

# **Albert Schweitzer and Ethical Mysticism**

## **Schweitzer the Moral Philosopher**

Ph.D. in Philosophy (University of Strasbourg), 1899

Major works:

*Die Religionsphilosophie Kants von der Kritik der Reinen Vernunft bis zur Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft.* (Freiburg, 1899)

-Schweitzer's dissertation, published as *The Essence of Faith: Philosophy of Religion*. Translated and edited by Kurt F. Leidecker. New York: Philosophical Library, 1966.

*The Philosophy of Civilization.* Translated by C.T.Campion. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1987.

-contains two volumes: *The Decay and Restoration of Civilization*, and *Civilization and Ethics*, both originally published in 1923.

*Indian Thought and its Development.* Translated by Mrs. Charles E.B. Russell. London: Adam & Charles Black, 1951.

-originally published in 1935.

## **Schweitzer the Biblical Scholar / Theologian**

Licentiate in Theology, 1900

Major works:

*The Quest for the Historical Jesus.* Translated by W. Montgomery, J.R. Coates, Susan Cupitt, and John Bowden. Edited by John Bowden. Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2001.

- This is the Schweitzer's second and revised edition, originally published in 1913. (The first edition was published in 1906.)

*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle.* Translated by William Montgomery. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

- Originally published in 1930.

*The Kingdom Of God and Primitive Christianity.* Translated by L.A. Garrard. Edited by Ulrich Neuenschwander New York: Seabury Press, 1968.

- The substance of the book was written in 1951-1952.

### **Schweitzer the Musicologist / Musician**

Schweitzer was an authority in organ construction and a world-renowned concert organist.

Major Work:

*Deutsche und Französische Orgelbaukunst und Orgelkunst* (Leipzig: Bretkopf und Hartel, 1906).

Schweitzer was an authority on the composer Johann Sebastian Bach.

Major Works:

*J.S. Bach*. Translated by Ernest Newman. (New York: Macmillan), 1950.

- Originally published in French in 1905.
- Revised and expanded into two volumes and published in German in 1908.

*Johann Sebastian Bach. Complete Organ Works: A Critico-Practical Edition in Eight Volumes*. Edited by Charles-Marie Widor, Albert Schweitzer, and Edouard Nies-Berger. New York: G. Schirmer, 1954.

- The first two volumes were published in 1912.

### **Schweitzer the Physician / Philanthropist**

M.D. 1913.

Dissertation:

*A Psychiatric Study of Jesus*, trans. Charles R. Joy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1948).

- Schweitzer's dissertation published in 1913

Established and governed a hospital at Lambarene, Gabon (formerly French Equatorial Africa) from in 1913 until his death in 1965.

Received Nobel Peace Prize for 1952.

### **Other important sources for understanding Schweitzer's moral philosophy**

*Memoirs of Childhood and Youth.* Translated by Kurt Bergel and Alice R. Bergel.  
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997.  
-originally published in 1924.

*Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography.* Translated by Antje Bultmann Lemke.  
Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.  
-originally published in 1931.

### **Influences on the life and thought of Albert Schweitzer**

Kant

Jesus of Nazareth

St. Paul

J.S. Bach

Goethe

Vedanta, Buddhism, and especially Jainism

### **Summary of Schweitzer's 'Reverence for Life' Ethical Mysticism**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer recognized that **western civilization was in crisis - an ethical crisis.**

**The modern crisis of ethics is rooted in a crisis of worldview.**

“This stunting of our . . . ethics has its cause in the character of our world-view, in regard to which we have been going through a crisis since the middle of the nineteenth century. It is no longer possible for us to arrive at a conception of the universe in which the meaning of the existence of men and of mankind can be recognized, and in which, therefore, there are also contained the ideals which flow from a thoughtful world- and life- affirmation and from ethical volition.”

**The problem of ethics according to Schweitzer:**

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**Ethics is in crisis because philosophy failed to provide a worldview sufficient for ethics.**

“The task before philosophy was to change the world- and life- affirmation which arose from enthusiasm over the attainments of discovery and invention into a deeper, inner world- and life- affirmation arising out of thought about the universe and the life of man, and on that foundation to build up an ethical system. But philosophy could do neither.”

“By its belief in an optimistic-ethical philosophy the modern age became capable of a mighty advance towards civilization. But as its thought has not been able to show this philosophy to be grounded in the nature of things, we have sunk, consciously and unconsciously, into a condition in which we have no world-view at all, a condition of pessimism, too, and of absence of all ethical conviction, so that we are at the point of complete ruin.”

**Philosophy’s failure produced inhumane thoughts and ‘pseudo-ethics’.**

“An inexorable development of thought, then, brings it about that the philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, either advances to a supra-ethical world-view, or lives among ethical ruins. . . . Everywhere there grows up an unethical conception of civilization. The masses reconcile themselves in an incomprehensible way to the theory of the relativity of all ethical standards and to thoughts of inhumanity.”

“Ethics go only so far as humanity, humanity meaning consideration for the existence and the happiness of individual human beings. Where humanity ends, pseudo-ethics begin.”

**Major moral philosophers in modern philosophy have also recognized a worldview crisis in ethics.**

Friedrich Nietzsche

Anscombe, G.E.M. "Modern Moral Philosophy" *Philosophy* 33, No. 1 (January 1958)

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: 1981)

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

**Basil Mitchell on "the crisis of the traditional ethical consciousness":**

"[The 'traditional consciousness' of thoughtful people] tells them that certain sorts of conduct are wrong in all, or almost all, circumstances; that it is of supreme importance that they as individuals should become and remain certain sorts of people and that the society to which they belong should exemplify certain standards; and that these moral demands upon them are not the expression simply of choices made by them or by their society, but are in some important sense objective and categorical. And they are faced with the question what view of man and what conception of man's place in the universe can make sense of such a conscience; and whether, if no acceptable rationale for it is on offer, they should regard it as obsolete and give it up."

Basil Mitchell, *Morality: Religious and Secular* (Oxford University Press, 1980) 78.

[As I See it -What is Needed:

A focus on character ethics

A worldview which will provide Character Ethics with:

*\*an experienced basis of moral solidarity* that is more than subjective emotion or sentiment – whether of an individual or a group

*\*an experienced basis of moral motivation* that is based in more than subjective emotion or sentiment – whether of an individual or a group

An account of ethics / a worldview that is one of 'Ethical Mysticism'

- rather than Aristotelian metaphysical biology
- rather than (Thomistic, etc.) theism
- rather than "ethics naturalized"

]

Albert Schweitzer offered **an ethical-mystical worldview that can ground virtue ethics.**

“[Schweitzer] affirms the sacredness of life in its diversity and unity, linking ethics to spirituality without religious dogma. And anticipating the contemporary renaissance of virtue ethics, he makes ideals of character fundamental while celebrating individualism and wide tolerance in applying those ideals. Reverence for life emerges from the will to live present in each of us, widens by affirming our kinship with other life, and unfolds in a moral optimism of self-realization through service to others and the pursuit of excellence.”

Martin, Mike W. *Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life: Ethical Idealism and Self-Realization* (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007).

Schweitzer held that what is needed is an **‘optimistic-ethical’ worldview**.

“The task before our generation is to strive with deepened thought to reach a truer and more valuable world-view, and thus to bring to an end our living on and without any philosophy of life at all.”

“The one serviceable worldview is the optimistic-ethical. Its renewal is a duty incumbent upon us.”

An ethical **worldview must be grounded within the ‘life-view’** of individuals – **not life-view grounded in worldview.**

“Is it really the case that life-view is towed along by world-view, and when the latter can no longer be kept afloat must sink with it into the depths? Necessity bids us cut the tow-rope and try to let life-view continue its voyage independently. . . . While people still acted as though their life-view were taken from their world-view, the relationship between the two was really just the opposite, for their world-view was formed from their life-view.”

The optimistic-ethical worldview must be **grounded in thought**.

“The restoration of our [optimistic-ethical] worldview can only come about as a result of inexorable truth-loving and recklessly courageous thought. Such thinking alone is mature enough to learn by experience how the rational, when it thinks itself out to a conclusion, passes necessarily over into the non-rational. World- and life- affirmation and ethics are non-rational. They are not justified by any corresponding knowledge of the nature of the world, but are the disposition in which, through the inner compulsion of our will-to-live, we determine our relation to the world.”

“Rational thought which thinks itself out arrives at something non-rational and subjective which is a necessity of thought, namely the ethical affirmation of world and life.”

### **The significance of Friedrich Nietzsche:**

“Nietzsche . . . shows that all ethics rest upon the morals of the individual. The question about the essential nature of good and evil which was generally accepted as settled, he puts forward again in elemental fashion. The truth that ethics in their real nature are a process of self-perfecting shines out in his works . . . Hence his place is in the first rank of the ethical thinkers of mankind.”

“Nietzsche’s criticism means that only that system of ethics deserves to be accepted which springs from independent reflection on the meaning of life.”

### **The ‘elemental’ life-view truth: “I am ‘will to live’”.**

“True philosophy must start from the most immediate and comprehensive fact of consciousness, which says: ‘I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live.’ This is not an ingenious dogmatic formula. Day by day, hour by hour, I live and move in it. At every moment of reflection it stands fresh before me.”

### **One must seek to know / understand one’s ‘will to live’.**

“It is our destiny to live by means of convictions which an inward necessity makes a part of our thought. In the old rationalism reason undertook to investigate the world. In the new [rationalism] it has to take as its task the attaining to clarity about the will-to-live which is in us. The will-to-live which tries to know the world is a shipwrecked castaway; the will-to-live which gets to know itself is a bold mariner.”

“The knowledge of the will to live is direct, and takes me back to the mysterious movement of life as it is in itself.”

### **‘Will-to-live’ expresses itself in ‘reverence for life’.**

“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.”

One is **“compelled” to reverence their own individual ‘will-to-live’.**

One is **“compelled” to reverence the ‘will-to-live’ of other / all living beings.**

The ‘will to live’ strives for **perfection / self-realization.**

“The highest knowledge, then, is to know that I must be true to the will-to-live. It is this knowledge that hands me the compass for the voyage I have to make in the night without the aid of a chart. To live out one’s life in the direction of its course, to raise it to higher power, and to ennoble it is natural. Every depreciation of the will-to-live is an act of insincerity towards myself, or a symptom of unhealthiness.”

“The essential nature of the will-to-live is determination to live itself to the full. It carries within it the impulse to realize itself in the highest possible perfection.”

**Ethics is ‘self-perfection’.**

“Ethics is the activity of man directed to secure the inner perfection of his own personality.”

**‘Self-perfection’ includes ‘self-devotion’ to others.**

“The ethics of sincerity towards myself passes imperceptibly into that of devotion to others. . . . It is not from kindness to others that I am gentle, peaceable, forbearing and friendly, but because by such behavior I prove my own profoundest self-realization to be true. Reverence for life which I apply to my own existence, and reverence for life which keeps me in a temper of devotion to other existence than my own, interpenetrate each other.”

“The ideal of self-perfecting through self-devotion, which we experience as the mysterious element within us, is after all a natural manifestation of the will-to-live.

The ego, which has reached the highest height of willing and representing enlarges itself by over-lapping other human existence. Self-devotion is, therefore, not a surrender of the self, but a manifestation of its expansion. The man who analyzes himself more deeply learns by experience that the highest life-affirmation comes about, not by natural will-to-live simply rising to will-to-power, but by its ‘expanding’.”



**‘Self-devotion’ to others is devotion to ‘Being’.**

“When it comes to clearness about itself, the will-to-live knows that it is dependent upon itself alone. . . . It follows from an inner necessity, and is sufficient for itself. By its means my existence joins in pursuing the aims of the mysterious universal will of which I am a manifestation. . . . With consciousness and with volition I devote myself to Being. I become of service to the ideas which it thinks out in me; I become imaginative force like that which works mysteriously in nature, and thus I give my existence a meaning from within outwards.”

“Reverence for life means to be in the grasp of the infinite, inexplicable, forward-urging Will in which all Being is grounded. “

**Devotion to ‘Being’ is ethical mysticism.**

“Self-perfecting can consist of nothing but man coming into his true relationship to the Being that is in him and outside him. His natural, outward connection with Being he strives to change into a spiritual, inward devotion, letting his passive and active relation to things be determined by this devotion.”

“The ethic of self-perfecting is in inmost connection with mysticism. Its own destiny is decided in that of mysticism. Thinking out the ethic of self-perfecting means nothing else than seeking to found ethics on mysticism. Mysticism, on its side, is a valuable world-and life-view only in proportion as it is ethical.”

**The necessity of ethical mysticism:**

“The ethic which is to satisfy thought must be born of mysticism. All profound philosophy, all deep religion, are ultimately a struggle for an ethical mysticism and mystical ethics. . . . Our great mistake, however, is thinking that without mysticism we can reach an ethical world- and life- view, which shall satisfy thought.”

**Devotion to ‘Being’ is a devotion to the manifestations of Being that is “alive”.**

“The hitherto accepted mysticism leads into the supra-ethical because it is abstract. Abstraction is the death of ethics, for ethics are a living relationship to life. We must therefore abandon abstract mysticism, and turn to mysticism which is alive.”

“The Essence of Being, the Absolute, The Spirit of the Universe, and all similar expressions denote nothing actual, but something conceived in abstractions

which is for that reason absolutely unimaginable. The only reality is the Being which manifests itself in phenomena.”

“Reality knows nothing about the individual being able to enter into a connection with the totality of Being. As it knows of no Being except that which manifests itself in the existence of individual beings, so also it knows of no relations except those of one individual being to another.”

“There is no Essence of Being, but only infinite Being in infinite manifestations. It is only through the manifestations of Being, and only through those with which I enter into relations, that my being has any intercourse with infinite Being. The devotion of my being to infinite Being means devotion of my being to all the manifestations of Being which need my devotion, and to which I am able to devote myself.”

### **Reverence for Life IS Ethical Mysticism.**

“Rational thinking which is free from assumptions ends therefore in mysticism.  
*To relate oneself in the spirit of reverence for life to the multiform manifestations of the will-to-live which together constitute the world is ethical mysticism.*

### **Reverence for life produces ethical idealism.**

“All living piety flows from reverence for life and the compulsion towards ideals which is given in it.”

### **Ethical ideals are connected with virtues in Schweitzer’s ethics.**

“Each ideal of character is associated with a virtue that contributes moral guidance. For example, authenticity (sincerity with ourselves) requires us to be honest with ourselves and to develop our talents and interests. . . . To guide our decisions by reverence for life is to be guided by all these more specific ideals, as they are unified within an ethics of self-realization and nature-centered spirituality. (Martin, 18)

### **Reverence for life provides ‘the fundamental principle of morality’.**

“Ethics are nothing but reverence for life. That is what gives me the fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, promoting, and enhancing life, and that destroying, injuring, and limiting life are evil. . . . From an inner necessity, I exert myself in producing values and practicing ethics in the world and on the world though I do not understand the meaning of the world.”

“It is, then, on the basic principle of the moral that the attention of thought has to be fixed. The mere giving of a list of virtues and duties is like striking notes at random on the piano and thinking it is music.”

**Reverence for life provides ‘the fundamental commandment of ethics’.**

“The fundamental commandment of ethics, then, is that we cause no suffering to any living creature, not even the lowest, unless it is to effect some necessary protection for ourselves, and that we be ready to undertake, whenever we can, positive action for the benefit of other creatures.”

**Reverence for life and Jesus of Nazareth:**

“Schweitzer regards Jesus as the premier spiritual exemplar and morally heroic human being. . . . Jesus was able to convey an ethics of love with extraordinary purity because he believed he was bringing to pass the Kingdom of God through a singular act of moral purification. Jesus’ eschatological views were false; his self-sacrifice did not bring about the end of this world in the way that he thought it would. Yet, ironically, his belief that the world was ending enabled him to offer the most powerful statement ever made of love as an ideal.” (Martin, 10)

**Reverence for life and Jesus of Nazareth’s command to love:**

“The ethics of reverence for life is nothing but Jesus’ great commandment to love—a commandment that is reached by thinking; religion and thinking meet in the mysticism of belonging to God through love.”

“Reverence for life is the Christian love—universal and necessary to be thought about—that deals with reality.”

Quoted in Ara Paul Barsam, *Reverence for Life: Albert Schweitzer’s Great Contribution to Ethical Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2008) 23.

= 'myth' function of Schweitzers' metaphysics / mysticism (see Hick)  
= ethical, 'real-world and real-people mysticism'

Schweitzer was concerned about the powerlessness of "superficial ethical principles" ungrounded in reason or experience. There is the need for profound ethical principles grounded in ' "required by" experience and reason. Without ethical mysticism, 'reverence for life' is merely another phrase, superficial principle, moral theory that is powerless to effect ethical action in individuals or community. One must "learn" as a matter of spiritual character formation = both insight, illumination-enlightenment and practice . 'conversion.'

Gives an ethic that is something less than an attainable absolute and something more than a regulative ideal.

People want to live-survive

More than live-survive but live-well being  
= 'prosper'

= 'meaningful'

need a synoptic vision

need an intensive-depth vision

➤ mysticism

ethical mysticism

ontic and ethical solidarity > moral connections - relations

➤ moral sentiments

➤ > moral virtues

➤ > moral actions

If a spiritual – transcendence worldview is possibly justifiable, it will be mystical – and if mystical, then it will be non-abstract and ethical

The ultimate choice is between positivism -emotivism and mysticism in worldview

In mysticism the choice is between abstract, submergence, identity mysticism and reverence for life ethical mysticism

Schweitzer's ethical mysticism worldview ultimately depends upon imagination-intuition  
= an ethical. Existential 'necessity' vs. a necessity of thought

That Schweitzer's views were conditioned by / a product of childhood experiences of compassion is not much of a reductive argument to prove that he 'perceived' something that is not there, because the same reductionism applies also to the skeptic: his negative experiences / conditioning conditions his positivism and causes an inability to perceive what is there

If one wishes to embrace Schweitzer's ethics but not his worldview of ethical mysticism. one leaves ethics ungrounded, arbitrary, and a matter of superficial-arbitrary principles. Ethical mysticism is a rationally possible account of ethical obligation and to some (in a position to know?) the experientially (by enlightenment / realization [see and compare with Alan Watts]) ground of ethics.

Why does one choose as one does? By some kind of inner 'necessity.' And does one think that other should choose likewise – does one 'universalize' (Kant) this worldview?