

*Ecological Ethics in a European Context: A Comparative Study of Bernard Charbonneau, Hans Jonas, and Erazim Kohák*

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The purpose of this project is to explore the thought of three intellectuals who have played a significant role in the development of a European environmental consciousness—Bernard Charbonneau (1910-1996), Hans Jonas (1903-1993), and Erazim Kohák (1933-2020)—but who tend to be rather neglected in contemporary discussions. Under the aegis of this project, I want to investigate both the ways in which they provide essential resources for the development of an ecological ethics in an era of climate crisis, and how a knowledge of their thinking is indispensable for everyone seeking to understand the development of the environmental movement in the European context.

All three are engaged in a philosophically sophisticated and historically informed cultural criticism that leads to the articulation of an ecological ethics; for all three, the analysis of the development of modern technology contributes to how they understand the modern predicament, which means that the solution to the ecological crisis cannot primarily be of a technological sort (even if none of them is hostile to technological development as such). For all three, finally, ethics is deeply related to an understanding of humankind—a philosophical anthropology—both affirming our continuity with the rest of nature and our distinction as moral subjects.

The last point is particularly significant: For Charbonneau, Jonas, and Kohák we must affirm the human uniqueness in the same breath as we affirm our kinship with non-human nature. This may turn out to be their major critical contribution to a discussion that always threatens to veer either into a hostility towards humanity as such (as if it would be best if there were no human beings around), or into an anthropocentric utilitarianism (as if we can only reason about ecosystems and their value in relation to human survival). But how do we understand this human distinction, which is the presupposition both of our freedom and of our unique moral responsibility? This is a key question I want to explore in this project.

The differences between them are important too—not least the fact that Jonas was Jewish, Kohák Christian, and Charbonneau agnostic. This is an interesting theme to explore within the project since the relation of religion to the ecological crisis has been under constant discussion ever since Lynn White Jr. published his controversial ‘Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’ (1967). White traces the roots of this crisis to some aspects of the Judeo-Christian worldview—not least ideas about the human distinction in relation to the rest of nature. All three thinkers enter into discussion with this kind of critique, deepening it while also trying to find untapped resources within religion for a contemporary ecological ethics. This is yet another significant theme to be explored in the project.