

## The Limits of Tolerance and Responsibility

**Abstract:** This article examines the limits of tolerance through the lens of Hans Jonas's ethics of responsibility. Classical liberal theories – those of Voltaire, Mill, and Popper – conceive tolerance as a virtue of coexistence within a stable moral and political order. However, they presuppose a world in which human action is limited in scope, harms are reversible, and responsibility concerns only existing individuals. Jonas challenges these assumptions by arguing that modern technological power has transformed the nature of human action and extended the moral horizon toward future generations. His ontology of responsibility shows that tolerance cannot be justified when it endangers the long-term conditions of human life. In this framework, tolerance becomes a derivative virtue subordinated to the imperative of safeguarding the fragile future of humanity. The article argues that Jonas provides a deeper, ontologically grounded criterion for determining what must not be tolerated in the technological age.

**Keywords:** Hans Jonas, Ethics of Responsibility, Limits of Tolerance, Technological Civilization, Future Generations

## Granice tolerancji i odpowiedzialności

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł analizuje granice tolerancji w świetle etyki odpowiedzialności Hansa Jonasa. Klasyczne liberalne koncepcje – Voltaire'a, Milla i Poppera – pojmują tolerancję jako cnotę współistnienia w stabilnym porządku moralnym i politycznym. Zakładają one jednak świat, w którym ludzkie działanie ma ograniczony zasięg, szkody są odwracalne, a odpowiedzialność dotyczy wyłącznie istniejących osób. Jonas kwestionuje te założenia, twierdząc, że współczesna technika radykalnie zmieniła naturę ludzkiego działania i poszerzyła horyzont moralny o przyszłe pokolenia. Jego ontologia odpowiedzialności pokazuje, że tolerancja traci uzasadnienie tam, gdzie zagraża długoterminowym warunkom ludzkiego życia. W tym ujęciu tolerancja staje się cnotą pochodną, podporządkowaną imperatywowi ochrony kruchej przyszłości człowieka. Artykuł dowodzi, że Jonas dostarcza głębszego, ontologicznego kryterium określania tego, czego nie wolno tolerować w epoce technologicznej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Hans Jonas, Etyka odpowiedzialności, Granice tolerancji, Cywilizacja technologiczna, Przyszłe pokolenia

## Introduction

“Human self-endangerment has long since become a normal part of our everyday lives”<sup>1</sup> (Böhler 2008, 20). The problem of tolerance occupies a central position in modern moral and political philosophy. From its early articulations in the works of John Locke and John Stuart Mill to its reformulation in Karl Popper’s “paradox of tolerance”, the concept has served as a normative foundation for pluralistic coexistence within liberal democracies. Classical theories of tolerance, however, presuppose social and political conditions in which human action remains limited in scope, reversible in effect, and largely confined to the present. They operate within a framework in which moral and political agents interact as bearers of rights and duties situated in a stable world that their actions can influence only locally and temporarily.

In the context of contemporary technological civilization, these assumptions can no longer be taken for granted. Human action has acquired a new scale, depth, and temporal reach: it shapes ecological systems, determines technological trajectories, and affects the conditions of life for future generations. The unprecedented magnitude of human power raises a question that classical theories of tolerance were not designed to address: What should be the limits of tolerance when certain forms of action or inaction jeopardize the long-term possibility of human existence?

This article approaches this question through the lens of Hans Jonas’s ethics of responsibility.<sup>2</sup> Jonas argues that the nature of human action has fundamentally changed and that moral philosophy must therefore shift its center of gravity. Because technological action now produces global and irreversible consequences, ethical judgment must extend beyond the immediate present and toward the future conditions of human life. Jonas grounds this expanded moral horizon in an ontological principle: the duty to preserve the possibility of genuine human existence.

The central thesis of this article is that Jonas’s ontology of responsibility provides a non-political, future-oriented foundation for determining the limits of tolerance. Whereas liberal theories typically define the limits of tolerance in political or epistemic terms – focusing on threats to social order, civil peace, or rational discourse – Jonas grounds these limits in a deeper moral requirement: the preservation of the very conditions that make human life, and therefore moral agency, possible. On this account, tolerance is a valuable virtue, but one that must ultimately be subordinated to the imperative of sustaining the ecological, technological, and cultural preconditions of humanity’s continued existence.

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<sup>1</sup> “Die Selbstgefährdung des Menschen ist längst eine Sache unserer normalen Lebenspraxis geworden“ (Böhler 2008, 20).

<sup>2</sup> “Act in such a way that the effects of your actions are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life on Earth.” – “Handle so, dass die Wirkungen deiner Handlung verträglich sind mit der Permanenz echten menschlichen Lebens auf Erden” (Böhler 2008, 31).

# 1. Classical Theories of Tolerance and Their Internal Limitations

Classical liberal theories of tolerance emerged in early modernity as responses to religious conflict and the threat of political destabilization. Their principal aim was to secure peaceful coexistence in conditions of deep moral and doctrinal disagreement. Although these theories represent decisive historical advances, they also contain intrinsic limitations when evaluated from the perspective of Jonas's ethics of responsibility – especially regarding technological civilization, intergenerational obligations, and the ontological fragility of life.

## 1.1. Voltaire: Tolerance as a Moral–Political Imperative within a Shared Human Nature

Voltaire's *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763) frames tolerance primarily as a requirement of morals and civic peace in a religiously divided society. His core argument is anthropological: human beings are naturally fallible, prone to passion, and incapable of absolute certainty. This fallibility mandates mutual tolerance. As Voltaire writes: “We are all weak, inconstant, and prone to error; such beings ought to tolerate one another.”<sup>3</sup> The demand for tolerance thus arises from epistemic modesty and moral decency. Moreover, Voltaire grounds tolerance in a minimal universalism, emphasizing the shared vulnerability and equality of human beings: “We should regard all human beings as our brothers.”<sup>4</sup>

Voltaire's account of tolerance, though historically significant, remains confined to an anthropocentric and politically modest framework. It addresses conflicts among existing individuals but does not consider the natural world, future generations, or long-term technological risks. His aim is to end persecution, not to delineate substantive limits of tolerance in situations where tolerance itself could become destructive. Moreover, Voltaire grounds tolerance in epistemic modesty and the recognition of human fallibility (Parker 2005, 170-185), whereas a later Jonas-inspired perspective will argue that, under conditions of heightened technological power and existential vulnerability, uncertainty calls not for broader toleration but for stronger forms of moral restraint.

## 1.2. Mill: Tolerance, Individual Liberty, and the Harm Principle

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) deepens the classical liberal justification of tolerance by grounding it in both individual self-development and the epistemic benefits

<sup>3</sup> “Nous sommes tous faibles, inconstants, sujets à l'erreur; que de tels êtres se supportent les uns les autres” (Voltaire 1763, 8).

<sup>4</sup> “Il ne faut regarder tous les hommes que comme nos frères” (Voltaire 1763, 10).

of dissent (Gray 2003, 117-118). In *On Liberty*, Mill repeatedly insists that suppression of opinion harms collective progress because it deprives humanity of potential truth. As he famously states: “The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race” (Gray 2003, 22). Mill also argues that individuality is a necessary condition of human flourishing: “He who lets the world ... choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation” (Gray 2003, 63). Tolerance is therefore justified both instrumentally (for the pursuit of truth) and intrinsically (for autonomy and development of individuality). Crucially, Mill limits tolerance through the harm principle: “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised ... is to prevent harm to others” (Gray 2003, 14).

Mill’s liberal defense of tolerance, though more sophisticated than Voltaire’s, relies on assumptions that become increasingly fragile in the technological age. His framework presupposes a world in which harms are direct, local, and reversible, and in which freedom of expression reliably promotes moral and cognitive progress. Such optimism becomes problematic once human action acquires global, long-term, and potentially irreversible consequences. Mill’s understanding of tolerance remains tied to contemporaneous interpersonal relations and does not account for risks transmitted to future generations or to the biosphere itself. From a Jonasian perspective, this renders Mill’s model insufficiently sensitive to the expanded moral horizon created by modern technological power and to the need for precautionary limits when the stakes involve the very conditions of human survival.

### 1.3. Popper: The Paradox of Tolerance and the Defense of the Open Society

Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1966, 5<sup>th</sup> ed.) introduces a decisive internal critique of liberal tolerance: tolerance must not extend to movements that aim to abolish tolerance itself. Popper articulates this principle when discussing the defense of democratic institutions: “Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance” (Popper 1966, 4). Popper argues that democratic societies must be prepared to limit the liberties of groups advocating violent or totalitarian ideologies: “We may become the makers of our fate when we have ceased to pose as its prophets” (Popper 1966, 12). Popper thus rejects historicist determinism and insists on active institutional responsibility for preserving an open society.

Popper introduces a crucial internal limit to tolerance by arguing that a tolerant society must not tolerate movements that seek to abolish tolerance itself. Yet even this influential formulation remains anchored in a political and institutional framework concerned primarily with protecting democracy and individual freedom. It does not address forms of intolerance that arise not from political actors but from technological, ecological, or civilizational processes that threaten the future possibility of human life. Popper assumes that harmful

developments are reversible through rational reform, whereas Jonas will later contend that technological action can produce irreversible consequences demanding a deeper, ontological threshold of intolerance. In this light, Popper's paradox of tolerance, while normatively valuable, does not reach the level at which Jonas situates the ultimate moral limits of what may be tolerated.

The classical theories of tolerance examined in this chapter – Voltaire's moral humanism, Mill's liberal individualism, and Popper's political defense of the open society – each articulate important dimensions of the modern ideal of toleration. Yet they also share structural assumptions that prove insufficient in the context of contemporary technological civilization. All three approaches remain grounded in an anthropocentric and present-oriented outlook: they presuppose that human action is limited in scope, that harmful consequences are largely reversible, and that the moral community consists only of existing individuals whose interactions unfold within stable social and natural conditions. Within such a framework, tolerance can be conceived as a virtue of coexistence or a safeguard of political freedom, but not as a practice that must confront risks extending beyond the present generation or threatening the very continuity of human life.

These limitations become evident once human agency acquires a new magnitude and temporal depth. Modern technological power reaches far beyond the interpersonal and political sphere presupposed by classical liberal theories, affecting ecological systems, the biological integrity of humanity, and the prospects of future generations. Under these conditions, the question of tolerance can no longer be addressed solely in terms of preventing persecution, protecting freedom of expression, or preserving democratic institutions. It must instead be situated within a broader ethical horizon that takes seriously the fragility of life and the possibility that human action may undermine the long-term conditions of coexistence.

This expanded horizon is precisely the point at which Hans Jonas's ethics of responsibility becomes indispensable. Jonas argues that the nature of human action has fundamentally changed and that ethics must therefore shift from a focus on present interpersonal relations to the safeguarding of the future possibility of human life.<sup>5</sup> His ontological account of responsibility –rooted in the vulnerability of living beings and the asymmetry between present power and future dependence – offers a deeper foundation for understanding the ultimate limits of tolerance. The next chapter therefore turns to Jonas's diagnosis of the technological age and the conceptual architecture of his ethics of responsibility, in order to clarify how tolerance must be rethought when the stakes involve not merely political order, but the very continuity of human existence.

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<sup>5</sup> "The goal that ... we attribute to Jonas's philosophy of life is *the affirmation of the inherent self-purposefulness and value of being, life, and all living beings...*" (Jurić 2010, 61-62).

## 2. Hans Jonas: The Imperative of Responsibility<sup>6</sup>

“Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life; or expressed negatively: Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life; or simply: Do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth; or, again turned positive: In your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will” (Jonas 1984, 20).<sup>7</sup>

In his book *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, in the chapter *The Good, the ‘Ought’, and Being: A Theory of Responsibility I. Being and Ought-to-Be* (79-89) Hans Jonas develops the ontological foundation of his ethics of responsibility by challenging the dominant modern claim that no ‘ought’ can be derived from any ‘is’. His aim is to show that being itself contains a normative dimension, and that the structure of life inherently points to an ought-to-be.

### A. The problem of grounding obligation in being

Jonas begins by acknowledging the modern ‘dogma’ that no value or obligation can be derived from factual existence. He calls this the reigning view of moral theory: “The crux of present theory is just the alleged chasm between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, which can only be bridged by a fiat, either divine or human” (Jonas 1984, 79-80). Such a position assumes a “naked ‘is’” – a concept of being devoid of value. Jonas’s project in this chapter is to demonstrate that such a notion is philosophically untenable.

### B. The search for an ontological paradigm where ‘is’ and ‘ought’ coincide

Jonas argues that if there is even one instance where factual being and normative obligation coincide, then the barrier between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ collapses. This requires identifying a situation in which the mere existence of a being already contains a claim upon us. He writes: “Needed, therefore, is an ontic paradigm in which the plain factual ‘is’ evidently coincides with an ‘ought’ ... Is there such a paradigm?” (Jonas 1984, 80). This prepares the ground for his later analysis of the newborn<sup>8</sup>, but already here Jonas signals that life itself may be such a paradigm.

<sup>6</sup> “It is the mature work of a philosopher who urges us to reconsider and rethink our role and place in the world, and above all, to rethink human duty towards the world” (Nikulin 2001, 99).

<sup>7</sup> “Handle so, daß die Wirkungen deiner Handlung verträglich sind mit der Permanenz echten menschlichen Lebens auf Erden; oder, um es negativ auszudrücken: Handle so, daß die Wirkungen deiner Handlung nicht zerstörerisch sind für die künftige Möglichkeit solchen Lebens; oder, einfach: Gefährde nicht die Bedingungen für den indefiniten Fortbestand der Menschheit auf Erden; oder nochmals positiv: Schließe in deine gegenwärtige Wahl die künftige Ganzheit des Menschen unter den Gegenständen deines Wollens ein” (Jonas 1986, 36).

<sup>8</sup> See Jonas 1984, 131-136.

### C. Purposiveness as the first evidence of value

Jonas introduces purposiveness (teleology) as the key to understanding how being can contain value: “We can regard the mere capacity to have purposes at all as a good-in-itself ... infinitely superior to any purposelessness of being” (Jonas 1984, 80). The existence of purpose in living organisms reveals a self-affirmation of life, a striving for continued existence. This striving is not invented by human subjectivity but is objectively present in nature. Thus, life itself declares that it ought to be. As Jonas says: “In every purpose, being declares itself for itself and against nothingness” (Jonas 1984, 81). This is the decisive ontological move: purposive being implicitly contains an *ought-to-be*.

### D. Why value requires a being capable of responding to it

Even if value exists objectively in being, an ethical obligation emerges only when a being exists who can: recognize value, hear its implicit claim, and act in accordance with it. Thus, Jonas links ontology and moral psychology: “A theory of responsibility... must deal both with the rational ground of obligation and with the psychological ground of its moving the will” (Jonas 1984, 85). Ethics requires not just an object with value, but a subject capable of responding – that is, capable of responsibility.

### E. The transition from value (good) to obligation (ought)

The normative force of the good expresses itself through the subject’s emotional and rational capacities. Jonas therefore argues that sentiment plays a crucial role in recognizing obligation: “The gap between abstract validation and concrete motivation must be bridged by the arc of sentiment” (Jonas 1984, 86). This is key to his critique of purely formal ethics (e.g., Kant’s), which lack the motivational grounding necessary for a robust ethics of responsibility.

### F. The good in being as the foundation of responsibility

Jonas insists that life as purposiveness is not a subjective projection but an objectively existing value: “The value that life is ... presents itself as an obligation to the being whose being it is to recognize and respond to value – the human being” (Jonas 1984, 87-88). Responsibility thus arises from: the intrinsic value of life, the human capacity to recognize this value, and the power human beings have to affect the continuation of life. He concludes that the human being is the creature uniquely situated to hear the call of being: “The human being has the capacity to recognize the value of life ... and to include the consequences of actions in projections concerning future actions” (Jonas 1984, 88). This naturally leads

toward Jonas's later argument (Jonas 1984, 129-136) that the newborn is the paradigm where the unity of 'is' and 'ought' becomes visible.

In this chapter Jonas dismantles the modern prohibition on deriving 'ought' from 'is' by showing that living being is never mere facticity. The purposiveness inherent in life constitutes an ontological good, and this good contains an inherent ought-to-be. Because human beings uniquely possess the capacity to recognize and act upon this good, responsibility arises as the essential correlate of freedom and power. Thus, the moral claim does not emerge from abstract rules, but from the value disclosed in being itself.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.1. Why the infant is the archetype of responsibility

For Jonas, the infant<sup>10</sup> represents the purest and most evident form of moral obligation. "Against the background of vague responsibilities ... the newborn stands out as utterly beyond comparison" (Jonas 1984, 134). In his analysis, responsibility does not originate in contracts, reciprocity, rational deliberation, or the attribution of rights. Instead, responsibility arises prior to and independently of any mutuality. The newborn child is: entirely dependent, unable to articulate rights or claims, incapable of self-preservation, wholly vulnerable to neglect or care. This situation reveals the primal structure of responsibility: the mere fact of another being's vulnerability generates a binding obligation in the one who is capable of acting.

For Jonas, this is not a contingent social arrangement; it is an ontological insight. The infant's dependence exposes that moral responsibility is grounded in the structure of life itself, not in political systems, legal frameworks, or mutual agreements. Because the infant's survival depends directly on the caregiver's action, responsibility appears here in its most concrete, undeniable, and non-reciprocal form. Thus, the infant is not merely an example of responsibility – it is the archetype through which the essence of responsibility becomes most clearly visible.

<sup>9</sup> "Thus the 'ought' manifest in the infant enjoys indubitable evidence, concreteness, and urgency. Utmost facticity of 'thisness', utmost right thereto, and utmost fragility of being meet here together. In him it is paradigmatically evident that the locus of responsibility is the being that is immersed in becoming, surrendered to mortality, threatened by corruptibility. Not *sub specie aeternitatis*, rather *sub specie temporis* must responsibility look at things; and it can lose its all in the flash of an instant. In the case of continually critical vulnerability of being, as given in our paradigm, responsibility becomes a continuum of such instants" (Jonas 1984, 135). – "So besitzt das im Säugling sich manifestierende 'Sollen' fraglose Evidenz, Konkretheit und Dringlichkeit. Äußerste Faktizität der Diesheit, äußerstes Recht darauf und äußerste Fragilität des Seins fallen hier zusammen. In ihm zeigt sich exemplarisch, daß der Ort der Verantwortung das ins Werden eingetauchte, der Vergänglichkeit anheimgegebene, vom Verderb bedrohte Sein ist" (Jonas 1986, 245-246).

<sup>10</sup> "The newborn unites in himself the self-accrediting force of being-already-there and the demanding impotence of being-not-yet..." (Jonas 1984, 134).



## 2.2. How Jonas links the fragility of being with the absoluteness of the moral claim

Jonas argues that the moral 'ought' arises from the fragility of being – the precarious and contingent nature of living beings. "Utmost facticity of 'thisness', utmost right thereto, and utmost fragility of being meet here together" (Jonas 1984, 135). In the case of the infant, Jonas says that "utmost facticity", "utmost fragility", and "utmost right" coincide. This triad is crucial:

- Facticity → a concrete, existing life, not an abstraction
- Fragility → the possibility of harm, destruction, or non-being;
- Right → the claim-to-be that arises simply because life is there and vulnerable.

From this, Jonas derives the absoluteness of responsibility: precisely because the infant's being is so fragile, the obligation to protect and sustain that being carries maximal urgency and weight. Importantly, the absoluteness does not come from external norms or divine command, but from the metaphysical situation of the being itself. Vulnerability is not morally neutral; it is morally motivating. Fragility summons responsibility. The more vulnerable the being, the stronger and more unconditional the moral claim that arises from it. In Jonas' words, fragility and obligation belong to one another: the infant's precarious existence is exactly what makes the moral demand both self-evident and inescapable.

## 2.3. How Jonas derives an analogy between the infant and future generations

"The individual right (to procreation) here follows from the general duty to continued human existence..." (Jonas 1984, 42). Jonas argues that the structural features present in the infant-caregiver relationship reappear – though in a more abstract form – in the relationship between present humans and future generations:

- a. Future generations are utterly dependent on us: They cannot influence the present, protect themselves, or mitigate risks caused by current technological and ecological actions.
- b. They cannot articulate rights or claims: Just as the infant cannot speak, future generations cannot assert demands. Jonas emphasizes that "the nonexistent makes no demands"<sup>11</sup>, but this does not annul responsibility – it intensifies it.
- c. Their existence is fragile and at risk because of human action: Modern technology gives present humanity an unprecedented capacity to jeopardize the very conditions of life. Future people, like infants, exist within a horizon of radical vulnerability.
- d. Responsibility is therefore non-reciprocal and anticipatory:  
As the infant calls forth responsibility from the caregiver, so the mere possibility of

<sup>11</sup> "The nonexistent makes no demands and can therefore not suffer violation of its rights" (Jonas 1984, 39).

future human life calls forth responsibility from present agents. This is why Jonas speaks of responsibility as an “obligation toward being” and not merely toward existing persons. “Thus in all these cases we owe the anonymous future only the general, not the particular—the formal possibility and not the determinate substantive reality” (Jonas, 1984, 133).

e. From this analogy Jonas derives the ontological limit of tolerance:

What we cannot tolerate – ethically – are those actions, systems, or freedoms that:

- undermine the conditions of future life;
- expose future generations to existential risks;
- destroy ecological stability;
- or compromise the integrity of human nature.

The infant reveals the structure of moral responsibility; future generations reveal its scope.

For Jonas, the infant is the paradigm of responsibility because its extreme vulnerability discloses the fundamental ethical structure in which the being of another becomes a binding claim on the agent. Fragility itself generates obligation. By analogy, future generations stand in the same moral position as the infant: voiceless, dependent, and exposed to harm from present actions. Therefore, the duty of responsibility extends beyond contemporary individuals to encompass the future of humanity, establishing an ontological boundary for what may ethically be tolerated.

### 3. How Jonas’s Ethics of Responsibility Establishes the Limits of Tolerance

“However, the new imperative says precisely that we may risk our own life – but not that of humanity; and that Achilles indeed had the right to choose for himself a short life of glorious deeds over a long life of inglorious security ... but that we do not have the right to choose, or even risk, nonexistence for future generations on account of a better life for the present one” (Jonas 1984, 20–21).<sup>12</sup>

Classical liberal theories of tolerance define its limits in political, social, or epistemic terms: tolerance must not undermine civil peace (Voltaire), must not permit harm to others (Mill), and must not allow the rise of intolerant movements that threaten the open society (Popper). These approaches assume that human action is limited in its impact, reversible, and primarily situated within the moral space of present generations. Jonas’s ethics of

<sup>12</sup> “Der neue Imperativ sagt gerade, daß wir unser eigenes Leben aufs Spiel setzen *dürfen*, aber nicht das der Menschheit; und daß Achill wohl das Recht hatte, für sich selbst ein kurzes Leben ruhmreicher Taten von einem langen Leben ruhmloser Sicherheit zu wählen (unter der stillschweigenden Voraussetzung nämlich, da eine Nachwelt da sein wird, die von seinen Taten zu erzählen weiß); daß wir aber nicht das Recht haben, das Nichtsein künftiger Generationen wegen des Seins der jetzigen zu wählen oder auch nur zu wagen” (Jonas 1986, 36).

responsibility challenges all three assumptions by shifting the moral horizon from present interpersonal relations to the long-term ontological conditions of human existence.

Jonas's decisive contribution lies in grounding ethical limits not in political stability or procedural fairness, but in the fragility and future-directedness of human life itself. His analysis of the infant as the paradigm of responsibility reveals that moral obligation arises where two features coincide: the vulnerability of a being and the power of another to affect its survival. In the case of the newborn, responsibility arises from what Jonas calls "the utmost fragility of being" and the immediacy with which its existence "becomes a claim upon us" (Jonas 1984, 134-135). Because the infant cannot secure its own survival, its mere being confronts the caregiver with an unconditional moral demand. This structure is then extended by analogy to future generations. Jonas argues that unborn humanity occupies a moral position structurally identical to that of the infant: it is voiceless, radically dependent on the present, and exposed to existential risks produced by contemporary technological action. As he writes, "with every newborn child humanity begins anew, and in that sense also the responsibility for the continuation of mankind is involved" (Jonas 1984, 135-136). If responsibility is defined by the asymmetry between vulnerability and power, then our technologically amplified capacity to affect the future becomes the central moral fact of our age. The unborn possess no capacity for self-defense; the present generation alone holds the power to safeguard or endanger their possibility of existence. This ontological asymmetry constitutes the deepest foundation for the limits of tolerance. Tolerance cannot extend to actions, systems, or practices that threaten the very conditions for future human life. Jonas formulates this principle with striking clarity: "we may risk our own life – but not that of humanity" (Jonas 1984, 20-21). Whereas Mill's harm principle restricts tolerance to avoid harm to contemporaries, Jonas's imperative restricts tolerance to avoid existential harm to future humans and to the biosphere that sustains them. This establishes a qualitatively different framework: the limit of tolerance is reached the moment an action jeopardizes the ontological preconditions for the continuation of human life. In this perspective, toleration is not an unconditional liberal ideal but a derivative moral practice whose legitimacy depends on a deeper normative requirement: the protection of the possibility of human existence. If tolerance threatens that possibility – by permitting destructive technological, ecological, or social trajectories – it loses its moral standing. Thus, Jonas redefines the boundary of toleration not as a political or epistemic constraint but as an ontological threshold rooted in responsibility for the future of humanity. He thereby transforms the discourse from what a society must tolerate to what humanity must not tolerate if it is to survive.

### 3.1. The Ontological Basis of the Limits of Tolerance

The most distinctive contribution of Jonas to discussions of tolerance lies in his claim that moral limits arise not only from political considerations, but from the nature of human existence itself. Jonas's account begins with the observation that living beings possess

an inherent ought-to-be, grounded in purposiveness and the self-affirmation of life (Jonas 1984, 80-81). This ontological value becomes ethically binding once a being capable of responsibility recognizes it (Jonas 1984, 85-89). Central to this insight is Jonas's analysis of the newborn, whose "utmost fragility of being" and "demanding impotence of being-not-yet" reveal that vulnerability itself generates a moral claim (Jonas 1984, 134-135). The infant is the paradigm of responsibility because it demonstrates that obligation arises where one being holds power over the fragile existence of another. When extended to the temporal horizon of technological civilization, this paradigm implies that future generations occupy precisely such a position: silent, dependent, and exposed to risks they cannot influence. Responsibility for future generations is necessarily implicated in the present. From this ontological structure Jonas derives what classical liberal theories could not articulate: tolerance must end where actions jeopardize the preconditions of future human life.

Unlike Mill's *harm principle* or Popper's political *paradox of tolerance*, Jonas's limit is not procedural or political but existential. What we may not tolerate, under any circumstances, are those actions or systems – whether technological, economic, or cultural – that undermine "the permanence of genuine human life" (Jonas 1984, 20). The moral prohibition is thus grounded in the ontological priority of life itself, which precedes all political arrangements and normative ideals, including toleration.

### 3.2. Tolerance, Technological Power, and the Ethics of Precaution

Jonas's ethical framework transforms the meaning of tolerance in the age of advanced technology<sup>13</sup>. Traditional liberal tolerance presupposes that harmful actions are local, reversible, and limited to the present. However, Jonas argues that modern technology has altered the 'nature of human action' by introducing effects that are global in scope, unpredictable in development, and irreversible in consequence. Under such conditions, the liberal presumption of toleration becomes ethically inadequate. For Jonas, the decisive moral fact is that contemporary humanity possesses a historically unprecedented power to endanger future existence. This power introduces what might be called the responsibility of precaution: ethical agents must refrain from actions whose consequences they cannot fully foresee but which may threaten the continuity of life. As Jonas puts it, "we may risk our own life, but not that of humanity" (Jonas 1984, 20). This insight reshapes the normative structure of tolerance. Uncertainty, which Mill and Voltaire interpreted as a reason for broader tolerance, becomes for Jonas a reason for moral restraint. In conditions of existential risk and long-term technological impact, a permissive attitude toward potentially harmful practices are no longer virtuous; it is irresponsible. The ethical task is not merely to safeguard

<sup>13</sup> "According to Jonas, the uniqueness of our present 'condition' comes from the fact that contemporary action is intrinsically connected to the power of technology" (Nikulin 2001, 99).

the freedom of present individuals, but to protect the possibility of future humanity.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, tolerance –understood as the willingness to allow beliefs, practices, or systems one finds objectionable –cannot extend to behaviors that may irreversibly damage ecological systems, destabilize the biosphere, or endanger future generations. Jonas’ ethics thus reframes tolerance not as an unrestricted ideal but as a derivative virtue, whose legitimacy depends on whether it is compatible with the deeper imperative to sustain the “future wholeness of Man” (Jonas 1984, 20).

These considerations allow us to situate tolerance within the broader architecture of Jonas’s ethics. Whereas classical theories conceive tolerance as a virtue of social coexistence, Jonas grounds its limits in the ontological priority of preserving life.

## Conclusion

“The reception of his ethics of responsibility and of the works that followed his globally renowned *The Imperative of Responsibility*, as well as the influence they have exerted on debates concerning the power of modern science and technology and the responsibility of contemporary humanity for the future of humankind and the planet, have by no means diminished” (Jurić 2003, 538).

The analysis undertaken in this article has shown that the modern ideal of tolerance, as articulated by Voltaire, Mill, and Popper, rests on presuppositions that no longer hold under the conditions of technological civilization. Classical theories assume that human actions are limited in scope, that harmful effects are generally reversible, and that moral responsibility is confined to present interactions among existing individuals. In such a world, tolerance can flourish as a political virtue aimed at preventing persecution, enabling freedom of expression, and safeguarding democratic coexistence.

Hans Jonas challenges this conceptual landscape by shifting the ethical horizon from the present to the future and from the interpersonal to the ontological. His ethics of responsibility begins with the recognition that modern technology has fundamentally altered the nature of human action – as we witness every day – its consequences are global, long-term, and potentially irreversible. Under these conditions, tolerance can no longer be evaluated solely within the framework of social and political coexistence. Instead, it must be assessed in light of its compatibility with the preservation of the very conditions that make human life possible.

<sup>14</sup> “Granted that our actions today have repercussions that extend far into the future because of our technological capacities, the question becomes, what can motivate us to act so as to limit or eliminate the possibility of harm to future generations, as well as to the Earth itself?” (Morris 2013, 133).

From his ontological foundation Jonas derives a limit to tolerance that classical liberal thought could not articulate. While Mill restricts tolerance to prevent harm to others, and Popper warns against tolerating movements that seek to abolish tolerance itself, Jonas argues that tolerance must not extend to actions that endanger the long-term possibility of human existence. The decisive question is no longer merely what a free society can tolerate, but what humanity may not tolerate if it wishes to survive.

In Jonas's framework, tolerance becomes a derivative virtue, whose legitimacy depends on its alignment with a deeper moral imperative: safeguarding the future wholeness of human life. Tolerance is justified only insofar as it does not compromise ecological stability, technological responsibility, or the existential security of future generations. Once tolerance permits trajectories that jeopardize these conditions, it ceases to be a virtue and becomes a form of ethical negligence.

Thus, Jonas invites us to reconceptualize tolerance not as an unrestricted liberal principle, but as a practice bounded by an ontological horizon. The ultimate limit of tolerance is reached where the survival of humanity is at stake. Under contemporary conditions – marked by ecological degradation, technological acceleration, and far-reaching planetary vulnerability – this Jonasian insight offers a crucial corrective to classical liberal thought. It reveals that the defense of tolerance requires, paradoxically, that some things must not be tolerated: those actions, systems, and technological developments that endanger the fragile future of human life.

In this sense, Jonas does not weaken the ideal of tolerance; he strengthens its moral foundation by anchoring it in the responsibility for the being and becoming of humanity itself. His ethics thus provides not merely a supplement to liberal theories of toleration, but a necessary deepening of their normative horizon in the face of the unprecedented powers that shape the world today.

“Not duty itself is the object; not the moral law motivates moral action, but the appeal of a possible good-in-itself in the world, which confronts my will and demands to be heard – *in accordance with* the moral law. To grant that appeal a hearing *is* precisely what the moral law commands: this law is nothing but the general enjoinder of the call of all action-dependent ‘goods’ and of their situation-determined *right* to just *my* action. It makes my duty what insight has shown to be, of itself, worthy of being and in need of my acting. For that enjoinder to reach and affect me, so that it can move the will, I must be receptive for appeals of this kind. Our emotional side must come into play. And it is indeed of the essence of our moral nature that the appeal, as insight transmits it, finds an answer in our feeling. It is the feeling of responsibility” (Jonas 1984, 85).

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