

Reverence for Life A Moral Value or the Moral Value?

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§1.

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) became well-known for his ethics of reverence for life. While Schweitzer's life and his ethics have had an enormous appeal to wide audiences all over the world, philosophers have generally ignored his contribution. This may be a loss for philosophy, for, despite some internal problems, Schweitzer's ethics of reverence for life promises a viable alternative to consequentialism, Kantianism, and virtue ethics.

The task of this paper is the following: Schweitzer argues that reverence for life is the basic ethical principle and the highest moral value. After a brief presentation of Schweitzer's life and moral philosophy, I will consider two questions: 1. Can Schweitzer show that reverence for life is the highest moral value (principle)? 2. Is reverence for life a moral value (principle) in the first place? I will argue that, with some provision, Schweitzer's position is tenable.

§2.

Before we discuss Schweitzer's ethical theory, let us briefly outline Schweitzer's work and his influence. In his late twenties, he was already an accomplished organist and the author of a book on J. S. Bach (1905). Schweitzer was also a respected philosopher and theologian, who published *Kant's Philosophy of Religion* (1899), *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (1901), and *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906). At the age of thirty, he decided to study medicine, with the idea of abandoning his professorship at the University of Strasbourg and moving to Africa to serve as a physician there. In

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1913 he and his wife opened a hospital in equatorial Africa where, with some interruptions, he lived and worked until his death.

In 1950, *Time* magazine pronounced Albert Einstein and Albert Schweitzer as the persons of the 20th century. In 1952, Schweitzer was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian work in Africa and for his engagement against nuclear weapons. Einstein is still on the top of the list of most important persons of the 20th century, but Schweitzer seems forgotten. Yet, as his critic Werner Picht asserts, Schweitzer “remains the greatest moralist of our twentieth-century civilization.”¹

§ 3.

Let us now take a look at the central ideas of Schweitzer’s moral philosophy. In his most important philosophical book, *The Philosophy of Civilization* (1923), Schweitzer introduces the ethics of reverence for life in three steps. He first prepares the ground by arguing against Descartes:

With Descartes, philosophy starts from the dogma: “I think, therefore I exist.” With this paltry, arbitrarily chosen beginning, philosophy is landed irretrievably on the road to the abstract. It never finds the right approach to ethics, and remains entangled in a dead world- and life-view. The 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

¹ Werner Picht, *The Life and Thought of Albert Schweitzer*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 26.

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wills-to-live.” This is not an ingenious dogmatic formula. Day by day, hour by hour, I live and move in it.²

From this realization, “I am life which wills-to-live, in the midst of life which wills-to-live,” Schweitzer then advances to reverence for life proper:

Ethics consists ... 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 morals which is a necessity of thought. It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it.³

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consists; deleted question

This understanding of good and evil implies that life has an intrinsic value or, as Schweitzer would say, that all life is sacred. This sacredness leads to a sense of responsibility which characterizes a genuine ethical attitude: ethics is responsibility without limit toward all that lives. This brings us to the third and the culminating stage in the development of Schweitzer’s ethics:

In this generality, this determination of ethics ... does not make a very moving impression. But it is the only complete one. Compassion is too narrow to rank as the total essence of the ethical. It denotes only interest in the suffering will-to-live. But to ethics also belongs feeling of all the circumstances and all the aspirations of the will-to-live, as well as its pleasure, its longing to live itself out to the full, and its urge to self-perfecting.⁴

After this brief presentation, Schweitzer outlines six defining characteristics of the ethics of reverence for life. First, this ethics is rational because it is

² Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, trans. C. T. Campion (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1987), 309.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 311.

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developed as a result of thinking about life. Second, this ethics is absolute, in the sense of being contrasted to that which is practicable and achievable. Third, the ethics of reverence for life is universal insofar as it applies to all living beings: “In no instance can we say of life: ‘This has no value’.” Fourth, the ethics of reverence for life has spiritual significance insofar as it seeks to attain harmony with the mysterious Spirit of the universe. This harmony can be accomplished by the community of life, not by the community of thought, that is, by serving this Spirit of the universe rather than by understanding it. Fifth, the ethics of reverence for life is natural in the sense in which Hume claims that sympathy is natural. Sixth, Schweitzer argues that this sympathy, which lies at the bottom of reverence for life, is part of our psychological makeup. By using several examples, he tries to show that even animals display the rudiments of this sympathy. This natural disposition, however, human beings need to develop in the direction of highest spirituality.

§4.

Schweitzer’s ethical approach is quite original, and not easy to classify. Although his theory is normative, it is neither teleological nor deontological. Schweitzer was never a supporter of consequentialism. He considered Kant’s categorical imperative to be superior to any utilitarian calculus, yet he emphasized that for the exalted character of the moral law Kant pays the price of having it devoid of all content; Kant gains profundity at the cost of vitality. Schweitzer’s reasons for the shortcomings of Kant’s moral philosophy are: 1. Kant’s ethics is too narrow, limited only to the duties that human beings have toward each other, and ignoring our attitudes and actions toward other living beings. 2. Kant blocks the natural sources of morality and does not allow direct sympathy to be regarded as ethical; in opposition to direct sympathy, Kant’s “pure will is an abstraction with which nothing can be set in motion.” 3. Kant’s ethics is based on a confusion of the ethical with the intellectual, insofar as the

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ethical activity is represented as dependent on the results of his epistemological (transcendental) idealism.

Schweitzer's ethical approach may appear closer to the ethics of virtue than to the ethics of conduct, yet reverence for life is not a virtue. It is primarily an attitude of responsiveness to other living beings and values in general. Schweitzer's theory is non-hedonistic, since it centers on reverence for life, but it is hard to say if this theory is monistic or pluralistic. To clarify this, consider the following question: Why believe that reverence for life is a moral value?

Our initial answer may be that it is commonplace that reverence for life is a moral value. Every civilized society forbids and punishes attacks on human life. In most countries sick persons, whether rich or poor, are entitled to medical attention. Cruelty toward human beings and animals is considered unethical, even when not forbidden by law. Why, then, even raise the question as to whether reverence for life is a moral value?

One reason for this question is the unlimited scope of Schweitzer's moral principle. We are willing to grant the validity to the principle of reverence for life when it is restricted to human beings and some higher animals, but do not usually extend it to *all* living beings. We have no reverence for the lives of flies and mosquitoes, of bacteria which transmit diseases, or of plants not used for food. In times of war, we display no reverence for the lives of enemy soldiers, or even of their civilians. Schweitzer maintains that reverence for life is a necessity of thought which arises from an inner compulsion. What happens to this compulsion in the cases described?

Schweitzer claims that our sense of responsibility for all living creatures gets obscured by psychological and pragmatic considerations. For example, we favor the familiar and useful and distance ourselves from what is not considered as such. If, however, we pay careful attention to the realization that "I am life which wills-to-live, in the midst of life which wills-to-live," we notice that there is no strictly ethical ground for any limitation to reverence for life. All life displays the same drive to maintain and enhance itself. Instead of a hierarchy of various forms of life, this realization leads Schweitzer to postulate

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the fundamental similarity and unity of all living beings. The insight that my will-to-live is one of infinitely many wills-to-live leads me not only to overcome an egotistical point of view but also to realize that there is no properly ethical ground on which we can prefer any one life to any other.

§5.

Consider now another objection to Schweitzer's position that reverence for life is a moral value. He admits that, despite proclaiming that all life is sacred, "life can exist only at the cost of another life." We kill in order to get food and to protect ourselves from dangerous diseases. Thus, the greatest challenge for both teaching and practice of the ethics of reverence for life is this: How can we respect life if we need to destroy it?

There are several possible lines of response to this question. Schweitzer favors the following one: "Whenever I injure life of any sort, I must be quite clear whether it is necessary. Beyond the unavoidable, I must never go, not even with what seems insignificant."⁵

There are plenty of cases in which the distinction on which Schweitzer insists, namely the one between necessary and unnecessary killing is clear enough. For instance, we can avoid all killing of animals for the sake of pleasure (in the form of hunting and fishing). There are, however, many examples which are problematic. The difficulty arises not only because of the complexity of those specific situations, but also because the very concept of necessity is not easily definable. In order to preserve one life we need to kill another; but why give preference to any one life over any other? Does not Schweitzer argue that there is no ethical distinction between living beings?

The whole issue is even more complicated when we remember the double aspect of reverence for life: good consists in preserving life and furthering it. In order to preserve one life it may be necessary to kill another.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 318.

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But may it not also be necessary to kill another life in order to enhance the life we favor? Or does necessity arise only with respect to the negative aspect of reverence for life? Be it as it may, when deciding whether harming and killing are necessary, must not Schweitzer at the end resort to those pragmatic and utilitarian criteria which he rejects when he defends the universality of his ethics?

Schweitzer does not think so. In order to defend his position, he first points out that no general principle could be given that would resolve all possible cases:

It is not by receiving instruction about agreement between ethical and necessary that 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.⁶

Somewhat like Gandhi, Schweitzer insists that our decision concerning when it is necessary to harm or kill another life depends not only on the universal sanctity of life, nor only on the context and its pragmatic and utilitarian considerations, but also on the level of our ethical maturity. The more we develop our sense of reverence for life, the more responsive and caring we will be toward other living beings. Schweitzer also hopes that, with the cultivation of our moral sensitivity, the line that separates the necessary from unnecessary killing will gradually shift, so that what appeared to be the cases of necessary harming and killing in the past do not look so any more.

Schweitzer thus not only recognizes the problem but also offers a solution which he thinks only strengthens his position further. Ordinarily we accept that we must make compromises and sacrifices. Our mistake, according to Schweitzer, consists in making virtue out of necessity, and then accepting the

⁶ *Ibid.*, 317.

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relativity of ethical values. My killing of another life in order to survive is commonly accepted as morally justified, but Schweitzer insists that this is not so: “All destruction of and injury to life, under whatever circumstances they take place, [the ethics of reverence for life] condemns as evil.”⁷ The practicality and usefulness of our decisions to destroy another life in order to survive do not make such acts moral, nor do they absolve us of moral responsibility toward the life destroyed. A lesser of two evils is still an evil.

§6.

Like Isaiah Berlin, Schweitzer maintains that human tragedy consists in being forced to choose among incompatible values. The fact that such values are incompatible does not make them any less valuable or less morally significant.⁸ While Berlin is the pluralist with regard to values in the strictest sense of that word, Schweitzer favors a view which advocates that, among many irreducible values, there is one ultimate moral value. This ultimate value is reverence for life.

Can Schweitzer justify his standpoint?

One serious problem with Schweitzer’s belief in one ultimate value is that his reverence for life is complex, rather than elementary. It contains two principles, rather than one: (a) do not destroy life, and (b) enhance life. (Enhancing life may be further divided in a way that resembles Robert Nozick’s distinction between “ethical pull” and “ethical push.”⁹) Logically speaking, (a) does not imply (b). Even if Schweitzer can convince us that this implication is moral rather than logical, can he also show that this complex value is the highest principle of ethics?

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ For Berlin’s view, see his two classical essays: “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” and “Two Concepts of Liberty,” both reprinted in Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 1-16, 191-242.

⁹ See Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 401-473.

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We will presumably never find one *a priori* fixed scale of values, such as the one in which Max Scheler believed when he distinguished between (i) pleasure values, (ii) vital values, (iii) spiritual values, and (iv) the values of the holy.¹⁰ Nevertheless, even more flexible and changeable comparisons of values would be most useful. I cannot discuss here what makes any value or principle the highest, whether in Schweitzer's or any other ethical theory. But I would like to point out at the end that the "basic" and the "highest" need not mean the same thing. As Nicolai Hartmann has demonstrated, we do not use one unified scale of values but two: one based on the respective strengths and one on the respective heights of considered values. The aspect of reverence for life which prohibits the destruction of life is among the strongest and most basic we can have; it is the foundation of all other higher values. The second aspect, the enhancement of life, which Schweitzer understands in terms of spiritual development and self-perfecting, is among the highest values of which we know, but it is not very basic and strong. The two scales of values work in an inverse ratio: the strongest values are the lowest, and the highest values are the weakest. If forced to choose between violating the strongest and the lowest value on the one hand, and fulfilling the highest and the weakest value on the other, Hartmann correctly argues that it is more important not to violate the stronger and the lower value: "When the higher value is violated, the transgression is less, not more serious; but when the stronger value is fulfilled, the meritoriousness is not greater but less."¹¹

Schweitzer has reasons to insist on the interconnectedness of both aspects of reverence for life: the preservation of life and the enhancement of life. Yet despite their connectedness, they are separable. When we have to choose between them, we must give primacy to the first aspect rather than to the

¹⁰ See Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 89-100.

¹¹ Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethics*, trans. Stanton Coit (New York: Macmillan, 1932), vol. 2, 451.

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second. It is easier to establish that reverence for life is the most basic and foundational moral value, rather than that it is the highest.

This result does lead to a modification, but not to any significant devaluation of Schweitzer's ethics. Reverence for life is not only a singular moral value, but a very central moral value. However, it is not the highest value. (So, in order to capture this special role of reverence for life, we need something between *a* value and *the* value, which the usual English does not provide.) Schweitzer emphasizes that reverence for life serves as the foundation for further higher-minded pursuits: of individual self-perfecting, of the brotherhood of all human beings, and, as Schweitzer also expected, as the foundation of a lasting peace in the world. If this is really so, Schweitzer's ethics deserves further and more rigorous examination for it carries a promise of being more rewarding than those more often discussed ethical theories: consequentialism, Kantianism, and virtue ethics. In Schweitzer's words:

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Once man begins to think about the mystery of his life and the links connecting him with the life that fills the world, he cannot but accept, for his own life and all other life that surrounds him, the principle of reverence for life. He will act according to this principle of the ethical affirmation of life in everything he does. His life will become in every respect more difficult than if he lived for himself, but at the same time it will be richer, more beautiful, and happier. It will become, instead of mere living, a genuine experience in life.¹²

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¹² Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*, trans. A. B. Lemke (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), 233-234.