



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND THEORY OF RESPONSIBILITY IN PAUL RICOEUR AND HANS JONAS: AN APPROACH ON SUSTAINABILITY IN POSTMODERNITY

¹Thiago Souza Silva, ¹Nádia SAMPAIO, ²Monique de Jesus Bezerra dos Santos, ³José Ricardo Oliveira Mello, ⁴Luciana Araujo Dos Reis and ⁵Elton Moreira Quadros

¹Doctoral student of the Memory: Language and Society Course, State University of Southwest Bahia - UESB, Brasil

²Master in Social Psychology from the Federal University of Sergipe - UFS, Brasil

³Master Student of the Memory Course: Language and Society, Southwest Bahia State University - UESB, Brasil

⁴Prof. Doctor of the Postgraduate Program in Memory: Language and Society of the Southwest Bahia State University - UESB, Brasil

⁵Prof. Doctor of the Postgraduate Program in Memory: Language and Society of the Southwest Bahia State University - UESB, Brasil

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 14th September, 2019

Received in revised form

06th October, 2019

Accepted 19th November, 2019

Published online 30th December, 2019

Key Words:

Environmentalism, Environmental Breakdown, Environmental philosophy.

*Corresponding author: Thiago Souza Silva

ABSTRACT

The rising environmental breakdown is leading the way into a substantial change in precepts and questionings concerning human responsibility towards the environment, which in turn incites a resignification of the existing bondings between agent and nature, and thereby promotes the systematization of an ethics that contributes to reverse the problems caused by human actions. Considering this reality, the present article aims to address some deliberations regarding the ethical dimension as an effective elucidation for the handling of environmental issues, which are part of an emerging trend in post modernity. What we propose is that the making of a sustainable world based on socio environmental values calls for a thorough reflection about the individual's perception of the world, and concerning the new behaviors that should have priority and be developed in the individual-nature relationship, considering environmental responsibility as one of the conducting parameters. In order to achieve such purpose, we carried out bibliographical research with Paul Ricoeur's and Hans Jonas' works as main theoretical foundations, and specifically, on the existing intersection between ethics as the ideal of living well, and of the promotion of environmental responsibility.

Copyright © 2019, Thiago Souza Silva et al. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Thiago Souza Silva, Nádia SAMPAIO, MONIQUE de Jesus Bezerra Dos Santos, 2019. "Environmental ethics and theory of responsibility in paul ricoeur and hans jonas: an approach on sustainability in postmodernity", *International Journal of Development Research*, 09, (12), 32396-32400.

INTRODUCTION

Typically, the use of ethical assumptions was restricted to the human realm, since only the agents presented there quired qualifications to compose the moral universe, that is, the grouping of people over whom regulations are imposed in order to regulate the behavior of moral agents.(HOTTOIS, 2003). Therefore, it was an inter subjective representation of the ethical proposition that did not condone the granting of moral regulation to non-human elements such as fauna, flora, and ecosystems. Because they are not deemed as ends in themselves, in accordance with Kant's view (KANT, 2010), it was believed that this status deprived any non-human species of protection when compared to the immeasurable power with which human action was decorated. Such understanding of anthropocentrism came through the structuring of a genealogy that acknowledges some of the most prominent streams of

western thought as anthropocentric. This whole situation is due to the Aristotelian concept of human being as a rational animal, given its specificity, and to the Judeo-Christian understanding of the human being as a privileged creature with a broad capacity for governance of nature, someway likely to the Cartesian perspective (DESCARTES, 2014). Environmental ethics emerged as a reaction to the understanding in which nature was considered both as an inexhaustible collection of inputs that are essential for human subsistence, and as having a regenerative capability. Such understanding of nature became the chief reason for the present environmental problem. In this path of acknowledging the responsible, and in the search for plausible answers to the environmental breakdown, which already exceeds the limit of tolerable impacts on Earth, and is provoked by human lifestyle, anthropocentrism has been accommodating various

interpretations, and an ambivalence of meanings. To study these mentioned questions, this article will use both the theory of responsibility, approached under the conceptual framework of Paul Ricoeur, and the notion of ethical attribute as viewed by Hans Jonas, which by its very nature seeks for otherness. Hans Jonas developed a category of ethics defined as a cosmic ethics, which is aligned with the ecological bias, is preoccupied with the future aspect of the scarcity of nature's resources, intends to overcome the human proneness to short term action, and strives to draw a reflection about human actions in the present (momentary), and the moral duties and consequences it brings.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This investigation is based on two parameters for action. We undertook a bibliographic study, specifically on ethics and environmental sustainability in the perspective of Hans Jonas and Paul Ricoeur. Yet, different authors also studied their use of those concepts, as the rest of this work will show. We, thence, purpose to engage and compare the conceptual worlds of both authors, and subsequently relate them to different interpretations of contemporary authors. According to Lima and Mioto (2007), bibliographic research intends to lay the theoretical foundation for a defined object of study. We should also assert that for these authors, this modality of academic work presents itself as:

a indefatigable movement of apprehension of the objectives, observance of the stages, reading, questioning and dialoguing critically with the bibliographic material, which in turn allows a range of possibilities in the apprehension of the multiple questions that relate to the object of study (LIMA e MIOTO, 2007, p. 44).

Furthermore, in a second moment we used the contributions of different sources of information to engage this conversation, which demanded a scrutiny of scientific works in virtual libraries and platforms of scientific journals, such as the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), and the Database of Thesis and Dissertations of CAPES, in order to assemble an amount of works that hold the current academic conversations, and engage with some key thematics that were used to choose them, namely: otherness, anthropocentrism, ethics, sustainability, environmentalism, environment, the good life, and others like these.

RESULTS E DISCUSSION

Teleological Aristotelian Ethics in Ricoeur: Theoretical Conceptions

In order to comprehend the ethics developed under the conceptual world of Paul Ricoeur, it is necessary a previous reflection about the Aristotelian concept of ethics as a starting point for Ricoeur. We need to turn to teleology, having in mind the thesis that states that the elements arranged in the universe are bearers of purpose (*telos*). Thus, "every action and rational choice is thought to aim at some good; and so the good has been aptly described as that at which everything aims." (ARISTOTLE, 2000, p. 3). Based on this concept Aristotle concluded that human practices are directed by rationality to reach a goal, to pursue the supreme good. This search is, however, that of a good that must be considered in itself, as explained by Aristotle in the fragment below:

So if what is done has some end that we want for its own sake, and everything else we want is for the sake of this end; and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (because this would lead to an infinite progression, making our desire fruitless and vain), then clearly this will be the good, indeed the chief good.

(ARISTOTLE, 2000, p. 4)

Evidently, for Aristotle happiness stands as the most excellent good, since "*happiness in particular is believed to be complete without qualification, since we always choose it for itself and never for the sake of anything else*" (p. 10). Therefore, this attribute refers to "*a certain kind of activity of the soul in accordance with complete virtue.*" (p. 20).

Excellence has two categories. The first one is intellectual, related to the properties of intellect, wisdom, and judgement. The second category is moral, relative to aspects of circumspection and freedom. The former is an image of the exercise of instruction, which demands an engagement with the elements of time and experience. The latter, on the other hand, requires an intermediation of the habit, and is the product of the repeated practice of actions consistent with the habit. Accordingly, there is an increasing improvement by steadiness of achievement through the execution of morally good actions. One achieves excellence through this process, and by its turn, excellence leads to the path of happiness (ARISTOTLE, 2000). It should be noted that such action would be equivalent to conducting oneself well, or according to the good, to act with integrity, to desire the results of a life well lived, to enjoy a good life, to relish the happiness and the good as the foremost purposes, as the Stagirite puts it. The prescriptions of the concept of living well and the good life, which is highlighted in this work, establish the first of the three forms of "little ethics" mentioned by Ricoeur (2000). Thus, the *telos* proclaims that the attaining of a happy life would become the ultimate aim of human activity, and it would reverberate into a personal ethic of virtuous fulfillment, that under take good actions to support the attainment of this goal.

According to Ricoeur (2000), Aristotelian ethics envisions the good as a purpose that assists the agent in establishing a wholesome practice for his actions, qualified by a constantly immaculate and equitable execution. Over again, therefore, ethics in Aristotle claims the use of the good as an outcome of action. However, it is clear from Ricoeur the existence of a restriction contained in this Aristotelian model of mean-end, as it eventually acts as a constraint on the ability to choose (inspired by wisdom) and to the expression of deliberation (product of reason), and as it do not fully accommodate the field of action. Only the *techné* is considered: "*an action that does not exhaust in itself and, therefore, has its purpose elsewhere*" (ROSSATTO, 2010, p. 50). For a further illuminating understanding, we use Aristotle's positive statement about the statesman. He ought to exercise persuasion using a good argumentation, and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). According to the philosopher, the standards of excellency are responsible for safeguarding the ethical vision of living well, attenuating the instrumental personality of the mean-end archetype. To behave in a fitting manner, to do the appropriate action, to be a congruent agent, and to endorse excellent life projects and role models that aspire to a good life are things that report a common task. Everything congruent and wholesome for an individual ought to be – in the same logical proportion – as congruent and wholesome for another

individual and for the collectivity, since the actions of an individual are not isolated, but have effects that will touch distinct people other than the one who acts. Facing what we already considered about the discussion intrinsic to Aristotelian ethics, which proclaims the good living and happiness as pre-eminent ends, and was later introduced into the theoretical concepts developed by Ricoeur with the purpose of endorsing the arguments related to the small ethics, from now on we will bring a conversation about the existing integration between ethics and environmental topics. Ricoeur defines the issue of wisdom as potential for human action. We use his contributions and theoretical foundations. We also use Hans Jonas' contributions, as he gives us a reflection about a kind of responsibility that faces the probability to injure the other.

Intersection between Ethics and Environment from the point of view of Ricoeur and Hans Jonas

The existing connection between the ethical attribute and environmental protection can be appreciated from the perspective of Ricoeur's theoretical assumptions. He wrote about the ecological issue based on the aspects of law and ethics. This way, "*the action apprehended in the view of law is comprehended through the specificity of law, which appears midway between ethics and politics*" (GARCIA, 2007, p. 106). Ethics emerges as an intention of achieving a dignified and enjoyable life. This way, the law manifests itself as a viable alternative for building conceptions that will allow actions to be disposed in order to put in proper condition the establishment of a good life. The concepts provided here are obviously found in the range of a theoretical definition capable of supporting human activities, and the promotion of conservation of the environment. Precautionary foundations are practical illustrations that theoretical formations were essential to the constitution of environmental law both at the macro and micro territorial instances. As previously discussed, Garcia appreciates the understanding concerning responsibility fostered by Hans Jonas's perspective. In the legal realm, he suggests a new balance between three principles: imputation, solidarity, and risk. In the ethical realm, the concept of responsibility is restructured (GARCIA, 2007). In this sense, Jonas understands that the ethical discussion passes through an effective need for objective care, even when human action was not intended, and its consequences were not desired, as a "misdeed" (JONAS, 1985, p. 90). However, the human presence in the world was acquiring a shape that threatened the future of the author's living time, what we now experience as the present time, as the philosopher reflects:

The presence of man in the world had been a first and unquestionable given, from which all idea of obligation in human conduct started out. Now it has itself become an object of obligation: the obligation namely to ensure the very premise of all obligation, that is, the foothold for a moral universe in the physical world – the existence of mere candidates for a moral order. This entails, among other things, the duty to preserve this physical world in such a state that the conditions for that presence remain intact; which in turn means protecting the world's vulnerability from what could imperil those very conditions. (JONAS, 1985, p.10).

Responsibility is transferred from the realm of the agent that causes harm to the direction of responsibility towards the other. Besides the possibility of damage being caused, the

issue here is the probability of affecting the other. In addition, it follows that the ethical responsibility has been enlarged to encompass situations of human susceptibility (GARCIA, 2007). According to Ricoeur, environmental responsibility is about the classic notion established by Aristotle that delineates the wisdom of the agent as potential. The individual becomes someone responsible for his own actions, someone who has as parameter the outcomes of his actions.

Garcia details the ethical responsibility defended by Ricoeur, as follows:

In any case, nevertheless, there is no doubt that in the view of Paul Ricoeur in both the ecological field (as in the end of life), and the bioethical (as in the beginning of life), action, particularly action involving risks, is forged from the theoretical knowledge of the experts, from the argumentation generated by this knowledge, from the conviction of each individual, all these within a material framework in which creativity is present, since the classical moral principles do not respond to present situations. Therefore, Paul Ricoeur proposes the *moral judgment specific to situation*, required by the need of assessment of the *ecological question* from an ethical perspective (GARCIA, 2007, p. 109).

Thus, we mention the questioning Ricoeur poses, calling individuals to a thorough reflection on environmental sustainability, that is, "*how far in space and time does the responsibility for our acts extend? ...How far does the chain of harmful effects of our acts extend that we can take as still implied in the principle, the beginning, the initium for which a subject is held to be the author?*" (RICOEUR, 2000, p. 29). Given the complexity of this subject, it is important to meditate on ethics as a value of solidarity that has the ability to guide the expressions of human life, and even to influence the way individuals interact with the environment, and to consider the impacts of such interactions and their future effects.

An Ethics of Solidary Responsibility in favor of Environmental Sustainability: In this dialogue, we can mention that the program of the Symposium on Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Development, held in Bogotá, 2002, echoed in the formalization of a documentary tool entitled 'Manifesto for Life in Favour of an Ethics for Sustainability'. The preparation of its text received the contribution of numerous renowned authorities engaged in socio environmental actions. Following there is a quote from the document's text:

The sustainability concept is based on recognition of nature's limits and potential, as well as the environment's complexity, and it inspires a new understanding of the world, in order to address the challenges facing humanity in the third millennium. The sustainability concept promotes a new nature-culture partnership by establishing a new economy, redirecting the potentials of science and technology, and building a new political culture founded on an ethic of sustainability in values, beliefs, feelings and knowledge, thereby renewing existential meanings, worlds of life and ways of inhabiting the planet Earth. (Manifesto for Life in Favour of an Ethics for Sustainability, 2003)

Maya (2002) reaffirms the concept when he states that the rising of an ethics engaged with environmental interests is a reaction to the assumption that "*everything is solved with a*

simple technical innovation, or with some minimal economic reforms” (p. 23). Maya’s view is that if we do not develop an intense reflection about the fundamentals on which the contemporary technological society is grounded, it will be useless to fight against the dangerous environmental crisis that society is engendering. It is apparent that the current scenario imminently demands us to contrive alternatives that are more effective, and to constitute legal apparatus that are more incisive to contain the environmental degradation. History shows us that the changes made in the judicial system have always been the result of new ethical determinations and intense philosophical reformations. In his work ‘*Saber Ambiental*’ [Environmental Knowledge], Leff (2001) describes that ethics contain the idea of a set of precepts that act as conductors of individuals’ lives. Thus, the expectation for the consolidation of balance of human behaviors towards the environment ought to be based on an environmental ethics. Ethics must be capable of advocating a set of values tied up to an “*alternative productive rationality, new development potentialities, and a diversity of cultural lifestyles*” (LEFF, 2001, p.86). This author prescribes that the ethical elements of the environmental sphere should reverberate into strategies that seek to guide the manifestation of the moral attribute in the intersection of collective rights and the individual.

There can be seen new emerging ethical conformations to be adopted by humans. “*A new ethics of solidary responsibility in face of the ecological crisis of the technical-scientific civilization*” (APEL, 1994, p. 172). This leads to an ethical and political direction crucial for the current time, which is characterized by a scenario of a hazardous environmental collapse, and at which sustainability is important at the planetary level, and there is an evident imperative of responsibility towards future generations as an environmental agenda. This situation outlines the environmental reality, calls for effective interventions by the judiciary, and for the development of an ethics that critically reflects on the adherence of a rationality and responsibility that ought to be incorporated by human action. Given this situation, it is necessary to study with prudence these prescriptions in the light of the works of Jonas and Ricoeur, as we advised in the previous topic.

Hans Jonas's Proposition of a New Ethics Engaged to the Future and a New Understanding of Responsibility in Ricoeur

In the midst of this reality, the theoretical production of Has Jonas comes into view. He published a book named 'The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age', which became a paradigmatic work. In this work the author employs several parameters and principles as suggestions for the making of a new ethics, once conventional ethics were no longer satisfactory in overcoming the setbacks arising from technological modernity. According to this intellectual, the ethical problems triggered by the technological evolution – an immeasurable and harmful power – and its interference in nature say something about the devastating consequences that extend over the long term, with cumulative and irremediable effects. Jonas (2006) points out that in traditional ethics the positive and negative impacts resulting of human actions were only limited by the variants of space and time tangent to human actions. In that way, no previous ethical principle cared about the universal situation of human life, or was committed to the distant future, or to the

maintenance of the species. These negative implications were neglected until then. The author adds that human activity (reinforced by technology) has the capacity to permanently harm nature and humans themselves. Then, new resignification appears not previously contemplated by traditional ethics on the understanding of the attribute of responsibility, henceforth embracing the notion of a moral instrument capable of integrating itself with new degrees of values, and capable of measuring human interventions and their repercussions in the future. In face of the emergence of these new space-time dimensions on which the human actions take place, Jonas (2006) demonstrates an ethical determination by which he recommends the individual to *act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life* (p. 11). Speaking otherwise, that the individual “*act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life*” (p. 11). Or else, that he or she *do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth* (p. 11).

The set of propositions that compose the work under analysis has become a substantial reference for the numerous conversations in the environmentalist framework, which also extends to polymorphous frameworks: science, politics, and law, among others. This bibliography in particular was responsible for disseminating the ideas elaborated by Jonas, and was consolidated as a prominent instrument in the conversation, where ecological conceptions are established as a central theme, and even pointed as one of the foundations of environmentalist philosophy. In this wake of reasoning, we can also mention the contributions of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2000), for whom the understanding about the conception of responsibility that grew in strength in modernity is more directed to a limited judicial notion than to a more holistic approach of the concept. This implies that there is a fear about the identification of the type of responsibility an individual holds when the action perpetrated by him or her is likely to result in destruction. In such circumstances, the perpetrator should be obliged to retract. Ricoeur (2000) highlights the fragilities of this perspective of responsibility, and proposes another category for this direction of thought he calls social and collective responsibility. He suggested that the traditional concept of responsibility – which until then was understood as a kind of imputation – should be changed into a concept essentially oriented to ideas of stewardship, prudence, and prevention – qualities that in the end imply and display vaticination and anticipated judgement of the effects of the performed actions. This is due to the growth of environmental threats, many of them immeasurable, stemming from the enormous technological arsenal available today.

We can presume based on this technological context and from the statements of Ricoeur (RICOEUR, 2000) that the impacts of human-generated processes can spread over time and reach the future. Thus, the results of a present action – albeit driven by a *bona fide* intentionality – may have disastrous effects in the future. In order to become a practitioner of a responsibility that is inoculant of such parameters, it is not only required a predisposition to moral reflection, but also the cooperation of scientific knowledge working alongside with the study of future developments of current human interventions in the environment. The argumentation defended by Ricoeur is close to the Aristotelian definition of *phronesis*, which implies the use of wisdom as an indispensable property of conduct, and therefore should become a common criterion under which the

responsibilities of both collective and individual nature should be designated. Frequently, the word 'ethics' has assumed a position of relevance in countless spheres of the social conjuncture. However, this is not due to evidence of an effective applicability, but on the contrary, of the absence of such effectiveness. Rocha (2011) points out that "*the lack of ethics is due more to the lack of comprehension of reality than to the choice of truth*" (p.12). Nalini (2003) articulates the appeal to ethical bias in order to summon a greater attention to emerging environmental issues by the sensitive conscience of individuals. This would thus represent a human ethics oriented towards the custody of the environment, once the risks that make nature vulnerable would indeed be a matter of ethical concern, and require a change of attitude by the human race. Faced with this picture, the author notes that

Protection of nature is not dependent on education, wealth, or even religion. There are transgressors in every stratum of society. From the great loggers with no law and country to the dispossessed who decimate the areas near the springs. Environmental law has not been sufficient constraint. Normative proliferation appeases the intimidating force of order. At other times, the sanction is insignificant and worth bearing, because the benefit-cost ratio stimulates the transgression of the rule. (NALINI, 2003, p.33).

The most appropriate option to ensure a harmonious life on Earth would be then to build an ethical environmental conscience, one committed to transmuting the current thought that views nature as a means of satisfying the human pretensions – regarded as the only ends. Based on this expectation, this process is responsible for establishing the resignification of ethical principles, as well as implementing a relevant environmental reeducation. Environmental ethics will intend to present a new approach in which the other will no longer be viewed as a rival, but as a partner cohabitant of the same environmental space. In addition, environmental ethics shall exercise the tasks of emphasizing that the environment is a collective good, and of correcting the notion that its existence is directed to attend particular interests. With this, we may finally think about an educational strategy that "*will replace the narcissistic reason with an ethical reason*" (NALINI, 2003, p.35) actually implemented. Moreover, the scope of an ethics of responsibility presented by Ricoeur and Jonas contributes significantly to pointing us in the direction of this need for an ethical reason, an ethical reason of responsibility that takes into consideration all the members of this planet as an interested and active part in the process of appropriate care.

Acknowledgement

We thank the Postgraduate Program in *Memória: Linguagem e Sociedade*, and the following foundations for research funding: *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (CAPES) and *Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado da Bahia* (FAPESB).

REFERENCES

- APEL, K.O 1994. Studies of modern morality. Petrópolis: Voices.
- ARISTOTLE , 1992. Nicomachean Ethics. Trad. Mario of the Kury Range. 2. ed. Brasília: University of Brasília.
- DESCARTES. R 2014. Method Speech. Lisbon: Editions 70.
- GARCIA, M. G.F.P.D. 2007. The place of law in environmental protection. Coimbra, Almedina, 536p.
- HOTTOIS. G. Anthropocentrism. In New Encyclopedia of Bioethics, ed. G. HOTTOIS; J. M. 2003. Mass. Lisbon: Piaget Institute.
- JONAS, H. 2006. The responsibility principle: test of an ethic for the technological civilization. Rio de Janeiro: Counterpoint: Ed. PUC-Rio.
- KANT. I. Duties toward animals and spirits. In KELLER, D. R., 2010. Environmental Ethics. The big questions. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- LEFF, E. 2001. Environmental knowledge: sustainability, rationality, complexity, power. Rio de Janeiro: Voices.
- LIMA, T.C.S; MIOTO, R. C. T. 2007. Methodological procedures in the construction of scientific knowledge: the bibliographic research. Katál Magazine, v. 10, no. esp, p. 37-45.
- Manifesto for Life in Favour of an Ethics for Sustainability. Available at: <http://www.pnuma.org/educamb/documentos/PDF/ManifestoEng.pdf>
- MAYA, A. A. 2002. The return of Icarus. The reason of life.(Death and life of philosophy. An environmental proposal). Bogotá: UNDP, IDEA.
- NALINI, J. R. 2003. Environmental ethics. Campinas: Millerinium Editora Ltda., p.29.
- RICOEUR, P. 1992. Oneself as Another. Trad. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- RICOEUR, P. 2000. The Just. Trad. David Pellauer. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- RICOEUR, P. 2000. The Just. Trad. David Pellauer. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- ROCHA.J.M.S. 2011. Legal ethics: for an ethical philosophy of law. Rio de Janeiro: Elsevier. p.12.
- ROSSATO, N. D. 2010. Paul Ricoeur's Ethics. In: SILVEIRA, D. C.; HOBUSS, J. (Org.). Virtues, rights and democracy. Pellets: UFPel , p.45-60.
