

Week 5

Hans Jonas—

***Technology and Responsibility:
Reflections on the New Task of Ethics***



**Jonas' contention is that
“the nature of human action
has changed, and since ethics
is concerned with action, it
should follow that the changed
nature of human action calls
for a change in ethics....”**

I.

“Cities rise and fall, rules come and go, families prosper and decline; no change is there to stay, and in the end, with all the temporary deflections balancing each other out, the state of man is as it always was.”

Humans are or should be in control and responsible for their actions.

Nature has not been a human concern.

II.

**Humans were not involved
in non-human issues—
especially in ethics.**

**It was anthropocentric.
Ethical commands were:**

“Love thy neighbor as thyself.”

“Do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you.”

“Subordinate your individual good to the common good.”

III.

**Ethics had been tied to the here and now...
what was known. Ethics had an immediacy.**

**Ethics was not directed at the future
or on unintended consequences.**

IV.

**However, nature now is involved
in the ethical situation that we find ourselves.**

Humans now are ethically responsible for nature.

**Jonas writes that we should
“not kill the goose that lays
the golden eggs, or saw off
the branch on which we sit....”**

**We are affected by what
we do to nature...that is the
ethical issue for Jonas
and all of us.**



V.

Jonas says poetically, “If nothing succeeds like success, nothing also entraps like success.”

Humans have succeeded with advanced technology, but have failed ethically.

**If we invent new things,
we need to invent new ethics.**

VI.

Jonas quotes Kant's categorical imperative:

“Act so that you can will that the maxim of our action be made the principle of a universal law.”

If we ethically mess with the future for the benefit of today, it is both foolish and is not logical.

Jonas, then concludes, “Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life.”

**Jonas want us to use Kantian logic...
move from the present and private action
to the hypothetical universalization.**

**If I do this, what is the ethical issue
if it universalized?**

**Jonas says that we will add *time*
to the ethical *horizon*.**

VII.

**Longevity has been our goal
since the beginning of time.
Jonas wants to question its ethics
for the individual and the race.**

**In our day, this is an issue when
we are adding years and decades to life.**

If we stop death occurring, are we to stop births?

Macbeth says about death, “Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more.”





**If Macbeth gets his wish,
what then will the ethical
issue of birth be, since we
will not need babies?**

IX.

**Jonas in his convoluted and poetic manner said,
“The very nature of the age which cries out
for an ethical theory makes it suspiciously
look like a fool’s errand. Yet we have no
choice in the matter but to try.”**

**This has to be faced whether or not religion
is able to *man-up* to the task—ethics must.**

