

Conference: Science, Precaution, Innovation¹

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Lecture: The Precautionary Principle and Dutch policy

My name is Alja Hoeksema. Last year I followed the master course Applied Ethics and I recently graduated as ethicist at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands.

I wrote my thesis on the research question whether the current Dutch policy regarding exposure to EMF's is ethically justified.

The first question is: what is ethics?

Ethics is a trend within philosophy which concerns the question: What is the good life?

Within ethics different theories and principles have been developed to answer the question what the good life is. One of these principles is the precautionary principle.

Since the precautionary principle knows many interpretations, in my thesis I argued that the most plausible interpretation would be the one that was most similar to the view of the one who formulated the precautionary principle. Dutch scientists assume that the precautionary principle is grounded in the theory of Hans Jonas.² That is why I studied his book. It may not be entirely correct, since the European Environment Agency (EEA) states in the first part of the report *Late lessons from early warnings* that the precautionary principle emerged within "environmental science in the 1970s, when German scientists and policy-makers were trying to deal with 'forest death' (*Waldsterben*) and its possible causes, including air pollution."³ Unfortunately I did not have the time to dive into that. So, I will concentrate on what I studied and that is the theory of Jonas.

Hans Jonas wrote the book *The principle Responsibility* in 1979⁴. In this book he explains that the traditional ethics do no longer suffice to judge modern technologies. In particular the ability of modern technique to destroy mankind or the earth in its entirety asks for new ethics.

Jonas considers his responsibility principle a categorical imperative. He borrowed this phrase from the philosopher Immanuel Kant. It means it is a fixed law. A kind of law of the Medes and Persians. This law, according to Jonas, is the duty of politicians to always act in such a way that the continuation of the current and future existence of humanity is safeguarded⁵.

¹ <https://ensser.org/events/2019/pp-conference/#more-2452>

² See for instance; *Prudent Precaution*, Health Council Netherlands, 2008, p.15 and *Voorzorgverplichtingen*, Elbert de Jong, (Publisher: Boom juridisch, 2016), p. 55.

³ EEA, *Late lessons from early warnings*, (Copenhagen, 2001/2008), ISBN 978-92-9167-323-0, p. 13.

⁴ Hans Jonas, *Het principe verantwoordelijkheid, Een onderzoek naar een ethiek voor de technologische civilisatie*, translation: Ingrid ten Bos (Utrecht, Publisher: IJzer, 2011).

⁵ Jonas, *Het principe verantwoordelijkheid*, p. 39.

After marking out the goal of the principle he gives a moral compass to guide our choices within the goal. The beauty of Jonas theory is that Jonas realises that, in order to find good answers to ethical questions, you need your head as well as your heart. That is why he formulated 2 preliminary duties and a main duty for the moral compass.

The first preliminary duty is to acquire an impression of long-term consequences of modern technique (with your head).

The second preliminary duty is to evoke the appropriate feeling from this impression (in your heart). Jonas requires a willingness *to be influenced* by the thoughts of possible harm.

The main duty is to attribute more weight to potential negative consequences of modern technology than to its potential positive consequences⁶.

Jonas formulated these duties for politicians because they usually make decisions regarding the permission of modern technologies. The people are made more vulnerable because of this power and that is why, according to Jonas, politicians should comply with the responsibility principle.

Jonas states that, if love is added to this responsibility, it gets wings, by the dedication of someone who learns to shiver for the fate of those that are entrusted to his or her responsibility.

This is Jonas' new ethics.

If we take a look at the Dutch policy regarding the precautionary principle and exposure to EMF, we can see that the governmental Antenna Agency states that, due to European law, the Netherlands should apply the precautionary principle to the placement of antenna installations. However, since exposure limits are in place and since, according to the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP)⁷, health effects due to exposure below these limits are not plausible, the precautionary principle is not applied.

I presume you all know that these exposure limits are subject of a scientific debate. To be specific; 251 scientists, that have published peer-reviewed papers on the biological or health effects of non-ionizing electromagnetic fields, argue that these exposure limits are not safe.⁸ Given these facts, it seems rather clear what the moral compass, that Jonas provided for politicians, would point at;

- It would look for and find negative long-term consequences.
- It would evoke the appropriate feeling of concern regarding the potential harm.
- It would attribute more weight to the judgement of the 251 scientists than to the ICNIRP scientists.
- Following this compass politicians would also comply with Jonas' categorical imperative to safeguard current and future generations of mankind.

⁶ Jonas, *Het principe verantwoordelijkheid*, p. 63-66

⁷ <https://www.icnirp.org/>

⁸ <https://www.emfscientist.org/>

So, one of the conclusions in my thesis was that, if we regard Jonas the founder of the precautionary principle and we follow his guidelines, the current Dutch policy regarding exposure to EMF's is not ethically justified.

This summary is a very brief overview of some elements in my thesis. Please feel free to contact me in case of questions and/or comments. My e-mail address is:
a.s.hoeksema(at)concepts.nl