To what extent can Critical Theory and the discourse ethics, which claims to relay and reframe it, truly integrate an ecological problematic? The difficulty of such an endeavour is well apparent in the sharp criticisms made by Hans Jonas towards Marxism. Jonas wanted to hammer in the truism that we should include prudential imperatives towards nature in our ethical behaviour and political strategies, which according to him, necessarily relativises the scope of Marxism that was said to remain naïve in this regard. However, he also intended to highlight the secondary, conditional, and indeed meaningless imperative of emancipation in the face of the necessity to preserve the environment. In this respect, the aim of liberation developed into an ethics of discursive reciprocity was good for a time, preoccupied as it was with the improvement of the life conditions of human beings. These were times when problems were only amongst beings of the same species, and when nature figured only in the background, or as a resource deemed inexhaustible. At a time when nature’s reproduction has become problematic, however, this is no longer
the order of the day. More radically, it seems that Jonas’ intention was, in the end, to denounce emancipation as an illusion, and almost as a danger. For Jonas, it was an illusion because it remained trapped in the false ontology of the not-yet, of the unfulfilment of being, an ontology which is no longer valid once, in crisis, we have come to realise the primacy of the self-assertion of life that carries us and is our enduring condition. Finally, it remained a danger for Jonas to the extent that the devastation of the environment appeared as the direct historical consequence of the modern promotion of the emancipatory project itself, in the sense that it entailed the domination of nature. In the face of a sense of contemporary emergency, the principle of responsibility and of the protection of nature at all costs appears to be incompatible with the principle of emancipation and must be substituted as a guide for action. Freedom, in whatever sense one might take it, has ceased to be the reference value of acting.

It is interesting to see how the two main theorists of discourse ethics have reacted to this provocative thesis, which asserts the non-assimilative character of any serious ecological stance into its position.

**Apel’s Position**

Apel agrees with the relevance of a project of an ethics of responsibility oriented towards the future of humanity, in opposition to a traditional ethics obsessed with the present of the face-to-face and a restrictive definition of community. He is close to Jonas’ position in that he identifies as the critical anchoring point of that ethics, the will to limit instrumental rationality, which dominates modernity and underpins its modern scientific and technical project. However, Apel simultaneously refuses to ground ethics in an ontology of nature because for him it constitutes a regression into a naturalist paralogism. More importantly, he rejects Jonas’ diagnosis by showing that Jonas can only disqualify reason and the emancipatory project because he identifies the latter with the modern trajectories of capitalism or socialism, that is to say, using post-war terminology, with societies whose centre of gravity is situated in the practical domination of nature destined to feed constant population growth and self-sustaining economic development. According to Apel, though, it is clear that we must link emancipation, if this concept has any sense, not to instrumental action, but to communicative action, that is,