

Hans Jonas' *"The Imperative of Responsibility"*, future generations and the ironical situation of ethics

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Abstract

Hans Jonas' book „The Imperative of Responsibility“ has inspired many ethicist. His work not only calls for assuming responsibility for problems caused by technological advancement, but also challenges society to take responsibility for ethical concepts themselves. Jonas sets new criteria for an ethics that is in keeping with the times: Contemporary ethical reflection, he argues, must keep step with technological advancement and the far-reaching future effects of present human actions.

This article wants to respond to this challenge by unfolding Jonas' instigation und relating it to Feuerbach's *"Principles of Philosophy of the Future"*. Feuerbach shows in his work that not only ethical concepts but also notions of "technology" or "generations" have been shaped by a non-generational ontotheology – and therefore have to be restated. But there seems to have developed an ironic constellation: Whereas ethics has discarded ontotheological traits, in turn there have arisen new social and technological developments that exhibit characteristics of the absoluteness. The purpose of this article is to respond to these collisions.

1. "The Imperative of Responsibility": Reconstructing ethics for a generational-genealogical ethical thinking

In his book *"The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age"*, Hans Jonas calls for a fundamental revision of ethics. Jonas points out that ethical reflection is no longer keeping up with the development in a "technological civilization". The idea is that traditional metaphysical concepts of ethics have been outdated by technical advancements. But what does this mean? Is the focus of such an argumentation to point out a "technological civilization" as another ontological status, which needs a new ethics on a new ontological level? Or does it mean to renew the conception of ethics for enabling an ethics of technical development by unfolding civilization as an order of responsible interacting?

In the following explanations, Jonas' call to reconstruct ethics will firstly become critically revised by focusing his referring on generational items. For this, Jonas' main approach will be related to the critique of philosophy und ethics which Ludwig Feuerbach proclaims in his text *"Principles of Philosophy of the Future"*. Both philosophers share the ambition of developing

a new ethical and finally philosophical way of thinking. Feuerbach's "Principles" allow the sharpening of this task. They essentially help to understand the ontotheological structure of a causal shortened ethical discourse based on absolute items in contrast to an ethics of plurality, the condition for generational genealogical reflections.

After sharpening the review of ontotheological metaphysics and ethics, some main issues of Jonas' ideas will be discussed. It will be considered, that his understanding of "technology" and of "the future generation" has also not a genealogical, but an ontotheological tendency. Some possibilities for reviewing such tendencies will be presented. The first aim is to reconstruct the non-generational/non-genealogical shape of ethical concepts. The second is to reconstruct an intergenerational ethics beyond dichotomizing the position of a present and a future generation. Over all, reconstructing ethics means reconstructing non-genealogical shapes of metaphysics. Which traditions and focus of storytelling can become engaged? How the paradigm of "responsibility" can become engaged as a genealogical-intergenerational criteria?

2. Reconstructing ethics, reconstructing non-genealogical metaphysics

In criticizing traditional ethical concepts, Hans Jonas focuses mainly on their metaphysical character.¹ Ethical concepts are generally based on *predeterminism* (of human nature), *uniqueness* and *determinability* (of the good) and *limitation* and *closeness* (of the effects of human actions). However, these *metaphysical reasons* are no longer adequate for the foundation of ethics.²

In his first approach, Jonas reacts to this shortcoming of ethical theory neither by directly *de-liberating* on the determinability of human nature, nor by *identifying* the good in a new way, nor by *establishing* the effects of human action as limited and manageable anew. On the contrary, by criticizing such a metaphysical categorization, Jonas opts for a seemingly postmodern paradigm shift of ethics.

When looking at Jonas' whole attempt of formulating a new concept of ethics, it must be asked whether he was successful in carrying out and maintaining this paradigm shift. As the title of his important book "*The Imperative of Responsibility*" shows, he uses criteria and categories of Kant's moral theory of duties and principles. For example, he defines responsibility as caring for another being, recognizing this practice as a duty, while at the same time he denies the validity of the deontology of duties.³

In addition, it is peculiar that Jonas permanently uses the phrase "*the human being*" (germ. "der Mensch"). This singular phrase contradicts his purpose of introducing a new ethical discourse. Even when he speaks about "the future of *humankind*" or "the child", he is not aware

that these are concepts for human relationships representing the plurality of being human especially in the form of the generations beyond every “the” or natural predeterminism. On the contrary, Jonas creates an idealistic perspective. He tries to construct responsibility based on the power of the relationship with a newborn as “the timeless archetype of every responsibility” in order to get an “uncontradictable ontological dogma”.⁴ A child’s essential need for responsible adults is not identical with the *needs* of adults. Today, it is no longer a taboo that nearly every fourth mother goes through a postnatal depression. In Germany, the number of paternal neglection rises.⁵ Furthermore, parents never have “the child”. They have a child, one, two, four, six or twelve children, and the amount of the children can modify the quality of the parental relationship to each of their children. Bonding to the first child can be very different from bonding to the second, fourth or twelfth one. The parents’ will that their children stay alive depends on their willing, concerned on their capability to take care of each of them. Over all, the willing of having a child by a mother and/or a father is not following the idealistic idea of “having *the* child” the western societies have tried to keep up in the last centuries.

Referring to “*the* human being” doesn’t take into account the differences between the concrete lives of human beings, it ignores the concrete human beings, their generational and historical situations and their individual lives. In this way, the potential of developing an ethics of plurality, genealogy or heteronomy vanishes. Such a conceptual constellation is the reason why a lot of thinkers, who follow Jonas’ call, are engaged in working out the ethical dimension of the generations for overcoming absoluteness as the leading profile of ethical concepts.

It remains to be seen to what extent Jonas is aware of the necessity of a metaphysical paradigm shift or of the necessity to take his intuition as a sign for a new ethics. Perhaps, Jonas gets distracted by his fear concerning certain technological advancements. As a consequence, it is necessary to follow Jonas’ call for a reconstruction of the ethical without becoming distracted by the will to directly find ethical answers to certain technological or other kinds of (disastrous) advancements, such as the climate change and the increase of nuclear waste. Such a will shouldn’t be the only drive behind ethical reflection. However, every kind of technological advancement has to be taken seriously since it represents the challenge for ethics to metaphysically categorize on an equal level. The metaphysical categorizations of ethics have to prove their validity in confrontation with the specific metaphysical categorization of a certain phenomenon, a technology represents. Ethics has to improve its causal reach to deal with this challenge on an equal footing.⁶

3. The metaphysical character of ethics

In his book, Jonas characterizes ethics as a *power* to orientate human lives. Ethics is effective in form of “voluntary reins”, supported by the motivation to prevent adversity, especially caused by restless impulse.⁷ This combination of “reins” with “voluntary” is particular, because it overcomes the idea of creating reins and vetoes for technological advancements through ethical conceptions. “Voluntary reins” are specific reins, reins for the “restless impulses” as an effective ethical power. This power can be regarded as the specific ethical power. It is the power of the ethical, which has its own effects parallel to the power of the natural, the usual or the dominant.

The phrase “voluntary reins” is paradox, and this paradox can be regarded as an invitation not to take it as an association of deontological concepts created by the reference to “reins”, but to take it as an indication of the specific power of ethics.

Picking up the most inspiring point, the „imperative of responsibility“ as Hans Jonas calls it, is not reduced to assuming responsibility for other fields such as technology. Overall, it focuses on responsibility for developing good new ethical approaches to technological advancement. This ethical approach has to be on a par with such technological advantages, but less with the notion of “reins”. However, considering the power of ethics needs a crystallizing of ethical concepts.

Jonas’ approach to develop a responsibility for the future is revolutionary since he does so by assuming *responsibility for ethics*: for ethical concepts and perspectives, for reconstructing the ethical as a power. The validity of this instigation is independent of the question whether Jonas was able or willing to accomplish this project.

In a new ethical metaphysics, there is hope that human beings will orientate themselves by discovering meaning, making good decisions and reflecting on the meaning of setting limits. This does not mean to positivistically practice ethics as a system of norms and limits, but to make the power of the ethical effective. Ethics is not based on a domination regime or a perfect will, but on the confidence in human’s longing for morals and morality and their ethical capability.

4. New philosophy, openness and plurality

Trying to balance ethics in a new way, Jonas finds himself in the tradition of understanding ethics as something to be permanently revised. Concerning the metaphysical critique of the ethical concepts, especially of the newer philosophy (related to Immanuel Kant), Ludwig Feuerbach outlines a similar metaphysical concept of philosophy and ethics as Jonas.

Along the trichotomy of “theology”, “newer philosophy”, “new philosophy”, Feuerbach points out that the concepts of modern philosophy aiming at dissolving theology in anthropology are deficient. Attempts to ground ethics in humanity succeed only on the level of contents; however, on the logical and metaphysical level, ethical concepts remain theological. Using factors such as “absoluteness”, “unity”, the “one”, “abstraction”, “infinite” or “knowledge”/“cognition”, they remain religious. Thus, the human being becomes the “only, universal and highest object of philosophy”.⁸

Feuerbach not only bashes the ontotheological structure of the newer philosophical discourses, he also generates a clear alternative. An understanding of human beings must include their sensualism, their communality and their diversity, as beings-*with*-other-humans and beings-*for*-other-humans. Finally, Feuerbach introduces human plurality as cause and effect relation as well as purpose of the human condition.

In human plurality, Feuerbach finds the bases of freedom, infinity and openness. Concerning metaphysical categorizations reflecting upon “*the* human being”, he profiles these in form of the category of interpersonal relationality. Categorically considered, freedom is a *relativum*; concepts of infinity can differ from each other according to their belonging to an ontotheological metaphysics or to a metaphysics of relationality. Both, “infinity” and “freedom” arise out of plurality and its bonding possibilities.⁹

Whether concepts of unity are different or not depends on how they are unifying: by universalisation reducing singularity and thereby plurality, or by following the diverse manners of bonding whereby the composing of the unifying relationships is brought to the fore and in further consequence can be changed.¹⁰

In a metaphysic of relationality, openness is present in two different ways, on the one hand as an effect of irreducibility and on the other hand as an effect of the various possibilities combining diverse, plural phenomena. As a consequence of the latter, the new philosophy leads to ethics: to the human art of qualifying links and linking human beings by finding better and more just possibilities.

Feuerbach turns his critique of the ontotheological structure directly against the ethical concept of Kant’s philosophy. He reproaches Kant of attributing “predicates of divinity” to the human will.¹¹ In opposition to this, Feuerbach establishes the moral not in the being of the single person (and its autonomous will), but in the collective of human beings. The human moral being is, as he says, “in the community”.¹² The meaning of “is in” is not elaborated, it can be interpreted though. It may indicate that humans’ moral constitution emerges in the community, whereas the origin of the moral is not clear. It may also express that human morals are in the community because they emanate from being-*with*-other-humans. Within this

human constellation, in being-with-other-humans, especially in being-for-other-humans lies the origin of morals and morality.

This view of the ethical is supported by a lot of factors. Anthropologically, one should mention the human capability of perspective-taking, which allows a newborn to survive in the human network. Perspective-taking means the capability of putting oneself in the position of someone else and in doing so also in his/her moral ideas and behavior. It is the capability to qualify the relationship to others especially by confronting oneself with the morals of another person. This complex confrontation helps to build one's own moral decisionmaking. It is a main condition for moral reflection.¹³

Moreover, the human will is neither homogeneous nor autonomous, but fortunately heterogeneous and relative. It is stimulated by external factors, which are normally simultaneously oriented towards different things, such as the pleasure of perceiving differences in human beings and the wish for successful relationships. In elaborating the heteronomy of the human will, Sigmund Freud argues: If the last two ambitions are missing, humans are not able to bear each other.¹⁴

It is the heteronomy of the human will that creates morals and morality. Starting from a pluralistically motivated concept of the will, it must be taken into consideration that humans want to bind to each other. Binding oneself is a primary need, overcoming fear and uncertainty. Humans want to be acknowledged, they wish reciprocity. They want to be acknowledged as unique persons and to acknowledge others as such, too. They want to assert themselves and they want to bring into being something. In the best case, these needs may be satisfied. In this case, their feeling is raised by the experience of being the center and creator of their own life. However, if self-esteem and self-assertion are only possible at the expense of other human beings, their morality suffers.¹⁵

Regarding philosophical history, Plato's Republic can be mentioned. Socrates argues that justice cannot be defined by an individual perspective; it must be developed along a differentiated understanding of human cooperation represented by the city.¹⁶ In his concept of justice, Plato depicts the ethical as a phenomenon of human relatedness: as the quality of human relationships turning less or even more just with every decision.

Putting aside ontotheological notions, the ethical can thus be regarded as origin, cause and interdependency generated through human acting with and for each other. Driven by the wish to bond in a successful manner, human beings must and can come to decisions which in and of themselves lead to a greater or lesser degree of justice. Justice is an effect of different people acting in relatedness. They pick up different possibilities and look for a new combination. Therefore, their action is not determined, not absolute, not generalized, not abstract. The ethical indicates the open, stands up for it by signifying that the consequence will be less or more

just relationships. Furthermore, in connection with human plurality, the categorization in form of the relative does not lead to relativism or arbitrariness, but rather it produces more justice or more injustice.

At the same moment, the ethical offers the relation between the openness of a situation for transcendence and the human future. According to Hannah Arendt, human beings stand always in the gap in time, making a stand against past and future.¹⁷ For Jacques Derrida, justice comes from the future.¹⁸ The particular *power* of ethics is based on this temporal-ethical relatedness of human existence in plurality.

5. Ontotheological or open attitudes towards the ethical

Resentments, moralization, moral rigidity, fanaticism, morally organized fundamentalism – Friedrich Nietzsche impressively works out the attitudes for preserving familiar moral ideas as a closed system.¹⁹ Indeed, a relative moral incertitude,²⁰ the capability and willingness to let arraign oneself and one's moral ideas²¹ or decentering one's wishes and interests, because one wants to have more than the having itself,²² all these are attitudes towards moral beliefs and certainties, too. Polarized between certainty and uncertainty, the colliding attitudes are constructed through a dualized metaphysical program. The metaphysical dualizing seems to double itself: It forms the contents of moral ideas as well as the attitudes towards them.

Plato is fully aware of this problem. As a consequence, he suggests the epistemic position of profiling thinking out of the middle. This attitude means: We are always standing in the middle, especially in the middle of dualizing or interfering issues. We are in-between beginning and end, origin and aims, reason and sensuality, known and unknown, definable and indefinable, contingency and necessity, justifiable and non justifiable, certain and uncertain, just and unjust, catastrophe and success, own opinions and the dialog with others²³, or past and future, as Hannah Arendt picked up Platon's idea of the middle.²⁴ Starting at the middle position, we can move in the direction of both poles. Often, this works simultaneously. This movement help us to understand the single combination we are confronted with, and to judge the specific interaction (considering the mediality – the light – together with the illumination sources of the own perspective). According to Plato, therefore virtue is the core of a moral practice.²⁵

According to this attitude, situations are determined and not determined, decisions are justifiable and non justifiable, effects are predictable and non predictable. Wishing to justify and having to judge while being aware of the simultaneity of the justifiable and the not justifiable, the thetical and the non thetical, the truth and something whose truth first has to be found, this is the causality of the ethical, Julia Kristeva explains. It is the capricious causality of human cognition and a special pleasure.²⁶ Furthermore, the simultaneity in a decision situation in-

cludes that what is just is decidable and not decidable.²⁷ This ambivalence does not suspend, it qualifies decidability.

Thus, Plato's attempt can be called the epistemic of virtue. A behavior of virtue means to look for the right measure, in individual ethics for example for courage as the middle between high spirits and cowardice. Beyond individual ethics, it represents the ethical epistemic. In addition, following Hannah Arendt, we can take the given point as the break where diverging forces meet, potentiating each other: pushing forward to the infinite.²⁸ Inhabiting such tensions opens a movement of transcendence towards a better, more just future.

In this manner, in the ethical openness and interrelatedness are combined. This is valid, too, when it asserts a unique answer sometimes. This can be kept lucent by indicating a decision as a (ethically qualified) decision, but not as the quintessence of reason, the truth of nature or a divine factor. The authority of such a decision is not impaired. On the contrary, it becomes a force by bringing into light its ethical character: its character of being an answer, motivated and carried by the will for searching the good for the relationship of human beings (in plurality) and practiced the human capability of distinguishing between just and unjust. By qualifying the openness of such a decision, it brings the break, the gap, the open into language and invites to stand for the openness of the future. But this openness is not absolute. It is not unconditioned. It is a "conditioned openness".²⁹ In this manner, conditioned by the past and the future at one and the same time, openness arises.

6. Ethics and technical futures

The critique of the ontotheological concepts relates not only to philosophy and ethics. Concerning Jonas' ambition of giving answers to technological advancements, not only his ethical concepts, but also his concept of technology turns out as ontotheological. He unifies the use of technologies as well. By declaring technology as the cause of destruction, Jonas "identifies actual realizations of necessary conditions with those conditions themselves than, indeed, there is only room for either 'conservatism' or total revolution and/or destruction of human and animal life."³⁰ As a consequence, Han van Diest criticizes that by the dualisation and onto-theologisation technology becomes a divine and absolute power. In addition, it is ignored that actual conditions are not good without exception, but need changes.³¹ Over all, such an ethics is not focused on future, but determined by the past respectively by a specific view on the past. It is conservative; as such it conserves the shortcomings of the present, too.

Van Diest recommends understanding technology as an expression of human self-standing and creativity. With its aid human beings handle the conditions of their lives. By this understanding, human beings are regarded as the center of acting and agents of technical practices. Their practice is not a no-brainer. On the contrary, they make ambivalent experiences having

technology modified. They develop their behavior towards their inventions, individually and contextually.

Ethics intends to regulate human behavior. Deontologically shaped, ethical regulations are formed as unifying behavior. Thus, human behavior is not developed as *human* behavior. As well, it builds no fundament for worldwide practices. Instead of qualifying the different and plural human ways of behavior towards technology, the ethical discourse forms phenomena like technology to autonomous (destructive) issues for legitimizing its deontological and conservative character. A counter concept consists of an ethical practice using such differences and ambivalences for developing their goods.

Nevertheless, Jonas' emphasis on the destructive sides of technical advancements can be accepted, since it gives him a reason to search for a new ethics of technology. Having worked on technological impact assessments for years, for example Arnim Grunwald concludes that the phrases "the technology" or "the technical future" are insufficient. He proposes to use the expression "the technical *futures*" (germ. "Technikzukünfte").³²

Using the plural form, Grunwald wants to underline that a concrete technical advancement can generate very different effects, since it interacts with diverse complex situations, and human beings react to their effects too. Furthermore, very different technical products were developed to solve single problems. Also, their temporal effectivity differs from each other. Above all, Grunwald draws attention to the semantic interdependence of technology and future, generating an imprecise temporal character. "Technical future" is an idea produced in the here and now. As such, it has a medial function. On the one hand, the mediality of "technical future" depends on the understanding of "future" and on people's expectations for the future. On the other hand, this mediality is affected by mostly stereotyped images of technology. These interdependences are eminently fatal. Particularly if technology is regarded as a deterministic force, it is exploited easily, because it is used to promise unambiguous results and controllability.

However, images of technical futures can be used as a medium to debate technical issues. They turn into resources for an ethically qualified orientation, losing their threatening character. Grunwald explicitly bashes the technocratic and positivistic nature of many ethical discourses. He vouches for developing a hermeneutic of technical futures and collects some important questions, for example: Where are the origins of the substances of technical futures, where are their cultural roots? Such first questions show that technology does not only have a future, but also a past. Looking at technical pasts brings up the question: What does a new technology substitute? A comparison is necessary. The replacement must be assessed.

Other questions are: How do these futures challenge the present societies and their moral standards? What is at risk? What images of human beings, nature and technology emerge?

How do they change? What kind of anthropological questions are involved? Which plans for societies resonate with the future projections? What is their new contribution? Why do they have this cognitive, social, economical, psychological, cultural, political importance?³³

At the same time, new approaches are necessary to deal with speculative practices. For this purpose, Grunwald promotes an *explorative philosophy*. Instead of falling back to well-known ethical terms and practicing a speculative ethics, new terms must be generated.³⁴

The storytelling of technical futures can be reviewed. Which telling frame is used? What is being spoken about? Are only the products and their effects being regarded? Or does the storytelling also include the story of the processes in which their production is decided? Which forces are producing culture and which values are being considered – is it justice or growth or rather competition? Which “we-identity” is being spoken of? Examples for a new storytelling may be: “In our society, nobody is so silly to drive a rover vehicle in town” or “we don’t senselessly travel by air four times a year”.³⁵

Making the diverse dimensions of technical futures accessible empowers the heteronomy of the will to sustain the longing for the just. Grunwald’s, Fücks’ and Leggewie/Welzer’s publications about world development are special, since they reconstruct mistaken ideas of technology, economy, culture and politics or rather democracy and treat them as a single complex. Even though they do not mention it explicitly, they oppose an ethical discourse on such mistaken ideas. Their ambition is to gain and stabilize new attitudes and perspectives. However, they are not going to conservatively maintain the existing developments with the help of an outdated value speech. On the contrary, they want to reach a new flexibility. Reading their suggestions gives the impression that only a new flexibility in storytelling and decisionmaking leads to finding new goods.

7. Speaking of the generations, speaking of the future

Hans Jonas’ book inspires many thinkers. Besides the discussion about technologies and future, reflecting on the relation between responsibility and future generations has become an important discussion. However, his reflection also suffers from ontotheological logic.

Currently there is an ongoing discussion whether or not present generations can be responsible for future ones, since wishes and ideas of the latter are not known. Such discussions prefer a certain concept of time span.³⁶ In addition, they push for absolute und universal answers. Feuerbach’s critique of an absolute notion of generations has been completely neglected. It must be considered that the relationships of generations are plural.

For such a differentiation, one of my students made an interesting comment. He remarked how terrible it would be if no adult would care about the following and all future generations.

The fact that many people care about the following generations seems to be a sufficient fundament for generational ethics. It implies that not all adults are practicing this care, and those who do care are not necessarily successful. Similarly to Van Diest's idea of ethically looking at the human subjects of technology, this view leads to taking human beings as subjects of the generational relationality seriously.

Instead of creating dualistic thinking by giving a generation an absolute status, it is possible to start here with a dual movement, too. The present generation creates life conditions for the following ones, whereas at the same time it is one of them. Furthermore, every generation has a past. It may be the first, second, fifth, twelfth, forty-seventh and thousandth generation after. To elaborate these experiences, a new language and new stories are necessary. Founded on a genealogical thinking, the Jewish and Christian traditions can inspire such stories if they are willing to change the standard viewpoint. Instead of unifying the origin of mankind or of Christianity by looking at the birth or death of Jesus, it can be asked: What does it mean to be living in the 80th generation after Jesus? Does such an asking help to reflect on the future of the generations? The French Revolution can be another point of reference. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, people are living in the 25th generation after the French Revolution: What could be the relevance of this fact for democratic cultures? How can it help to reflect on the future of the generations?

In addition, everybody can ask such questions himself/herself. If someone is the sixth generation in his/her family after a specific familiar incident (for example, ancestors migrated because of a war), what knowledge can he/she gain by reflecting on this fact? What can someone know about being a part of the generational relationships? Having been once the future generation of the own ancestors, what can one learn about looking after the future generations and assuming responsibility for them?

In the same way that technical products have technical pasts, generations do have generational pasts. This cannot be extrapolated ontotheologically, through absolute conceptualized generational figures, but only historically. Otherwise, a generation will have neither an origin nor a future in a historical sense. Concerning the future,³⁷ Johannes Rohbeck states to understand the openness of the future not as an unconditioned situation. In the future, not only the fundamental living conditions, but also the historical preconditions are decisive. It is these preconditions that govern the actions of the present generation for the future in a wrong direction, sometimes even cripple – or just make the organizations and practices for another situation available.

Ethics is responding to such concrete conditions. Preconditions can be an important condition of the wanted open future.³⁸ Longing for an open future is the activity guiding human subjects. As a consequence, thinking the generations must not be developed principally for hu-

man's responsible practice. Humans have acted responsibly even if ethics hasn't reflected on this aspect well as its own condition.

8. The ironical situation of ethics due to historically global and eternal problems

As pointed out above, the deconstruction of the ontotheological and deontological forms of discourses is connected with every field of human activity. Perhaps the universalizing of all the discussed issues is a result of confusion. Ontotheological thinking was used to create abstractions. Indeed, the capability to abstract is needed to reflect on the human experiences considering them as a part of the generational relationships at the beginning of the 21st century. However, this capability must be distinguished from both universalizing and absolutization.³⁹ Abstraction refers to one concrete situation and helps to combine this concrete situation with another one. It consists in the capability to create relationships: relating the experiences of being a part of the former generations with the ones of being a part of the future generations. The aim of abstraction is to potentiate such experiences. At this point, ethics, genealogy and metaphysics meet anew in a complex constellation.

Over all, by sorting out some actual fields, for example looking at the problems of nuclear waste or climate change, one can recognize a special challenge. Considering some qualities of such fields, ethics seems to find itself in an ironical situation. Concepts of ethics, of technology and of generations are losing their ontotheological and deontological character while these kinds of attributions seem to represent a special historical truth. Especially from the perspective of the present generation, taking care of the present nuclear waste is a task that will last eternally. The hazards of nuclear power plants are global. Climate change will continue affecting the whole planet forever. Such temporal and spatial dimensions characterize human acting as a peculiar combination of space, time, generations and technology. Fear of such a combination may lead to looking for absolute and universal speech. The inconsistencies in Jonas' "The Imperative of Responsibility" may also be regarded as a clear symbol for this ironical impact of the new situation, ethical discourses are exposed at the present time.

A first impression of this inversion is the following: When ethics is conceptualized ontotheologically, the problematic phenomena may not seem to be absolute. But some phenomena, spatially and temporally getting out of hand, show a kind of absoluteness, in which ethics synchronously loses its ontotheological character and turns into a phenomenon of relatedness. The criticism of ontotheological ethics and the historical challenges for ethics collide, because each of them seems to reset its relationship to the absolute in the opposite direction.

To reconstruct ontotheological ethics, it is important to reflect on this special collision. How can ethics respond to the characteristics of problems which are historically global and eternal? As a result, can the answer be that ethical reflection falls back into the old logic of the

ontotheological discourse? What does it mean to take up the collision and work through this specific tension as a historical situation for ethical conceptualizing? What kind of non absolute ethical attitudes are possible for developing an attitude regarding absolute attributes of historical phenomena? What attitudes are possible to cope with the peculiar metaphysical relationship between ethics and climate change? This article has attempted to present some possible answers.

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- ¹ Following Aristotle's „Metaphysics“, I understand metaphysics to be the human art of connecting and building relatedness that enables human beings to develop categorizations and classification criteria, but I don't agree a first philosophy is necessary for this challenge. See Aristoteles, *Metaphysik. Schriften zur ersten Philosophie*, edited by Franz F. Schwarz (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Jun., 1970).
- ² Hans Jonas. *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (Frankfurt/M.: Insel), 1979, p. 15.
- ³ Jonas, *Prinzip Verantwortung*, p. 391.
- ⁴ Jonas, *Prinzip Verantwortung*, p. 234 (my translation).
- ⁵ Deutsches Jugendinstitut. Frühe Hilfen. Online at: , (accessed 16.03.2013.)
- ⁶ Jonas, *Prinzip Verantwortung*, p. 9.
- ⁷ Jonas, *Prinzip Verantwortung*, p. 7.
- ⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach. *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft* (Frankfurt/M.: Klostermann, 1967), para. 55 (my translation).
- ⁹ Feuerbach, *Grundsätze*, para. 60.
- ¹⁰ Feuerbach, *Grundsätze*, para. 63.
- ¹¹ Feuerbach, *Grundsätze*, para. 17.
- ¹² Feuerbach, *Grundsätze*, para. 59.
- ¹³ Eva-Maria Kenngott. *Perspektivenübernahme. Zwischen Moralphilosophie und Moralpädagogik*. (Wiesbaden: Verl. für Sozialwiss., 2012), pp. 134-139, 145-147.
- ¹⁴ Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and its Discontents*, edited by James Strachery (New York: W.W.Norton&Company, 1962), pp. 13, 41-43.
- ¹⁵ Fitzgerald Crain. *Fürsorglichkeit und Konfrontation, Psychoanalytisches Lehrbuch zur Arbeit mit sozial auffälligen Kindern und Jugendlichen*. Gießen; Psychosozial-Verlag, 2005, p. 200.
- ¹⁶ Plato. *The Republic*, transl. by Desmond Lee, London: Penguin, ²2007, paras. 372d-376e.
- ¹⁷ Hannah Arendt. *Between Past and Present. Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 11.

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- ¹⁸ Jacques Derrida. *Gesetzeskraft. Der mystische Grund der Autorität* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 21-22.
- ¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral* (München: dtv, 1999), pp. 26-29.
- ²⁰ Peter Berger. *Meinungen statt Gewißeheiten*, FAZ 7.5.98.
- ²¹ Helmut von Hentig. *Ach, die Werte! Ein öffentliches Bewusstsein von zwiespältigen Aufgaben - über eine Erziehung für das 21. Jahrhundert* (Weinheim; Basel: Beltz, 2001), p. 26.
- ²² Plato, *Republic*, paras. 338d–339.
- ²³ Plato, *Republic*, paras. 517-518.
- ²⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, pp. 7-9.
- ²⁵ Plato, *Republic*, para. 516.
- ²⁶ Kristeva, Julia. „Kein weibliches Schreiben?“ (Freibeuter 2, 1979), p. 83.
- ²⁷ Derrida sees in this contemporaneity the reason for the search of justice, vgl. Derrida, *Gesetzeskraft*, pp. 9-40.
- ²⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, pp.11-12.
- ²⁹ Johannes Rohbeck. *Zukunft der Geschichte. Geschichtsphilosophie und Zukunftsethik*. Berlin: Akademie-Verl., 2013, pp. 88-92.
- ³⁰ Han van Diest, In Discussion with Hans Jonas: Towards a Framework of Responsibility. Ontology, organisms and organizations, unpublished reference, p. 13.
- ³¹ Ralf Fücks. *Intelligent wachsen. Die grüne Revolution* (München: Hanser, 2013), p. 24-26.
- ³² Armin Grunwald. *Technikzukünfte als Medium von Zukunftsdebatten und Technikgestaltung* (print on demand: Karlsruhe, 2012, <http://digbib.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/volltexte/1000030441>), pp. 23-25.
- ³³ Grunwald, *Technikzukünfte*, p. 284.
- ³⁴ Grunwald, *Technikzukünfte*, pp. 201-204.

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- ³⁵ Claus Leggewie, Harald Welzer, *Das Ende der Welt, wie wir sie kannten. Klima, Zukunft und die Chancen der Demokratie* (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2009), p. 234-235.
- ³⁶ Johannes Rohbeck offers an actual overview about this discussion and its dualizing character; cf. Rohbeck, *Zukunft der Geschichte*, pp. 68-71.
- ³⁷ Following Leibniz, Hannah Arendt focuses on an open past by distinguishing between the truth of facts and the truth of reason. The latter is an open truth, because it depends on interpretations and subjective viewpoints, cf. Hannah Arendt. *Wahrheit und Lüge in der Politik* (Piper: München, ²1987), pp. 48-50.
- ³⁸ Rohbeck, *Zukunft der Geschichte*, pp. 88-92.
- ³⁹ Onora O'Neill: "Gerechtigkeit, Geschlechterdifferenz und internationale Grenzen". *Politische Theorie. Differenz und Lebensqualität*, edited by Herta Nagl-Docekal and Herlinde Pauer-Studer (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), pp. 417-450.