Hans Jonas (1903-1993)

- German-American (or, arguably, German-Canadian) philosopher, typically identified (e.g., by Mitcham and Nissenbaum) with a "continental" approach to ethics and technology

- I.e., Jonas is less concerned with specific technologies than with the overall phenomenon of modern technology in an abstract sense…

Some Background on Jonas

- A student of the eminent (or infamous) German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)

- On Heidegger’s account, “technology,” in the most fundamental sense, refers not to hardware or software, or to the methods and materials of applied science, but to a basic tendency in the history of metaphysics, i.e., in the study of reality and how it is comes to be known…
Heidegger on Technology  
(Nutshell Version)

- Technology, according to Heidegger, discloses things (not just physical stuff, but the realm of entities in general, entities-in-their-being) as a standing reserve (Bestand)—as a stockpile of resources. Things appear to us as knowable in principle by human reason and as available for human use.

- The danger of this sort of technological enframing (Gestell), says Heidegger, is that it leads to a kind of forgetfulness about the fundamental power and elusiveness of being.

  (Compare, Aristotle: “science begins and ends in wonder…”)

- In Jonas’s best-known work, The Imperative of Responsibility (1979, [1984]), Heideggerian concerns are, so to speak, brought down to earth from the realm to metaphysics to address the practical question of survival in a technological age.

- The book has been very influential, especially in the German Green movement, selling more than 200,000 copies in German and English.

  (The essay “Technology and Responsibility” is a sort of précis of this book.)
The New Task of Ethics

- Ethics is concerned with action; it involves both what we can do and what we can know.
  
  (Recall Aristotle: *We deliberate about what is within our power to do…*)

- Jonas argues that the nature of human action has changed in a way that makes previous ethical theories inadequate.
  
  “…the qualitatively novel nature of certain of our actions has opened up a whole new dimension of ethical relevance for which there is no precedent in the standards and canons of traditional ethics.” (115)

The World of Traditional Ethics: Four Characteristics

1. All dealings with the non-human world are ethically neutral—both in respect of the object and the subject of action.
   
   - In respect of the object because human action impinged only trivially on the self-sustaining nature of things.
   
   - In respect of the subject because *technē* is a kind of activity that conceived of itself as a *determinate response to necessity* rather than a self-validating advance toward an ultimate goal.

   (Compare: Bacon, Descartes).
2. Ethical significance belonged to the direct dealing of “man with man,” including a person’s dealings with himself (recall Kant).

Nature, animals, etc., are not normally considered to be moral agents or to be of any especially great moral value in traditional ethical theories. (Views such as Singer’s are exceptions.)

People may, sometimes, direct (emotive, expressive) actions against “the world at large,” but such actions are not generally the concern of ethics.

3. In traditional morality, the entity ‘man’ was understood as having an unchanging (and unchangeable), essential nature; what it is to be a human being was not itself an object capable of being reshaped by technē.
Four Characteristics...

4. In the world as understood by traditional morality, the good and/or evil of those human actions that were of moral significance was **closely proximate to the act in terms of time and space**. The rightness or wrongness of an action was not a matter for remote planning, instead the context of action was taken to be the agent’s own.

What’s Changed?

“Modern technology has introduced actions of such novel scale, objects and consequences that the framework of former ethics can no longer contain them.” (118)

- In particular, nature as a whole has become vulnerable to man's technological intervention.

This change in the nature of human intervention into nature makes a moral difference in at least two respects…
a) Our interventions into nature have much **greater scope** in both space and time.

*Consider:* Nuclear weapons. Prior to the 1940s, no person or group of persons had it within the scope of their powers to act deliberately to eliminate all life on earth.

Now, some people do.

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b) We have available to us (or ought to have available to us) **knowledge** of the impact created by our technological interventions in a way that was not possible in the past.

E.g., by contrast, Eastern Mediterranean soil depletion; extinction of North American megafauna.

Presumably ancient peoples did not know what they were doing. We, by contrast, have (or could have or should have?) scientific knowledge that enables us to predict the long-term consequences of our technological actions.
Anthropocentrism

The anthropocentricity of traditional ethics can no longer stand, Jonas suggests.

“The presence of man in the world… has itself become an object of obligation” (120)

- That is, the continued existence human being as such has now become something that falls under our power, and, therefore, something for which must be responsible.

Some Specific Questions Raised By Modern Technology:

I. Regarding Human Nature

- Control over mortality, or at least longevity.
- Control over human behavior
- Control over the genetics, the life prospects, of future people

All of these things are now open to human manipulation as never before.
II. Regarding the Life on Earth

- Insofar as technology has become extremist—“utopian” in Jonas’s sense of the term—we now regularly choose (or fail to choose) among options that affect the total condition of life on earth.

- Making sensible choices in such conditions presumably requires supreme wisdom—something we simply do not have...

An Ethics of Responsibility

- The fact that we are apparently unable to disengage from the extremist tendencies of modern technology suggests that we must expand the scope of ethics to include some awareness of the long-range effects of our current actions.

  Jonas: “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life”

  Spider-Man: “With great power comes great responsibility”

- Specifically, Jonas calls for an ethic in which the biosphere is treated as a “sacred trust.”
A Legislative Solution?

- With respect to future generations, Jonas notes, there is the problem of "the insufficiency of representative government" (124).

Future generations (and, for that matter, the biosphere and nature itself) do not elect today’s MPs, do not form PACs, do not participate in economic and political decision-making.

Only those interests that are represented in the present get represented.