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## THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF ALBERT SCHWEITZER

### PART I—FOUNDATIONS, DEFINITIONS AND DIAGNOSIS

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**T**O the great majority of ordinary citizens philosophy is something academic and apart from life. They do not consciously pursue wisdom or the ultimate knowledge of things and their causes. Yet every man is in fact a philosopher; for implicit in his attitude to life and people, however unconscious he may be of the general principles which daily rule his conduct, is a theory of reality or, if his thinking falls short of this, some basic assumptions as to his function in the scheme of things which enable him to come to terms with the facts of living as he meets them. Man cannot cease to be a philosopher without abdicating his humanity; man without a philosophy is either an animal or a psychiatric case.

Philosophy is, therefore, the essential foundation to human life. Its object is to make us, as thinking beings, "understand how we are to place ourselves in an intelligent and inward relation to the universe and how we are to be active under the impulses which come to us from it."<sup>(1)</sup> It is the argument of these articles describing Dr. Schweitzer's "Philosophy of Civilisation", that the present intolerable condition of our world

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(1) Goethe by Albert Schweitzer, p.3-4.

is primarily due to our philosophical bankruptcy. We no longer challenge, as each generation must, the principles and values of our life and thought, and replace them, when exhausted, by creative acts of thinking; but we coast along in a state of mental and moral apathy, squandering the almost spent intellectual capital of our predecessors. We have ceased to be active philosophers.

If any further argument is needed to make us inquire what is the message of this great contemporary philosopher, we should find it in the life that Schweitzer has led. For long before he had formulated his philosophy, he was in fact practising it. As the Master of Balliol College, Oxford, wrote: "This man is extremely remarkable. He must be taken with the utmost seriousness, and it is worth attending to everything that he says."<sup>(2)</sup>

In 1905 at the age of thirty Albert Schweitzer was on the threshold of a brilliant academic and artistic career. Already a doctor both of philosophy and theology (with two more doctorates shortly to follow), about to publish a book on the historical Jesus which put him in the front rank of the world's theologians, he was also an acknowledged authority on Bach, a renowned concert organist, and consulted all over Europe about the construction and renovation of organs. That same year he resigned his university posts at Strasburg to become a medical student, taking his M.D. in 1912. Taxing even his exceptionally robust constitution to the limit, he kept up much of his pastoral, theological and musical work during his second studentship, until in 1913 he renounced them all, and his financial independence, to go and found a hospital in the jungle at Lambaréné in French Equatorial Africa.

In 1917 he was compelled to return to France as an Alsatian prisoner of war and during the following years he underwent two serious operations and a long slow convalescence during which he almost despaired of being able to take up his life-work again. But the assistance of friends, scholars and music lovers from all over Europe enabled him to build up his funds by lectures and recitals, and in February 1924 he was back in Lambaréné.

Then, and again in 1927 when he moved it to a new and larger site, he rebuilt his hospital, acting as his own architect, surveyor, carpenter, engineer, and estate planner. There in the fetid, tropical jungle he has been ever since, with intervals in

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(2) Albert Schweitzer by Oscar Kraus, p. vi.

Europe to recruit health and funds by concerts and lecture tours. His one-man hospital has grown into a large affair with several doctors and nurses; it draws its financial support from many countries and its patients from hundreds of miles around. Now past seventy-five, Schweitzer has practised little surgery for some years but remains, as he has always been, the administrator and inspiration of his foundling. Before he landed on leave in February 1939 a speech of Hitler's, heard on the wireless, convinced him of the imminence of war, and he returned to Africa in the same ship a fortnight later so as to be with his hospital throughout the war. He re-emerged after the war to take part in the Goethe bicentenary celebrations in Europe and America, as he had done in 1932 for the centenary of Goethe's death in the city of Frankfurt, whose Goethe prize he had received.

By great good fortune his medical missionary activities have never completely deprived western civilisation of the intellectual services of one of its greatest living sons. On a special piano, presented by the Paris Bach Society, he has been able to maintain and develop his skill as an interpreter of Bach and at intervals over the years there have appeared from the solitude of the primeval forest books of philosophy, theology and autobiography, mostly written at night after the day's work in the wards in a stifling, enervating climate. Some of his manuscripts bear the marginal inscription "in great weariness".

But perhaps the most important thing about this extraordinarily rich and varied life—and what directs our attention towards his thought—is the motive upon which it has been founded. Others have felt, as Schweitzer feels, the need to atone for the sins of the white races against the coloured and have realised the burden of pain and anxiety which the negro bears. But in a sense Schweitzer's forty years' devotion to his cause was incidental to the main purpose—it was only the manner of expressing an even deeper inner necessity. For throughout his childhood he had been oppressed by the amount of suffering around him.

"It became steadily clearer to me that I had not the inward right to take as a matter of course my happy youth, my good health and my power of work. Out of the depths of my feeling of happiness there grew up gradually within me an understanding of the saying of Jesus that we must not treat our lives as being for ourselves alone. Whoever is spared personal pain

must feel himself called upon to help in diminishing the pain of others. We must all carry our share of the misery which lies upon the world." (1)

Hence sprang the decision at the age of twenty-one to devote himself to the arts and science until he was thirty and thereafter to the direct service of mankind. It is not the decision, which distinguishes Schweitzer—many of us make vows at that age—but the joyful, uncompromising manner of its execution, the dedication of his life to the alleviation of suffering where the need seemed greatest, at the then apparent sacrifice of a most eminent career as a scholar and musician. He had much to give and he gave it all. It was with deep personal feeling that he later wrote:

"Only a person who can find a value in every sort of activity and devote himself to each with full consciousness of duty, has the inward right to take as his object some extraordinary activity instead of that which falls naturally to his lot. Only a person who feels his preference to be a matter of course, not something out of the ordinary, and who has no thought of heroism, but just recognises a duty undertaken with sober enthusiasm, is capable of becoming a spiritual adventurer such as the world needs. There are no heroes of action: only heroes of renunciation and suffering." (2)

The two published volumes\* of the *Philosophy of Civilisation* appeared in 1923, having been largely written during the war years at Lambaréné. A third and fourth volume are projected; the third\*\* is known to be already in manuscript. Of it Schweitzer has said recently, "all my thoughts have been centred on this work, for it would bring my life's work to conclusion." While we await this cornerstone of his philosophical structure, there is much for us to study in what he has already built.

The first essential for a philosophy of civilisation is, of course, to agree on a definition of civilisation. This does not merely consist in the aesthetic and historical elements, nor in the extension of our material knowledge and power.

With prophetic insight, which we have since seen horribly fulfilled in the air over Hiroshima, Schweitzer wrote:

(1) *Memories of Childhood and Youth*, p. 82.

(2) *My Life and Thought*, p. 110.

\* "The Decay and Restoration of Civilisation" and "Civilisation and Ethics."

\*\* "The World-View of Reverence for Life."

"All progress is discovery and invention evolves at last to a fatal result, if we do not maintain control over it through a corresponding progress in our spirituality. Through the power which we gain over the forces of nature, in sinister fashion we get control as human beings over other human beings. . . . Some new invention may make it possible for one man by a single movement to kill not merely a hundred, but ten thousand of his fellow men." (1)

This thirty-year-old judgment is to-day widely accepted by thinking men. Even before the Hydrogen Bomb threatened the extinction of all life, an internationally famous French biologist and physicist wrote:

"Man must be made to understand that the mechanical transformations he has introduced in his environment and his adaption to them will mean either progress or ruin according to whether or not they are accompanied by a correlative improvement in his moral attitude?" (2)

And the greatest living psychologist asks:

"Is it not time to realize that all external changes and technical advances do not touch man's innermost being, and that everything depends on whether or not the man who handles science and techniques is sane and fully responsible?" (3)

Civilisation, therefore, is something more than material or artistic progress; these represent the struggle of mankind in and against nature. But man has also to assert himself among and against his fellow-men. Complete civilisation, then, consists for Schweitzer in "realising all possible progress in discovery and invention and in the arrangement of human society, and seeing that they work together for the spiritual perfecting of individuals which is the real and final object of civilisation". (4)

Civilisation is twofold in its nature; it expresses itself in the supremacy of reason, first, over the forces of nature, and secondly, over the dispositions of men. Progress can be material or ethical, but only in so far as it is ethical does it mark an advance in civilisation. In other words, what really matters in civilisation is the outcome of the struggle between the remains of the animal in us and what is distinctively and uniquely human.

(1) "Civilisation and Ethics", p.273.

(2) Dr. L. du. Noux's "Human Destiny" (1947) p. 139.

(3) C. G. Jung's "The Symbolism of the Spirit" (1949).

(4) Civilisation and Ethics p. 266.

The second fundamental preliminary on which Schweitzer insists is that any real progress depends on our holding an optimistic and affirmative theory of the world and our function in it. We cannot do better than turn to Dr. Seaver for the definition of terms which occur repeatedly in Schweitzer's philosophy:

"Optimistic thought may be defined as a conviction that life is worth living; it asserts the value of existence in general and of one's own existence within it; it seeks to promote and enhance life; it is therefore 'world-and-life-affirmation'. Pessimistic thought is convinced that life is not worth living; it denies any value to existence; it seeks to discourage the impulse to live (though it does not encourage the actual destruction of life); it is therefore 'world-and-life-negation'". (1)

It is obvious that, if we regard our existence as meaningless, the will to progress is extinguished or very greatly impaired. In fact, Schweitzer considers that our present lack of any theory of the universe is the ultimate source of all the catastrophes and miseries of our times.

For, until the end of the 18th century, philosophy had always, with very minor exceptions, been ethical and founded in a world-view (theory of the universe). It had been the forerunner of progress, sign-posting the future. But the Age of Enlightenment, when what we now despise as Rationalism triumphed, was the last to have a firm-based moral philosophy. When, as happened in due course to every preceding world-view, the Rationalist world-view proved itself inadmissible, a calamitous divorce occurred between morality and philosophy. Politics with Napoleon became frankly pragmatical; morality in a sceptical world became expedient. Hegel wrote: "What is reasonable is real, and what is real is reasonable." That is to say, everything serves progress; standards of good and evil are irrelevant and superfluous. "On the night of June 25th 1820, when that sentence was written, our age began, the age which moved on to the (first) world war—and which perhaps some day will end civilization."<sup>(2)</sup> Few of us now would dare disregard this sombre warning, which Schweitzer gave in 1934.

The consequences of Hegel's thought were disastrous for philosophy. Rationalism combined belief in progress with ethical will-to-progress, a concept so fundamental in the thought

(1) "Albert Schweitzer, the Man and his Mind" (1947) p. 256.

(2) *Christian Century*, 21/11/34.

of the time that no one observed the abandonment of ethics in Hegel's theory of imminent progress. Ethics got left behind, while other less balanced intellects led thought away from consideration of the basic principles of life and living into realms of pure speculation. Thought sought, not a valid world-view, but the meaning of Being and the Infinite Will; and, unable to fight through to any conclusion in these speculative exercises, it issued in various forms of pessimism and materialist determinism. It was the age of *realpolitik*, of debased, unbridled nationalism, founded all too often on some historically mendacious national myth. The ethical unit, the individual, was submerged in that abstraction, the public, or its master, the State. What passed for philosophy became merely a history of past philosophies. In all previous philosophy the real had been the ideal, and the ideal had been realisable. Now only the actual was considered real. Philosophy had ceased to lead, and stooped only to serve material and acquisitive ends. We had entered the second Dark Ages, without ideals and therefore without the possibility of a living ethic.\*

The way back from these new Middle Ages will be hard. It will be hard, first, just because it is a way *back*. We have to reunite thought and knowledge, philosophy and ethics, civilisation and a valid world-or-life-view. When, in past history, we have reached similar periods of decadence, there have been fresh races, new to civilisation, to assist the old world to recover her optimism. Now we have reached the boundaries of our world. Urbanisation and industrialism have caused widespread loss of personal and economic freedom and have created a society of never-concentrated minds, spiritually relaxed and incapable of self-collectedness. Specialisation has produced one-sided and incomplete personalities and has thereby reduced the spiritual possibilities of mankind—for spirituality requires the whole man. Men are treated as mere industrial or social units with the inevitable result that the advance to fully developed inhumanity is only a question of time. Over-organisation and fear of public opinion complete the submergence of the individual.

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\*cf. the verdict of another great scholar:—"The intellectuals who have succeeded the priests as the guardians of the higher tradition of Western culture have been strong only in their negative work of criticism and disintegration. They have failed to provide an integrated system of principles and values which could unify modern society, and consequently they have proved unable to resist the non-moral, inhuman and irrational forces which are destroying the humanist no less than the Christian traditions of Western culture." Christopher Dawson's "Religion & Culture" (1948) p. 106.

"The modern man is lost in the mass in a way which is without precedent in history, and this is perhaps the most characteristic trait in him. His diminished concern about his own nature makes him susceptible, to an extent which is almost pathological, to the views which society and its organs have put, ready made, into circulation." (1)

This is the great paradox and problem of our time. By definition civilisation demands free men and only by free men can it be thought out and brought to realisation, first, within themselves and then in their relations with others. "It is only an ethical movement which can rescue us from the slough of barbarism, and the ethical comes into existence only in individuals." (2) Yet never before have man's material circumstances so dwarfed his individuality. And severely as this impedes his search for true civilisation, he aggravates it daily by his own choice. For the convulsions of two world wars have made security appear the paramount virtue and in its pursuit man has rediscovered the fears of his prehistoric ancestors and their antidote—the need to aggregate, the spirit of the herd, the elementary instincts of the horde. In Fascism, Communism, Socialism, the Welfare State, continental and inter-continental alliances, the collective society dominates the individual. In his weariness of suffering man surrenders to the vain hope of material protection, externalises and disindividualises himself, abdicates his humanity.\*

The recovery of civilisation requires that we must face the painful facts of our material environment and reassert the primacy of individual ethical will, founded upon a valid view of life.

(1) "Decay and Restoration of Civilisation" p. 29.

(2) *ibid* p. 73.

\* cf. "It is a well-known fact that the morality of a society as a whole is in inverse ratio to its size; for the more individuals congregate together, the more individual factors become blotted out. This means the decay of morality, which rests entirely upon the moral feeling of the individual, the indispensable condition of which is freedom. . . . Hence the larger the organization, the more are its immorality and blind stupidity inevitable. . . . Our admiration of our great organizations would soon dwindle were we to become aware of the other side of the wonder, namely, the tremendous heaping up and accentuation of all that is primitive in man and the unavoidable disintegration of his individuality."

C. G. Jung's *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (1928) pp. 158.f.