In terms of intellectual achievement and practical morality, Albert Schweitzer has been described as probably the noblest figure of the 20th century. Born in 1875, he was brought up at Gunsbach in Alsace. His intellectual achievements span four major disciplines. Schweitzer learnt the organ under Charles-Marie Widor in Paris and published *J. S. Bach, le musicien-poete* in 1905. He studied theology and philosophy at Strasbourg, Paris, and Berlin, and published major works of New Testament scholarship, most notably *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906; trans. 1910). In 1896 he made his famous decision to live for science and art until age 30 and then devote his life to serving humanity. Accordingly, despite his international reputation as a musician and theologian, Schweitzer turned to medicine and qualified as a physician. By 1913 he resigned his posts as principal of the theological college in Strasbourg and preacher at St Nicholas and founded the hospital at Lambaréné, Gabon where he stayed until his death in 1965.

By 1952 Schweitzer had become a legend in his lifetime: his work in Lambaréné captured the public imagination, earning him the Nobel Prize for peace. But Schweitzer considered his most meaningful contribution, the one for which he wished to be remembered, to be his ethic of reverence for life’ (*Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*). Although the concept of reverence for life is known, it has been subject to a range of distortions and so it is important to confront these in order to understand what Schweitzer meant by these three words.

The first distorting lens is legalism. Contrary to many commentators, Schweitzer does not propound reverence as a moral law, but rather as ethical mysticism.
Ethical mysticism begins with a personal reflection on the self in the finite world that binds humans with non-human life and God (often referred to as the infinite Will-to-Live). For Schweitzer, the most immediate and comprehensive fact of consciousness is that “I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live.” The direct, experiential identification of one’s individual will-to-live (life) with other life, and through life with God, is foundational to his ethical mysticism. Though his mysticism starts from the individual subject (‘I am life which wills-to-live’), it extends to a generalization on the world (in the midst of other wills-to-live). Crucially, Schweitzer returns to the finite manifestations of life and presents human moral action as the locus of mystical relation: in loving self-devotion to other life we realize our spiritual union with [God].

The second distorting lens is inviolability. Many commentators have assumed that reverence for life upholds the moral inviolability of all life. It is true that Schweitzer sometimes writes in such a way as to invite this misunderstanding. The ethical person is one who:

…tears no leaf from a tree, plucks no flower, and takes care to crush no insect. If in the summer he is working by lamplight, he prefers to keep the window shut and breathe a stuffy atmosphere rather than see one insect after another fall with singed wings upon his table.

At first sight the sheer practical impossibility of these injunctions presents itself.
But what Schweitzer offers here are not rules but rather examples of the type of action expected from one who upholds reverence for life. Indeed, the very word ‘reverence’ (Ehrfurcht) indicates that he is not depicting obedience to moral law but concerns a new temper of mind.

The third distorting lens is inconsistency. Since Schweitzer defines reverence as an absolute ethic which enjoins responsibility without limit towards all that lives, it is perhaps not surprising that reverence is judged to entail inconsistency in practice. Indeed, Schweitzer is not immune from such charges since, for example, he notoriously had fish caught to feed his sick pelicans. Such inconsistencies are made more glaring in the light of his rejection of any moral hierarchy: the ethics of reverence for life makes no distinction between higher and lower, more precious and less precious lives.

Schweitzer is often interpreted at this point as suggesting that no form of life should ever be destroyed and that all creatures, humans to microbes, should have the same moral worth. It is doubtful whether this was his intention. Rather what he is doing is rejecting here the long tradition of hierarchy that places humanity at the top of the pyramid of descending moral worth. Schweitzer readily and regrettably admitted that it is sometimes necessary to make choices between various forms of life. But what he wanted to emphasize was the essentially subjective (anthropocentric) nature of these declarations.

Having clarified aspects of Schweitzer’s thought, it is now possible to indicate three of his contributions to religio-ethical thought.

The first contribution concerns service to life as practical mysticism. In contrast to most mystics, Schweitzer maintains that union with the Divine is achieved not through
contemplation, but primarily through service to other life: It is through the community of life, not community of thought, which I abide in harmony with the infinite Will. This is the mystical experience of ethics. In short, the phenomenon we call life is not something put here for our use or pleasure; we are part of life and our role is to enhance and serve each and every manifestation of it.

Schweitzer’s second contribution concerns his protest against an anthropocentric view of creation. In a 1919 sermon he questioned whether humans should be considered the goal of creation:

> The purpose of nature, with her thousands of appearances of life, is not understood as merely the presupposition of man’s existence, …and humanity may not conceive of itself as the purpose of the infinite world.

Schweitzer’s rejection of the elevation of humans in the universe suggests a transformation of our relationship to other life: we are to perceive each manifestation of life for itself, and no longer for ourselves.

Building on these insights, Schweitzer challenges the idea that humans sole responsibility in the world is to take care of their own species. In his exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan, he seeks to expand our understanding of neighbor:

> What is the sort of love toward God which compels us to be kind to others? What does love for our neighbour mean? …The
presupposition of morality is to share everything that goes on around us, not only in human life but also in the life of all creatures.

Schweitzer’s reading of the parable develops Jesus’ refusal to limit the extent of neighbor love by extending the category of neighbor to include all life: reverence does not draw a circle of well-defined tasks around me, but charges each individual with responsibility for all life within his reach and forces him to devote himself to helping that life.’ Schweitzer reads the parable as a metaphor for moral inclusiveness that corresponds analogically to non-human species. Similar to Jesus’ rejection of a racially restrictive criterion of neighborly discrimination, Schweitzer counters the limiting structures of communal proximity by highlighting humans’ participation in the community of life.

The third contribution concerns non-injury to life as the central ethical imperative. A man is truly ethical, Schweitzer writes, “only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life which he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives. The time is coming when people will be astonished that humankind needed so long a time to learn to regard thoughtless injury to life as incompatible with ethics.” Schweitzer regarded traditional philosophy which restricted ethics to human-to-human relations as spiritually impoverished. He was deeply critical of animal experimentation, opposed sport hunting, and eventually embraced a vegetarian diet. His hospital at Lambaréné was a model of ecological responsibility: he went out of his way to preserve trees and flora, reused every piece of wood, string, and glass, and rejected modern
technological developments which would have resulted in environmental degradation.

As he saw it, his life was his argument.

To reverence life and to serve it: this is the heart of Schweitzer’s commitment.

His personal and intellectual legacy continues to hold strong moral appeal and serve as an inspiration for a wider ethic of life. In the words of Rachel Carson: If during the coming years we are to find our way through the problems that beset us, it will surely be in large part through the wider understanding and application of his principles.

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Further Readings:


