

Irene Kajon

(Sapienza – University of Rome)

Technological Man according to the Thought of Hans Jonas

Among the Jewish philosophers who think about the problem of technology in the 20th century Hans Jonas (Mönchengladbach, Germany 1903 – New York 1993) has a special place because in his writings, as I shall try to show, he explicitly connects this problem and the Jewish and Christian tradition. Other Jewish philosophers point out the connection between philosophy and technology, but do not pay attention to religious tradition. As we shall see, Jonas considers technology and Jewish and Christian tradition as well in their positive and negative sides from the point of view of the knowledge of the nature and the economic growth and welfare of mankind. Exactly within their negative sides Jonas finds out important ideas which could open a humanistic perspective to be realized in the future. Philosophers and theologians – especially Jewish and Christian theologians – in our time should have the task to emphasize these ideas that could help us to give a solution to the problems of our technological societies.

The problem of the relation between technology and Jewish and Christian traditions

In the 20th century there are a number of Jewish philosophers who think about the question of technological civilization.

Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their book, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* [Dialectic of the Enlightenment], published in Amsterdam in 1947, consider technology as the last result of a reason that does not know anymore its own criteria and ends, becomes only an instrument to find out means for ends which are not rational at all. The hero of the Enlightenment is for them Ulysses. Ulysses is not for Adorno and Horkheimer, as for Dante in the *Divina Commedia*, the man who says to his fellows, inviting them to continue their travel beyond the Pillars of Hercules, “Fatti non foste a viver come bruti/ ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza” [you are not made to live as brutes/ but to search virtue and knowledge]. Rather, Ulysses is for

them a man who uses reason for his own egoistic aims, a cold calculator, an enemy of emotions and immediate feelings: Ulysses as the symbol of the technological man. Hannah Arendt in *Vita activa: The Human Condition* (Chicago 1959) makes a distinction between *homo laborans* [the working man], *homo faber* [the constructing man], and *homo agens* [the acting man]: the first is the man who works only because he has to satisfy his elementary needs at the beginning of civilization; the second is the man who builds his own world, transforms his environment, and he appears only in the modern era; the third is the political individual, who lives in political communities and takes decisions together with other citizens according to his own judgement, as it happened in the ancient *poleis* and should happen today. She underlines in her book that only the third man, *homo agens*, really acts as a free man because the other two men act only as people who have needs, are still dependent on nature. For Arendt technology is a field of an action which is not fully free: in fact, intelligence is in this case only a tool for private natural desires, while in politics intelligence looks at the common or public existence, acquires universality. Günther Anders, another Jewish thinker (the true name was Günther Stern), is the author of a book, entitled *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* [Man is antiquated] (the first volume was published in Munich in 1956, the second in 1980), where he points out all the risks of technology in our era: he thinks, taking again the concept of *Entfremdung* [alienation] used by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*, that the objects produced by man in technological civilization are the masters of man, technical devices have their own life beyond human life, and the nuclear means, especially nuclear arms, are a continuous danger of autodestruction of mankind. For him too – like for Adorno and Horkheimer, and for Arendt – technology in contemporary age is not so much the result of human freedom as an expression of human weakness and misery.

These Jewish philosophers give us many interesting insights; however, they do not reflect about the role of Jewish and Christian tradition in our technological age. They do not give us any analysis which explains how from the Middle Ages, whose culture was mostly formed by Biblical religion, a new way of thinking man, as the being who is able to conquer the world and to use it for his own needs and desires, could arise. This new way of thinking man was certainly a progress because it produced that events – industrial revolutions, control of natural phenomena – which could win over the poverty and diseases of the past in many regions of the world; but at the

same time it brought new forms of uneasiness and unhappiness in history. And these Jewish philosophers do not explain if Jewish and Christian religions, which have a responsibility in this negative results, could give us also the ideas and the ways of life which in our times could contrast this uneasiness and this unhappiness. Jonas, on the contrary, gives us such an analysis and such an explanation. Actually, he describes 1. the genesis of technological man from the *homo religiosus*, i.e. from a man who is aware of his dignity within the natural world, and of the positive effects this produces; 2. at the same time, the serious dangers which such an evolution from the first steps of civilization to a technological society implies for humanity; 3. and how Biblical religion – especially Judaism and Christianity as two forms of faith born from the Biblical root – could today help us to introduce changes in our societies, dominated by technology, by the means of ideas typical of its own tradition. Paradoxically, if we deepen our reflection on the relationship between technology and Jewish and Christian tradition, from the crisis itself new possibilities arise. The following parts of my paper will deal with these three points. Finally, I would like to point out how these new possibilities could be shared not only by the people who are members of the Synagogue or the Church, but also by people who are beyond them: mankind should share the same values if they want avoid anti-humanistic societies and ways of life, grounding them on a religious faith or an intellectual view.

Technology as a result of a Biblical concept of man

In his book *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago 1985) Jonas quotes the words of the Chorus from Sophocles' *Antigone* to underline how in the ancient times there was certainly a clear consciousness of man as the being who can do things that no other living being can do because of his skills, his technical spirit. So the Chorus says:

Many the wonders but nothing more wondrous than man.

[...]

Speech and thought like the wind

and the feelings that make the town,

he has taught himself, and shelter against the cold,
refuge from rain. Ever resourceful is he.
He faces no future helpless. Only against death
shall he call for aid in vain. But from baffling maladies
has he contrived escape. [p. 2]

However, according to Jonas, the recognizing of man's capacity to build his own world, which allow him to escape from natural dangers – only from death he cannot escape – has in the ancient world its *pendant* in the recognizing of the eternal laws of the *kosmos*. Man is part of the *kosmos*: he constructs its own City, but within the nature which is ruled by the gods. He cannot dominate nature as a whole.

Only in Judaism and Christianity – according to Jonas's interpretation of the relationship between Greek and Roman thought and Biblical thought – man appears really as the centre of the natural world, the being who is able to modify it deeply, completely independent from the cosmological laws, and therefore free to determinate himself by his will and decision. While in the ancient culture a free man is, especially in the Stoicism, that man who acts according to the principles expressed by his reason, in the Biblical culture a free man is that man who makes a choice, who acts according to his own determination. Of course also in Judaism and Christianity there is the consciousness of human limits. But man here has a special place in the nature because he was created by God, receives a revelation from God, is saved by God.

Already in his first book, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem. Ein philosophischer Beitrag zur Genesis der christlich-abendländischen Freiheitsidee* [Augustine and St. Paul's problem of freedom. A philosophical contribution for the genesis of the Christian-Western idea of freedom], published in Göttingen in 1930, Jonas opposes the concept of freedom of the pagan philosophers, taking into consideration particularly Neoplatonists, and the concept of freedom of Augustine: the first concept is grounded on a theory of the being, the second is grounded on a theory of man as the master of the being. In a series of lectures he gave on *Problems of freedom* in New York, at the "New School for Social Research", in 1970, Augustine is seen by Jonas as the heir of the Biblical approach to man and his place in the world:

It is emphatically denied in the Jewish position that the world is image of God. The world was not created in the image of God and it cannot really tell us what God is, although it can teach us – when we view it with the eyes of a non-cosmic piety – a great deal about the power, will, and wisdom of God. But it cannot, in itself, reveal what is God. If it is not itself God nor the image of God then it cannot be the object of worship, nor can anything in the world be made to substitute as a symbol of the divine. [...] But of man it is said that he is created in the image of God. [...] As God is conceived as the Lord of the universe as well as its Creator, so man, in his image character, is the potential ruler of all other creatures, assigned to him by God as his rightful subjects. [...] This kingship means that the rest of nature is not of the same dignity as man. It established from the beginning, in the Jewish conception – and intensified later in the development of the Christian conception – a clear distinction between man and the rest of creation, a distinction that [...] finds its expression in action. Man is the rightful user of the rest of nature, by virtue of a title that comes from a higher sanctioning power, a higher authority. [*Problemi di libertà*, It. ed., Turin 2010, Appendice I: English text of the lectures, pp. 339-342].

Thus Jonas underlines the connection between Biblical view of man and technology: a technological society could arise in the Western societies only after the decline of the Greek-Roman civilization. Technology and modern science are, according to Jonas, the result of the same idea of man as a creature who can imitate his Creator.

In a contribution entitled *Seventeenth Century and After: The Meaning of the Scientific and Technological Revolution* (1971) (reprinted in Jonas's *Philosophical Essays. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Chicago 1974, pp. 45-80), the philosopher writes that the modern metaphysics, whose representatives are Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and the technology, whose development is impressive especially in the 19th and 20th century, have the same roots: the emphasis on human freedom as *liberum arbitrium*, a new value given to the new instead of the old, the complete desecration of the nature, the idea of the knowing subject as the centre of universe. Not only mechanics, but also chemistry, biology, electronic physics have deeply transformed our world. And this has given us new opportunities. The modern mind, Jonas underlines, is optimistic, self-confident, and looking much more at the future than at the past. And we should not refuse these aspects of modernity.

The dualism between nature and spirit as a risk for technology: Gnosis and the Bible

However, Jonas is deeply aware of those aspects of technology which could endanger mankind. It is true that the modern mind produced many improvements in our societies. But it is also true that the celebration of man's freedom and power in modern thought produces the distance between spirit and nature, destroys every idea of a divine presence in the world, breaks every reference of man to God as Creator and Lawgiver. If the difference between man and the world is not maintained, man certainly lives in a world where the destiny dominates the events, and his freedom remains prisoner of his existence – his birth, his family and nation, his social class – without any possibility for him to escape the necessity of the things. But, according to Jonas, if this difference becomes a dualism, then the risk appears not to recognize any meaning in the world, to consider man only in an abstract way, and to see nature as a mechanic being without any finality, almost created by a bad God. So the modern mind falls in a nihilism which is similar to the nihilism produced by the Gnosis, the ancient religious movement which opposed man and nature, man and other men, man and God, the good God who is beyond the world and the bad God who is the master of this world. Of course the Bible which is the ground of the rising of modern mind is anti-Gnostic because it defends the idea of the uniqueness of God and considers the world created by the unique God. Still, Jonas thinks that Gnostic elements are not completely denied in the Bible – especially in the New Testament where the opposition between sin and redemption becomes dramatic.

In an essay entitled *Jewish and Christian Elements in Philosophy: Their Share in the Emergence of the Modern Mind* (1967) (in his *Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 21-44) Jonas underlines both the risk of science and technology to produce a feeling of omnipotence and the risk of Biblical tradition to incline towards the Gnosis. He opposes the concept of the eternity of the world, which implies a connection between the world, God and man through the Logos and the concept of the world as contingent, formed by particulars, and not so much image as only object of the divine will and therefore human will. Francis Bacon, the author who defends the idea of knowledge of nature as a conquest of nature, has this concept of the world. Augustine and the Augustinian tradition in the Middle Ages prepare the individualism and voluntarism of the modern approach to nature. For Duns Scotus God – and therefore man – is not so much intellect as will and power and these are

the sources of values. From here to Nietzsche, who will criticize the Biblical ideas of creation and revelation in name of man's "will to power", there is a continuous line: man's action has the aim of dominating a hostile being which is deprived of any rationality or universal order. So Jonas writes:

This was the potential dynamite in the Scotistic-plus-nominalistic turn with which the Middle Ages passed over into the Modern Age. [ibid., p. 43].

In modernity no more theory but activism becomes the main character of human intelligence, which also becomes an extraneous force with regard to the world. Alienation and estrangement in the world are exactly the characters of the Gnostic man. So the subjectivism of our age – which does not permit anymore common rational values, does not recognize anymore a divine presence in the world, and praises human freedom without any limits – is rooted, according to Jonas, in the Jewish and Christian Bible in so far as from it a Gnostic inspiration could arise.

In the brilliant essay *Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism* (1952), reprinted in his book *The Gnostic Religion. The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (2. ed. Boston 1963, pp. 320-340), Jonas shows how many themes the modern thought shares with the Gnosis: Pascal, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre have a dualistic concept of man, suspended between spirit and nature, God and the world – but precisely this concept is what has originated modern science and technology.

Technics and Ethics: Biblical religion as source of the concept of responsibility

Thus Biblical religion, which positively gave rise to technology, is also the source of a negative development, when it defends with energy human freedom as choice in front of a universe which does not have anymore internal criteria, objective measures. However, from the negative itself – subjectivism or man's loneliness in the world – as the result of modern thought a new possibility, according to Jonas, arises: if man is alone, the world does not give him anymore principles and aims, this means that he has the responsibility of the being, he has the obligation to discover rules for his actions in his consciousness. Jonas refers to a Biblical root the idea and feeling of responsibility which man has when he looks at nature and human beings as something that should be respected in working and educating, in our effort to keep and promote well-being: in fact, they are part of God's creation.

In the article *Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective* (1968) (*Philosophical Essays*, cit., pp. 167-182), thinking about the connection between modern criticism of man as *animal rationale* or *imago dei* and man's technological kingship over nature, so Jonas writes:

The dialectical togetherness of these two facts – the profound demotion of man's metaphysical rank by modern science [...] and the extreme promotion of his power by modern technology (based on this self-same science) – constitutes the major ethical challenge of our day, and [...] Judaism cannot [...] be silent in the face of it. [pp. 172-173].

Judaism, when refusing every reductionism of man to a natural or historical being, maintains the old faith in man as the being who knows what is good and what is evil and so makes experience of the "transempirical" and "non-demonstrable meaning of the things" [ibid., p. 179]: man is the being who is responsible of all the creation – the other human beings, the living beings, the nature – in front of God and should act on the ground of this responsibility. Jonas thinks that also in Christianity there is such an idea of man, although Christianity, according to him, more than Judaism, has also an individualistic and mystical side, and therefore the Christian believer looks at a transcendent world as his true world rather than at this world.

In this way, Jonas considers the Biblical ethics, confirmed by Jewish and Christian traditions, as a strong help to fight against the negative effects of technology.

Conclusion: Biblical religion and universal humanistic ethics

Our society is, however, a secular society. Not always religious traditions have influence on the most of the people. So Jonas tries to formulate his Biblical ethics in terms of a universal humanistic ethics, grounded on a philosophical analysis.

In the chapter 4 of his book *The Imperative of Responsibility* (cit., pp. 130 ff.), using the phenomenological method of his master Edmund Husserl, he gives us a subtle description of our view of the newborn: from here the idea and feeling of responsibility arise – because we are obliged to take care of the newborn, his life, his health, his education. So Jonas writes, pointing out how this phenomenon acquires a paradigmatic value for all the other cases of responsibility in human life:

The concept of responsibility implies that of an ought – first of an ought-to-be of something, then of an ought-to-do of someone in response to the first. The intrinsic right of the object is prior to the duty of the subject. Only an immanent claim can objectively ground for someone else an obligation to transitive causality. The objectivity must really stem from the object. [...] When asked for a single instance [...] where the coincidence of “is” and “ought” occurs, we can point at the most familiar sight: the newborn, whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely, to take care of him. Look and you know. [...] Here the plain being of a *de facto* existent immanently and evidently contains an ought for others, and would do so even if nature would not succor this ought with powerful instincts or assume its job alone. [...] “But why evident?” the theoretical rigorist may ask: What is really and objectively “there” is a conglomeration of cells, which are conglomerations of molecules with their physiochemical transactions, which as such *plus the conditions of their continuation* can be known; but that there *ought* to be such a continuation and, therefore, somebody ought to do something for it, that does not belong to the finding and can in no manner be seen in it. [pp. 130-131].

We are in the front of a phenomenon which is more than a pure phenomenon. A religious person could say that in taking care of the newborn it listens a commanding voice coming from God. A no religious person could say that in the nature and history itself appears something which does not belong to pure nature and history, is beyond them, i.e. a moral duty. Philosophical ethics confirms what a religious ethics recognizes. Both religious people and secular people share the same imperative of responsibility: only in this way, where Judaism and Christianity meet with a philosophy which know the difference between the *mundus sensibilis* and the *mundus intelligibilis*, technology could be controlled by ethics and so give mankind good gifts.