Introduction

Freedom, Technology, and Destiny

"The next frontier is . . . ourselves."[1] The West has been won and the moon has been conquered. The human person's vigorous spirit needs a new task against which to measure itself. And it seems that Gregory Stock is right. The new frontier is not Planet Mars but something by far more challenging, promising, and fascinating: it is ourselves. In the past two hundred years or so, technology has accomplished incredible feats in transforming the world, and to many it seems that the time has come to apply our attempts at changing the world to ourselves: "Starting with fire and clothes, we looked for ways to ward off the elements. . . . Telephones and airplanes collapsed distance. Antibiotics kept death-dealing microbes at bay. Now, however, we have started a wholesale process of aiming our technologies inward. Now our technologies have started to merge with our minds, our memories, our metabolisms, our personalities, our progeny and perhaps our souls. Serious people have embarked on changing humans so much that they call it a new kind of engineering evolution—one that we direct for ourselves."[2]

At the same time, while technology remains fascinating and no one would want to miss its many accomplishments, we have generally grown more sober in its regard, having learned the hard way the thoroughly dialectical character of our technological ingenuity. Modern technology, essentially a child of the Enlightenment, has its share in the famous dialectics of the latter.[3] There is, first of all, the fact that yesterday's privileges become today's necessities, so that our new toys do not always make us freer and happier but rather create new dependencies, multiplying our

1. Stock, *Redesigning Humans*, 171.
2. Garreau, *Radical Evolution*, 6.
3. Cf. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

reasons to be unhappy. Just a few decades ago, who would have felt upset when, due to a temporarily failed Internet connection, it took half an hour to send an important document from Rome to New York instead of the usual two minutes? We easily take for granted the marvels of instant communication and get frustrated when for a brief period we are negated its benefits. Without necessarily having in mind the Internet, already Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed these dynamics: "For, besides their continuing thus to soften body and mind, as these commodities had lost almost all their pleasantness through habit, and as they had at the same time degenerated into true needs, being deprived of them became much more cruel than possessing them was sweet; and people were unhappy to lose them without being happy to possess them."[4] Technology, moreover, can be used for good or ill, and even in its essentially benign uses it often has bad side effects, which may well outweigh the benefits they bring with them.

All this goes to say that the promises of winning the new frontier, that is, of applying our technology to ourselves, fall onto soil that is generally more critical of technological progress than has been the case in the past, in a world prior to Chernobyl and global warming. And yet, the appeal of biotechnology seems hard to resist: "Rather than fearing change, we ought to embrace it, rather than prohibiting the exploration of new technologies, society ought to focus on spreading the power to alter our minds and bodies to as many people as possible. . . . The benefits to be won from biotechnology are concrete and measurable. Keeping people young longer would slow the rise in worldwide health spending . . . . Improving human memory, attention, and communication abilities would increase productivity, which in turn would lead to new scientific discoveries and faster innovation."[5]

Then again, when we listen to critics of the biotechnological revolution, we certainly find arguments one could in principle level against any new technology, such as appeal to cautionary principles and cost-benefit calculations. But we also find concerns so fundamental that no one in his or her right mind would ever raise them against the use of airplanes or the composing of short text messages. These fears give expression to the fact that here, with biotechnology applied to human beings and their very nature, we are indeed heading toward a new frontier, which raises issues

4. Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin," 147.

5. Naam, *More Than Human*, 5–6.

of an unprecedented kind. Thus, Francis Fukuyama, in his best-selling *Our Posthuman Future,* voices the concern that what could be at stake here is our very humanity along with our moral sense: "The deepest fear that people express about technology is . . . that, in the end, biotechnology will cause us in some way to lose our humanity. . . . Human nature is what gives us a moral sense, provides us with the social skills to live in society, and serves as a ground for more sophisticated philosophical discussions of rights, justice, and morality. What is ultimately at stake with biotechnology is . . . the very grounding of the human moral sense, which has been a constant ever since there were human beings."[6]

In his booklet *The Future of Human Nature,* Jürgen Habermas echoes Fukuyama's concern, wondering what an established practice of biotechnological engineering would do to our moral self-understanding: "Will we still be able to come to a self-understanding as persons who are the undivided authors of their own lives, and approach others, without exception, as persons of equal birth? With this, two presuppositions of our moral self-understanding . . . are at stake."[7] In this way, both authors express an existential and dramatic concern: with our biotechnology we may risk abolishing the human person as a moral being.

How could this be so? Do these authors not perhaps overstate their case? What is at the basis of these fears? In this book, I will attempt to put the promise of biotechnology, which mainly consists in a greater freedom by giving us greater strength, superior intelligence, and more years to live, into the perspective of our human destiny, which, I will argue, consists in love. The greatest freedom is the freedom for our destiny, which is the freedom to love. But love is nothing that can be manufactured or technologically enhanced. It does not as such fall under the objects of biotechnology, while biotechnology, at least in some of its forms, may make it more difficult for us to love and hence, it may actually decrease our freedom.[8]

In order to explore this hypothesis, I will turn to the thought of Hans Jonas, one of the founding fathers of what today is called "bioethics."[9]

6. Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, 101–2.

7. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 72.

8. Cf. the concern that Stanley Hauerwas raises in this context: "For when freedom and its enhancement becomes an end in itself, we lose any account of human life that gives content and direction to freedom. As a result we end by being less rather than more free" (Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, 14).

9. Jonas was one of the founding Fellows of the Hastings Center on Bioethics, the

In the first chapter, I will examine his "philosophy of the organism."[10] Jonas explains the distinguishing characteristics of the living body, which make manipulating an organism very different from manipulating lifeless things. I hope to show with Jonas that the meaning of the organism is freedom understood as the power of self-transcendence. Freedom in turn—and here I will go beyond Jonas, while moving from his premises—finds its highest expression in love understood as a call to communion.

In the second chapter I will discuss Jonas' philosophy of responsibility, arguing that for him responsibility ultimately amounts to benevolence and that benevolence is at the foundation of the new categorical imperative he proposes: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life."[11] For Jonas humanity ought to be because responsibility ought to be. In other words, the reason for why it is better for humanity to be rather than not to be lies in this: only with humanity there is the principle of responsibility and benevolence in the world. A world in which there is benevolence or love is better than one in which these are absent. The greatest concern about biotechnology that Jonas voices, along with Fukuyama and Habermas who follow him here, is that one day, with our tools, we may prevent our descendants from being responsible or benevolent beings. Jonas writes, "[It is] their duty over which we have to watch, namely their duty to be truly human," which—as becomes clear in the rest of Jonas' book—amounts to their capacity to be responsible beings, a capacity of which we could rob them "with the alchemy of our 'utopian' technology."[12]

In the final chapter, I will turn to Jürgen Habermas and the way in which he engages Hans Jonas in his essay *The Future of Human Nature,* spelling out in more detail the dangers of injuring or even abolishing human morality by biotechnology. Some aspects of Habermas' argument presuppose peculiar elements of his theory of communicative action and discourse ethics, while other important parts draw on Jonas' thought. The main line of his reasoning consists in showing how, by means of biotechnology, one generation may attempt to impose its own ideas and intentions on the next generation. This imposition disrupts the equality that previously existed among them, dividing them into one master

first American "think tank" for bioethics (Cf. L. R. Kass, "Practicing Ethics," 5–12 and Jonas, *Memoirs*, 200).

10. Cf. Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life.*

11. Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 11.

12. Ibid., 42.

generation and many manufactured ones who are deprived of the full extent of their spontaneity and freedom and will have to feel inferior toward those who made them, no longer able to have a sense of full authorship of their lives. Summing up both Jonas' and Habermas' thought, one can say that the central issue consists in this: we must not impose our own image on our descendants. In fact, the Bible's prohibition against the making of an image (cf. Exod. 20:4) can with very good reason be applied not only to the Lord but also to the human person made in his image, which for us will always remain mysterious and out of the reach of our free disposal.[13]

The Context and Procedure of Our Study

Before going into the argument, let us briefly discuss the context of Hans Jonas' life and work. Jonas was born in Germany in 1903 and studied under luminaries such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Rudolf Bultmann at the universities of Freiburg, Berlin, and Marburg.[14] As he presented a paper in one of Heidegger's seminars, the latter was so excited about it that he helped him to get it published. *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem*—"Augustine and the Pauline Problem of Freedom"—would thus become Jonas' first book. For his dissertation, which he wrote under Heidegger's direction, he turned to a study of the Gnostic religion. His *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* became an influential, if not uncontroversial, work on the subject.[15] When the National Socialists took power in Germany in the 1930's, Jonas, who was Jewish and active in the Zionist movement, first went to England for a year and then emigrated to what was then Palestine. At this time, he vowed to himself that only as a soldier of a conquering army would he ever set foot again in Germany.[16] In 1940 Jonas volunteered for the Jewish Brigade of the British Army, with which he in fact victoriously entered Germany in 1945. Already during the war, as he was separated from his books, his interest shifted from Gnosticism to what he would later call a "philosophical

13. I owe the idea of summing up their arguments by means of the above Scripture passage to Junker-Kenny, "Genetic Enhancement," 12.

14. For most of the biographical data, see his autobiography: Jonas, *Memoirs*.

15. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*; English: *The Gnostic Religion*.

For an apt summary of the controversies ensuing upon the publication of Jonas' work and for an appraisal of its significance for Gnosis research, see Waldstein, "Hans Jonas' Construct 'Gnosticism,'" 341–72.

16. Jonas, *Memoirs*, 75.

biology." Perhaps it was the experience of the utter precariousness of life during the war that prompted him to turn his attention to issues related to the organism, i.e., to the question of what it means for something to be "alive."[17] In 1948 he took part in Israel's War of Independence and shortly afterwards emigrated to Canada where he taught philosophy at Carleton University. In 1955 he moved to the United States and became a professor at the New School for Social Research in New York City. He retired from teaching in 1976 but stayed in New Rochelle, close to New York, until the end of his long life in 1993.

His philosophical reflections on life were published as *The Phenomenon of Life* in 1966. Ever since his emigration, Jonas had been writing in English. In 1979, however, he drafted a book in German again: *The Imperative of Responsibility.*[18] In this work, which turned out to be a major success in Germany, he proposes a new "ethics for the technological age," pointing out the ambiguities and dangers connected with modern technology and criticizing the utopian elements present in the pervasive idea of progress. Given the new situation, in which our acts have global, and at the same time often unforeseeable effects, and given the absolute duty for humankind to exist, we need our technological choices to be guided by a "heuristics of fear."[19] By this latter concept he does not mean timidity or a fear *of* something, but rather a fear *for* something, namely for "the image of man," which we may come to understand better precisely by becoming alert to the dangers to it. "*We know the thing at stake only when we know that it is at stake.*"[20] What is also implied here is the disposition to give greater heed to the predictions of possible harm than to the promises of possible benefit when it comes to evaluating the use of technology.[21] The book has been very influential for the German Green movement,[22] and by now many of its ideas have become so commonplace that one

17. This is what Lawrence Vogel suggests in his "Hans Jonas's Exodus," which is his very useful introduction to a posthumous collection of Jonas' essays, edited by Vogel himself: Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, 1–2: "The life-and-death battle, especially on the Italian front, hardened Jonas's resolve to move beyond the historical inquiries of his student years and develop his own philosophy. Appropriately enough, his musings came to focus on the corporeal, metabolic basis of all life and the struggle of all organisms to maintain their lives in the face of the ever-present threat of not-being or death."

18. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung.* English: Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility.*

19. Cf. for instance, Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 26–27.

20. Ibid., 27. All italics in citations throughout this book are original.

21. Cf. ibid., 31.

22. Cf. Vogel, "Hans Jonas's Exodus," 3.

may easily forget that it was rather revolutionary when it was published more than thirty years ago.[23] As a sign of his success in Germany, Jonas received the "Peace Prize of the German Book Trade" in 1987, which put him in the illustrious company of thinkers such as Martin Buber, Karl Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel. Contrary to custom, the award ceremony did not take place in Frankfurt but in Mönchengladbach, Jonas' native city, where, on the same occasion, he also received honorary citizenship and the Federal Republic's Medal of Honor.[24]

In the last stage of his life, Jonas found the occasion to formulate his own "cosmogonic speculations in which decades of thought about ontology and the philosophy of nature found expression."[25] Here he made explicit some of his ideas that had already been more or less implicit in his earlier thought and that regard the questions of the genesis not only of life but of the whole cosmos and the relation of God and the world. In particular, how do we need to think of God, given that he allowed radical evil in his world, such as the horror of Auschwitz and everything which that name stands for?[26] Thus, one can find roughly four phases in Jonas' writing that can be summarized in the following points: (1) Gnosticism, (2) philosophical biology, (3) responsibility and technology, and (4) cosmogonic speculations and theodicy.[27] We will mainly be concerned here with the second and third, even though elements of the first and fourth may also enter occasionally.

In our endeavor to ask about the meaning of human freedom in our biotechnological age in the thought of Hans Jonas, we will broadly proceed as follows. We will dedicate the first part of this book to Jonas'

23. For Jonas' influence on political programs, see, for instance, Schmidt, "Die Aktualität der Ethik von Hans Jonas," 558: "Jonas also influenced political programs. His ethics of responsibility was taken up and made concrete by the Brundtland Commission for the environment and development in 1987. The commission propagated the concept of *sustainable development*" (translation my own).

24. Cf. Jonas, *Memoirs*, 259.

25. Jonas, "Matter, Mind, and Creation," 166.

26. See the collection of his essays *Mortality and Morality*, in particular the articles "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice," 131–43 and "Matter, Mind, and Creation: Cosmological Evidence and Cosmogonic Speculation," 165–97.

27. Cf. the categorization that Jonas' wife Lore gives of his work in her Introductory Remarks to his autobiography: Jonas, *Memoirs*, xvi. She finds three elemental phases, corresponding to his three major publications: his book on Gnosis, his *Phenomenon of Life*, and his *Imperative of Responsibility*. In a similar attempt at categorizing Jonas' work, Lawrence Vogel names as the final stage a theological one, which we find justified and would add as a fourth point to Lore Jonas' list (cf. Vogel, "Foreword," xiv).

philosophy of the organism, where freedom is primarily revealed as the freedom of the living being's form with respect to its matter. Then we will turn to Jonas' reflections on our technological civilization, where freedom is revealed to exist in closest conjunction with responsibility. Third, we will argue for the continued relevance of Jonas' thought by examining its influence on a relatively recent and important publication by Jürgen Habermas, who in his *The Future of Human Nature* presents a noteworthy case against genetic enhancement.