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The Business of Life and Death, Vol. 1: Values and Economies

Collected Philosophical Essays
by Giorgio Baruchello, PhD

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The Business of Life and Death, Vol. 1: Values and Economies
Introduction

A direct descendant of the Ontario Agricultural College, the University of Guelph can boast among the members of its vast academic family two great Canadian intellectuals, who have never been afraid of tackling public affairs and economic matters with unswerving courage, subtle acumen and dazzling style.

The first one is John Kenneth—"Ken"—Galbraith (1908–2006). During his very long career, he came to be admired internationally *qua* economist, social scientist, novelist, Oriental art historian, diplomat, political advisor, media personality, relentless champion of progressive causes, and unsurpassed master of witty prose. Being myself the son of a long-time bank manager, a projected employee of the same bank, and having been named after a member of the prominent Genoese family owning it—my baptismal godfather—, I grew up surrounded by banking issues and regular talks about these issues, by occasional heated debates on economic questions and, not least of all, by Galbraith's books, which were literally scattered around my paternal home. It is therefore also, if not primarily, because of his books that I developed a deep interest in economic matters and trusted the humanities to afford better insights into them than run-of-the-mill economics or business studies. As a teenager, I could already notice how a comparison of undergraduate textbooks revealed an alarming gap between economics' assumed anthropology and the variety of views on human nature available in the humanities at large. Any novel by Dostoyevsky, Balzac or Laxness was infinitely more instructive on this point than any textbook in economics or business studies, and much closer to the human reality that I could observe around myself. Similarly, the acknowledged forms of economic organisation and behaviour exhibited by human societies in the long history of our species appeared grossly oversimplified, if not plainly wrong, in the textbooks peddled to undergraduate students in economics and business studies. The very history of Genoa and the Genoese, the likely cradle and inventors of capitalism, could hardly be grasped by means of the categories of thought provided in those textbooks, which in my view marginalised or ignored pivotal factors of historical self-affirmation and economic expansion such as strict family bonds, military conquest and predominance, outright slavery, class-skewed taxation, relentless mono- and oligopolistic practices, intentionally asymmetric information, the cunning use and abuse of credit, and the bottomless depths of religious belief.

If anything, I knew as well that the young recruits in my godfather's bank, upon entrance into the austere institution that was going to employ them, were told quite bluntly to simply forget what they had studied. Real life, apparently, had little to do with what they had read in their textbooks—none of which was authored by Galbraith, incidentally. Whether wise or unwise, and probably rhetorically inflated, such an injunction was certainly not a good piece of advertising for the economic and business disciplines. Thus, though my professional path never led me into the banking world awaiting me since birth, I ended up pursuing undergraduate and graduate studies in philosophy and deal nonetheless with issues such as, *inter alia*, private property, money, preference satisfaction and consumer behaviour. As a middle-aged family man, I still read plenty of literature on economic subjects, I review books on them, I am a fellow of the American Association for Economic Research, and I still like returning to classics such as Adam

Smith (1723−1790), Vilfredo Pareto (1848−1923), the brothers Karl (1886−1964) and Michael Polanyi (1891−1976), and Carlo Cipolla (1922−2000). Clearly, I could not escape my family's background and expectations, notwithstanding my unconventional choice of seeking a career in such a bohemian, if not monastic, field of study as philosophy—to the initial dismay of my father, I must add.

Few years ago, after yet another financial crash that most professional economists had not seen coming, a dear friend and research partner of mine—a British professor of economics—gave me great comfort by telling me that, when young people ask him what disciplines they should study in order to understand actual economic phenomena, he answers unfalteringly that history, philosophy and politics are far better options than a degree in economics. In his view, his own discipline has become too far removed from real human life, including actual economic activities. Though parading themselves as serious social scientists, he has come to believe that most of his colleagues favour self-entrenching *a priori* mathematical modelling upon rigid, limited and fantastic sets of admissible assumptions, over candid empirical observation, conceptually richer inter-disciplinary study, and plain, open-minded, honest reflection. Engaged in impressive displays of mathematical skill determining their discipline's internal pecking order, my friend and research partner claims that most economists have ended up forgetting about their defining realm of investigation, which they either misconstrue or neglect altogether. *Pace* much widespread prejudice, economics is by and large ceremonial; the humanities, on the contrary, can be instrumental, at least with regard to making sense and operating within actual economies.

The blindness of mainstream economists to the nature and workings of actual economies is a theme that Galbraith himself had hammered upon incessantly since at least the 1940s and up to his very last book, *The Economics of Innocent Fraud*, published in 2004. The great irony in my colleague's recent echo of his thought is that Galbraith was not the first famous economist in North America to accuse his peers of real-life irrelevance by self-inflicted methodological myopia. Galbraith was himself inspired by Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) who, long before him, had uttered the same vibrant accusations, this time against William Stanley Jevons (1835–1882) and Alfred Marshall (1842–1924) rather than Milton Friedman (1912–2006) and Robert Emerson Lucas (b.1937). Similarly Veblen, to whom we owe the notions of "ceremonial" and "instrumental" institutions that I have just utilised, had also tried to reform the way in which economics was pursued within academia. Instead of the neoclassical emphasis on deduction, he believed there should be one on induction. Instead of the neoclassical choice of mathematical engineering and physics as paradigm, he thought that evolutionary biology should replace it. A new school of economics had eventually emerged, following Veblen's initial efforts, the so-called "institutionalist" or "institutional economics", which is still in existence today. However, Veblen did not succeed overall, and neither did Galbraith, who is regarded as a significant member of this school. The mainstream of economic research has continued along its conventional path and, having rejected Marxism and emasculated Keynesianism, it has never truly surrendered its neoclassical roots, which are most marked in introductory textbooks and in the accepted dogmas of business studies. Veblen's and Galbraith's school of thought is today nothing but a 'minor', 'marginal' and blasphemously 'heterodox' approach. Evidently, the blades of Marshall's scissors are made of very tough steel, capable of withstanding the attacks of several professional inheritors of Veblen's and Galbraith's scepticism, such as Joan Robinson (1903–1983), Gunnar

Myrdal (1898–1987) and Steve Keen (b. 1953). Had institutionalist economics become the new normal, then my British friend and research partner would have not been so dismal about his own discipline just a few years ago.

The second illustrious Guelphite is John McMurtry (b. 1939), Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and, as already acknowledged, Honorary Theme Editor for UNESCO's gargantuan *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*. McMurtry is also a former football player, educator, journalist, an academic star in Marxist studies during the 1970s[1]—which he later superseded *via* life-value onto-axiology—and a fiercely engaged public intellectual, who has become the *maître à penser* of Peter Joseph's internationally active *Zeitgeist* movement. Thanks to the several documentaries, roundtables, conferences and media projects launched by this progressive non-profit organisation, which is the brainchild of a former US stockbroker turned financial reformer, McMurtry's philosophy, or at least some tenets of it, have become familiar to millions of people around the planet. In particular, Peter Joseph's 2011 film entitled *Zeitgeist: Moving Forward* has been crucial in making McMurtry's philosophy well-known. In it, extensive interviews with McMurtry are comprised and his life-value onto-axiology endorsed as the correct path to understand the world's actual economies, By the end of 2016 it had been viewed on YouTube alone by more than 23 million people, not to mention the other websites and media supports available for its fruition, plus the many dubbed and texted versions circulating worldwide. This sort of mass visibility is very rarely attained by academics.[2]

Controversial, combative, committed and consistent, McMurtry has never shirked criticism, whether coming from him or directed at him—possibly a legacy of the tough spirit that one must develop when playing football at high levels. Above all, as far as I am concerned, McMurtry is the founder of life-value onto-axiology, namely the most comprehensive theory of value articulated by any philosopher in our century. Fascinated by it, I had the privilege and the hard charge of studying under McMurtry at the University of Guelph, the man being as tough *qua* doctoral supervisor as he is *qua* public intellectual—and as he must have been when he was a football player. Later in my life, this time as an academic, I have done much in terms of spreading the knowledge of life-value onto-axiology inside and outside philosophy departments, scrutinising its legal and economic implications, and expanding the fields for its fruitful application. Tellingly, the publications hereby revised and reissued were printed in six different countries (Canada, the US, Iceland, the UK, Israel and Greece) and as many different disciplinary areas (philosophy, economics, politics, law, health sciences and development studies).

As regards these diverse publications, the first part of the present volume introduces the reader to life-value onto-axiology by way of three review essays—duly revised, of course—covering respectively the first edition of McMurtry's *Cancer Stage of Capitalism* (1999; chapter 1), his 2002 book entitled *Value Wars: The Global Market Versus the Life Economy* (chapter 2), and the

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[1] Cf. John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World-View*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

[2] To exemplify the relevance of non-academic media exposure, the interviews with McMurtry contained in Peter Joseph's 2011 film have been aired frequently on *La Cosa Web TV*, i.e. the web channel associated with Beppe Grillo's (b. 1948) *Movimento 5 Stelle*, i.e. Italy's second largest party since 2013. Though no direct causation can be established, it is remarkable that many policy proposals of this party are blatantly reminiscent of McMurtry's own philosophy and policy proposals for financial reform.

second edition of *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism: From Crisis to Cure* (2013; chapter 3). Though they are not the most articulate presentation of life-value onto-axiology, which I have already stated to be McMurtry's own contributions to UNESCO's *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*, these three books offer in all probability the most immediate and understandable, for they address, analyse and assess today's global economies in light of McMurtry's value theory, from the so-called "end of history" to the Great Recession, *via* the alleged "clash of civilisations" that, whether spontaneous or forced onto the nations by unwise militaristic policies, finds blatant and gruesome manifestation in contemporary Islamic extremism and resurgent fascism.

The second part of the present volume collects two earlier book chapters, one conference proceeding, a review essay and a short note, each of which displays the application of life-value onto-axiology to a specific area of inquiry: political conservatism (chapter 4), the tourist business (chapter 5), Europe's recent banking crises (chapter 6), oncology (chapter 7), and higher education (chapter 8). The nature, scope, aims and motives of life-value onto-axiology are thus disclosed by way of case studies in diverse fields of expertise, some of which are bound to resonate more (or less) forcefully with each reader.

The third part comprises nearly as diverse a spectrum of previous publications of mine, but tackles only two specific topics for which life-value onto-axiology has implications that I find fascinating. The former topic is the history of economic and political thought and, precisely, the intellectual legacy of Adam Smith, who has been playing a pivotal role, at least rhetorically (chapter 9), in buttressing the now dominant liberal ideology (in the European sense of "liberal"), its alternatives having been lost or marginalised (chapter 10) despite the many thorny issues marring Adam Smith's own thought (chapter 11) and economic liberalism at large (chapter 12). The latter topic is economic history, which has been 'colonised' more and more by the methods and assumptions of mainstream economics, to the point of losing sight of the idiographic complexity of its study subject (chapter 13), possibly because of its devotees' self-serving goals (chapter 14). To further stress the specificity of the two topics selected and dealt with in the third part, the book's chapter titles differ considerably from those of the original publications.

Finally, a 2009 article issued in *Economics, Management and Financial Markets* serves as an epilogue offering a synthetic appraisal of life-value onto-axiology *vis-à-vis* the overall aims of economic agency in principle, and the adverse environmental and social impacts of predominant economic activities in current practice.

Given the centrality of life-value onto-axiology and the recurrent references to its main proponents—its founder above all—there is inevitable overlap among the texts collected and revised here. Considerable redrafting went into assessing and reducing repetitions, yet without sacrificing excessively the internal coherence of each chapter. Besides, though essentially the same, the key-notions of life-value onto-axiology have been stated over the years in slightly different forms by McMurtry himself, which the present volume *ipso facto* records and acknowledges in their evolution and manifestations. The reader who is interested in tracking these forms can patiently read all the initial chapters and their specific take on such key-notions. The reader who is already familiar with life-value onto-axiology, or that is chiefly curious about some of its specific applications and implications, should skip the parts where accounts of life-value onto-axiology are reiterated. (In truth, the reader can do whatever she likes, once she's got this volume in her hands!)

What is more, in a collection of essays such as the present one, the old texts are meant to be polished up rather than written anew. Because of these competing exigencies, I erred on the side of caution in the initial five chapters and changed therein less rather than more. Deleted sections and substantive revisions become more and more pronounced in the ensuing chapters, which rely on what is presented to the reader in the preceding ones. The third part stands out in this sense, its texts involving a considerable amount of redrafting, though I did not fall victim of the temptation of writing altogether new material. As a result, the chapters in this volume are uneven in length and some are rather short in comparison with the original publications. The original structures, focuses and scopes have been preserved throughout, however.

Conceptually, little was in genuine need of thorough modification, insofar as the critical analyses offered by McMurtry since at least the mid-1980s were proven correct by subsequent events. And someone did take notice of this fact. Though never orthodox and always challenging, McMurtry's own involvement with UNESCO, his election to Canada's most prestigious scientific society, and the enormous international visibility gained after 2008 make one wonder whether John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) was perhaps overly pessimistic when stating: "Worldly wisdom teaches that it is better for reputation to fail conventionally than to succeed unconventionally."[3]

On the one hand, the global financial collapse of 2008 and the ensuing Great Recession have led even mainstream pundits, institutions and scholars to take belated stock of the conspicuous problems that had long been denounced by McMurtry. The life-destructive inner logic of our economic order, which McMurtry's works painstakingly reveal, may not be as openly acknowledged by them yet. However, after such gargantuan traumatic events as the fall of Lehman Brothers or the Panama Papers scandal, even the popular press writes today about the ills of unbridled financial capitalism, ballooning gross inequality, troubling State capture by private interests, shameless and seamless corporate tax-dodging schemes, industry's murderous environmental irresponsibility, and the pitfalls of indiscriminate free trade. All these topics had been taboo for a long time. Only variously labelled and *ipso dicto* publicly disqualified "nostalgic", "socialist", "anachronistic", "radical", "discontent", "soft", "utopian", "pie-in-the-sky", "bleeding-heart", "crackpot" or "unscientific" academics would have dared proffer, before 2008, outspoken "jeremiads" or "rants" against the triumphant liberalism of the age embracing Reagonomics, the Washington Consensus, New Labour, the 2.0 economy, and the Great Moderation. Liberal rhetoricians have never been poor in verbal daggers with which to pierce, debase and discount their critics. Who, in her right mind, would challenge the system capable of defeating the so-called "evil empire"? Who would challenge the assumedly self-evident engine of prosperity, which cannot but be secured by the miraculous combination of private self-interested initiative with freedom from the "Leviathan" and its "protracted interference", i.e., from the rapacious State?[4]

Such was the self-congratulatory conventional wisdom of broadly neoliberal world leaders and academic sycophants for almost three decades, until public authorities had to step in and

[3] John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, 1936, chapter 12, § 5, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/keynes/general-theory/>.

[4] Alan D. Morrison and William J. Wilhelm, Jr., *Investment Banking. Institutions, Law and Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 187 & 225.

rescue the previously self-evident engine of global prosperity from its own faulty machinations, the greed that the same engine had been incessantly selecting for, and the awfully creative wizardry of its best and brightest innovators. Almost ten years have elapsed since the iconic collapse of Lehman Brothers, and the world's economies, their central banks, and large scores of under- or unemployed people are still struggling with the consequences of the crash. *Ad hoc* exculpations can be as numerous as the aforementioned liberal daggers, and many a rhetoric involving "crony capitalism", "bad apples", "national character", "transitions" and "one-in-a-lifetime crisis" have already been heard many times since the 2008 crash.[5] Nonetheless, possibly because of the length and breadth of the ensuing economic crisis, the seeds of critical doubt and intelligent reflection have had time to germinate. As a consequence, it is now publicly allowed and reasonable to talk adamantly of "the 1%", the scourge of tax havens, the perils of extreme wealth disparity, and the criminogenic frenzy of high finance.

This sort of talk was certainly not so permissible and mainstream in the 1980s and 1990s, when McMurtry was braving, with only few companions (including the old maverick Ken Galbraith himself), the conventional wisdom of the age. Given enough time and suffering, though, conventional wisdom can mutate, at least to a degree. Emblematically, after three decades of uncritical free-trade and liberal mantras, a self-declared "socialist" politician competed with considerable success in the latest primaries of the US Democratic Party, while an unashamed "old-labour" activist has become the head of the second largest political party in the UK. Ironically, in today's US, the current President is the real-estate tycoon and TV-celebrity Donald Trump (b. 1946), who won a fierce electoral campaign by promising, *inter alia*, American jobs for American citizens and protection from unrestrained free trade, whilst also criticising the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and his predecessors' overseas adventures. Whether Trump shall deliver on such electoral promises or not, we do not know yet. Nevertheless, protectionist populism and, in particular, outspoken isolationist postures had not been seen in American politics for a century, i.e. since Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) won re-election in 1916 with the slogan "He kept us out of war!". Times have clearly changed. When McMurtry published *Understanding War* (1989) and *Unequal Freedoms* (1998), or when he openly attacked George W. Bush's (b. 1946) militaristic foreign policy, the US Republicans, and most Democrats too, were squarely *not* on the same side as McMurtry.

On the other hand, over the same past few decades, we have been witnessing repeated high-level attempts at stemming in the most worrisome effects of climate change, which in the official parlance is no longer "avoidable"—as it was implied back in the 1990s—but only "adaptable to". As gloomy as this semantic shift may sound, some influential business interests are still willing to ignore it at our own collective peril. In point of fact, I am writing these lines on the day that the aforementioned US President Donald Trump announced his administration's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate change. Technical exculpations aside, the withdrawal is a politically potent statement, as well as an unfriendly act toward most other nations and, above all, Mother Earth and Her children. US exceptionalism notwithstanding, the European leaders' scathing rejoinders to Donald Trump's decision, China's quick ascent to the

[5] Self-declared free-market advocate Alan Greenspan brushes away crashes like the latest one and that of 1929 as "notably rare exceptions" ("U.S. Debt and the Greece Analogy", *Wall Street Journal,* 18th June 2010,<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704198004575310962247772540.html>).

world's leadership in renewable energy production, and the flourishing of countless projects for novel and environmentally sounder economies and economics—variously dubbed "green", "evolutionary" (a label that is as old as Veblen) and "doughnut"—are proof of McMurtry's being on the ball all along.

McMurtry's being correct with regard to the ecocidal character of contemporary economies is most clearly exemplified by the unaware and somewhat bizarre literal reinvention of his concept of "civil commons", which Burns H. Weston and David Bollier operated in the 2010s in a book entitled *Green Governance: Ecological Survival, Human Rights, and the Law of the Commons*.[6] So urgent and so poignant is this notion under the ongoing ecocidal circumstances, that these two researchers ended up reaching the same conceptual conclusion and verbal connotation as McMurtry had done many years before them.[7] Naturally, it remains to be seen whether the consistency between McMurtry's time-tested arguments and admonitions on the one side, and the eco-friendly trends on the other, is going to be substantial or not. McMurtry's identification of the private sector's inherent inability to lead to an ecologically sane order, unless forced into it by public authorities at several levels, is pivotal in this respect. There are certainly many positive signs in both technological and political developments today, but the damages of for-profit economic activities upon the planet's life support systems have neither been cancelled nor stopped yet, and even less have they been reverted in their grinding inertia. Living species continue to go extinct at spasm rates. Living spaces keep being polluted at all micro- and macro-levels. Livelihoods are still being callously sacrificed to investors' returns on equity and corporate quarterly reports. For every breath of fresh air that we successfully reclaim, at least twice as many are taken away.

The value-calculus offered by McMurtry's philosophy is as simple as it is damning: if the ecological and social systems allowing for life-ranges to exist and expand are damaged by the ongoing economic activities, then these economic activities cannot be deemed positive, even if they prove most profitable to the investor communities or to large sections of the population of some nations. This realisation was valid in the 1980s and it is still valid today. What is good is good; what is bad is bad. By grasping the fundamental conditions for value and disvalue, life-value onto-axiology does not lose relevance with the passing of time. As such, it is paradigmatic philosophy.

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[6] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[7] I contacted both authors, who, in a further proof of academia's astounding ability for self-seclusion, confirmed that they were unaware of McMurtry's twenty-year-older term and concept.

Chapter 4: What Is to Be Conserved? An Appraisal of Political Conservatism

Conservatism is by no means univocal. Since the dawn of humankind, psychological conservatism has characterised the attitude of many people, whose opposition to change flags out their nearly instinctive reaction to anything that may threaten long-lived habits of thought and action. More articulate and internally diverse has been political conservatism, whereby philosophers and political thinkers have reasoned upon which given institutions ought to be maintained or restored against the rising tide of reform and revolution. Legal conservatism has expressed the cautious approach of all those jurists and, mostly, men of law, who believe that any new piece of legislation must be vetted cautiously and within an established constitutional framework, and/or that judicial activity must be restrained by precedent, strict standards of interpretation, and/or time-honoured professional praxes. Fiscal conservatism has rejected State intervention in the economy by various means, including taxation, which should be either minimal or non-existent. Religious conservatism has emphasised the important roles and values of given religious and theological traditions, which must be maintained, lest humankind be doomed to suffer in this world and/or in the next. Moral conservatism too has stressed the important roles and values of given codes of behaviour, which must be preserved and cherished, independently of otherworldly considerations. Social conservatism, in a parallel fashion, has highlighted the important roles and values of given praxes and habits, which alone are deemed capable of explaining the enduring success of certain human associations *vis-à-vis* the dangers and difficulties that fate has been throwing at them.

Rhetoric

On their part, scholars in rhetoric have observed that conservatism fares well when it comes to producing persuasive arguments. The "locus" of "order" based upon comparisons of "earlier" and "later", such that the former is described as preferable to the latter, abounds in all spheres of human communication.[8] This "locus" or "commonplace" appears to be particularly successful within those professional contexts where individual and/or group identity and/or recognition rely upon the specificities of the "technical language" that has been acquired by its professional members, who may have engaged as well in sacred "oaths" or "rituals" that further strengthen "inertia" or adherence to "precedent".[9] Deviation from established norms becomes therefore an exercise in "futility", if not even a token of utter "perversity" that may place in "jeopardy" the cherished institutions of a given community.[10]

It is true that the opposite line of argument has been employed repeatedly too. Modernity seems to have favoured change and chance to conservation, up to the point that even the most

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[8] Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1969, 93.
[9] Ibid., 86–109.
[10] Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Futility Perversity, Jeopardy*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1991.

banal marketing campaign of yet another consumer goodie is presented today to potential buyers as 'revolutionary' and *ipso facto* most desirable. Similarly, a recurrent and exemplary complaint has been voiced of late by several economists, and even more Wall Street firms, after the 2008 collapse of international finance. According to them, governmental re-regulation of the financial sector is despicable, for it may stifle innovation. Change and chance are thereby revealed to be so powerful a rhetorical commonplace that they can challenge the seemingly obvious and unassailable inference that the global, dramatic, and ongoing economic crisis, which was caused by the deregulated financial sector in the first place, should be compelling enough a reason for its re-regulation. Gifted with such a persuasive ability, change and chance have been so appealing and successful in the modern age that many self-professed political "conservatives" have become nothing but proponents of yesterday's reformist ideologies, such as representative democracy and economic liberalism. Thus, the paradoxical situation has been engendered, whereby self-professed political conservatives eagerly attempt to preserve human institutions that have demonstrated time after time to be forces for major transformation.[11]

A parallel twist can be observed in the field of contemporary conservationism, that is to say, the broad philosophical and political family of environmentalists. Despite their frequent association with today's reformist parties and even revolutionary left-wing ideologies, the original spirit of conservationism is far from being either reformist or revolutionary. In nearly all of its known forms, conservationism has opposed science-technology and/or industrial society, insofar as either or both of them have threatened ecosystems, life forms, and/or living species. The 19th-century roots of Western conservationism—at least according to Donald Gibson's erudite account of its history—lie with reactionary "aristocrats" and "gentlemen" that were disquieted by several of the destructive effects of the industrial revolution.[12] Self-professed conservative environmentalists did become a minority during the 20th century, but they were not altogether absent, such as *Lord of the Rings* author and Oxonian linguist John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892−1973) and German-born ethicist and historian of religion Hans Jonas (1903−1993).

In the present chapter, the contribution by the latter 20th-century thinker is discussed as an eminent token of conservative conservationism. Subsequently, the notion of "life ground" is presented, with reference to life-value onto-axiology, which is then applied in order to show how good and bad conservatism can be identified in principle. Finally, Hans Jonas' contribution is assessed.

Hans Jonas

Hans Jonas took very seriously the issue of environmental degradation, which he regarded as the result of humankind's overblown "ingenuity".[13] In this he followed the steps of his mentor Martin Heidegger (1889−1976), whom Jewish and Israeli war-veteran Jonas admired as a thinker and loathed as a committed German national socialist. Both of them believed science and

[11] Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, London: Verso, 2009.
[12] Donald Gibson, *Environmentalism: Ideology and Power*, Huntington: Nova Science, 2002.
[13] Hans Jonas, "Sul razzismo", *Il concetto di Dio dopo Auscwitz. Una voce ebraica*, translated by Carlo Angelino, Genoa: Il melangolo, 1993, 48.

technology to form an indissoluble binomial, at the theoretical level as well as at the practical one. They thought that science-technology had been successful at providing unprecedented means to shape and reshape natural and human reality; but also that it had been dangerously weak, if not utterly unequipped, *vis-à-vis* determining the ends for the proper employment of such wondrous means. Throughout his career, Jonas ceaselessly warned his readers and students against this binomial's tendency to:

- Isolate itself from other realms of human insight, such as religion, the arts and philosophy; and
- Self-engross as a life-threatening end-in-itself.

According to Jonas, well-established and often idolised science-technology had been engaging in a prolonged self-referential process of "permanent self-surpassing toward an infinite goal."[14] In this pursuit, it had been "neither patient nor slow", for it had "compresse[d]… the many infinitesimal steps of natural evolution into a few colossal ones and forgo[ne] by that procedure the vital advantages of nature's 'playing safe'."[15] Jonas did not fear the binomial's failure, but its boundless triumph: "the danger of disaster attending the Baconian ideal of power over nature through scientific technology arises not so much from any shortcomings of its performance as from the magnitude of its success".[16]

In primis, Jonas' concerns are the expression of an ethical conservatism that is reminiscent of René Descartes' (1596−1650) provisional morality. Any leap forward—no matter how glorious it is said to be—or any substantial change—no matter how momentous—are looked upon wearily by prudential reason because, if any such transformation proves to be misdirected, then to correct its harmful effects becomes arduous, if not impossible. Much wiser is to imitate nature's "playing safe", thus taking small steps and so long enough a time as to be able to ponder upon and examine carefully what happens and/or may happen. There need be no needless hurry: "progress is an optional goal, not an unconditional commitment, and… its tempo… has nothing sacred about it."[17]

Being an outspoken advocate for reasonable and reasoned prudence, Jonas opposed the commonly heard notion whereby collective wellbeing and the advancement of human knowledge could justify *per se* painful or morally ambiguous sacrifices. In his view, human dignity and the sanctity of life have been placed in danger far too often and culpably light-heartedly, whenever swift instrumentalist calls for progress resound loud and wide, e.g.:

- Cases of "selective abrogation of personal inviolability and the ritualized exposure to gratuitous risk of health" due to scientific experimentation upon vulnerable human beings;[18]

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[14] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, 168.
[15] Ibid., 31.
[16] Ibid., 140.
[17] Hans Jonas, "Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects", *Daedalus*, 98(2), 1969, 243.
[18] Ibid., 224.

- The development of techniques for organ transplantation, particularly heart transplants, and the related expeditious novel criteria for death introduced in the latter half of the 20th century;[19] and
- The dramatic character of genetic engineering, which, unlike common engineering, acts irreversibly upon living creatures in the very process of experimenting.[20]

Preventing disaster may require extreme remedies, but improving the human condition does not and, according to Jonas, it ought not to. This holds true even if accepting such a principled restraint implies perishing of old age or disease, like our ancestors did before us: "grievous as it is to those who have to deplore that their particular disease may be not yet conquered."[21] The stringent deontological principles of proper conduct handed down by our forefathers should not become the victims of a much-trumpeted and hurried quest for brighter, better futures: "Society would… be threatened by the erosion of… moral values… caused by too ruthless a pursuit of scientific progress".[22] Besides, aging and dying have always been part of the human horizon, and they too contribute to making life valuable *qua* "incentive to number our days and make them count."[23] Though appreciable, future-driven technical-scientific possibility and its social desirability carry less normative weight than moral duties grounded in what has been recognised as good across generational time, and particularly the continuation of nature and humankind: "Unless the present state is intolerable, the melioristic goal is in a sense gratuitous… Our descendants have a right to be left an unplundered planet; they do not have a right to new miracle cures."[24]

Jonas' plea for prudence notwithstanding, both scientific knowledge and new technological devices expanded enormously in his lifetime and he had no wish to deny the evidence placed before his eyes. Hence, his reflections and his teaching endeavoured to lead his readers and his students to acknowledge that "responsibility with a never known burden and range ha[d] moved into the center of political morality."[25]

In the modern age, according to Jonas' analyses, we have become disenchanted yet super-powerful creatures, whose hands can mould as easily as destroy the environment surrounding and sustaining us. We must grow into responsible masters, then, for we are no longer slaves. Neither God nor the Creation can be the outright sources of moral and political wisdom capable of directing modern, disenchanted humankind's behaviour. Humankind alone can and ought to be such a source, for its own survival is at stake.[26] As Jonas wrote: "the very same movement which

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

[21] Hans Jonas, "Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects", 243.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 230.

[25] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility,* 122.

[26] Jonas' own work was not secular, but informed by religious belief, such as the "reverence of creation" and "cosmic piety" discussed in D. Levy, *Hans Jonas: The Integrity of Thinking* (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 2002) and the Biblical wisdom cited by Jonas and discussed in E. Cohen, "Conservative Bioethics and the Search for Wisdom" (*The Hastings Center Report*, 36(1), 2006, 44–56).

put us in possession of the powers that have now to be regulated by norms—the movement of modern knowledge called science—has by a necessary complementarity eroded the foundations from which norms could be derived."[27] The frailty-born divine presence in nature or "sacrosanctity" that had told our ancestors what to do is no longer available to us.[28] Secular, rational, and alone, modern humankind has to reckon with the duties arising from its novel position of mastery over nature and, *a fortiori*, over itself. This is no easy task, for "[w]e have sinned" much already by damaging "at full blast" our planet, which is the true "inheritance" of our descendants.[29] Nevertheless, since "mankind has no right to *suicide*", we must engage in "the pursuit of virtue", that is to say, the cultivation of "moderation and circumspection", thus hoping to rescue ourselves and our own planet from us.[30]

In secundis, Jonas was never entirely positive about the epistemic successes of modern science-technology. Its disastrous implications for planetary survival mirrored a deeper failure. Reflecting upon the mathematically abstract and the dispirited mechanistic approach that had been informing science-technology since its inception, Jonas noticed and highlighted how basic biological phenomena like individuation *via* metabolism, the felt side of being, or human freedom itself, had regularly escaped the grasp of the modern scientist. In his view, a novel "philosophical biology" was needed, which could recognise "life" for what it is, unlike mainstream "biologists and behaviourists", who had been training themselves to toying with sheer "abstractions" and "mathematical values".[31]

Since Galileo's (1564−1642) day, science-technology had either neglected the corporeal realm in its living dimensions or attempted to reduce these dimensions to more manageable inorganic aspects *via* "physical description".[32] Rather than tackling the living *qua* living, biology—though one could say the same of much contemporary medicine and economics—had been trying to follow the lead of physics and chemistry, which describe and predict their objects of study as mathematically formalised regular uniformities, that is to say, inanimate abstractions. Then, as Jonas concluded, we may even acquire "a minutely detailed inventory of the composition of the eye, the optical nerve, the cerebral centre for vision, and of the modifications taking place therein when visual stimulations occur, yet" this is not even to begin to "know what 'to see' may mean."[33]

In tertiis, Jonas claimed—unexpectedly for a 20th-century religious conservative thinker—that a Marxist economic system would make a better candidate than a capitalist one *vis-à-vis* sustainable development.[34] It was his pondered view that beneficial self-denial, identification with one's own community, and a sophisticated philosophical anthropology that addresses the human being *qua* sensuous living creature can be retrieved in Marx's writings far more easily

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[27] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility,* 22.
[28] Ibid., 32.
[29] Hans Jonas, "Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects", 230.
[30] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility,* 36 & 204 (emphasis added).
[31] Hans Jonas, *Dio è un matematico? Sul senso del metabolismo*, translated by Carlo Angelino, Genova: Il melangolo, 1995, 60–2.
[32] Ibid., 41.
[33] Ibid., 61.
[34] Jonas' conservatism was not dogmatic, as discussed in L. Vogel, "Natural law Judaism? The Genesis of Bioethics in Hans Jonas, Leo Strauss, and Leon Kass" (*The Hastings Center Report*, 36(3), 2006, 32–44).

than in any liberal economist's. Moreover, a dictatorial Marxist government could reach the desired goals much more swiftly than a liberal one, which must allow ample room for parliamentary deliberations, profitable business strategies, and paradoxical advertising-saturated consumer sovereignty.[35] As Jonas stated, the latter type of government involves an astounding amount of "waste attendant upon the mechanics of competition, and… the nonsense of a market production aimed at consumer titillation."[36] On the contrary, the former type of government expresses "the promise of a greater rationality" given its "centralized bureaucracy".[37]

Nevertheless, Jonas did observe the actual practice of Marxism in the 20th century and detected therein an invariable flourishing of Baconian utopias that paid no heed to moderation, circumspection, or prudence. Quite the opposite, in the name of some glorious future, self-proclaimed Marxist nations promoted a form of development akin to the one pursued by liberal countries, and such that "the most colossal mass extinctions can appear as a necessary, alas painful, but beneficent surgical operation."[38] Jonas' conservative and conservationist assessment leads then to the curious conclusion that Marxism may indeed be a better candidate than liberal capitalism as concerns preventing the ecological devastation of the planet; but also that the People's Republic of China and Soviet Union have had conspicuously less to do with Marxism than their constitutions declare. Theory and practice, in an additional disavowal of Marx's thought, had been kept separate in the tangible history of these countries.[39]

20th-century Marxist countries were not alone in betraying their founding principles. As far as liberal countries are concerned, Jonas believed them to have failed in many and tragic ways too. The fascist dictatorships of Europe, born after the collapse of the liberal economic order, were the clearest examples of this betrayal. Jonas himself had been affected by them, for he was a German-born Jew who sought refuge abroad while Nazism triumphed in his homeland, fought in a volunteer Jewish brigade of the British Army engaged in the Italian campaign of 1943−1945, and witnessed the post-colonial quagmire of the Middle East as a volunteer soldier in the Israeli army. As he admitted in a 1993 speech about racism held at Percoto (Italy): during "the darkest night of Europe… [only] some solitary lights" were visible.[40] The liberal's Enlightenment and the capitalist's industrial revolution, that is to say, the two pillars of the "developed and much-celebrated Euro-American white civilization" had failed in eradicating or controlling the ancient, deep-rooted racist propensities of the human soul.[41]

Fascism was not the only tragedy that Jonas had in mind when he spoke about the failure of liberal, capitalist countries *vis-à-vis* racism. As though the "hell" of the Holocaust in the ravaged

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[35] Jonas valued human freedom, the biological preconditions of which he recognised and cherished, as discussed in E. Mendieta, "Communicative Freedom and Genetic Engineering" (*Logos*, 2(1), 2003, 124–40).

[36] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 145.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 185.

[39] Soviet environmental history is rife with dramatic events, as discussed in in M. Deutsch, M. Feschbach and A. Friendly Jr., *Ecocide in the USSR: The Looming Disaster in Soviet Health and Environment* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). It is true that Chapter 2, Article 18 of the 1977 constitution of Soviet Union did contain clear references to "future generations" and the sound conservation of natural resources and pristine environments, but often they were disregarded, as discussed in C.E. Ziegler, *Environmental Policy in the USSR* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).

[40] Hans Jonas, "Sul razzismo", 46.

[41] Ibid., 47.

Europe of the inter-war period had not been terrifying enough, liberalism had equally been unable to prevent the "scabrous heritage of slavery in contemporary America", that is to say, the prosperous and militarily sheltered country in which Jonas spent most of his adult life.[42] To avoid the continuation or repetition of similar tragedies, Jonas thought that we ought to employ "all forces of moral education and a vigil political attention", which should never underestimate the power of the "beast hidden within our imperfect human condition."[43]

In this respect, Jonas stated that a somewhat puzzling aid in the fight against racism could emerge from "the planet's ecological meltdown" characterising "the second half of the twentieth century".[44] Race, in the face of this terrible new "challenge" should become "anachronistic, irrelevant, almost farcical", whilst "a shared guilt" should "bind us" and reveal "a shared responsibility" such that "either we react and act together as 'one', or we will perish and, with us, the Earth as we know it."[45] Sparing no strong language, Jonas concluded his 1993 speech as follows:

> In the old days religion told us that we were all sinners because of the original sin. Today it is our planet's ecology that accuses all of us of being sinners because of the overexploitation of human ingenuity. Back in the old days, religion terrified us with the Last Judgment at the end of times. Today our tortured planet predicts the coming of that day without any divine intervention. The final revelation... is the silent scream emerging from things themselves, those things that we must endeavour to resolve to rein in our powers over the world, or we shall die on this desolate earth which used to be the creation.[46]

Consistently with the secularised character of modernity, the ancient images of fear, doom and damnation would seem to have found for Jonas new, modern faces. It is difficult to disagree with him. Throughout the 20th century, our planet's environment was spoiled by the scientifically and technologically assisted processes of financing, extraction, production, transportation, marketing, consumption and disposal of the goods traded worldwide.

The spoliation denounced by Jonas has persisted in the 2000s. With the exception of occasional lower carbon emissions in the EU and the reduction in the thinning of the planet's ozone layer—protected since 1989 by a unique piece of top-down international legislation—none of the other basic dimensions of the Earth's biosphere has been spared by the enduring combined processes mentioned above. Not the planet's forests; not its marine flora and fauna; not its hydrologic cycles; not its sources of fresh water; not its top-soil mantle; not its biodiversity; not its air quality. These are the essential ecological dimensions upon which humankind relies for the satisfaction of its most basic and universal vital needs, such as

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 47–8.
[44] Ibid., 48.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 48–9.

breathing, eating and drinking. They are the "things themselves" that, according to Jonas, "scream" because of the "overexploitation of human ingenuity."[47]

Life-blind Economics

Confronted with the twin crises of our day, the UN's Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (b. 1944) denounced on the 22nd May 2009: "The economic and financial turmoil sweeping the globe is a true wake-up call, sounding an alarm about the need to improve upon old patterns of growth and make a transition to a new era of greener, cleaner development."[48] Evidently, twenty years after the collapse of the ecologically dubious experiments of Soviet Union and its satellite countries, "things themselves" keep screaming at us.

Moreover, if we look at the world today, Jonas' "waste attendant upon the mechanics of competition" and "the nonsense of a market production aimed at consumer titillation" have actually increased over the same decades.[49] They now affect even Earth's most populous country, which is nominally one of the few Marxist regimes still standing: the People's Republic of China. As amply shown in words and practice, contemporary Chinese enterprises and the Chinese government have accepted profit as a valid motive for human agency, as well as capitalist competition on the international markets as a crucial goal for the nation's economic policies. What is more, by being a willing recipient of highly polluting industries and a provider of cheap labour on unhealthy and hazardous workplaces, contemporary China offers concrete examples of the life-destructiveness of for-profit economic activity.[50]

We need not gaze upon China to observe this sort of life-destructiveness, though. Wherever "competition" and "market production" are in place, the causal nexus between the pursuit of profit and life-destruction is given away each and every time the business community and/or its political representation opposes and/or circumvents environmental and/or health-and-safety regulation, and/or effective enforcement thereof. "Costs", "rigidity" and "competitiveness" are the usual slogans that demonstrate the inability to consider, or the eventual unwillingness to take aboard, any substantive life-based considerations that may endanger profitability, such as the long-term environmental sustainability of the industrial or financial processes involved, the wellbeing of future generations, or the mental health of the societies affected by the same industrial and/or financial processes. Sales rule, not vital parameters—*ergo* Ban Ki-moon's hope for "transition to a new era of greener, cleaner development."

Most revealing of the etiological nexus between the pursuit of profit and life-destruction is the way in which the governments of liberal countries such as the US and the UK spent the years following the international financial collapse of 2008 bailing out private banks that were co-responsible for the ongoing global economic downturn. By this policy alone, these governments made sure that otherwise failed banks would retain or recover profitability, while at the same

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[47] Hans Jonas paid no heed to the deniers of climate change. In this book, I follow his lead.

[48] Ki-moon Ban, *UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's message for the World Environment Day*, 2009, SG/SM/12265ENV/DEV/1055 OBV/788.

[49] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 145.

[50] Andrew Jacobs, "In China, Pollution Worsens Despite New Efforts", *The New York Times,* 28th July 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/29/world/asia/29china.html>.

time thinning or withdrawing public resources from life-protective and life-enabling institutions (e.g. healthcare facilities, public education, wildlife protection, international aid) in order to fund the bailouts themselves, protect the money-measured value of existing assets, servicing debt, and display an attractive profile to treasury bond holders, amongst whom are the bailed-out banks themselves.[51]

Environmentally and vitally sound restrictions upon business activities do exist, and sometimes they are thoroughly applied too. Nevertheless, the crux is that no intrinsic life-based restriction is deducible from the profit-driven machinery of the global economy *per se*. As both the jargon of standard neoclassical economics and concrete economic activity reveal incessantly and ordinarily, human beings, plants, animals, water aquifers and ecosystems are mere "externalities" to the economic processes; and external do they remain unless they are translated into:

(A) "[C]osts" (e.g. novel tax burdens, fines by monitoring authorities); or
(B) "[B]usiness opportunities", whether these be found in
    (B1) Life-enabling forms (e.g. increased labour productivity by safe and secure workers, ecotourism, organic farming, innovative recycling methods), or
    (B2) Life-disabling forms (e.g. child labour, pesticide-protected monocultures, factory-farmed chickens, plastic-bottled water and greenhouse-effect-increasing mining operations in glacier-free Greenland).

Treating life and the living either as external or as instrumental, it comes as no surprise that a very large number of economic "commodities" are extremely "incommodious" to life and the living, such as junk food, cigarettes, carcinogenic construction materials and speculative financial products.

Emblematically, former White House economic advisor and World Bank Chief Economist Lawrence—"Larry"—H. Summers (b. 1954) asserted on this point: "the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable, and we should face up to that."[52] An orthodox heir to the received views of classical and neoclassical liberalism, he too fails to acknowledge life's intrinsic worth, going instead by the lifeless "mechanics of competition" denounced by Jonas. Under this perspective, life's value is, *au fond*, instrumental.

History bears ample witness to this fact. From Charles Dickens' (1812−1870) England to today's China, environmental and workplace-related life-saving restrictions have been imposed upon the market economy from the outside. For example, it was the combined action of Christians, socialists, chartists and compassionate or enlightened capitalists like Robert Owen (1771−1858) that made it possible for the 19th-century British factory system, so vividly described by Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky (1821−1881) in his 1863 travel diaries as a man-eating "Baal", to become the life-provider of the West celebrated by Austrian economists Ludwig von

[51] This phenomenon has come to be known under the simple term "austerity".

[52] Lawrence H. Summers, "The Memo" [internal memorandum circulated on 12th December 1991], <http://www.whirledbank.org/ourwords/summers.html>; cf. also Kevin Smith, "'Obscenity' of Carbon Trading", *BBC News*, 4th April 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/6132826.stm>.

Mises (1881−1973) and Friedrich A. Hayek.[53] Back then, right-thinking liberals like Herbert Spencer (1820−1903) and his many followers criticised loudly as unwarranted State interference in market equilibria nearly all the primeval forms of welfare provision that had been surfacing across the industrialised nations, especially in the final decades of the century:[54]

> [T]o administer charity, to teach children their lessons, to adjust prices of food, to inspect coal-mines., to regulate railways, to superintend house-building, to arrange cab-fares, to look into people's stink-traps, to vaccinate their children, to send out emigrants, to prescribe hours of labor, to examine lodging-houses, to test the knowledge of mercantile captains, to provide public libraries, to read and authorize dramas, to inspect passenger-ships, to see that small dwellings are supplied with water, to regulate endless things from a banker's issues down to the boat-fares on the Serpentine.[55]

Echoing Spencer's biocidal conception of market freedom, Harvard economist Larry Summers argues that the developing nations are countries in which the inhabitants are paid "the lowest wages" and die younger than "people" in richer nations, who instead "survive to get prostrate cancer", despite the developing nations' natural environments being "UNDER-polluted… compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City".[56] Consequently, the same developing nations are also the countries in which "health impairing pollution" can be "done… [at] the lowest cost", for such already poorer and shorter-lived populations have less to lose, i.e. they have lower "foregone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality".[57]

Summers' memo does not address the fact that such an impeccable logic, if followed, would also be self-reinforcing, hence condemning shorter-lived populations to remain shorter-lived. Equally, the likely damages to the natural environments caused by the sort of trade advocated by Summers are not considered either, despite their obvious economic implications: mired in growing polluted environments and worsened health, developing nations would never become developed, whilst developed nations would accrue an even bigger advantage over the developing ones. Reconsidering the validity of economic categories of thought producing such an "impeccable logic" in light of their paradoxical implications is not something that Summers is willing to do.

What Summers does in his memo, instead, is to follow such categories of thought to the utmost and therefore reduce the scope of conceivable socio-economic relations to short-term, horizontal, two-party exchanges, that is, to commutations. A species of particular justice, commutative justice is all the justice that Summers can conceive of. There is no awareness of the

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[53] Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky, *Note invernali su impressioni estive*, translated by Serena Prina, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993, 49.

[54] The inherently homicidal character of liberalism has deep historical roots. Consider, for example, the classical liberal Drummond professor of political economy William Nassau Senior (1790–1864) who, when told that a million Irishmen had already died in the potato famine (1845–1849), famously replied: "It is not enough!"—the iron law of supply and demand had not yet run its full course (cf. US economist Michael Hudson, "Breakup of the euro?" (26th May 2011), <http://michael-hudson.com/2011/05/eu-politics-financialized-economies-privatized/>).

[55] Herbert Spencer, *The Man* versus *the State*, Caldwell: The Caxton Press, 1960, 162 (published originally in 1884).

[56] Lawrence H. Summers, "The Memo".

[57] Ibid.

different allocations of resources, or of the rights and duties that would be required in order to level the playing field on which wealthy and poor nations enter into contractual exchanges. There is, in short, no awareness of the fair redistributions demanded by the logically corresponding latter kind of particular justice, i.e. distributive justice, as recognised long ago by Aristotle (384–322 BC) or the natural law tradition (e.g. by means of international cooperation, productive credit provisions, fair trade, etc.).

Nor is there any notion of general or social justice, whereby any community, in order to function properly, is owed first of all continued good environmental conditions, enforced good laws and adequate fiscal resources in view of both the present and the future common good. Such genuine goods can be obtained *via* well-meaning cooperation with other communities, not *via* the exploitative and plausibly lethal exchanges advocated by Larry Summers.[58] Summers is actually so blind to general or social justice, as to write "'[d]irty' industries" between quotation marks, i.e. as though polluting and health-damaging dirt were not as real an issue as the profits that the polluters can make.[59] Similarly, he describes "a clean environment" and "pretty air" for "aesthetic and health reasons" as matters of "demand", i.e. as tradable goods to be bought and sold by contractual parties, rather than as mandatory preconditions for a well-functioning society aiming at the common good.[60] Life, whether individual, collective, local and global, is itself reduced to a matter of profitable trade, which is *ipso facto* regarded as more valuable.

The history of Lawrence Summers's infamous memorandum is also intriguing *per se*. After the memo was leaked to the public in February 1992, Brazil's Secretary of the Environment José Lutzenburger (1926–2002) sent the following comments to Larry Summers, who was back then at the helm of the economists' team at the World Bank: "Your reasoning is perfectly logical but totally insane... Your thoughts [provide] a concrete example of the unbelievable alienation, reductionist thinking, social ruthlessness and the arrogant ignorance of many conventional 'economists' concerning the nature of the world we live in... If the World Bank keeps you as vice president it will lose all credibility."[61] Lutzenburger lost his job shortly after writing his letter. Larry Summers, instead, was appointed in 1999 the U.S. Treasury Secretary, and later became President of his *alma mate*r, where he still teaches *qua* Professor and Director of the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government. No better example of what constitutes mainstream, self-rewarding, well-paid, life-blind, right-thinking orthodoxy could be concocted.

Nonetheless, facing prolonged media inquiries and some political backlash, Summers has been trying to disavow it.[62] In the late 1990s, a former young member of Summers' staff at the World Bank and soon-to-be colleague of his at Harvard—the economist Lant Pritchett—claimed to be the actual author of the memo, which he had merely shown and given to Summers to sign, its tone being sarcastic, its aim being to spur internal debate, and its leaked version having been

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[58] Cf. Arthur Fridolin Utz, *Wirtschaftsethik* (Bonn: Scientia Humana Institut, 1994) for a concise and precise articulation of the Aristotelian-Thomist notion of justice (i.e. particular—distributive and commutative—and general or social) and its application to modern economic orders.

[59] Lawrence H. Summers, "The Memo".

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Cf. "Harvard Students Rip New President Lawrence Summers on Toxic Waste Memo", *Boston Globe*, 13 March 2001.

used malevolently to discredit Summers and the World Bank.[63] Whatever the case, which reminds one of the popular TV series *House of Cards*, the memo crystallises poignantly the callous character of laissez-faire liberalism and, whether sarcastic or not, it has been taken seriously by many scholars, including economists affiliated with the libertarian Cato Institute.[64]

The Earth's Life Support Systems

Today's environmentalism in its many manifestations, including Jonas' own contribution, is attempting to counter and/or integrate precisely this short-term-oriented, self-maximising perspective of theoretical and practical economic agents and let them grasp fully, not to say resolve, the aetiology of the ongoing ecological collapse. Without external assistance, these agents are quite simply blind to the biological and ecological requirements of life, despite presupposing them throughout their operations.

In a forward-looking attempt to assess and revise "old patterns of growth" and promote the "greener, cleaner development" advocated by UN's Secretary-General Ban, UNESCO had already established in 2002 the world's largest source of information on sustainable development currently available to scholars and governments worldwide. This source, as seen in the first part of this book, is EOLSS, which defines its study object as follows:

> A life support system is any natural or human-engineered (constructed or made) system that furthers the life of the biosphere in a sustainable fashion. The fundamental attribute of life support systems is that together they provide all of the sustainable needs required for continuance of life. These needs go far beyond biological requirements. Thus life support systems encompass natural environmental systems as well as ancillary social systems required to foster societal harmony, safety, nutrition, medical care, economic standards, and the development of new technology. The one common thread in all of these systems is that they operate in partnership with the conservation of global natural resources.[65]

The definition of LSS supplied and endorsed by UNESCO acknowledges two main typologies. On the one hand, there are natural LSS, such as the hydrological cycles of the planet and the oceans' plankton-based ecosystems. On the other hand, there are LSS created and maintained by collective human agency, such as the nations' educational institutions and the UN treaty bodies assessing and fostering the enforcement of ratified human rights covenants. Together, these two typologies of LSS embrace and draw attention to those ecological and social dimensions upon which human life depends for its very being and/or wellbeing.

Qua EOLSS' Honorary Theme Editor, John McMurtry refers to all LSS on Earth as "civil commons". This notion, which has become part of the technical armoury of Anglophone social

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[63] Cf. "Toxic Memo", *Harvard Magazine*, 5 January 2001.

[64] Cf. Jay Johnson, Gary Pecquet and Leon Taylor, "Potential Gains from Trade in Dirty Industries: Revisiting Lawrence Summers' Memo", *Cato Journal*, 27, 3 (2007): 397–410.

[65] UNESCO, *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*, "Definitions", 2002, § 2.

scientists, comprises all "social constructs which enable universal access to life goods".[66] According to McMurtry—and consistently with Jonas' assessment of humankind's mastery over nature and over itself—both natural LSS and those created and maintained by collective agency are civil commons. Insofar as all LSS are acknowledged and conceptualised as LSS, and insofar as all LSS require human protection, promotion or recovery, then all LSS are socially constructed in order to secure and/or foster human life.

There are, in other words, no LSS that can be left outside the scope of our life-serving social forms of consciousness, agency and regulation, unless any such LSS have not yet been recognised as LSS. In this perspective, we can appreciate why McMurtry lists a most diverse and far-reaching variety of civil commons:

> [C]ommon sewers, international outrage over Vietnam or Ogoniland, sidewalks and footpaths, the Chinese concept of jen, the Jubilee of Leviticus… water fountains, Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest… old age pensions, universal education, Sweden's common forests… the second commandment of Yeshua… the rule of law, child and women shelters, parks, public broadcasting, clean water… the UN Declaration of Human Rights… village and city squares, the Brazilian rainforests, inoculation programmes, indigenous story-telling, the Ozone Protocol, the Tao, the peace movement, death rituals, animal rights agencies, community fish-habitats, food and drug legislation, garbage collection, the ancient village commons before enclosures.[67]

As tokens of socially conceived LSS, all of the civil commons listed above contain a single defining function. All of them are concerned with securing life means to all the members of a community whose members' wellbeing depends on them. Also, taken together, all of these tokens of civil commons indicate how deep and how broad in both time and space can be the "life ground", which is defined below.

The Life Ground

According to McMurtry, the life ground is "concretely, all that is required to take the next breath; axiologically, all the life support systems required for human life to reproduce or develop."[68] UNESCO's LSS are understood by him as denoting those civil commons that humankind has established conceptually and/or materially in different times and places in order to secure universally the means necessary for human life to continue and, possibly, blossom.

Given that all value depends ontologically upon such LSS/civil commons, McMurtry attributes the highest importance to them: "Life support systems – any natural or human-made system without which human beings cannot live or live well – may or may not have value in

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[66] John McMurtry, "What is Good? What is Bad? The Value of All Values across Time, Place and Theories", *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*, 2009–2010, § 5.34.10.
[67] John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, 206–7.
[68] John McMurtry, "What is Good? What is Bad?", Glossary.

themselves, but have *ultimate* value so far as they are that without which human or other life cannot exist or flourish."[69]

As regards the understanding of life, McMurtry discusses three main ontological modalities in which life regularly unfolds within and across living individuals, that is to say:

(1) "[A]ction" (also called "biological movement" or "motility");
(2) "[E]xperience" (also called "feeling" or "felt being"); and
(3) "[T]hought.[70]

No ontological dualism or radical disunity is involved: "Although we can distinguish the cognitive and feeling capacities of any person, this does not mean dividing them into separate worlds as has occurred in the traditional divisions between mind and body, reason and the emotions. Life-value onto-axiology begins from *their unity as the nature of the human organism*."[71] Henceforth, actual civil commons protect and promote life as action (e.g. legal standards for nourishing food, public provision of potable water), felt being (e.g. freedom from fear *via* job security, counselling services for the youth), and/or thought (e.g. increased access to academic institutions, independent media).

Civil commons are to accomplish their life-grounded task whilst having genuine vital needs as the baseline criterion. As McMurtry explains: "'n' is a need if and only if, and to the extent that, deprivation of n always leads to a reduction of organic capacity."[72] It is only that without which life capacity is harmed that may count as a real need. We can survive and perhaps even flourish without cars and computer gadgets, but we can hardly take another step without nourishment, protection from natural elements, regular sleep, or temporally sustained participation in inter-subjective networks such as families and human communities.[73]

In connection with the notions of "civil commons", "life ground" and "need", McMurtry's "Basic Well-Being Index" (WBI) aims at identifying the complete and universal set of goods serving vital needs. These are the needs that must be met in order for human life to be possible and its genuine fulfilment attainable; the corresponding life goods being:

1. Air quality
2. Access to clean water
3. Sufficient nourishing food
4. Security of habitable housing
5. Opportunity to perform meaningful service or work of value to others
6. Available learning opportunity to the level of qualification
7. Healthcare when ill

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[69] Ibid., § 6.2.1 (emphasis in the original).
[70] Ibid., Glossary.
[71] Ibid., § 6.3 (emphasis in the original).
[72] John McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms*, 164.
[73] Human needs balance mutually, as argued in Noonan' book entitled *Democratic Society and Human Needs* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill's-Queen's University Press, 2006). For example, the need for water is balanced out by the need to urinate; whilst the need to be educated can only turn into pathological solipsism if it is not balanced out by the needs to rest and socialise.

8. Temporally and physically available healthy environmental space for leisure, social interaction and recreation.[74]

McMurtry's WBI exists in a variety of slightly different versions and constitutes his most visible contribution to the establishment of socio-metrics for human wellbeing, along the lines of the life-capabilities approach championed since the 1980s by Amartya Sen (b. 1933) and Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947).[75]

However, the WBI does not wish to be solely a standard of evaluation that integrates those of mainstream economics. The WBI serves also the end of pinpointing fundamental dimensions of human existence—namely the life ground—that are threatened by mainstream economic activity and the comprehension of which is obfuscated by mainstream economics. As McMurtry observes: "Claimed 'economic goods' which disable or do not enable life abilities are not means of life; they are economic 'bads'".[76] Machine guns, conversion of bio-diverse forests into monocultures, and global-insecurity-creating securitisation packages are not good. They may maximise, in the short term, the revenues of select economic agents, which is why they are regarded as valid and positively valuable in both current economic theory and practice. Nevertheless, like slave labour in previous centuries, speculation on prime agricultural sources of nourishing carbohydrates and toxic industrial chemicals such as oxirane, glyphosate and ethylenedibromide are bad, because they unquestionably reduce existing as well as possible wider ranges of action, felt being and thought. Albeit these items of trade may satisfy someone's preferences, they fail to satisfy another's fundamental and, from a life-grounded standpoint, axiologically prior need.

Aware of the recurring and avoidable destruction of life in current market economies, McMurtry concludes that the ongoing threat to living creatures and ecosystems is so deep, pervasive and unchallenged, that the oncologic paradigm is the best way to explain it.

First of all, McMurtry describes the logic of economic activity as the relentless generation of money returns to money investors. This is, in essence, the founding principle of so-called "free-market" activity. Reducible to this principle are, in his view, all those common expressions of economic commendation, which are often presented as value-neutral scientific descriptors, such as "wealth", "efficiency", "competitiveness", "productivity", "growth" and "development". Guided by this founding principle, profit-pursuits replicate themselves across Earth's societies and ecosystems through sequences of investments and returns mimicking the pathological self-replication of cancerous cells.

Secondly, like cancerous cells, the relentless profit-driven sequences of the global economy show no self-limitation for the sake of the host body's organic wellbeing. Indeed, these sequences are expected to proceed without limit, for all economic agents are assumed to be self-maximising indefinitely: their craving for more knows no satiety. Thus, not even the planet's

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[74] John McMurtry, *Value Wars*, 156.

[75] Cf. Martha Nussbaum, "Nature, Functioning and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 6, suppl., 1988, 145–84 and Amartya Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities*, Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1985.

[76] John McMurtry, "Principles of the Good Life: The Primary Theorems of Economic Reason", 2005 [Unpublished manuscript circulated amongst EOLSS contributors].

environmental meltdown, to which they contribute decisively, serves as a stopping point. As conducive to "growth" as they may be for the standard conception of economic activity, regular profit-pursuits lack any alternative or deeper guiding principle grounded in life, that is to say, in those biological, ecological and social conditions that are needed for human life to continue and, if possible, flourish. The host body, i.e. Earth's ecosystems and societies, is therefore bound to suffer and it might even die because of them, for they are blind to the host's needs: "The system is by its inner logic a horizonlessly expanding money-demand machine engineering all that lives to extract more money value from it, to reduce the costs of continuing its existence, or to extinguish it as of no money worth."[77]

The unrestrained self-replication of profit-sequences is profoundly anti-economic too. In the long run, the unstopped sprawling of profit-pursuits disrupts the natural and the social fabric underpinning any stable economic activity fostering human and humane development. This is no novel or radical realisation. Long ago, in the wake of the calculating mentality of the revolutionary liberal man of commerce, Edmund Burke (1729−1797) had already feared for the survival of those religious and moral values that had made Europe great: "Even commerce, and trade, and manufacture, the gods of our economical politicians, are… themselves but effects, which as first causes, we choose to worship. They certainly grew under the same shade in which learning flourished. They too may decay with their natural protecting principles."[78] Today, faced with the environmental spoliation of the planet, John McMurtry fears for the survival of that invaluable source of all values, which makes everything human possible, economic activity included: the life ground.

The oncologic paradigm may appear hyperbolic, at least *prima facie*, not unlike Jonas' own depiction of an approaching man-made apocalypse. Yet, as substantiated by the ongoing ecological and economic crises recognised by none less than Ban Ki-moon himself, the effects of the theoretically endless, non-satiable self-replication of profit-pursuits have been detrimental to life at many different levels of analysis:

- Since the dawn of the industrial revolution in the Atlantic nations, the Earth's LSS have been put under unprecedented pressure, whether by contamination or overexploitation of underground aquifers, pollution-caused cancers, or desertification and loss of arable soil;
- Despite or even because of new scientific discoveries and technological applications, this pressure has mounted further during the latter half of the 20th century, to the point of being acknowledged as a threat to human survival by scientific and diplomatic bodies at the highest levels of international representation;
- Fuelled by finance-driven globalisation, this pressure has extended in recent decades to several of those life-protecting and life-enhancing social civil commons that had been developed by previous generations as instruments to steer the course, and select the effects of, otherwise life-unprincipled profit-pursuits. As a result, life-destructive social phenomena have become commonplace worldwide, such as:
    - Sudden meltdowns of countries that deregulated capital and currency trade;

[77] John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, 242.
[78] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1791, § 134, <http://bartelby.org/24/3/>.

- The disappearance of allegedly expensive public housing programmes;
- Selloffs of and/or cuts to publicly provided culture, education, sanitation, environmental protection, health-and-safety monitoring and healthcare;
- Privatised hence less inclusive and legally less regulated security provision, both domestic and international;
- Privatised hence less secure old-age pension schemes; and
- Reduced and less secure occupational options and/or longer working hours in countries affected by stress-related yet profitable increases in mental ill-health.

Representatively, as the last example in the list is concerned, one of Argentina's leading experts in medical science has recently remarked:

> According to neoliberal dogma, the market is the perfect allocator of resources and the ideal arbiter of priorities and policies. Beginning in the unfortunate decade of the 80's, the market, in both general society and in health, weakened labor, increased unemployment, dismantled universal social coverage, lowered salaries, reduced public health expenditures, privatized services, mandated user fees, and decreased supervision of private health care providers and of the pharmaceutical industry. All these initiatives deteriorated the collective physical health. As to mental health, the replacement of more or less predictable individual lives with the uncertainties and unpredictability of unchecked market forces quite clearly deteriorated it.[79]

The profitable reconstruction of mental illness and ill-health further exemplifies Jonas' own recognition of the fact that the scientific-technological apparatus that has been responsible for the sustained demographic boom of modern nations, both capitalist and Marxist, can be utterly blind to life and to the causes of its depletion.

In combination with this recognition, McMurtry's oncologic paradigm elucidates why the same can be said of other complex social apparatus that are institutionally committed to the common good. For instance, over the past few decades, democratic governments, research centres and central banks have regularly failed to acknowledge the ongoing assault on life-protective and life-enhancing civil commons. Almost without exception, these civil bodies have cooperated with the assailant, namely with the endless replication of profit-pursuits, as amply exemplified by:

- Conceptualising public investments in education or healthcare as costs;
- Conceptualising and dismantling life-protecting regulation as 'red tape';
- Addressing business ethics as yet another instrument towards higher profits;
- Dismantling the currency trade regulations implemented after the experience of the Great Depression and its mass-murderous political offshoots, i.e. fascism and World War II (WWII);

[79] José C. Escudero, "What is Said, What is Silenced, What is Obscured: The Report of the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health", *Social Medicine*, 4(3), 2009, 183.

- Interpreting "rights" in trade treaties solely as a subset of civil rights concerning property and contracts;
- Conflating life-grounded terms such as "wellbeing" and "prosperity" with life-decoupled economic "growth" and "efficiency"; and
- Fostering the privatisation of public banks and other public assets guaranteeing a steady flow of revenues to the public purse that sustains the nations' civil commons.

According to McMurtry, this sort of recurrent institutional behaviour shows how many of societies' long-established life-aimed agencies have given further proof of the cancer-like character of standard economic reality. Specifically, they have acted analogously to the immune defences of a living organism that did not detect the presence of self-replicating cancerous cells as pathological and therefore facilitated their ominous self-replication. These institutions' ties to the life ground, from which they all emerged and upon which they rely for their continued existence, have been either forgotten or tragically misunderstood.

Good Political Conservatism

The emphasis placed upon the role of public institutions and public resources might suggest that McMurtry's onto-axiology is incompatible with so-called "free market" economies, whose cancer stage he denounces so forcefully. This incompatibility subsists as current implementations of such economies are concerned, but it is not a logical necessity. From a life-grounded perspective, which economic system is in place is not of crucial importance. What matters, instead, is that life-capabilities are protected and promoted. The obligations derived from the recognition of the paramount character of vital human needs concern the results, not the means. From a life-grounded perspective, any economic system is successful if and only if: "[It] secure[s] provision of means of life otherwise in short supply (i.e. the production and distribution of goods and the protection of ecosystem services which are otherwise scarce or made scarce through time)."[80]

If properly selected and aptly regulated "free markets" were able to deliver these means of life universally and across generations, then such "free markets" would be successful. Yet, as far as the prevailing version of "free markets" has been assessed, this delivery has not taken place to an adequate degree, which explains Ban Ki-moon's emblematic call for "transition" as recently as in 2009. Proposing more of the same alleged "development", dubbed variously as a "return to growth" or renewed "efficiency" and "competitiveness", means proposing further life-blindness and likely life-destruction, which increased logging of pluvial forests and austerity programmes exemplify respectively in both so-called "developing" countries and "developed" ones.

Indeed, long before Ban and the current global economic crisis, Jonas had already concluded that the very survival of humankind as we know it had been put into question by the now predominant liberal model of economic activity. Alternatives are therefore *needed* in the genuine sense of the word, for life is at stake in its biological and ecological preconditions. The planet's

[80] John McMurtry, "Principles of the Good Life".

LSS are in peril; and if "free markets" are incapable of distinguishing between good and bad, then someone else will have to do it for them.

Given the current conditions of world affairs and the history of the world's modern nations, public bodies appear to be the most plausible institutions invested with the power or, at least, the legitimacy required to perform this service. After all, they have already provided it on previous occasions, such as the already-mentioned international agreement on the ozone layer. Elected governments, publicly funded monitoring bodies and courts of law can and ought to, *inter alia*, function *qua* civil commons. This vital function of theirs is particularly urgent if Jonas' fears for the continued existence of our species are realistic. Clearly, EOLSS' expert founders and contributors testify to these fears.

Under the current socio-economic conditions, it is difficult to get such potentially life-serving institutions to operate as genuine civil commons. We live in a world dominated by the TINA-like demands of for-profit 'free' market agency in practice—a first contradiction—and yet devoted in theory to democratic and postmodern 'pluralist' difference—a second contradiction.[81] With the exception of so-called "subjective" and "individual" market choices, any alternative determination of good and evil is looked upon with suspicion, especially if it claims to be "objective", which McMurtry does in fact claim, since he cannot imagine how there could be any pluralism, any democracy, any economy, any value, indeed anything human at all, without the life ground.

Obstacles notwithstanding, McMurtry's axiology has been made available by UNESCO to individuate a sharp, principled way to discern what is good from what is bad, while having sustainable development in mind as the northern star for collective decision-making. As it is stated in the central paragraph of his 2009−2010 EOLSS Theme Essay, "*X is value if and only if and to the extent that x consists in or enables a more coherently inclusive range of thought/experience/action*", while "*X is disvalue if and only if and to the extent that x reduces/disables a range of thought/experience/action*."

In short, that which allows for life to persist and flourish is good. That which does not is bad. Such is the core of McMurtry's onto-axiology. A thorough discussion of the two axioms above would exceed the limits of the present work. Hopefully, it suffices here to stress how McMurtry's life ground entails that a good economic system:

(1) Must secure the provision of vital goods for as many citizens (ideally all of them) and for as long a time as possible (sustainability being no short-term goal); and

(2) It must generate the conditions for a fuller enjoyment of life along the same spatio-temporal coordinates.

Whereas (1) indicates that which is most important in order to live, (2) points towards the conditions for living well. Unless a cruel fate or human callousness dictates otherwise, the ideal horizon of the human person is cast well beyond the mere level of vital needs. We do engage regularly and recurrently in both actions and interactions that, it is hoped, will enrich us

[81] In the 1970s, UK's trade unionists coined the acronym "TINA" to ridicule PM Margaret Thatcher's (1925–2013) catchphrase "There Is No Alternative", *pace* her frequent references to "liberty" and "freedom".

physically (action), spiritually (felt being) and intellectually (thought), thus making our life worth living.

Human communities have established a great variety of civil commons that aim not solely at securing access to basic goods such as food, care and shelter, but also to those goods that make us more human, if not better humans, such as education, sports and the arts.[82] Additionally, it is hoped too that the enrichment enjoyed by each agent may extend to her communities, which have constructed and/or allowed for the performance of such actions and interactions. The "free market" itself has been justified in this way, insofar as a providential "invisible hand" is said to combine market agents' individual pursuits into collective wellbeing—the persisting failure of which is what Jonas and McMurtry highlight in their works. The life ground discloses in principle which praxes and policies may be genuinely enabling and which, instead, disabling.

Conservatism, in each of its many declinations, is therefore good if it serves life, i.e. if it *conserves* those LSS that enable universal access to life goods and foster action, felt being and thought. It is bad if it reduces access to these goods or destroys them and/or the conditions for their production and reproduction through time. In more concrete terms, good conservatism endeavours to *conserve* genuine civil commons, such as:

- The planet's ecosystems;
- The public centres of universal schooling and education at their different levels of complexity and achievement;
- The local theatres and community libraries that have disseminated culture for generations;
- The hospitals and healthcare facilities that have provided care to the infirm in urban and rural areas;
- The laws and regulations that have steered economic activities towards the construction of healthier, longer-living, more cohesive and peaceful nations;
- The policing and law-enforcing institutions that have granted security to citizens, guests and visitors of modern states; and
- The moral virtues and religious piety that inspire life-enabling attitudes and behaviours such as mutual respect, justice, compassion, solidarity and humaneness.

From a life-grounded perspective, good conservatism conserves the international community's longstanding official commitment to the rights enshrined and ratified in life-enabling centrepieces of worldwide legislation such as the ICCPR and the ICESCR. Bad conservatism does the opposite of all this.

If an individual can lose sight of what is good or cause harm in the pursuit of a misconstrued good, so can conservatism fail in conserving the conditions for the preservation and extension of the given ranges of thought/experience/action. This is what has happened to today's most popular form of self-proclaimed conservative political ideology, i.e. neoliberalism. Jonas' work substantiated the notion whereby the application of this ideology during the 20th century proved

[82] Cf. Jeff Noonan, *Democratic Society and Human Needs*: the history of democracy is a history of rising civil commons.

ecologically unsustainable, analogously to its political counterpart, namely Soviet Marxism. McMurtry's work further helps to comprehend the reasons for this failure: insofar as neoliberalism accepts wholeheartedly and unwaveringly the main tenets of standard ("neoclassical") economics, then it is conceptually unequipped to tackle human needs and life-grounded considerations. Furthermore, as exemplified by Robert Nozick (1938−2002), one of the most representative theoreticians of this ideology, neoliberalism has been capable of arguing positively that actual life is of secondary importance, especially *vis-à-vis* the abstract right to own life goods privately:[83] "[A] right to life is not a right to whatever one needs to live; other people may have rights over these other things. At most, a right to life would be a right to have or strive for whatever one needs to live, provided that having it does not violate anyone else's rights.[84]

No equally biocidal theory and practice is retrievable in Jonas' streak of conservatism, or certainly not as patently. Responsible prudence was, for Jonas, the fundamental move in the right direction, not the primacy of property rights or of any particular economic system. A religious man, Jonas revered nature as God's creation, not man's parcelling and ownership of it, which can find adequate justification in much conservative thought, but as a means to a higher end (e.g. Thomism), not only as an end in itself or as a supreme social value (e.g. Objectivism).[85]

Quite the reverse, Jonas concerned himself with the risks associated with continuing in the fast-paced "melioration" of humanity by science-technology, which he concluded to be conducive to what he termed a "suicide". All other political considerations were subsidiary to this prime concern: preventing humankind's suicide. By choosing so forceful a formulation, Jonas' appeal for the establishment of a political morality centred upon responsibility selected life as the ultimate ground of value available to human comprehension.

Grounding humankind's hopes for salvation in life was no random case or unreflective circumstance on Jonas' part. On the contrary, Jonas did believe that it is from the phenomenon of life that morality and, *a fortiori*, responsibility emerge. According to him, there exists a "timeless archetype of all responsibility, the parental for the child", which can be retrieved in all historical and human settings, despite apparent exceptions to and variations of parental care.[86] This timeless archetype is the one paradigm for moral action that ought to apply to all spheres and roles of human existence requiring responsibility, such as "the artist [*vis-à-vis*] his work" and "*the statesman* [*vis-à-vis*] *the state*".[87] Jonas claims the "timeless archetype of all responsibility" embodied in parental care to be nothing less than "an ontic paradigm in which the plain factual 'is' evidently coincides with an 'ought'—which does not, therefore, admit for itself the concept of a 'mere is' at all."[88] As he argues: "We can point at the most familiar sight: the newborn,

[83] It should be noted that property rights extend to social institutions such as non-living for-profit legal persons, i.e. the modern corporation, to which belongs the lion's share of contemporary world trade.
[84] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, New York: Basic Books, 1974, 179.
[85] Cf. Arthur Fridolin Utz, *Wirtschaftsethik*.
[86] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 130.
[87] Ibid., 100–1 (emphasis added).
[88] Ibid., 130.

whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely to take care of him."[89]

Even if we may explain away this ontic—i.e. lived or experienced—paradigm by means of some inhumane exercise in abstract sceptical reason—hence bringing it to the onto-logical level—the new-born's breath of life is bound to reverberate in our flesh, in our heart, in the deepest and most diverse depths of our being. The new-born's breath is a powerful, natural statement of absolute value; it is an embodied categorical call for responsibility. As Jonas wrote: "Here the plain being of a *de facto* existent immanently and evidently contains an ought for others, and would so even if nature would not succour this ought with powerful instincts or assume its job alone."[90]

Concluding Remarks

In his appeal to the "timeless archetype" of parental care, as well as in his opposition to humankind's overingenious ongoing suicide, Jonas' philosophy resonates forcefully with life-value onto-axiology, despite the personal, chronological, and theoretical differences between Jonas and McMurtry. In this archetype, our ties to the life ground are not severed, but revealed and set as the benchmark for informed, reasoned deliberation. Science-technology is itself assessed in connection with life-grounded concerns and Jonas' reformulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative is most explicit on this point: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine life… Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life." Or also, "[i]n your present choice, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will."[91]

Jonas' philosophy is crystal-clear on life's axiological primacy, as also are his condemnation of the planet's plundering by irresponsible human beings and his qualified acceptance of illness, aging, suffering and death as conducive to a fuller appreciation of life. On the one hand, plundering the Earth that we have inherited endangers life as action and, with it, the preconditions for all felt being and thought. On the other hand, the awareness and the experience of our mortality are seen by Jonas as instrumental toward acquiring a richer feeling of aliveness and a deeper understanding of life's intrinsic value. All three ontological modalities of life individuated by McMurtry are present and foundational in Jonas' call for responsibility and prudence, which wishes to secure "the future wholeness of Man." In the end, whether Jonas' reinterpreted Kantian Categorical Imperative can be easily instantiated in each specific case or not, the basic parameters for evaluation are such that life's needs and value are clearly posited as primary and paramount. By application of life-value onto-axiology, Jonas' conservatism is likely to be good.

[89] Ibid., 131.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., 11.

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