

# APPLICATION AND ASSESSMENT

By C. W. M. GELL

**A**S we suggested in the first of these three articles, Schweitzer's most remarkable characteristic is the extent to which he has practised his own philosophy. He himself wrote:

"Such thinkers as have suited their actions to their ethical way of thinking are the most powerful factors in world history in so far as without them and their beneficial influence the moral and cultural state of mankind would be incomparably more horrible than it is at present."(i)

History will assuredly apply this verdict to Schweitzer. Like his beloved Goethe and a handful of other great men, he has transcended all national or continental boundaries and belongs to humanity as a whole. People of many nations support his hospital, which by thus focussing the humanitarianism of many lands has become an international cultural factor. In a world torn by national hostilities and warring ideologies Schweitzer and his mission are one of the few forces uniting nations around the tattered remnants of our common civilisation. Professor Kraus was, as we have seen, critical of Schweitzer's philosophy, but full of admiration for the man:

"The history of mankind is rich in men who have achieved great things in varied and specialised fields of activity and knowledge. But it was and still is poor in great selfless characters, in men of ethical will, who have served as a beacon for others, lighting up the path for them. Such a man is Albert Schweitzer."(ii)

If, therefore, we would understand how to apply the ethic of reverence for life, we should look first to Schweitzer's own life. The decision to renounce his academic and artistic life, his desire to atone to the coloured races, his recognition of their great physical distress and of the duty of civilisation to meet it, his forty years of service among them on behalf of "the Brotherhood of those who bear the mark of pain"—all this reveals the pattern of the ethical man.

It is not in the broad outlines of his life only, but also in its daily details, that Schweitzer exemplifies the ethic of reverence for life. He cannot explain the mystery of why all life has to live at the expense of other life. But he regards this painful fact as requiring of us the decision only to take life when it is

(i) Quoted by Prof. Kraus in his "Albert Schweitzer" (1944). p. 14.  
(ii) Ibid p. 64-65.

unavoidable—for food or to save other life—and to conduct ourselves towards all other life as one who owes it a debt for the lives we have had to end.

“However seriously man undertakes to abstain from killing or damaging, he cannot entirely avoid it. He is under the law of necessity, which compels him to kill and to damage both with and without his knowledge. In many ways it may happen that by slavish adherence to the commandment not to kill, compassion is less served than by breaking it. When the suffering of a living creature cannot be alleviated, it is more ethical to end its life by killing it mercifully than it is to stand aloof. And again and again we see ourselves placed under the necessity of saving one living creature by destroying or damaging another.”(i)

But man can avoid thoughtlessness towards life. Thus we see Schweitzer on tropical nights toiling over the third volume of his philosophy in a stuffy room with the windows shut, lest insects enter and die round his lamp with singed wings—laboriously transplanting oil-palms which he had just freed from strangling creepers, rather than fell them to clear his site more easily—lifting toads from the holes before lowering in the piles, moving worms from the tarred roadway, feeding thirsty ants on the floor before beginning his own meal, or refusing to kill the beetle which had just ruined a raincoat because he is a trespasser in its country. Only such a man has the right to say:

“The farmer who has mown down a thousand flowers in his meadow to feed his cows, must be careful on his way home not to strike off in heedless pastime the head of a single flower by the roadside, for he thereby commits a wrong against life without being under the pressure of necessity.”(i)

It is an exacting ethic and Schweitzer applies it relentlessly. Repeatedly he warns against compromise, against promoting the lesser of two evils into something therefore good. Ethics are never relative. One evil is not *better* than another; it remains evil, even if necessity forces us to prefer it to a greater evil. We must never shirk the responsibility for an act of injury to life, however small and however great the other injuries it may avert. “The good conscience is an invention of the devil.”

(i) Indian Thought and Its Development p. 83.

(ii) Civilisation and Ethics p. 252.

If we meet this dilemma in our relation to nature and the animal world, we meet it far more urgently in every contact with our fellow-men. For the code of social morality, based as it must be on such conceptions as Bentham's "greatest happiness of the greatest number" or Rousseau's General Will, is not ethical but expedient. The individual must often be sacrificed to some social purpose. Thus, and the distinction is no mere quibble but one on which our whole moral integrity depends, what society will often regard as a good and honourable action, the ethic of reverence for life considers as a distressing but necessary evil. However essential, it remains something bad in itself, and he who performs it must consciously take the responsibility for it. Ethics and necessity should never come to terms. "Individual ethics without social ethics are imperfect, but they can be very profound and full of vitality. Social ethics without individual ethics are like a limb with a tourniquet round it, into which life no longer flows. They become so impoverished that they really cease to be ethics at all. The essence of humanity consists in individuals never allowing themselves to think impersonally in terms of expediency as does society, or to sacrifice individual existences in order to attain their object."(i)

It is a justifiable criticism here that Schweitzer does not sufficiently consider the question of value. He admits that in practice we are often compelled to choose between one life and another, but he gives us no criterion to guide our choice. The present writer believes that the omission is deliberate\*. Once we attempt a scale of values, we far too readily justify expediency or selfishness, as (in religion) anger and hatred took refuge in the euphemism of righteous indignation. Rather than give us any excuse for avoiding the issues, the ethic of reverence for life forces upon us personal responsibility for evaluating the ethical and expedient causes involved in each decision and obliges us to accept responsibility for its consequences.

Turning to the problems of political philosophy, the relations between the individual, society and the state, we must again recall what civilization really is. It is not the perfecting of laws or the readjusting of social and economic relationships, however these improvements may advance equity. Men will not be made moral by such alterations of external circumstances—this fallacy is the basis of the Communist heresy. At best

(i) Ibid p. 157.

\* This is in fact the case cf. *My Life and Thought* pp. 270-272.

there may be removed some of the hindrances to ethical progress; although at present much reform is having the opposite effect by increasing the area of state and social interference, with its limited and expedient morality, at the expense of individual freedom. Again and again Schweitzer insists that the ethical only comes into existence in free individuals. "The essence of civilisation consists in this, that the reverence for life which is my will-to-live struggling for recognition does get stronger and stronger in individuals and mankind."(i) That alone is progress in civilisation.

Certainly, therefore, the ethic of reverence for life is opposed to the unbounded increase in state interference and control which is the dominant feature of the contemporary world. But its individualism is not unlicensed. It is required that the individual will of his own free decision place his wealth and possessions at the service of the community. He who possesses little can give at least of his labour and leisure to some service for his fellows. The happy, the healthy, the gifted, the successful, the industrious—from each is due their debt to humanity for their especial good fortune. Reverence for life is an inexorable creditor ceaselessly demanding that we shall, as men, give ourselves to other men who need help, sympathy, love. There is no planned blue-print for charity (in its widest sense); we must each serve as we can and the variety of our methods and contributions will eventually match the intricate pattern of the demand for humanitarianism. Reverence for life pares off the sterile material ideology from a great phrase and renews its meaning: "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need."

The emphasis must, therefore, be on the increase of individual morality based on the principle of reverence for life. Church, state and society must cease to claim authority in their own right, and become capable of development as reflections of the progress of their members towards spiritual integrity and independence.

"We need a society, a faith and a church that respect and exalt the individual, calling forth all the powers of ethical thought and devotion that are innate within him. Churches for the most part tend to decry unhampered thinking."(i)

Bertrand Russell and others have objected that it has been proved impracticable for the under-privileged to wait passively

(i) Civilization and Ethics p. 266.

(ii) Spectator 18.2.49.

for the moral perfecting of the over-privileged. This is fair criticism and it may be that in the fourth volume of his philosophy Schweitzer will examine if and when the state should properly interfere. But in emphasising the individualism of true ethics Schweitzer has seized on an important truth which the world to-day too lightly disregards. The materialist ethics of socialism and its kindred creeds show an appalling lack of imagination in approaching the wealth and variety of human psychology. Their vision blinded by a sense of injustice or the desire for security, they rely on external, social solutions which suppress individual liberty and lead to dictatorship or the dominance of the collective state. Some such temporary diminution of human rights may be necessary to correct particular evils; the great heresy of the materialist creeds is to believe that collectivism is good in itself.

The fourth volume of Schweitzer's philosophy is to be called "The Civilised State." We do not know quite what ground it will cover but we may be sure that the founder and first President of Czecho-Slovakia has stated its basic principles in the following passage:

"No state or policy can prosper unless the groundwork be moral. As St. Paul wrote at the beginning of the fourth chapter of the second Epistle to the Corinthians: 'therefore, seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy we faint not; but have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.' This is the programme of democracy *sub specie aeternitatis*. The ethical basis of all politics is humanity, and humanity is an international programme. It is a new word for the old love of our fellow-men."(i)

## II

We have already briefly noticed in the previous article that Schweitzer's philosophy contains three antinomies, which do not endear it to the logicians, but which, in the sense that it can thereby more fully meet the lack of logic we find in nature, give it a peculiar strength and stability. For while it is impossible to derive ethics naturally from pantheism and monism, theism and dualism leave unresolved the eternal philosophical

(i) Thomas Masaryk's "The Making of a State", last chapter.

mystery of *unde malum*. Schweitzer's ethical mysticism, as Dr. Seaver remarks, remains a paradox for thought; ethically it leans towards theism and dualism, mystically towards pantheism and monism. Again and again Schweitzer comes back to the problem of the conflict between God as we know Him within and the knowledge of Him which we derive from the natural world. In one of his many vivid similes he likens the God of Love (ethical will-to-live) to the scientifically inexplicable Gulf Stream moving within the Ocean of the enigmatic God of the forces of the universe (Universal will-to-live)—“One with Him and yet so totally different.”(i) Which brings us to the third of the antinomies, the agnosticism or pessimism of Schweitzer's knowledge and the optimism of his willing. It is in every way typical of him that he should give priority to the active impulse.

“I came gradually to rest content in the thought that there is only one thing that we can understand about the problem, and that is that each of us has to go his own way, but as one who means to help to bring about deliverance.”(ii)

In Schweitzer's view of the universe as compounded of creative, destructive and moral forces, we can see the same classification that underlies the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. Nor is this the only affinity of his thought with that of the East. At first sight reverence for life appears to have much in common with the Hindu and Jain doctrine of *ahimsa* and with Buddhist compassion. In fact Schweitzer's ethic is a development from these oriental foundations; for *ahimsa* is an almost purely negative concept ‘thou shalt neither kill nor hurt’) and compassion (as Schweitzer thinks, not quite justly) is limited to sympathy with the suffering. The complete ethic is characterised by fellowship in suffering and joy, in contemplation and in action; compassion must be practised or it becomes sterile. Schweitzer would certainly wish his philosophy to endorse the words of Jesus “I am come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly.”

In other respects, too, his philosophy is a synthesis between the thought of East and West. For the Oneness of all life—a predominantly Eastern conception—is as fundamental to his thought as the Western insistence on the intrinsic value of man as a person. There is also the close interlocking of thought and activity in his ethic, which is akin to the truth contained

(i) Christianity and the Religions of the World p. 78.

(ii) My Life and Thought p. 280.

in the *shakti* or male-female symbolism of the Indians. Where the West has lived too complacently in the unreflective activity of the Round of Existence and the East has sought to escape from the world in meditative self-perfecting, Schweitzer has fused the two approaches in ethical mysticism, which combines Wisdom and Method. In China they lived separately, the Wisdom as Tao and the Confucian Method; they meet and merge in the Buddha and in Schweitzer, though with slightly differing emphasis.\*

But, although Eastern thought has left its mark on Schweitzer, he remains essentially of the life-affirming West. As he himself wrote of St. Paul, with whom he is so much in sympathy, Schweitzer is a man of profound and admirable humanity. His mysticism does not seek to renounce the world, but to find inner freedom from it. For much as he owes to the East, he owes more to the tradition of the West: to Jesus for his selfless ethic of love and his demonstration of the potency of spiritual force: to St. Paul for the vindication of the supremacy of thought in religion: to Goethe (and through him to Spinoza and back to the Stoics) for a philosophy of nature and for the spiritual value of manual work: to Kant for the moral imperative: to Bach for his artistic integration of the sacred and the secular and reticence about one's ultimate and inmost belief: and to all these in some degree for the mystical approach to life.

### III

Since Schweitzer gave us the first two volumes of his philosophy in 1923, we have passed through the unlamented inter-war years and a second World War into the explosive uneasiness of the Cold War. Who can say that civilisation has survived or will survive. One of the few places where it can still be found is among the primitive Africans in the jungle at Lambaré. We have all too little time before barbarism finally engulfs us in which to learn from that example that, whatever the outward circumstances, the springs of true civilisation lie within.

In his latest published comment, Schweitzer says:

"We are at the beginning of the end of the human race. The question before it is whether it will use for beneficial purposes or for purposes of destruction the powers which modern

\* There is a marked parallel between Gautama and Schweitzer—both in the circumstances of their times, when religion had ceased to be a living faith and philosophy had become a dialectical exercise; and in their attack upon these common evils by their insistence on ethics as the means of salvation, while refusing to be drawn into speculative controversy.

science has placed in its hands. So long as its capacity for destruction was limited, it was possible to hope that reason would set a limit to disaster. Such an illusion is impossible to-day, when its power is illimitable. Our only hope is that the Spirit of God will strive with the spirit of the world and will prevail.

This it will only do when it has won its victory over that spirit in our hearts. Nothing can be achieved without inwardness."\*

(This is the last of three articles on the life and thought of Albert Schweitzer—Ed.).

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\*Epilogue by Dr. Schweitzer to "The Theology of Albert Schweitzer" by E. N. Mozley, published October 1950 and

cf. Christopher Dawson's very similar verdict in "Religion and Culture" pp. 215-218.

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