Schweitzer Reconsidered:  
The Applicability of Reverence for Life as Environmental Philosophy  

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As the last great philosopher of the will, Albert Schweitzer rejected the radical individualism of Nietzsche and the pessimistic-mystical detachment of Schopenhauer, and instead sought to create a true social ethic. Schweitzer’s particular contribution was to move further than Nietzsche to reconcile philosophy with natural science while simultaneously preserving and transforming the sense of mysticism and higher world-order principles from Schopenhauer. He joined this new cosmology to the virtue ethics of Aristotle, and recovered one key element of his ontology of becoming to transcend the Humean “is/ought” gap for ethics. The result is a philosophy that is as much biographical of Schweitzer himself as it is systematic. This result is both the strength and greatest weakness of his reverence-for-life ethic. It is tailor-made for contemporary environmental ethics: it has applications in many strands of environmental thought, including deep ecology, ecofeminism, and ecotheology, and may attract considerable interest from environmental movements that seek to cultivate deep personal conviction.

INTRODUCTION  

The Nobel Laureate Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) is very much maligned today as a philosopher. The harsh judgment is the result of the initial reactions to Schweitzer’s philosophy by his contemporaries. Schweitzer was not unaware of the criticism. Yet, he chose to ignore it—a lifelong pattern that notably worked in his favor on the nuclear weapon test ban treaty debate (discussed further below). Schweitzer believed that his work would speak for

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itself but he never received critical recognition on his philosophy during his lifetime. It is possible that he drew comfort from the fact that Spinoza, “whom hitherto everyone had attacked without making any effort to understand him,” remained in obscurity until he was rediscovered by Friedrich Jacobi over a hundred years later. But time has so far only solidified the harsh assessment against Schweitzer’s philosophy. In this article, I hope to redress the long-standing misinterpretations of his work and help establish reverence for life at the forefront of environmental philosophy and ethics today. Such an undertaking must begin with a summary of the criticism leveled against him.

I begin with Karl Barth and Oscar Cullman who found it incomprehensible that Schweitzer, a Lutheran minister, would create a secular ethic after establishing himself as the foremost representative of liberal Christianity in 1906 with The Quest for the Historical Jesus. But the characterization of reverence for life as a secular ethic stands in contrast to the view of Claus Günzler, a present-day scholar on Schweitzer, who believes his philosophy is in fact too Christian—going as far as to say Schweitzer often comes across as a cliché Good Samaritan. Other modern day interpreters, such as Mike Martin, instead find his philosophy pantheistic. This interpretation can be contrasted with the view of H. Richard Niebuhr who concluded that Schweitzer’s work is henotheistic, and yet insufficiently inclusive of the world’s abiotic features. The point to be taken here is that, clearly, these assessments cannot be simultaneously true. Only two possible explanations can account for this situation—either Schweitzer’s work is so philosophically muddled that it has led to these widely contrasting views or none have yet read his work correctly.

Other criticisms are more penetrating to the core of Schweitzer’s thought. The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner alleged inconsistency between Schweitzer’s claim regarding the absolute equality of all life and his medical practice that required him to kill millions of pathogens daily to maintain sterile surgical conditions. Peter Singer and Edward Johnson advance this same criticism. Simply stated, ethics demand value hierarchies, and Schweitzer seemed unwilling to recognize this fact. As a result, the prevailing opinion today is that

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3 Clark, Philosophy of Albert Schweitzer, pp. 6–7.
6 Clark, Philosophy of Albert Schweitzer, p. 99.
7 Ibid., p. 6.
8 Peter Hay, Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 50.
Schweitzer was merely a sentimentalist, though a remarkably admirable one. As a philosopher, however, many regard him as little more than being of the “armchair” variety—a great man who espoused beautiful but wholly impractical beliefs. Such severe judgments have made it necessary to begin anew with a complete analysis of Schweitzer’s life and work, a sketch of which is provided here.

REVERENCE FOR LIFE IN OVERVIEW

Schweitzer is unique among modern philosophers by possessing multiple and diverse areas of expertise. Schweitzer earned four doctorate degrees in the humanities and medical science. He was a preeminent New Testament scholar, one of the foremost interpreters of Bach, a renowned authority on Goethe, a world-class musician (organist), and a first-rate medical doctor who, while operating in the most primitive conditions in French equatorial Africa (modern day Gabon), maintained a surgical hospital that produced lower operation death rates than modern hospitals in Europe during the same period. Schweitzer is also remarkable for producing the first comprehensive environmental report on the bio-accumulation and bio-magnification of radionuclide contamination in nature associated with nuclear weapon development and testing. This report, given during the landmark “Declaration of Conscience” radio broadcast in 1958, solidified public opinion against nuclear research and was instrumental in the subsequent passage of the worldwide nuclear test ban treaty by the United Nations. Schweitzer inspired Rachel Carson, author of Silent Spring.
(published in 1962), to produce a similar study on bio-accumulation and biomagnification of organochlorine pesticides—a book which she dedicated to Schweitzer, and which helped spawn the modern environmental movement. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Nobel Laureate Albert Schweitzer is one of the most imposing biographical figures of the twentieth century. But what concerns us here is his philosophy.

Schweitzer began as a Kantian scholar. His doctoral dissertation in philosophy analyzed the development of thought between earlier and later editions of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. But Schweitzer lost faith in Kantian moral philosophy in the wake of World War I. Schweitzer concluded that “at best, [his ethic] can teach us a certain decency and justice. . . . [yet] when the time came for our ethic to be tested, it fell away from us.”13 The horrors of the war revealed the ultimate superficiality of ethics born of practical reason, and how civilized behavior is quickly undermined from within by humankind’s vicious pre-rational impulses. Over nine-million soldiers died during the war, and countless civilians as well. Schweitzer concluded that the Kantian legacy was partially to blame. Kant had helped create an atmosphere of optimism regarding the progressive development of civilization through the categorical imperative. Focused on the universalization of the desired end, “many a brave man set out for battle in the belief that he was fighting for a day when war would no longer exist . . . [which] proved to be completely wrong. Slaughter and destruction continued year after year and were carried on in the most inhumane way.”14 Germany had arguably done more than any other nation to perfect ethics and philosophy in the modern period; yet, the aftermath of two world wars revealed to Schweitzer that the optimism in the power of reason was unfounded and could never lead to utopian societies.

Schweitzer instead turned to the pre-rational philosophies of the will developed by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. For Schopenhauer, the will was not intention or desire, but describes the etiological changes in bodies through time. The cause of change is the supra-personal unitary will which becomes an

individualized will-to-live when it joins with an archetypical Idea to become a discrete manifestation called a body. An acorn, for example, contains all the potential manifestations of an oak tree at once; yet, these forms only become actualized over time; the will describes the movement from potentiality into actuality. All bodies possess a will-to-live that bequeaths to that organism the instincts and dispositions necessary for the expression of its Idea.

Schweitzer was too much the modern scientist to accept Schopenhauer’s Platonic idealism; he took only his etiology of the will. Yet, at the same time, natural science cannot so succinctly capture the mysteries of life and becoming, as did Schopenhauer. While mystical and poetic, there is nothing particularly problematic in looking at biology this way. Nietzsche had shown the way to transforming nihilistic scientific knowledge into life-affirming human meaning through rational conceptions derived from the same (cf. Beyond Good and Evil, sec. 4), and Schweitzer seems to have followed his lead here. But while Nietzsche rejected Schopenhauer’s Buddhism-inspired detachment for an individualistic Dionysian embrace of suffering, Schweitzer would try to create a true social ethic by embracing the whole world of suffering through the Lutheranism’s Theology of the Cross (discussed further below). Schweitzer had no need for the ecstatic Rausch of Nietzschean self-overcoming. Schweitzer’s ontology would instead find the meaning for existence in service to Being, and the fullest expression of human potentiality through the reverence-for-life ethic. Schweitzer thus stands closer to Schopenhauer in terms of epistemology and world view (which is now largely Christianized), yet retains Nietzsche’s characteristic of looking at “science through the prism of the artist” (Birth of Tragedy, “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” sec. 2).

SCHWEITZER’S ARISTOTELIAN APPROACH TO ETHICS

Schweitzer sought to develop the philosophy of the will by reconciling, as much as possible, Nietzsche with Schopenhauer, and thereby create a true nature philosophy complete with a moral principle. He did so by producing a two-tiered philosophical system. The first tier is an epistemological naturalism that supports, in part, Aristotelian virtue ethics. The second tier builds on the first, and expands it to include an “ethical mysticism” aimed at a higher world order. Nevertheless, as a medical doctor, Schweitzer embraced scientific naturalism. This world view was reflected throughout his entire body of work. For example, The Quest for the Historical Jesus searched for a very human messiah—a person incapable of supernatural miracles, but who nevertheless inspired a new ethic of love that transformed the western world. Schweitzer believed that speculative philosophy based solely in metaphysics was untenable in the face of scientific truth, concurring in this respect with Nietzsche. Philosophy must contend with the two true universal laws of nature: the instinctual desire for self-preservation and the procreative instinct. The evolutionary
The history of the world is a study of these two laws acting together to speciate all life from a single common genetic ancestor. Schweitzer’s concept of the supra-personal creative will operating in nature was grounded in these natural laws. Schweitzer began with an epagoge of a universal will-to-live adduced from the observable behavior in every animal and every plant. Each life struggles to maintain and maximize its vitality whether it is a weed growing from a concrete joint, the desperate struggles of a wounded animal, or human enterprise. From each empirical example of individual “being” emerges the first principle of Being: the sum of all wills-to-live forms a common ontology for every life, human and nonhuman alike. From this naturalistic foundation, Schweitzer expands into Schopenhauer’s etiology of the will and rational world view: “I conceive myself as a physical phenomenon in space and time.”15 Schweitzer thus concludes that the phenomenal self is a manifestation of the will-to-live operating within Kantian space-time, and just a singular aspect of a supra personal will operating in nature as an evolutionary creative force: “everything, accordingly, which meets me in the world of phenomena [must also be] a manifestation of the will-to-live.”16

Schweitzer said his approach to the problem of philosophy was modeled after Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*—which is to say, to perform a critical deconstruction of all previous philosophies and to provide a reformulation of what remains into a new systematic philosophy.17 To this end, the virtue ethics of Aristotle were examined and found to be “technically advantageous” for his reverence-for-life ethic. Specifically, the chapters on moral excellence and friendship from *Nicomachean Ethics* were declared “deep and true,” but the sections on justice and temperance were found to be poorly grounded. 18 The principle flaw, Schweitzer indicated, was that a true moral principle is not identified by Aristotle. Rather, only the vague aim of happiness is cited as driving force for human behavior. Schweitzer believed that this error could be corrected with the will-to-live as the foundation for virtuous and ethical compassion.

Schweitzer agreed with Aristotle that “left to itself, the will rushes to extremes [but] rational reflection keeps it on the middle path . . . virtue, therefore, is readiness to observe the correct mean which is to be acquired by practice.”19 Aristotle set forth a line of reasoning that rational happiness is only achieved through personal excellence. This is a compelling argument for bellicose ancient Greece where virtue in this sense serves the end of self-preservation in a warrior culture—an excellent person would be an excellent

16 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p. 125.
The human animal receives its proper pleasure only in personal excellence through fine action, with the highest virtue being rational development of the mind through contemplative study (\textit{theorēin}) since this activity is most like the life of the gods. But Schweitzer says that Aristotle also erred here in that “ethics are not some sort of knowledge which gives content to activity. . . . [rather] the content of the will is already given.” For Schweitzer, the will-to-live is the very wellspring for eudaemonism and it contains within itself the seed of a teleological purpose that can be actualized into social ethics.

But here we find what hitherto has been the most damning criticism of Schweitzer. He never completed the last two volumes of his \textit{Philosophy of Civilization}. Critical gaps were left in the cosmological schema. The two completed texts from 1923 provided a deconstruction and commentary on Western metaphysics; the final two volumes were to further spell-out the world view and the civil manifestation of reverence for life. Most curiously, the manuscript remains from these uncompleted volumes show something else entirely. From 1931 through 1945, Schweitzer made four partial drafts of a critical engagement on world religions (Eastern and Western) that he intended to serve as a complement for the two earlier volumes.

Advanced age and his humanitarian duties are part of the reason why the work was never completed, but it is also clear from his autobiography (published in 1931) that he had changed his mind and instead intended the example of his life to be the definitive final word on his philosophy. Schweitzer

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\item Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, 10.5.8.
\item Ibid., 10.5.11.
\item Ibid., 10.7.8.
\item Schweitzer, \textit{Philosophy of Civilization}, p. 124.
\item Schweitzer, \textit{Kulturphilosophie} III, p. 16.
\item Schweitzer, \textit{Out of My Life and Thought}, p. 270. Schweitzer was also distracted by the need to complete other manuscripts. A partial bibliography follows to show the breadth of his scholarship during this period: \textit{Indian Thought and Development} (1935); \textit{From My African Notebook} (1938); \textit{The Hospital at Lambarene during the War Years} (1947); \textit{Goethe: His Personality and His Work} (1949); “Die Idee des Reiches Gottes,” in \textit{Schweizerische Theologische Umschau} (1953); \textit{The Problem of Peace in the World Today} (1954); \textit{Eight Year Report on Lambarene Hospital} (1955); “How Can We attain the Kingdom of God?” in \textit{The Christian Century} (1955); and “Haltet den Glauben an den Menschen Fest!” in \textit{Rundbrief für den Freundeskreis von Albert Schweitzer} (1960). Schweitzer also indicated that the campaign against nuclear weapons became his primary concern after 1945: “I felt the duty to use all of the spiritual authority I have in this world for this fight [against the Bomb] . . . also because I knew that Einstein depended on me . . . I really suffer from not being able to complete my works” (cited in Heiner Roetz, “Albert Schweitzer on Chinese Thought and Confucian Ethics,” \textit{Journal of Ecumenical Studies} 40, nos. 1–2 [2003]: 111–20).
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In translation: “... as the combinations arranged from the fierce struggle for existence emerge, they are set ratios” (Schweitzer, Kulturphilosophie III, p. 402). Schweitzer indicated the ‘fierce struggle’ is a reference to that famous passage from Aristotle’s Metaphysics: “rest cannot belong to that which is not [yet existent]” (11.11).

27 Aristotle, Metaphysics, 4.4, 5.30.

28 Schweitzer, A Place of Revelation, pp. 16–17 (emphasis in the original).
individuals? This is the conflict at the heart of all ethics, and most theories turn to arguments in favor of common advantage as the basis for ethical behavior. The inherent problem is that ethics grounded in rational self-interest dissolve under strong emotional influences (e.g., fear, anger, and avarice) such as those emotions experienced during warfare. Schweitzer instead looked for a substantial pre-rational foundation for social ethics. He provided a two-fold answer.

The first is a natural sympathy grounded in Schopenhauer and Hume’s conceptions and reinforced by Darwin’s research in evolutionary social instincts for species survival. Schweitzer reformulated and developed these arguments to support a claim that an instinct of biocentric altruism exists in nature though often latently or limited in expression. Such ideas continue to find defenders in contemporary environmental ethics (c.f. E. O. Wilson’s biophilia hypothesis). But Schweitzer also recognized that the natural order is a study of the will-to-live at variance with itself—through predation, one life exists at the cost of another. The altruism instinct, therefore, remains largely unactualized. Only humankind has the ontic potential to fully actualize this latent natural instinct and expand it to be inclusive beyond the ordinary confines of family, clan, nation, or species. To promote this end, Schweitzer developed in 1936 an ethical principle that anticipates the one later expressed by Aldo Leopold in relation to collective wholes (ecosystems): “I see that evil is what annihilates, hampers, or hinders life . . . goodness, by the same token, is the saving or helping of life, the enabling of whatever life I can to attain its highest development.”

Schweitzer claimed that biocentric altruism is a necessity of thought. The egotistical desires of an “unthinking” will-to-live inevitably finds itself obstructed in fellowship with others and confronted by the creeping theodicy of aging and death. Reflection on these inescapable facts of life drives individuals to seek principles to govern their affairs, if only at first to negotiate the satisfaction of selfish desires in human society. Ultimately, people begin to seek higher principles through which they can give their finite existence some lasting meaning. The personal will-to-live can only be satisfied vicariously—which is to say, in service to another in light of these principles. For Schweitzer, the historical problem has been that ethics and social sensibilities have been too narrowly focused on civil affairs (e.g., duties to family, philanthropy, professional achievement, personal legacies, etc.). He also found that religion, on the other hand, too often rejected active involvement in the present world in deference to a higher world order (e.g., prayer life and private devotion). The

30 Schweitzer, Philosophy of Civilization, p. 312.
31 Schweitzer, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life.”
bifurcation of the two spheres of ethics, religious and secular, often leads to conflicting supra-personal principles, and is itself an impediment to truly just societies. Schweitzer believed that a true ethic must couple an active social ethic with a sense of transcendent mysticism.

Schweitzer set out the second tier of his philosophy to redress this need: the “ethical mysticism” aspect of reverence for life (Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben; alternately, reverence before all life). Schweitzer believed that the human species achieves self-perfection and complete vitality only in service to Being. In this way he sought to build upon his cosmological foundation to support a higher world order. The transition, he indicated, was an outcome of further meditation on the fate of the finite self in a world without apparent meaning, pervaded as it is with suffering and death. Only in devotion to supra-personal entities, whether the family or society as a whole, can a person assign lasting meaning to their lives and honor their will-to-live vicariously through social responsibility: “Ethics consist, therefore, in my experiencing the compulsion to show to all will-to-live the same reverence as I do to my own.”\(^{32}\) But even that, for some, leaves the desire for truth and meaning unfulfilled. This is the inner drive that leads many to embrace religion, the one institution promising “everlasting life” to satisfy the personal will-to-live. This need for deeper and ultimate meaning is at the heart of Schweitzer’s concept of ethical mysticism.

The will-to-live is the basis for a cosmological teleology in which each organism seeks to promote its existence and to produce, through evolution, the natural wonders of the biosphere. This teleology in turn hints at an even deeper teleology. All life shares a common evolutionary ancestor, and this common ancestry signifies for Schweitzer that the will is in fact unitary, and further that all wills-to-live share in this primal unity. The will is thus conceived as its own force operating in Kantian space-time throughout evolutionary history, a natural force that seeks to promote life for its own sake. This is where Schweitzer finds Schopenhauer again: “behind all phenomenon there is will-to-live.”\(^ {33}\) The unitary will becomes his answer to the need for devotion to a higher principle: “whenever my life devotes itself in any way to life, my finite will-to-live experiences union with the infinite will in which all life is one.”\(^ {34}\)

The outgrowth described by Schweitzer from mere social legacies to higher world-order devotion is explicable, but not a necessity of logic. Many people will always remain content without believing in supra-personal ideals beyond human society. Schweitzer is seeking an augmentation and complement for his natural system of ethics, an added feature inclusive of the deeper longing embedded in human nature for those who feel this compulsion—as he certainly did.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 308.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 313.
FROM ETHICAL THEORY TO REAL-WORLD RESOLVE

To live one must destroy. Even vegetarianism takes life, albeit plant life—it is still life nonetheless. All life shares equally in will-to-live. Nevertheless, Schweitzer declared that “the ethics of reverence for life [can] know nothing of a relative ethic.”35 The duty to preserve all life is absolute, and always remains absolute. Schweitzer steadfastly refused to “lay down rules for every possible situation” where life-taking and life-saving conflicts arise; the stated reason was that doing so would externalize the morality in a codified object for rational cross-examination, leaving it vulnerable to egotistical rationalization, depreciating negotiations, and ultimately superficiality of conviction.36 Reverence for life is a moral compass, not a systematized guidebook. Instead, we find another rubric and a different means to create a realistic, living ethic for society.

Schweitzer’s practice as a physician required him to take life to save life. The greatest bane of the villagers that came to his field hospital was African trypanosomiasis, a sometime lethal disease (common name, “sleeping sickness”) caused by parasitic protozoa transmitted in the bite of the tsetse fly. The parasites, each a living organism, had to be killed to save a patient. As a practicing doctor in a remote hospital in a tropical rain forest, he faced countless similar decisions. His great love of animals also led him to take in sick and injured animals which had to be nursed back to health, often requiring the death of river fish or other lower life forms to feed them.37 It was also necessary to clear the surrounding jungle plant orchards of fruit trees to serve as a reliable food resource for his patients during wartime shortages. It has been rightfully said that ethical mysticism is a lived philosophy “with calluses on its hands.”38 Yet, even so, all this would still seem to point to a contradiction between his life and his philosophy, or at the very least a net loss in the moral calculus of one life equals one life irrespective of species. Not so—Schweitzer instead declared that every life taken incurs guilt requiring attonement through service to Being.39

36 Schweitzer, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life.”
37 In one memorable case Schweitzer took in a two-month-old wild boar that had been raised by hand. After six months of care, the boar had grown too wild to be allowed to have the run of the hospital grounds anymore—chickens were being killed by the tame boar, now named Josephine. The boar had lost all fear of humans and so would not avoid hunters—a certain and (undoubtedly) painful death awaited Josephine in the jungle. Schweitzer gave her as many months of life as he could, but to prevent further incidents and for the good of the whole community, he slaughtered the beloved Josephine himself with painlessly surgical skill. The meat was not allowed to go to waste. See Albert Schweitzer, The Animal World of Albert Schweitzer, ed. Charles R. Joy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), pp. 114–18.
Humans alone have the ontic potential to act as moral agents. The saving of human life thus benefits the universal will operating in nature since every potential moral agent saved creates an opportunity for further actualization of the reverence-for-life ethic. This position stands in contrast to Paul Taylor’s nonanthropocentric “respect for nature” and his principle of proportionality. Schweitzer also directs ethical behavior in favor of those animals that can suffer, with the biocentric altruism being strongest towards the “higher” organisms in terms of rationality as well as those animals kept as pets. Still, the call of ethical responsibility is boundless. Dying worms on a sidewalk elicit intense pity, and not one flower should be plucked for idle amusement, for “is it not possible that they feel and are sensitive even if we cannot demonstrate it?” The melting snowflake, grown to crystalline perfection under the natural laws of the infinite creative Will, also has its place in the worldview of ethical mysticism—for the will-to-live is recognized in all life equally, and moves through the material world bringing forth new creations of every type. Accordingly, Schweitzer cautioned, “we must perceive every act of destruction always as something terrible and ask ourselves, in every case, whether we can bear the responsibility as to whether it is necessary or not.”

The key question is what best serves the universalization of the reverence-for-life ethic in society. Using this criterion and Schweitzer’s life and works, an informal scale of responsibility and priority can be discerned. Nevertheless, the taking of life is never justifiable in the sense that consequentialism presents its logic, for the same action may serve or act against the actualization of the reverence-for-life ethic at different times or in different challenges to human conscience and rationalized egotism. Moreover, all decisions that take life incur guilt—always. Only those actions that serve to promote the reverence-for-life ethic itself can serve as partial payment in a never-ending atonement.

40 Schweitzer, Kulturphilosophie III, p. 403.
42 Schweitzer, A Place for Revelation, p. 25.
43 Ibid., p. 10. This position should not be confused with pantheism. The creative force moves within nature, but ethics cannot be founded on the natural order because the creative force creates and destroys capriciously. Humans alone have the ontic potential for recursive consciousness, thereby obtaining an awareness of both the self and the creative force. Schweitzer keeps his idealism elemental, moving no further into abstraction than the Schopenhauer conception of the unitary will: “...we must recognize the eternal which is present under the form of the temporal and transient and is developing within this, and thereby become reconciled to reality” (Schweitzer, Philosophy of Civilization p. 282). This recognition becomes the source for devotion: “...in us, beings who can move about freely and are capable of pre-considered, purposive working, the impulse to perfection is given in such a way that we aim at raising to their highest material and spiritual value both ourselves and every existing thing which is open to our influence” (ibid.). The reverence for life consciousness stands outside and is free of the capricious natural order, drawing solely upon the altruism instinct inherent to the will-to-live.
44 Schweitzer, A Place for Revelation, p. 27.
of lifelong devotion to Being. Schweitzer himself stopped eating meat in the last few years of his life because he felt that he was no longer giving back enough to justify the death of a sentient animal merely to satisfy his palate.\textsuperscript{45} He ate lentil soup instead.

Martin has criticized the reverence-for-life ethic as being excessively “guilt mongering” for promoting an atonement mentality.\textsuperscript{46} Perhaps so—but Schweitzer’s two-tiered philosophical system (a naturalistic ethic that gives way to a deeper ethical mysticism) is coherent, elegant in its reasoning, and potentially workable in larger collective contexts. Here it is important to note the key inspiration behind ethical mysticism. Schweitzer was an ordained Lutheran minister.

\textbf{THE RELIGIOSITY OF ETHICAL MYSTICISM}

The cornerstone of Lutheran theology is the \textit{theologia crucis}, the Theology of the Cross. When Martin Luther set out his “Ninety-Five Theses” in 1518, he proclaimed that salvation could only be obtained through absolute kenotic humility (after the example of Jesus) in service to God. A suffering world is a call to would-be Disciples of Christ to “suffer with” (\textit{Mitleid}—figuratively, to have “compassion for”) the world in direct personal intervention.\textsuperscript{47} Schweitzer was a true Lutheran in this respect. His personal letters before leaving for Africa reveal a deep passion to fulfill the admonitions of Matthew 25.\textsuperscript{48} He felt an unquenchable inner craving to care for the suffering—he actually \textit{wanted} lepers (a fact made more remarkable since there was neither a cure nor treatment for this disease when he built his first leper village). But all this is not to say that reverence for life is secularized and philosophical Lutheranism. Schweitzer was a student of world religions with a particular fondness for Chinese religious thought. His monumental, ever-expanding and never completed final volumes of the \textit{Philosophy of Civilization} bear witness to the fact that Schweitzer believed Reverence for Life was embedded within the heart of every world religion.\textsuperscript{49} The \textit{theologia crucis} “sensibilities” at the heart of Schweitzer’s work should therefore be interpreted first and foremost as a testimony that ethical mysticism is not unprecedented as a social ethic with far-ranging appeal, and secondarily that such an ethic can also exist as a secular expression of devotion to supra-personal ideals that seek to honor the will-to-live vicariously through the other.

\textsuperscript{45} Brabazon, \textit{Albert Schweitzer}, p. 495.

\textsuperscript{46} Martin, “Rethinking Reverence for Life,” p. 166.


\textsuperscript{48} Brabazon, \textit{Albert Schweitzer}, p. 151.

\textsuperscript{49} See Roetz, “Schweitzer on Chinese Thought,” for Schweitzer’s views on the Confucian philosopher Meng Zi (372–79 B.C.E.) on universal sympathy and love.
THE ACTUALIZATION OF A SOCIAL ETHIC

There is one final thread to the complex tapestry that is Schweitzer's philosophy, the one that allowed him to transcend the "is/ought" problematic. He envisioned the reverence-for-life ethic to emerge incrementally like Aristotle's *archē*: "Universals arise from sense perception, just as, when a retreat has occurred in battle, if one man halts so does another, and then another, until the original position is restored. The soul is so constituted that it is capable of the same." The actions of one moral person—just like the first soldier to turn around in the face of a battlefield rout—may inspire another, and another, until the whole human race is brought to an orderly ethical state. Schweitzer's fifty-year medical mission in Africa was dedicated to personifying the reverence-for-life ethic for this very purpose.

Today we would call this social phenomenon a dynamic within evolutionary psychology, a carryover, as Nietzsche would say, of humankind's herd mentality. Simply stated, leaders attract followers. This dynamic exists beneficially in the social movements inspired by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., both of whom led by example in the face of active persecution. This dynamic also exists in the bandwagon effect in politics, as well as in the "contagious" crowd violence that leads to riots. Schweitzer recovered this ancient truth about human behavior from Aristotle and used it as a catalyst to actualize the reverence-for-life ethic.

Like Kant, Schweitzer sought to universalize his ethic through the power of example. But where Kant envisioned the authority of reason and a civil authority to impute an ethical conscience into its citizenry, Schweitzer sought to harness pre-rational sympathy into a social movement through ethical mysticism. He

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51 It is revealing to compare this passage from Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* to a life-shaping event in Schweitzer's childhood reenacted for the Academy Award winning 1957 documentary by directors Jerome Hill and Erica Anderson entitled "Albert Schweitzer." Schweitzer recalls that as a seven or eight-year-old child, an older boy had recruited him to shoot stones at birds from slingshots. Despite his conscience, and "in obedience to his nod of command," he took aim with him (Albert Schweitzer, *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth*, trans. C. T. Campion [New York: Macmillan, 1931], p. 40). But just then church bells rang out, and the young Schweitzer regained his conviction and chased the birds away to save them from the other boy. An echo of this event appears in a key passage of his autobiography. When considering the future of humankind, he writes: "If men can be found who revolt against the spirit of thoughtlessness, and who are personalities sound enough and profound enough to let the ideals of ethical progress radiate from them as a force, there will start an activity of the spirit which will be strong enough to evoke a new mental and spiritual disposition in mankind" (Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought*, p. 241). But Schweitzer was far too humble to present himself as such a figure. "I would fain prove myself worthy. How much of the work which I planned and have in mind shall I be able to complete?" (ibid., p. 242). Yet, perhaps history may show that his life and works were indeed profound, and that he did in fact help evoke a new mental and spiritual disposition in humankind—albeit yet burgeoning, but which may still come to greater fruition.
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hoped to delve deeper into human nature than did Kant, whose ethic of practical reason proved superficial and readily undermined by emotions. Schweitzer believed that only devotion to principles more substantive and fulfilling to the true universal, the will-to-live, could hope to tame humankind’s animal nature. Religion has this power. The example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), a Lutheran who embraced his cross at the Flossenbürg concentration camp for opposing Hitler and helping Jews escape Nazi persecution, shows the transcendent power of devotion over and against animal instincts aimed at mere self-preservation. Schweitzer hoped that ethical mysticism would achieve the same end in a secular context.

Nevertheless, this cobbling together and reformulation of disparate philosophical and theological systems—the naturalism of Nietzsche, the mysticism of Schopenhauer, the virtue ethics of Aristotle, the kenotic self-sacrifice of Lutheranism—came together as one man’s personal mission and outlook on life. Schweitzer, through the sheer weight of determination and his uncompromising character tried to personally evoke a new ethic in humanity. He saw himself as the first truly moral person to turn around and stand his ground in the face of a collapse threatening to destroy civilization itself. While such statements could make Schweitzer seem vain and pretentious, as an Alsatian he had witnessed his two native countries utterly eviscerate each other in world war—not once but twice. He also lived long enough to see the cold war escalating to the verge of nuclear annihilation menacing the planet itself, and he personally intervened to try to stop it. Amazingly, one person did make a

52 Schweitzer had a very interesting, but less sensational, engagement with the Nazis. In a public speech on Goethe in Frankfurt in 1932, Schweitzer warned that Germany, like Faust, was about to make a deal with the Devil. “After all, what is now taking place in this terrible epoch of ours except a gigantic repetition of the drama of Faust upon the stage of the world? . . . In deeds of violence and murders a thousandfold, a brutalized humanity plays its cruel game! Mephistopheles leers at us with a thousand grimaces!” (Albert Schweitzer, Goethe: Four Studies, trans. Charles R. Joy [Boston: Beacon Press, 1949], pp. 56–57). Hitler was sworn in as chancellor less than a year later. Schweitzer left Germany for Africa (buying up all the medical supplies he could in anticipation of a new war) and vowed to never return while Hitler was in power (Brabazon, Albert Schweitzer, p. 382). Schweitzer was an extreme embarrassment to the Nazis; he was an affront to everything National Socialism stood for, and they actively worked to destroy his academic reputation (ibid.). But in one of history’s most bizarre twists, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels saw an opportunity for a public relations coup. He invited Schweitzer to return to Germany and teach Bach in the university (the only aspect of Schweitzer’s work they liked). Goebbels signed his letter with the characteristic Nazi salutation, “Mit Deutschem Gruß,” a very particular phrase now forbidden by sec. 86A of the Federal Republic of Germany’s penal code (Strafgesetzbuch). Schweitzer, naturally, declined the invitation, and brazenly signed his response, “With Central African Greetings” (ibid.), an unmistakable rejoinder to show his intense distaste for Nazism by altering their salutation this way. Schweitzer had declared the African races his brothers (Albert Schweitzer, On the Edge of the Primeval Forest, trans. C. T. Campion, [New York: Macmillan, 1931], pp. 131–32). He had found his cross in a living service at Lambaréné.

Cousins, Schweitzer’s Mission, pp. 299–300.
Nevertheless, a key issue in the modern environmental debate is the ethical locus of ecosystems as collective wholes versus that of protecting individuals. J. Baird Callicott has highlighted the conflict here. The preoccupation of Schweitzer’s philosophy with individual plants and animals would seem to allow “no possibility whatever for the moral consideration of the whole—of threatened populations of animals and plants.” But this is not necessarily the case. True, for Schweitzer all life is valued equally in comparative worth, but deference is always made in favor of those actions that promote wider and deeper acceptance of the reverence-for-life ethic. Leopold’s land ethic is not precluded as a key expression of that larger cause. Schweitzer’s aforementioned admonition to enable “whatever life I can to attain its highest development,” it could be argued, is only advanced when applied to the greater benefit of ecological wholes—including their abiotic features and processes. Schweitzer’s lived philosophy, it could also be said, finds its modern counterpart in resource managers who must likewise manage at-risk populations, as it were, with “calluses on their hands” just as Leopold did in his time.

A key feature of Schweitzer’s philosophy is that it presents a two-tiered system that can be employed jointly or severally. The first tier is an epistemology and cosmology grounded in scientific naturalism that expands ethical consideration to the nonhuman world by way of evolutionary social instincts and Hume’s concept of sympathy. The second tier deepens this ethical consideration through devotion. The religiosity of ethical mysticism could be a source of renewed criticism but, strictly speaking, the historical fascination with pure reason and logic is also a type of devotion to a “supernatural” authority. For Descartes, Kant, and others, reason was the means by which the Judeo-Christian God was revealed to the mere mortal mind; the divine light of reason became the means to illuminate the whole of humanity to a new social reality. While contemporary philosophy does not profess religion in this way, the dictates of reason and logic remain the unquestioned supra-personal authority over how


56 As an aside and with respect to Schweitzer’s applied philosophy of leading by example, his lived philosophy was not limited to just being a doctor and caretaker of animals. He also led his hospital workers by example, including joining in with the physical construction of the hospital facilities. Doing so led to one of the most astounding and revealing events in Schweitzer’s life. His friends Albert Einstein and Robert Oppenheimer had arranged for him to join them at the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies in 1948 so that he could finish his academic works (Brabazon, Albert Schweitzer, p. 400). Schweitzer wrote back that with great reluctance he had to decline the position. The hospital in Lambaréné could not be trusted to continue without his constant supervision, and he himself was left to do much of the carpentry and masonry (even at this advanced age) since the village men were not interested in (what seemed to them) undignified manual labor, preferring instead the prestige of the colonial trade schools (ibid., p. 402). He wrote that he still hoped to finish his academic works, nevertheless, when time permitted.
people should live their lives. If not devotion in the traditional sense, it is still devotion nonetheless, for the individual is still expected to make deference to this unquestionable authority in all matters of their affairs.

A new authority is needed. Schweitzer had pointed out the error here. People are simply not “rational” in terms of pure reason rationality. At best, they are periodically rational and only potentially capable of extended periods of punctuated rationality in the midst of highly emotional lives. Only the most disciplined minds are capable of anything more than that. Rationality, it must also be admitted, is a fleeting phenomenon when society faces food shortages, war, or other kinds of intense social strife. The dictates of pure reason are an exceedingly precarious ground on which to found social ethics. Accordingly, Schweitzer moved the philosophical locus of devotion from higher-order reason to the pre-rational will-to-live. People, after all, will not throw themselves on top of a grenade because of a syllogism, but only to save their fellow soldiers out of a sense of deeper devotion to principles grounded in pre-rational impulses. Schweitzer believed that rationality must remain elemental in terms of speculative metaphysics, and yet be sufficiently expansive in terms of world view—that is to say, in perceiving worldly phenomena as manifestations of the unitary will.57 The aim is a commingling of these disparate spheres of human existence into a new complete ethical life in that “reason and the heart must work together if a true morality is to be established,”58 for “the true heart is rational, and the true reason is sensitive.”59

CLOSING STATEMENTS

For Schweitzer, the distinguishing characteristic of the human species was not recursive consciousness and its derivative powers of abstraction and logical analysis, but the ontic potential to become moral agents—the virtue of being human is devotional service to Being. This is not a controversial claim when viewed in terms of parents to their offspring, or the citizens of a community in relation to the good of that community. A virtuous (in the Aristotelian sense) parent or citizen honors both their personal desire and the greater good through the other/Other. Schweitzer transformed Aristotelian virtue ethics and used his archê as means to actualize a latent potentiality of moral agency to act within larger ontological contexts. A fully developed and excellent human being is one that becomes a moral agent in service to being in its collective expression as Being.

Such a philosophy is tailor-made for contemporary environmental ethics

58 Schweitzer, A Place for Revelation, p. 7 (emphasis in the original).
59 Ibid., p. 13.
where the other/Other is envisioned as all life in the biosphere. While his work may find applications in many strands in environmental thought, including deep ecology, ecofeminism, and ecotheology, Schweitzer’s use of the power of example (Aristotle’s archē) in turning public opinion may attract considerable interest from environmental movements that seek to cultivate deep personal conviction (e.g., Earth First!). Schweitzer’s two-tiered system can serve as a valuable means to bridge the intellectual and the emotional in facilitating a wider audience for their causes. Schweitzer also presents a “bottom-up” ethic that universalizes from a popular social movement, not a Hobbesian Leviathan to impose order on brute humanity. This ethic may be seen as especially advantageous since it avoids the aura of authoritarianism or eco-fascism.

Schweitzer’s work anticipated, and in many ways helped usher in, the modern environmental consciousness. It is only fitting that his reverence-for-life ethic be recovered to help this movement further, and in this process restore his reputation as a philosopher to its rightful place as the heir to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It may be that Schweitzer’s legacy of compassion will yet find its full expression and actualization in society.

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60 Schweitzer never lost his innate childhood conviction about the sacredness of all life, and he made special note of the need to educate all children through the power of example so they would not grow to fear being seen as sentimental by their peers, and “even [if you] make yourself look ridiculous in front of thoughtless people . . . [they too] will also be more moved than they would like to admit by the elementary truth in that which touches them in such unfamiliar ways” (Schweitzer, A Place for Revelation, p. 26).