

THE MORAL IMPERATIVE

THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF ALBERT SCHWEITZER

PART II

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IT was the realization that we are nothing but *Epigoni*—inheritors of the past, squandering the philosophic legacy of earlier generations and ourselves contributing nothing new—which first aroused Schweitzer to philosophic thought. He saw that the way out of the present Dark Ages must lie through thought, through thought issuing in action, through ethics founded in philosophy. But, as we have seen, philosophy, and therefore ethics, must be firmly rooted in a theory of the world or life, if it and they are not to degenerate into expediency. The first objective, then, is such a world or life-view.

But here Schweitzer's thought failed him. With great intellectual courage he frankly confessed that the world, as it is, reveals no meaning in which our aims and objects could have meaning too. There is nowhere to be found in nature that purposive evolution in which human activity could find a place; such evidence as there is, is inconclusive, ambiguous and, often, contradictory. All our scientific knowledge only enables us to describe more minutely, not the whole, but the phenomena which make up the universe.

"All thinking must renounce the attempt to explain the universe. What is glorious in it is united with what is full of horror. What is full of meaning is united to what is senseless. The spirit of the universe is at once creative and destructive—it creates while it destroys and destroys while it creates, and therefore it remains to us a riddle. And we must resign ourselves to this. Look to the stars and understand how small our earth is in the universe. Look upon earth and understand how minute man is upon it. We must not place man in the centre of the universe."

"Only when thinking thus becomes quite humble can it set its feet upon the way that leads to knowledge. The first active deed of thinking is resignation—acquiescence in what happens. Becoming free, inwardly, from what happens, we pass through the gate of recognition on the way to ethics." (i)

(i) Article in the *Christian Century*, New York, Nov. 21 & 28, 1934, and reproduced in full as Appendix iii to Dr. Seaver's "Albert Schweitzer, The Man and his Mind" (1947).

This is one of the crucial phases in Schweitzer's thought. He has already postulated that philosophy (and therefore ethics) needs to be based on a valid world-view. Yet in chapter after chapter of "Civilisation and Ethics" he shows how the inadequacy or impermanence of its world-view has undermined and finally overthrown each successive philosophical system. It seems probable that each new theory of the universe—each Jeans or Hoyle confidently advancing to his brief hour of triumph—will go the same way, soon disproved by some new fragment of knowledge. Any philosophy which depends upon a particular world-view is doomed to an equal impermanence.(i)

The logical conclusion of Schweitzer's absolute scepticism about our knowledge of the world would, then, appear to be renunciation of a belief in world-and life-affirmation, leading, as with the Hindus, through pessimism and life-negation to withdrawal from the world. But Schweitzer is driven to life-affirmation by an inner compulsion far stronger than his intellectual pessimism. For he finds within himself that elementary and elemental knowledge, sought in vain in the external world, upon which to base his philosophy. Not "cogito, ergo sum" as Descartes began; for I must live before I can think. But "I am life that wills to live in the midst of life which wills to live."

The efforts made by the Indians and the few Western pessimists, notably Schopenhauer, to deny or suppress this will-to-live have led to endless casuistry and inconsistency, because it is something actual and elemental. Faced with the conflict between its optimism and life-affirmation and the scepticism deriving from our failure to found a world-view in external knowledge, we must give priority to the certainty of the will-to-live within us. It is the secret and the actuality of life. As Schweitzer says: "the world is life, and in life lies the riddle of riddles." We know that life *is*, without knowing how or why.

But the world presents the distressing spectacle of will-to-live preying upon will-to-live. Man alone has the ability to free himself from this endless round of pain and slaughter. What he lacks is a basic moral principle, inwardly compelling and universally valid, which he must recognize as a necessity of thought

(i) There are, of course, the metaphysical explanations of the universe on which the great world religions are based. These explain so much and yet leave so much more logically undemonstrable that it is not possible to discuss Schweitzer's attitude to them within the limits of this brief exposition of his philosophy. In any case, since the title of the third volume of the *Philosophy of Civilisation* is to be *The World-View of Reverence for Life*, we may hope that Schweitzer will there summarise his attitude to these existing explanations and suggest where he differs from them. In this sense the third volume would "bring his life's work to conclusion". Typically, both in his life and in his thought, the practise has preceded the enunciation of the theory, and to this extent only is the charge justified that his philosophy of life lacks spirituality.

and which must bring him to an unceasing dispute with actuality.

For long Schweitzer sought in vain this as yet unembodied conception. And then one evening, as a river steamer took him up the Ogowe to attend the wife of a missionary, there flashed into his mind, as he sat meditating on deck, the phrase "Reverence for Life." Years later he wrote:

"The iron door had yielded: the path in the thicket had become visible. Now I had found my way to the idea in which world and life-affirmation are contained side by side. Now I knew that the world-view of ethical world and life-affirmation, together with its ideals of civilisation, is founded in thought." (i)

For what is ethics but the recognition that it is good to maintain and further life: bad to damage and destroy it? "Assuredly the origin of ethics is that something which is contained as instinct in our will-to-live is absorbed by conscious reflection and further developed." (ii) Ethics consist in our experiencing the compulsion to show to all will-to-live the same reverence as we do to our own. Ethics is the reverence for the wills-to-live within us and around us.

Schweitzer's own description of the ethic of reverence for life can hardly be bettered:

"A man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives. Life as such is sacred to him. He tears no leaf from a tree, plucks no flower, and takes care to crush no insect. Ethics are responsibility without limit to all that lives . . . I am thrown indeed by reverence for life into an unrest such as the world does not know, but I obtain from it a blessedness which the world cannot give. If in the tender-heartedness of being different from the world, another person and I help each other in understanding and pardoning, when otherwise will would torment will, the division of will-to-live is at an end. If I save an insect from a puddle, life has devoted itself to life, and division of life against itself is ended." (iii) Reverence for life is the highest manifestation of will-to-live.

II

We must pause here because upon the validity of the basic principle of reverence for life depends the validity of the whole

(i) "My Life and Thought" p. 185.

(ii) *Civilisation and Ethics* p. 153.

(iii) *Civilisation & Ethics* p. 243-246.

of Schweitzer's philosophy, and, not unnaturally therefore, the principle has been the focus of much criticism and comment. The point most generally made is that the transition from will-to-live to reverence for life is an unexplained and logically unjustifiable short cut to a desired end. Most of those who criticise Schweitzer from the standpoints of logical positivism or scientific determinism would agree with Professor Kraus: "Schweitzer is a philosopher with no scientific bent, he is not a thinker of theoretical or scholastic nature but a mystic of ethical action and his philosophy is an instrument of his ethical will." (i)

Even if the charge be true and, if true, be damaging, we have some reason to be thankful, for it is the excess of scholasticism in many philosophies which have made them unreadable. Schweitzer's avoidance of the intricate niceties of mathematical thought makes him readily intelligible; but we should beware of interpreting an absence of pedantry as justifying the charge of illogicality. At the highest levels simplicity is more profound than the abstruse and Schweitzer's writing, like all great art, suggests more than it says.

The same critic develops his argument by distinguishing between philosophy, the child of wonder and patient reverence for truth, and religion, born of fear and distress and in its haste ever creating a temporary philosophy not reaching back to first principles. He considers Schweitzer's philosophy to be essentially of a religious character. Whatever may have been the origins of philosophy and religion, there is substance in the point made. Schweitzer himself admits that he has never (and I think he feels, *rightly* never)† sharply distinguished between philosophy and religion, although he has tried to keep his terms distinct.

"It has been my principle never to express in my philosophy more than I have experienced as the result of absolutely logical reflection. That is why I never speak in philosophy of 'God' but only of the 'Universal will-to-live', which I realise in my consciousness in a twofold way: first, as a creative will outside myself and, secondly, as an ethical will within me. I prefer to content myself with a description of the experience of reflection, leaving pantheism and theism as an unsolved conflict in my soul. For that is the actuality to which I am always being forced to return.

(i) Albert Schweitzer p. 65.

† "Philosophy is the offspring of religion and is a child which constantly returns to its parent" Christopher Dawson's "Religion and Culture" p. 50.

But if I speak the traditional language of religion, I use the word 'God' in its historical definiteness and indefiniteness, just as I speak in ethics of 'Love' in place of 'Reverence for Life.' For I am anxious to impart to others my inwardly experienced thought in all its original vividness and in its relation to traditional religion. For in both cases the result is exactly the same: renunciation of full knowledge of the universe and adoption of my inwardly experienced will-to-live as the prime factor."(i)

Returning, therefore, to the illogical short cut by which Schweitzer arrives at reverence for life, we find Schweitzer frankly confessing that it is the expression of an inwardly experienced reality. This is not a valid premise for the exponents of the various doctrines of positivism and determinism. They argue that the only valid philosophical method is by logical development from observed phenomena and scientific first principles. They may be right; but they have yet to prove that their philosophies are more true and less temporary than the unscientific philosophies of religion, which they condemn. There appears to be a definite trend among the philosophers of modern science to admit, not only the fragmentary nature of knowledge, but the necessity of a Divine Will (or non-chance). And while scientific discoveries thus postulate the existence of God, psychology suggests that we can only learn His nature by intuition through mysticism. A philosophy based on such inward vision may be subjective and false; but it may on the other hand contain such truth and durability as science and logic will never achieve. It will depend on the clarity of the vision. It is not, therefore, really important whether the short cut is illogical or not; what matters is whether it arrives at a valid principle. For, if Schweitzer's inward experience has led him to make a wild jump (as the determinists would think) in the right direction, it will be a great advantage to be rid of many of the attendant disabilities of scientific and logical philosophy, its transitory nature and partial truth. Further, the logician demands that a system of thought be either optimistic or pessimistic, theistic or pantheistic, monist or dualist. It may be that by comprehending something of each of these antinomies Schweitzer's philosophy more nearly approaches the truth.

But in the view of the present writer Schweitzer's transition from will-to-live to reverence for life is in fact neither such a

(i) Letter of 2nd January 1924 to Prof. Kraus, quoted by the latter on p. 42. *op. cit.*

short cut nor so illogical as it at first appears, although Schweitzer himself does not treat this point very fully. The connecting link is the extent to which man differs from the other animals. Examples of ethical behaviour in nature are rare and, as far as we can judge, instinctive rather than deliberate. Man alone has the power to be deliberately ethical. As Hieronymus Lorm put it: "In Man Nature has fallen out with herself"; and he goes on to contrast the starving man greedily eating food, which is natural, and giving it to a fellow sufferer, which is supernatural. It is this ability to rise 'above nature' which distinguishes the human animal. This argument is developed at length by an internationally famous scientist, the late Dr. Lecomte du Noüy, whose conclusions so closely resemble Schweitzer's.

Dr. Du Noüy reassesses the theory of evolution to show that man is the only still evolving species. He distinguishes between the mechanisms of evolution—adaptation, natural selection, mutations—and the evolutionary process itself, and argues that all natural species and man himself, in a physical sense, have finished evolving. Evolution continues through the moral perfecting of mankind.

"The evolutive branch—that of Man—successively disengages itself from all the others, first physiologically and morphologically, up to the appearance of conscious Man, then by widening increasingly, through moral ideas, the gulf which separated this man from the animal.

"After having for thousands of centuries blindly obeyed inexorable laws, a certain group of living beings differentiates itself biologically from the others and is confronted with new obligations. It is from mastery of his destiny, based on the liberty to choose between the satisfaction of the appetites and the flight towards spirituality, that human dignity is born."(i)

Man, and man alone, has the ability to break out of the circle of pain, which is will-to-live preying on will-to-live. As his thinking and intuitive powers develop, and as a result his ethical conscience, there comes a time when he begins to realise in an increasing degree the need to recognize and respect the will-to-live not only within himself but within, first, his fellow-men and, finally, within all creatures and living things. This transition is implicit in Schweitzer's thought. Those, therefore, who cannot admit the validity of the mystical experience and vision, may find that Dr. du Noüy's much fuller and more ob-

(i) Human Destiny (1947) pp. 87 and 104.

viously scientific approach will assist them to believe that, in reverence for life, which is the ethical expression of the basic will-to-live, Schweitzer has made a happy (if fortunate) 'guess' at the fundamental principle of human progress. If history and the modern barbarism, which we described in the last article, cause despondency, let us take heart again from du Noüy:

"Unquestionably, when considering the majority of men, it is possible to doubt the reality of the moral idea. The examples we see daily enable the pessimist to ask himself if the chasm between the animal and man is as deep as we thought. The answer is that we are still at the dawn of human evolution, and that, if only one man out of a million were endowed with a conscience, this would suffice to prove that a new degree of liberty had appeared."(i)

III

The mysticism of reverence for life contains the paradox that, if rational thought thinks itself out to the end, it arrives at something non-rational—that is, mystical. We have to admit that we cannot definitely answer the great questions about life and the universe, but we find the only stable basis for thought in an inner compulsion, now expressed as reverence for life.

We must, however, examine how far this principle avoids the great danger for all mysticism, that of becoming supra-ethical. "There is always the danger that the mystic will experience the eternal as absolute impassivity, and will consequently cease to regard the ethical existence as the highest manifestation of spirituality."(ii) In such mysticism there is at best an ethic of passive self-perfecting, as in much Indian thought. On the other hand much of the active self-devotion of the Western philosophies has lacked the inwardness which sets men free. But unreflective activity and inactive contemplation are alike repugnant to Schweitzer. Stating the same problem in the language of religion Schweitzer wrote:

"Human thinking must, no doubt, face all the enigmas of human existence which present themselves to thought and harass it, but in the last resort it must leave the incomprehensible uncomprehended, and take the path of seeking to be certified of God as the Will of Love, and finding in it both inner peace

(i) *Human Destiny* p. 110.

(ii) *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* p. 297.

and springs of action. Mysticism only takes the road to life when it passes through the antithesis of God's will of love with His infinite enigmatic creative will, and transcends it."(i)

Through resignation about external knowledge and intuitive knowledge of God as a moral force to action, Schweitzer's mysticism issues in ethics. To revert to philosophical language, Schweitzer proceeds from the certainty of an ethical world-will working within him to the necessity for active living. Thus reverence for life provides a spirituality which is ethical and an ethic which includes all spirituality. It is "ethical mysticism:"* the ethic of Love widened into universality.

Thus does Schweitzer, in his thought as in his life, vindicate the primacy of the practical over theoretical reason. He rejects the arid intellectualism of veneration of transcendent Absolute Being in order to devote himself in a practical manner to the manifestations of Being, through which alone we can know Being and through which alone we can make spiritual inward devotion to infinite Being a reality. In ethical mysticism the gruesome truth that spirituality and ethics are two different things no longer holds good.

With Goethe, Schweitzer says:

"Be true to thyself and true to others. . .
And let thy striving be in love
And thy life be an act."

The inward man must have an active ethic.

That there is a relation between the inward compulsion of reverence for life and Kant's Categorical Imperative is obvious. Schweitzer in his youth was a keen, though not uncritical, student of Kant. Where the two imperatives differ is in their scope. The Categorical Imperative was limited to the relations of man with man. Schweitzer, however, would agree with the Buddhist saying: "As long as living creatures suffer, there is no possibility of joy for those who are full of compassion." Reverence for life includes all forms of life, animal and non-animal. Reverence for life is thus a universal ethic; it applies to *all* men in their relations with *all* things. It is valid for the saint and the sinner, the recluse and the man of the world, the leader and the led, the intellectual, the philistine, the primitive and the pagan. And not only is it universally valid in a horizontal direction, as it were; it is applicable (ver-

(i) The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle p. 379.

*Dr. Seaver calls this a "telescopic term, combining servicable activity in the world of sense with spiritual experience of Infinite Being". (Albert Schweitzer, a Vindication (1950) p. 92.)

tically) to all experience. It fulfils Schweitzer's definition of the only true ethic, "one which is able, on the basis of one and the same conception, to give an ethical interpretation to all that a man experiences and suffers as well as to all that he does."(i) In the next article we shall consider how to practise the ethical mysticism of reverence for life and we shall find that we can say of it, as Schweitzer said of St. Paul's mysticism:

"The fact that the believer's whole being, down to his most ordinary thoughts and actions, is thus brought within the sphere of the mystical experience has its effect of giving to this mysticism a breadth, a permanence, a practicability, and a strength almost unexampled elsewhere in mysticism."(ii) (*The foregoing is the second of three articles on the life and thought of Albert Schweitzer.*—Ed.)

(i) The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle p. 302.

(ii) The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle p. 125.