

# Nature, Society and Future Generations

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Today's business has a major impact on society and the natural environment. It considerably affects the fate and survival of natural ecosystems and the life conditions of present and future generations. Applying the imperative of responsibility developed by Hans Jonas, we can say that business has a one way, non-reciprocal duty: to care for the beings which are under the impacts of its functioning.

## 1. The Imperative of Responsibility

To catalyze a responsible management ethos is needed to study moral responsibility in the context of the ecological, technological and social reality of our age. The most comprehensive theory of moral responsibility was presented by the German-American philosopher Hans Jonas in his opus magnum *The Imperative of Responsibility* (Jonas, H., 1979, 1984).

Jonas was born in Germany in 1903. He was tutored under the guidance of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Rudolf Bultman. Jonas began his philosophical work on Gnosticism and its role in the late Antiquity. In the post-war period Jonas was teaching philosophy at *The New School for Social Research* for decades. He published the German version of his theory of responsibility in 1979 under the title: *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethic für die Technologische Zivilization* (Jonas, H., 1979). The re-written and enlarged English edition was published in 1984 under the title: *The Imperative of Responsibility – In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Jonas, H. 1984).

In his book Jonas' basic preoccupation is the *impact of modern technology on the human condition*. The major theses on which his theory of responsibility is based are the following:

- (i) *“The altered, always enlarged nature of human action, with the magnitude and novelty of its works and their impact on man’s global future”;*
- (ii) *“Responsibility is a correlate of power and must be commensurate with the latter’s scope and that of its exercise”;*
- (iii) *“An imaginative ‘heuristics of fear’, replacing the former projections of hope, must tell us what is possibly at stake and what we must beware of”;*
- (iv) *“Metaphysics must underpin ethics. Hence, a speculative attempt is made at such an underpinning of man’s duties toward himself, his distant posterity, and the plenitude of life under his dominion”;*
- (v) *“Objective imperatives for man in the scheme of things enable us to discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate goal-settings to our Promethean power”.*

Jonas argues that human action has changed so dramatically in our times that this changed nature of human action calls for a radical change in ethics as well. He stresses that in previous ethics *“all dealing with the nonhuman world, that is, the whole realm of techne (...) was ethically neutral. (...) Ethical significance belonged to the direct dealing of man with man, including man dealing with himself: all traditional ethics is anthropocentric. (...) The entity of ‘man’ and his basic condition was considered constant in essence and not itself an object of reshaping techne. (...) The effective range of action was small, the time span of foresight, goal-setting, and accountability was short, control of circumstances limited.”* (Jonas, H., 1984, p.4-5).

According to Jonas new dimensions of responsibility emerged because *nature* became a *subject of human responsibility*. This is underlined by the fact of the irreversibility and cumulative character of man’s impact on the living world. *Knowledge*, under these circumstances, is a prime duty of man, and must be commensurate with the causal scale of human action. Man should seek *“not only the human good but also the good of things extra human, that is, to extend the recognition of ‘ends in themselves’ beyond the sphere of man and make the human good include the care of them.”* (Jonas, H., 1984, p.7-8.)

For Jonas an *imperative* that is responding to the new type of human action might run like this: *“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”* (Jonas, H., 1984, p.11). Since future human

beings and non-human beings do not have rights, our duties to the future generations and to nature are independent of any idea of a right or reciprocity. Human responsibility is a *non-reciprocal duty to guarding beings* (Jonas, H., 1984, p.38-39).

Jonas states that the necessary conditions of moral responsibility are as follows: “*The first and most general condition of responsibility is causal power, that is, that acting makes an impact on the world; the second, that such acting is under the agent’s control; and the third, that he can foresee its consequences to some extent.*” (Jonas, H., 1984, p.90). Jonas underlines that prospective responsibility is never formal but always *substantive*: “*I feel responsible, not in the first place for my conduct and its consequences but for the matter that has a claim on my acting.*” For example “*the well-being, the interest, the fate of others has, by circumstance or by agreement, come to my care, which means that my control over it involves at the same time my obligation for it.*” (Jonas, H., 1984, p.92-93).

The common features in responsibility are totality, continuity, and future-orientation. “*Responsibilities encompass the total being of their object. (...) The pure being as such, and then the best being of the child, is what parental care is about.*” The statesman’s responsibility is “*for duration of his office or his power, is for the total life of community, the ‘public weal’. (...) Neither parental nor governmental care can allow itself a vacation or pause, for the life of the object continues without intermission, making its demands anew, time after time. More important still is the continuity of the cared-for existence itself as a concern. (...) It is the future with which responsibility for a life, be it individual or communal, is concerned beyond its immediate present. (...) An agent’s concrete moral responsibility at the time of action does extend further than to its proximate effects.*” (Jonas, H., 1984, p.102 sq).

Jonas summarizes the *imperative of responsibility* as follows. “*The concept of responsibility implies that of an ought – first of an ought-to-be of something, then of an ought-to-do of someone in response to the first.*” This is the most evident in the case of a *new-born baby* “*whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely, to take care of him.*” Not only does the new-born call us in this way but “*the unconditional end-in-itself of everything alive and the still-have-to-come of the faculties for securing this end.*” (Jonas, H., 1984, p.130, 134).

## 2. Primordial Stakeholders of Business

Business activities considerably affect nature, society and future generations. These three entities are primordial stakeholders of business, with whom business has a non-contractual responsibility relationship. We should evaluate business activities from the perspective of nature, from the perspective of society, and from the perspective of future generations. (Zsolnai, L., 2003). From the perspective of nature, *integrity* is a central value. The notion of ecological integrity was first introduced by the American naturalist Aldo Leopold in his environmental classic *A Sand County Almanac*. He wrote: “*a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.*” (Leopold, A., 1948).

Business activities might be evaluated against sustainability indicators that operationalize the notion of ecological integrity (Azar, C. & al., 1996).

Let **A** be a business activity. Let **E1, ..., Ei, ..., Em** be sustainability indicators (**m > 1**).

**Ei ( )** is an ecological value function defined as follows:

- 1** if business activity **A** is good regarding sustainability indicator **Ei**;
- (1) **Ei (A) = 0** if business activity **A** is neutral regarding sustainability indicator **Ei**;
- 2** if business activity **A** is bad regarding sustainability indicator **Ei**.

**Ei (A)** reflects the ecological value of **A** regarding sustainability indicator **Ei**.

The following vector represents the ecological value of business activity **A** regarding all the sustainability indicators **E1, ..., Ei, ..., Em**:

$$(2) \quad \underline{\mathbf{E}}(\mathbf{A}) = [\mathbf{E1}(\mathbf{A}), \dots, \mathbf{Ei}(\mathbf{A}), \dots, \mathbf{Em}(\mathbf{A})]$$

To get an aggregate picture about the ecological value of a business activity system, we should define weights that show the importance of the sustainability indicators.

Let **w1, ..., wi, ..., wm** be such importance weights.

It is required that:

$$(3) \quad \sum w_i = 1$$

The aggregate ecological value of business activity  $A$  can be calculated as follows:

$$(4) \quad E(A) = \sum w_i E_i(A)$$

$E(A)$  shows the aggregate ecological value of business activity  $A$  ( $-1 \geq E(A) \geq 1$ ).

A business activity is considered *sustainable* if and only if its aggregate ecological value is positive. That is:

$$(5) \quad E(A) > 0$$

Evaluating business activity systems from a social perspective has been a long-lasting enterprise of welfare economics. Here *human well-being* is the central value. Amartya Sen proposed to understand human well-being in the terms of *capabilities*. Capability is a reflection on the freedom of a person to achieve valuable functioning. Therefore capabilities can be interpreted as substantive freedom that people enjoy (Sen, A., 1992).

Let  $C_1, \dots, C_j, \dots, C_n$  be capability indicators against which business activity systems can be evaluated ( $j > 1$ ).

Let the social value function  $C_j(\cdot)$  be defined as follows:

$$(6) \quad C_j(A) = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if business activity } A \text{ is good regarding capability indicator } C_j; \\ 0 & \text{if business activity } A \text{ is neutral regarding capability indicator } C_j; \\ -2 & \text{if business activity } A \text{ is bad regarding capability indicator } C_j. \end{cases}$$

$C_j(A)$  shows the social value of business activity  $A$  regarding capability indicator  $C_j$ .

The following vector represents the social value of business activity  $A$  regarding all the capability indicators  $C_1, \dots, C_j, \dots, C_n$ .

$$(7) \quad \underline{C}(A) = [C_1(A), \dots, C_j(A), \dots, C_n(A)]$$

To get an aggregate picture about the social value of business activity system **A** we should introduce weights that show the importance of the capability indicators.

Let **u<sub>1</sub>**, ..., **u<sub>j</sub>**, ..., **u<sub>n</sub>** be such importance weights.

It is required that:

$$(8) \quad \sum u_j = 1$$

The aggregate social value of business activity **A** can be calculated as follows:

$$(9) \quad C(A) = \sum u_j C_j(A)$$

**C(A)** shows the aggregate social value of business activity **A** ( $1 \geq C(A) \geq -2$ ).

A business activity is considered *pro-social* if its aggregate social value is positive.

That is:

$$(10) \quad C(A) > 0$$

How can we evaluate a business activity from the perspective of *future generations*? We cannot know too much about future generations but *freedom* is a central value here. According to Edith Brown Weiss the freedom of future generations is insured by satisfying the following principles (Brown Weiss, E., 1989):

- (i) conservation of options;
- (ii) conservation of quality;
- (iii) conservation of access.

Considering principles (i), (ii) and (iii), future generations indicators can be generated.

Let **F<sub>1</sub>**, ..., **F<sub>k</sub>**, ..., **F<sub>p</sub>** be such indicators against which business activity systems can be evaluated ( $p > 1$ ).

Future generations value function **F<sub>k</sub>( )** is defined as follows:

$$(11) \quad F_k(A) = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if business activity } A \text{ is good regarding future generations indicator } F_k; \\ 0 & \text{if business activity } A \text{ is neutral regarding indicator } F_k; \\ -2 & \text{if business activity } A \text{ is bad regarding future generations indicator } F_k. \end{cases}$$

$F_k(\mathbf{A})$  reflects the future generations value of business activity  $\mathbf{A}$  regarding indicator  $F_k$ .

The following vector represents the future generations value of business activity system  $\mathbf{A}$  regarding future generations indicators  $F_1, \dots, F_k, \dots, F_n$ .

$$(12) \quad \underline{\mathbf{F}}(\mathbf{A}) = [F_1(\mathbf{A}), \dots, F_k(\mathbf{A}), \dots, F_p(\mathbf{A})]$$

To get an aggregate picture about the future generations value of business activity  $\mathbf{A}$  we should introduce weights that show the importance of indicators  $F_1, \dots, F_k, \dots, F_p$ .

Let  $v_1, \dots, v_k, \dots, v_p$  be such importance weights.

It is required that:

$$(13) \quad \sum v_k = 1$$

The aggregate future generations value of business activity  $\mathbf{A}$  can be calculated as follows:

$$(14) \quad \sum v_k F_k(\mathbf{A})$$

$\mathbf{F}(\mathbf{A})$  shows the aggregate future generations value of business activity  $\mathbf{A}$  ( $1 \geq \mathbf{F}(\mathbf{A}) \geq -2$ ).

A business activity can be considered *future respecting* if its aggregate future generations value is positive. That is:

$$(15) \quad \mathbf{F}(\mathbf{A}) > 0$$

### 3. Responsibility for the Common Good

The *common good* is a notion that originated over two thousand years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. More recently, John Rawls defined the common good as “*certain general conditions that are (...) equally to everyone's advantage*”. The Catholic religious tradition, which has a long history to promote the common good, defines it as “*the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment*.” The common good, then, consists mainly of having the social systems, institutions, and environments on which we all

depend in order to work in a manner that benefits all people (Velasquez, M., Andre, C., Shanks, T., & Meyer, M., 2004).

Sustainability, pro-socialness and respect for the future are important components of the common good. In their paper “Should Multinational Corporations Be Concerned with the Global Common Good? An Interdisciplinary Exploration”, Henri-Claude de Bettignies and François Lépineux argue that multinational corporations, because of their huge economic power, their influence capacity and the multiple consequences of their activities, have to serve the global common good (De Bettignies, H-C. and Lépineux, F., 2005). Therefore business activities should be judged on the basis of serving the common good. I want to develop the argument of de Bettignies and Lépineux further. I claim that in today’s world characterized by climate change, ecological degradation, human deprivation, global interdependence, and high scale technological uncertainties, not only multinational corporations but *every business organization* has responsibility for the common good. Today the legitimacy and viability of a business depends on its contribution to nature, society and future generations.

The “invisible hand” of the market advocated by Adam Smith, Milton Friedman and others does not transform individual, profit-seeking behavior into the common good any more. Just the opposite, with its exclusive focus on profit-making, today’s business destroys the integrity and diversity of ecosystems, the autonomy of local communities, and the chances of future generations for a decent life. In today’s world, profit is inadequate as a sole measure of economic activities and dangerous as the main motivation for business activities (Zsolnai, L., 2006). The problem with profit as a measure is that in the market there are *non-represented stakeholders* (natural beings, future generations), *underrepresented stakeholders* (the poor and marginalized people), and *myopic stakeholders* (who discount things in space and time). Therefore profit cannot give a complete, unbiased evaluation of business activities. Profit always reflects the values of the strongest stakeholders and favors preferences here and now. The problem with profit as a motivation is that it destroys intrinsic motivation and decreases quality and leads to manipulation of others and oneself. Business should serve something bigger than itself to become a meaningful and productive activity.

Progressive companies like outdoor clothing company *Patagonia*, retail business firm *Ishka*, natural health care company *Blackmores*, skin care specialist *Jurlique*, and organic food company *Whole Foods* are good illustrations of doing successful business by serving the

common good (Pozzi, D., 2006; Nocera, J., 2006). *Patagonia* is an outdoor clothing company started by a group of climbers and surfers in the sixties. The company branched, from selling climbing equipment into clothing in the 1970s. Company founder Yvon Chouinard's vision of long-term sustainability and minimum impact on the environment has become a reality for Patagonia and its customers. This has been realized through producing quality clothing that outlasts fashion, and a business ethic which values the environment and its employees over rapid growth and the bottom line. Patagonia shows a strong commitment to the environment, donating a large percentage of the company's profits to environmental campaigns and an ongoing accountability to the environment, demonstrated by constant monitoring of the effects of its manufacturing. In 1996 the company shifted its entire cotton line to organically grown cotton: grown without the use of chemical pesticides, herbicides or defoliants. They say: *“Given what we now know about conventional cotton, there is no going back regardless of the decision's impact on the company's sales or profit. It's an ethical choice we have made and hope other companies will follow.”*

Acknowledging the impossibility of zero environmental impact, Patagonia also has a strong commitment to research into producing durable fabrics. This company is at the forefront of technology, having been the first to introduce such fabrics as Capilene in 1985, Polyester fleece in 1977 and Post Consumer Recycled Polyester fleece in 1993. Durable fabrics, coupled with durable and versatile designs, ensure that Patagonia's customers mirror the company's own philosophy of reduced consumption. Nor does the company compromise on the care for its employees. Heavily subsidized in-house and external child-care programs, available to women and men, a commitment to employee training and pleasant working facilities are deemed important to simultaneously provide for the employees and to retain valuable people for the business. Patagonia's broad vision considers how the company impacts on the environment, its employees and the community at large. Simplicity is its philosophy. Patagonia believes that *“Going back to a simpler life based on living by sufficiency rather than excess is not a step backward. Rather, returning to a simpler way allows us to regain our dignity, puts us in touch with the land, and makes us value human contact again”*.

A retail business that takes its business ethics seriously is *Ishka*: the chain of handcraft shops founded by Michael Sklovsky and which has been operating successfully for 25 years. This business follows Buddhist philosophy in which ethics play an important part. Most of

Ishka's products are manufactured in villages across 48 countries, including India, Thailand, Nepal and Indonesia. In villages greatly needed income is generated through Ishka buying locally crafted products. The purchasing of local handcrafts provides work for people in their own village. Exporting arts and crafts is a way through which families can break out of the poverty cycle. To become a crafts-person or artist can mean a well-paid profession for life. Ishka has direct dealings with most of the artisans from whom it purchases handcrafts. The company investigates the workshops of suppliers and examines the working conditions of the artisans. Moreover, Ishka makes sure not to deal with products of exploitation such as the popular “Persian” rugs copied in Pakistan by children in slavery. Another important ethical issue considered by Ishka is the use of environmental resources. Wherever possible, the company makes use of recycled products; and it is always aware of the need to preserve natural habitats. Ishka is also regularly involved with Amnesty International and Unicef, and has been acknowledged as Unicef's biggest Victorian fundraiser.

Natural health care company *Blackmores* extends its vision of drug free health care to encompass a more widespread respect for nature and the environment. Environmentalism has been a distinctive feature of Blackmore's corporate philosophy, as evidenced by its environmental committee. This committee enforces Blackmore's environmental policy, which is about “*more than just recycling and pollution control; it means integrity, quality and pride, not only in the way the company's products are manufactured, but with everything with which the company is associated*”. Blackmores is proud that its products are manufactured without causing suffering to animals, and that it features among the “cruelty-free” list of beauty products promoted by animal welfare groups, proving that cosmetic safety can be achieved without the use of testing on animals.

Adelaide-based skin care specialist, *Jurlique*, has successfully integrated spirituality into its corporate philosophy. Built around the three principles of “purity, care and integrity”, the organization believes that incorporating these values into all aspects of the production process enhances the final product, and the well-being of the company and its staff. “Purity” is observed in Jurlique's practice of organically growing, at the Jurlique Herb Farm, 85% of the herbs the company requires. The company ensures that only natural, non-chemical, unpolluted, organically and bio-dynamically grown raw materials are used in its products. Care for the environment, for oneself and for others, form the Jurlique philosophy. Its staff is encouraged to embrace change, energize others, break down barriers, to be customer-focused,

responsible and accountable, to strive for excellence and face reality. Co-founder of Jurlique, Dr Jürgen Klein considers consumer education vital in helping the public to be aware of the processes involved in “natural cosmetics”. In line with this view, Jurlique offers open days at the farm and factory, cosmetic ingredient listings, education and seminars covering skin and health care, aromatherapy and herbal medicines.

American organic food company *Whole Foods* is characterized by rapid expansion, double-digit growth and a business model that no competitor seems able to touch. Its stock has returned more than 2,700 percent since it went public in 1992. Wall Street analysts could not speak enough good things about Whole Foods. John Mackey, the co-founder of Whole Foods and the executive team make no bones about the fact that shareholders rank low on their list of priorities. They speak instead about the importance of keeping customers happy and employees engaged and sticking to the company’s core values. Mackey says that they consciously work for the *common good* rather than depending solely on the “invisible hand” of the market to generate positive results for the society.

Responsibility for the common good calls for a transformation of business. As we stated earlier:

- (1) Business should be *sustainable*, i.e. should contribute to the conservation and restoration of the natural world;
- (2) Business should be *pro-social*, i.e. should contribute to development of capabilities of the members of society;
- (3) Business should be *future respecting*, i.e. should contribute to the enhancement of the freedom of future generations.

In their present forms not all business organizations might be able to make considerable steps in the direction of serving the common good. It is a demanding job for business leaders, academics and NGO people to investigate how the prevailing conflicts between conventional stakeholder groups (especially shareholders) and primordial stakeholders (nature, society and future generations) can be reconciled.

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