

The Quest for a Boundless Ethic: A Reassessment of Albert Schweitzer Norm Phelps¹

Compassion [is] the ultimate ethic.

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Introduction

In September of 1915, while the Enlightenment was dying a bloody death on the battlefields of Europe, one of its last great votaries was hitching a ride on a flat bottom steamer towing barges up the Ogooue River in French Equatorial Africa. At first glance, Albert Schweitzer was an unlikely candidate for hitchhiker on an African tugboat. The scion of a family of Protestant clerics and academics from Alsace, he was a former member of the faculties of philosophy and theology at the University of Strasbourg. His publication in 1906 of *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* had revolutionized the study of Christian origins and established him as a leading figure in liberal theology. Even so, at 40, he was still best known as a classical and liturgical organist whose recitals had filled cathedrals and concert halls across Europe. A master organ builder, Schweitzer was also a musicologist whose study of Johann Sebastian Bach is still read.

But in 1905, at the age of 30, driven by a desire to devote his life to the service of others, he had put four brilliant careers on hold to enroll in medical school, where he specialized

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in tropical medicine and surgery. On the eve of World War I, Schweitzer departed Europe to become a medical missionary in the rainforests of what is now Gabon. In 1917, he was detained by the French and interned for the duration of the war. (Alsace had been part of Germany since 1871, making him an enemy national.) In 1924, he returned to Lambarene, where he remained, with only brief interludes until his death in 1965, not long following his ninetieth birthday.

In 1915, Schweitzer was on a quest to reweave the fabric of the European civilization that had come into being with the Enlightenment and had been coming unraveled since the middle of the 19th century. He considered this “modern” civilization, as it has come to be called, humanity’s highest achievement, and he blamed its decline on a failure to live up to its own principles: the supremacy of reason, the perfectibility of humanity and the virtue of progress. His fundamental assumption, the article of bedrock faith that he seems never to have questioned in an era when it was being rejected by philosophers, artists, and historians all around him, was the Enlightenment notion that philosophers create civilizations and that societies are largely the emanations of philosophical ideas. One of the leitmotifs of Schweitzer’s work is a vehement denial of the conviction that had recently taken hold in Europe that societies are shaped less by ideas than by “irrational” forces such as geography, economics, history, genetics and unconscious psychological drives.

Albert Schweitzer devoted his life to sticking his finger into the crumbling dyke of the Enlightenment in a desperate effort to hold back the sea of Darwin, Marx, Freud,

Spengler, Nietzsche and others who were ushering in the deluge that would eventually acquire the appositely uninspired name of “postmodernism.”

Reverence for Life

In 1923, Schweitzer would publish the book that he hoped would bring his beloved Europe to its senses. *The Philosophy of Civilization* was a rallying cry against the pessimism of Oswald Spengler’s immensely popular *The Decline of the West*, which argued that modern Europe was dying of old age. Schweitzer believed, on the contrary, that Europe was suffering an infection for which he had found the cure. In his Introduction, Schweitzer identifies ethics as the “driving force” behind true civilization and issues a call for Europe to save itself by devoting itself to becoming ethical.

Civilization, put quite simply, consists in giving ourselves, as human beings, to the effort to attain the perfecting of the human race and the actualization of progress of every sort in the circumstances of humanity and of the objective world. This mental attitude, however, involves a double predisposition: firstly, we must be prepared to act affirmatively toward the world and life; secondly, we must become ethical. . . *Civilization originates when men become inspired by a strong and clear determination to attain progress, and consecrate themselves, as a result of this determination, to the service of life and of the world. It is only in ethics that we can find the driving force for such action, transcending, as it does, the limits of our own existence (Philosophy xiii, emphasis added).*

The search for the transcendent ethic that would revitalize European civilization was the problem that had been monopolizing Schweitzer’s thoughts whenever he was not hard at work in his hospital. The answer had come to him on that steamy afternoon in 1915 as he rode a riverboat up the Ogooue River toward his hospital in Lambarene:

“Slowly we crept upstream, laboriously navigating – it was the dry season – between the sandbanks. Lost in thought I sat on the deck of the barge, struggling to find the elementary and universal concept of the ethical that I had not discovered in any philosophy. . . . Two days passed. Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen, unsought, the phrase “reverence for life.” [*Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*; although he spoke excellent French, German was Schweitzer’s dominant language.] The iron door had yielded. The path through the thicket had become visible. Now I had found my way to the principle in which affirmation of the world and ethics are joined together.” (*Life and Thought* 155).

Nearly the whole of *The Philosophy of Civilization* is a setting of the stage for the final pages in which Schweitzer presents and explains “reverence for life,” the concept that he believes will save Europe, and through Europe, humanity:

“With Descartes, philosophy starts from the dogma, “I think, therefore I exist.” With this paltry, arbitrarily chosen beginning, it is landed irretrievably on the road to the abstract. . . . True philosophy must start from the most immediate and comprehensive fact of consciousness, which says, “I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live.” This is not an ingenious dogmatic formula. Day by day, hour by hour, I live and move in it. At every moment of reflection, it stands fresh before me. . . . A mysticism of ethical union with Being grows out of it.” (*Philosophy* 309)

At the headwater of the Enlightenment, Rene Descartes had started modern philosophy down a track that led nowhere by proclaiming thought to be the primary, irreducible, undeniable truth from which all other truths derive and upon which they depend, and in so doing he made the massive blunder of failing to distinguish between thought and the substrate of consciousness that sustains it. Thought, Schweitzer is telling us, is not primary; it is, in fact, like sight or hearing in that it is one of the modes by which we experience objects. Arguably, the objects of thought (memories, imaginary images, ideas,

etc.) differ from the objects of the other five senses in that they exist within rather than outside of the mind; but even so, they belong to the category of sense objects. (Schweitzer borrowed this view from Hinduism and Buddhism, which he studied extensively, authoring a lengthy analysis of *Indian Thought and its Development*. These systems recognize six senses: the five we acknowledge plus thought). Descartes' failure to recognize this divorced philosophy from experience and reduced it to an academic exercise unrelated to life, and this was why European philosophy had been unable to develop an ethical system capable of leading humanity forward.

Schweitzer proposed to remedy this situation by establishing the primal substrate that was prior to thought as philosophy's point of departure. This substrate he terms the "will to live" (*Wille zum Leben*). And this brings us to a critical point, which is the way (profoundly influenced by Schopenhauer) in which Schweitzer conceives "will". Most of us think of will as a conscious desire; at its most basic a desire to experience pleasure and avoid pain. But to Schweitzer, as we shall see in a moment, pleasure and pain—indeed sentience in its totality—are secondary manifestations. For him (as for Schopenhauer), "will" is prior even to individual consciousness. And paradoxically, this "will to live", this utterly, fundamentally, quintessentially subjective phenomenon locked inextricably within each living being, forms the basis for an objective ethical principle that transcends the individual to embrace all living beings. Schweitzer explains the paradox this way:

"As in my own will to live there is a longing for a wider life and for the mysterious exaltation of the will-to-live that we call pleasure, with a dread of annihilation and of the mysterious depreciation of the will-to-live which

we call pain; so it is also in the will to live all around me, whether it can express itself before me, or remains dumb (*Philosophy* 309).”

It is the presence of an identical will to live in all living beings that transforms the subjective into the objective and the individual into the universal. And this recognition that what is most fundamental in me is also what is most fundamental in all who live opens the way to what Schweitzer calls “a boundless ethics,” reverence for life, or more precisely but less poetically, reverence for the will-to-live.

“Ethics consist, therefore, in my experiencing the compulsion to show to all will-to-live the same reverence as I do to my own. There we have given us that basic principle of the moral which is a necessity of thought. It is good to maintain and encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it.” (*Philosophy* 309)

A little further on, Schweitzer summarizes his ethic of reverence for life in a single sentence: “Ethics are responsibility without limit towards all that lives” (*Philosophy* 311).

At this point, we might be tempted to think of “reverence for life” as a philosophy of universal compassion. That is, in fact, the common conception of it. Most people who use the phrase today think that this is what it means. But in *The Philosophy of Civilization*, Schweitzer is at pains to make clear that compassion is not what he is talking about.

Compassion is too narrow to rank as the total essence of the ethical. It denotes, of course, only interest in the suffering will-to-live. . . Love means more, since it includes fellowship in suffering, in joy, and in effort, but it shows the ethical only in a simile, although a simile that is natural and profound (*Philosophy* 311).

Amazingly, the simile that Schweitzer has in mind is sexual attraction (*Philosophy* 311). Why a theologian of Schweitzer's commitment and creativity should, at this critical point in the development of his thought, choose to see love as a metaphor for sex instead of as a primary force in itself or as a metaphor for the love of God, I have never been able to understand. Perhaps he viewed sex as the universal force that generated life. But however that may be, the problem inherent in the ethical primacy of reverence for the will-to-live as opposed to compassion and love for sentient beings is apparent in the following passage from *The Philosophy of Civilization*:

“A man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life which he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives. He does not ask how far this or that life deserves one's sympathy as being valuable, *nor, beyond that, whether and to what degree it is capable of feeling. Life, as such, is sacred to him. He tears no leaf from a tree, plucks no flower, and takes care to crush no insect.*” (*Philosophy* 310, emphasis added)

Here, Schweitzer makes no distinction between the way we should treat sentient and insentient beings. It is life defined as the ability to grow and reproduce that grants ethical standing, not the ability to experience suffering and joy. For reasons that I will discuss in a moment, this constitutes an ethical naïveté that would surprise us in a thinker of Schweitzer's depth and originality if we had not encountered the same naïveté in his one-man crusade to re-make European civilization and reverse the flow of history. Schweitzer's errors are often the errors of noble overreaching. In the Preface to *Fear and Trembling*, Soren Kierkegaard identified the cardinal sin of 19th century philosophy (and Schweitzer is nothing if not a 19th century philosopher) as the urge to “go beyond” established and accepted principles that have stood the test of time. And Kierkegaard's

critique of “going beyond”—that it becomes a denial of the original principle and, therefore, instead of going beyond it, falls short of it—applies to “reverence for life” as well. By trying to go beyond love and compassion, Schweitzer’s ethic—as defined in *The Philosophy of Civilization*—fails even to equal it.

To Will or to Want, That is the Question

Like its English cognate, the German noun *Wille*—at least in everyday usage—implies intention and desire, and therefore, consciousness. Likewise, the related verb *wollen* (first and third person singular, present active indicative: *will*), which can be translated into English as either “to will” or “to want,” is the common, everyday verb meaning “to want.” When a German speaker wants a stein of beer, she says “*Ich will ein Stein.*” “I want to go home” is “*Ich will nach Haus gehen.*” In the jargon of 19th century German philosophy, however, especially the bastardized Buddhism of Arthur Schopenhauer, the noun *Wille* acquired the meaning of a vital, but impersonal, force that is the ultimate reality underlying the world of appearances that we experience day-to-day.

With this in mind, let’s revisit a statement of Schweitzer’s that I quoted above in the standard English translation. In Schweitzer’s original German, “I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live,” is “*Ich bin Leben, dass leben will, inmitten von Leben, dass leben will*” (Association Internationale), which can just as easily, and a lot more naturally, be translated, “I am life that wants to live surrounded by life that wants to live.” But the translator could not use the more straightforward, natural translation because “wants” implies conscious desire, and Schweitzer makes it clear in

the passage about not picking a leaf or plucking a flower that he is including in *Leben*, “life,” everything that grows and reproduces, not simply beings who are sentient and conscious.

In the course of identifying his own will-to-live with all other wills-to-live, Schweitzer systematically confuses the technical, Schopenhaurian meaning of *Wille* with the commonsense, everyday meaning, a confusion that is facilitated by the happenstance that *wollen* can mean both “want” and “will.” We can empathize with other wills to live, he tells us, because we can experience our own. But if another will-to-live cannot experience itself (or anything else), what is there to empathize with? Consciousness can empathize with consciousness, but to say that consciousness can empathize with an unconscious force is to commit a pathetic fallacy. In short, Schweitzer anchors his ethical thinking to consciousness, which he initially identifies with the “will-to-live.” But he then uses the dual meaning of “will” to extend his ethic to unconscious beings, apparently failing to realize that he has cut it loose from its original moorings.

This equivocation is the undoing of reverence for life as Schweitzer describes it in *The Philosophy of Civilization*. An ethic based on love and compassion is grounded directly in experience. I know from immediate, undeniable experience that my pain is evil. Therefore, I can empathize with your pain and know apodictically that it is also evil. The empathy of an ethic based on love and compassion is a valid empathy. An ethic based on will-to-live understood (at least sometimes) as distinct from and prior to consciousness is grounded in an intellectual abstraction, not direct experience. In this regard, Schweitzer’s

“will-to-live” differs little from Descartes’ “thought”. Its empathy is an illusion of abstract thinking.

To use Schweitzer’s examples that I quoted above, if I crush an insect I have destroyed a will-to-live that is conscious of itself and wants to continue living, wants to experience pleasure and avoid pain. I know that this is evil because I know directly, immediately, unarguably, that it would be evil if done to me. But neither the leaf nor the tree, the flower nor the plant on which it grows, is conscious. And so when I tear a leaf from a tree or pluck a flower, I do nothing wrong unless I indirectly harm a sentient being, such as a caterpillar for whom the leaf was food or shelter or a honeybee who needs the nectar from the flower. I have caused no pain. I have deprived of life nothing that wanted to live, nothing, in fact, that experienced life in any way. In terms of the suffering I have caused, I might as well have broken a rock with a hammer. All sentient beings are valid objects of love and compassion, and only sentient beings are valid objects of love and compassion. Comparing the crushing of an insect to pulling a leaf from a tree or picking a flower trivializes the crushing of the insect by negating the insect’s consciousness, and it is in that regard that reverence for life, as Schweitzer originally conceived it, falls short of an ethic based on love and compassion by trying to reach beyond it.

An Easy Way Out

If we apply the same ethical standard to both sentient and insentient life, as Schweitzer tried to do, we either treat insentient life in a way that renders living all but impossible—we don’t harvest grain or pick vegetables and fruit—or we engage in unnecessary cruelty to sentient beings—we kill them for food, conduct medical experiments on them and the

like.² Ethical standards that are appropriate to sentient beings are inappropriate to insentient beings and *vice versa*. It is entirely proper to treat insentient beings as a class, without showing great concern for individuals—to protect forests, for example, but not individual trees (except, as I noted above, for the indirect harm that may be done to the insects and birds who live in the tree). But because the ability to suffer and the love of life reside in the individual, we must protect sentient beings as individuals, not as aggregates. Schweitzer's will-to-live as formulated in *The Philosophy of Civilization* ignores a crucial element, perhaps *the* crucial element, in the ethical equation.

Like water, people follow the path of least resistance, and given a choice between treating plants as if they were sentient and treating animals as if they were insentient, most of us will choose the latter every time. Even Schweitzer—who went to extraordinary lengths to practice his boundless ethic in his daily life—illustrates the point. For most of his life, he continued to eat meat, becoming vegetarian only in his final years (Free 40). Better late than never. I was in my forties before I became a vegan. But what is troubling here is that Schweitzer arrived at his ethic of reverence for life at the age of 40 and for another four decades was able to justify to himself continuing to eat meat. Another example is vivisection, which Schweitzer, the medical doctor, defended to the end of his life, arguing only that it should be conducted as seldom as possible and then with every effort to minimize the animals' suffering (Free 36-37).

² Hierarchies of sentience, such as that taught in Jainism, are not relevant here because they are clearly not what Schweitzer had in mind, which is curious because Schweitzer was familiar with Jainism, and the Jain hierarchy of sentience would accommodate itself very comfortably to his view that it is sometimes necessary to do harm, but that we must always strive to do as little harm as possible.

Here, however, we have to admit that a semblance of a case can be made for vivisection on the basis of “reverence for life” that cannot be made for meat eating. It is, in essence, the case made by Utilitarian philosophers like Peter Singer. Vivisectors balance one set of lives against another set of lives. And it can be argued—as Singer and Schweitzer do, although from different philosophical premises—that a scientist could in good conscience decide that the suffering that his experiments will alleviate outweighs the suffering that they will cause, as in the case of the polio vaccine, where the suffering and death of millions of primates led to a vaccine that saved even more millions of human children (Singer 67).

There are two problems with this argument. The first is that ultimately, however you formulate it, it depends on a utilitarian calculus that presumes it is acceptable to cause suffering to one being for the sake of alleviating the suffering of another. Except in cases of warding off direct and immediate attack, I think that this is a very problematic premise on which to base public policy or societal behavior—and Schweitzer was attempting to construct an ethic that would undergird all of civilization—because ultimately it is the excuse behind which all tyranny, oppression and cruelty hide. It is a premise that has loosed far more suffering on the world than it has ever assuaged. Nearly everyone who promotes evil as public policy does so on the grounds that it will lead to a greater good. “The greater good” is the most destructive force ever unleashed upon the world.

The second problem—of which Singer is aware, but Schweitzer was not—arises from the fact that vivisection of unwilling or uninformed human subjects is practiced only rarely

and usually behind a veil of lies and secrecy; when it comes to light, it is invariably the subject of universal condemnation.³ Vivisection upon unwilling and uninformed nonhuman animals, however, is business as usual and widely approved by the global public as important to human health and longevity. In today's terminology, vivisection is speciesist (Singer 67-68). In the context of "reverence for life," this systematic infliction of suffering and death upon a class of beings with which the vivisector does not identify in order to benefit a class with which he does identify undercuts Schweitzer's cardinal rule of showing "to all will-to-live the same reverence that I show my own." Vivisection devalues the will-to-live of animals in favor of the will-to-live of human beings. And when the case-by-case balancing that Schweitzer talks about can result in the consistent devaluation of another category of living beings for the benefit of one's own category, reverence for life becomes an empty phrase.

Schweitzer was, however, acutely aware of the larger problem that living beings regularly come into mortal conflict with other living beings in ways that sometimes require us to destroy one life in order to preserve or support another. No ethical system yet devised has been able to cope successfully with this moral flaw built into the structure of the universe. Most ethical systems presume that it is always *possible* to act ethically, no matter what situation we may find ourselves in. We may not always do so, we may not always see

³ The largest scale experiments ever conducted on unwilling or uninformed human beings were, of course, the invasive and lethal experiments conducted by German doctors upon countless thousands of Jews, Roma, and other prisoners during the period of Nazi rule. (See, for example, Annas and Grodin, Lifton, and Spitz.) The most notable American example was the notorious Tuskegee experiment which ran from 1932 until 1972, in which nearly 400 impoverished and poorly educated African-American men suffering from syphilis were told they were being treated for "bad blood," when in fact they were not being treated at all so that researchers could observe the course of their disease (Brunner). In both of these instances, it was deeply ingrained racist attitudes that made the experiments seem morally acceptable, just as it is deeply ingrained speciesist attitudes that make animal experimentation seem morally acceptable today.

clearly what the ethical course of action is, but there always is an ethical course of action open to us, however unpleasant it may be. And so, traditional ethical systems tend to be guidelines for deciding which of the available options in any given situation is the ethical option.

The presumption that there is always an ethical course of action available to us—or to phrase it differently, that necessity can render moral an act that would otherwise be immoral—makes ethics relative to the situation. That is to say, what is unethical in one situation might well be ethical in another. Schweitzer tells us that in an absolute ethic, such as reverence for life, it is never ethical to take life, no matter what the circumstances. Since sometimes you will take a life—whether by action or inaction—no matter what you do, according to Schweitzer, *it is sometimes necessary to act unethically*, not for the sake of some greater good, but simply because there is no course of action available that does not result in the death of a living being. A variation on an example that is frequently invoked in the animal rights debate will illustrate the point.

Following a shipwreck, you are alone on a life raft in shark infested waters. A human child and a dog are swimming in the water beside you, and a crate of food and water comes floating by. It is a tiny life raft, and you can bring in the dog, the child or the crate. Or you can jump into the water yourself and put the child and the dog into the raft or put the food into the raft with either the child or the dog. But if more than two of the four entities in play are in the raft, it will swamp. The question is, What is the ethical thing for you to do?

The premise of the exercise is that there *is* an ethical course of action, and that the task of ethics is to help you find it. But this presumes that it is sometimes ethical to sacrifice one life for another, and the only questions to be decided are, Which life? and In what circumstances? And this presumption creates what for Schweitzer is an unacceptable compromise between ethics and reality, and in so doing makes ethics relative to the situation. That is to say, what is unethical in one situation—letting a dog drown, for example—might well be ethical in another.

When we fail to acknowledge this, as most of us do, we avoid responsibility for our actions by pretending that they are ethical, which makes it easier to act more unethically than is absolutely necessary. In order to salve our consciences, we willingly walk out onto a slippery slope. In a case where we have no choice but to act unethically, we must carefully review the specific circumstances and the likely consequences of each possible course of action and then simply do the best we can without any ready-made set of rules to guide us.

“Ordinary ethics seek compromises. . . . they produce experimental, relative ethics. They offer as ethical what is in reality not ethical but a mixture of non-ethical necessity and ethics. . . . The ethics of reverence for life know nothing of a relative ethic. They rank only the maintenance and promotion of life as good. All destruction of and injury to life, under whatever circumstances they take place, they condemn as evil. They do not keep in store adjustments between ethics and necessity all ready for use. . . . They do not abolish for [a human being] all ethical conflicts, but compel him to decide in each case how far he can remain ethical and how far he must submit himself to the necessity for destruction of and injury to life, and therewith incur guilt. It is not by receiving instruction about agreement between ethical and necessary that a man makes progress in ethics, but only by coming to hear more and more plainly the voice of the ethical, by becoming ruled more and more by the longing to preserve and promote life,

and by becoming more and more obstinate in resistance to the necessity for destroying or injuring life.” (*Philosophy* 317)

The point that Schweitzer is making here is of crucial importance for believers in an ethic of compassion for the same reason that it was a crucial point for Schweitzer. Sentient beings live in mortal conflict with one another. And try as we might, we cannot make ourselves exceptions to that rule. It is, as I said before, a flaw built into the structure of the universe. Even the vegan food I eat was produced at the cost of the lives of insects, worms, small mammals, and ground nesting birds. We can strive to minimize our participation in the conflict, but we cannot eliminate it. And the only guidance that Schweitzer gives us for resolving our dilemma is that we must become “ruled more and more by the longing to preserve and promote life, and [become] more and more obstinate in resistance to the necessity for destroying or injuring life.” It is not a lot of help. But Schweitzer doesn’t intend it to be. Relying on outside help in the form of codes that lay down specific rules for behavior governing every circumstance leads to confusion about what ethical behavior really is; it makes us morally lazy and irresponsible. It is only by recognizing evil as evil every time we do it that we will be able to reduce over time the evil that we do.

A Mixed Legacy: Schweitzer and Philosophy

Albert Schweitzer was a European nineteenth century philosopher writing in a global twentieth century. His love for the Enlightenment was such that rather than build a future, he tried to repair the past, an exercise in futility. Relatedly, his faith in European civilization—as informed by Christianity and the Enlightenment—made him a provincial

in an increasingly cosmopolitan world. In reverence for life, Schweitzer failed to discover the new ethic that he thought would be his crowning achievement. But “reverence for life” soon took on a life of its own, as the phrase resonated with millions of people who took it to mean exactly what it sounds like it means: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” applied to all sentient beings. In Schweitzer’s failure, people discovered anew a timeless ethic that can never be transcended or gone beyond.

There is reason to believe that Schweitzer himself may have quickly come to accept the public reading of the phrase that he had coined.⁴ At various times, he spoke in terms that made “reverence for life” sound very much like the love and compassion from which he had differentiated it in *The Philosophy of Civilization*. As early as 1924, for example, he argued, “Because the extension of the principle of love to animal creation means so great a revolution for ethics, philosophy shrinks from this step” (*Out of My Childhood and Youth*, quoted in Free 25), implying that “reverence for life” did precisely this, while neglecting to mention flowers and leaves. In 1931, he described reverence for life as, “the ethic of love widened into universality. It is the ethic of Jesus, now recognized as a logical consequence of thought” (*Life and Thought* 235). And in the final years of his life Schweitzer stopped eating animal flesh while continuing to eat grains, fruits, and vegetables. As he lay dying, he refused his daughter’s offer of beef broth, unwilling to buy strength for himself with the death of another sentient being (Free 40).

⁴ Henry Salt had actually used the phrase in his 1897 book *The Humanities of Diet: Some Reasonings and Rhymings*: “The logic of the larder is the very negation of a true reverence for life, for it implies that the true lover of animals is he whose larder is fullest of them.” (quoted in International Vegetarian Union) Schweitzer, however, was unaware of this.

To sum all of this up, despite his virtuous overreachings and parochial shortcomings, Albert Schweitzer made four major contributions to ethical thought, and taken together they form a coherent vision that ranks him among the most profound thinkers of the twentieth—or any other—century. First, he rediscovered, in spite of himself, the eternal truth that love and compassion are the only valid foundation for ethics. Then he applied that love and compassion to all living beings whom we have the power to help or harm. This, in turn, led him to the recognition that a society is only worthwhile to the extent that ethics is the driving force behind it, and that, in fact, the only valid way for a society to justify its existence is by protecting and nurturing all who are subject to its power. And finally, by way of offering us a means to assure that we do not betray our own ideals, he warned us that in a structurally imperfect world, it is not possible to act ethically in every situation, and that because of this, there is no way to maintain our ethics, and preserve the worth of our society, except by unrelenting mindfulness. There are no rules; there are only principles. Eternal vigilance is the price not just of liberty, but of love and compassion, as well.

A Mixed Legacy: Schweitzer and Africa

Mahatma Gandhi's reputation has endured in large part because he was on the right side of liberation movements for the non-European peoples of the world. By contrast, Albert Schweitzer's reputation has suffered greatly because he was on the wrong side of those same movements. Gandhi made the white race face its own rapacity and injustice, while Schweitzer, the medical missionary, grew into an old man who insisted on bearing the

white man's burden long after most Westerners had abandoned the Kiplingesque delusion that being ruled by Europeans was a blessing for the "primitive" peoples of the world.

In 1921, Schweitzer wrote that colonial rule was justified by the need to educate Africans and provide for their "wellbeing"; that Europeans must not fraternize too closely with Africans because familiarity would erode their authority; and that he was the brother of the Africans, but as a European he was their "elder brother", with "natural authority" over them (Schweitzer, *Anthology* 183-186). In his Nobel lecture, delivered in 1954, just six years before Gabon achieved independence, Schweitzer made only one passing reference to colonialism and its aftermath. "Spurious nationalism is rampant in countries across the seas too, especially among those peoples who formerly lived under white domination and who have recently gained their independence. . . . Indeed, *peace, which had prevailed until now in many areas, is today in jeopardy*" (Schweitzer, Nobel, emphasis added). Oppression and exploitation can be called peace only by those who fail to see them through the eyes of the oppressed and exploited.

On the other hand, Schweitzer was critical (if only mildly so) of colonial injustices such as displacing native peoples from their homes to build roads, cheating local communities out of their land, and forcing Africans to perform "compulsory labor", *i.e.* slave labor (Schweitzer, *Anthology* 166-167, 175-177). On balance, it seems fair to say that he saw Europeans as adults and Africans as children. Therefore, he believed that Europeans had a duty to act *in loco parentis* toward Africans, but criticized the colonial powers when he saw them behaving like neglectful or abusive parents. This was the same paternalistic

view held by many “enlightened” Europeans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and constituted a subtle but insidious form of racism because it infantilized the nonwhite peoples of the world and justified their subjugation for the benefit of Europeans.

Schweitzer devoted his life to healing and helping Africans. But his patronizing sense of European superiority put his very considerable moral authority in the service of colonialism. The genuine love and compassion that motivated Schweitzer to leave his beloved Europe and devote his life to the care of Africans were betrayed by his inability to transcend the European parochialism in which he had been nurtured.

Conclusion

The grand design that Schweitzer pursued was misguided, but the means he chose to pursue it left a legacy of good. Schweitzer’s larger-than-life quest for a boundless ethic was itself driven by the love and compassion that he had once tried to go beyond; and these led him to perform a lifetime of individual services to his fellow living beings at great personal sacrifice. He healed the sick and comforted the bereft of all races and species. Doing the right deed for the wrong reason is not always, as T. S. Eliot would have it, the greatest treason. More often than not, it is the only way that we poor, deluded human beings manage to do some good in spite of ourselves. It is not in our grand designs that we triumph, but in the small works that we perform in pursuit of them, because it is in these small works that compassion and love are best able to exert their force in the world. Works that are small in scope often have the greatest effect on the lives of those toward whom they are directed. Grand designs are rarely achieved, and

when they are, they tend to be destructive, witness the French and Russian revolutions. Grand designs defeat themselves. Small works endure.

Even if Schweitzer pillaged his own reputation as a modern day saint by his support for the European colonial enterprise, his half century of treating the sick, injured, and aged of the Ogooue basin, and his half century of protecting and preserving the nonhuman life that he found all around him in equatorial Africa, are examples of the greatness of soul in its purest form—the greatness of small works. Albert Schweitzer devoted his life to the service of those who suffer, without regard to any factor beyond their suffering. And after all is said and done, his life and work—even with their provincial shortcomings and quaint overreachings—point the way toward the very philosophy of love and compassion for all sentient beings that he had once tried to go beyond.

Perhaps our final assessment of Albert Schweitzer should be this: He was the hero of a modern Greek tragedy who scaled heights denied to lesser mortals until he was brought low by hubris. But in Schweitzer's case, it was not hubris on behalf of himself or his own achievements, but blinding pride in a Europe that was unworthy of his devotion. Albert Schweitzer was better than Europe, but his failure to realize that has diminished him forever.

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