

Albert Schweitzer's Ethic of Reverence for Life as an Educational Ideal

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Little or no attempt has been made in the English-speaking world to consider the possible significance for educational thought and practice of the late Albert Schweitzer's ethical principle of "Reverence for Life." Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to indicate the relevance for education of an ethic that claims to provide a worthy ideal, that of the civilized man.

Philosophy of Civilization

The background against which Schweitzer presents the ethic of Reverence for Life, or *veneratio vitae*, is covered mainly in the first two volumes of his *Kulturphilosophie*.^{*} (It is to be noted that Schweitzer appears to have considered this work, first published in the German in 1923, to have been the crowning achievement of his intellectual career.) The first of these volumes, *Verfall und Wiederaufbau der Kultur*,¹ serves as an introduction to the second, *Kultur und Ethik*.² Schweitzer tells us that his motive for writing them was his belief in the unsatisfactory and dangerous state of Western society around the turn of the twentieth century and in the period immediately preceding World War I. He did not share the optimistic views on progress that were then rife. On the contrary, he was profoundly disturbed by the widespread existence of inhumane ideas

*"Philosophy of Civilization (or Culture)." Schweitzer uses the words "civilization" and "culture" interchangeably.

and policies of *Realpolitik* or short-sighted nationalism. The failure on the part of the public to reject such ideas and policies had been a source of deepening concern to Schweitzer ever since his first years as a student at Strasbourg University. These earlier forebodings were more than realized with the outbreak of the "Great War."

Schweitzer attributed the current state of affairs to a *Zeitgeist* that reflected the nineteenth century legacy of positivistic and empiricistic modes of thought. Western man had failed to provide, and, in turn, to be guided by civilizing ideals. As a result, the dawn of the twentieth century was witnessing, under the pretext of "realism," an exaggerated faith in science. Overemphasis on the investigation of scientific law (the "how" and the "what") existed at the expense of consideration of the duty and responsibility of individuals to mould reality (or employ knowledge of facts) in accordance with the demands of ethics and morality (the "ought" factor).

Schweitzer believed that the reconstruction of the age lay in the need for a florescence of a type of utopian thinking reminiscent of the eighteenth century Age of Reason. Such thinking must take the form of visions projecting a better man and a better society. Hopefully, this might in turn lead to the eventual sway of a new world-view (*Weltanschauung*) in which the ethical and, therefore, civilizing disposition could somehow be rooted.

How could reflection lead man to a desire to act and behave in a civilized or humane way? How could the habit of humane thinking and conduct become felt as necessary for the individual man and woman? Such are the basic issues of Schweitzer's ethical thought.

In his *Kultur und Ethik*, the second volume of *Kulturphilosophie*, Schweitzer approaches the problem from an historical perspective (an approach somewhat similar to that taken in the celebrated *Quest of the Historical Jesus*³). A major part of this volume consists of an interpretative survey of the world's great religions and philosophical thought systems of the past. Provision of a rationale for dedicated endeavour and action is only briefly dealt with in the concluding chapters. Originally *Kulturphilosophie* was intended to comprise four volumes, of which the third was to be devoted to a fuller exposition of the Ethic of Reverence for Life. Another volume remained in manuscript form at the time of Schweitzer's death in

1965 and still awaits publication. The nature of *veneratio vitae* has, therefore, to be gleaned from these few concluding chapters of *Kultur und Ethik* (which were intended as an introduction to the unpublished volume), and from his other writings.

Little understanding exists of Schweitzer's ethical thought in the context of *Kulturphilosophie*. At least five reasons help explain why this has been the case: (1) the content of *Kulturphilosophie* is not academically respectable because it fails to correspond to any of the traditional disciplines; (2) his views on Christianity would probably be disturbing to many who hold orthodox religious beliefs (Babel, for example, suggests that Schweitzer is nearer the position of his existentialist cousin, Jean-Paul Sartre, than a superficial knowledge of his life and work may appear to indicate⁴); (3) *Kulturphilosophie* is not written in a way that makes it suitable for popular reading; (4) the brevity of material directly concerned with explaining the Ethic of Reverence for Life leaves too many unanswered questions; and (5) Schweitzer involves himself in his writings in a way that again may not be considered academically respectable.

On the other hand, this lack of understanding need not detract from the possible importance for education of one of the widely acclaimed teachings of our time. Dr. George Seaver, a leading authority on Schweitzer, has written:

Although Schweitzer tried to develop a *philosophy* out of this ethic [Reverence for Life] I do not think he succeeded. I regard it rather as an intuition than as a system of thought. But as such it is of paramount importance, and most certainly an Ideal in Education.⁵

Education and World View

In his *Kulturphilosophie* Schweitzer makes only incidental references to the subject of formal education. By and large these have as their purpose to illustrate the perilous state of civilization around 1920. The flagrant disregard of objectivity in the writing of history text books, for example, was a reflection of narrow indoctrinist aims born of the passion and prejudice ruling in society at large.⁶ Over-organization of the individual in collective enterprise, as a feature of the growing industrialization, is seen in the case of the school teacher whose spontaneity and creativeness become ever more curbed by rules and superintendence.⁷ The impersonal behaviour and lack of humaneness resulting from the overcrowding and stress of urban life likewise find a counterpart in the educa-

tion and school literature of the day. Schweitzer specifically mentions the waning use of such a book as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, in which the hero is continually endeavouring to abide by the standards of humane conduct. Instead of being considered by the schools as a prime necessity in the developing personality, the encouragement of humane feeling and sympathy is all but ignored.⁸

Of fundamental importance to education is the underlying concern of *Kulturphilosophie* with the diminished influence of the religious and philosophical world-views that had in the past helped provide an inspiration for dedicated service to the well-being of one's fellow man and society. Before the relentless advances of the natural sciences, traditional beliefs about the nature and destiny of man in relation to the universe stood revealed as incompatible with the new knowledge. Such was the extent of this failure that, by the turn of the twentieth century, the need for a consciously thought out philosophy of life was lost sight of in the glitter of scientific and technological achievements.

The triumph of science was apparent in the overemphasis on imparting specialized training and knowledge in the name of education. Schweitzer's indictment of specialization takes on added meaning in the following translation of a terse statement on education (in the sense of the German *Bildung*) that is perhaps the most penetrating reference to the subject extant in his published writings:

Education, in the profound sense of the term, exists when the principal features of the entire domain of human knowledge are comprehended and then consolidated into a unified *Weltanschauung*, which makes the individual conscious of his position in the world surrounding him, and which determines his judgement and actions. This trend to a *Weltanschauung* is deep down in man's soul. The sciences as such can never satisfy this need; only philosophy meets it. Philosophy sums up the respective positions of the sciences and relates the resulting image to the moral and religious interests of the individual, as well as of society as a whole.⁹

This co-ordination of the different branches of knowledge and the utilization of the results to form a world-view is in response to a need characteristic of the human species. Because of his powers of reflection, man is in a unique position to appreciate the hazards

and uncertainties of life. *Homo sentiens* is aware of helplessness and insignificance vis-à-vis the course of events. Consequently, he strives for an integration and harmony between the aspirations of his will and the pessimistic facts of knowledge. This striving takes the form of attempting to devise a coherent outlook on the world that serves as a guide and inspiration to the desirable or good life.

Education would certainly be seen from Schweitzer's point of view as ministering to such a need through the development of the world-view of Reverence for Life. He accordingly presents the civilized man of *veneratio vitae* as an educational ideal.

The world-view of Reverence for Life does not portray man's duty with reference to furthering some universal or cosmic purpose. Schweitzer implicitly rejects as wishful thinking a Christian world-view dating from the *Aufklärung* period that, for example, offers the hope of immortal life as a sanction for morality. In the same context he cautions against teaching Christianity as a religion that claims to fathom the unfathomable.¹⁰

Reverence for Life unequivocally asserts that reality must be faced in the endeavour to clarify duty to self and to others. Intellectual honesty can only lead to a recognition of the human dilemma. No wholly benevolent Creator is at the helm of events. Injury and destruction of life are as much a feature of reality as co-operation and good will. A slight change in the temperature of the earth, for example, and civilization, as currently understood, is at an end. Because of forces beyond human control, man cannot *intellectually* escape the fact of the underlying insecurities of existence.

The educated man is consequently humble in the face of his own ignorance. He recognizes a total and utter dependence on the Great Unknown. The ineffable mystery of the experience of cosmic loneliness has taken hold of him. But because of his adherence to the truth, he resigns himself to the chilly facts of the Galilean universe.

Mere resignation, however, does not satisfy the impulse of the will-to-live to enhancement and perfection. A central task of education is to help raise the potential in man for altruistic concern to a level of unmistakable compulsion to serve the cause of life.

Thought and Ethical Consciousness

Schweitzer lays special stress on the role of thought in arousing ethical consciousness (and in so doing fails to provide an adequate

description of moral development as far as the psychological side is concerned¹¹; for example, he overlooks or ignores the pioneering work of a contemporary, Sigmund Freud, on the role of the unconscious in personality formation). Reverence for Life is portrayed as the outcome of a certain kind of reflection, or meditation. This reflection does not have as its purpose the acquisition of scientific-type knowledge. Its aim is rather to deepen awareness of a sense of the communion of Being ("life"). Instead of treating phenomena as objects — that is, externalizing the world and treating it as something alien to the self — an individual must "think into" a "feeling with" and a looking out, as it were, through the "eyes" of the other in a way that recognizes an affinity of the I and the It. A type of identification, or — to use a term familiar in current humanistic psychology — "empathy," takes place. Will becomes fused with will in the experience of a mystical union and ethical compulsion that Schweitzer denotes by the phrase, "Reverence for Life."

To the man who has truly attained to knowledge (in religious terms, the Knowledge and Love of God) all life is sacred. Unlimited responsibility is felt towards every manifestation of Being in the world. This is especially so in the case of fellow man. But it includes, too, the lowliest forms of life (even the crystal!) *Veneratio vitae* refuses on a theoretical level to assign more value to one life than to another. Because it is an absolute ethic, only the promotion of life can rank as good. Any injury or destruction of life is at best a necessary wrong-doing. However, the necessity is always arising of having to expend one life in order to further another. This is the fact of evil. The decision to negate life has therefore to be made on the basis of subjective choice. Here an individual has only as his guide a feeling of the highest possible responsibility to prevent the thoughtless harming of any life. Nevertheless, the fact that injury to life must happen makes guilt inevitable. To the man under the sway of *veneratio vitae*, the assuaged conscience is unthinkable. The disquiet thus incurred carries with it an intrinsic tendency never to sacrifice life to some wanton purpose. Schweitzer has said that the day the absolutely binding nature of the inviolability of life is universally recognized will be among the most important in human history.¹²

Self-Realization

The man of *veneratio vitae* is claimed to have learnt the secret of spiritual self-realization. No answer is sought concerning the

significance of his activities in the totality of cosmic happenings. True, compared to the unceasing destruction of life he sees everywhere, his own efforts to serve life seem miniscule indeed. But he is prevented from being overwhelmed by debilitating pessimism (and guilt) through a living commitment to the service of life. In the surrender to a heightened awareness of *veneratio vitae*, he achieves a life-style of potency and exhilaration not attainable by such contrivances of modern man as alcohol, drugs and conformity to the group.

Education has a social as well as an individual aim. The man civilized through Reverence for Life is himself a begetter of civilization. Concern with the enormous political, social and economic problems of the current age of anxiety and alienation are the marks of such a man, because all have to do with the affirmation and negation of life. Before him he holds the view that civilization consists, not in promoting some narrow interests of an élite, but in the spiritual self-realization of every individual. The existence of weapons of mass destruction resulting from advances in science and technology is looked upon as inconceivable within the humanitarian ideal. There is a deep disquiet with a religion of technological progress in which the individual's creative, ethical, intellectual and artistic expressions are stifled by the rules and regulations of the bureaucratic organization. The growth of mental illness, violence and racial conflicts, the "generation gap" and the "drug phenomenon," all accompanying the general increase of material plenty in industrial society, are regarded as adequate testimony that man does not live by bread alone. Yet, the alleviation of material want takes its place, too, as an ideal of civilization. And in the pursuit of this goal, the value of the acquisition of scientific knowledge and methodology cannot be overlooked.

The man educated in the world-view of Reverence for Life has no sure answer to the means by which approximation to civilized ideals can be effected in modern society. Without the human agency the great problems of war and poverty, for example, could not have occurred. Upon that same agency, therefore, rests the burden of redirecting resources to ends that serve life. Reverence for Life accordingly entreats that concern for others become a much greater motivating force in the human disposition than now exists.

Schweitzer wrote in 1962 that "every one of us must activate all the loving kindness of which we are capable, in order that it may

reveal itself as a power to influence history and bring forth the Age of Humanity."¹³ In so doing, he defined the altruization of the individual as a paramount educational task of the twentieth century.

References

1. An English edition bears the title, *The Decay and Restoration of Civilization* (trans. C. T. Champion), London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1961.
2. An English edition bears the title, *Civilization of Ethics*, (trans. C. T. Champion), London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1961.
3. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (trans. W. Montgomery), London: Adam and Charles Black, Ltd., 1963.
4. Henry Babel, *Schweitzer: Tel Qu'il Fut*, Neuchatel: Les Editions de la Baconnière, 1966, pp. 92-93.
5. Letter from George Seaver, biographer, St. Ernan's, Donegal, Ireland, May 9, 1966.
6. Schweitzer, *The Decay . . .*, pp. 48-49.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
9. The original reads as follows: "Bildung besteht darin, dass das gesamte Gebiet menschlichen Wissens in seinen Grundzügen erfasst wird, sich in einer einheitlichen Weltanschauung ausbildet, welche dem Einzelnen seine Stellung zu der ihn umgebenden Welt zu Bewusstsein bringt und sein Urteil und sein Handeln bestimmt. Dieser Zug nach einer Weltauffassung liegt tief im menschlichen Gemüte. Die Wissenschaften als solche können ihn nie befriedigen; nur die Philosophie kommt diesem Zug entgegen. Sie fasst den jeweiligen Stand der Wissenschaften zusammen und bringt das entstehende Bild mit den sittlichen und religiösen Interessen des Einzelnen, sowie der Gesellschaft in Zusammenhang." (Albert Schweitzer, "Die Philosophie und die allgemeine Bildung im neunzehnten Jahrhundert," *Das Neunzehnte Jahrhundert*, ed. G. Wolf [Strasburg: Kommissions der Strassburger Druckerei v. Verlagsanstalt, 1900], p. 68).
10. Albert Schweitzer, *Christianity and the Religions of the World* (trans. J. Powers), London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960, p. 82.
11. Gabriel Langfeldt, *Albert Schweitzer: A Study of His Philosophy of Life* (trans. M. Michael), New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1960, p. 77.
12. Schweitzer, *Civilization . . .*, p. 227.
13. Albert Schweitzer, "Humanity," *Universitas*, V, 3 (1962), 228.