Abstract: Hans Jonas – Wissenschaft as Personal Experience

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Hans Jonas delivered his speech “Wissenschaft as Personal Experience“[[1]](#footnote-1) on October 15th 1986 as part of the 600 year anniversary of the Ruprecht-Karl-University in Heidelberg. I will recount the speech’s tenor with the aid of Jonas’ conversation motif, which he denotes as a pivotal one for the humanities at the beginning of the speech. Referring to the example of historical studies, he explains his view that historical studies and the humanities in general are best understood as an encounter of subjective agents. This view allows for understanding of the past through ways of subjective re-experience. Different historians look at the same subject from different positions. Therefore, just as many different construals of a historical phenomenon are possible, which then have to be brought together using ways of conversation. Likewise, historical studies and the humanities are described as discourses between scientists, and at the same time as linguistically mediated ways of experiencing the scrutinized phenomena.

Within philosophy, such a conversation is realized as a dialogical reading of the text, which itself expresses and allows for co-experience of a personal thinking. This dialogical experience can also be found in Jonas’ philosophical biology, which is the foundation of his ethic of responsibility. There, the dialogue becomes the expression of an imperative or demand of any living being. Facing this demand, the ethicist’s first step towards responsible action is to advocate this demand as a general one and to locate and integrate it in theory. But then, only a mode of belief can be the ultimate guarantee of validity of this general demand of life, a belief in its absolute value which calls on one’s responsibility independently of any specific experience and situation.

This argumentation for the ethical principle of responsibility – with its referral to personal experience in a dialogical situation – differs from the prominent one in *The imperative of responsibility*.[[2]](#footnote-2) Referring to the explained conversation motif, I will finally designate some connections to Max Weber’s speech “Science as a vocation” of 1919. For the handbook article, these connections are to be differentiated further.

1. Hans Jonas, “Wissenschaft as Personal Experience,” trans. Hunter Hannum and Hildegarde Hannum, *Hastings Center Report* 32, no. 4 (July 8, 2002): 27–35, https://doi.org/10.2307/3528086; Original German text: Hans Jonas, *Wissenschaft als persönliches Erlebnis*, Sammlung Vandenhoeck (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There Jonas refers to the „archetype of all responsibility“ (Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), 101.), resp. the explicitly visual “Urbild aller Verantwortung” (Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 234.). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)