Reverence for Life – A Moral Paradox?
By Predrag Cicovacki

In his ambitious book, *The Conduct of Life*, Lewis Mumford analyzes the crisis of Western civilization and the possibilities of its renewal. Although this book was first published in 1951, the deepening crisis of Western civilization makes it still actual. Let us then try to get a sense of how Mumford identifies the crisis and where he sees its potential solution:

But if Western civilization escapes the evil fate that its over-commitment to mechanism and automatism, its wholesale denial of human values and purposes, now threatens it with, if it overcomes its delusions of atomic grandeur and its psychotic compulsion to suicide or genocide, then the form that life will take, and the type of personality that will nurture it, is the form and the type that Albert Schweitzer has embodied. On such a basis, the renewal of life is possible.¹

The person who Mumford singles out as a prototype for the renewal of life, Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), was a theologian, philosopher, and musician who abandoned his already highly accomplished academic and artistic career to become a medical doctor. In 1913, he opened a hospital in the equatorial Africa. In that hospital, the only one in the radius of one thousand miles, Schweitzer spent the rest of his life. He dedicated it to his patients, but he also continued to play music and write. In the last fifteen years of his life, Schweitzer engaged in a vocal opposition against all nuclear testing. Just at the time when Mumford’s book was written, Schweitzer started receiving worldwide recognition for his humanitarian and artistic work. Among other prestigious awards, he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1954.

Like Mumford, Schweitzer also believed that our civilization is experiencing a very deep crisis. He thought that, while the material aspect of civilization has been overemphasized, we have lost significant moral ideals and vital moral energy needed for striving toward the full development of our humanity: “Technical progress, extension of knowledge, do indeed represent progress, but not in fundamentals. The essential thing is that we become more finely and deeply human.”²

If our civilization can achieve an ethical renewal, insists Schweitzer, it must be through the ethics of “reverence for life.” According to his most famous definition, “Ethics consists...in my experiencing the compulsion to show to all will-to-live the same reverence as I do to my own. There we have given us that basic principle of the moral that is a necessity of thought. It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it.”³

Interestingly enough, Mumford has a much higher opinion about Schweitzer’s life than about his philosophy: “His life says, better than any book he has written, that however deeply our own lives suffer from the passive breakdown or the active destruction of our civilization, it is
still possible to create a plan of life based on more solid foundations and directed toward higher ends: a life more organic in structure, more personal in expression, no longer the victim of specialism, nihilism, and automatism.”

Schweitzer’s philosophy, by contrast, Mumford finds “sometimes contradictory and inadequate.” The clearest objection to it is what Mumford calls the “final paradox” of Schweitzer’s ethics: “if all forms of life prospered equally their very success would bring about life’s own end; and before that happened, the higher forms would die out. No choice can be sanely made in terms either of the will-to-live or the derivative doctrine of unqualified reverence for life.”

While most commentators struggle with the possibility of reconciling Schweitzer’s call to treat every life with reverence (including those of animals and plants) with the necessity of killing (for food or in self-defense, for instance), Mumford objects to something opposite to that: if we assume that everyone takes Schweitzer’s call to treat all life with reverence, the full realization of this ethics would lead to its self-refutation. We cannot bring about even the prosperity of the entire human race – that may already endanger the survival of the species. Much less can we attempt (as Mumford implies that Schweitzer did) the preservation and prosperity of all life. Schweitzer’s very idea, according to Mumford, is therefore paradoxical.

The word “paradox” literally means “beyond belief.” I will argue that what Mumford finds paradoxical does not lead to any contradiction and is based on a misunderstanding. Yet Mumford is right to claim that Schweitzer’s ethics is based on a paradox – only this paradox is much deeper and more consequential. Perhaps the very possibility of the renewal of our civilization – the goal of Mumford’s philosophizing, no less than Schweitzer’s – depends on the acceptance and resolution of this paradox.

When Schweitzer claims, “it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it,” he is not saying that killing should not and will not happen. What he means is that destruction or injury to any form of life should never be inflicted thoughtlessly or needlessly, but always – when it cannot be avoided – quickly and mercifully, reflectively and reverently. There is thus no real danger that, because of the universal application of reverence for life, the forms of life will multiply beyond control, so that their sheer number would bring about the destruction of life – and especially the destruction of its highest form, i.e., humanity.

To understand Schweitzer more fully, let us reflect on the phrase “reverence for life.” When Mumford talks about “the conduct of life” and “the renewal of life,” he primarily thinks of human life. But Schweitzer treats life as a universal phenomenon, and speaks not only about the concrete manifestations of life – say this patient that he now needs to treat as a physician [life as a biological category] – but also and perhaps most about the symbolic manifestations of life. Of such symbolic manifestations of life we need to distinguish at least the following three: metaphysical, ethical, and socio-historical. Schweitzer would say that, as a living being, a patient standing in front of him is a manifestation of the universal will-to-live, of an impulse, drive, and energy aiming to sustain its own existence. Everything that is alive, plants and animals no less than human beings, has this drive, impulse, and energy to sustain its existence. Through this
shared feature, each life is part of the enigmatic, and Schweitzer thinks ultimately unexplainable phenomenon of life. Following Schopenhauer, Schweitzer thinks that this will-to-live is one of the metaphysical building blocks of the universe.7

The universal presence of the will-to-live leads inevitably beyond the mere metaphysical consideration, for we realize that it must affect our attitudes and practical behavior toward other living beings. As a conscious human being, I am aware of this ultimate metaphysical drive not only in myself but in everything else that lives: “I am life that wills-to-live, in the midst of other lives which will-to-live.”8 The very impulse of the will to live is the same in all living beings; the recognition of the will-to-live does not provide ethical grounds for any hierarchy of living creatures. Rather than to lead toward their separation, the recognition of this impulse brings different lives together.9

For Schweitzer, life is one of the central ethical categories. Some philosophers have tried to ground ethics in an external source of authority (such as God or Nature), while others have tried to root it in something related to human beings (reason, pursuit of happiness, social solidarity, etc.). Schweitzer insists on rooting it in life, which is something both internal and external, both most intimate (since each one of us is a vehicle of life) and a manifestation of something independent (the ultimate purpose of which we can never grasp).10 Although Schweitzer ties his ethics of reverence for life to the basic ethical concerns regarding good and evil, his central preoccupation is broader – it is the meaning of life, specifically of human life, and he argues that ethics has to reflect this general and ultimate preoccupation. Ethics is a way of dealing with life – my own and the lives of others; not just human life, but life in the entire cosmos. And from this “cosmic perspective we are specks of dust, vulnerable from every direction, destined to die, and able to help others in only limited ways. Rather than promoting despair, however, this humility paves the way for moral commitment.”11

Before we clarify the nature of this commitment, let us first notice that, despite his insistence on the centrality of life, Schweitzer’s position should not be characterized as “vitalism.” Ethics is not about “row life,” life that refuses form and structure, life that is an unrestrained energy, or life that is a sheer power.12 Ethics consist in the human attitude of reverence for all life. Many commentators have pointed out that, in its original German form (Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben) this phrase already contains a sense of awe that we cannot translate into a suitable English phrase. The whole phrase, Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben, means (roughly) respect for life which is understood as being far more than sheer existence.

Religious and mystical elements are already implied in this attitude, and this is why Schweitzer speaks of reverence rather than of, say, respect. Reverence is more emotionally charged than respect, which also why Schweitzer frequently speaks about love. Yet the term love is notoriously ambiguous; Schweitzer finds it useful only insofar as it clearly brings to our attention the relevance of the personal motivation for ethics: whatever we do, we need to do it with sympathy and compassion; whatever we do, we need to do it with enthusiasm and devotion.
Schweitzer clearly understands reverence for life in terms of a life-centered spirituality. It is important to emphasize, however, that his ethical stance is not tied to any particular religious view, nor does it encourage any religious irrationalism or fanaticism. Although Schweitzer was brought up as a Christian and even served as a Lutheran pastor before going to Africa, his inspiration for the ethics of reverence for life came not only from Christianity but also from Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The ethics of reverence for life is compatible with many versions of theism, pantheism, and even atheism. Schweitzer often mentions how Plato and Aristotle, the two pagan philosophers, emphasize that philosophy begins with wonder. Schweitzer extends this idea further to claim that ethics also begins in wonder and even presupposes the continuation of this healthy attitude (of wonder) throughout our lives. In his words: “To experience the world as a secret always again ... that is a great gain.”

To experience the world as a secret is to experience it as something overwhelming, as something much bigger than any one individual human existence, or even bigger than the existence of the entire human race. For Plato and Aristotle, the wonder they describe as the source of philosophy deals with the beauty and order of the cosmos, which for them is a living being. Schweitzer also understands the universe as a living being (he calls it an “infinite Being”), yet (unlike Plato and Aristotle) his attitude toward the cosmos is not primarily cognitive but ethical. Schweitzer thinks that we will never be able to grasp the world as a whole, but that we nevertheless have to change our prevailing attitude toward this mysterious world. It should not be one of negligence and contempt – the world is not a playground for the satisfaction of our needs. Nor should we continue to think that human life can flourish only at the expense of other forms of life.

Mumford points out how Schweitzer understands ethics in terms of self-sacrifice and service to others. (As Gabriel Langfeldt emphases, “it must be a self-sacrifice that is really felt as a renunciation of other needs that otherwise it would have been more natural to satisfy.”) Precisely in this regard Mumford sees Schweitzer as a potential pointer to the resolution of the ills of our civilization and the renewal of life: “But in order to remain a whole man, Schweitzer committed the typical act of sacrifice for the coming age: he deliberately reduced the intensive cultivation of any one field, in order to expand the contests and the significance of his life as a whole.”

Mumford now comes close to the realization of the central paradox not only of Schweitzer’s life, but of his ethics as well. To renew life, we need not attempt to dominate, control, or exploit it in ever more efficient and diverse ways. To renew life, we need to make sacrifices and put ourselves in the service of other life. In Biblical terms often quoted by Schweitzer: “Only he who loseth his life...shall find it.”

This is paradoxical, yet Mumford argues that by means of service and sacrifice Schweitzer manages to become “a whole man” and to expand “the significance of his life as a whole.” If this is what Mumford praises about Schweitzer, and if he sees Schweitzer as a prototype for the future renewal of life, then he needs to explain what is so fruitful about it. Yet
Mumford did not do so, and for an account of this paradox and its possible resolution we need to turn back to Schweitzer, for whom this is one of the central issues of his ethics of reverence for life.

Trying to base his ethics to something natural, Schweitzer points out toward two elementary impulses in all human beings: the impulse toward self-preservation on the one hand, and sympathy for the suffering of others on the other. Schweitzer is convinced that even (some) animals display analogous impulses. Yet although these impulses are necessary – they provide a natural ground for ethics – they are not sufficient. Ethics consists precisely in the ennoblement of such impulses, in making sure that they are not fleeting desires but lead to genuine ethical commitment, which he then calls “reverence for life.” In Schweitzer’s words,

All that is ethical goes back to a single principle of morality, namely the maintenance of life at its highest level, and furtherance of life. The maintenance of one’s own life at the highest level by becoming more and more perfect in spirit, and the maintenance at the highest level of other life by sympathetic, helpful self-devotion to it – this is ethics.16

If this is ethics, it has to resolve what Schweitzer himself does not call a paradox but the “weighty question” (die gewaltige Frage der Ethik): “What is the inner connection between the struggle for self-completing and action for the common advantage?”17

Put differently, the weighty question is how to reconcile the two fundamental ethical impulses: one that leads in the direction of the preservation and development of my own life, and the other which leads me to sacrifice my interests and serve others. The first impulse, which Schweitzer calls intuitionistic, is directed inwardly; the second impulse, which is altruistic, is directed outwardly. These impulses often clash, and this is why virtually all ethicists pronounce one of them as the most fundamental and base their ethical theory on that one impulse. Schweitzer argues that both impulses are equally basic and equally indispensable. He then stakes his ethical theory on an attempt to reconcile them. This attempted reconciliation, and not what Mumford calls by that name, is the central paradox of Schweitzer’s ethics. Yet an account of how Schweitzer reconciles this paradox and an evaluation as to what extent he succeeds in this, we need to save for another occasion.

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Notes


5 Ibid., 207.

6 Ibid., 213.

7 Jackson Lee Ice compares Schweitzer’s will-to-live to a psychoanalytical rendering of this issue: “While Freud introduced into psychology what is called the pleasure principle, or the will-to-pleasure; and Adler made us conversant with the role of the will-to-power as a main factor in human behavior; and while, more recently, Victor Frankl, a one-time Freudian psychiatrist now a psychotherapist, stresses the will-to-meaning, Schweitzer speaks of the will-to-live, which includes all of the above and several other important factors which he believes more adequately account for man’s nature”; Schweitzer: *Prophet of Radical Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 101.


9 What is more, this black patient whom he needs to treat now, this concrete will-to-live, Schweitzer also sees as a member of the race exploited by the generations of white colonizers. The conditions of life for the primitive people may have been bad even if they were left on their own, but Schweitzer was fully aware of the numerous evils of colonization which only made the lives of the natives more complicated and, in more cases than not, progressively worse. So, when treating a native patient, Schweitzer was also aware of shared responsibility that the white men have for the terrible conditions of the natives.

10 In his letter to Dr. Oskar Pfister of December 19, 1926, Schweitzer points out that life “is the most universal and yet the most immediately determined phenomenon.”


12 Mumford has also noticed that “Western civilization has lived for more than a century under the sign of power: forgetting, in our pride, that uncontrolled power in any of its manifestations, as heat, as light, as physical force, as political compulsion, is inimical to life; for life flourishes only to the extent that it is able to regulate power, screening off its direct impact and reducing it to those amounts that are favorable to vital processes”; *op. cit.*, 13.


15 Mumford, *op. cit.*, 209.