

Tradition and critical thinking

On the value of the past in Hans Jonas's critique of the modern mind

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to attempt an interpretation of Hans Jonas's philosophical approach to tradition in terms of an exercise in critical thinking. Although several modern authors have seen in tradition a normalising and conservative force that either constrains the powers of human reason or prevents new disruptive ideas from thriving, other philosophers have contested this accusation and concurred to sketch the general guidelines of a theory of the critical value of tradition. Commenting on both published and unpublished material, I claim that Jonas's meditation on the history of western culture belongs to this latter stance. Moving from this thesis, I then analyse some passages of Jonas's oeuvre where his position concerning the critical potential of tradition is theorised or directly put into practice. In particular, I focus on the essay *The practical uses of theory* and on an unedited transcription of the 1967 conference *Contemporary problems in science and ethics. A Jewish comment*.

Keywords: Hans Jonas; tradition; critical thinking; ethics of technology.

1. *Introduction*

The purpose of this essay is to attempt an interpretation of Hans Jonas's philosophical approach to tradition in terms of an exercise in critical thinking. Although several modern authors have seen in tradition a normalising and conservative force that either constrains the powers of human reason or prevents new disruptive ideas from thriving, other philosophers have contested this accusation and concurred to sketch the general guidelines of a theory of the critical value of tradition. Commenting on both published and unpublished material, I claim that Jonas's meditation on the history of western culture belongs to this latter stance. Moving from this thesis, I then analyse some passages of Jonas's oeuvre where his position concerning the critical potential of tradition is theorised or directly put into practice.

The essay is structured as follows. In section 2 I review in general terms the opinions of some authors who believe tradition to be an obstacle to critical thinking, if not its worst enemy. In section 3, on the contrary, I discuss the posi-

tion according to which tradition should be conceived not as hindering critical thinking, but rather as one of its most productive sources. In section 4 I focus on Jonas's case and present the reasons why, in my opinion, he should be counted among those who defend the critical value of tradition and employ it in order to diagnose the weak points of the most dominant viewpoints of their time.

While sections 2-4 are dedicated to the theoretical debate on tradition and critical thinking, in sections 5-7 I take under consideration two writings in which Jonas actually reflects on traditional concepts to criticise specific aspects of modern culture. To this aim, in section 5 and 6 I concentrate on the essay *The practical uses of theory*, where Jonas ponders on the ancient Greek notion of *theoria* in order to identify a crucial missing element in the modern understanding of the notion of knowledge and diagnose the worrisome effects of such shortcoming. Finally, in section 7 I analyse the unpublished transcription of *Contemporary problems in science and ethics. A Jewish comment* – a conference held in 1967 where Jonas presented some very interesting notes on how the Jewish tradition, if understood correctly, may still be of great significance for modern mankind.

2. *The case against tradition*

Since European culture entered the modern age, the attitude of many philosophers towards their own cultural heritage has been highly conflicted. As it is well known, this situation is especially due to the attraction that the intertwined ideals of progress and method exercised on the minds of modern intellectuals, eager as they were to shake off the overwhelming yoke of unquestionable authorities and traditional convictions. As a result, the market value of traditional cultural treasures started to be dispassionately reviewed, often downward.¹

An instructive example of this attitude may be found in the works of a pioneer of the modern spirit, Francis Bacon.² In his opinion, the verbose, naïve and unproductive knowledge inherited from the past – full of disputes and empty of application, rich in problems and poor in solutions – is of little use

¹ The brief overview carried out in this paragraph is to be considered neither exhaustive nor conclusive. Instead, it serves only as a general introduction to a shared attitude towards tradition that has been influencing the modern mind in a way so steady and deep that its signs can be recognised in authors also distant in time. The attitude I sketch here is opposite to that, at least in my opinion, endorsed by Jonas in his historical-philosophical reflection. As such, an overview of its main tenets, even if summary and historically unsophisticated, legitimately belongs to the narrative of this essay, since it clarifies the context within which the following notes inscribe themselves.

² Cf. Bacon, *Instauratio Magna, Preface*; Id., *Instauratio Magna, II (Novum Organum)*, I, §§ LXXI and LXXXIV; Id., *Redargutio Philosophiarum*; Id., *The Advancement of Learning Divine and Humane*, §§ 28-29.

to the modern thinker. Moreover, our cultural past is not to be pictured as a treasure chest in which the most valuable conquests of human intelligence are saved from oblivion for the good of future mankind. On the contrary, cultural history should be imagined more as a river, on the streams of which what is light and bloated floats, what is scientifically sound and heavy sinks – until, at least, its waters are channelled into the strong levee of the scientific mind. In essence, Bacon warns us not to take tradition at face value nor to honour our predecessors more than they deserve. Indeed, the ancients are the childhood of humanity, while their modern heirs represent its maturity. Since modern scholars can count on more experience than their forebears, they should not lay prone to ancient teachings but trust the acumen of their own mind. The more history unravels, the more data are collected and analysed, the more humanity reaches higher levels of knowledge and wisdom. As Bacon once wrote, “truth is rightly called the daughter of time and not of authority” (2000: 69).

Tradition, then, must face at least a twofold charge since Bacon’s words of advice. On the one side, the so-called wisdom of the ancients, with all its errors and naiveties, is perceived as hindering true scientific progress rather than supporting it. On the other hand, the overstated authority of past thinkers is experienced as a noose that chokes the modern mind and keeps it in a state of submission and immaturity;³ and this represents the greatest danger for science, since modern scholars can count on a more refined spirit that should be left entirely free to express itself.

However, these are not the only charges that modern thinkers have pressed against tradition. A third accusation usually moved to it may be illustrated by quoting from the overture of Karl Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just as they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language (1972: 10)

³ Cf. also Kant’s essay *An answer to the question: what is enlightenment?*, where the meaning of the word “enlightenment” was famously explained as follows: “*Enlightenment is the human being’s emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one’s intellect without the direction of another. This immaturity is self-incurred when its cause does not lie in a lack of intellect, but rather in a lack of resolve and courage to make use of one’s intellect without the direction of another. ‘Sapere Aude!* Have the courage to make use of your own intellect!’ is hence the motto of enlightenment” (2006: 17).

According to Marx's suggestion, tradition seems to master the power of incorporating all that is new, thus dulling its effects and redirecting its disruptive potential to paths already tread and schemes already used. Tradition looms over the progressive efforts of humankind as an irresistible repository of reliable patterns and good old ways which prevents what is actually ground-breaking to take hold and unfold. In this case too, then, tradition is supposed to hinder progress: not, however, by thwarting the expressive capacity of the modern mind, but by luring revolutionary acts into categories and frames which ultimately dissolve their innovative impetus. Tradition, in other words, appears to be an enemy of modernity due to its inner normalising effect, that sterilises the future and annihilates the possibility of creating something significantly new.

All these claims received their crowning triumph in one of Nietzsche's famous *Untimely Meditations* – namely, *On the uses and disadvantages of history for life*. Here Nietzsche took a hard stand against the risk of valuing “the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate” (1997: 59). History and its cultural heritage may become disadvantageous for human life if detached from the dynamics and forces of the present and, which is worse, if used to blunt the bursting energies life releases.⁴ “Our knowledge of the past”, in fact, may very well be taken up “for the weakening of the present or for depriving a vigorous future of its roots” (77). The majestic body of cultural history, if not revived by fresh nourishment, would turn us into “walking encyclopaedias” on the brink of “perish(ing) of indigestion” (78). Such attitude towards history ultimately leads, in Nietzsche's opinion, to “the “weak personality” by virtue of which the real and existent makes only a slight impression” (78), since its innovative character is already diluted and submerged in the flows of history. Furthermore, the excessive weight of tradition “hinders the individual no less than the whole in the attainment of maturity” (83), keeping our mind in a state of submissiveness, pettiness, and laziness that transforms human beings “almost into mere *abstractis* and shadows” (84). History crashes human initiative by implanting the harmful “belief that one is a latecomer and epigone”⁵(83), and finally delivers modern humanity in the paralysing hands

⁴ Cf. also Nietzsche (1997: 95): “When the historical sense reigns without restraints, and all its consequences are realized, it uproots the future because it destroys illusions and robs the things that exist of the atmosphere in which alone they can live”.

⁵ It may be worth noticing that, whilst Bacon situated his contemporaries in the adulthood of mankind, Nietzsche worried that oversaturation with history may convey the impression of living in “the old age of mankind” (1997: 83); an age, this one, when it is too late for anything to change and too many things happened already for anything really new to come to pass. To stand on the peak of modernity, which Bacon hailed as a mark of superiority in knowledge and wisdom, is in Nietzsche's eyes already a matter of concern, being linked to the stale and static condition of old age. Apparently, western culture took no less than two millennia to mature, but got old in little more than two hundred years.

of cynicism, out of which nothing valuable might ever derive. The words Nietzsche wrote directly addressing his pairs could hardly be misunderstood:

forget the superstition that you are epigones. You will have enough to ponder and to invent when you reflect on the life of the future; but do not ask of history that it should show you the How? and the Wherewith? to this life. (94)

As the previous remarks show, a definite pattern of thought in western modern culture concerning the value of tradition takes to trial the normalising power of the past. Tradition is supposed to stifle innovation, to keep the modern mind in a state of subjection, and to hinder new possibilities to be envisioned. As such, cultural history has been mostly understood as an obstacle to critical thinking, i.e., to the ability of approaching reality in ways that question the status quo and of imagining new courses of thought and action. According to this perspective, to distance themselves from the conditions of their existence and elaborate a critical assessment of their own time, modern thinkers cannot count on any direct support or useful insight from the works of their renowned predecessors. On the contrary, it appears that it is pointless, if not counterproductive, to turn to history for help in finding the points of tension of the contemporary world.⁶ In this regard, philosophers must stand alone before reality, trusting the unique powers of their pure understanding.

3. *Tradition and critical thinking*

Yet, the opposition between tradition and critical thinking, which became almost common sense at least from the Enlightenment on (Gadamer 2004: 274-281), seems to be partially called into question during the XX century. In order to clarify the general terms of this reconsideration, but without any claim of exhaustivity,⁷ let's consider an interesting argument by Karl Löwith. As other Jewish scholars of Heidegger, Löwith could not avoid to reflect upon the lack

⁶ In Nietzsche's opinion, the only true help history can provide consists in the inspiration offered by the lives of great men. In order to enjoy such enlivening effect, however, history must be approached in the freest way, according to the stirring of one's own plastic power, and the past must be assimilated and appropriated more than carefully and thoroughly reconstructed. The three ways – *monumental*, *antiquarian*, and *critical* – in which history is productive for life are all of a negative or inspirational kind, i.e., are modes either to free oneself of the excessive weight of the past or to enforce the courage needed to take real action in present times by imitating those who did the same in their time, if not even competing with them (1997: 59-77).

⁷ Again, it is not my purpose here to develop a thorough and exhaustive account of such reconsideration of the role tradition may play in the critical assessment of contemporary issues. All I wish to accomplish here is to lay down the general guidelines of such trend as an introduction to Jonas's approach, in order to provide some historical-philosophical context to his reflections.

of critical thinking Heidegger showed in his public affiliation to Nazism. In Löwith's case, this reflection led to a thorough analysis into the requirements of critical thinking (1956; 1964: 15-29). In short, Löwith believed that Heidegger's fault – not just a man's failure, but rather a failure of philosophy itself, as also Jonas thought (1987a) – was caused by the overwhelming weight that his philosophy acknowledges to the existential category of the present.⁸ Such close intertwining of thinking and the present had the side effect of wearing away the possibility of taking distance from the historical conditions and mood in which Heidegger found himself involved. However, as it is apparent, taking distance from one's own historical context is necessary to any form of detachment and, therefore, to critical thinking. It is not a case, then, that where philosophy failed, theology lived up to expectations (Löwith 1986: 35-36; Calabi 2008). Theology, Löwith argued, resisted the call of history and held itself firmly to a very different standpoint, that of eternity. On the one side, Heidegger's philosophy (at least in *Being and Time*) delivered thinking entirely to the stream of present time, thus losing the possibility of taking a step back from the contemporary situation. On the other side, the consideration of human deeds *sub specie aeternitatis*, which is proper to theology, freed a thinker like Karl Barth from these boundaries and guided him to a strong critical stance against what was happening.⁹ As Löwith's remarks suggest, the capacity of putting distance between oneself and the historical situation, its dominating mood, its most implicit assumptions, and the events that determine its overall configuration seems to be a precondition of critical thinking. Moreover, this detachment seems to be possible only if thinkers keep themselves in touch with a dimension, so to speak, that be at the same time neither external to the contemporary mindset nor totally extraneous or irrelevant to it. Löwith, as seen before, appears to be convinced that religion and theology could offer such a standpoint. However, he was also entirely aware of the fact that the requirements of faith go far beyond what specifically pertains to philosophy, so that it cannot tread the same path of theology in order to find its own Archimedean point. What sort of "dimension", then, may come to the aid of philosophy here?

The thesis that I want to explore in this essay – which coincides with the insight that, in my opinion, marks Hans Jonas's dialogue with the voices of western

⁸ A similar argument against Heidegger's philosophy of existence, which also opposes the existential present as an unraveled texture torn apart by the grasp of the past and the tension to the future, may be found in Jonas's essay *Gnosticism, existentialism, and nihilism* (2001b). Here, Jonas diagnoses an unsustainable lack of permanence in Heidegger's perspective and sets forth to try and retrieve a dimension to dwell in, which may be still acceptable to the modern mind. On this cf. for example Vogel (1995) and Fossa (2019).

⁹ The reference here is to Barth (1933).

culture – is that the intelligent relation between modern scholars and tradition may provide this kind of service. Tradition, in other words, may offer to philosophical thinking a dimension neither too close to the present condition of human existence, nor too far off from it, thanks to which the modern times might be read in an interesting, even disruptive light, i.e., without suppressing their innovative potential but rather highlighting it if not, perhaps, also releasing it.

In order to clarify such position, even though only in a preliminary way, a good place to start may be the pages of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* in which the philosopher discussed the intertwined notions of authority and tradition (2004: 278-285). According to Gadamer, it would be an oversimplification to merely set tradition and critical thinking one against the other. The two, on the contrary, may be productively intertwined. Therefore, their relation must not be framed exclusively in conflictual terms, but also in terms of cooperation. Tradition in itself, in fact, cannot be held to cause exclusively the enslavement of minds and the sterilisation of the future; it also offers a unique standpoint from which to see one's own historical situation from a different, eccentric perspective. If, on the one hand, a prone and submissive relation to cultural history may suppress originality, on the other hand a free and intelligent acquaintance with it may provide the right degree of distance to approach present issues in new ways, without losing sight of their specificity.

In Gadamer's opinion, every content of tradition interacts with our thinking in the form of an appeal that comes from a different time, i.e., from a different historical context. Yet, this diversity is not of essence, so to speak, but only of degree. This is why the appeal, faint or puzzling though it may be, still can reach our ears. The condition of historicity marks a continuity between past and present human beings which bonds them together through time and space, even if their actual historical contexts may vary significantly. Due to such commonality, cultural products of past minds can still pique our interest and offer innovative point of view from which to throw new light on our problems. Given its relation of similar dissimilarity to the present cultural landscape, tradition may help bring current issues into sharper focus by revealing hidden assumptions embedded in our cultural context and ways of thinking. In this sense, tradition may well be that paradoxical dimension that is, at the same time, heterogeneous to the cultural context in which we find ourselves, and yet not entirely extraneous or irrelevant to it. Accordingly, the encounter between thinking and traditional contents cannot be entirely reduced to the normalisation of future possibilities. On the contrary, this encounter may be characterised as the very opposite, that is, as a chance to uncover and unleash the repressed energies latent in the present state of things. In fact, traditional contents may be retrieved and analysed not only for their own sake, but also for the implications

they might have on present states of affairs.¹⁰ The confrontation with traditional contents, in other words, may be sought for its creative and critical potential, that is, for the contribution it may make to detaching oneself from one's own cultural context and attaining a critical perspective on it. Besides, as Gadamer wrote, "in tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history itself" (282) that may start the engine of creativity and critical thinking.

4. *The critical potential of tradition: Hans Jonas*

In my opinion, what Gadamer theorises about the relevance of tradition is an outstanding guide to understand Hans Jonas's practice of critical thinking. Although Jonas did not tackle directly, at least in his published works,¹¹ the question concerning the value of tradition for critical thinking, many pages of his oeuvre are a direct exploration of such potential. Jonas's closeness to the point of view I briefly illustrated commenting on Gadamer's pages, however, surfaces in a short foreword to an introductory course to philosophy he presumably held in 1949-1950, when he was working as a lecturer at the Dawson College of McGill University in Montreal.¹²

At first sight, this document contains just a methodological foreword to the way in which the history of philosophy was going to be approached in the following lectures. However, the ideas here presented sound also as a statement of intent bound to hold not only for the course they are meant to introduce, but also as general guidelines to Jonas's approach to traditional sources. In this brief

¹⁰ Cf. also Gadamer (2004: 285): "Rather, in the human sciences the particular research questions concerning tradition that we are interested in pursuing are motivated in a special way by the present and its interests. The theme and object of research are actually constituted by the motivation of the inquiry. Hence historical research is carried along by the historical movement of life itself and cannot be understood teleologically in terms of the object into which it is inquiring. Such an 'object in itself' clearly does not exist at all".

¹¹ In this respect, Jonas' essay *Change and permanence. On the possibility of understanding history* (1974b) is undoubtedly of a certain interest. This essay, however, focuses not on the critical value of tradition, but on the possibility of historical understanding. Nonetheless, since the points of contact between the two issues are evidently relevant, the connection between our topics and those discussed in *Change and permanence* will be addressed in footnotes. On this essay and its relevance cf. also Borghese Keene (2014).

¹² This *Introduction to philosophy*, along with a sheet of notes entitled *Human conditions of the philosophical attitude*, is filed as HJ 4-9-9 in the philosopher's *Nachlass* at the *Philosophisches Archiv* of the University of Konstanz. The *Introduction* displays the first part of a lesson that followed the opening session of the course mentioned and shows many points of contact with another sheet of notes filed as 4-9-7, where Jonas wrote down some remarks concerning the status of questions and answers in philosophy. The following quotes, until stated differently, are taken from HJ 4-9-9. On this and other documents collected in the folder 4-9 cf. Jonas (2017) and Fossa (2018).

foreword, Jonas begins by underlying that the questions and answers of philosophy cannot be abstractly separated from the very entity that asks these questions and attempts to answer them – and this performance, so to speak, is proper to human life. Therefore, philosophy must be understood in tight connection with the human mode of existence, whose most significant character is historicity. This claim has at least a twofold implication. On the one hand, it implies that philosophical inquiries do not belong exclusively to the contingent situation in which they are formulated and carried out but, since they are intertwined with the human mode of existence per se, they also pertain to all the concrete individuals that share in such mode of existence. Philosophical questions are bound to be asked over and over again, since they address issues that stem from human life itself and, thus, cut history crosswise. Therefore, every future concretisation of human life will have its opportunity to ask these questions and try to answer them. On the other hand, the claim also implies that the circumstances in which such questions are raised cannot be entirely set aside, since it is always a context-related spark that sets the philosophical engine in motion.¹³

As a consequence, every time a philosophical issue is posed, no answer can be taken for granted: as Jonas writes, the thinker must “start all over again, as if he stood anew at the beginning of all questions”. Not, however, to shake off the shackles of tradition and approach the problem with the purity of modern intellect, as Bacon seems to suggest, but to “recapitulate the intellectual labours, engaging in discussion with the minds of the past, in order of the generations to arrive at his own late point in this continuous adventure of mankind and possibly carry it on”. In fact, the words we use to express our ideas and the concepts we resort to in order to elaborate them are also traditional products. Therefore, it is of greatest importance to be aware of their history and, so to say, of the successive layers that make them look and sound to our modern understanding as they do:

In fact the very means by which we frame the problem as such & by which we undertake its solution, namely the concepts at our disposal, reflect the evolution through

¹³ Jonas exposed his theory concerning such issues in the methodological Introduction to *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, I (1988) but later revised it in *Gnosticism, existentialism, and nihilism* (2001b). Even though in the latter essay the affinity between Gnosticism and Existentialism is accounted for in a different way, the general framework outlined in *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* seems not to be rejected altogether. On the contrary, Jonas's philosophical anthropology and theory of objectification served as a basis to *Change and permanence* (1974b), where the historicity of human existence – i.e., the “original dimensions of man's relation to the world, each with its own horizon of possibilities” (253) – is retrieved as the shared element that founds the possibility of understanding cultural products across history. The doctrine of historical understanding explored in *Change and permanence* represents the theoretical background against which these notes on the critical value of tradition must be read.

which they have assumed their present meaning. Their history unfolds this otherwise hidden meaning.

Recapitulating the history of ideas and terms, then, provides critical awareness of their historical nature and, as such, undermines their apparent incontrovertibility. Moreover, it helps single out presuppositions and biases embedded in our cultural views, showing that a promising way to get the current cultural context into critical focus is to read it through the lenses provided by historical analysis:

man's being is the outcome of his past doings. The past meant here is the cultural past of the race as retained in historical memory, and only insofar as this past is really remembered, is man really aware of what his present being is & what therefore is now the true meaning of his problems with regard to existence.¹⁴

As these quick but relevant remarks show, in Jonas's opinion tradition may serve as an observatory situated in the most convenient of locations: it stands far off from what must be studied at a distance, without at the same time losing touch with it.¹⁵ From such vantage point, the thinkers' look can distinguish the many threads of which the current cultural tapestry is woven and follow their past weft, thus becoming aware of the many shapes they have contributed to bringing up. Rethinking tradition, in sum, is an exercise in critical reflection that allows to deconstruct the indisputability of the current state of things and to catch a glimpse of the possibilities hidden in its folds.

However, what does this mean in practice? Where is to be found the alleged

¹⁴ For a similar claim, cf. Jonas (1974b: 260): "But we, who have surrendered ourselves to history, and accordingly are under her whip as never man before – we have no choice. As long as we are caught in this current of perpetual event and becoming, we must, on pain of drifting blindly in it, endeavor to understand history – our own or that of all mankind. Else we have no right to our own – a right problematic enough as it is".

¹⁵ The need of finding the golden mean between involvement and detachment is a problem that concerns the understanding of both the past and the present, as Jonas writes in (1974b: 238, 248). Jonas formulates this issue in very clear terms: "But as insufficient as the concept of knowing like by like is for a theory of understanding, as untenable, even absurd, would be its formula as a knowledge of the absolutely Other. Between absolutely "others" there can be no understanding. To be understandable, the other must partake in the generic premises of my own possibilities, which include those of my imagination and sympathy, without coinciding with their contingent reality. The other – it is a truism to say it – must be a human other, an other within the domain of man" (241). Jonas's tentative answer, as already mentioned, consists in acknowledging the historicity of man as a transversal element that allows the possibility of understanding cultural products, even though the circumstances of their elaboration and of their comprehension differ widely: "The extrahistorical element in history is thus what is most accessible to the historical understanding, available as it is in its sameness to all of us at all time; and it is the premise for everything else. But then, proliferating around the persistent core, come the mutations of historical man in their endless, never-recurring diversity; it is for their sake, for all the nuances they display, that we study history (as distinct from anthropology) – and not to meet old acquaintances" (257). The similarity of such notes to Gadamer's hermeneutics could hardly pass unnoticed.

critical value of tradition? In what follows, I propose a discussion of two moments in which Jonas calls into question some aspects of the current cultural context by putting the critical power of tradition to good use. In particular, I will focus on Jonas's criticism of the predominant weight that technological and scientific knowledge has conquered in our worldview, along with the widespread faith in progress which dominates the modern mind. In both cases, as I will underline, the exact profile of these modern issues is determined through an insightful comparison with traditional views – more specifically, with perspectives and ideas belonging to ancient Greek philosophy and the Jewish tradition. Such reading of present issues against the background of traditional reflections not only lets the specificities of the modern case surface in their uniqueness, but also helps diagnose the shortcomings of the current framework and envision possible solutions.

5. *On classical and modern theories of knowledge*

The first essay I wish to focus on is *The practical uses of theory*¹⁶ (Jonas 2001c), in which Jonas takes under consideration the concept of knowledge and its practical value. Jonas begins his analysis by summarising two ways in which the practical value of knowledge has been commonly understood in western thought:¹⁷ the theoretical ideal, which dates back to ancient Greek philosophy, and what may be called the power ideal,¹⁸ which belongs to Bacon's doctrine. The clash between the two perspectives is evident and was entirely clear to the modern scholars and scientists who endorsed the viewpoint that Bacon so vividly expressed. However, adds Jonas, in the centuries after Bacon's time new evidence has come to light that starkly impinges on this disagreement, thus requiring new analysis and discussion. To this aim, Jonas embarks upon a reconsideration of the ancient Greek position that may highlight the specificity of the modern stance but also its shortcomings, as they are evoked by "the

¹⁶ A first draft of this essay was presented at a conference held in New York City in 1958, on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the University in Exile. The conference, which deeply impressed Leo Strauss and other listeners, was a great success – as Jonas himself recalled in his *Memoirs* (2008).

¹⁷ Although in the *Memoirs* Jonas said that the conceptual clarification of this topic followed a suggestion by Alfred Schütz concerning the subject to discuss at the University in Exile 25th Anniversary conference, unpublished material found in the 4-9 folder at the *Nachlass* indicates that Jonas had been already reflecting on this issue for years. As the document HJ 4-9-4 testifies, in April 1956 Jonas prepared a handout for a philosophical discussion group in which he listed 4 different views on knowledge: 1) the theoretical ideal, revolving around Aristotle's philosophy; 2) the moral ideal, based on Socrates's teachings; 3) the prudential ideal, belonging to Stoic philosophy; and 4) the power ideal, represented by Bacon's doctrine.

¹⁸ Cf. note 17.

new ‘necessities and miseries of humanity,’ which are besetting us, so it seems, precisely as a concomitant of that use of knowledge which Bacon envisaged as the remedy for humanity’s old necessities and miseries” (189).

According to Jonas’s account, ancient Greek philosophers used to consider *theoria* as the noblest and most useful form of knowledge. The nobility of theoretical knowledge stems directly from the nobility of its eternal and unchangeable object, which can be properly approached only through contemplation. *Theoria*, then, must be understood as a sort of intellectual communion with the everlasting perfection of immutable being.¹⁹ Due to its exceptional features, the true object of knowledge is also the most venerable one and, as such, it dignifies those who know it, thus promoting their fulfilment and happiness – the complete realisation of which is, however, a divine condition that humans may enjoy only rarely and shortly, if at all.

In relation to human existence, then, the knowledge of the noblest object corresponds to the fulfilment of the best possible life and, therefore, to happiness. However, it would be a mistake to characterise knowledge as a means to the end of living a full and happy life, just as it would be incorrect to account for the practical value of knowledge accordingly. *Theoria*, on the contrary, is to be sought as an end in itself, whilst happiness is a sort of concurrent and contingent by-product generated by the process of attaining knowledge. It is true that the quest for knowledge exercises a beneficial influence to the philosophers’ life, but this is no reason to claim that *theoria* is a means to happiness as a separate purpose. The only reason knowledge is to be pursued lies in the nobility of its object, which deserves to be studied exclusively for its ontological status. The happiness that accompanies knowledge is nothing but the seal of fulfilment affixed on the best human way of life (191-192).

This, however, does not imply that *theoria* is completely detached from the practical dimension. As philosophers return to the platonian cave, in fact, knowledge leads their actions. What they contemplated in the sunlight outside the cavern makes them responsible towards the city and their fellow citizens, whose lives still await to be steered towards the Good. *Theoria*, thus, may very well have practical effects. Still, knowledge needs anything but itself: it is completely self-sufficient. This also implies that knowledge contains the modes of its own application, i.e., that it may not be used indifferently in a good or evil way. Since *theoria* has the Good as its most crucial object, it is not real knowledge that, the effects of which are not in line with the Good. As a consequence,

¹⁹ During the early fifties, Jonas explored this characterisation of ancient theoretical knowledge as a “mode of communion with essence” or “communion with being” in two documents also filed in HJ 4-9: *Socratic wisdom and virtue* (HJ 4-9-8, pp. 10-12 of the manuscript) and *Of the causes and uses of philosophy* (HJ 4-9-1/2, pp. 14-15 of the manuscript).

theoria is not just an instrument that might be employed for the attainment of any purpose whatsoever. In its practical side, knowledge manifests itself as a full, happy life lived under the sign of the Good (194-195).

Moreover, *theoria* exhibits a connection to arts, or *technai* (189-190). As it is well-known, in ancient Greek philosophy arts represent a lower kind of knowledge that is concerned with the intelligent manipulation of changeable things and is based on past experience. In this respect, *theoria* teaches how to turn to arts properly, i.e., how to use them wisely, according to reasonable limits and right purposes. Arts manage the satisfaction of the material needs of life and are among the main forces of civilisation, which is intended by the Greeks as a finite task. In this sense, knowledge instructs on how to distinguish real from socially induced needs and on how to satisfy the former in the appropriate way. Again, however, it is not this “use” of *theoria* that qualifies it as something worth seeking. The real “use” of knowledge, then, is not of an instrumental kind, but must be understood as the ultimate end of human life. Pursuing knowledge is not a means to an end apart from it; rather, it is an end in itself.

On the other hand, the modern mind characterises the practical use of knowledge in a rather different way. The symbol of this shift is, again, Francis Bacon’s philosophy: his theory of knowledge marks a break that starkly divides ancient from modern views.²⁰ Indeed, Bacon’s new characterisation of the usefulness of knowledge, embedded as it is in our scientific-technological culture, sounds much more familiar to our ears. Let’s try and get a clearer idea of such epochal shift.

First of all, modern knowledge aims to a new object. Bacon is not interested in the unchangeable and everlasting realm of being, but rather in the dynamic and everchanging domain of natural phenomena. Nature is no more seen as the moving image of an unchangeable world, but as a continuous self-making process whose operating rules must be deciphered. Things that change, along with the constants and variables of these changes, are now acknowledged as the real objects of scientific investigation.

Along with the notion of an unchangeable object of knowledge, also the idea of a qualitative difference between the ontological status of changeable and unchangeable things was destined to be discarded. The modern interpre-

²⁰ Although many pages of *The practical uses of theory* are dedicated to Bacon’s doctrine of science and its relation to modern technology, Jonas offered the most thorough and exhaustive discussion of the scientific revolution and its ontological relevance in *Seventeenth Century and after: the meaning of the scientific and technological revolution* (1974c). On Jonas’s reflections upon Bacon’s works cf. Lazier (2003). To the historical genesis of the current technological worldview Jonas also dedicated a university course in 1967 with the title *Scientific and technological revolution*. A transcript of Jonas’s lectures is filed as HJ 1-1 at the *Nachlass* and has been published in Jonas (2013). On these lectures cf. also Heller 2015.

tation of nature is led by a preliminary “ontological reduction” according to which only what is extended and measurable may be submitted to scientific study (200-205). To be scientifically knowable, an object must be describable exclusively and satisfactorily in quantitative terms, i.e., in the formal language of mathematics. As a consequence, to know something coincides with analysing it – i.e., decomposing it in its formal constituents –, re-building it, and finally run it. In a sense, modern knowledge is not interested in what a certain thing is, but rather in how it is made and in how it works.

Understanding of what components something is made and how it works, however, also means understanding how to control it and master its dynamics. Just as contemplation was the appropriate mode of ancient knowledge, manipulation is the appropriate mode of modern science. Besides, the paradigm of research as manipulation cannot but follow from the interpretation of nature in terms of process and composition. This is, of course, the most basic principle of experimental science, a form of active research in which scientists make nature work in a desired fashion. Modern knowledge is the result of an interrogation that forces nature to act on known conditions. As Giambattista Vico wrote, *verum et factum convertuntur*; but, in the technological world, the *factum* includes not only the domain of human history, as the Neapolitan philosopher suggested, but also the domain of nature – firstly understood as a self-making process, then controlled, and finally reproduced.

6. *Science, technology, and human values*

Compared to the case of *theoria*, the practical use of modern knowledge is much more ordinary and direct. Baconian science, in fact, is thought of as a means to the material well-being of humanity. “The nature of things”, Jonas writes, “is left with no dignity of its own. All dignity belongs to man: what commands no reverence can be commanded, and all things are for use” (Jonas 2001c: 192-3). Accordingly, the purpose of knowledge consists in securing the satisfaction of material needs through the technological exploitation of natural resources. Just as nature is stripped of any qualitative feature, also the idea of the good life ceased to weigh on the scientists’ conscience more than life plain and simple. In this new scenario, happiness corresponds to the progressive emancipation of mankind from the material urges of life. Knowledge, paired with the commitment to the never-ending improvement of human existence on earth, is the means to the end of final and complete happiness. The practical value of knowledge, then, is proportional to its effectiveness in obtaining material results, i.e., in providing resources for human flourishing. In this perspective,

Jonas stresses, knowledge is mainly understood as a tool, as a means to an end which is separate and different from knowledge itself. Accordingly, the value of knowledge must be assessed as tools are usually assessed, i.e., by instrumental criteria: effectiveness, productivity, control and prediction power, and so on.

Nevertheless, centuries after Bacon's vision, the long-awaited freedom from material needs is still to be attained. Human technological power over nature has generated new needs and new strategies for the satisfaction of old and new desires. Science and technology have also introduced their own needs for better equipment, more powerful tools, and more resources. The mutual relation between science and technology has kindled a self-reproducing and self-regulating process²¹ which poses its own goals and strategies. As science demands more powerful, more effective devices in order to prove its hypotheses, the same devices open new research perspectives (204-205) and lend themselves to multifarious commercial applications. In this way, technological science reunites theory and practice both in an epistemological and social sense. Since the well-being of mankind depends on the products of knowledge, technological science and society intertwine on the deepest level and share the same fate.

As these notes show, the advancements of modern science result in a constant increment of human power over nature. However, this kind of power is as qualitatively neutral as are the things to which it is applied. Whether the effects of such power are beneficial or not, it depends on the use that it is made of it. In order to address this issue, Francis Bacon was compelled to combine the scientific spirit with the virtue of charity, which may work as an external guarantee to the good use of knowledge (193-194). Bacon's insistence on charity and Christianity stems from the awareness that his notion of scientific knowledge does not carry in itself any guideline for its good application, as *theoria* did. Although, of course, technological science provides guidelines for the efficient and correct application of its contents, it includes no direct reference to the good of mankind.²² The good of mankind is an end both external and extraneous to the

²¹ The self-reproducing dynamics of power that describes the developmental logic of technological science is explained by Jonas as follows: "Control, by making ever more things available for more kinds of uses, enmeshes the user's life in ever more dependencies on external objects. There is no other way of exercising the power than by making oneself available to the use of the things as they become available. Where use is foregone the power must lapse, but there is no limit to the extension of either. And so one master is exchanged for another" (2001c: 193). This idea concerning the feedback mechanism of technology profoundly influenced Jonas's thinking and played a relevant role in both *The imperative of responsibility* (1984) and *Technik, Medizin und Ethik* (1987b).

²² Cf. (199-200): "This knowledge alone [concerning ends, ed.] would permit the valid discrimination of worthy and unworthy, desirable and undesirable uses of science, whereas science itself only permits discrimination of its correct or incorrect, adequate or inadequate, effectual or ineffectual use". See also (208-209).

dynamics of technological science, which in itself is *wertfrei* indeed:

modern theory is not self-sufficiently the source of the human quality that makes it beneficial. That its results are detachable from it and handed over for use to those who had no part in the theoretical process is only one aspect of the matter. The scientist himself is by his science no more qualified than others to discern, nor even is he more disposed to care for, the good of mankind. Benevolence must be called in from the outside to supplement the knowledge acquired through theory: it does not flow from theory itself. (195)

Here is the point where tradition exhibits its critical potential. If Jonas is correct in claiming that the current situation is still to be read within the theoretical context of Bacon's ideas, then a close comparison with the classical notion of *theoria* may offer an external standpoint to the modern idea of knowledge, thus helping thinkers formulate their criticism. Indeed, an insightful difference emerges from this comparison. Whilst *theoria* included in itself a reference to the ultimate end of humanity and the good use of knowledge, its modern counterpart, being essentially instrumental, lacks any internal information about its good use. In other words, modern science is incapable of yielding knowledge of the ends of humanity: "if there is a knowledge of it", Jonas states, "not science can supply it" (197). Besides, human beings can become objects of Baconian science exclusively according to the ontological reduction that characterises its methodology (196). Since its proper domain extends exclusively over physical matters, the dialectics of ethical values and social ends falls beyond its reach. The only internal end of technological science is its own development. Baconian knowledge follows its own inner logic and develops according to a self-regulating process which is blind to human values and ends.²³ To the techno-scientific point of view, human beings are just another object to analyse, recompose and make more efficient.²⁴

What, then, can the ancient notion of *theoria* suggest to us, who stand at the peak of modernity? It would be absurd, obviously, to repudiate the extraordinary conquests of modern science and technology. Recommending a return to the ancient way of living would also be an impossible, if not ludicrous, proposition (209). This, however, does not imply that setting tradition aside is either inevitable or healthy for the modern mind. Unlike in technology, antiquity and obsolescence are not always synonymous in the cultural dimension. For the reasons previously exposed, the voices of our predecessors may still come to our ears with interesting words.

²³ Cf. (197): "But even if a guiding knowledge of the good, that is, true philosophy were available, it might well find its counsel to be of no avail against the self-generated dynamics of science in use".

²⁴ For the bioethical implications of such claim cf. note 33.

In this regard, Jonas focuses on the different ways in which the practical use of theory has been traditionally understood in order to distance himself from his own cultural context, to examine it critically, and to diagnose its shortcomings.²⁵ The comparison between *theoria* and Baconian knowledge fuels a critical attitude towards the current cultural dominance of technological science, suggesting to pay due attention to the link between scientific knowledge, ethical values, and social ends. Such suggestion, far from being antiscientific or luddite, recommends to engage in reflection concerning the good use of technological science, since this form of knowledge does not produce by itself the guidelines for its good application. Although the question concerning the good use of technology and the related questions concerning “the image of man”²⁶ (205), i.e., human values and social ends, lie outside the epistemological domain of Baconian science, they still pertain to human knowledge – a knowledge, this one, of a different kind, but equally important for humanity.

7. *Contemporary problems in science and ethics. A Jewish comment*

Ancient Greek philosophy is not the only traditional viewpoint from which Jonas sought help to develop his criticism of modern culture. Not only Athens, but also Jerusalem provides an interesting observation point from which to approach contemporary problems posed by technological science. As Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophy, the Jewish tradition offers Jonas an opportunity to critically reflect on modernity. This attempt, that may risk being banned in advance as untimely or reactionary, is instead explored by Jonas as a potential source of creative and critical thinking.²⁷

²⁵ Such critical, distancing value of tradition evidently surfaces when Jonas writes that, even if important “attitudes and experiences” differentiate the moderns from the ancients, “it is well to consider the Greek reasoning in the matter, so as to put the contemporary dynamism of the active life in its proper perspective” (206).

²⁶ On Jonas’s difficult but central notion of “image of man” cf. Franzini Tibaldeo (2018).

²⁷ In this case, Löwith’s idea of the critical potential included in studying one’s own time *sub specie aeternitatis* combines with the critical value of tradition here under examination. It may be interesting to notice that Jonas seems convinced as well of the peculiar advantage enjoyed by theologians in virtue of their eccentric viewpoint. As a matter of fact, in (1974b: 260) he writes as follows: “Possibly it is not true that we must know our whole antecedent history, and in addition that of all the other parts of mankind, in order to understand ourselves. Or, if this is true, perhaps it is not true that we must understand ourselves in *this* sense in order to be true men. For this, the knowledge of the timeless may be more important than the understanding of the temporal, and to see himself in the light of the one may profit man more than to interpret himself by the data of the other. Who knows?”.

At the end of the 60ies, as part of a more articulated reflection upon his Jewish legacy (1967; 1968a),²⁸ Jonas explicitly put the critical power of the Jewish tradition to test by asking what would emerge from a “Jewish reading” of modern technological science and its connection to human values. In this respect, the main writing that must be taken into account is the essay *Contemporary problems in ethics from a Jewish perspective*, published in January 1968b on the “Central Conference American Rabbis Journal” and later included as chapter 4 in *Philosophical Essays* (1968b; 1974a: 168-182). Before the essay was published, however, Jonas discussed similar topics in *Contemporary problems in science and ethics. A Jewish comment*, a conference held on April 30, 1967 at the Free Synagogue of Mount Vernon, N.Y.. The transcription of this conference, which is stored in the philosopher’s *Nachlass* as HJ 16-6-10,²⁹ is of particular interest for our present purposes, since in its pages Jonas directly addresses the question concerning the critical value of tradition and offers another example of his *modus operandi*.

At the beginning of his speech, Jonas states that several ethical problems characteristic of the modern age show a definite connection to technological science and must be read in the light of its multifarious impacts “upon the attitudes, the modes of thought, the behavior of modern man” (1). The depth of such influence on many contemporary widespread beliefs could hardly be underestimated, to the point that it is almost possible to speak of a new faith born as “the human response of what science has done to our world and what technology has done to our lives” (1). The social pervasiveness of technological science, in other words, fuels an entire *Weltanschauung* that characterises modern culture. Implicitly or explicitly, in the eyes of the public science has

²⁸ On the Jewish dimensions of Jonas’s philosophy cf. Wiese (2007). For a polemical appraisal of Jonas’s role in XXth Century Jewish thinking cf. Lawee 2015.

²⁹ Cf. HJ 16-6-10. To be precise, two copies of this transcription are stored at the *Archiv*; however, HJ 20-10-22 exhibits only the even numbered pages of HJ 16-6-10, which on the contrary displays the complete transcription of Jonas’s speech. As other unpublished documents show, this transcription caused Jonas a minor editorial incident. Initially, the document was probably shipped to Jonas by the staff of the magazine *Dimension*, which also had organised the meeting and at the time was led by Rabbi Jack Bemporad – cf. the letter of July 10th, 1967 from Miss Myrna Pollak, associate editor of *Dimension*, to Hans Jonas [HJ 1-10-5d]. Miss Pollak asked Jonas to revise the transcription and send it back along with his permission to print it in the fall issue of the magazine. Although Jonas forgot to meet Miss Pollak’s demands, a slightly modified version of the transcription appeared on *Dimension* II, 1 (1967) under the title *Terms of faith* [HJ 1-10-5c]. Since Jonas didn’t reply to Mrs. Pollak’s letter and didn’t send the transcription back to be published, the editors of *Dimension* must have revised it by themselves without notifying the author. Jonas strongly complained to the editors in a letter of September 17th, 1967, demanding a public statement on the columns of the following number [HJ 1-10-5b]. On October 2nd, 1967 Miss Pollak and Rabbi A.M. Schindler, executive editor of *Dimension*, wrote back to Jonas apologising for the misunderstanding [HJ 1-10-5a]. On this account, I hold HJ 16-6-10 more reliable than HJ 1-10-5c.

become the ultimate judge of what is truth and what is just belief, myth or fantasy. According to this “popular” view, science marks a progress in human knowledge from the imaginative speculations of ancient myths and religions to a more educated comprehension of the world and the self. In this framework, then, the results of modern science appear to deny and rectify traditional beliefs: for instance, it is hard (if not impossible) to reconcile the value-neutral scientific interpretation of nature with the biblical notion of the goodness of creation, let alone Darwinism with the idea that human beings are created in the image of God.

Not only hard sciences, however, lie at the basis of the “popular mental picture” (1) according to which a dividing line must be drawn between tradition and modernity. The ontological reduction on which the scientific method is built applies, in Jonas’s opinion, also to “another modern doctrine that has very little to do with natural science, but partake of its spirit which in general fosters the same type of ideas everywhere” (2). This doctrine is historicism, intended as a deterministic philosophical anthropology that reduces human beings to the result of the influences exercised by their historical context and that, rephrasing as matters of fact what were perceived before as matters of truth, is also a form of subjectivism or relativism. Moreover, to the same demythologising trend belongs modern “naturalistic” psychology as well, which both “denies the authenticity of the spirit, of the transcendent accountability of the person” by reducing it to “the voice of some basic biological interest” (2) and makes human beings the absolute masters of a disenchanting world.

It is self-evident that the modern understanding of the self and the world, as characterised by such views, is entirely incompatible with the Jewish perspective. What is worse, Jonas adds, is that in this view the Jewish tradition is already set aside as a non-scientific (therefore, irrelevant) faith. Indeed, in our times, the Jewish tradition

somehow seems to have difficulty in holding its own in the face of this general pseudo-scientific confidence that says we have looked through all that and we can replace this outdated mythological view with the mature knowledge of how things really operate and with the kind of superior prosaic knowledge that there is nothing else. (2)

However, Jonas continues, the scientific image of the world leaves modern human beings with a deep sense of misery engendered by the contrast between our technologically enhanced power of action and our ethical disorientation. The type of knowledge to which all knowledge has been reduced, in fact, is unfit to bring forth “any guide or rule for using” (2) its own power. As clarified before, technological science provides a tremendous power of action and the criteria for its effective use, but no instruction concerning its good application.

This paradoxical situation – a defining character of modernity – gives new meaning to Pascal’s reflection on the human condition as “a mixture of grandeur and misery”, which “certainly is the modern condition” (2). And since the only sources of value are the arbitrary whims of human will, modernity must be defined as a nihilistic era.³⁰

if there is nothing but his [man’s] will left and no objective rule to govern that will, then that will must itself be its own supreme law and rule, and ultimately what rules in the absence of an objective norm is desire. (3)

Furthermore, such ethical discomfort is hardly impossible to express by standing within the boundaries of the popular-scientific *Weltanschauung*. The critical understanding of such cultural mindset cannot rise from the self-analysis of science, since this peculiar task involves a whole dimension of human existence that lies beyond its epistemological domain. The popularisation of scientific thought shuts the door to any different interpretation of knowledge and of its possible objects. As in Andersen’s famous story *The emperor’s new clothes*, however, it is through that very door that may enter the child who exclaims that the emperor is naked. That being the case, Jonas notices,

it is quite legitimate to turn to our own heritage and see whether perhaps there we can find some answers and an alternative view to the one which arises from a one-sided and somehow superstitious acceptance of the scientific account of the world and of man. (3)

As seen before, critical thinking requires the clashes of different perspectives and, thus, originates in the debate between different approaches to similar issues. Tradition serves as an observation point external to the contemporary worldview, which could be intelligently employed to develop a critical assessment of the cultural context to which one belongs. In this sense, science and myth are not alternative to each other, since they approach apparently similar issues through completely different epistemological modalities. In virtue of this similar dissimilarity, however, their comparison can be mutually beneficial,³¹

³⁰ In the transcription, Jonas expands on this issue by briefly examining the nihilistic attitude shared, in his opinion, by several modern ethical theories such as “pragmatism, emotivism, linguistic analysis”. All these doctrines, explains Jonas, “deal with the facts and meanings and expression of man’s goal setting, but they cannot deal with the principles of such goal setting, because they deny that there are any such principles” (3). This claim is then further explored by discussing the emotivist position, which Jonas attacks as the “the hooray-boo theory of ethics”, i.e., a theory that denies “the distinction between the mere fact of preferences and the question of the ought” (3).

³¹ Jonas readily acknowledges that science has also had a beneficial effect on myth and religion, since its critique clarifies the correct domain of meaning and knowledge within which religious beliefs and mythological reflections are to be situated. However, this criticism should not be read as an absolute rejection of myth and religion, but rather as a further definition of the respective domains

provided that their relationship is not hastily framed in terms of obsolescence and progress. Indeed, meditating on tradition may mitigate the particular cockiness that seems to characterise the modern spirit in its dealings with the past, thus contributing to putting its conquests in the right perspective:

one characteristic of the modern spirit and one of the factors operative in the ethical predicament of modern man is the extreme cockiness and assurance of those who think that with science they not only now know everything that is to be known or at least are in a good way of getting to know everything they need to know, but this goes together with another self-confidence, namely we are cleverer than our forebears, we know best, we know not everything but certainly we know better, we are cleverer, we are wiser than our ancestors. There is a profound difference between information and wisdom and I think we are more informed; we deal more successfully with particular practical tasks. There we are surely more informed than our forebears who stood helpless before many of the problems of nature with which we now with a kind of skill of engineering are easily able to deal with. But as regards to wisdom which asks what use we make of these powers, what are the ultimate purposes which make it worthwhile and which should direct the use of these powers, in regard to that we are by no means superior to our forebears. Again, not because they were by nature or in their own natural endowment superior to us, but because they listened to something else. (5-6)

What the Jewish tradition allows Jonas to realise, in this case, is what lacks from the scientific interpretation of man and the world. This element, says Jonas, is human freedom, i.e., the possibility of a “transcendent horizon in man” (4). Oddly, freedom is presupposed by scientists in practice, but denied and rejected in theory:

reflection by man on the miracle of his own being and of that element of the transcendent, of the absolute, of the unconditional which again and again raises his voice, should make him pause and ask: do I really know all about man when I have analyzed the mechanism by which his mind works (...)? What remains there? There remains something in which is located the very possibility for man to construct such theories and to make some ultimate choices. One ultimate choice, for instance, is the resolution to look at one self materialistically. This itself is not a materialistic fact, this itself is an exercise of human freedom. (...) It is a strange thing, often overlooked, that not the findings of science, but the facts that there are scientists, that there is the freedom of looking at things with an interest for truth and nothing else, that there is a commitment to truth is something which itself in its own nature goes beyond anything which

of validity: “This process of dispelling errors or illusions or images of a certain kind which do not strictly qualify as evidence is quite a healthy and good thing; it is an achievement of the modern spirit. But in that process it may have perhaps stripped down much more than legitimately should have been done because an attitude of seeing can be engendered in which certain aspects of reality are missed, in which an impoverished picture of reality comes to be taken as the exclusive truth” (4).

then in the process of this enterprise may be found among the objects. Whatever science may find, the human fact of science is itself something that points beyond what science finds among its own objects.³² (4)

The different standpoint of the Jewish tradition, thus, sheds light on a side of human existence that science is unable to account for, even though to a certain extent scientists presuppose it. By securing the possibility of a different knowledge, tradition supports the effort to think outside the boundaries of one's own cultural context. For instance, "the deeper meaning" of the biblical "image theory of man", according to which human beings are created in the image of God, consists in stressing "that the value of any human person is beyond measure by any comparative scale of value" (5) and, as such, supports the demand to put human dignity before the advancement of technological science and "the remaking of man in some image or other which a geneticist or a political power drew up blueprint for" (6)³³ – which, as it is evident, is a guideline to the good application of technological power. Similarly, the idea of a world created by God and positively judged by Him, along with the responsibility that comes from being its "caretaker" (6),³⁴ may help modern humanity to realise the need of mitigating the technological exploitation of the environment:

it is here where Judaism should help us to restore a proper relationship to tradition. Not in the sense that anything said in tradition must be accepted as absolutely and forever binding, but in general just as Judaism can help us restore a sense of reverence and awe towards nature, and sense of reverence and awe towards the ultimate essence of ourselves, so it can help us to restore a sense of reverence and humility towards tradition. It is only men isolated from the tradition through which the voice of God speaks who is in the nihilistic situation of modern man, man who thinks he knows everything and needs not listen any more to the long dialogue in which man and God came to a mutual communication called the covenant. When it comes to wielding the power of modern technology, I think Judaism can tell us one thing. Don't be too sure, don't be too modern. (6)

In these last lines, Jonas's account of tradition as a source of critical thinking emerges in the clearest of terms. Our cultural history, as the recourse to the

³² This argument plays an important role in Jonas's critique of scientific or pseudo-scientific claims against the phenomenological evidence of human freedom. An earlier formulation of this paradox may be found in *Cybernetics and purpose: a critique* (Jonas 2001: 124) and in its appendix *Materialism, determinism, and the mind* (129-130); its most accurate discussion is carried out in (1987c). On this cf. also Spinelli 2003.

³³ Jonas further dealt with this bioethical issue in later essays such as *Biological engineering—A preview* (1974a: 141-167) and *Mikroben, Gameten und Zygoten: Weiteres zur neues Schöpferrolle des Menschen* (in 1987b: 204-218). On this cf. also Becchi and Tibaldeo 2017.

³⁴ On the idea of human beings as responsible caretakers of the creation cf. Fossa 2017.

Jewish tradition testifies here, provides modern thinkers with the opportunity to recognise and call into question the most implicit and embedded elements of the dominating worldviews. Here lies its critical potential: an intelligent, unprejudiced, and proactive reconsideration of traditional contents may supply positive insights into how to diagnose the diseases of the contemporary world and, perhaps, also tentative suggestions on how to treat them. In our case, tradition may help to strike a balance between our enormous technological power and ethical uncertainty, so that sound and shared guidelines to its good application may be proposed, discussed, and promoted. Such task, claims Jonas, may greatly benefit from our ancestors' support:

the balance would consist in matching the achievement of modernity with the wisdom of the ages – which no other community, at least in the western world, has so taken with it through the millennia as the Jewish one. If we forego being modern at all and at any cost, if we have the courage to synthesize what is contemporary with what is durable in our past, then we probably have better chance of dealing with the ethical problematic of our time than modern philosophical ethics have offered up until now. (7)

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