

Hans Jonas and the Stoic Notion of Freedom

Emidio Spinelli – Sapienza/Università di Roma

“International Jonas Conference” – University of Siegen, 6-9 June 2018

Guidelines

Introduction

Apart from some (maybe scattered, even occasional or only preparatory) observations about the role of Stoic ideas (*e.g.*: in his works on Gnosticism or in his early monography on *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*, 1930), special attention will be devoted to a course, that Hans Jonas offered twice at the *New School for Social Research* in New York (1966 and 1970: see therefore H. Jonas, *Problemi di libertà*, a cura di E. Spinelli, con la collaborazione di A. Michelis, Nino Aragno Editore, Torino 2010, introduction, italian translation/english text=**Jonas 2010**).

Among the Hellenistic schools, Jonas attributes a decisive role to Stoicism, because “Stoic philosophy reinterprets the position of man within his environment and ultimately within the universe. The major event in ancient history which brought about this transformation was the fall of the Greek polis” (**Jonas 2010, p. 281**). The new and stimulating position held by ancient Stoicism should be considered crucial, because (over, above and better than Aristotle) it seems to represent the first and best philosophy, that examines the idea of freedom from a strong, systematic, holistic point of view.

1. One has to stress the crucial role played by Jonas and his special attitude for a coherent interpretation of the concept of freedom not only in some ‘classical authors’ (as for example Plato and above all Aristotle), but especially in ancient Stoicism
2. As to the main structure of the courses devoted to the topic *Problems of Freedom*, its focus clearly is on the roots of the notion of freedom, or better on a plurality of different, even conflictual notions of freedom in the ancient world (from Plato to Augustine)
3. Indeed, the concept of freedom as a ‘*fil rouge*’ of Jonas’s overall philosophy, in each step of his production, is always well attested not only in his published works, but also and often in his didactic activity at the *New School for Social Research*
4. I would like to offer just a short quotation of the various positions about freedom in Greece before the analysis of the Stoic solution: from Plato (a very short ‘spot’ on *Rep.* X, 614 ff.) to a sort of ‘running commentary’ on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, book III, on the distinction between voluntary/involuntary actions as well as about the notion of ‘deliberate choice’
5. A common, distinctive trait of this ‘classical’ idea of freedom is the following: it is intended as a question of power or capacity to positively do something, namely as a political feature of the Greek citizen/*polites*, who reaches his moral excellence or *areté* by acting ‘outside’, in the open field of the political engagement linked to the everyday life of his *polis*
6. After this historical reconstruction of the Greek (maybe and especially Athenian) concept of freedom, Jonas seems to change the perspective of his analysis and rather stresses the ‘practical’/‘theoretical’ background of any possible question/debate in the ancient world about freedom → **Handout: TEXT 1 (=Jonas 2010, p. 268)**
7. Given for granted this ‘theoretical’ approach, Jonas indicates a big, decisive ‘turning point’ in the history of ancient Greece: the scenario of the Hellenistic Age after the huge

conquest of Alexander the Great and the new political order established after his death; it is a crucial moment, that especially affects and deeply changes the same idea of moral excellence/*areté* and accordingly any ethical attitude for and inside the new Hellenistic schools of philosophy → **Handout: TEXT 2 and 3 (=Jonas 2010, p. 282 and 293)**

8. Among this schools, Jonas attributes a decisive role to Stoicism, because “Stoic philosophy reinterprets the position of man within his environment and ultimately within the universe. The major event in ancient history which brought about this transformation was the fall of the Greek polis” (**Jonas 2010, p. 281**); and all that crucially because (over, above and better than Aristotle) Stoicism can be considered as the first and best philosophy, that examines the idea of freedom from a strong, systematic, holistic point of view → **Handout: TEXT 4 (=Jonas 2010, p. 295)**
9. The problem of freedom in Stoicism cannot be restricted to a mere moral question, since one has at the same time to clarify some necessary aspects in logic and physics; Jonas rightly underlines the systematic/‘organic’ character of Stoic philosophy (a very different approach, in comparison with our contemporary attitude, that tends to create isolated ‘departments’ or ‘bits and pieces’ of knowledge, not reciprocally and necessarily inter-related: the normal way of nowadays specialisms, indeed...)
10. Let me add thta a strong lesson of methodology is here offered by Jonas: he examines the Stoic notion of freedom without ignoring any of its logical, physical, theological, ethical aspects; therefore he insists on the physical structure of the Stoic world as well as on the dialectical relationship between the whole (interpreted as a perfect, harmonious, ordered, beauty *kòsmos*, a material/corporeal entity, the divine Fire, not eternal but characterized by a cyclic development) and its parts (human beings above all)
11. It is impossible not to underline the deep philosophical interest of such a doctrine: it wants to defend a very strong idea of necessity, that however should not be identified (at least in case of human beings) with a form of “blind necessity” (**Jonas 2010, p. 303**) or better a too strict form of constraint/compulsion; accordingly, Jonas offers and explain the technical use of the term *heimarméne* → **Handout: TEXT 5 (=Jonas 2010, p. 302)**
12. If this is the global picture of the Stoic idea of ‘destiny’ and more generally of its notion of ‘determinism’, one should always remember (against the background of a specific form of ‘immanentism’, rather than pantheism) that such a form of *heimarméne* has also a theological value and must be identified with a specific form of ‘providence’/*prònoia* (namely: in the *infinita series causarum* everything is pre-ordered towards what is the best condition of the universe), although all that cannot seem to exercise its power up to single human lives in their minute, minimal details → **Handout: TEXT 6 (=Jonas 2010, p. 304-305)**
13. Jonas highly evaluates this Stoic doctrine (or at least he seems to do that *at this point of his course*), because it does not propose a blind form of determinism, but rather seems to anticipate a global idea of ‘theodicy’ → **Handout: TEXT 7 (=Jonas 2010, p. 301)**
14. There are also some very prickly questions raised by Jonas while examining such a doctrine - Once accepted this complex and complicated Stoic physical picture of the world, which is the space and the special role granted to human beings? Which is the relationship between them as moral agents and the totality of the events, that forms the ‘history’ of the entire *kòsmos*? And how should we intend the alleged virtue/*areté* attributed to human beings as privileged members of the whole?
15. The Stoic answer makes use of a clear metaphoric model: 1. the organism, the organic body, where each part has a biologically vital function, surely not only for itself, but in

- order to guarantee the global and correct functioning of the whole body, inside a network of inter-related elements → **Handout: TEXT 8 (=Jonas 2010, p. 299)**
16. But again: what about human beings? Jonas stresses the fact that for Stoicism their peculiar function is guaranteed not only by the special/creative use of their hands (maybe a sort of privilege already highlighted by Anaxagoras), but also and especially by the centrale role played by their reason or *lògos*, surely the main feature of their ethical approach to reality (thanks to the well known/Socratic attitude of a deep moral intellectualism, strongly defended by ancient Stoic thinkers)
 17. Jonas raises now an additional question (and maybe he also begins his critical attack): from a Stoic point of view, how is it possible to concile the rational use of our intellectual powers on the one side and on the other the full achievement of our freedom? Under which conditions can we reach the goal of a complete *eudaimonia*, namely of that happiness intended as *summum bonum*? The Stoic answer cannot be: because we are able to modify and alter the determined course of things and the events in the network of the *heimarméne*, since our *logos* can only limit itself to the knowledge of the whole, of its inner relations; as Jonas originally underlines, this is another version of the Greek love for contemplation or *theoria*, but with a new dimension, since the Stoics pursue it “not so much for the service of the delight of contemplation in the strict theoretical sense, i.e. in the sense of a dialectical // (p. 102) penetration into the structure of being, but more in the religious sense of being able to discern the identity of one’s own innermost principle with the principle of the all” (**Jonas 2010, p. 306**)
 18. This seems to be another, refined, highly intellectualistic form of assimilation to God, although this does not mean that human beings can determine their own essence or the nature of other natural things; neither can they modify the *infinita series causarum* around them; does this imply that they can only play a mere passive role and that the mental power of the best part of their soul (the so called *hegemonikòn*) is inevitably limited? In one sense, the answer must be positive: human beings can only give their assent (*synkatàtheis*) to some representations or *phantasiai*, that are absolutely true, namely in the technical Stoic jargon *kataleptikàì*; we have here a mental mechanism of action/reaction valid at the same time from a logical, physical, ethical point of view (and maybe supported by an absolutely optimistic attitude towards knowledge)
 19. Here the horizon of Stoic freedom clearly emerges: it is depicted as a form of obedience, it acts as a strong conformity to the universal law of the whole; the Stoic sage, indeed, the only actual free human being is submitted to the orders of the *Lògos* (or of Zeus, if we prefer to use the strong theological image defended by Cleanthes in his famous *Hymn to Zeus*), since he comes to know and therefore willingly accepts the perfect plane of the divine providence
 20. We can here use another metaphorical tool for describing this Stoic doctrine of a positive *eudaimonia* considered as a good flux of life or *éuroia bìou*: we always should be ‘in tune’ with the overall and necessary structure of the *kòsmos*, since the highest peak of our morality cannot but be represented by our complete/total agreement with the harmonious course of the world; and Jonas underlines that this “is a Stoic trick by which the tragic aspect of man’s condition in a powerful world is eliminated and everything is turned to the good. Whatever happens, can be accepted as being for the good by the wise man who has made the cause of the cosmos his own and has therefore made the cause of God his own” (**Jonas 2010, p. 307**)
 21. One can here add another Stoic metaphoric reference: the sage is like an actor, a good actor, who is able to play any role assigned to him on the great stage of the *kòsmos*, without even trying to act outside the perfect plot written by the divine *Lògos*

22. At the end of such long and detailed reconstruction of the Stoic idea of freedom, Jonas begins to advance his objections and his critiques: given for granted the Stoic acceptance of the universal and immutable law of the whole, are we still allowed to properly speak of *freedom* for human beings? According to Jonas this rather seems to be a radical form of fatalism; indeed, it risks to destroy any autonomous power of moral agents, since it confines our alleged free actions inside the restricted realm of the inner self and denies any possibility of changes/modifications with respect to the strict rules imposed by the *heimarméne*; in this case Jonas's polemical tone becomes very tough → **Handout: TEXT 9 (=Jonas 2010, p. 307)**
23. In conclusion, I think it is worth noticing that such a critique can be properly understood *if and only if* we put it against the wider and very well known background of the crucial step in Jonas's thought, namely his strong fight against any passive attitude and any form of resignation or quietism, to which he fiercely opposes his active idea of a widespread, conscious, strong kind of *Verantwortung*; in sum, also these pages about Stoicism in his *Problems of Freedom* (1966 and 1970) can be rightly considered a clear anticipation and a sort of 'pre-historical' chapter of his masterpiece devoted to *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (1979)