Albert Schweitzer and man’s relationship with animals

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‘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 “reverence for life.” The iron door had yielded. The path through the thicket became visible.’

Introduction

Whatever Schweitzer may have said in his autobiography, translated from which the above quotation is taken, this sudden insight ‘unforeseen and unsought’ should be seen in the context of a life which, from the very earliest days, saw the importance, the delight, the wonder, of life all around. And yet this was a life which, at the time, was deeply troubled by suffering, whether it be in the trenches of the first world war, the patients for whom he cared in the African forest or the animals injured and killed around him, even the parasites he was killing to cure those very patients.

Here was a man who, though a professor in theology and philosophy, a renowned organist and master organ builder, saw suffering around him and acted by giving up his academic life to study for a medical degree in order to devote his life to the people of what he later came to call ‘the primeval forest’. Much has been written regarding Schweitzer, his motivation and his thought. But perhaps the best way of delving into his thought world is through his own numerous writings. While he summarises much in his text ‘Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography’, the context of his views on animal and human suffering and worth is perhaps best evaluated though his more descriptive texts ‘Memoirs of Childhood and Youth’ ‘On the Edge of the Primeval Forest’ together with his sermons on the subject from his early years in Strasbourg and later addresses in Africa and elsewhere.

As a child, long before his formal theological or philosophical education began, Schweitzer remembers his concern that family prayers seemed to exclude the animal kingdom ‘It was wholly unreasonable to me – this was even before I had gone to school – that in my evening devotions I should pray only for men. So when my mother had prayed with me and kissed me goodnight, I used secretly to add another prayer which I had myself composed for all living creatures. It ran like this: ‘Dear God, guard and bless everything that breathes; keep it form evil and give it quiet sleep.’ In his Memoirs from Childhood and Youth Schweitzer also remembers that ‘as long as I can remember, I have suffered because of the great misery I saw in the world….I used to suffer particularly because the poor animals must endure so much pain and want. The sight of an old limping horse being dragged along by one man while another man struck him with a stick…being driven to the Colmar slaughterhouse, tortured me for weeks.’ It should be said, though, that the writing of Memoirs of Childhood and Youth was prompted in 1923
by a visit to Schweitzer’s friend the psychoanalyst Oskar Pfister. As Schweitzer notes ‘In the early summer of 1923, while travelling across Switzerland…I had to wait two hours in Zurich and went to visit [Dr Pfister]. He relieved my thirst and gave me an opportunity to… rest my weary body. But he at the same time made me narrate to him, just as they came into my mind, some incidents of my childhood, that he might make use of them in a young people’s magazine.’ Thus we see that what Schweitzer recalled may well be influenced by his later musings on the importance of reverence for all life. Nevertheless these stories and recollections strongly suggest that from a young child, Schweitzer was concerned for more than merely mankind’s interests.

In the same volume Schweitzer writes of his concern, at age seven or eight, when friends in his village went to fire stones with slings at song birds. The birds were saved by the bell, that of the passiontide bells of the local church which, as Schweitzer says ‘rang into my heart the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ at which he scared the birds away.’ Schweitzer was similarly affected by instances with his pet dog Phylax which he would ‘try to master with blows’ when the postman came to the door but later ‘…blamed myself for striking him.’ The same happened with other animals from a trotting horse he overworked, a vicious neighbour’s dog he hit once with a whip, to the ‘horror of fishing’.

Note that Schweitzer is concerned not only for the fish but their bait also: ‘My horror at the mistreatment of the impaled worms and at the tearing of the mouths of the fishes when they were caught, made it impossible for me to continue.’ Overall Schweitzer tells us that ‘out of such heart-breaking experiences that often shamed me there slowly arose in me the unshakable conviction that we had the right to bring pain and death to another being only in case of inescapable necessity and that all of us must feel the horror that lies in thoughtless torturing and killing.’ Schweitzer suggests that his concept of ‘reverence for life’ came out of the blue, as we saw in the quotation at the beginning of this essay while others suggest that it was his education and research in theology and philosophy that led him to this ethical stance. It would appear from his early writings that this respect for all living things started early in life in the rural setting of Günsbach, Alsace.

This circle of concern extended to all living things and required Schweitzer, so he considered, to repay something to the world of what he had taken out. ‘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.’ Thus Schweitzer decided that ‘while still a student I resolved to devote my life until I was thirty to the office of preacher, to science and to music. If by the time I should have done what I hoped in science and music, I would take a path of immediate service to my fellow man.’ Thus at the age of thirty one we find Schweitzer beginning his studies in medicine ready for a life of medical service in what we now call the third world.

In reading Schweitzer’s autobiographical volumes, the next encounter with animals comes as he enters, by boat, the river system that was to be his working environment for the rest of his life, the branches of the Ogowe river and its maze of lakes in Gabon, Central Africa and the mission hospital he set up at Lambarene deep in its heart. ‘River and forest … who can describe the first impression they make? We seemed to be
dreaming ... a heron flies heavily up and then settles on a dead tree-trunk; white birds and blue birds skim over the water, and high in the air a pair of ospreys circle. Then – yes, there can be no mistake about it! – from the branch of a palm there hang and swing – two monkey tails. Now the owners of the tails are visible. We really are in Africa! The point of noting this appreciation of the wildlife around him right at the start of his African sojourn is that it continued That first heron was one such creature which, over Schweitzer’s time in Africa, was gradually hunted almost to extinction by those keen to ship their feathers to Europe. ‘Unfortunately there are still hunters who pursue the white heron...whose feathers are most sought after in Europe for hat ornaments...more and more these birds are withdrawing to remote and inaccessible stretches of water...they are hardly ever seen now on the river.’

From the hippopotamus that teemed in the rivers and who accompanied Schweitzer as he had his revelatory understanding that the reverence of life was key to his ethical world, to the ants which swarmed over the grounds of the hospital, Schweitzer saw every living thing as having value. ‘Schweitzer’s sense of comradeship extends to the humblest of creatures. I was sitting beside him just before dusk one day in Lambarene, two small antelopes ...playing before him and two puppies ...playing behind, when I notices a black ant crawling up the white collar of his shirt. Without thinking I reached up to brush it off. “no no!” said he, “that’s my ant!” Noel Gillespie...who went out to help Schweitzer....was putting on his raincoat one day when he saw a beetle which had been eating holes in the coat and ruining it....fall to the ground. He started to step on it when he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard Schweitzer say “Gently Noel! Remember you are a guest in its country.”

This sense of reverence even extended to microbial pathogens causing disease in the very patients Schweitzer was treating. He writes; ‘I rejoice over the new remedies for sleeping-sickness, which enable me to preserve life, whereas I had previously to watch a painful disease. But every time I have under the microscope the germs which cause the disease, I cannot but reflect that I have to sacrifice this life in order to save other life.’ Immediately beforehand in the epilogue to his autobiography My Life and Thought, from whence that quotation is taken, Schweitzer notes ‘To the man who is truly ethical all life is sacred, including that which, from the human point of view, seems lower in scale. He makes distinctions only as each case comes before him and under the pressure of necessity, as, for example, when it falls on him to decide which of the two lives he must sacrifice in order to preserve the other. But all through this series of decisions he is conscious of acting on subjective grounds and arbitrarily, and knows that he bears the responsibility for the life which is sacrificed.’

Later he writes ‘If he has been touched by the ethic of Reverence for Life, he injures and destroys life only under a necessity which he cannot avoid, and never from thoughtlessness. So far as he is a free man he uses every opportunity of tasting the blessedness of being able to assist life and avert from its suffering and destruction.’ In undertaking new building work in the hospital, Schweitzer was careful to ensure that no life was harmed: ‘Before the pile is lowered in the hole I always look to see whether any ants or toads or other creatures have fallen into it, and if so I take them out with my
hands, that they might not be crushed by the pile or later killed by the pounding down of earth or stones." Indeed it is not only animal life that is to be valued: 'It is our duty to share and maintain life. Reverence concerning all life is the greatest commandment in its most elementary form. Or expressed in negative terms: "Thou shalt not kill". We take this prohibition so lightly, thoughtlessly plucking a flower, thoughtlessly stepping on a poor insect, thoughtlessly, in terrible blindness because everything takes its revenge, disregarding the suffering and lives of our fellow men, sacrificing them to trivial earthly goals.'

But what might have become an ethic that had no grounding in real life was never that for Schweitzer, who lives in the harsh reality of the Lambarène hospital. On the one hand he was only too happy to admit animals as his patients from monkeys to gazelles. 'I have the virtue of caring for all stray monkeys that come to our gate. Sometimes there will come to the monkey colony a wee baby whose mother has been killed…I must find one of the older monkeys to adopt and care for the baby.'

Thus, when an epidemic of rabies affected animals in the hospital, associated with an overabundance of horseshoe bats, Schweitzer has no compunction in euthanasing them, but again only under a strict necessity. Walter Munz, who worked with Schweitzer in Lambarene at the time notes ‘The situation had, thus, become more dangerous for everyone, men and beasts, at the beginning of 1965 when Schweitzer delegated the medical responsibility of the hospital to me… I spoke with the Chief Physician for the region of Lambaréné and …via telegraph, I received this response … Kill all the dogs on campus and procure enough anti-rabies vaccine to treat everyone who has been bitten." Armed with this advice and a heavy heart, I went to find Albert Schweitzer in his room. He asked me if I too considered these measures necessary. "Yes, Doctor," I replied. "And Tschütschü and Caramba?" he asked. (These were the names of the Doctor's own two dogs.) "Yes Doctor, them too." Then, without further questions or comments, he said to me, "You will call the police from Lambaréné. It's for them to carry out this task."

It should not be thought that Schweitzer merely left it to others to fulfill such tasks. Munz also remembers another episode of note concerning an overpopulation of cats at the hospital He remembers: ‘I was not fully aware of this problem until the day when, during the siesta when most of us were resting in our rooms, I observed Schweitzer walking down toward the river with a sack made of jute over his shoulder. I followed him and observed from a distance, without making my presence known. Arriving on the riverbank, the Doctor crouched down, plunged his hand into the sack, and took out a tiny wriggling creature, seized it in his hands with vigor, and hit the little head against the trunk of a tree. Then he tossed the body out up in the air and into the river. He repeated this several times. And when the sack was empty, he retraced his steps back to the path and climbed up slowly toward his house. That evening I asked Dr. Schweitzer about what I had seen. He responded, "You know, it is a cruel necessity. It has to be done. Alas, I could not ask anyone else to carry out this sad task."

What then of his views regarding meat-eating? Again Schweitzer treads a fine line between human need and animal care. He was not a complete vegetarian; indeed in his
early adulthood he enjoyed meat. Olga La Marquise de St Innocent remembers ‘Woody [Woodland Kahler her husband who became a vegetarian in 1948 aged 53] and I often lunched or dined with Schweitzer and his wife. He always ate with gusto - veal cutlets, steak, or chicken - whatever was put before him. In spite of the fact that he had invented that wonderful phrase, "respect for life," those cutlets from the little dead calf got no respect from Schweitzer. During those meals we would ply him with all sorts of questions about his philosophy and his work, until finally he said, with a twinkle in his eye, "Do not try to know the unknowable." Later in life Erica Anderson, Schweitzer’s photobiographer said ‘No bird or animal in the hospital village – hen or pig or sheep – is killed for food. Fish and crocodile meat brought by fishermen are occasionally served at table but Schweitzer himself in recent years has given up eating either meat or fish, even the liver dumplings he used to relish and enjoy.’ Schweitzer himself is recorded as having commented ‘I can’t eat anything that was alive any more.’

What then does Schweitzer feel about use of animals in medical research? Let him speak for himself: ‘Those who test medicines or operating techniques on animals or who inoculate them with illnesses in order to help mankind through the results they hope to obtain in this way must never quiet their conscience with the general excuse that in practicing these cruel methods they are pursuing a lofty purpose. In every individual case they must ascertain whether it is really necessary to impose such a sacrifice on the animal for the sake of humanity. They should take a very particular care to reduce suffering as much as is within their power.’ As a physician Schweitzer could see the necessity in some circumstances to use experimental animals, but considered it essential that such work should always be weighing down on the conscience of those undertaking the work.

It was suffering which bound Schweitzer together with the others, be they human or animal, around him in Africa; ‘the cry of the Fellowship of those who bear the Mark of Pain’ as he put it. The problem was that Nature was burdened by pain and suffering; ‘The world is horror in splendour, meaningless in meaning, sorrow in joy. Nature is beautiful and sublime, viewed from the outside. But to read in its book is horrible. Nature knows no reverence for life. It produces life in thousands of most meaningless ways and destroys it in thousands of the most senseless ways. Creatures live at the cost of other creatures.’ What then was Schweitzer’s response to such ‘painful enigma’, as he put it? ‘However concerned I was with the suffering in the world, I never let myself become lost in brooding over it. I always held firmly to the thought that each of us can do a little something to bring some portion of it to an end. Thus I gradually came to the conclusion that all we can understand about the problem is that we must follow out own way as those who want to bring about redemption.’

Having seen where Schweitzer’s ethic led him, we must once again try to find where, from a philosophical and theological perspective, he gained the background to this new ethic for man’s interaction with animals and nature around him. Schweitzer’s wide reading as a philosopher and theologian before his move to medicine, had brought him into contact with philosophers including Schopenhauer (1788-1860). Indeed as Barsam notes ‘In Schweitzer’s metaphysics, the greatest single philosophical influence to consider is that of Schopenhauer.’ Ironically Schweitzer was critical of much of
Schopenhauer’s thought – he was profoundly Christian in his thinking and ethic while the his philosophical forebear was atheist in belief - but we can see that several important strands of Schopenhauer’s work were foundational to Schweitzer’s Reverence for Life ethic. The key thought from Schopenhauer was that everything was a manifestation of ‘Will’; what we might describe as real essence – maybe even Telos. As Schopenhauer writes: ‘Unlike the intellect, it [the Will] does not depend on the perfection of the organism, but is essentially the same in all animals as that which is known to us so intimately. Accordingly, the animal has all the emotions of humans, such as joy, grief, fear, anger, love, hatred, strong desire, envy, and so on. The great difference between human and animal rests solely on the intellect's degrees of perfection.’

Schweitzer sees this will as fundamentally a will to live. Importantly both Schopenhauer and Schweitzer take an analysis of Kant as their starting point. Schopenhauer criticizes Kant’s delineation of absolute knowledge based on the differentiation between ultimate realities or noumena and things as experienced by ourselves, phenomena. Schopenhauer saw people as being aware of things cognitively, by which means we are aware of external things and from within, which he described as Will zum Leben, or will to live. Schweitzer agrees that this will to live is something at the very heart of both animal and human lives.

Indeed it is interesting that Schopenhauer had a particular interest in animals and their rights. He praised the formation in London of the Society for the Protection of Animals, later to become the RSPCA and even protested at the use of the pronoun ‘it’ for animals as it led to treatment of them as though they were inanimate objects. In the same volume he writes ‘The assumption that animals are without rights and the illusion that our treatment of them has no moral significance is a positively outrageous example of Western crudity and barbarity. Universal compassion is the only guarantee of morality’

We can see from that quotation alone how Schopenhauer may well have influenced Schweitzer.

It has to be said that Schopenhauer and Schweitzer, though they may travel much of the way down what appears to be the same road, come to very different destinations. Schopenhauer sees ‘everything which helps deaden the will-to-live is good’ while Schweitzer argues exactly the opposite. ‘Affirming the will-to-live is natural, because it corresponds with the instinctive will to live or an instinctive reverence for ones own life.’ It might be said that in all this discussion Schweitzer does not bring God into the picture. Yet this was his epic three-volume Philosophy of Civilisation, started when a prisoner of war in his own hospital at Lambarene in 1915, which he wrote specifically wishing to discuss the development and ethics of civilisation, and its downfall devoid of references to theological influences. This was, of course, not really possible. For while Schweitzer sought there to develop his ethical theory apart from his theological worldview, what had been with him since a child could not but influence his thought.

Having said this, his later ventures into Indian philosophy had important influences too, as he details in his later book Indian Thought and Its Development. He came into contact with these writings though Schopenhauer; indeed one of Schopenhauer’s students, Deecke, was the director of the Mulhouse Secondary School in Alsace which Schweitzer attended as a youth. In a lecture given to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, India
to accept the Rabindranath Tagore Medal only three months before he died, Schweitzer credits Deecke with introducing him to Indian thought ‘at an early date’. Barsam devotes a chapter to Schweitzer’s ‘Voyage to India’ and here all we can do is mention it. The concept of Ahimsa or non-violence had a great impact on Schweitzer, as did the enlarged circle of ‘boundless ethical importance’ upheld by Eastern thought and especially Jainism. ‘What I like about Indian ethics is that they are concerned with the behaviour of man to all living beings and not merely with his attitude to his fellow man and to human society.’ Schweitzer’s problem with Inidian ethics, however, is that much of it rests on what he terms ‘world and life negation.’ Such negation ‘regards existence ... as something meaningless and sorrowful [with the result that it] mortifies the will to live [and] renouces all activity which aims at improvement of the conditions of life in the world.’

Schweitzer has the same problems with Christianity which he sees as generally world-negating. On the other hand, however, Schweitzer sees ‘the ethics of reverence for life [as] 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.’ A read through Erica Anderson’s wonderful pictorial account of Schweitzer’s life shows how Schweitzer lived out this concept in service to the people and animals of the African rainforest.

Indeed perhaps the most important feature to note regarding Schweitzer is, as Barsam notes, that his ‘greatest contribution lies not in his words, but in the application of his ideas.’ On being asked for his definition of justice Socrates replies ‘Instead of speaking of it, I make it understood by my actions.’ Justice is far less about speaking it than living it. And similarly Schweitzer stated at the age of thirty ‘My life [is] my argument.’ Schweitzer wrote prolifically but always saw that his actions should always speak louder than his words. This they did in regard to his service for mankind and for the animal kingdom. His life is a lesson to us all in its dedication to the cause he thought most central, that of reverence for life itself.

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1 A Schweitzer, Aus Meinem Leben und Denken, (Leipzig, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1932) translated as My Life and Thought, (London, Allen and Unwin, 1933) henceforth ‘Life and Thought’
3 ibid, p24
4 Life and Thought, p192
5 Childhood and Youth, p24
6 ibid, p25
7 ibid, p 26
12 *Life and Thought*, Epilogue p271,
13 ibid p270
14 ibid p272
15 *On the Edge*, p112
16 *Reverence for Life* p64
18 Munz W, "Reverence for Life" at Lambarene in Albert Schweitzer's Last Years
A Speech By Walter Munz delivered at: Colloquium: The Ethics of "Reverence for Life" November 18-19, 2005 Marc Bloch University-Strasbourg II available online at http://home.pcisys.net/~jnf/Munz_EthicsReverence.html
20 A Schweitzer in E Anderson, The Schweitzer Album; a portrait in words and pictures. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) henceforth *Portrait*
21 ibid, p49
22 A Schweitzer, *On the Edge* p124
23 A Schweitzer *Reverence for Life* p25
24 A Schweitzer *A Place for Revelation. Sermons on the Reverence for Life* p15
26 A Schweitzer *Life and Thought* p242-3
PHYSIOLOGY_AND_PATHOLOGY.
30 Referenced in A Schweitzer *Reverence for Life* p11
31 A Schweitzer, *Civilisation* p279
34 A Schweitzer, *Indian Thought* Preface vi
35 ibid p2
36 A Schweitzer, Correspondence with DE Rolffs (1931) and Josselin de Jong (1930) in *Letters*
37 E Anderson, *Portrait*
38 A Barsam *Contribution* p161