The reception that the work of Hans Jonas has experienced in France, has been mostly determined by the timeline of the translations of his books. *The Imperative of Responsibility* (IR) has been published by Jean Greisch in 1990, and this translation is, without any doubt, the one that has arisen the interest of the French intellectuals for Jonas[[1]](#footnote-1). It would be useless to hide that this reception has been partly negative; particularly on account of the Kantian character of that reception[[2]](#footnote-2). Jonas has been presented as being anti-humanist, because he wanted to think an obligation towards the nature[[3]](#footnote-3) , and as anti-democratic because of his catastrophism[[4]](#footnote-4) which would paralyze our reason. Then, it would not be surprising seeing that he promoted an authoritarian regime to enforce his ethical principle. That kind of critique makes no sense. But there has also been a very interesting and suggestive critical thinking about *IR* from Bernard Sève, Catherine Larrère and Jean-Pierre Dupuy which I would like now to emphasize. All of them do not restrain themselves to blindly criticize Jonas. On the contrary, they try to see what kind of question he helps us formulating.

Bernard Sève wrote three papers[[5]](#footnote-5) about *IR* which have a certain continuity between them. First, he highlights the absolute pertinence of the new principle explained by Jonas, but according to him, Jonas is bluntly unjust when he asserts that Kant would be incapable to justify the immorality of the disappearance of mankind; because such idea would not include an auto contradiction. Of course, such a statement does not include a logical contradiction, but a Kantian will *not be able to want* such a thing, as Sève underlines it. The dangers raised by the new essence of technique oblige us to formulate a new principle, which protects us against the hypertrophic developments of such a technique. Nevertheless, the French professor criticizes the ontological foundation of such an imperative. Jonas would fall into a kind of new dogmatism when he develops his metaphysics of life. Even if Sève mentions *the Phenomenon of Life* (PL) that will be translated later in France in 2001 by Danielle Lories, he does not analyze it. When he blames the ontological foundations of the Jonasian ethics, he relies on the presentation of it made by Jonas in the IR and ignores the whole conceptualization elaborated in the PL, such as the ontology of death, the positive anthropomorphism, the interpolation etc. Therefore, contrary to some proposals of the IR, the ontological foundation is irrelevant for Bernard Sève. So he may only focus in his second paper on a particular topic of the IR, that on the heuristic of fear. As indicated, he may put aside the link between such concept and the ontological foundation of the principle of responsibility, which is though essential. Indeed, what matters to Sève is rather to evaluate the efficiency of such a tool. On the one hand, to imagine the future risks which mankind would run because of technology and, on the other hand, to help people becoming aware of such dangers in order to avoid them. According to Sève, and contrary to the claim of Jonas, it is impossible to anticipate the effects of the technique that *don’t have analogy in the past*, which may be required though, according to the author of IR, to preserve our future. Such a requirement is impossible to Sève’s point of view. Therefore, we are forced to conclude that the heuristic of fear is useless and, worse than that, it could be even more dangerous if he intended to use it. Indeed, producing an indeterminate fear in the public sphere due to such irrational anticipation of a risk of which *we can’t have a precise representation,* necessarily leads to a weakening of the democratic organization. In this regard, Sève draws a very interesting comparison between the Hobbesian and Jonasian conceptions of fear. Whereas Hobbes tries to diminish the natural and the *theological* fear of the public sphere, to concentrate it on the fear of the *Leviathan* and oblige people to obey the laws and to rationalize their fear; Jonas would introduce in the public space, a new form of indeterminate fear, close to that of the hell of the theologians; which owing to this they could have the control of souls. The new hell here would be that of a nature destroyed by the techniques. Sève makes clear that Jonas encourages the paralyzing of the reason which is harmful to democracy.

Furthermore, fear would not be a good tool to amass consciousness. Fear does not help thinking and does not influence behaviors. It would be better to insist on the positive advantages of changing our attitude towards techniques, than insist on the catastrophic effects of our passivity. And to tell the truth, the weight Jonas gives to fear comes from the insufficiency of his thinking to understand the status and the nature of reason which remains indeterminate. In fact, if he had developed a deliberative conception of reason, he would have escaped to the temptation to overvalue fear. To deliberate is the only means for the citizens of a democratic country to face the threats of the future. Despite these negative conclusions, Sève acknowledges that Jonas made a point when he asserts that the main problem is to know how we can face threats that we cannot wholly anticipate. But he would not be right when he asserts, that if the threat reaches the integrity of mankind, it is better to give up every action to avoid any risk. In that case the principle of responsibility turns into an ethics of conviction –any action, in the long run, could be seen as putting mankind in danger - which undermines the common exercise of democracy grounded on deliberation. Sève displays the antinomy between the principle of deliberation and the principle of responsibility in a third and last paper. Indeed, we cannot deliberate at the infinity when it deals with assuming important risks for the future of mankind. On the one hand, we need to face our responsibilities and make decisions effectively. But on the other hand, this responsibility may not consist of imagining catastrophic scenarios, stopping any technical action, renouncing collective discussions in behalf of the preservation of mankind. On the contrary, we need to discuss rationally about it. For this reason Sève advocates a sort of synthesis between both principles. To put it in another way, we have to exercise our responsibility by arguing. The deliberation is included in the principle of responsibility. But we also have to limit the discussion, which could go until the infinite, in order to be able to take effective measures. That is why responsibility must control that deliberation. Our absolute responsibility also means that any kind of argument is limited, that it is not intended to be our absolute responsibility, that there is not a sole reasoning that could be able to solve a problem and, for that reason, each person must recognize the legitimacy of the other arguments. The principle of responsibility legitimizes the pluralism.

Catherine and Raphaël Larrère in *Du bon usage de la nature[[6]](#footnote-6)* will follow the worry of Sève about the lack of democratic mediations in the IR. The emphasis on fear is detrimental to deliberative reason. The principle of responsibility is hyperbolic. We are not able to embody it in a social context. He may not have a political meaning. Any technique might give rise to a potential risk for mankind and we would be invited to renounce to any technical progress on behalf of the Principle of Responsibility. For that reason, the principle of precaution is more adequate to our democratic society because it considers the concrete conditions of the action and the economic cost of our abstention. When it deals with the dangers for our environment, it invites us to deliberate, to decide which risk is acceptable and which one must be strictly forbidden. As for our concern for the future generations, it cannot remain purely abstract and cannot be confined to preserve an abstract freedom for mankind in general. For this reason, the notion of heritage (*patrimoine*) may be particularly useful to Larrère’s eyes. Indeed, it is an effective juridical notion and it is more concrete. It values the collective preservation of something that we have to care about, something to hand it down to the next generation which does not exclude to use it, but it must be done with precaution.

However, we could ask if we are not losing some of the precious intuitions of Jonas when we reject the primacy he gives to the anticipation of the worst technological scenario in order to avoid its realization. This is the point which gave rise to an intellectual controversy between Larrère and Dupuy. In *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé*[[7]](#footnote-7)*,* Dupuy asserts that we must congratulate Jonas for perfectly enouncing the kind of problem we must address. Indeed, the challenge is that we do not *believe* in catastrophes, even if they are *certain* and for that reason we are unable to face them, and we avoid them. We would need a theory to oblige us to consider that the worst is certain precisely to prevent it from happening. The “Prophecy of doom” of Jonas has the great merit to call our attention on what deserves to be thought, i.e., the absolute reality of the future threats that will occur, but it fails to provoke a change in our behaviors. That is the reason why Dupuy considers, it is necessary to propose a theory that helps us being convinced that the worst will come *undoubtedly* in order to avoid that… it happens! The preservation of our future depends on our capacity to fight against the catastrophes that we have no doubt that they will occur!

Nevertheless, the French discussion about the catastrophism of Jonas must also be placed at an ontological level. In *Après la fin du monde, critique de la raison apocalyptique*[[8]](#footnote-8)*,* Michaël Fœssel is very critical towards Jonas’ dispositive. Even if the German philosopher makes a plea to protect nature in the view of the defense of human dignity, he does not define that dignity and what a human world is, which makes difficult to preserve it. Furthermore, as he defines life from its metabolic activity and the human being in continuity with it, it is led to understand mankind from vital needs. Instead of conceiving it as a world maker, building significations, he understands it as a living being which satisfy his needs to preserve himself. Such a human being does not have a world but only a milieu. He follows the preexistent significations of nature instead of introducing new significations in it. He is enclosed in the regime of the same, of the effective instead of that of the otherness and the possibility. He is closed to the innovation and to the progress. Fœssel, which tends to follow an Arendtian inspiration, opposes the philosophies of life moved towards the conservation and the philosophies of the public existence aiming at building a common world, and he ranks Jonas among the first.

At first sight, we could find quite a similar critique from Paul Ricœur[[9]](#footnote-9). He asserts that Jonas succeeded in founding a principle which commands to preserve human life *as a species* - it is the biological conception of mankind - but not *as an Idea* – it is the idealistic one characterized by his dignity. We can see the signs of such a failure in the “grand detour” made by Jonas to try to find his imperative of responsibility towards the idea of mankind. On account of the gap between both aspects of mankind, Jonas would have been obliged to turn to a new kind of ontological argument (the duty of responsibility is included in the idea of mankind), which would be subordinated to a general axiom (the Good is in the Being), which would lead him to rephrase the Leibnizian question: Why is it better that there is something rather than nothing? Such a metaphysical detour would clearly indicate that Jonas is not able to find his imperative from his ontology of life. To put it in another way, Ricœur considers there is a hermeneutical circle between three distinct axioms in Jonas: The self-approval of life, the requirement of realization of the idea of mankind (a new form of Kantism) and the preferability of the being in comparison with the no-being. In the last instance, the deficiency in the philosophical foundation of the imperative would be due to the inconsistency of his ontology of life. Ricœur criticizes that ontology which he calls a “teleological philosophy”, a “metaphysics of biology” rather than a phenomenology of life. Jonas would remain prisoner of the psycho-physical dualism. He is the victim of the belief in the possibility to overcome the opposition between the point of view of the subject and the point of view of the object in a single and common language; but that language is impure. Jonas tends to project our subjective experience of thought about the objective conception of life as metabolism. Therefore, for Ricœur, it is not possible to conceive an ontology of life.

Such a critique may be understood from the own perspective of Ricoeur. In *Le volontaire et l’involontaire*[[10]](#footnote-10)*,* Ricœur establishes that “life is the condition *sine qua non* of the will and in general of the conscience” which means that we cannot ontologically articulate life and conscience. The biological explanation is only an *index* or a *signum* which reminds us of the role of organism in the life of the mind but which also indicates the relative autonomy of the spirit. We are not able to go deeper to think the relationship between mind and life. There is an epistemological gap between both discourses. Even if there is an ontological link, we cannot think of it, except from the point of view of the experience of the conscience which is aware of the ambiguity of life. Ricœur will remain faithful to this thesis after his hermeneutical turn. This one will lead him to study the world of life from the model of the interpretation of texts but without giving up the conviction that we are not able to exceed the limits of the life of subjectivity towards a unified conception of life which would include the organism.

Despite such a critique, it is worth mentioning that Ricœur will find a source of inspiration in the Jonasian dispositive. On the one hand, in *Ce qui nous fait penser. La nature et la règle[[11]](#footnote-11)*, he will consider that his biological philosophy may serve as a preface to understand our moral capacity. Indeed, as Jonas thinks organic life from freedom and on condition that we do not forget that life also includes violence, such conception may help us explaining the possibility of morality. It does not deal with justifying our duty towards mankind *from life* but rather with meeting, *ex post* and from the point of view of the idea of mankind,vital dispositions which makes it possible the exercise and the formulation of our duty. On the other hand, in *Soi-même comme un autre*[[12]](#footnote-12)the French philosopher will use Jonasian ethics of responsibility as a counterweight to the impersonal law of the accountability only focused on the responsibility of the past actions. On the contrary, the principle of responsibility is seen as a means of taking into account the vulnerability of people and of caring for the future.

As we see the very core of the Ricoeurian critique of Jonas consists in rejecting the possibility of an ontology of life and it has consequences about his ethics. As we are not able to reconcile the subjective experience of life with its objective and biological explanation, we are obliged to recognize a certain gap between the empirical mankind and the idea of mankind. According to Ricoeur, this gap may be reduced at a practical level thanks to a practical wisdom and the use of imagination, but it is pointless to try to hide it or to rub it out with the Jonasian ethics of responsibility.

Through all those critiques, we can identify a faithfulness to some humanist heritage. It is not adequate to put together the experience of life and the organic conception of life, because it would lead us to a spiritualization of life or, even worst, to a materialization or animalization of the human life. For that reason, it is essential to go on asserting the separation between animal life and human life. A boundary that is not possible to cross.

Consequently, it is particularly interesting to have a look at the reception of *The Phenomenon of Life* by Renaud Barbaras[[13]](#footnote-13). Indeed, he dedicates himself exclusively to the exploration and evaluation of that phenomenology of life letting aside the IR. Such a decision is determined by the very aim of Barbaras which he shares with Jonas: Defining a universal ontology of life. In his *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie[[14]](#footnote-14)*, Barbaras addresses the issue of life: “There is an equivocity of life which is torn between our subjective experience (*Erleben*) and our objective explanation of it” (*Leben*.) Contrary to Ricoeur, Barbaras asserts that we must reconcile both conceptions of life in a common discourse but without reducing it to one of its form. We must escape from dualism but without falling in some sort of monism, either spiritualist or materialist. The chapter dedicated to Jonas is the biggest of the book written by Barbaras and we must explain why. After examining the various candidates who could intend to solve the problem of life to Barbaras’ eyes, i.e. Henry, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Patočka, the author concludes they all failed. We must emphasize here the very reason of such a failure. Indeed, all of them remain dependent on “the ontology of death” of the tradition, as Jonas calls it. Here Barbaras is inspired by the first Essay of the PL by Jonas. He appropriates himself the fundamental critique Jonas makes towards the whole ontological tradition. According to Barbaras, we stay profoundly determined by an abstract humanism, by a blindness to what life is. Instead of thinking it by itself, positively, we apprehend negatively in the horizon of death, which denies life. Such a reading of life necessarily leads to conceive it as a mere dynamic of survival. Since life is what tries to escape from the death, life is nothing else than conservation of itself, mere reproduction of its activity, auto-polarization. It cannot have a transitive meaning. It cannot open itself to something exterior. Such a conception of life explains why mankind may not be explained from life. The only means of understanding human life is to add some principle external to the mere life, in order to open the human being to something else than itself, and this principle is what the tradition calls conscience, reason, language etc. As we see, the dualism between mere life and human life has got a clearly identified cause. It is due to the restrictive conception of life determined by the horizon of death from which is understood.

The consequence that Barbaras draws from this analysis is that we must realize *a épochè on death.* It means that it is required to think life by itself without interpreting it from death. As we can immediately notice, if Barbaras follows Jonas when this one criticizes the ontology of death, he stands back regarding the conclusion we must draw from that domination of such an ontology. According to Jonas the tradition was wrong when it thought death as *an external negation*. But it does not mean that we must renounce to use death to think life. On the contrary, he will assert that we must think life from death as *an internal negation* in order to understand its dynamic. We will see soon that this divergence between both authors has major consequences regarding their respective ontology of life.

But, first, Barbaras is grateful to Jonas for his contribution to the cause of ontology. Indeed, he has the great merit to try to break with the dualism of the tradition. He proposed an authentic phenomenology of life thanks to a positive use of anthropomorphism. If we take some precaution, we can count on our experience of life to interpret the sense of the biological category of metabolism to conclude to the universal metabolic dimension of life. This one is characterized by its openness to the world and to itself because it is intrinsically free. This freedom is the result of the relative independence of the form on the matter which enables the endless renewal of the matter. Because we make the experience of freedom, of having purposes we can understand the activity of metabolism as permanent, a mere mechanism. Barbaras praises Jonas for thinking the very specific identity of life, for having a comprehensive notion of it since he does not limit himself to interpret human life but offers a general understanding of all forms of life thanks to his phenomenology. The humbler forms of organisms, plants, animals and human beings are understood by the light of such a phenomenological conception of the metabolism. They all have the same essence. They only differ in terms of degrees of openness to the world.

Nevertheless, according to Barbaras, Jonas does not succeed in realizing this phenomenology of life. In the first place, his philosophical interpretation of metabolism does not permit him to justify our relationship with exteriority. The French philosopher opposes the *desire*, which opens horizons, characterized by the indetermination of what it aims at; and the *need* which is more strictly determined and which searches for satisfaction thanks to the consumption of a particular object. As the metabolism is dynamized by the necessity of its permanent restoration, it opens itself to the determined objects of the world. But this conception of dynamism presupposes a world, a horizon of horizons in which the objects of consumption are included. To use the language of Husserl, the Jonasian conception of the organism remains dependent on the natural attitude characterized by the belief in the substantial existence of a pre-given world whereas it would be necessary to describe the givenness of such a world. Jonas intends to describe such an openness from the needs of metabolism but he presupposes what he wants to establish. Indeed, the need is not able to open a world. It can only link itself to an object in a world. Instead of describing the openness of the world thanks to the activity of the metabolism, he presupposes this world in which the metabolism already is. Only a subjectivity thought from desire could open a world because only the desire can put us in a relationship with the indetermination of the worldly horizons. In the second place, the Jonasian doctrine of movement would not be consistent. As we know, movement appears with the animal, as being one of its characteristics, whereas the plant is relatively deprived of movement[[15]](#footnote-15) because it does not need it to renew its metabolism. But how could movement appear suddenly with the animal if it does not exist since ever in life? According to Barbaras, we need a conception of life strictly determined by movement. To sum it up, the subject of life or the living subjectivity must be in movement and determined by desire. Actually, the deficiencies of the Jonasian phenomenology would be due to a more profound reason. As we already suggest it, Barbaras considers that Jonas remains dependent on the ontology of death he himself denounced. For him, the essence of life is determined by the internal negativity of death. The organism opens itself to the possibility to fight against that with which has an intimate relationship: death. It does not want to die and, for that legitimate reason, it tries to survive. According to Barbaras, this affirmation leads to a too restrictive conception of life which prepares the return of dualism. As the human being cannot be only explained from a mere conservative motivation, it is necessary to add conscience, exterior to mere life, to explain the whole range of its behaviors. Such a dualism would be implicit in the Jonasian phenomenology of life and makes it possible monist interpretations of his philosophy. Jonas would indifferently be spiritualist – if we consider that he projects the experience of our spirit on mere life to explain its dynamism – or materialist, if we consider he remains dependent on the biological category of metabolism. Anyway, Jonas would be a truly “realist”, since he would not succeed in referring life to an intentional process of opening to the world. Such a failure would be due to his conception of negativity. It is true that life is determined by an internal negativity but this one is not possible to be that of the relationship with the death, but rather that of the desire. The subject opens itself to the world to satisfy its desire endlessly and, for that reason, it is constantly and since ever in movement. Unfortunately, not only looks Jonas after the essence of life outside itself in the death, but also we do not understand how Jonas can phenomenologically explain such an internal conception of death. Indeed, for Barbaras, Jonas develops this conception from an interiorization of the objective dangers of the world. The living being is polarized by death because it appropriates the *objective* risk of his *own* disappearance. But how it is possible to pass from a biological understanding of the living being for which the notions of disappearance, negativity or lack, do not have a meaning to a subjective one, grounded on the notion of relationship with an emptiness? Indeed, according to a materialist interpretation, death does not *appear;* when it occurs it corresponds to a mere change in the organization of the thing but it remains “in the full”, it doesn’t face the emptiness.

As for now, I think that the current French reading of Jonas must be inspired for these critiques and learn from them. In my opinion, it means we must face at least four challenges. Not only it will deal with the new means of addressing the problem of the ontology of life (1) and with the meaning of the “ontological idea of mankind” (2) but also with the link between the principle of responsibility and the environmental ethics (3) and with the missing politics in Hans Jonas’ philosophy (4).

First, we could ask if it would not be necessary to reconsider the ontology of life of Jonas by the light of a thought about intersubjectivity. The living being has a solitary existence, is obsessed by the risk of death. All other living beings are only preys or predators for the Jonasian organism. This conception of life proceeds of the influence of Heidegger which understood our authentic existence from the relationship with death. On the contrary, it could be helpful to put emphasis on the various links irreducible to the mere consumption, for instance the care, between the living beings to understand how a world can emerge from those relationships and to escape from the dogmatic realism on which Jonas seems to remain dependent in consequence of the ontology of death (see above with the critique by Barbaras). Instead of understanding the organism from the satisfaction of needs, and the necessity to escape from death, we could develop a phenomenological interpretation of it as a living being which is necessarily and from the very beginning in relationships with other living beings, as some passages of the original manuscript of *The phenomenon of Life* suggest it. The emergence of a world would be the consequence of this original intersubjectivity and we could escape, in that manner, from any rest of “realism.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Second, I think it is necessary to recognize that the Jonasian imperative of responsibility is quite abstract. Jonas finds it but he does not describe its genesis. For instance, we do not really know how it can appear and develop itself from his ontology of (solitary) life. In addition to this, we do not know if it deals with preserving an image of mankind or an ontological idea of it. That is the reason why I think a meditation about the ontological status of the imagination would be here necessary to understand. On the one hand, how imaginary variations about what mankind is, could give rise to an ontological idea of mankind, which we had to preserve; and on the other hand, how this imagination, as the faculty of the “unreal”, of the possibilities would enable intersubjective relationships likely to make emerge, in real life, the principle of responsibility[[17]](#footnote-17).

Third, as we know, Jonas was convinced of the necessity to develop an environmental ethics but he was also convinced that such an attempt was premature. The priority had to be given to a medical ethics as an application of the principle responsibility on account of its axiological primacy - the human beings have more value than the other living beings and it would be more urgent to protect them against the technological development of the biomedicine than against the destruction of their environment - and on account of the lack of global model to understand the terrestrial dynamics, which would be a condition *sine qua non* to elaborate an environmental ethics. On the contrary, we already have a good representation of the human body and for that reason we can elaborate a medical ethics. Nevertheless, it may be important to show the intimate link not only between both applied ethics but also with the principle of responsibility. And it could be done by the light of a new interpretation of the philosophy of Jonas that takes into account its intersubjective dimension and the new status of the imagination[[18]](#footnote-18).

Finally, we cannot ignore that even if the ethics of Jonas has been elaborated to be politically applied; Jonas does not succeeded in defining the political regime which would be able to embody the principle of responsibility. We must confront this aporetic question by showing how the ontological principle of responsibility includes a principle of discussion to make it effective. It would enable us to reconcile this ethics with democracy thanks to a new conception of the ecological and cosmopolitan citizen enlightened by the principle of responsibility[[19]](#footnote-19).

1. Les autres traductions / What about the concept of god after Auschwitz? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique*, L. Ferry, 1992 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ref [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ref [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ref [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Paris, Champs essais, 1997 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Paris, Seuil, 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paris, Seuil L’ordre philosophique, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ref [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ref [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ref [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ref [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Deux refs [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ref [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. relativiser [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ref à mes livres [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Mes refs [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Mes refs [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. refs [↑](#footnote-ref-19)