

## CHAPTER NINE

# THE IMMEDIACY OF ENCOUNTER AND THE DANGERS OF DICHOTOMY: BUBER, LEVINAS, AND JONAS ON RESPONSIBILITY

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*For Dietrich Böhler*

The concept of responsibility plays a pivotal role in the philosophy of Hans Jonas as well as in the thought of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. One may wonder, however, if this is not just a superficial parallel. The relationship between Buber and Levinas is undoubtedly closer than that between the two and Hans Jonas.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Jonas, Buber and Levinas did not try to reestablish the notion of *scala naturae* as a basis of normative ethics; and unlike Buber and Levinas, Jonas did not take part in the project of establishing a philosophy of dialogue. But concerning the basic account of moral responsibility, there are nevertheless some non-trivial analogies and complementary problems in the interpretations of all three philosophers, or so I will argue. Each of them criticizes the solipsistic limitations of Edmund Husserl's philosophy and the egocentrism of Heidegger's concept of "solicitude" or "self-care." Each of them tries to overcome the Kantian subject-object dichotomy. Each of them construes responsibility as a bipolar relation only. And each of them deals with new forms of dichotomies and with problems concerning the exclusion of "thirdness" which emerge from their own conceptual decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the few comparative studies on Jonas and Levinas, I want to highlight chapters 6 and 7 in Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

### 1. *Competing Intuitions Concerning the Instance of Moral Responsibility*

Let us begin with some general considerations on moral responsibility. Responsibility, as a relational term, has to be understood as a relation between a *subject* or a bearer of responsibility, an *object* or something for which the subject is responsible, and an *instance* of responsibility or someone to whom the subject is responsible. Whereas some philosophers prefer to add more relations, we may for now be content with the three already mentioned. Each of the three relations has its own problems: With regard to the subject of responsibility, one may try to define the properties which are necessary conditions for ascribing responsibility to it. This is where the debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists takes place. Regarding the object of responsibility, one may ask about the range and the distribution of responsibility. This is the context of numerous discussions, *inter alia* the debate between consequentialists and Kantians on acting and omitting; and this is also the context of Hans Jonas's admonition that the range of our moral responsibility has tremendously expanded on par with our rising power. But the third dimension of responsibility has its problems too, and this holds true particularly with respect to *moral* responsibility. While it is easy to state the instance of legal responsibility or other forms of role-specific responsibilities, the task of specifying the instance of moral responsibility is, indeed, a sophisticated one, at least if undertaken within the limits of secular moral philosophy. In his important book, *The Imperative of Responsibility*,<sup>2</sup> Hans Jonas does not explicitly discuss the problem, but he addresses it in his *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen*:

I am responsible for my act as such (as well as for its omission), regardless of there being someone who—now or later—holds me to my responsibility or not. Responsibility exists with or without God, and, of course, without any mundane court. It is, however, . . . the responsibility *to* something—an obliging instance, to whom we are responsible. This obliging instance is—so people say once they no longer believe in God—the conscience. But this just turns the question to the next, from where the conscience has *its* criteria, from which source *its* rulings are justified.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Hans Jonas, *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1992), 131. My translation.

Thus, the reference to human conscience cannot count as a sufficient answer to the question of to whom we are morally responsible. But it seems hard to find a more convincing answer. When trying to specify the instance of moral responsibility, we are confronted with at least two serious problems.

First, we have to answer the question whether the instance of responsibility has to be understood as something finite, like a real person, social institution, or mental entity, or if it has to be viewed as something transcendental that in some way transcends the borders of finite entities. Regarding this question, we have to cope with conflicting intuitions: On the one hand, it appears that moral responsibility, unlike other forms of responsibility, cannot depend on any finite entity, since, given the limitations, the imperfection, and also the egocentrism of finite beings, this could turn moral responsibility into an arbitrary concept. To put it in the words of Derrida: Any *particular* instance of responsibility would mean a “betrayal” or “absolute sacrifice” of all other possible responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> The assumption that the instance of moral responsibility cannot be any empirical entity may therefore be regarded as a consequence of the intuition of *categoricity*, the conviction that ethical responsibility is essentially categorical and hence has to be *universal*. On the other hand, it seems that moral responsibility has to be understood as grounded in our real interactions, in our real “life-world,” and that it would imply, as it were, a betrayal of humanity if we should bind moral responsibility to some extramundane entity or some abstract metaphysical concept. For lack of a better name, we may call this second intuition the *intuition of life-world dependency*. Trying to do justice to this intuition, we may interpret the instance of moral responsibility in a way that guarantees that real persons—moral agents and those affected by their actions—are at least in some way represented in it.

At this point however, a second problem arises. The metaphor of representation, due to its political connotations, may lead us to the question, how to determine the proportion between moral agents and those affected by their actions. Regarding this question, the intuition of life-world dependency does not help, since it comes in two different flavors. On the one hand, there is the intuition that moral agents must

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<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 68–69.

never be subjected to rules beyond their own control but should always be able to voluntarily affirm the principles according to which they are living their lives. Thus, morality has to be understood as a specific kind of self-determination. On the other hand, there is the intuition that it is always the other, as a possible object of our actions, who takes center stage in morality, and that the core of morality is respect, care, or perhaps even love for the other. In search of a quick and handy label, we may call these competing intuitions the *intuition of autonomy* and the *intuition of alterity*. Let us now explore which answers Buber, Levinas, and Jonas give to the two problems and how they cope with the intuitions mentioned above.

## 2. *The Intuition of Alterity as a Challenge for Kant's Philosophy*

One of the philosophical motifs shared by Buber, Levinas, and Jonas is the critical attitude toward Kant and Kantianism. Albeit in very different ways, each of them disputes the inevitability and universal reach of the subject-object dichotomy and plays the intuition of life-world dependency off against Kant's philosophy.<sup>5</sup> All three philosophers share philosophical motifs which may be called phenomenological. But to the extent to which they emphasize especially the intuition of alterity, they also turn against solipsistic and egocentric elements inherent in Edmund Husserl's as well as Martin Heidegger's respective versions of phenomenology, for example against Heidegger's "contentless" decisionism and his self-oriented concept of "solicitude" or "self-care."<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the anti-Kantian impulse of the philosophy of dialogue, see Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, Studies in contemporary German social thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), xx; idem, *Der Andere: Studien zur Sozialontologie der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965), 243ff.

<sup>6</sup> See Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 177ff., 185ff.; and see Jeffrey Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor: Emmanuel Levinas and the Religion of Responsibility* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2000), 88–106; Alwin Letzkus, *Dekonstruktion und ethische Passion: Denken des Anderen nach Jacques Derrida und Emmanuel Levinas* (Munich: W. Fink, 2002), 135–292; Lawrence Vogel, *The Fragile "We": Ethical Implications of Heidegger's Being and Time* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), esp. 103ff.; idem, "Jewish Philosophies after Heidegger: Imagining a Dialogue Between Jonas and Levinas," *The Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 23 (2001): 119–46; Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), chap. 5.

following reflections will focus on the debate with Kantianism and thus begin by pointing at a problem of Kant's "social ontology."

Martin Buber's *I and Thou*<sup>7</sup> can in large parts be read as a critique of the physicalistic limitations of Kant's epistemology.<sup>8</sup> The hypostatization of the methodological ideal of natural sciences in his theoretical philosophy urges Kant to dispel human freedom from the world of appearances into an extramundane transcendental sphere, and therefore does not allow for an adequate reconstruction of real communicative interactions between real persons. For any such reconstruction has to presume the possibility not only of free actions, but also of the *appearance* of free actions in our contact with others.<sup>9</sup> Due to these limitations, Kant could not really cope with the intuition of alterity. It is true that the logical operation which in Kant's ethics provides the universal validity of moral principles should also deal with the claims of the other, but it either does not really achieve this task or it merely pretends to do so.<sup>10</sup> For the Kantian universalizing procedure requires that I ask myself if *I* would be content with universal observance of the rule I want to follow.<sup>11</sup> Thus it provides no *real* rule-making but only a thought experiment to see how *I* would feel if *I* were in the other's stead. But that is not the same as taking into account *her or his real* perspective and claims—the perspective and the claims of a concrete other.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou: A New Translation with a Prologue 'I and You' and Notes by Walter A. Kaufmann* (New York: Scribner, 1970).

<sup>8</sup> It may be worth noting, though, that Buber's concept of the I-You relation shares important attributes with Kant's description of respecting the other's dignity by regarding her or him as an end in itself; see Norbert M. Samuelson, *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 192–93. Jeffrey Bloechl notes a similar congruence between Levinas and Kant's concept of dignity; see Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor*, 77–82.

<sup>9</sup> See Dietrich Böhler, *Rekonstruktive Pragmatik: Von der Bewußtseinsphilosophie zur Kommunikationsreflexion: Neubegründung der praktischen Wissenschaften und Philosophie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 56ff.

<sup>10</sup> See also Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), chap. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Kant proposes the following question as an "unerring" test for the morality of my maxim: "Should I be content that my maxim... should hold good as a universal law, for myself as well as for others?" Immanuel Kant, "Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten," in *Werke: Akademie Textausgabe* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), 403; trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/ikfpm10.txt>; emphasis added.

Kantians may argue that Kant's "I" is not really meant to be me as an empirical, singular person but me as a rational member of a "kingdom of ends," which, due to its universal reach, also comprises the perspective of my particular vis-à-vis. So, they may add, the kingdom of ends provides a way out of solipsism since it is to be understood as a forum of universal representation. But here the problem lies since, to say the least, Kant has not made clear how the kingdom of ends could constitute itself as a forum, where real claims of real persons can be settled. Ultimately, the kingdom of ends remains an abstract *idea* of community—a community in pre-established harmony, well-ordered by practical reason, which is already common to all members and which guarantees universality by itself. This is also the reason why in Kant's ethics there is no tension between autonomy and universalism: the will of rational beings—their rational will as opposed to mere affections—is *as such* universal. Thus Kant insinuates that on our way from the ego-centric perspective of empirical beings to the universal perspective of rational members of the kingdom of ends, we could skip the perspective of the other, that is to say the perspective of the *concrete* other.<sup>12</sup> And along with this insinuation, he cannot adequately take into account the bodily incarnation, the biological foundation, and natural history of human reason. While the former problem is addressed particularly by Buber and Levinas, Jonas also deals with the latter.

### 3. *Martin Buber's "I and Thou" as an Answer to Kantianism*

Buber's answer to Kantian epistemology is quite radical. According to him there are two "basic words"—two fundamentally different and irreducible ways to refer to the world, which correspond to two different basic attitudes or "mode[s] of existence."<sup>13</sup> One of these attitudes seems very similar to the attitude of a Kantian subject—it is the attitude of an I toward an It. Like the Kantian world of appearances, the I-It relation is governed by the subject-object dichotomy. Regarding other beings as an It, we address them as things that consist of qualities and processes that consist of moments, things recorded in terms of spatial coordinates

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<sup>12</sup> See George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

<sup>13</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 53, cf. 82.

and processes recorded in terms of temporal coordinates, things and processes that are bounded by other things and processes and capable of being measured against and compared with those others.<sup>14</sup>

As long as we stay in the I-It relation we are not living as whole beings and we have no chance of achieving wholeness. Our essence stays concealed, we cannot actualize it. And since we have “nothing but objects” and “objects consist in having been” we have “only a past and no present” and our “moment has no presence.”<sup>15</sup> But, following Buber, we are not condemned to persist in the suffocating relation between I and It throughout our entire life. It may happen to us “by grace”<sup>16</sup> that another being encounters us as a You, and if we venture entering the relation to a You, we transcend the Kantian world of objectivity. Entering into the I-You relation is possible only as a deed of our whole person and it is also only by that “essential deed”<sup>17</sup> that we could actually become whole persons: “Man becomes an I through a You.”<sup>18</sup> Addressing other beings as a You, we do not see them as physical objects.<sup>19</sup> What constitutes the relation between I and You is not observation or instrumental action but *dialogue*.

For Buber, however, dialogue does not necessarily mean a real *linguistic* dialogue. Concerning the role of language, Buber’s remarks are somewhat ambivalent.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, Buber characterizes the two different world-relations as a correlative of the two pairs of basic *words* (I-You and I-It). He also emphasizes that if the You is another person, the I-You relation is an essentially linguistic relation (it is “*sprachgestaltig*”).<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Buber regards the I-You relation as “unmediated”: “Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination.”<sup>22</sup> Regarding the unmediated nature of the I-You relation, Buber’s statements are stern and apodictic: “Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 63–64.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>20</sup> See Bernhard Casper, *Das dialogische Denken: Franz Rosenzweig, Ferdinand Ebner, und Martin Buber*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg i. Br.: Alber, 2002), 285–86.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Jun., 1995), 6; the translation does not seem perfectly accurate here; cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 62.

encounters occur.”<sup>23</sup> However, it is obvious that any real linguistic dialogue is mediated by physical entities and events which act as signs and which on their part relate to other physical, mental, social, or cultural entities, events, or relations as their reference. Buber himself even supposes that it is only the It-world that can actually be a topic of linguistic communication.<sup>24</sup> Thus for Buber the ideal I-You relation is the relation of a silent, a “prelinguistic” dialogue:

Only silence toward the You, the silence of *all* tongues, the taciturn waiting in the unformed, undifferentiated, prelinguistic word leaves the You free and stands together with it in reserve where the spirit does not manifest itself but is. All response binds the You into the It-world.<sup>25</sup>

Buber himself appears to be concerned about the ambivalent status of language in his picture of the I-You relation, since he wonders: “But how can we incorporate into the world of the basic word what lies outside language?”<sup>26</sup> His answer to that concern is the idea of the prelinguistic language of spirit.<sup>27</sup> Buber attributes this kind of spirit also to animals: “The eyes of an animal have the capacity of a great language.”<sup>28</sup> We may therefore be encountered not only by persons and “spiritual beings” but also by non-personal forms of nature like animals or even trees.<sup>29</sup> Thus the I-You relation is reciprocal also in case our You is an animal or even a tree: “relation is reciprocity.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>27</sup> “Man speaks in many tongues—tongues of language, of art, of action—but the spirit is one. . . . Spirit is word. And even as verbal speech may first become word in the brain of man and then become sound in his throat, although both are merely refractions of true event because in truth language does not reside in man but man stands in language and speaks out of it—so it is with all words, all spirit.” *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>29</sup> “Three are the spheres in which the world of relation arises. The first: life with nature. Here the relation vibrates in the dark and remains below language. The creatures stir across from us, but they are unable to come to us, and the You we say to them sticks to the threshold of language. The second: life with men. Here the relation is manifest and enters language. We can give and receive the You. The third: life with spiritual beings. Here the relation is wrapped in a cloud but reveals itself, it lacks but creates language. We hear no You and yet feel addressed; we answer—creating, thinking, acting; with our being we speak the basic word, unable to say You with our mouth.” *Ibid.*, 56–57, cf. 149–50.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

The world of It is dominated entirely by causal connections between objects which set limits to each other.<sup>31</sup> But by addressing another being as You, as a partner in a (silent) dialogue, we step inside a relationship where responsibility and love take place.<sup>32</sup> According to Buber, love must not be seen as a mental or psychological state of the lovers, but as something *between* the loving beings. As a relation of responsibility between beings—as “responsibility of an I for a You”<sup>33</sup>—love is more real than just the *feeling* of love, which may accompany this relation.

The I-You relation is exclusive. As long as we stay in the relation to a You, our You claims all of our advertence:

Every actual relationship to another being in the world is exclusive. Its You is freed and steps forth to confront us in its uniqueness. It fills the firmament—not as if there were nothing else, but everything else lives in *its* light.<sup>34</sup>

Thus any relation to a You, which may also, as part of the It-world, be regarded as a finite being, excludes other finite beings, which cannot, at the same time, act as our You:

As long as the presence of the relationship endures, this world-wideness cannot be infringed. But as soon as a You becomes an It, the world-wideness of the relationship appears as an injustice against the world, and its exclusiveness as an exclusion of the universe.<sup>35</sup>

Solely in relation to God are unconditional exclusiveness and unconditional inclusiveness one in which the universe is comprehended.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. *Emmanuel Levinas as Martin Buber's Heir and Critic*

The similarities between Buber's philosophy of dialogue and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas are striking and have often been mentioned.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 66–67.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>37</sup> See Peter Atterton, Matthew Calarco, and Maurice S. Friedman, “Introduction,” in *Levinas & Buber: Dialogue & Difference* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 1–28, here 6; “Buber's I-Thou relationship has obvious parallels to Levinas's face-to-face, in which I recognize the otherness of the other not by competing with him but by responding in a relation of *discourse*. Both Buber and Levinas place the relationship

Levinas himself acknowledges Buber as a predecessor, even if he claims that it was “not by starting out from the Buberian oeuvre that [he had] been led to a reflection on the alterity of the Other”:<sup>38</sup>

That valuation of the dia-logical relation and its phenomenological irreducibility, its fitness to constitute a meaningful order that is autonomous and as legitimate as the traditional and privileged *subject-object* correlation in the operation of knowledge—that will remain the unforgettable contribution of Martin Buber’s philosophical labours. . . . Any reflection on the alterity of the other in his or her irreducibility to the objectivity of objects and the beings of beings must recognize the new perspective Buber opened.<sup>39</sup>

Levinas approves of Buber’s differentiation of two possible attitudes and world-relations, and, based on the phenomenological distinction between being as being and being as entity, he deepens that dichotomy and underlines the exteriority of the other. For him, just as for Buber, responsibility is an integral element of the relation between me and the other whom I address as a You (*Vous*). Indeed, “Buber’s statements that “love is [a] responsibility of an I for a You” . . . and “responsibility which does not respond to a word is a metaphor of morality” . . . could have stemmed from Levinas.”<sup>40</sup> In solemn words Levinas emphasizes the immediacy of my being encountered by the other, who appears in the epiphany of his face. Inseparably associated with that epiphany is the manifestation of my responsibility for the other. Following Levinas, the face *as such* is already a begging, but also an imperative, which makes me responsible for the mortal other. It is the origin of value

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with otherness—or the readiness for such an encounter—at the beginning of experience. Both consider the encounter as oriented toward the other prior to theoretical understanding and knowledge. And finally, both posit the relation with the Thou as in some sense incorporating or deriving from the relation with the absolutely Other called God.”

<sup>38</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “On Buber,” in *Levinas & Buber: Dialogue & Difference*, ed. Peter Atterton, Matthew Calarco, and Maurice S. Friedman (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 32–36, here 32. The fact is that even before 1923 (the year of publication of *Ich und Du*) the philosophy of dialogue had multiple parents—Hermann Cohen, Ferdinand Ebner, Gabriel Marcel, Franz Rosenzweig, and finally Martin Buber—who came to similar conclusions independently; see Theunissen, *The Other*, xx; idem, *Der Andere*, 253.

<sup>39</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1993), 41.

<sup>40</sup> Stephan Strasser, “Buber and Levinas: Philosophical Reflections on an Opposition,” in Atterton, Calarco and Friedman, eds., *Levinas & Buber: Dialogue & Difference*, 37–48, here 38; first citation, Buber, *I and Thou*, 66, second citation, Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 17.

or the good and the idea of human order.<sup>41</sup> Levinas's privileging the saying to the said may also be seen as an analogy to Buber's reserved stance on language.<sup>42</sup>

There are points of disagreement between Buber and Levinas as well.<sup>43</sup> In his essay, *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida summarizes three critical motifs in Levinas's discussion of Buber: Levinas criticizes Buber's account of the I-You relation "(1) for being reciprocal and symmetrical, thus committing violence against height, and especially against separateness, and secretiveness; (2) for being formal, capable of 'uniting man to things, as much as man to man'; (3) for preferring... the 'clandestine nature' of the couple which is 'self-sufficient and forgetful of the universe.'" <sup>44</sup> Owing to their systematic relevance we may briefly examine these issues, even though Levinas's position is not consistent throughout his work and it is hence unclear how far he upholds the second and third charge in his later publications.<sup>45</sup>

As to the first point—the "main thing separating"<sup>46</sup> Levinas from Buber—one may doubt that Levinas's portrayal of Buber's position is completely adequate. While Buber indeed emphasizes the reciprocity of the I-You relation, this does not in every case imply *symmetry*, as he himself points out in his postscript to *I and Thou*. The existence of asymmetric types of I-You relations seems obvious in regard to the relation between human beings and God or the relation between human beings and animals or plants. Following Buber there are even cases of asymmetric relations between human beings.<sup>47</sup> But even if we revise

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<sup>41</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

<sup>42</sup> For a benign analysis of Levinas's conception of saying, see Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor*, 241–42.

<sup>43</sup> See Arno Münster, *Le principe dialogique: De la réflexion monologique vers la proflexion intersubjective: essais sur M. Buber, E. Lévinas, F. Rosenzweig, G. Scholem, et E. Bloch* (Paris: Kimé, 1997), 61–79, and the very instructive studies assembled in Atterton, Calarco, and Friedman, eds., *Levinas & Buber*.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in idem, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 97–153, here 134, n. 37.

<sup>45</sup> See Atterton, Calarco, and Friedman, "Introduction," 6; Robert Bernasconi, "'Failure of Communication' as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue," in Atterton, Calarco, and Friedman, eds., *Levinas & Buber: Dialogue & Difference*, 68–91; Neve Gordon, "Ethics and the Place of the Other," in *ibid.*, 98–115, here 104–5, 108ff.

<sup>46</sup> Levinas, "On Buber," 32.

<sup>47</sup> See Buber, *I and Thou*, 177; Sydney Ch. Rome and Beatrice K. Rome, *Philosophical Interrogations: Interrogations of Martin Buber, John Wild, Jean Wahl, Brand Blanshard, Paul Weiss, Charles Hartshorne, Paul Tillich* (New York: Holt, 1964), 27ff.; Maurice S. Friedman,

Levinas's picture of Buber, Levinas is correct in stating disagreement with Buber, since Buber argues that "'asymmetry' is only one of the possibilities of the I-Thou relation, not its rule,"<sup>48</sup> while Levinas claims that the I-You relation is *in any case* asymmetrical, that it is asymmetrical by its very nature. According to Levinas, the other always encounters us from a *position of height*, he "has always—and *by right*...—a right... over Me."<sup>49</sup> It is important to notice that this asymmetry should not only act as an antidote to the egoistic inclinations of human nature—as it is for Kant, whose "asymmetric" principle to realize our own perfection and the happiness of others is meant to be fully compatible with ethical universalism. For Levinas, the asymmetry is a substantial characteristic of our relation to the other.

Regarding the charge of formalism, one may argue that it refers rather to a problem of philosophical language than to a basic problem of Buber's position. How can we speak at all about being encountered by the *singular* other in *general* terms? Must not any effort to describe general attributes of encounter appear "formal," compared with the adventure of real encounter? The only chance to deal with that problem is to be content with *pointing at* actual encounter instead of trying to *describe* it—and in some passages of *I and Thou* Buber does just this: "every word must falsify; but look."<sup>50</sup> Levinas may still have a point insofar as Buber separates the I-You relation from any hint at the It-world and thus from any specification of the concrete You we are confronting. The non-dialectic dichotomy of the two world-relations leaves the other (as a You) devoid not only of generally ascribable attributes but of any *possible* attributes. However, this problem is present also in Levinas's philosophy, since Levinas's *vous* encounters me also from beyond the world of concrete attributes.

Things may be similar concerning Levinas's third critique of Buber. The exclusive character of the I-You relation, its exclusion of third persons, is indeed a crucial problem, especially if we regard that relation as the basis for a comprehensive account of normative ethics. This problem seems to be inseparably connected with the notion of

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"Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas: An Ethical Query," in Atterton, Calarco, and Friedman, eds., *Levinas & Buber: Dialogue & Difference*, 116–32, here 120ff.; Gordon, "Ethics," 103.

<sup>48</sup> Buber in Rome and Rome, *Interrogations*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Levinas, "On Buber," 33.

<sup>50</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 67.

the I-You relation as an *immediate* relation. But the exclusion of any third person from the I-You relation poses a problem for Levinas as well as for Buber. One may even argue that the problem is more severe for Levinas than for Buber, since Buber does not claim to provide a comprehensive philosophy of moral obligations. The crucial question in Buber's *I and Thou* is not which obligations we have toward others or how to fulfill these, but how to become a whole being—how to become present and authentic. Hence he writes: “Whether the institutions of the state become freer and those of the economy juster, that is important, but not for the question concerning actual life that is being posed here.”<sup>51</sup> His focus on authenticity is also the reason why Buber states: “If all were clothed and well nourished, then the real ethical problem would become wholly visible for the first time.”<sup>52</sup> One may criticize Buber for neglecting the problems of social justice,<sup>53</sup> but he is careful at least in passing his philosophy of dialogue off as a substitute for existing conceptions of practical philosophy. Levinas, on the other hand, in *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*<sup>54</sup> explicitly tries to give an account of justice as well as of responsibility for the other who actually encounters us. But it seems doubtful if the boundless responsibility for the other, who appears in his face, can in any way be reconciled with the demands of justice, since justice inevitably requires some standpoint of interpersonal comparison.

##### 5. *The Dichotomic Epistemology of the Philosophy of Dialogue and Its Implications for the Concept of Responsibility*

As we have seen, the intuition of life-world dependency and especially the intuition of alterity is a central issue in the critique of Kant, brought up by Buber, Levinas, and Jonas. Buber and the other philosophers of

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>52</sup> Martin Buber, “Replies to My Critics,” in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp and Maurice S. Friedman (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1967), 689–744, here 723.

<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the relevant passages of *I and Thou* are not free of social romanticism. But we cannot discuss Buber's conception of political ethics in detail here, which would be pointless without referring to his later works; see Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (New York: Macmillan, 1950).

<sup>54</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

dialogue have brought forward an important insight by distinguishing between two world-relations. While neo-Kantians had already conceded the existence of a realm of culture and social interactions as a special part of the world of appearances besides the realm of physical objects, Buber emphasized the distinction not only between different types of objects but between different types of attitudes and relations. This distinction of world-relations is significant for any adequate understanding of moral responsibility as something grounded within interactions between real persons. For as long as we restrict our relation to the world to that type of an observing and engineering relation which we may have as physicists to the objects of our experiment, there is no room at all for responsibility, neither in ourselves nor in the outer world. But once we try to share our observations, or ask a colleague for help, or just think about the next steps of our experiment by ourselves, we cannot avoid stepping into another type of relation to other persons or to ourselves, namely a linguistic and reflective relation, where we are held responsible for our statements and for our conduct in general and where we also hold ourselves or others to certain kinds of responsibility. One could even assume that the self-ascription of responsibility is a constitutive condition of being a person and that someone who as a person addresses another one as a person cannot help but ascribe responsibility to each of them. Buber and Levinas, of course, did not want to go that far. Unlike the exponents of discourse ethics<sup>55</sup> they did not try to reconcile their insight into the existence of the I-You relation with a Kantian concept of ethics—even if Buber occasionally uses Kantian terms like “the *a priori* of relation.”<sup>56</sup>

Ironically, Buber and Levinas in some respect remain much closer to Kant than the protagonists of discourse ethics: Insofar as they conceive the relationship between the I-You relation and the I-It relation as a strict dichotomy, they seem to be true followers of Kant, as he also draws an insuperable line between the world of appearances and the transcendental sphere, where personal freedom may exist. Though the other for Buber and Levinas is not beyond any possible experience, it is also true that the I-You relation or the epiphany of the face, on the one hand, and the I-It relation or the world of objectivity on the other

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<sup>55</sup> See Karl-Otto Apel, *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action: Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

<sup>56</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 119.

hand mutually exclude each other. There is no intermediation between them. Moreover, due to the immediacy of the I-You relation and the resulting exclusion of (real linguistic) language it even seems unclear how intermediation between the realm of You and the realm of It should at all be possible.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Buber's option for a "silent language" does not seem compelling. Where Buber writes that "all response binds the You into the It-world,"<sup>58</sup> he seems to underestimate the capacity of real (linguistic) language not only to express but also to constitute interpersonal relations. While of course in some way referring to the It-world, sentences like "I promise to do X" or "Please excuse me for Y" or even "I can assure you of Z" not only act as means of communication about the It-world, but also generate actual relations between subjects. Since Buber does not reflect on this pragmatic dimension of real language, he leaves aside the intrinsic normativity of language. If "all response binds the You into the It-world," it seems to be better not to respond, if we do not want to destroy the presence of the I-You relation. Hence Levinas's critique of the intimacy of Buber's I-You relation may be valid in some sense: It appears a consequence of Buber's preference for the "silent language of spirit" that the relation of responsibility remains empty.

Since the exclusive character of actual relationship implies also the exclusion of any third person, it directly leads into serious issues of justice. While reflecting on these problems extensively, Levinas does not seem to have a convincing answer to them. Far from it, his insistence on the asymmetry of the I-You relation rather aggravates the problem. For as soon as we try to include the perspective of a third person, it is no longer clear who may justifiably claim the position of height. Then it becomes inevitable to balance different needs of different beings and thus to make interpersonal comparisons.<sup>59</sup> These are possible only if we put into perspective and relativize the perspective of concrete others

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<sup>57</sup> See Casper, *Das dialogische Denken*, 282ff., with reference to Hermann L. Goldschmidt, *Hermann Cohen und Martin Buber: Ein Jahrhundert Ringen um jüdische Wirklichkeit* (Geneva: Migdal, 1946), 70–71; see also Theunissen's detailed analysis of the "negative" character of Buber's concept of the I-You relation in *Other*, §§ 45–72.

<sup>58</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 89.

<sup>59</sup> For a detailed analysis see Torsten Habel, *Der Dritte stört: Emmanuel Levinas, Herausforderung für politische Theologie und Befreiungsphilosophie, mit einem Exkurs zum Verhältnis zwischen E. Levinas und M. Buber* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1994), esp. 104–41; Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor*, esp. 54–57; Münster, *Principe*, 75–79; Wolfgang Nikolaus Krewani, *Emmanuel Levinas: Denker des Anderen* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1992), esp. 240ff.

and thus refer to relevant circumstances of the “It-world.” But this, of course, is impossible as long as the singular other, in Buber’s words, “fills the firmament.” The dichotomic structure of world-relations, which prevents any intermediation, comparison or exchange between others seen as our You and others seen as third persons thus makes it impossible to construe a comprehensive account of ethics, including not only charity but also justice, in terms of the philosophy of dialogue:

The “comparison of the incomparable” which Levinas demands cannot be thought within the context of his own approach; encountering the third person, who is always present, the axiom of responsibility, asymmetry, cannot be sustained, so that the justification of responsibility loses its basis. Hence the transfer from the dyadic relation to a theory of justice leads into aporia.<sup>60</sup>

But if it is true that the asymmetry of the relation between the other and me does lead into severe issues of justice, why does Levinas insist on this asymmetry? A plausible explanation may be that Levinas, by ascribing infinite height to the other, tries to reconcile the intuition of alterity with the intuition of categoricity, that he tries to secure the imperative, categorical character of our moral obligation, while at the same time disapproving of universalism. Levinas explicitly turns against ethical universalism. Following Levinas, “Universality,” as found in the ontological systems of philosophy, “appears as impersonal” and must therefore be regarded as a kind of “inhumanity.”<sup>61</sup> As mentioned above, Kant’s conception of ethical universalism may indeed be criticized for insinuating an immediate access to the interpersonal standpoint of universalism, thereby skipping the perspective of the concrete other. Levinas’s anti-universalism, however, his commitment to the perspective of the concrete other and thus to the *intuition of alterity*, goes beyond a mere epistemological critique of Kant’s philosophy. Levinas charges philosophical universalism *as such* for being violent. But the discarding of universalism poses the problem of how to rescue the categorical character of ethical obligation. For the rejection of universalism is also a refusal of the standpoint of morality, the universal *moral point of view*, which for Kant is—speaking in Levinas’s terms—the position of “ethical height” and thus can act as the origin of unconditional moral obligations. For Kant, the instance of moral responsibility is

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<sup>60</sup> Habel, *Der Dritte stört*, 130. My translation.

<sup>61</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.

the (virtual) community of the “kingdom of ends,” the interpersonal standpoint of which is represented in human conscience. Abolishing that standpoint of universalism, Levinas either has to renounce the categorical character of responsibility or raise an alternative standpoint of “height.” But where could he find such a standpoint? Given that the bipolar relation between the other and me is exclusive, there seem to be just two alternatives: to identify the instance of responsibility with the other (the object of responsibility), or with me (its subject). Levinas chooses the first option and ascribes to the other the ethical position of infinite height so that I find myself as the other’s hostage. This, of course, is a radical consequence, but, given the exclusiveness of the bipolar relation between the other and me, Levinas’s decision at least seems traceable.

#### 6. *Elements of Intuitionism and Naturalism in Hans Jonas’s Ethics*

Hans Jonas had a good personal relation to Martin Buber, whose work was of pivotal importance for Jonas’s intellectual biography since his schooldays.<sup>62</sup> But unlike Levinas, Jonas cannot be assigned to the tradition of the philosophy of dialogue. However, there are parallels between Jonas’s concept of responsibility and the approach of Buber and Levinas. First of all, Jonas joins in the effort to overcome the subject-object dichotomy. For him, just as for Buber and Levinas, the physicalistic perception of the world is fundamentally deficient. In his *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Jonas traces the development of the modern scientific worldview in a way which calls to mind the outline given in Buber’s *I and Thou*.<sup>63</sup> He also shares with the exponents of the philosophy of dialogue the conviction that there is another, pre-scientific access to the world, which does not present the world as a conglomeration of neutral objects but allows for spontaneous and immediate perceptions—or intuitions—of value. Jonas also to some extent shares with Levinas (and also with other

<sup>62</sup> See Hans Jonas, *Erinnerungen: Nach Gesprächen mit Rachel Salamander*, ed. Christian Wiese (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005).

<sup>63</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), esp. chap. 1; Buber, *I and Thou*, 69–82.

phenomenologists like Max Scheler)<sup>64</sup> the conviction that ethics can be based on such value-intuitions. Thus he tries to show—in the same pointing language we already know from Buber—that the sheer sight of a breathing newborn baby directs to us a claim for aid and care: “Look and you know.”<sup>65</sup> This claim is, Jonas affirms, not irresistible but uncontradictable: so even if it

can meet with deafness (though at least in the mother this is considered an aberration), or can be drowned by other calls and pressures, like sacrifice of the firstborn, Spartan child-exposure, bare self-preservation—this fact takes nothing away from the claim being incontestable as such and immediately evident.<sup>66</sup>

Just as for Buber and Levinas, moral value, obligation, and responsibility immediately occur in concrete relation to another animate being. For Jonas, though, it is a special kind of relation: the paradigm of moral responsibility is the relationship between parents and their children. Again like Buber, who speaks about the realness of love in *I and Thou*, Jonas argues that the moral claim of the infant and our immediate responsibility for him must not be reduced to some kind of inner feeling. The evident moral claim of the newborn must not be confused with “sympathy, pity, or, whichever of the emotions may come into play on our part. . . . I mean strictly just this: that here the plain being of a *de facto* existent immanently and evidently contains an ought for others, and would do so even if nature would not succour this ought with powerful instincts or assume its job alone.”<sup>67</sup>

Following Jonas, this intuitively evident ought may serve as basis for a sound foundation of ethics, which in that respect might be regarded as a variety of ethical intuitionism. But Jonas argues what Levinas would never have conceded, namely that the newborn baby has to be understood as a paradigm of being, an “*ontic* paradigm.”<sup>68</sup> Levinas would have presumably rejected such a statement as a relapse into an outdated and potentially violent “ontological” conception of philosophy, and Buber

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<sup>64</sup> See Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik: Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus*, 3rd ed. (Halle a. d. S.: Niemeyer, 1927). Jonas refers to this work in the context of his critique of Kant—Jonas shares Scheler’s charge of “formalism”; see Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 89, n. 7.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

also would scarcely have endorsed it. Their presumptive discomfort is the result of a basic dissent: Jonas, unlike Buber and Levinas, does not purport a dualistic epistemology. While he in fact differentiates between our pre-scientific, unrestrained experience of the phenomena and the scientific access to reality, which is methodically delimited as to allow general propositional knowledge, he does not discriminate as radically as Buber and Levinas between two disparate world-relations. Our pre-scientific encounter with the newborn does not lead beyond the world of natural sciences but discloses important additional aspects which belong to this world. Thus for Jonas, the value we intuitively perceive in the case of the newborn baby is an *objective* value and thus can not only be attributed to all other human beings, but to some degree can also be extended to the entire realm of animate beings.

As in the case of any intuitionist approach, Jonas's argument leaves open two critical questions: How can our intuitive evidence guarantee the objectivity of that value or justify its intersubjective validity? And how can we legitimately generalize our value-intuitions if they are not shared by all persons in all relevant situations?<sup>69</sup> As to the first point, we likely have to concede that "‘intuitions’ are not strictly speaking a *justification* at all. . . . At the most, intuitions are a window that opens on to some fascinating insights, but they cannot grant the truth of the picture they show."<sup>70</sup> As to the second point, Jonas's effort to defend the universal validity of our benevolent intuitions in view of examples of deviant reactions by explaining the latter as results of "deafness" or "other calls and pressures" does not seem very convincing. For this explanation is structurally equal with the interpretation of our benevolent intuitions as results of "powerful instincts," an interpretation which, following Jonas, does not question the validity of the intuitions. Thus Jonas is apparently applying double standards here, and it seems unclear how that may be justified. Richard Wolin points to another problem connected to the question of generalization. He argues that "the very uniqueness of the rapport between parent and child interferes with the prospect of transposing it to extra-familial settings. Its exclusive nature poses serious obstacles to extending it to other human relationships, let alone to humanity in general."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> See Christian Illies, *The Grounds of Ethical Judgement: New Transcendental Arguments in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 21ff.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> Wolin, *Heidegger's Children*, 122.

While Jonas shares the intuitionist approach to some extent, it is important for the original characterization of his ethics that he combines ethical intuitionism with naturalism.<sup>72</sup> Thus he deploys a comprehensive philosophical interpretation of biological life. His philosophy of nature, as presented in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, is undoubtedly one of his most important contributions to current philosophy. It is meant as an interpretation of nature, which is intrinsically plausible as well as compatible with the emergence of freedom, value, and responsibility in the history of evolution.<sup>73</sup> In his considerations at the end of this book, Jonas makes clear that he would indeed appreciate a new ontological foundation of ethics:

Ontology as the ground of ethics was the original tenet of philosophy. Their divorce, which is the divorce of the “objective” and “subjective” realms, is the modern destiny. Their reunion can be effected, if at all, only from the “objective” end, that is to say, through a revision of the idea of nature. And it is becoming rather than abiding nature which would hold out any such promise. From the immanent direction of its total evolution there may be elicited a destination of man by whose terms the person, in the act of fulfilling himself, would at the same time realize a concern of universal substance. Hence would result a principle of ethics which is ultimately grounded neither in the autonomy of the self nor in the needs of the community, but in an objective assignment by the nature of things.<sup>74</sup>

From Jonas’s point of view, philosophy of nature should contribute to ethical theory in at least two regards: First, it should enforce the intuition that biological life as such is valuable. Second, it should help to fulfill the task of ascribing graded values to different forms of life. While for Levinas the spontaneous intuition of value carries the whole burden of ethical justification, since, according to him, the idea of human order emanates directly from the face, Jonas considers necessary—and also possible—a philosophical sublation of value-intuitions in terms of a new ontology of nature. Thus for him, the difference between the other, who by his face appears in the role of a you, and the other, seen as a third person, has nothing of a dangerous abyss. The immediately evident value-intuitions may be generalized and adjusted by means of

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<sup>72</sup> See Micha H. Werner, “Dimensionen der Verantwortung: Ein Werkstattbericht zur Zukunftsethik von Hans Jonas,” in *Ethik für die Zukunft: Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas*, ed. Dietrich Böhler (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994), 303–38.

<sup>73</sup> See the contribution of Strachan Donnelley in this volume.

<sup>74</sup> Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 283.

embedding them into a comprehensive phenomenological philosophy of the development of nature.

So far it seems that Jonas's approach is both basically similar and substantially different from that of Buber and Levinas. It is similar insofar as he tries to overcome the subject-object dichotomy of the Kantian world of appearances by referring to a non-scientific form of experience, which occurs in relation to another animate being and allows for an immediate access to value and immediately manifests responsibility for an encountered being. It is substantially different insofar as Jonas does not reintroduce a new dichotomy—a dichotomy between the I-You relation and the I-It relation, between Totality and Infinity, between ontology and metaphysics and the like. Or so it seems at first sight.

### 7. *Bipolarity and Asymmetry in Jonas's Account of Responsibility*

However, if we scrutinize the passage from *The Phenomenon of Life* I have quoted before, we will come to the conclusion that Jonas does not claim to have yet accomplished the task of espousing the objective with the subjective realm. We also find a certain asymmetry insofar as Jonas states that the initiative to remarriage has to “be effected . . . from the “objective” end, that is to say, through a revision of the idea of nature.” But what exactly does that mean? It seems that we primarily have to obtain a new interpretation of nature—an interpretation which overcomes the Humean distinction between facts and values—and only afterwards discover our subjective obligations toward different natural beings. Ethical authority would thus lie in the object of responsibility, which obliges us by its own intrinsic value, not in the subject, its consciousness, a Buberian sphere “between” subject and object (or co-subject), and also not a third entity besides subject and object. But is this interpretation correct? In order to verify it, we shall have a look at Jonas's detailed theory of responsibility in the fourth chapter of *The Imperative of Responsibility*. The concept of responsibility which Jonas develops here is characterized, inter alia, by four features:

(1) Jonas distinguishes between “natural” and “contractual responsibility.”<sup>75</sup> The former results from the intrinsic value of animate beings,

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<sup>75</sup> Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 94. Capitalization removed.

as in the case of the newborn, while the latter “draws its binding force from . . . agreement.”<sup>76</sup> Since the obligation to abide by a contract cannot itself spring from agreement, contractual responsibility is dependent of natural responsibility: “If there were no responsibility ‘by nature’ there could be none ‘by contract.’”<sup>77</sup>

(2) Jonas differentiates between “formal responsibility” and “substantive responsibility.”<sup>78</sup> “Formal responsibility” stands for the “causal attribution of deeds done.”<sup>79</sup> Following Jonas, this type of responsibility is always retrospective. It is attributed without any reference to values or norms and has to be regarded as ethically neutral. In contrast, the second type of responsibility is a “substantive, goal-committed concept,”<sup>80</sup> which comprises moral duties. According to Jonas, this morally substantive concept of responsibility is always prospective. Thus there is a first type of asymmetry in Jonas’s account of responsibility, since the retrospective responsibility is ethically neutral while the prospective responsibility is not.

(3) Jonas construes moral responsibility as a bipolar relation, as a relation between subject and object. As mentioned above, Jonas does not explicitly address the question of the instance of responsibility in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, but does so in a later work. There he verifies our assumption of the priority of the objective realm, which he states at the end of *The Phenomenon of Life* has implications for the theory of responsibility, since he answers the question of where to find the “obliging instance” of moral responsibility by identifying the instance (the “to”) of responsibility with its object (its “to”).<sup>81</sup> Thus following Jonas there is no need to introduce a third element into the relation of responsibility besides subject and object.

(4) According to Jonas, responsibility—at least “natural” responsibility—is an asymmetric and even “nonreciprocal”<sup>82</sup> relation. This second type of asymmetry again has two correlative aspects: On the one hand, it is the intrinsic value of the object which imposes on the subject the obligation to care for it. Thus the object has a kind of “normative authority” over the subject. On the other hand, natural responsibility

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 90, 92. Capitalization removed.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 90. Capitalization removed.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>81</sup> See Jonas, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 131.

<sup>82</sup> Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 94. Capitalization removed.

emerges only as a result of a converse asymmetry, namely an asymmetry of power. It is only because the subject has power over the object that the former is responsible for the latter.<sup>83</sup> Thus the relationship between parents and their children can be understood as the paradigm of moral responsibility.

None of these four points is trivial. The first element of Jonas's analysis combines a relatively uncontroversial distinction (between moral and contractual responsibility) with Jonas's very specific interpretation of moral responsibility as a kind of obligation, "where the immanent 'ought-to-be' of the object claims its agent *a priori* and quite unilaterally."<sup>84</sup> Second, while the distinction between retrospective and prospective responsibility is unproblematic, the assumption that the retrospective type of responsibility is ethically neutral and that any form of substantive responsibility must be prospective is not. Of course, causal relations are crucial for the ascription of retrospective responsibility, but retrospective personal responsibility cannot be reduced to causality. This seems obvious at least in the case of omissions: While there are uncountable events we do not impede even if we have the power to do so, we are held responsible for just a few of them. It also seems natural to assume a symmetric relation between prospective and retrospective ascriptions of responsibility: a lifeguard may be held (retrospectively) responsible for a swimmer's death not only because of his behavior and its causal consequences but also because he was (prospectively) responsible for the swimmer's life. In my opinion there are good reasons to assume that we can find this kind of symmetry in any type of personal responsibility and hence that any ascription of "retrospective" personal responsibility refers to "prospective" normative standards, but I can not substantiate that claim in enough detail here.<sup>85</sup> By all means, it seems hard to dispute that at least some types of retrospective responsibility are normatively substantial.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> See *ibid.*, 94.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>85</sup> See Micha H. Werner, *Diskursethik als Maximenethik: Von der Prinzipienbegründung zur Handlungsorientierung* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003), sect. 3.1.

<sup>86</sup> If it is permitted to pose a heretical question, one could ask if Jonas's assumption of the general ethical neutrality of retrospective responsibility and the focus on responsibility for future generations might have been one feature of his ethical account which unconsciously contributed to its attractiveness in post-Shoah Germany. This, of course, would have had nothing to do with Jonas's philosophical intentions, nor would it diminish the importance of his *Ethics for the Technological Age*. For further aspects of the reception of Jonas's work in Germany, see Wolin, *Heidegger's Children*, 123ff.

The third and fourth points are especially relevant for our inquiry, since the identification of the instance of moral responsibility with its object leads to a *bipolar* and *asymmetric* account of responsibility which in a structural respect is obviously similar to Buber's and even more so to Levinas's interpretation of responsibility. Jonas's twofold assumption of asymmetry—that the object of responsibility holds the position of normative authority while it is at the same time at the mercy of the subject—strongly reminds us of Levinas's analysis of our relation to the other, who on the one hand holds the position of ethical "height," while he on the other hand meets us as the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the poor. This analogy is barely accidental. The primal intuitionism in Jonas's ethics leads to the same constellation which we know from Levinas: Since the relation between subject and object (me and my neighbor or the parent and his newborn) is an immediate one—a relation without any linguistic intermediation and also without interference of any third (co-)subject or other entities—the instance of responsibility has to be identified either with the subject or with the object of responsibility. And since the role of ethics is to guide the subject's conduct and to set limits to its egoism, it does not come as a surprise that Jonas also chooses to identify the instance of responsibility with the object.

But one may argue that the criterion of moral responsibility cannot be any arbitrary claim of a concrete other or any arbitrary need of a concrete living being. Thus Levinas and Jonas both have to show that the claims of the object or the concrete other are not at all arbitrary but that they somehow bring into play the pivotal standards of ethics. So Levinas takes refuge in the assumption that the ethical command is somehow already inscribed in the face of the other and that "the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face."<sup>87</sup> Jonas, however, is more reluctant to refer to theological motifs. As we have already seen, he tries to support, integrate, and rank our intuitions by embedding them in a capacious philosophy of nature. Within the framework of an elaborated naturalistic value-theory, the ethical importance of the needs of any living being would be settled by appeal to its status within the unity of nature. According to Jonas, this status should be extracted from the history of nature or, in his own words,

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<sup>87</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.

from the “direction of [the] total evolution”<sup>88</sup> of nature as a whole. This reference to a teleological concept of nature<sup>89</sup> is not theological by itself nor dependent of theological convictions even though it is closely connected to Jonas’s philosophy of religion, namely to his theory of an emergent God, immanent to the world.<sup>90</sup>

However, Jonas seems to have had doubts about the tenability or at least about the possible acceptance of a fully elaborated naturalistic conception of ethics. That his concept of ethical naturalism remained programmatic and hypothetical is also indicated by the grammatical form of the crucial sentences at the end of *The Phenomenon of Life* (“there *may be* elicited a destination of man. . . . Hence *would* result a principle of ethics”).<sup>91</sup> Jonas’s caution seems reasonable, since any effort to ground ethics on a teleological philosophy of nature is burdened with at least three severe problems, concerning the *justification*, *content*, and *scope* of the resulting notion of ethics. The problem of *justification* lies in the fact that any teleological account of nature remains speculative: Since nature does not speak to us, we can never be sure if our ascription of intrinsic goals is not simply an anthropomorphic projection. Any teleological notion of nature is just an interpretation—it may be (more or less) plausible, but it can never be compelling. Therefore even the alliance of intuitionism and naturalism cannot lead to a sufficient justification.<sup>92</sup> Jonas explicitly concedes the speculative character of his philosophy of nature and he also draws its ethical consequences. Thus he admits that his argument cannot “achieve more than to justify an *option* which, by its inner persuasiveness, it offers to the thoughtful.”<sup>93</sup> The second problem, the problem of *content*, arises as soon as one tries to accomplish Hans Jonas’s program of reestablishing a modern variant

<sup>88</sup> Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 283.

<sup>89</sup> See *ibid.*, chap. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good After Auschwitz*, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996); and see Vogel, “Jewish Philosophies After Heidegger,” 125ff.

<sup>91</sup> Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 283; emphasis added.

<sup>92</sup> See inter alia Dietrich Böhler, “Hans Jonas—Stationen, Einsichten, und Herausforderungen eines Denklebens,” in Böhler, ed., *Ethik für die Zukunft*, 45–67; Ralf-Peter Koschut, *Strukturen der Verantwortung: Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Theorien über den Begriff der Verantwortung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Spannungsfeldes zwischen der ethisch-personalen und der kollektiv-sozialen Dimension menschlichen Handelns* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1989), esp. 337ff.; Wolfgang E. Müller, *Der Begriff der Verantwortung bei Hans Jonas* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1988), 67ff.; Werner, “Dimensionen der Verantwortung,” 316ff.

<sup>93</sup> Jonas, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 140. My translation.

of the ancient *scala naturae*, an axiological hierarchy of animate beings. Definitely, philosophy of nature has to leave the history of natural evolution as it is. If we want to interpret evolution as a teleological process, we cannot help but interpret it as a kind of success story. But if we would do so, how would we escape the danger of a false theodicy of natural evolution—the danger of not only legitimizing but glorifying what Darwin called “natural selection,” including all the losses and pains inevitably associated with it? How could we avert a neo-Darwinian approach to ethics? Even if we could find a solution to the former problem it seems doubtful that any philosophy of nature could provide ethical measures which are sufficient for the *whole scope* of social ethics. It seems doubtful if any philosophy of nature can offer a convincing interpretation of justice or give measures for the legitimacy of political institutions.<sup>94</sup>

8. *Another Dichotomy, at Last: Jonas’s “New Imperatives” versus  
“Traditional Ethics”*

Whatever his reasons might have been, Jonas decided *not* to build his concept of *Ethics for the Technological Age* upon an all-embracing concept of naturalistic axiology. In fact, he restricts the content of his ethics of responsibility to a moral minimum. Its pivotal principle is the imperative to “act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life.”<sup>95</sup> Thus Jonas proposes his imperative of responsibility explicitly not as a *substitute* but merely as a *supplement* for the traditional ethics of interpersonal relations. Here is another definite difference to Levinas, who focuses clearly on relations of proximity, while trying to give an overall account of ethics (including not only responsibility but also justice). Jonas’s ethics, in contrast, gives an account of global responsibility for the existence and “wholeness”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> The political connotations of Jonas’s paternalistic concept of “natural responsibility” have often been mentioned; see inter alia Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children*, 120ff.; Matthias Kettner, “Verantwortung als Moralprinzip: Eine kritische Betrachtung der Verantwortungsethik von Hans Jonas,” *Bijdragen: Tijdschrift voor Filosofie en Theologie* 51 (1990): 418–39.

<sup>95</sup> Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 11.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

of humankind.<sup>97</sup> Jonas's imperative of responsibility is not designed to compete directly against what Jonas calls traditional ethics, against Kant's practical philosophy or other universalistic and justice-centered conceptions of normative ethics. Unlike Levinas, Jonas does not rebut universalism.

Perhaps one could also describe Jonas's turn to a more specific conception of ethics as a kind of "transcendental turn" since he restricts the content of our responsibility to the basic *conditions of possibility of any value*. This turn to a narrow notion of responsibility helps to avoid problems of a comprehensive approach of "ontological ethics," some of which we have adumbrated above. In addition, it strengthens the force of its obligations, since, as Jonas himself states, only a supporter of nirvana could reject his imperative to preserve humankind.<sup>98</sup> But Jonas's "transcendental turn" may also have a downside, as the concept of a supplementary ethics raises new questions regarding ethical universalism. For it is not clear how the ethics of interpersonal relations, which Jonas calls traditional ethics, should be intermediated with his new ethics of global responsibility. Here lies a difficulty, which in a certain way recalls Levinas's problem of intermediating between responsibility for the other and justice to third persons. Thus even if Jonas does not adopt Buber's and Levinas's radically dualistic epistemology, his intuitionism and the resulting bipolar interpretation of moral responsibility finally lead to a problematic form of dichotomy also in Jonas's ethics. For as Jonas and Levinas conceive responsibility as a relation between just two poles—between me and the other or between subject and object—and identify the instance of moral responsibility with the object or the other, they can hardly unclothe this relation for possible claims of others or also for ethical considerations, based on another type of moral philosophy. How could we reconcile our obligation to preserve humankind (and thus to avoid any risks to its existence or essence) with rights to justice, political participation, or other civil rights? How could

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<sup>97</sup> See Walter Lesch, "Ethische Argumentation im jüdischen Kontext: Zum Verständnis von Ethik bei Emmanuel Levinas und Hans Jonas," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 38 (1991): 443–69.

<sup>98</sup> See Hans Jonas, "Der ethischen Perspektive muß eine neue Dimension hinzugefügt werden: Hans Jonas im Gespräch mit Mischka Dammaschke, Horst Gronke, und Christoph Schulte," in Böhler, ed., *Ethik für die Zukunft*, 34–44, here 39.

we intermediate Jonas's principle of preservation with a principle of political emancipation?<sup>99</sup>

However, there are arguments in the work of Hans Jonas which may open up a way out of those problems. So he proposes as an argument against any action which endangers the existence of humanity, that we never can assume the consent of future generations to their non-existence.<sup>100</sup> While this argument does not conflict at all with his equation of the object and the instance of responsibility, it nevertheless signifies an important amendment, since it adds a third source of moral justification besides moral intuition and the philosophical reflection on the history of nature, namely, the rational consent of the community of humankind. Since Jonas's argument not simply relies on the stoic concept of *consensus gentium* but (in a quasi-Kantian way) states as a criterion of the moral rightness of an action the possible rational consent of those affected, it may indeed give a hint of how we can do justice to the competing intuitions of categoricity and universalism, autonomy and alterity. And it may also give a clue as to how we could intermediate between the traditional ethics of interpersonal relations and Jonas's imperative of responsibility for terrestrial life as a whole. After all, it is the richness we find throughout Jonas's considerations and his ability to carefully realize the specific scope of individual arguments which characterize him not only as a seminal thinker of responsibility but also as a deeply responsible thinker.

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<sup>99</sup> See Karl-Otto Apel, "Macroethics, Responsibility for the Future, and the Crisis of Technological Society: Reflections on Hans Jonas," in idem, *Selected Essays*, vol. II (New York: Humanities Press, 1996), 219–49.

<sup>100</sup> Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 37.