H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

both traditional and current scientific worldview, which made the ethics extremely anthropocentric and short-sighted, "emphatically denies us all conceptual means to think of Nature as something to be honored".¹⁹ Jonas says, consequently, that "we should keep ourselves open to the thought that natural science may not tell the whole story about Nature".²⁰ We can find the similar statement in *The Notion of Nature and Its History* (Der Begriff der Natur und seine Geschichte) by Georg Picht: "The modern natural science destroys the nature",²¹ so that "the science which destroys the nature cannot be the true knowledge on nature".²²

Besides the above sketched biological-scientific and ethical-philosophical way of thinking about the life, there is the third perspective which should be taken into account – the metaphysical and theological one.

The question of life is not only the question about the *development* of life, about its evolution. It is also the question about its *beginning*, which comprises both its biological evolution and successive ontological revolutions. However, there is also a question about the "first cause", which could be helpful while answering questions on purpose and meaning of the great cosmic adventure of life.

Trying to come to the "first cause", as well as to the "final answers" in this field, Jonas included into his philosophy of life the "metaphysical speculations", too, which are certainly inspired by his earlier studies of Gnosticism. Sometimes he did it by using strictly philosophical categories, sometimes he used theological concepts, but sometimes he dared to propose his own cosmogony or even theogony. Jonas explains his "metaphysical speculations" as "an ontological revisioning, fulfilling the concept of 'matter'", i.e. "a meta-physics of the world-substance".²³

On the other hand, we cannot say that Jonas was the "creationist", although his theory is close to Judeo-Christian creationism, neither can we say that he was "evolutionist", although his theory is close to the Darwinist evolutionism. His philosophy of life presupposes the spontaneity of life and nature, but he does not deny the concept of "mind in nature" or the "prime mover". However, it should be noted that this weakens both the metaphysical-dogmatic images of "divine plan" and "god-mathematician", and the concept of "pointless and meaningless evolution".

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Georg Picht, *Der Begriff der Natur und seine Geschichte*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1993, p. 12.

²² Ibid., p. 15.

²³ Hans Jonas, *Materie, Geist und Schöpfung. Kosmologischer Befund und kosmogonische Vermutung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a/M 1988, p. 20.

Anyhow, there are strong ethical demands arising from this viewpoint, and Jonas develops them following the logic of responsibility.

Conclusion

In brief, Jonas' "philosophical biology" could be explained as an attempt of both "biologization of philosophy" and "philosophization of biology", including "ethicization of the question of life". In its center stands the ethically connotated philosophy of human, nature and life, which respects the results of natural sciences, but also opens the door to the metaphysical speculations, that means theological or even mythological speculations.

If we follow Jonas, we could show how the synergy of evolutionist-biological, teleological-philosophical and religious-theological approach contributes to answering the question of life. Only such an integratively structured notion of life can be the starting point of *integrative ethics of life*, or *integrative bioethics*, which implies respect and responsibility for the nature and life in general. Only such an integrative philosophy and ethics of life can show us what pluriperspectivity and integrativity in bioethics actually mean, because it is far from any reductionism and tries to include different scientific and non-scientific perspectives, offering at the same time a platform for their dialogical mediation.

By emphasizing philosophical approach to the phenomenon of life, I did not want to devaluate other approaches. The point is that the philosophical approach to the life – which we can find in Jonas' works – is characterized by exceptional integrativity. On the one hand, it activates all the potentials of philosophy (from metaphysics, ontology and anthropology, over ethics, to cultural and political philosophy), while on the other hand, it transcends the boundaries of philosophy as a discipline, because it enables (or even demands) broadening of the perspective on the natural sciences and theology. Philosophy – as a model of integrative thought – presupposes an attempt to embrace and dialogically intermediate empirical-scientific, rational-speculative and psychological-emotional dimensions of the approach to the world and life. This means that philosophy and, especially, philosophical ethics – first and foremost owing to their inherent integrative features – do play a major role in integrative bioethics, which is not in disagreement with the methodological principle of interdisciplinarity and pluriperspectivism. Anyway, neither philosophy nor any other science, neither religious nor non-religious approaches – if they are isolated from other approaches – can have the monopoly on the truth of life. The only ban which is implied by the pluriperspective approach is the ban of monoperspectivism.

"The phenomenon of life itself negates the boundaries that customarily divide our disciplines and fields",²⁴ says Hans Jonas. It is up to us to respect or disrespect this fact. But we should keep in mind that monoperspectivism makes us short-sighted or even blind, while pluriperspectivism enables us to look at the phenomenon of life both through microscope and telescope, as well as with our inner theoretical eye, in order to approach an integrative understanding of and knowledge on life, as well as an integrative ethics of life.

²⁴ H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. xxiv.