CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

INFANTS, PATERNALISM, AND BIOETHICS:
JAPAN’S GRASP OF JONAS’S INSISTENCE
ON INTERGENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY*

William R. LaFleur

1. A Surprising Affinity

To be charged with holding views that are “paternalistic” has been something that thinkers in Europe and America have been eager to avoid for decades. Bioethicists have been especially sensitive to it. We need to pay close attention, therefore, when Richard Wolin judges Hans Jonas to have held views that are not only “antidemocratic” but also “paternalistic.” Since Wolin links this criticism with an attempt to show that Jonas remained far more influenced by Heidegger than he would publicly admit, the issue is crucial, especially for persons—among whom I number myself—who deem Jonas to be a thinker of extraordinary importance and relevance for our time. Wolin’s perspective on Jonas, although in my view seriously mistaken, has been influential. When, for instance, in public seminars on bioethics I have tried to make a case for the importance of Jonas, I have met with resistance from persons who, while themselves eager to articulate a distinctively Jewish perspective on this topic, at the same time reject Jonas as irrelevant. And one stated reason for such a dismissal has been that Jonas remained, even after his early teacher’s embrace of the Third Reich, a closeted Heideggerian.

So I here will scrutinize Wolin’s claim of paternalism in Jonas. But I will do so in a roundabout way—specifically by first paying some attention to how ethicists and bioethicists in Japan have looked at this

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matter. Jonas’s work is fairly well known in Japan and, at least from how I see things, deemed far more important there than in North America to persons doing ethics. In my own reading in Japanese bioethics over more than a decade I have been surprised at how often I have seen Jonas cited. Jonas figures prominently in a centrally important treatise on bioethics published in 1986 by Hisatake Katô, arguably Japan’s leading contemporary ethicist and the person under whose editorial overview Jonas’s Das Prinzip Verantwortung was translated and published in Japanese in 2000. My supposition, based on references to him in their works, is that most of Japan’s major philosophers have read Jonas—in German, in English, or in Japanese. Yoshihiko Sugimura, a Professor at Kyoto University, has compiled and provided me with a list of twenty-two relatively recent publications in Japanese discussing Jonas. And, significantly, the general Japanese reading public has also been introduced to the thought of Jonas in, for instance, an op-ed on Jonas in the mass-circulation national newspaper, Mainichi Shimbun.

It appears that for his readers in Japan what best encapsulates the distinctively important principle in the thought of Jonas is what is referred to as his perspective on sedaikan no rinri, an “intergenerational ethics.” The Japanese phrase denotes “an ethic that spans the generations.” It is seen as deeply connected to Jonas’s insistence that a Kantian ethic, because it focused solely on responsibility to one’s contemporaries, is in serious need of being supplemented. The new imperative of our time, Jonas wrote, “adds a time dimension to the moral calculus which is entirely absent from the instantaneous logical operation of the Kantian imperative.”

Although I do not find it mentioned within the materials in Japanese with which I am familiar, I here offer the hypothesis that Japanese ethicists have, at least compared to their Anglo-American counterparts, gravitated so readily to the Jonasian view in part because in many ways it is not really so very new to them. That is, I will try to show that this theme in Jonas has a strong, even if implicit, affinity with a major emphasis in traditional ethical systems in East Asia, specifically

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2 Hisatake Katô, Baiershikusu to wa nanika (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1986).
3 Personal communication, May 21, 2007. At this date I have not read all of these.