

Schweitzer at Mansfield

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Albert Schweitzer first came to Oxford in the Hilary term of 1922, to give the Dale Lectures at Mansfield College. He was then just beginning to acquire the reputation which would eventually make him, as President Kennedy said, “one of the transcendent moral influences of our century”.¹ A few years later, Oxford University gave him an honorary doctorate in Theology, and among other such recognitions he received the Goethe Prize, the Nobel Peace Prize, even the British Order of Merit. Merely his name became a talisman: those exploiting its virtue included KLM Airlines (for a new DC8) and the Marseilles Boy Scouts (thereafter the Catholic Albert Schweitzer Boy Scout Troop). I remember being given, in the early 1960s, a book entitled *All Men are Brothers: a Portrait of Albert Schweitzer*; probably it was a conscientious god-parent’s present or a school prize, for to learn to admire Schweitzer would then have been thought to constitute a moral education. Its author gets straight to the heart of his subject thus: “Wherever the question is asked: ‘Who is the greatest living person in the world today?’ the answer is the same, with few exceptions: Albert Schweitzer.”²

Why did this extraordinary reputation fade so quickly after Schweitzer’s death in 1965? For his work as a missionary doctor, eclipse was no doubt inevitable. During the half-century of Schweitzer’s labours in his hospital near Lambaréne in Gabon (then part of French Equatorial Africa), his heroic Samaritanism had been overtaken by new ideals and new politics. It would be inaccurate to say that his thinking was paternalistic: he specifically said that the native Africans were his “brothers”, as that book-title reminds us. Of the European exploitation of Africa and its peoples he wrote that “when we have done all that is in our power, we shall not have atoned for the thousandth part of our guilt.”³ Still, even that “brothers” terminology progressively dates him, and he had anyway, in earlier days at least, qualified it by calling himself the “elder” brother. Accordingly, and unfashionably, he thought projects of independence to be premature. The running of the Lambaréne hospital reflected this thinking, and its medical standards were latterly criticized as likewise

pre-modern. Once Schweitzer's live voice and authority were gone, he very quickly seemed to belong to a former age.

Perhaps he does belong there as the autocrat of that missionary hospital and its haphazard village of out-patients and their families and animals. But as a moral philosopher, which is how he started (he had written his doctoral thesis on Kant) and intermittently continued, Schweitzer was ultra-modern and still speaks to us from the future, in so far as there is to be one. When John Middleton Murry, who recognised Schweitzer as one of the "spiritual heroes of our time", nevertheless complained that as a philosopher he was "intolerably extending our ethical obligations towards the whole of nature", he spoke as the past protesting against the claims of the future.⁴ A few years later, it was to Albert Schweitzer that Rachel Carson dedicated her prognosis of that future, *Silent Spring*. For all those interested in the whole of nature, Schweitzer must remain a "transcendent" personality.

This centenary of the Great War is an especially suitable time to recall Schweitzer's ethical thought, because the shock of that war was what largely prompted it. We can hardly celebrate the anniversary of its outbreak, but we surely ought to look back and see what might have been got from that catastrophe other than sorrow and (as a species) shame. Schweitzer's was one of the most ambitious and generous-minded of the lessons offered at the time. He provided the prospectus for it in those lectures at Mansfield, and the full statement came the following year in his book *The Philosophy of Civilization*.⁵ The book begins, "We are living today under the sign of the collapse of civilization". The War, then, was only an indication: the collapse itself may or may not come. Hence the urgency with which Schweitzer searches Western philosophy for the recuperative ethics which it is finally up to himself to provide, and which he summarizes in the famous phrase (duly Latinized in his Oxford degree citation) 'reverence for life'. He lays out what that means mainly in the last two of his twenty-seven chapters, further than he had time to go at Mansfield. Perhaps for that reason a recollection of Schweitzer's visit there, published in the college journal in 1955, recalls the person rather than anything in the lectures themselves: "We had, of course, a very great man indeed among us", the author says, doing his bit to make of Schweitzer's "greatness" a kind of tomb.⁶

Philosophy, Schweitzer says in the book, "must start from the most immediate and comprehensive fact of which we are conscious." He was a doctor, labouring to save human lives within the wider life-

clamour of the Gabonese jungle. In 1917 he had been deported as an enemy alien back to his home-village of Günsbach in Alsace, then still German but situated on the Western Front and accordingly part-ruined by war. He very reasonably, therefore, found philosophy's most immediate fact in the will to live, confirmed and rewarded as it is on one side by pleasure and growth, embattled on the other by obstruction, pain, and the death these adumbrate. The individual will, anciently striving for what does its own life good and shrinking from what does it harm, becomes ethical when it sees – as at last, in humans, it became capable of seeing – that all living things share and mirror its own predicament. It then becomes subject to “the compulsion to show to all will-to-live the same reverence” that it shows to its own. This compulsion Schweitzer generalizes into “a basic principle of the moral [...] It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it.”

It is more than bad, in fact; it's tragically perverse. For behind this moral doctrine is a conviction, felt and proposed by Schweitzer as both a fact and a mystical apprehension, that life is unitary. As he had said in one of his sermons, quoting from the *Upanishads*, “Wherever you see life – that is yourself!”⁷ Therefore, “If I save an insect from a puddle, life has devoted itself to life, and the division of life against itself is ended.” This image, with its zooming perspective, is in one form or another a favourite of Schweitzer's (as indeed the action itself evidently was). It dramatizes the optimism and consequent purposefulness of his ethics, just those elements that he found dangerously absent from modern (ie. post-Enlightenment) thought – absent, for instance, from the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, which is otherwise the most obvious influence in *The Philosophy of Civilization*, and is extensively discussed there. For – so the image implies – although we cannot now enjoy the elite status in the universe which we once thought we had, our fall from uniqueness actually restores us to our proper company and function in the great solidarity of living things.

I wish that Schweitzer had made more of that word ‘solidarity’, which he does sometimes use (as *solidarität*). The word implies both a fact and the feeling that belongs with it, which is always the essential partnership in his argument. He would have done well to use it for the motto of his philosophy, instead of that problematic word “reverence”. Schweitzer himself was not quite happy with his choice, admitting that “the phrase ‘reverence for life’ sounds so general as to seem somewhat lifeless.” Even so he uses it with almost superstitious

confidence (Murry called it “the phrase of a conjurer”⁸). But then the German original – and Schweitzer neither spoke nor wrote English – is much more forceful: “*ehrfurcht vor dem leben*” suggests some galvanizing awe as well as respect. By contrast, the English word ‘reverence’ has too much of the merely contemplative, even ‘pi’, about it, to represent adequately what Schweitzer called “activist ethics”.

That, at any rate, seems to be the character of the word that E. M. Forster has in his mind when he uses it to fix the ineffectual good-will of his two missionaries who stray into Schweitzer’s ethical domain at about this same date:

Consider, with all reverence, the monkeys. May there not be a mansion for the monkeys also? Old Mr Graysford said No, but young Mr Sorley, who was advanced, said Yes ... And the jackals? Jackals were indeed less to Mr Sorley’s mind, but he admitted that the mercy of God, being infinite, may well embrace all mammals. And the wasps? He became uneasy during the descent to wasps, and was apt to change the conversation. And oranges, cactuses, crystals and mud? And the bacteria inside Mr Sorley? No, no, this is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing.⁹

This passage helpfully instances just the sorts of thing Schweitzer did not mean by *ehrfurcht*. He was, for example, writing with immediate intent, not about after-lives but about life on earth, and himself living out his philosophy in one of earth’s most testing scenes. Then, there is nothing in him of Mr Sorley’s wistful improvisation: Schweitzer is intellectual and absolute, insisting (and hoping to show in this substantial book) that his ethic was “a necessity of thought”.

But perhaps most notably, Schweitzer always speaks of other species with impartial courtesy, even those least like ourselves in size or habit of life; he uses none of the proportioning irony with which Forster gently ridicules Mr Sorley’s speculations. Indeed, it was exactly in order to purge the subject of this speciesist smirk that Schweitzer habitually chose, for his illustrations, just those lives which might seem to make the faintest of claims on our seriousness: “an insect when it is in difficulties”, “the head of a single flower”. For he did indeed see will-to-live, homogeneous with our own and therefore entailing full membership of “our gathering”, in monkeys, insects, plants and even bacteria (which of course, as his professional enemies, he often needed to destroy). “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." The stress falls pedagogically on "all" and "anything", and it's noticeable that the obedience is less to a rule than to life's own physiological discipline, compelling towards benefit and shrinking from harm (not necessarily with success, of course). The "truly ethical" person realises the solidarity of all life not just in the sense of detecting it to be real, but also in the sense of experiencing it as real.

Therefore the search for a sort of pass-mark separating life's moral insiders and outsiders – a search which naturally appeals to academic minds, with their histories of coming top in exams, and which accordingly still goes on in the ethics departments of some universities¹⁰ – Schweitzer dismisses: it will simply mean "judging them by the greater or lesser distance at which they seem to stand from us human beings." Here indeed is the true critique of anthropomorphism as an idol of the mind: not that it over-estimates other animals by imputing to them something like our own sensibilities, but that it thereby under-estimates them, miscasting them as unsuccessful humans, more or less commendable runners-up. Modesty is required, as to our knowledge and our importance: "Who among us knows what significance any other kind of life has in itself, and as part of the universe?"¹¹

True, there seems to be no comfortable significance at all in the universe for any kind of life: what we can see of it is "a ghastly drama of will-to-live divided against itself". And we seem obliged to participate in this, even within merely human society: "I get my food by destroying plants and animals. My happiness is built upon injury done to my fellow-men." But Schweitzer refuses to make terms with any of this. For instance, although he greatly admired Jeremy Bentham, he rejects the utilitarian system of compromise. It calls 'ethical' what is really ethics adulterated with (at best) necessity, and in doing so it degrades the ethical motive. Besides, it collectivizes ethics, and Schweitzer believed that "leaving ethics to society" in this way was exactly how we were endangering civilization – a belief well borne out by the remainder of the twentieth century.

Still less, of course, should we take the larger "ghastly drama" as a guide of any sort. Indeed, it is one of Schweitzer's purposes in *The Philosophy of Civilization* to make ethics independent of any ruling metaphysic, independent especially of the apparent metaphysical senselessness of the universe which, he believed, had demoralized ethics during the nineteenth century: "the will-to-live should rouse itself at last, and once for all insist on its freedom from having to

understand the world.”¹² Instead, he puts in the foreground, at odds with all such prescriptive settings, the “ethical personality”, striving to enact the solidarity which is his or her known situation in the world, and urged on all the more by the debts incurred through inevitable betrayals of it. This is a variety of the existential hero, then: in fact Schweitzer’s “I give my existence a meaning from within outwards” is something which one of Jean-Paul Sartre’s characters might well have said (as it happens, Sartre and Schweitzer were cousins).¹³ But for Schweitzer the “meaning”, though initially discovered in the self, is not self-created; it’s a given of life, waiting to be noticed by the first species privileged to know what’s going on.

It does not much matter, perhaps, whether Schweitzer should really be called a philosopher or not. Professional philosophers seem mostly to have taken no notice of him. It can at least be said that *The Philosophy of Civilization* lays out in laborious detail the failings in Western philosophy which, as Schweitzer believed, let the frightful carnage of the Great War happen. His own ethics he then fits into that deficit. His thinking is, therefore, very much a part – if the missing part – of an academic tradition, and two recent books have indeed claimed a place for him there.¹⁴ But it must be admitted that Schweitzer’s account of ‘reverence for life’ works best where it is (or was) most revolutionary, as an inter-species ethic. His insistence on “life as such” puts to one side precisely the social complexities which strictly human morality has to solve, and when Schweitzer does give guidance there he sounds less inspired, more simply homiletic (he was, after all, a Lutheran pastor). He must have felt this, and he never did write, as he had intended to, a sequel to *The Philosophy of Civilization* in which he would apply ‘reverence for life’ more specifically to social and political questions. But anyway he was convinced that humans could not learn to live ethically or even at peace with each other until they had ceased to practise selfishness and violence in their relations with the rest of nature, and it is here, as the moralist of man in nature, that Schweitzer had genius. For this reason he has quite properly been regarded as a pioneering philosopher for the animal rights movement. It’s true that he ate meat, and that he reluctantly accepted the “cruel proceedings” of vivisection, but then he regarded all such compromises as unstable. Reverence for life was an absolute, towards which the enthusiast – and everyone who reflects on the matter must, he believed, become such an enthusiast – would always be impatiently moving. He himself came to refuse meat-eating in his later years: he too was on that way.

Such was the case which Schweitzer was introducing to Oxford in 1922. Less than four years had passed since the Armistice. Many of his audience must have been possessors of the Victory Medal, recording their service in "The Great War for Civilization". It may have been hard for them to like hearing a man with a German name and a German accent (Schweitzer lectured in French, with an interpreter) impartially stating that "we" had "drifted out of the stream of civilization".¹⁵ And perhaps, with memorials to the young men killed in the war appearing all over Oxford, it was bold and even tactless to speak there (if he did) about helping insects in difficulties. Of course, Schweitzer felt acutely the suffering and waste of the war; the sermons which he preached in the Church of St Nicolai, Strasbourg, in 1918 illustrate that vividly enough. But for him, as I have said, the war was not the crisis itself, but one manifestation of a crisis in which not just all nations but all varieties of life were implicated. His real subject was the future, and the human outlook which might fit us to rescue it. There's still time, and very good reason, to learn from him on that subject.

1 *Letters of Albert Schweitzer 1905-1965*, ed. Hans Walter Bähr, transl. Joachim Neugraschel, New York: Macmillan, 1992, p.320

2 Charlie May Simon, London: Blackie, 1959, p.9

3 *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*, London: A. & C. Black, 1953 (1st ed.1922), p.124

4 *Love, Freedom and Society*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1957, pp.20 and 164

5 Translated from *Kulturphilosophie* (also 1923). The quotations in this article are taken from the Prometheus Books (Amherst) edition of 1987, transl. C.T.Campion, all of them from Ch. 26 unless otherwise indicated.

6 'Dr Albert Schweitzer and Mansfield', *Mansfield College Magazine*, 1955, pp.255-6

7 *Reverence for Life: Sermons of Albert Schweitzer*, transl. Reginald Fuller, London: SPCK, 1970, p.115

8 *Love, Freedom and Society*, p.158

9 *A Passage to India*, London: Penguin Books, 2005 (first published 1924), p.34

10 See, for instance, R.G.Frey, 'Animals,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics*, ed. Hugh LaFollette, OUP, 2003, pp.161-87

11 *My Life and Thought*, transl. C.T.Campion, London: Allen and Unwin, 1933, p.271

12 *Philosophy of Civilization*, p.285

13 *Philosophy of Civilization*, p.283

14 As to philosophy, David K. Goodin, *The New Rationalism: Albert Schweitzer's Philosophy of Reverence for Life*, London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013; as to theology, Ara Paul Barsam, *Reverence for Life: Albert Schweitzer's Great Contribution to Ethical Thought*, Oxford: OUP, 2008. For an excellent and up-to-date biography, see James Brabazon's *Albert Schweitzer*, New York: Syracuse U.P., 2000 (1st ed. 1975).

15 *Philosophy of Civilization*, p.1