

**Dissertation:**  
**A Philosophical Critique of American Bioethics in its Origins:**  
**Applying the Contribution of Hans Jonas Toward a Way Forward**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this dissertation is to make a philosophical critique of the so-called discipline of bioethics in America by demonstrating the philosophical problems which have beset it since its beginning in the 1960s. My critique will be made through an application of the thought of the German Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas (1903-1993), specifically, his insights on the non-dualistic nature of organismal life and wholeness, on the transformation in the meaning of nature and knowledge in modernity, and on the dynamism of modern science and technology.

The two critical problems which American bioethics suffers from since its origins are i) a reductionist and therefore vastly inadequate conception of the nature of organismal life, and ii) a failure to understand the philosophical horizons of modern science and technology and the nature of the technological ontology bequeathed to modernity. These inadequacies inherent in the discipline will be illustrated by way of engaging with the contemporary phenomenon of “brain death,” initially known as irreversible coma, an ethical and medical quandary that Hans Jonas became embroiled with in 1968, and which helped give rise to the birth of bioethics in America. Ongoing conceptual defence by bioethicists and philosophers of why “brain death” constitutes the true death of the human organism reveals how bioethical reasoning operates with tacit metaphysical assumptions about aliveness, death, form, substance, and wholeness that are grounded in a reductive conception of the nature of living being, and moreover, remains deeply rooted in a technological ontology whose logic is governed by *praxis*.

My critique thus serves as a pivotal step in a way forward for bioethics today, by reigniting our thinking over the root realities implicated in current bioethical issues where human life and dignity are profoundly and gravely threatened.