THE PLACE OF ALBERT SCHWEITZER IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY, AND WHY WE SHOULD CONCERN OURSELVES WITH HIS ETHICAL THOUGHT NONETHELESS

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The Place of Albert Schweitzer in Contemporary Philosophy,
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with his Ethical Thought Nonetheless

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Thesis Abstract

Clinton Marshall Willey, "The Place of Albert Schweitzer in Contemporary Philosophy, and Why We Should Concern Ourselves with his Ethical Thought Nonetheless"

As a philosopher, Albert Schweitzer is known chiefly for his notion of Reverence for Life, as well as his statement that "My life is my argument." Yet *The Philosophy of Civilization*, his philosophical *magnum opus,* is a sweeping analysis, and to some extent, indictment of the Western philosophical tradition, especially in the period after the eighteenth century. In examining his analysis and indictment, I try to render a clearer picture of Schweitzer's critique of modern philosophy, drawing from it inferences concerning what Schweitzer believes concerning the nature of the most true and most profound ethics. I also examine the role of ethical impulses in a rigorous argument. Finally, I argue that Schweitzer should have a more prominent place in contemporary discussions of ethics.

Tez Özeti

Clinton Marshall Willey, “Albert Schweitzer’ın Modern Felsefedeki Yeri, Ve Schweitzer’ın Etik Felsefesinin Önemi”

Bir felsefeci olarak Albert Schweitzer genellikle "Yaşama Saygı" kavramı ve "Yaşamın ispatımdır" sözü ile bilinir. Ancak Schweitzer'in başyapıtı, Medeniyetin Felsefesi, batı felsefesinin ve özellikle 18'inci yüzyıl sonrasının kapsamlı bir analizi ve hatta bir noktaya kadar yargılanmasıdır. Bu çalışmada da Schweitzer'ın analiz ve yargılamasından hareketle, yazarın çağdaş felsefe eleştirisi netleştirilirken, en derin ve en doğru etik algısı incelenmektedir. Dahası çalışmada etik dürtülerin işlevi de derin bir tartışmaya açılmıştır. Son olarak, tezde Schweitzer'ın günümüzün etik tartışmalarında daha önemli bir yer sahibi olması gerektiği savunulmaktadır.

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Thanks also to Berna Kılınç for encouraging me to continue working on philosophical problems, to take risk on my thesis in writing about what mattered to me, and not to give up. She is also a wonderful neighbor.

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Finally, a thank you to the spirit of Albert Schweitzer, who has become a constant presence in my mental life, influencing how I think of the world as it is and as it should be and reminding me how much better a person I could be.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction, I quote words that, in the context of contemporary ethical philosophy, could safely be considered of the fighting variety:

> Complicated and laborious are the roads along which ethical thought, which has mistaken its way and taken too high a flight, must be brought back. Its course, however, maps itself quite simply if, instead of taking apparently convenient short cuts, it keeps to its right direction from the very beginning. For this, three things are necessary: It must have nothing to do with an ethical interpretation of the world: it must become cosmic and mystical, that is to say, it must seek to conceive all the self-devotion which rules in ethics as a manifestation of an inward, spiritual relation to the world; it must not lapse into abstract thinking, but must remain elemental, understanding self-devotion to the world to be self-devotion of human life to every form of living being with which it can come into relation.[1]

Say that someone schooled in contemporary ethical thought chanced on a book titled promisingly, if ambitiously, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* and so picked it up, leafed through it, and came across this paragraph, with its talk of the necessity of "cosmic", "mystical" and "elemental" thinking and its disavowal of "ethical interpretation[s] of the world" and "lapse[s] into abstract thinking". Would he keep reading, or would he close it and move on? Why? Less open for debate is that he would not question that, though he might wonder why, such a thinker has no place in the contemporary canon. Of course, it's not hard to see why.

So it's no surprise that Albert Schweitzer—still seen as a humanitarian *nonpareil*, a musicologist and a musician whose mastery of Bach extended from the organ to the scholarly treatise, a prescient man of peace and perhaps the most

[1] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* trans. by C.T. Campion, Tallahassee: The University of Florida Press, 1980, p. 307.

eloquent opponent of nuclear arms, as well as the person who paid most for his opposition, a controversial theologian who probably more than any other turned biblical exegesis away from the miraculous and toward the historical—isn't taken seriously as a philosopher. Yet this is what he considered himself first and foremost, though by his definition of "philosopher", Bach and Goethe numbered among the greatest of all philosophers.[2]

For reasons that I now expect to be apparent, though not necessarily justified, from the excerpt above alone, the thought of Albert Schweitzer, *Le Grand Docteur Blanc,* has suffered a fate quite a bit less esteemed than one would have been likely to suppose at the midpoint of the last century, when he was widely seen as perhaps the world's greatest—and if not, certainly it's most popular—living human being;[3] let alone earlier in the twentieth century, when certain of his works made quite a splash indeed. For many theologians, he was not quite theological enough; for many philosophers, insufficiently philosophical.[4] Certainly this can be said of his ethical theory, though to a much lesser degree his chief ethical insight, Reverence for Life.[5] I don't think I would be going out on a limb if I were to say that, were Schweitzer publishing today,

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[2] Albert Schweitzer, *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision: A Sourcebook,* Predrag Cicovacki, ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. See Chaps. 12 and 13, pp. 179-208.

[3] James Brabazon, *Albert Schweitzer: A Biography,* 2nd ed., Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000. See, in particular, Chapter 23 (pp. 396-416).

[4] Ara Paul Barsam, *Reverence for Life: Albert Schweitzer's Great Contribution to Ethical Thought*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008. See pp. *xi* for an interesting and fairly lengthy, if cursory, list of various scholars' objections to Reverence for Life.

[5] To which distinction—between his theory (and his argument for it) and his chief insight (in the true sense of the word, deriving as it did from a legendary "Eureka!" moment—we will soon return.

his ethical methodology would likely have trouble[6] finding a receptive audience in the editorial boards of contemporary philosophical journals, and one can hardly imagine his prose style and presentation of content—which, though elegant and perhaps a little too confident, often comes across as borderline bombastic, favoring as it does grand metaphors, sweeping pronouncements about all-encompassing concepts where others would tread far more lightly (e.g. civilization, the history of western of thought, the state of post-Enlightenment ethics, etc.), and seemingly glib dismissals of towering figures in the history of philosophy,[7] not to mention what can appear to be a lack of systematic argument—undergoing anything less than thorough revision. Schweitzer was one of (if not *the)* great polymaths of the twentieth century, but he can yet seem to be a man of another time—perhaps the Renaissance or, as I think he might say, the eighteenth century—as his style at least attests.

Whatever the reason, Schweitzer's philosophical ideas do not even comprise a footnote in the mainstream of contemporary philosophical education and argument, with the exception of certain thinkers, such as Brian Regan,[8] concerned with the ethical analysis of animal issues, wherein certain of Schweitzer's ideas do merit the status of footnotes or interesting asides. Nonetheless, some thinkers do continue to publish occasional essays or books on what Schweitzer himself considered his chief contribution not only to ethical

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[6] And then some.

[7] For a representative, not to mention potentially amusing—or hackle-raising, depending on one's point of view—case in point: "It is because he misunderstands their nature that Aristotle can't help ethics forward. […] Among teachers of virtue he is one of the greatest. Nevertheless, the least if those on the search for the basic principle of the ethical is greater than he." (Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 127).

[8]Regan addresses Schweitzer's thought once in *The Case for Animal Rights,* (Updated ed., Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2004) pp. 241-242. Notably, Peter Singer *does not* in *Animal Liberation*.

thought, but to the world, humanity and all that lives: Reverence for Life—and these occasional essays continue to be collected in anthologies concerning, topics like, prominently, the relevance of Reverence for Life for today's world.[9] On the other hand, Ara Paul Barsam's very recent *Reverence for Life: Albert Schweitzer's Great Contribution to Ethical Thought* is largely—though by no means exclusively—concerned with establishing the dependence of Schweitzer's philosophical thought on his theological thought.

In my view, however, treating Schweitzer's ethical thought in this way, while certainly valid and, in Barsam's case, of significant scholarly interest, is nonetheless to sell it short. Regardless of whether Schweitzer is of interest to contemporary analytic moral philosophers—save for the passing fancy or temporary diversion, he is not—there is certainly a strong argument that could be made to the effect that his ethical thought and observations are of paramount importance to the world itself—and not simply today, though perhaps especially today. For one, his predictions about the directions in which twentieth century events would turn (the internecine chaos and slaughter that followed the decolonization of Africa, mass global environmental degradation, and in the wake of the "1914 War", an increasing inability (or lack of will) to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants in war, to name just a few) are of the type that often seem self-evident in retrospect but that are widely ignored, rejected or denounced at the time. Indeed, Schweitzer was often virtually prescient concerning trends to come or unfolding catastrophes: an interesting question concerning that foresight is the degree to which it is based in his philosophy: I would argue that it is considerably so. For another—perhaps more

[9] I will cite such works when referring to them below.

substantially, perhaps more controversially—Schweitzer is, as mentioned above, still regarded, by all accounts to my knowledge, as one of the greatest humanitarians who ever lived, famously writing, for example, the essay "My Life is My Argument." What are we to make of the fact that, among all ethical philosophers, the one whom would almost certainly be most regarded as having lived an ethical life; as having established and relentlessly pursued a worthy ethical ideal; as having served as a moral exemplar, a direct inspiration to millions, including notable lights such as Rachel Carson; should be one whose contributions to ethical thought are largely ignored or dismissed?

To some, such a question might seem rather naïve. Being a good person does not qualify one to be an ethicist.[10] Nonetheless this point can hardly be argued in Schweitzer's case. In virtually all areas of expertise, from medicine to mountain climbing, we consider ourselves wise to seek and heed insights and instruction from their foremost practitioners. If we can point to a *practitioner* of ethical theory in recent times, it is most assuredly Albert Schweitzer. If he weren't a philosopher, we might only point to his life and take it as a model, either to emulate or from which at least to learn. But he *was* an ethical theorist: his views—in their totality—deserve far more than a passing glance.

In every endeavor there is theory and there is practice. Ethics cannot be limited strictly to the former; to do so, considering the purview and the point of ethics, would render it meaningless.

Schweitzer would be appalled by how the twentieth century continued to unfold following his death in 1965 and by the ominous trends that have taken root early in the 21st century. Nonetheless, his own diagnoses account both for

[10] Though the question of whether one's deeds should disqualify him from being an ethicist remains open.

these trends and, more to the point in this discussion, for his fate in contemporary philosophical discourse. Schweitzer would be disappointed, but perhaps not surprised at how academic philosophy has treated his ideas; he might view it as a continuation of philosophy's failing to do its duty on behalf of civilization and of its preference for derivative and unessential questions over what he called the "elemental" questions whose answers shape a society, determining whether it deserves to be called a civilization.

In this thesis, I will consider what Schweitzer means by a "philosophy of civilization" by examining closely his chief philosophical work, *The Philosophy of Civilization.* My aim, at least partially, is to make a paragraph such as that quote at the outset seem more worthy of consideration in the context of contemporary ethics. To do so, we must arrive at a more complete picture of his argument in *The Philosophy of Civilization,* paying attention to more than only his concept of Reverence for Life, so that we allow that concept to take up its proper, crowning position in his ethical thought.

Contemporary thinkers engaged with Schweitzer's thought would argue that I have already hamstrung my project—to arrive a fuller picture of Schweitzer the ethicist—by choosing to focus almost exclusively on *The Philosophy of Civilization*. Ara Paul Barsam would argue that his major theological works on Jesus, Paul, and "The Kingdom of Heaven" and his treatment of Jainism and other Indian systems of thought in *Indian Thoughts and Its Development*—even his works on Bach as well as other works in his substantial corpus—are essential to arriving at a complete picture of Schweitzer's thought. And they would, of course, be correct. Nonetheless, both practical and philosophical purposes recommend limiting the scope of this

inquiry to *The Philosophy of Civilization.* Practically speaking, a reasonably thorough examination of *The Philosophy of Civilization* is a reasonable goal within the context of a thesis. Philosophically speaking, *The Philosophy of Civilization* is unique among his book-length works in that here the former Professor of Philosophy at Strasbourg, now removed to the scene of his life's work in equatorial Africa, is writing self-consciously as a philosopher, forgoing the many other perspectives a man of his talents could write from, and indeed did often write from, albeit elsewhere. If Schweitzer is to be seen as a philosopher in the contemporary academic sense, it must be on the basis of this work.

The first part of what follows will take a look his critique of philosophy, given the role in civilization that he ascribes to it. The second part will consider Schweitzer's ideas on what and what cannot constitute the foundation for an "optimistic ethics". The third and final part will then explain what Schweitzer means by an "optimistic" ethics as well as how he "rescues" it from an "optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world". In so doing, this thesis will aim to make a perhaps novel contribution to the study of Schweitzer by focusing not on Reverence for Life, as does the majority of literature on Schweitzer as a philosopher, or on putting him in a historical context. It will aim both to explain the process by which what Schweitzer calls the "truths of emotion" can play a fundamental part in ethical theorizing and to provide a philosophically rigorous explication of the most relevant case-in-point: Schweitzer's philosophical argument on behalf of his most prized "truth of emotion".

CHAPTER 2. SCHWEITZER'S CRITIQUE OF PHILOSOPHY [11]

> I have come to the conviction that the aesthetic and the historical elements, and the magnificent extension of our material knowledge and power, do not themselves form the essence of civilization, but that this depends on the mental disposition of the individuals and nations who exist in the world. All other things are merely accompanying circumstances of civilization, which have nothing to do with its real essence.[12]

When Albert Schweitzer's ethical philosophy is considered today, it is not his ethical thought per se that is discussed, but rather his concept of Reverence for Life. While there is no doubt that Reverence for Life is his greatest contribution to ethical thought—Schweitzer himself certainly thought so, and literally no commentator whose path I have crossed fails it treat as his primary, often his sole, subject—it is not an idea that emerged in a vacuum. I would submit that, rather, Reverence for Life is more an idea that emerged out of Schweitzer's struggle to fill a vacuum he perceived very clearly and that consumed his philosophical efforts. To understand his project more fully, we should first try to understand the nature of that vacuum.

Schweitzer's story of how the Reverence for Life came to him as he was traveling down the Ogowe River[13] has been quoted or otherwise retold many times, but rarely[14] has the backstory of why he was searching for what became Reverence for Life been told; it is treated as a classic "Eureka!" moment from

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[11] This chapter will draw extensively—perhaps, though I hope not, excessively—on longish quotes from the early parts of *The Philosophy of Civilization*. I ask that you bear with me as I believe the reasons will become clear.

[12] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* pp. xi-xii.

[13] More on this later.

[14] I hesitate to add "if at all", though I have yet to come across an example.

which a deep insight dawned on him, *ex nihilo,* which is to some extent true. Nonetheless, treating the origins of Reverence for Life thus incompletely fails to recognize that Schweitzer spent years searching for an idea that would play the essential role that he believed Reverence for Life plays—filling the gaping void he saw at the heart of ethical philosophy, the philosophy of civilization, from about the mid-nineteenth century on. (I recall Randall Jarrell's observation on poets: "A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great." Something similar might be said about philosophers; in any case, to focus on the moment of inspiration itself at the expense of the perhaps decades of work that preceded it is hardly fair, let alone a path toward understanding an idea fully.)

Lest you think I indulge in hyperbole,[15] consider the title of the first chapter of *The Philosophy of Civilization,* the book that, in part, sets out to convince us that ethics is not really possible without Reverence for Life: to wit, *How Philosophy is Responsible for the Collapse of Civilization*. Schweitzer is in earnest on this point; what drives his philosophical project is his sense that the question of whether philosophy performs its proper function[16] is central to whether civilization will commit "suicide"[17]—in essence, whether humanity will survive.

Therefore, in order to understand the place of Reverence for Life in Albert Schweitzer's philosophy, we must take a closer look at the parts of his

[15] "Gaping void" and what not.

[16] "Proper function" as Schweitzer sees it, it goes without saying.

[17] Indeed, Schweitzer does use this word. *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 2.

ethical writings that are, in a sense, preamble to Reverence for Life. We must try to understand what he means by "civilization", his view of the role of philosophy in enabling—or disabling—it, and his assessment of the consequences that follow from the failure of philosophy to meet the mission he accords to it. This picture, clarifying the nature of the gaping hole he saw in modern philosophy, will, in turn, segue naturally into a discussion of the qualities that Schweitzer believes must characterize a true ethical system, and then, ultimately, why he believes that only Reverence for Life can meets these criteria.

Schweitzer's definition of "civilization" makes him "a stranger amidst the intellectual life of [his] times",[18] which, as he characterizes it at least, took it for granted that the rapid material progress made possible by industrialization and the perceived superiority of Western nations in matters economic, political, and aesthetic obviated the need to question whether what we lived in was in fact a civilization. Rather, that what we lived in comprised a civilization was self-evident; the practice of intellectual interrogation of civilization thus consisted of little more than an examination of its historical roots.[19]

For Schweitzer, however, the history of a civilization is little more than that—history—if it assumes that civilization is whatever we happen to live in and if it accords value according to material attainment:

> [A]s though in obedience to some secret order, [those who have written about "civilization"] made no attempt to settle and make clear the conditions of our intellectual life, but devoted themselves exclusively to its origin and history. They gave us a relief map of civilization marked with roads which

[18] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. xii.

[19] "Little" in the sense of its intellectual purview, though one can imagine Schweitzer wryly noting the heft of the resultant tomes.

> [sic][20] men had observed or invented, and which led us over hill and dale through the fields of history from the Renaissance to the twentieth century. It was a triumph for the historical sense of the authors.[21]

History, if it fails to treat with primacy the animating ideas of the periods with which it deals, becomes an enabler of the dangerous view that progress can be measured in material terms. For Schweitzer, however, a history of civilization is by definition a history of the ethical ideas and worldviews that characterized it at various stages. To treat the history of civilization otherwise is, unfortunately, not only mistaken and misleading, but also potentially dire in the precedents that doing so sets:

> The crowds whom these works instructed were filled with satisfied contentment when they understood that their civilization was the organic product of so many centuries of the working of spiritual and social forces, but no one worked out and described the content of our spiritual life. No one tested its value from the point of view of the nobility of its ideas, and its ability to produce real progress. Thus we crossed the threshold of the twentieth century with an unshakable conceit of ourselves, and whatever was written at that time about our civilization only confirmed us in our ingenuous belief in its high value.[22]

Note Schweitzer's characterization of our "belief in its high value" as "ingenuous"—childlike, trusting, naïve. The implications, as shall soon be made clear, are that in a society where, for whatever reasons, philosophy has abdicated its role, people will assume that whatever we live in, that's what civilization is, especially as we seem to be better off materially than the generations that preceded us; they will either fail to recognize that their society has lost its way,

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[20] Campion's translation of *The Philosophy of Civilization* is riddled with uses of "which" when "that" is the correct word. In places, this can be confusing, though not here. I shall not change them, however, nor mark them with "[sic]" hereafter.

[21] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* pp. 1-2.

[22] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 2.

believing rather that they live at the apex of an interrupted stream of historical progress, or, recognizing that something is amiss, they will nonetheless not understand how to analyze what is wrong, let alone how to correct it.

Schweitzer clearly has in mind a radically different approach for interrogating the concept of "civilization". It begins by re-evaluating the nature of "progress":[23]

> [A]ll human progress depends on progress in its theory of the universe,[24] whilst, conversely, decadence is conditioned by a similar decadence in this theory. Our loss of real civilization is due to our lack of a theory of the universe.[25]

For Schweitzer, progress in civilization must be thought of in ethical terms, lest the concept lose, if not all, then its ultimate meaning and significance:

> We shall not succeed in re-establishing our civilization on an enduring basis until we rid ourselves completely of this superficial concept of civilization which now holds us in thrall, and give ourselves up again to [an] ethical view.[26]

What, then, is civilization?

> Civilization, put quite simply, consists in our giving ourselves, as human beings, to the effort to attain the perfecting of the human race and the actualization of progress of every sort in the circumstances of humanity and of the objective world. This mental attitude, however, involves a double predisposition: firstly, we must be prepared to act affirmatively toward the world and life; secondly, we must become ethical.[27]

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[23] At this point begins in earnest the potentially excessive quotation for which I have already apologized. I note that I feel it justified a) because the severity of Schweitzer's claims is so strong that I feel I should present them in his own words and b) because doing so will be more efficient. Analysis of what is said will, of course, follow.

[24] "Theory of the universe" is one of the translator's several renderings in *The Philosophy of Civilization* for the German word *"Weltanschauung"*. In my opinion, this particular translation is both needlessly grandiose and a bit misleading. What Schweitzer means by *"Weltanschauung"* need not be construed as a "theory of the universe". A view of life's meaning and purpose would be sufficient.

[25] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. xii.

[26] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. xii.

And what are its necessary conditions?

> Civilization originates when men become inspired by a strong and clear determination to attain progress, and consecrate themselves, as a result of this determination, to the service of life and of the world. It is only in ethics that we can find the driving force for such action, transcending, as it does, the limits of our own existence.[28]

And so how exactly then is philosophy "responsible for the collapse of civilization"? "The decisive element in the production of this result was philosophy's renunciation of her duty."[29]

Schweitzer's conception of philosophy's duty lies at the heart of what he thinks makes civilization, in its genuine—again, that is, ethical—form, possible. He was deeply committed to the idea of a "philosophy of the people,"[30] and believed that philosophers set the tone for the ways in which "the people" think, the questions they struggle with, and their attitudes toward the meaning of convictions for individual life and for society, to all of which concepts we shall return briefly. But more immediately pressing for us at this point is the question of whether philosophy had ever performed its duty and, if so, at what point and under what circumstances did it begun to fail.

> The age of the Illuminati[31] and of rationalism had put forward ethical ideals, based on reason, concerning the development of the individual to true manhood, his position in society, the material and spiritual problems which arose out of society, the

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[27] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. xiii.

[28] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. xiii.

[29] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 3.

[30] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 6.

[31] Here the translation again shows its age. "Illuminati" here refers to figures of the Enlightenment, not to members of any super-secret religious society or to any other quasi-historical Dan Brown-esque figures.

> relation of the different nations to each other, and their issue in a humanity which should be united in the pursuit of the highest moral and spiritual objects. These ideals had begun, both in philosophy and in general thought, to get into contact with reality and to alter the general environment.[32]

Thus we stood at the cusp of "the age of true civilization". What happened?

> About the middle of the nineteenth century this mutual understanding and co-operation between ethical ideals and reality began to break down, and in the course of the next few decades it disappeared more and more completely. [Thus it was that w]ithout resistance, without complaint, civilization abdicated.[33]

Schweitzer believed that philosophy had taken the lead, guiding "thought in general" up until sometime in the mid-nineteenth century. Philosophy until this time was characterized by

> […] elementary[34] philosophizing about man, society, race, humanity and civilization, which produced in a perfectly natural way a living popular philosophy that controlled the general thought, maintained the enthusiasm for civilization.[35]

But by the mid-nineteenth century, the thought of rationalism and the Enlightenment, which had theretofore promoted a "healthy" "philosophy of the people", could no longer[36]

> […] meet the criticism levelled at it by pure thought. Its naïve dogmatism raised more and more prejudice against it. Kant tried to provide the tottering building with a new foundation, undertaking to alter the rationalistic view of things in accordance with the demands of a deeper theory of knowledge, without, however, making any change in its essential spiritual elements. […]

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[32] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 2.

[33] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 3.

[34] Schweitzer here means "elementary" in the sense of "elemental" rather than "basic" or "rudimentary". More on this later.

[35] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 3.

[36] Here is the longest of the aforementioned long quotes, included at this length for the reasons cited above.

Fichte, Hegel and other philosophers, who, for all their criticism of rationalism, paid homage to its ethical ideals, attempted to establish a similar ethical and optimistic view of things by speculative methods, that is by logical and metaphysical discussion of pure being and its development into a universe. For three or four decades they succeeded in deceiving themselves and others with this supposedly creative and inspiring illusion, and in doing violence to reality in the interests of their theory of the universe. But at last the natural sciences, which all this time had been growing stronger and stronger, rose up against them, and, with a plebeian enthusiasm for the truth of reality, reduced to ruins the magnificent creations of their imagination.

Since that time the ethical ideas on which the civilization rests have been wandering about the world, poverty-stricken and homeless. No theory of the universe has been advanced which can give them a solid foundation; in fact, not one has made its appearance which can claim for itself solidity and inner consistency. The age of philosophical dogmatism had come definitely to an end, and after that nothing was recognized as truth except the science which described reality. Complete theories of the universe no longer appeared as fixed stars; they were they were regarded as resting on hypothesis, and ranked no higher than comets.

The same weapon which struck down the dogmatism of knowledge about the universe struck down also the dogmatic enunciation of spiritual ideas. The early simple rationalism, the critical rationalism of Kant, and the speculative rationalism of the great philosophers of the nineteenth century had all alike done violence to reality in two ways. The had given a position above that of the facts of science to the views which they had arrived at by pure thought, and they had also preached a series of ethical ideals which were meant to replace by new ones the various existing relations in the ideas and the material environment of mankind. When the first of these two forms of violence was proved to be a mistaken one, it became questionable whether the second one could still be allowed the justification which it had hitherto enjoyed. The doctrinaire methods of thought which made the existing world nothing but material for the production of a purely theoretical sketch of a better future were replaced by sympathetic attempts to understand the historical origin of existing things for which Hegel's philosophy had prepared the way.

With a general mentality of this description, a real combination of ethical ideals with reality was no longer possible; there was not the freedom from prejudice which that required, and so there came a weakening of the convictions which were the driving power of civilization. So, too, an end was put to that justifiable violence to human convictions and circumstances without which the reforming work of

> civilization can make no advance, because it was bound up with that other unjustifiable violence to reality. That is the tragic element in the psychological development of our spiritual life during the latter half of the nineteenth century.[37]

I mean at this point neither to criticize this encapsulated critique of Western philosophy from Kant to the early twentieth century nor to embrace it. Still, I will opine that, regardless of whether you disagree with Schweitzer wholesale, or feel that he, while making some valid points, overreaches considerably—or whether you find yourself largely sympathetic with his critique itself or, at least, with his desire to render so sweeping a critique, or neither—it is hard to deny that he seems to have anticipated postmodernism more than a decade before the publication of even what—I would argue—would much later become its foundational text, Heidegger's *Being and Time.*[38] More to the point, important tenets of Schweitzer's ethical thought begin to emerge here. I start by extracting a series of what I take to be Schweitzer's arguments, but laid out in a more user-friendly format.

Argument A:

I. A "theory of the universe" derived solely via metaphysical speculation into "pure being" and such cannot yield a picture of reality that will withstand the assault of what science has to say about the world.

II. Ethical ideals must be compatible with the truth about reality.

III. Therefore, any ethical system deriving from metaphysical speculation will ultimately be shown to be vulnerable to science.

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[37] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* pp. 3-5.

[38] Schweitzer completed *The Philosophy of Civilization* in 1917.

The significance of Argument A lies in showing us that, though Schweitzer is a philosopher who seems to be at this point leaning toward a view embracing absolute truth, and certainly to be rejecting relativism, he is looking for that absolute truth, in experience of some kind—really of multiple kinds, as it will turn out: the experience of thought, of emotions, and thus by extension of the sense experiences that make these possible; if Schweitzer seeks absolute truth, that is, he does so with his feet on the ground, if you will, rather than deriving it from some notion of, for example, the Will of God or, for that matter, of any other transcendent idea for which we can derive no evidence from experience.

Argument B:

I. Rationalism is far from a perfect system of thought: for one, it cannot withstand the interrogation "levelled at it by pure thought".

II. Kant tried to overcome this problem, but ultimately failed, because he made no room for the "essential spiritual[39] elements". Presumably, therefore, these spiritual elements must play a role in filling out a "rationalistic view of things" and, ultimately, in helping justify the ethical conclusions toward which a rationalistic view points.

III. Nonetheless, and once again, ethical ideals must be compatible with the truth about reality; and "a rationalistic view", though vulnerable to criticism based "pure thought", has a more significant, albeit incomplete, role to play than the latter in the search for ethical truth. Both, after all, seek to locate truth in

[39] Of course, we will have to clarify what Schweitzer means by "spiritual".

reality rather to bend reality to its own theoretic constructs, as do worldviews based on "pure thought".

IV. Therefore, the search for ethical truth must utilize both rationalistic and spiritual thinking.

Schweitzer himself said as much in an interview he gave on Radio Brazzaville in 1953:

> I was always, even as a boy, engrossed in the philosophical problem of the relation between emotion and reason. Certain truths originate in feeling, others in the mind. Those truths that we derive from our emotions are of a moral kind – compassion, kindness, forgiveness, love for our neighbour. Reason, on the other hand, teaches us the truths that come from reflection.
>
> But with the great spirits of our world – the Hebrew prophets, Christ, Zoroaster, the Buddha, and others – feeling is always paramount. In them emotion holds its ground against reason, and all of us have an inner assurance that the truth of emotion that these great spiritual figures reveal to us is the most profound and the most important truth.
>
> The problem presented itself to me in these terms: must we really be condemned to live in this dualism of emotional and rational truths? […]
>
> If rational thought thinks itself out to a conclusion, it arrives at something non-rational which, nevertheless, is a necessity of thought. This is the paradox which dominates our spiritual life. If we try to get on without this non-rational element, there result views of the world and of life which have neither vitality nor value.[40]

Whether one takes issue with Schweitzer's rather apparent belief that "the non-rational" can be the source of truths that "the rational" cannot yield, it is nonetheless the case that he accords "the rational" the capacity to arrive at some truths as well as to bring us to edge of others. The point, of course, is that ethics derives from both types of thought—from what Schweitzer called "that unity of

[40] http://www.schweitzerfellowship.org/features/about/phil/phil.aspx?id=5

emotion and reflection that constitutes the individual"[41]—but from neither in isolation. This crucial point will be one of the focuses of the second chapter.[42]

[41] I am reminded of the famous exclamation from one of Wittgenstein's letters to Russell: "How can I be a logician before I'm a human being!"

CHAPTER 3. SCHWEITZER'S CONCEPTION OF WHAT ETHICS CAN AND CANNOT BE BASED ON

> My subject is the tragedy of the Western world-view.
>
> While still a student I was surprised to find the history of thought always written merely as a history of philosophical systems, never as the history of man's effort to arrive at a conception of the universe. Later, when reflecting on the current of civilization in which I found myself living, I was struck by the strange and inexorable connections which exist between civilizations and our view of the world as a whole. Next I felt a still stronger compulsion to put to Western thought the question what it has been aiming at, and what result it has reached in the matter of a philosophy of life. What has it offer when we demand from it those elemental ideas which we need, if we are to take our position in life as men who are growing in character through the experience given by work?
>
> So I came to an unsparing effort to come to an understanding with Western thought. I recognized and admitted that it has sought for that outlook on life from which alone a deep and comprehensive civilization can come. It has wanted to reach a position of world- and life-affirmation and with that as a foundation decree that it is our duty to be active, to strive for progress of all kinds, and to create values. It has wanted to reach an ethical system and on that foundation establish that for the sake of serviceable activity we have to place our life at the service of ideas and of the other life around us.[43]

But apparently it hasn't. The reason for this failure is decisive in explaining why, for Schweitzer, Western philosophy's fundamental approach to ethics, while often serviceable and valuable in many ways, ultimately cannot successfully yield the ethical philosophy it seeks. Schweitzer puts it best, to my knowledge, in his essay on Goethe:

> All his life long, Goethe refused to be a systematic philosopher. In one of his poems, he boasts of having achieved splendid results because he never lost his way "thinking about thought".
>
> His dislike of philosophy—so he tells us in Truth and Poetry—goes back to his student days. The rationalistic

[43] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* pp. 72-73.

> philosophy of the eighteenth century, with which he became familiar at Leipzig (1765-1768) and at Strasbourg (1770-1772), offers him nothing he does not already know and irritates him with its doctrinaire quality. He finds fault with it for its scholastic discoloration, especially in its logic and metaphysics. In Faust he expresses freely the feeling that he cherishes.
>
> This philosophy is alien to him also because it pretends to explain everything. By this very fact, he thinks, it proves that it is not giving a true account of the grandeur of nature's mysteries. […]
>
> The position taken by Goethe at Strasbourg toward the French and German philosophy remains decisive throughout his life, as he tells us in *Truth and Poetry.* Every time he confronts some new philosophy, he studies it from three principal points of view:
>
> [Question 1] Does it touch the reality of nature without preconceived theories, and does it bring men into direct contact with nature?
>
> [Question 2] Has it a profound and enlightened ethical idea?
>
> [Question 3] Does it have the courage, when it arrives at the ultimate problems raised by research and thought, to admit that there are mysteries that cannot be plumbed, or does it rather presume to offer a system that explains everything?[44]

Although these are questions derived from Goethe, they nonetheless apply equally well to Schweitzer as he considers systems of ethical thought and ethical thinkers. It is, in fact, because he believes that Reverence for Life is an ethical principle about which the reply to each of these three questions would be "Yes" that Schweitzer believes he has arrived at the central principle in ethics.

Let us now make of the first question a rubric for considering why Schweitzer believes "Western thought" has failed to "reach a position of world- and life-affirmation and with that … [the comprehensive] ethical system" it has sought.

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[44] Albert Schweitzer, *Albert Schweitzer's Ethical Vision: A Sourcebook,* Predrag Cicovacki, ed., p. 194.

But first, importantly, what does Schweitzer mean by "world- and life-affirmation"?

> World and life affirmation consists in this: that man regards existence as he experiences it in himself and as it has developed in the world as something of value *per se* and accordingly strives to let it reach perfection in himself, whilst within his own sphere of influence he endeavours to preserve and to further it.[45] [46]

Schweitzer takes it as established that the great majority of Western thought has strived to be world- and life-affirming, which he too takes as central to the veracity of an ethical system. The problem has not been this goal but another, for Schweitzer has, with his first question, shown that for him nature is primary over mind, putting him at odds with the vast majority of the Western philosophical tradition from Descartes on. The problem with starting philosophical interrogation of the world from the mind is that it assumes that we will succeed in making both man and the universe a single, seamless, and purposive system. But whereas ethics certainly focuses on the issues of meaning and purpose in human life, for Schweitzer there is no such meaning or purpose in the universe. To start from the mind, therefore, is to doom the search for a foundational ethical principle before the first step is taken.

> The process by which Western thought has hitherto sought for a world-view is doomed to be fruitless. It has consisted simply in interpreting the world in the sense of world- and life-affirmation, that is to say, in attributing to the world a meaning which allowed it to conceive the aims of mankind and of individual men as having a meaning within that world. This

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[45] Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and its Development,* trans, by Charles E.B. Russell, Boston: The Beacon Press, 1936, p. 1.

[46] Schweitzer had a lifelong fascination, and respect for, Indian and Chinese philosophies, and frequently juxtaposes world- and life-affirmation with world- and life-negation, a notion he finds especially prevalent in various systems of Indian thought. For our purposes, however, a discussion of this concept, though potentially interesting, is off topic.

> interpretation is […] the main course of the river [in Western philosophy].
>
> […] The optimistic-ethical interpretation [of the world] is often found imbedded in the results of investigations into the nature of knowledge it often appears beneath a veil of "metaphysics".[47]

Schweitzer is adamant that ethics be "optimistic" in character (we will consider below what he means by this) but he makes a distinction between ethics deriving from "an optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world" and an ethics that is simply—and thus powerfully—optimistic. The former has been both the boon of the West and bane of Western philosophy—the boon because an optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world at least drove Western thought to promote an optimistic worldview, securing a "prejudice in favour of world- and life-affirmation", aspects of ethical thought that are indispensible to civilization, which Westerners "are inclined to assume as more or less self-evident";[48] the bane because "an optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world", based as it is on faulty assumptions about the nature of the universe and the nature of man's relationship to universe, can only ever result in an incomplete, fragmentary ethics. Such an interpretation, because it has chosen not to answer Question 1 ("Does it touch the reality of nature without preconceived theories?") affirmatively, but has rather started the interrogation of life and universe with the mind, is therefore never capable of rendering a completely satisfactory answer to Question 2 ("Has it a profound and enlightened ethical idea?"). "The optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world" does, as we shall see in Chapter 3, promise a profound ethical idea; sadly, however, it cannot provide that idea with the unassailable foundation it needs.

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[47] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 74.

[48] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 75.

This dichotomy between the what an "an optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world" can and cannot do also highlights why Schweitzer held rationalism in such high esteem, believing that it, at least, made civilization possible, while its less elemental philosophical step-children from the mid-nineteenth century on became responsible for the collapse of civilization. Rationalism, despite its ultimate imperfections, encouraged a habit of thought that promoted optimism and world- and life-affirmation; in seeking to fit man seamlessly into the universe, it was at least trying to explain something literally fundamental about man—that is, again, something "elemental". From the mid-nineteenth century on, by shifting its focus, according to Schweitzer, to the history of philosophy and philosophy of—or an accommodation with—science, that is, by shifting its methods from elemental questioning to the construction of elaborate metaphysical systems that could not compete with an ever more detailed *picture* of the world derived from science, philosophy tended to encourage pessimism more than optimism, without which one cannot have even a moderately coherent worldview.

Thus, while rationalism obtained, its wrestling with ideas could both inspire the layman to question his life and the world, making philosophy "a philosophy of the people" and thus disseminating the impulses that promote civilization, and leave the door open to a subsequent revolution in thought that might supplant the mind with nature as the theoretical starting point in ethics. Thus, the "unfinished work of the eighteenth century" was explaining the "natural, fundamental bond between ethics and our concept of the world."[49]

[49] Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*, trans. by Antje Bultmann Lemke, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, p. 200.

However,

> Kant, Fichte, Hegel and the other great thinkers of speculative philosophy were not satisfied with the simple and naïve theories of moral rationalism of the eighteenth century. They arrived at their conclusions through more complicated operations of thought. They stated that the ethical affirmative view of life can only be reached through a correct theory of knowledge, or the logical comprehension of the original "Being" within the context of world events in space and time.
>
> In the artificial complexity of the great systems, the educated minds if the early nineteenth century assumed they had proof that the ethic of life affirmation was the logical result of rational thought. […] Around the middle of the [nineteenth] century these logical castles in the air crumbled and collapsed under the pressure of a realistic and scientific method of thinking. A period of severe disenchantment set in. Reason gave up all its attempts to make this world comprehensible either by manipulation or force. It was ready to resign itself and come to terms with reality as it is, drawing from it motives for action that are consonant with an ethical acceptance of the world. It soon learned that reality refuses to provide what is expected of it. Reason alone cannot provide an interpretation of the world that assigns a course of ethical action for man.[50]

So we see that for Schweitzer neither reason alone nor the world alone can supply the foundations of ethics. Reason fails because, as we saw at the end of the first chapter, Schweitzer asserts that there is emotional truth and, regardless, there is more to reality—much more—than mind alone. The world fails to cooperate with speculative reason because no matter how anthropocentric a worldview we contrive metaphysically, scientific realities and the simple facts of the scale of the universe and that it is impossible to speak of such things as the purpose of an earthquake, we cannot overcome reality to derive "an optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world".

How, then, would Schweitzer approach the problem so as to solve the crisis in Western ethics that he has diagnosed? First, please recall Question 3

[50] Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*, pp. 203-204.

above ("Does it have the courage, when it arrives at the ultimate problems raised by research and thought, to admit that there are mysteries that cannot be plumbed, or does it rather presume to offer a system that explains everything?"). Schweitzer's answer is, without fear of the repercussions for human knowledge—and for knowledge about human beings—but with the conviction that he has uncovered something both novel and profound, an emphatic "Yes":

> My solution to the problem is that we must take up our minds to renounce completely the optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world. If we take the world as it is, it is impossible to attribute to it a meaning in which the aims and objects of mankind and of individual men have a meaning also. Neither world- and life-affirmation nor ethics can be founded on what our knowledge of the world can tell us about the world. In the world we can discover nothing of any purposive evolution in which our activities can acquire a meaning. Nor is the ethical to be discovered in any form in the world-process. The only advance in knowledge that we can make is to describe more and more minutely the phenomena which make up the world and their implications. To understand the meaning of the whole—and that is what a world-view demands!—is for us an impossibility. The last fact which knowledge can discover is that the world is a manifestation, and in every way a puzzling manifestation, of the universal will to live.
>
> I believe I am the first among Western thinkers who has ventured to recognize this crushing result of knowledge, and the first to be absolutely skeptical about our knowledge of the world without at the same time renouncing belief in world- and life-affirmation and ethics. Resignation as to knowledge of the word is for me not an irretrievable plunge into a skepticism which leaves us adrift about in life like a derelict vessel. I see in it that effort of honesty which we must venture to make in order to arrive at a serviceable world-view which hovers within sight. Every world-view which fails to start from resignation in regard to knowledge is artificial and a mere fabrication, for it rests upon an inadmissible interpretation of the universe.[51]

Thus, for Schweitzer, the world is characterized by irresolvable mysteries, yet from the standpoint of ethics, imperfect knowledge need be no impediment to

[51] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 76.

deriving a "serviceable", "world- and life-affirming" theory, whereas the assumption that some sort of perfect knowledge of the world is attainable derails the quest for a non-contradictory ethical theory. Mustering the courage to accept the places to which reason, metaphysics, science or any combination of these cannot get us, we can still start from points that he says we do *know*—which, a little more than incidentally, concerns the "will-to-live", to which we shall return. That is why Schweitzer is so adamant about emphasizing the "elemental" in ethics.

Schweitzer believes that paradoxes, or dualisms, if you prefer, are indissoluble facts of human of existence, between, for example, thought and emotion, the rational and the non-rational, knowing and willing. It is naïve to assume that any system will be able to dissolve all of these paradoxes, and it is pointless to try to overcome the complexities of life or of the world by contriving another complexity, in the form of an elaborate theoretical construct. Rather, ethical theorizing must follow two dictums in order to succeed.

First,

> Whatever is deep is also simple, and can be reproduced as such, if only in its relation to the whole of reality is preserved. It is then something abstract, which secures for itself a many-sided life as soon as it comes into contact with facts.[52]

And,

> To become ethical means to begin to think sincerely.[53]

Lest these dicta sound merely like wishful thinking—"Wouldn't it be nice if everything were that simple?"—I point out that Schweitzer accepted that many

[52] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 7.

[53] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 308.

of the toughest ethical situations in the real world were so tough as to defy being explained away by any theory. For example, killing: the author of Reverence of Life believed that all killing was wrong. That human life requires us to kill—and not merely animals, which is at least most often debatable, but trees and other plants, even the malaria parasite—does not morally justify the act of killing other living things; it merely necessitates it, and necessity does not necessarily imply justification. Such an idea would probably seem logically inconsistent to most moral philosophers, but that line of argument would miss the boat for Schweitzer because logical consistency cannot be our sole and decisive criterion in assessing ethical questions.

Being human is complex, comprising as it does intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual experience. Because the natures of these species of experience are complementary rather than congruous, one species of experience may lead to conclusions that the others may not able to. Thus,

> [T]hought is no dry intellectualism, which would suppress all the manifold movements of our inner life, but the totality of all the functions of our spirit in their living action and interaction.[54]

The dicta of simplicity and sincerity recognize, for one, that emotional truths may yield in a flash of insight a truth to which reason can only aim but never reach on the basis of logic alone; for two, that denying the import of human experience other than the intellectual is actually to deny—perhaps somewhat disingenuously, perhaps under the spell of an overly pedantic philosophy that has lost touch with the world and people beyond the walls of the department—the full scope of thought and the messy, insuperably complex totality of really being a human being and living in the world. The dicta of simplicity and sincerity

[54] Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 57.

recognize also open the door to the possibility of a, or *the,* key ethical idea's being something other than a necessity of thought—a flash of inspiration that comes to one ethical (though not necessarily also philosophical) genius once in a generation or century, perhaps; or a conclusion that great masses of people will arrive at together, though one by one, once its stage has been set by the spirit of their age; or an idea crucial to the resurrection of civilization despite the fact that it cannot be derived from logic *alone*.

Most importantly, the dicta of simplicity and sincerity make room in an ethical theory for love, not as an indispensible though "non-rational" reality to be accounted for, but potentially as its foundation.

CHAPTER 4. A NEW ETHICS: RESCUING OPTIMISM FROM THE "OPTIMISTIC-ETHICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE WORLD", THE WILL-TO-LIVE, AND THE ARRIVAL AT REVERENCE FOR LIFE

> You all know the name of the philosopher Schopenhauer, who tried to convince men in his writings that the greatest wisdom was to see in life nothing but sufferings and struggle and distress. I can never open one of his books without asking: What would have become of him if, instead of retreating with distinction into his ivory tower, far from professional and human contact, he had been forced to take the post of a schoolmaster in a poor mountain village, where he would have had the task of turning a haphazard mob of children, with slack habits, into self-respecting men? He would never have written the books that made him famous, never have been surrounded by clouds of incense, nor had the crown of laurels placed on his white locks; but he would have had more understanding; he would have acquired the deep conviction that life is not only a battlefield, but that it is at one and the same time a struggle and a victory.[55]

I think it valuable at this point to indulge in a bit of selective reiteration. We have until now, among other things, laid the foundation upon which Schweitzer justified his inclusion of the "the non-rational" as an essential aspect of what constitutes thought as well as access to truth and thus also justified his appeal to the non-rational in answering the "elemental" questions with which he a true ethics must grapple. We read three questions that Schweitzer adapted from Goethe's *Truth and Poetry* and pointed out that Schweitzer also made use of them in assessing philosophical theories and methodologies, including his own. We considered how "the optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world" fails with regards to Question 1 ("Does it touch the reality of nature without preconceived theories?") and Question 3 ("Does it have the courage, when it arrives at the ultimate problems raised by research and thought, to admit that there are mysteries that cannot be plumbed, or does it rather presume to offer a system that

[55] Albert Schweitzer, *Albert Schweitzer: Essential Writings,* James Brabazon, ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005, p. 134.

explains everything?"). We have also seen that Schweitzer, on the other hand, rejected idealism as the potential foundation for a true ethical theory, thus enabling him to answer Question 1 with a "Yes", and accepted skepticism with respect to knowledge of the world without the fear of abandoning the hope of ethical knowledge in the process, thereby answering Question 3 with another "Yes".

We also alluded to the relationship between Question 2 (Has it a profound and enlightened ethical idea?) and "the optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world", pointing out that while said interpretation proposes such an idea—a valuable contribution in its own right—it ultimately fails to deliver, and can only ever fail to do so. Finally, I promised to pick up the strain of the question of what Schweitzer means by optimism. I have delayed doing so until this point in the text so that we could kill two questions with one exposition.

Recall that Schweitzer's problem with "the optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world" is not that it is "optimistic-ethical". Indeed, "[t]he greatness of European philosophy consists in its having chosen the optimistic-ethical world-view."[56] His problem, rather, is that it insists that an "optimistic-ethical" worldview can only be founded in an "interpretation of the world" part, as we have seen at length in the preceding chapters:

> [The weakness of European philosophy consists] in its having imagined that it was putting that conception on a firm foundation, rather than admitting to itself the difficulties of doing so.[57]

Recall also that Schweitzer has been consistent in saying that an ethics must be "serviceable"—essentially, that it must intrinsically be not only a philosophy that

[56] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 271.

[57] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 271.

values and promotes civilization, that is, that it must be world- and life-affirming, but also sufficiently "elemental" in nature that the philosophy of philosophers readily translates into a compelling "philosophy of the people". Schweitzer, then, who is not a consequentialist ethically, nonetheless turns out to be something of a consequentialist as an evaluator of ethical theories: the rationalism and Enlightenment thinking that predated the great speculative philosophies of Kant, Hegel and Fichte, let alone what followed once these thinkers had established the course of the philosophy to follow, was "serviceable" because it contributed decisively to making of the non-philosophers of its age thinking people, who are far more the "building blocks" of civilization than any factory or material advance. In a sense, therefore, this rationalism, though imperfect, was good enough, because it valued, supported, and encouraged mass thought girded by an intrinsic dedication to the value of "optimism" and "civilization", and perhaps even a tacit sense that the latter was impossible without the former. Moreover, for Schweitzer, encouraged by a widespread "habit of thought" that valued it, civilization could, guided by philosophy, flourish and so setting the stage for an even truer, more elemental philosophy to emerge ultimately.

In the wake of the mid-nineteenth century, however, with the foundations of "optimistic-ethical" philosophy shattered beyond repair, the world paying the price[58], and philosophy retreating into institutions to busy itself with non-

[58] Here might be a good place to note, if for no other reason than the sake of interest, that Schweitzer should not be lumped together with other Germanic (though Schweitzer himself was Alsatian, bilingual and an author in both German and French; following Versailles, he, "born" German, "became" French) prophets of doom of the era of *The Philosophy of Civilization,* notably the curmudgeonly Oswald Spengler. Whereas Spengler, for example, saw the 1914 War as the precipitator of "The Decline of the West", Schweitzer saw it, with its unprecedented exposure of non-combatants to violence and its mechanized horror, as a symptom—not a cause—of a civilization that had lost its world-view.

"elemental" concerns and scholarly technique, Schweitzer—no Hegelian in his view of history—concluded that philosophy, without whose guidance true civilization becomes impossible, needed an intervention:

> The task before our generation is to strive with deepened thought to reach a truer and more valuable world-view, and thus bring to an end our living on and on without any philosophy of life at all. […] New ways of thinking can arise only if a true and valuable conception of life casts its spell upon individuals.[59]

Doing so, therefore, meant finding an alternative solution to the justification of "optimism", leaving us with two questions to address: A)[60] What is so important about "optimism"? and B) How does Schweitzer "rescue" it from "the optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world"?

"Optimism" is so important for Schweitzer because the "degeneration" of civilization occurs when "true optimism, without our noticing it, [begins to disappear] from among us."[61] When philosophy forgoes what should be its fundamental concern with "elemental" questions and thus ceases to provide the food of philosophical thought to "the people", the tendency of individuals to think deeply about crucial questions concerning the meaning of life and one's responsibilities therein—both to oneself and to others—the distinction between civilization as a drive toward the perfection of individuals and of society—materially, but more importantly, spiritually—and civilization as simply the place and time in which we happen to live, begins to dissolve. Schweitzer was deeply concerned about the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the relationship of people to their work. In its wake, work had been severely

[59] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 271.

[60] We will call these questions "A" and "B" to prevent confusion.

[61] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 98.

diminished in the sense of the value of one's labors that it afforded the mass of people; moreover, a lifetime of labor spent playing a role more akin to that of a part of machine than, say, to that of a more traditional craftsman—in the service of a hugely multi-faceted engine of production, but to the great detriment of their development as people of civilization—necessarily shrunk their perspective, their natural sense of and interest in the whole, rather than merely in some of its disconnected parts. Thus, though people had been weakened and made decadent,

> [W]e are by no means a race weakened and decadent through excessive enjoyment of life, and needing to pull ourselves together to show vigour and idealism amid the thunderstorms of history. But although we have retained our vigour in most departments of the direct activities of life, we are spiritually stunted. Our conception of life with all that depends on it has been lowered both for individuals and for the community. The higher forces of volition and influence are impotent in us, because the optimism from which they ought to draw their strength has become imperceptibly permeated with pessimism.[62]

Thus does pessimism come to pass for optimism:

> What passes for optimism with the mass of people is the natural or acquired faculty of seeing things in the best possible light, this being the result of lowered ideals for the future no less than for the present. A person ill with consumption is brought by the poison of the disease into the condition which is called Euphoria, so that he experiences an imaginary feeling of health and strength. Similarly there is an external optimism present in individuals and in society just in proportion as they are, without realizing it, infected with pessimism. [63]

For me, the foresight with which Schweitzer diagnosed the ills of our own time is almost preternatural. Circa 1920, when, despite the recent war, burgeoning industry was still widely seen as the harbinger of a future of stainless steel metropolises where material want was a thing of the past, his prognoses might be

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[62] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 98.

[63] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* pp. 98-99.

taken as the dystopic ramblings of a man holding fast to a quaint view of a simpler time; today, some of the points above are taken as more or less self-evident by people representing a range of political, religious and philosophical views. Though such people differ, often and significantly, in their definition and analysis of the problems besetting civilization, I suggest that the discourse has come more closely to resemble Schweitzer's in spirit—that we should speak not merely of the problems confronting the contemporary way of life, but the problems *with* it. I further submit that this lends credence, deeply albeit intuitively, to the value of his entire philosophical project. From such transparent government euphemisms as "collateral damage", in place of the often much more fitting phrase "wanton murder", to such pop phenomena as "The Secret", and from such academic trends as "Positive Psychology" to such catastrophes as our ongoing global financial crisis, enabled more or less in full by an array of absurdly "optimistic" enablers—governments, financial institutions, credit-rating agencies, credit-drowned consumers—Schweitzer's distinction between what optimism is and what it is perceived to be has massive explanatory power. He wants to show us that the ideological emperor of our times is Pangloss, and that the emperor is wearing no clothes. He does so by explicating his distinction between what optimism is and what it is, wrongly and widely, taken to be:

> True optimism has nothing to do with any sort of lenient judgment. It consists in contemplating and willing the ideal in the light of a deep and self-consistent affirmation of life and the world. Because the spirit which is so directed proceeds with clear vision and impartial judgment in the valuing of all that is given, it wears to ordinary people the appearance of pessimism. That it wishes to pull down the old temples in order to build them again more magnificently, is by vulgar optimism put down to its discredit as sacrilege.
>
> The reason, then, why the only legitimate optimism, that of volition inspired by imagination, has to carry on such a hard struggle with pessimism is that it always has first to track the

> latter down in vulgar optimism and unmask it. That is a task which optimism has never finished. Never must it think that it is at an end. For so long as it allows the enemy to emerge in any shape whatever, there is danger for civilization. When that happens, activity in promoting the special aims of civilization always diminishes, even if satisfaction with its material achievements remains as strong as before.
>
> Optimism and pessimism, therefore, do not consist in counting with more or less confidence on a future for the existing state of things, but in what the will desires the future to be.[64]

Thus, true optimism is both an essential cause and a product of civilization, making civilization dependent on human will. Schweitzer's term for this will is "will-to-live", which we have encountered above and which I have studiously avoided dealing with until now. The tendency of commentators on Schweitzer[65]—and, more understandably, of casual readers of Schweitzer who, if trained in philosophy, naturally derive the association—is to find a deep affinity between Schweitzer's conception of will-to-live and Schopenhauer's. However, as I hope should be obvious, the views of the two philosophers are diametrically opposed, and as the quote at the outset of this chapter implies, so is their conception of will-to-live, if for no other reason than Schweitzer's insights derive from engagement with life and people based on a foundational belief in the value of both and of the civilization that can be both result and continuing cause for their perfection, whereas Schopenhauer's derive from anything but.

I believe that justifying Schweitzer's assertion of the "will-to-live" is not as hard as it may appear. After all, how, for Schweitzer, should one seek after ethical truth? Recall the dicta we identified above. First, "Whatever is deep is also simple", because for an idea to contain within itself the possibility of being

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[64] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 99.

[65] Especially the aforementioned Ara Paul Barsam.

abstracted to a universal—" its relation to the whole of reality" intact—it must derive from an "elemental" observation, not a foundational observation contrived to support a metaphysical inquiry or system.[66] Second, "To become ethical means to begin to think sincerely", which I take to mean, for at least one, that, for Schwetizer, the "elemental" may be too obvious to miss as we assay the foundational facts of existence, let alone to choose to ignore. Therefore,

I. What is it that all living things have in common? That they are alive.

II. Our experience of the world shows that all living things, except under rare, often unusual, circumstances, will choose to continue living rather not to do so.

III. Hence, the universality of the "will-to-live".

As to the component of optimism (by which I mean Schweitzer's "legitimate" variety) that Schweitzer would argue is the natural manifestation of the will-to-live, a simple argument based on experience also suffices:

I. All living things would choose to better their conditions (again, saving human beings under unusual circumstances) if they could—the animal seeks more and better sustenance, the plant better light, the bacteria a suitable host, the human material and spiritual sustenance, etc.

II. Hence, the will-to-live naturally accords to Schweitzer's conception of optimism ("Optimism […] consist[s …] in what the will desires the future to be.")

[66] Think Descartes.

This brings us to Question B from above: How does Schweitzer "rescue" optimism from "the optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world"? He has already argued that the nature of thought consists of more than reason, that certain truths derive from the emotions, and that purely speculative thought fails to provide ethics with the foundations it requires against the very stuff of which speculative thought is primarily made: logic. So he has already set the stage for demonstrating that the final step in attaining true ethics must be a leap from the edge of where reason can lead us to the other side, thus uniting the "rational" with the "non-rational".

> There are two things that thought has to do for us; it must lead us from the naïve to a deepened world- and life-affirmation, and must let us go on from mere ethical impulses to an ethic which is a necessity of thought.
>
> Deepened world- and life-affirmation consists in this: that we have the will to maintain our own life and every kind of existence that we can in any way influence, and to bring them to their highest value. It demands from us that we think out all the ideals of the material and spiritual perfecting of individual men, of society, and of mankind as a whole, and let ourselves be determined by them to steady activity and constant hope. It does not allow us to withdraw into ourselves, but orders us to bring to bear a living, and so far as possible an active, interest on everything which happens around us. To endure a state of unrest through our relation to the world, when by withdrawing into ourselves we might enjoy rest: that is the burden which deeper world- and life-affirmation lays upon us.
>
> We begin our life-course in an unsophisticated world- and life-affirmation. The will-to-live which is in us gives us that as natural. But later, when thought awakes, questions crop up which make a problem of what has hitherto been a matter of course. What meaning will you give your life? What do you mean to do in the world? When, along with these questions, we begin trying to reconcile knowledge and the will-to-live, facts get in the way with confusing suggestions. Life attracts us, they say, with a thousand expectations, and fulfils hardly one of them. And the fulfilled expectation is almost a disappointment, for only anticipated pleasure is really pleasure; in pleasure which is fulfilled its opposite is already stirring. Unrest, disappointment and pain are our lot in the short span of time which lies between our entrance on life and our departure from it. What is spiritual is in a dreadful state of dependence

> on our bodily nature. Our existence is at the mercy of meaningless happenings and can be brought to an end by them at any moment. The will-to-live gives me an impulse to action, but the action is just as if I wanted to plough the sea, and sow in the furrows. What did those who worked before me effect? What significance on the endless chain of world-happenings have their efforts had? With its all illusive promises, the will-to-live only means to mislead me into prolonging my existence, and allowing to enter on existence other beings to whom the same miserable lot has been assigned as to myself, so that the game may go on and on without end.
>
> The discoveries in the field of knowledge which the will-to-life encounters when it begins to think, are therefore altogether pessimistic. It is not by accident that all religious world-views, except the Chinese, have a more or less pessimistic tone and bid man expect nothing from his existence here.
>
> Who will prevent us from making use of the freedom we are allowed, and casting existence from us? Every thinking human being makes acquaintance with this thought? We let it take a deeper hold of us than we suspect from one another, as indeed we are all more oppressed by the riddle of existence than we allow others to notice.
>
> What determines us, so long as we are comparatively in our right mind, to reject the thought of putting an end to our existence? An instinctive feeling of repulsion from such a deed. The will-to-live is stronger than the pessimistic facts of knowledge. An instinctive reverence for life is within us, for we are will-to-live.[67]

I recall Albert Camus's famous observation that, "There is really only one serious philosophical question, and that is suicide." Albert Schweitzer might counter that the question should be rendered, if suicide comprises a serious philosophical question, it would instead be, what do learn about human nature from the fact that the overwhelmingly vast majority of people do not seriously[68] consider suicide, even if their world-view is dark indeed. Schweitzer might observe that of the many places to begin a philosophical interrogation of ethics, the instinct against suicide is a fine place to start. For, if there be no logical

[67] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* pp. 278-279.

[68] Presumably.

reason not to take one's own life, there must be a powerful emotional or spiritual reason at work. That reason must establish the extreme value I place on my own life—an instinct against whose existence it is hard to debate.

For Descartes to start his philosophy with the *Cogito* strikes Schweitzer as contrived and weak, and lands philosophy "irretrievably on the road to the abstract."[69] For Schweitzer, that I am alive and that I wish to stay alive is the starting point—the first being readily apparent, the second being an instinctual value judgment. Thus, if we think sincerely, the proper starting point for any philosophical inquiry into what life is, is itself decidedly non-rational: there is what I observe of reality, and there is what I feel regarding the primordial and irreducible fact that I am alive, that every other being I encounter is as well, and that what we all want is in some way to flourish. For Schweitzer, reason enters only then, enabling us to determine what we mean by flourishing. Reason enables us to conceive of civilization and to understand that we must value it because achieving it represents a commitment to perfecting ourselves and, once achieved, encourages a culture that values self-perfection. Civilization becomes both the effect and the cause of philosophy.

Reason is also what shapes our ethical impulses into an optimistic-ethical world-view. It forces us to recognize that if we value our own lives, and if what we have in common with all other living things is life, then we must value their lives as well. Along these lines, any ethical theory that did not take into account the "all" in "all life", it goes fundamentally astray from the beginning: "It seems

[69] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 308.

as if Descartes with his dictum that animals are mere machines had bewitched the whole of European philosophy."[70]

Thus with an "ethical impulse" and an argument, and with the belief that neither can render a complete, optimistic and "serviceable" world-view in the absence of the other, Schweitzer concludes that Reverence for Life is the fundamental insight not only underlying all ethics but making it possible at all.

[70] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization,* p. 297.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

For months on end I lived in a continual state of mental agitation. Without the least success I concentrated—even during my daily work at the hospital—on the real nature of the affirmation of life and of ethics and on the question of what they have in common. I was wandering about in a thicket where no path to be found. I was pushing against an iron door that would not yield.

All that I had learned from philosophy about ethics left me dangling in midair. The notions of the Good that it had offered were all so lifeless, so unelemental, so narrow, and so lacking in content that it was impossible to relate them to an affirmative attitude.

Moreover, philosophy never, or only rarely, concerned itself with the problem of the connection between civilization and concepts of the worldview. The affirmation of life in modern times seemed so natural that no need was felt to explore its meaning.

To my surprise I recognized that the central province of philosophy into which my reflections on civilization and the worldview had led me was virtually unexplored territory. Now from this point, now from that, I tried to penetrate to its interior, but again and again I had to give up the attempt. I saw before me the concept that I wanted, but I could not catch hold of it. I could not formulate it.

While in this mental state I had to take a long journey on the [Ogowe] river. […] The only transportation I could find was a small steamer, which was about to leave, towing two overloaded barges.[…]

Slowly we crept upstream, laboriously navigating—it was the dry season—between the sandbanks. Lost in thought I sat on the deck of the barge, struggling to find the elementary and universal concept of the ethical that I had not discovered in any philosophy. I covered sheet after sheet with disconnected sentences merely to concentrate on the problem. Two days passed. Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase "Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben" ("reverence for life"). The iron door had yielded. The path in the thicket had become visible. Now I had found my way to the principle in which affirmation of the world and ethics are joined together![71]

[71] Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought,* pp.154-155.

The purpose of what I have written has not been to explore the nature of Reverence for Life, nor to deal with the, admittedly, many questions it raises and problems it poses for its defenders—for example, What exactly does "Reverence" mean? Must I really revere all life, including bacteria and the like? Why? How can killing a tree or a parasite be necessary yet not moral justified? Does the world really confront us with one paradox after another, and if so, how are exactly are we supposed to get around them in ways that are ethical? A great thesis could be written to address these topics in full; indeed, much has been and continues to be written on Reverence for Life, its attributes and problems, how some feel it the idea that can save the world and others see it as more or less empty.

Instead, I have attempted to analyze how an "ethical impulse" can both serve and be served by a rigorous, rational philosophical inquiry. Many have tried to find the common ground between reason and emotion, but I personally believe that Schweitzer has shown us that each is lost without the other and that neither can accomplish alone what they can accomplish together. He tells us one the one hand that without philosophy there can be no civilization, yet on the other that philosophy must reach beyond itself in order to ultimately provide a foundation for that which it values, or at least should value, most dearly.

There is no question that insight plays a crucial, perhaps indispensible, role in all sorts of thought that is decidedly rational. One can view such insights as the fruit of inductive processes that somehow merely reflect deductive reasoning processes that, though hidden from the person who has the insight, nonetheless obtain. The weakness of such views, however, is their assumption that the rational underlies all that has philosophical value, that behind every flash

of inspiration lies something more pedestrian. After all, we have no trouble acknowledging the artist's creative inspiration as the source of her work. Why not allow the philosopher the same?

Uniting the truth of reason with the truth of emotion is a worthy goal. But what if it is not attainable? There is room for an ethical theory that makes "necessities of thought" of ethical insights beyond what reason alone can achieve. Such a theory might succeed in replacing utilitarianism's impersonal calculus with a more direct, value-driven, and personal recognition of what it is that all beings share in common. It might succeed in founding a universal ethics on love.

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