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Jonas' Ethics of Responsibility – A Necessary Reflection in Times of Pandemic

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Abstract- This work aims to reflect about some aspects of the main work of the German philosopher Hans Jonas, “The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age” published in 1979. The Jonas *Principle of Responsibility* makes a critical assessment of modern technoscience, considers that man started to maintain a relationship of responsibility with nature, since it is under his power. A new ethical proposition is needed that contemplates nature and not only the human person, who also has a look not only at the present, but at the future, that is, for future generations. Thus, Jonas' ideas, in addition to his contribution in the field of bioethics, has an important contribution in environmental issues. The possible impacts and imbalances that occur as a result of climate change or even the uncontrollable deforestation of the planet's already scarce forest reserves are known, in addition to the repercussions on human health caused by the deterioration of the environment, the Covid-19 pandemic could be a of its repercussions, increasing human vulnerability and producing inequities as its effects are disproportionate among peoples around the world.

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Jonas' Ethics of Responsibility – A Necessary Reflection in Times of Pandemic

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Abstract- This work aims to reflect about some aspects of the main work of the German philosopher Hans Jonas, "The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age" published in 1979. The Jonas *Principle of Responsibility* makes a critical assessment of modern technoscience, considers that man started to maintain a relationship of responsibility with nature, since it is under his power. A new ethical proposition is needed that contemplates nature and not only the human person, who also has a look not only at the present, but at the future, that is, for future generations. Thus, Jonas' ideas, in addition to his contribution in the field of bioethics, has an important contribution in environmental issues. The possible impacts and imbalances that occur as a result of climate change or even the uncontrollable deforestation of the planet's already scarce forest reserves are known, in addition to the repercussions on human health caused by the deterioration of the environment, the Covid-19 pandemic could be a of its repercussions, increasing human vulnerability and producing inequities as its effects are disproportionate among peoples around the world. For the author, there is an expectation in the present, of a future that may not be realized, showing the need to create a new statute of responsibility for men aimed at maintaining human and extra-human life. Thus, Jonas's thinking requires a posture that is not only reflective, but critical of our way of being and staying in the world and in this regard, we recognize the important role of critical environmental education which understands the need for educational action that is capable of contributing to the transformation of a reality that, historically, is placed in a serious socio-environmental crisis.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This work aims to reflect on some aspects arising from the Principle of Responsibility present in the work of the German philosopher Hans Jonas, "The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Era" published in 1979.

The Jonas Principle of Responsibility, in addition to making a critical assessment of modern technoscience, considers that man started to maintain a relationship of responsibility with nature. Its new ethical proposition indicates that it is necessary to contemplate

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not only the human person, but also nature, which also has a look not only for the present, but for the future, that is, for future generations. Thus, Jonas' ideas, in addition to his contribution in the field of Bioethics, have an important contribution to environmental issues and implications for human health.

II. PANDEMICENO: THE AGE OF VIRUSES

The possible impacts and imbalances that occur as a result of climate change or even the uncontrollable deforestation of the planet's already scarce forest reserves are known.

On April 28, 2022, Nature Magazine published an article entitled "Climate change increases cross-species viral transmission risk" (Carlson et al, 2022). The article points out that at least 10,000 virus species have the capacity to infect humans, but at present, the vast majority are circulating silently in wild mammals. However, climate and land use change will produce novel opportunities for viral sharing among previously geographically-isolated species of wildlife. In some cases, this will facilitate zoonotic spillover—a mechanistic link between global environmental change and disease emergence.

The study predicts that species will aggregate in new combinations at high elevations, in biodiversity hotspots, and in areas of high human population density in Asia and Africa, driving the novel cross-species transmission of their viruses an estimated 4,000 times. Because of their unique dispersal capacity, bats account for the majority of novel viral sharing, and are likely to share viruses along evolutionary pathways that will facilitate future emergence in humans. Surprisingly, the authors find that this ecological transition may already be underway and holding warming under 2°C within the century will not reduce future viral sharing.

The findings highlight an urgent need to pair viral surveillance and discovery efforts with biodiversity surveys tracking species' range shifts, especially in tropical regions that harbor the most zoonoses and are experiencing rapid warming.

The Covid-19 pandemic may be one of the results of man's impact on the environment. Thus, in addition to the repercussions on human health caused by the deterioration of the environment, human suffering is increased, and inequities are produced because its effects are disproportionate among the peoples of the world.

III. SOME MORAL ASPECTS IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

One of the pioneers of ecological ethics, Aldo Leopold, from the University of Wisconsin, in 1949 (Leopold, 1949), argued that only the moral expansion that must include respect for the Earth can find the adequate solution to guarantee the survival of man on the planet. He considers that the environmental crisis has its roots in human economic activity, especially that without an ethical basis. For Leopold (1970), the economic relations between the countries of the world forgot the ecosystem, and they themselves were the object of environmental deterioration. The context of the 1970s was marked by an environmental crisis presenting, among other aspects, the oil crisis and production systems that use polluting and low energy efficiency technologies, the alternative use of nuclear energy which brings with it serious risks, in addition to the reduction of natural resources. According to the author's thinking, there was a mistake in the relationship between man and the environment, insofar as the Earth was considered as something to only be explored. The relationships established were only economic and utilitarian, offering privileges to the human being, depriving him of any moral obligation.

Van Rensselaer Potter, the oncologist biologist who popularized the term bioethics, considers Leopold's Earth Ethics as the main antecedent and referent of bioethics. For this reason, almost at the time of his publication *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future* in 1971, Potter (1971) managed to introduce a dedication to Leopold, and in his second book in 1988, *Global Bioethics* (Potter, 1988), adding the subtitle *Building on the Leopold Legacy*. In this way, the author makes it clear that his global vision of bioethics is relevant. This shows that Leopold's contribution to environmental ethics, according to Potter, is indeed substantial.

The Bioethics bridge proposed by Potter aimed to establish a relationship between science and ethics with the intention of forming a bridge to the future and shaping a society on sustainable bases, to enable the survival of the human species in which environmental ethics and the medical ethics (Potter, 2000a). Potter's bioethics was conscious in its beginnings of a concern for the biosphere, under the image of the bridge between the life sciences and the human sciences. What was missing from Potter's early bioethics was a systematic notion that Leopold developed.

The second moment of Potter's Bioethics, which corresponds to global bioethics, refers to the confrontation of problems related with globalization, the environment and the destiny of future generations. The objective of this bioethics is the development for sustainability, because without it, it would not be possible to conserve the environment or ensure a

dignified future for future generations. For all these reasons, for Leopold it is necessary to articulate social ethics and environmental ethics, so that their relations are integrated within the same system. This posture, very attractive, is the vertex of the environmental problem, as it articulates social behavior and its intrinsic relations with the environment. The environment is not a place alien to the social conditions of human life.

The interdependence that exists between the ecological and the social, but also – and to a considerable extent – the political, are recognized. The liberal economic model allowed all productivity efforts to be inserted in the context of the market, which is governed by laws of supply and demand, payment capacity, existence of raw materials, etc. The exploitation of planetary resources is mediated by these market economy relationships. For example, the natural forests and rivers of some African and Latin American countries would not be equally exploited, with the environmental consequences produced, if the economic determinants were not what they are now. Another aspect refers to the development interests of underdeveloped nations in the context of generating wealth, industries, etc., in a concern for immediate development and which leads to a forgetfulness of the responsibility we have for the environment. An inconsistent social ethics cannot work alongside consistent environmental ethics. For example, the serious issue of atmospheric contamination and its interdependence with urban concentration, poverty, marginalization and industrialization are elements that are part of a sociopolitical structure where the environmental problem is located. In this aspect, socio-political and environmental factors are conditioned in a bidirectional way, such as: marginalization and exclusion of social groups; inequality of rich and poor; carelessness in education; etc., which necessarily condition environmental problems, and understandably, these same problems will condition socio-political ones.

According to Grün (2007), the environment is a highly complex phenomenon, and its relationship with people's health and quality of life has acquired increasing importance. Currently, the concepts of ecology and environment in relation to health and quality of life become significantly more complex, incorporating relationships such as reduced earnings, limited education, uncertain employment, structural unemployment, inadequate housing, agglomeration, lack of basic sanitation facilities, exposure to different pathogenic organisms, pollutants and toxic substances, among others. The risk of accidents and violence generates conditions that foster psychic imbalance and social injustice. The oppression and lack of responsibility of government sectors and the State to protect the common good intensifies the ecological crisis and the population's health problems, compromising their quality of life. Therefore,

environmental problems are thus, of natural and social essence.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL BIOETHICS

The approximation between bioethics and environmental ethics is evident. Both deal with problems related to life, mainly moral dilemmas related to the environment and people's quality of life, the moral imperative to protect future generations and the obligation to preserve life in general, not just human life. In this aspect, it has a strong relationship with the Ethics of Responsibility proposed by Jonas, as will be presented below.

A deeper analysis shows us that bioethics, already in its historical beginnings, was conceived from an integral approach that is not limited to the scope of human life. Potter, despite being an oncologist biologist, does not expose this new discipline reduced to the clinical scope, the doctor-patient relationship or research with human beings. On the contrary, it refers to a 'bridge' discipline between all the natural sciences and the human sciences. The same title of the two works mentioned outlines this idea of "science of survival" and "bridge to the future". Later, Potter himself will speak explicitly of global bioethics, then of deep bioethics and finally of sustainable bioethics, always in this integral line.

The historical background that demonstrates the integral character of Bioethics since its birth reveals that it is inconceivable without a broad approach that includes all aspects of reality. Clinical bioethics and the so-called global bioethics are not exclusive, complementary, subspecialties or sealed compartments, but they are one, because the health-disease process is not reduced to merely biomedical issues. Its problem exceeds the physical-chemical variables of the biological body and calls for a model of anthropological medicine, that is, a medicine that recognizes the human being in its cultural dimension, locating it in a natural, social and historical context. If we understand that this is the model of medicine that we should practice, it is clear that Bioethics must address environmental, economic, educational and other issues that, directly or indirectly, affect people's lives and quality of life.

In summary, ecobioethics is not a novelty or a fad, but it is the very essence of Bioethics (Potter, 2000b). This is the discipline that deals with moral problems related not only to the healthy or sick human being, the family and the community, but also covers all living beings that have a relationship with the human being, as well as justifies the need to address the environmental problem under the analysis of sociocultural factors, and economic dependence and the distance between rich and poor countries play an important role.

Bioethics, like scientific and technological knowledge, is socially constructed according to economic, political and social circumstances, and takes the stamp of each era, each culture and each civilization, with support in interactivity - subject-object relationship and dialogue of knowledge - and in intersubjectivity. It is from intersubjectivity and interactivity that the constructive character of bioethical knowledge emerges.

From an integrative view, environmental quality of life can be conceived as the result of the relationships that individuals and communities establish with the biotic and abiotic elements of the environment. This concept cannot be perceived individually, but must be approached from an economic, social, cultural and environmental point of view, since all subjective evaluation will be immersed in a specific socio-historical context. The quality of water, air, land and contact with nature directly impact people's quality of life, affecting their health processes (Jahr, 2005).

Bioethics, in relation to the environment, presents a concrete aspiration that is to establish the ethics of human relations with nature, that is, to determine not only that the preservation of the environment is a duty and a necessity, as this has already been formulated, and sufficiently reiterated by other disciplines, but to establish a field of reflection on the relations of the human being, as a species and as a group, with the biosphere, so that not only the mechanisms of preservation of the environment are investigated, but also the ethical legitimacy of the within a philosophy of nature that justifies the place of human beings and the meaning of their action on themselves and on the ecosystem. As Jonas points out:

[...] if the duty towards man presents itself as a priority, it must include the duty towards nature, as a condition of its own continuity and as one of the elements of its own existential integrity. We could go ahead and say that the solidarity of destiny between man and nature, a solidarity recently revealed by the common danger that both run, allows us to rediscover the dignity proper to nature, calling us to defend its interests beyond the utilitarian aspects (Jonas, 2006, p.230).

It is evident that the problems raised by Environmental Bioethics put in discussion fundamental questions of philosophy: who is the human being? what is your meaning? what is your role in the world? Questions without which it is not possible to answer other questions, such as those arising from reflection on environmental problems: how can the rich sectors of the planet and each country change their consumption habits and develop a more restrained lifestyle? How can the market and politicians change their short-term view? And, in the case of this impossibility, whose role is it to provide society with a longer-term vision? How can we introduce a more respectful and caring view of nature into culture?

V. ABOUT FUTURE AND JONAS'S RESPONSIBILITY ETHICS

Given the current dilemma of human beings between consuming more resources, but also conserving them, the paradigm of sustainable development arises in satisfying current needs, but without compromising those of future generations. Bioethics in this context is a political action that not only observes short-term but long-term interests. This is, as Potter (2000b) says, the “era of global bioethics” that will enable the sustainability of biological systems guided by profound wisdom. Modern society, culturally consumerist and marked by a model of economic development that increasingly increases production and consumption, has come to live with environmental threats that put the survival of the Planet at risk. The environmental crisis has given rise to the need for a planetary awareness regarding the limits to the use of interventionist technoscience in nature, aspects that will be addressed below from Jonas's perspective.

For Hans Jonas, the shock caused by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki would be one of the initial milestones in the abuse of man's dominance over nature, causing destruction. The dropping of the bombs raised thoughts towards a new type of questioning, matured by the danger that our power, man's power over nature, represents for ourselves. However, more than the awareness of a sudden apocalypse, he perceived the feeling of a possible gradual apocalypse resulting from the growing danger of the risks of techno-scientific progress, in this sense, climate change can be one of the examples.

The work of Hans Jonas and his *Ethics of Responsibility* suggests that we would be living a possible gradual apocalypse arising from the growing danger of the risks of global technical progress and its misuse. Modern technological intervention has placed nature for human use and capable of being radically altered. Thus, for Jonas, man started to maintain a relationship of responsibility with nature, since it is under his power. A new ethical proposition is needed that contemplates nature and not only the human person, which also has a look not only at the present, but at the future, that is, for future generations. He warns:

The definitively unchained Prometheus, to which science gives previously unimaginable strength and economy the indefatigable impulse, calls for an ethic that, through voluntary checks, prevents the power of men from becoming a disgrace to themselves. The promise of modern technology has become a threat. (...) Conceived for human happiness, the submission of nature, to the extent of its success, which now extends to the very nature of man, led to the greatest challenge ever posed to human beings by their own action (...) No traditional ethics teaches us about the norms of “good” and “evil” which must be submitted to the entirely new modalities of power and its possible creations. The new continent of collective praxis that we

enter with high technology still constitutes, for ethical theory, a no man's land (Jonas, 2006, p.21).

Jonas criticizes the ethical tradition that considers, in its maxims, the immediate circle of action, that is, the one who acts and the other in his action are participants in a common present. Thus, the moral universe consists of contemporaries and located in the same space, thus proposing an alteration of this model.

The author proposes to replace the Kantian categorical imperative, typical of modernity, by the “imperative of responsibility”. The author understands that the ethics of modernity is an “anthropocentric” ethics, however the successive scientific-technological advances and the conflicts that arise around them, claim for the present time a “cosmocentric” ethics. This ethic extends anthropocentric responsibility to responsibility to future generations and to all of nature.

When elaborating the idea of the future in his Principle of Responsibility, he emphasizes that the future to be considered should be the long-term one, and in it, we should build a heuristic of fear. In his words: “the impotence of our knowledge with regard to long-term prognosis means that, in matters of these capital eventualities, more weight is given to the threat than to the promise”. It therefore becomes “necessary to listen more to the prophecy of doom than to the prophecy of salvation” (Ibid, 2006, p. 76-77).

Considering the tragedy of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led to the deaths of millions of people around the world, would it not be reasonable to claim the fear heuristic?

For Jonas, futurology must form knowledge about present damages and hypothetical risks in order to generate an ethical diagnosis in three areas: (1) what should be expected; (2) what to encourage and (3) what to avoid compared to what to expect. The threat takes on a heuristic character, as knowledge about the risk would generate, according to Jonas, through the “*knowledge of malum*” (Jonas, 2006, p.71) as a potentiality and a possibility, the change of present attitudes and behaviors. For Jonas “the recognition of malum is infinitely easier than that of *bonum*, it is more immediate, more urgent, much less exposed to differences of opinion; above all he is not sought after (...)” (Ibid, 2006, p.71). We do not doubt evil when we encounter it; but we are only sure of the good, for the most part, when we deviate from it.

It should be noted that the heuristic of fear is not a paralyzing fear, as the author well points out: “on our part, we do not fear the accusation of cowardice or negativity, when we declare this type of fear as an obligation, which naturally must always be accompanied by hope, to avoid evil. Fear, but not cowardice” (Ibid, 2006, p. 353).

Finally, we highlight the important role of critical environmental education with a focus on capabilities inspired by bioethical values. Bioethics contributes, in

its interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspective, by introducing the ethical variable in the analysis of environmental problems. A necessary reflection is required regarding an ethics of life that allows facing, in a critical way, the resolution of environmental dilemmas that are barely visible. Thus, a bioethical thought is proposed that transcends society and public policies.

VI. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

When dealing with the origins of Bioethics from Potter's perspective, we identify environmental concerns in its original identity, with the author considering it the science of survival. These marks of Bioethics, called Environmental Bioethics, allowed us to identify some moral aspects of the environmental crisis.

A form of Environmental Bioethics, supported by Jonas' Principle of Responsibility, seeks to face the context of social inequality of the globalized liberal economy that accentuates poverty and increases the distances between rich and poor countries. In this context, rich countries "socialize" environmental degradation for the entire world, while the benefits are concentrated in their territories. This Bioethics claims an Environmental Justice. Environmental justice that seeks to ensure that no group of people, whether ethnic, racial or marginalized groups, bear a disproportionate share of the degradation of collective space, as it considers that there is an unequal distribution of environmental risks between social classes, namely the most disadvantaged, characterized by as a consequence of the liberal capitalist economy.

For Jonas, there is an expectation in the present, of a future that may not materialize, showing the need to create a new statute of responsibility for man aiming at the maintenance of human and extra-human life. Thus, Jonas' thinking demands not only a reflective, but a critical stance of our way of being and being in the world.

Jonas' Principle of Responsibility (2006), which contains the foundations of an ethics for technological civilization, represents a serious effort to exchange the presumptuous dream of utopias for the dream of moderation, accepting the fragility and fallibility of the human condition. In this sense, critical environmental education is essential. Such critical environmental education understands that it is necessary to differentiate an educational action that is capable of contributing to the transformation of a reality that, historically, is placed in a serious socio-environmental crisis.

The increase in human vulnerability producing inequities, with disproportionate effects among peoples around the world, imposes on us the duty to reflect on the negative experiences arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in diseases and deaths of human lives, and impoverishment.

Here is the challenge and the effective exercise of an authentic Bioethics through an approach of a Critical Environmental Education.

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