

Reverence for Life-An Ethical Concept

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ABSTRACT

In the twentieth century, the ambivalence of scientific and technical progress became more and more apparent. The abuse of modern technology against man was obvious not only in phenomena such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima. The modern civilization which seemed to be peaceful and philanthropic at first also started to turn against human beings. Towards the end of the twentieth century, a common awareness arose that the question of progress is at its core an ethical question. By the end of the First World War, Albert Schweitzer drew attention to this matter. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of thinkers searching for an appropriate answer to the challenges of the present age are referring to Schweitzer's ethics of reverence for life. It seems that only now the depth of Schweitzer's thought is understood. He is considered by many to be a precursor of bioethics, a seeker, and an architect of a new moral attitude of humans towards life. This article throws light on his ethics of reverence for life, his ideas for restoration of civilization, evaluation of reverence for life and its current value in the modern society.

Key words:

Reverence, Life, Albert Schweitzer, Ethics, Medicine

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of people began referring to Schweitzer's ethics of reverence for life. Immediately after the First World War, Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) recognized the decay of western civilization as a result of an excessive discrepancy between the material development of the world and man's moral responsibility. To restore western civilization, he proposed the ethics of reverence for life, which is based on the fundamental experience of man: "I am life that wills to live, and I exist in the midst of life that wills to live." Because man is indispensably connected to the surrounding living world and his moral responsibility extends to all living things. Reverence for Life is beyond self-sacrifice, self-fulfilment and self-improvement, is a creative force related to civilization. The ethics of reverence for life, together with certain contributions from other thinkers is also very relevant today in the search for answers to the challenges of the modern world

THE DECAY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

The First world war led Schweitzer think about the decay of western civilization.

"The disastrous feature of our civilization is that it is far more developed materially than spiritually"

(Schweitzer 1987: 86)

According to him, the war was only a sign of collapse of western civilization. The modern generation gained extreme power to control and change life but according to Schweitzer material development without moral and spiritual development is

"Like a ship with defective steering gear that goes out of control at a constantly accelerating pace, thereby heading for catastrophe"

(Schweitzer 1987: 86)

Fast and powerful development of mankind also requires control and navigation. The decay of western civilization started in mid-nineteenth century because morality and spirituality were no longer required in the technological development. Ethics even became a hindrance for scientific and technological progress.

RESTORATION OF CIVILIZATION

Schweitzer did not merely content himself by recognizing the decay of civilization but also proposed ideas for its restoration. He was convinced that western civilization was not fated to collapse completely. At the beginning of modern civilization, philosophy had wrong ideology. He found Descartes principle, “Cogito, ergo sum” abstract and illegal which means “I think, therefore I am”. It is based on the fact that someone capable of any form of thought necessarily exists. Schweitzer’s question is that “What is the content of that thinking in which I always render myself an account of my existence”

(Schweitzer 1999: 426)

Schweitzer attributed the following to human thought: Philosophy of life must be based on the consciousness, which says:

“I am life that wills to live, in the midst of life that wills to live”(Schweitzer 1987: 309)

Thus the basic experience of a human being is not just absence from the world [as Descartes Says] but his experience and connectedness with the lives surrounding him. However there is no harmonious system between nature and human beings.

According to Schweitzer, the ethical will-to- live is an “innate element” of each being that commands them to show equal respect to all wills-to-live as to his own.

“Ethics is not a park with precisely arranged and well-maintained paths, but a wilderness in which everyone should find and travel his own route. What is determined is the direction that one has to follow”

(Schweitzer 2000: 154)

THE RADICAL NATURE OF ETHICS OF REVERENCE FOR LIFE

The philosopher of the African primeval forest is convinced that, through his basic principle of “Devotion to life inspired by reverence for life”(Schweitzer 1987: 311)

He provided a general material content to the formal ethical imperative. According to Schweitzer, if humans acknowledge their connectedness with all living creatures, if they are aware of their basic experience that “life in the midst of all life,” then they are not permitted to set up a limit up to which they will respect life. The radical nature of Schweitzer’s ethics was even more apparent when he did not allow any scale of values for living creatures. Ethics is defined as “responsibility without limit towards all that lives”. Every human action should be

directed towards the preservation of one's own life and the life of the creatures that are part of one's environment.

It is evident that human lives are inevitably co-dependent in the life of other living creatures. Humans are forced to kill other living creatures to survive. On a theoretical basis, the ethics of reverence for life is totally consistent. On the other hand, at the practical level the demand to "Preserve and promote life" puts man in a paradoxical situation. To save one life, a man is obliged to destroy another one. Schweitzer presented the following example:

"In order to keep a heron from starving if it has broken its wing, we must condemn that many fish to death. We can show mercy only if we act without mercy at the same time." (Schweitzer 2000: 153). For such conflict situations, Schweitzer created the following guideline:

"Beyond the unavoidable I must never go, not even with what seems insignificant" (Schweitzer 1987: 318).

The ethics of reverence for life does not set limits for inevitability. They require the individual to respect the fundamental principle "to maintain and promote life," whereby the concrete realization of this principle is up to the individual.

EVALUATION OF ETHICS OF REVERENCE FOR LIFE

Schweitzer's ethical acts touch the reader profoundly. Basic moral questions are discussed in a broader way. His examples are provocative and force people to think. Readers are forced to rethink of their ethical positions.

On the downside, the ethics of reverence for life was largely criticized by philosophers for lacking terminological precision, which could easily result in misunderstanding.

Schweitzer proceeded from the argumentation level to the personal level in his writing and tried to directly evoke readers' emotions. The central notion of "will-to-live," which in fact denotes a conscious and targeted orientation, is used uncritically for all living creatures.^[4] Schweitzer stated that,

"I intentionally avoided technical philosophical terminology. I wanted to appeal to thinking men and women, and to motivate them to think in a basic sense about the questions of existence that are in the minds of every human being" (Schweitzer 1998: 202)

The most harshly criticized part of Schweitzer's philosophy was definitely his refusal to rank life forms. Schweitzer considered that all life is sacred. His support for the intrinsic value of all

living beings originates in his metaphysics, which suggests

There is a cosmic, creative, and mysterious will-to-live, “in which all Being is grounded” (Schweitzer 1987: 283).

He did not permit ranking of life forms even though he did not attribute the same value to all living creatures. It is definitely true that humans as “a life in the midst of life” discovers fundamental connectedness with all living things as well as dissimilarities between our will-to-live and other living beings. Humans undoubtedly possess more worth than that of other living creatures. It is certainly necessary to overcome Schweitzer’s dichotomy between “ethical and necessary”. If human beings were given a special role within the living world, the ethics of reverence for life would not lose its value. Moreover, it will gain applicability and practicality. Another downside of Schweitzer’s ethics is its limitation to individual ethics. The socio-ethical aspect seems to be underestimated. He could be partly understood if one considers that at the beginning of the twentieth century socialist and communist, or biologist and nationalist subjected the individual to society.

THE CURRENCY OF ETHICS OF REVERENCE FOR LIFE

Schweitzer’s philosophical ethics pose a unique challenge on mankind. Its currency mainly lies in emphasizing his fundamental connectedness with all living creatures. The content of Hans Jonas ethics of responsibility nearly summarizes Schweitzer’s criticism of western civilization and his ethics of reverence for life. Jonas searched for new ethics for the new situation ^[5], but he did not take into account the fact that Schweitzer had pointed to the fundamental discrepancy between material and spiritual development, between technological power and internal responsibility. From the philosophical point of view, Jonas’ ethics is undoubtedly perfect; however, Schweitzer’s is more profound and original. They both provide solid foundations for ethics of life ^[6]. The understanding of human as a “life that wills to live in the midst of life that wills to live” constitutes an excellent starting point for the creation of ecological ethics, which is of primary importance today if people also want to ensure the existence of mankind on this planet in the future.

The ethics of reverence for life definitely provides a very good basis for the education of environmentally responsible behavior. Schweitzer always believed that a person is capable of accepting responsibility for life only if he internally experiences the responsibility for life.

Therefore, it is very important to establish a direct contact with the environment and living creatures in children's education as well as to promote the perception of man's connectedness with the living world.

REVERENCE FOR LIFE TO BIOETHICS

Bioethics is a new field of knowledge. Inter-disciplinary is a core characteristic of Bioethics. It is a meeting ground to share knowledge between disciplines. Since the beginning, the founder fathers - Van Rensselaer Potter and Fritz Jahr - proposed Bioethics as this. Even Aldo Leopold, that uses Land Ethics concept instead of Bioethics used this approach. Reverence for Life is the main theoretical contribution of Albert Schweitzer to Philosophy and Bioethics. In one of his biographies he describes:

Late on the third day [September, 1915], 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". Now I knew that the ethical acceptance of the world and of life, together with ideals of civilization contained in this concept, has a foundation in thought.^[7]

This insight was the beginning of a very brilliant thought. He explained and used Reverence for Life in terms of theoretical and practical approach. The first time he publicly shared this concept was on February 19, 1919 at St. Nicolai's Church, in Strasbourg, during a Sunday morning service. He said that:

"Reverence for the infinity of life means removal of the alienation, restoration of empathy, compassion, sympathy." ^[8]

In the same 1919 sermon, Schweitzer enlarges his concept, saying that:

"Life is feeling, experience, suffering. If you study life deeply, looking with perceptive eyes into the vast animated chaos of this creation, its profundity will seize you suddenly with dizziness. In everything you recognize yourself." ^[8]

Fritz Jahr, in his foundation article, published in 1927, used the same comprehensive approach to compassion, when he says:

“Philosopher Schopenhauer, openly invoking the Indian ideas, considered, as a special quality of his Ethics, the fact of having claimed also to animals the feeling of compassion.” [9]

Aldo Leopold, in his Land Ethics proposal, in 1930s, made a very similar assumption:

“Land Ethics simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” [10]

Schweitzer re-affirms, in his book Civilization and Ethics, the broader view, when he said:

“A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, and that of plants and animals as that of his fellow men... Only the universal ethic of the feeling of responsibility in an ever-widening sphere for all that lives - only that ethic can be founded in thought.” [11]

Jahr made the same assumption:

“From Biopsychology to Bioethics just one step is required, the acceptance of moral obligations to all living beings, not only in relation to humans.” [9]

Expanding Ethics to all living beings – humans, animals and plants – was a very creative and a vivacious proposal even in contemporary Bioethics. Albert Schweitzer understood that Ethics is intrinsically related to life and deals with good and evil. He linked these concepts when he proposed:

“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.” [11]

Eve Marie Engels, who was the first author that refers to Fritz Jahr's Bioethics approach in a published text, assumes following:

“Bioethics as an ethical reflection about living beings, including human beings, such as those living beings are presented in everyday relationships in the living world and in theoretical and practical contexts in science and research.” [12]

This approach to Bioethics, including human beings as moral partners of all living beings, in a practical and theoretical framework, is a challenge to our society. Bioethics, these days, could be defined as a complex, shared and interdisciplinary reflection about the actions related to Life and Living.^[13] Understanding Albert Schweitzer contributions is fundamental to understanding Bioethics as a whole. Schweitzer is a Bioethics precursor because he anticipates Jahr's bioethical thinking.^[14]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Reverence for Life is a basilar concept to Bioethics. Albert Schweitzer wrote that:

“Just as the screw which churns its way through the water drives the ship along, so does reverence for life drive the man.” [7]

The ethics of reverence for life definitely provides a very good basis for the education of environmentally responsible behavior. It is based on the immediate experience of life, which is of major importance for today's lifestyle. Schweitzer believed that a person is capable of accepting responsibility for life only if he internally experiences the responsibility for life. Therefore, it is very important to establish a direct contact with the environment and living creatures in children's education as well as to promote the perception of human's connectedness with the living world. This will encourage the development of responsible behavior within the natural environment. Only when human experiences connection with another life, when they taste the oneness of life, when they feel connected to all beings – only then they are motivated to take upon themselves the responsibility for all living things.

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