



A Life as an Argument: the Plight of the Individual in Modern Society

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The visitor to Kaisersberg, Albert Schweitzer's birthplace, will find a commemorative statue of him in the main square. The inscription is disarmingly simple: Albert Schweitzer 1875-1965, PRIX NOBEL DE LA PAIX. No doubt the local committee soon realised the impossibility of listing his achievements beneath the rugged carved head, hewn from a local stone. Even an enumeration of his various roles of physician, musician, philosopher, theologian etc. would have appeared cumbersome and long-winded. Hence the laconic epitaph.

On the hill overlooking the church and village of Gunsbach, where Schweitzer's father had been pastor, and where he himself built a house and recorded Bach's organ works, there is another statue. It is hewn from the same red stone, but is full-size, and portrays Schweitzer, pencil in hand, concentrating intensely on a book. This statue conveys an impression of massiveness and a rare degree of inner power. These memorials, however, only achieve their full impact in the light of knowledge of the man, his work and his thought. This article focuses on Schweitzer's diagnosis of the plight of the individual in modern society, the way in which he himself responded to this, and the role which he felt the individual capable of assuming in fostering a more humane climate in human affairs.

Elemental philosophy

In the epilogue of *My Life and Thought*, Schweitzer makes a distinction of crucial importance to those who approach philosophy according to the true meaning of the term, as lovers of wisdom not merely of words: he distinguishes between elemental and unelemental thinking. The former, he asserts, is 'that which starts from the fundamental questions about the relations of man to the universe, about the meaning of life, and about the nature of goodness. It stands in the most immediate connection with the thinking which impulse starts in everyone. It enters that thinking, widening and deepening it.'

By contrast, unelemental philosophy no longer has as its focal point humanity's relation to the world. Man (I use this term advisedly) becomes analysing spectator of his existence, as opposed to a participant in it. He indulges in logical and epistemological speculations that are only of peripheral relevance to the central and elemental questions. The logical positivist abolishes metaphysics altogether as unverifiable: philosophising in this sense consists of mastering a virtuosity of technique, while discussions about definitions replace those about problems on fact.

In short, such as philosophy can only further uproot an already rootless modern humanity, and has totally forgotten its original purpose of formulating a meaningful worldview. In the preface to *The Decay and Restoration of Civilisation* Schweitzer asserts that 'the future of civilisation hangs on our overcoming the meaninglessness and hopelessness that characterise the thoughts and convictions of men today, and reaching a state of fresh hope and fresh determination.' He sees humanity bogged down in a swamp of scepticism, whose origins lie in the reaction of disappointment to the optimistic idea of progress engendered by the Enlightenment. As a result of this people

have lost confidence in their ability to think for themselves, have laid themselves open to the impinging of external authority, and have stunted their potential for spiritual growth.

The danger of dehumanisation

Schweitzer saw the number of self-employed artisans declining with the rural exodus, and the absorption of human and craftsmen into larger organisations. These new employees were separated from the soil, their homes and nature. Moreover, they were caught up in long hours of monotonous occupations, which made mental collectedness and self-control in leisure hours more difficult. Rather than opportunities for self-improvement, the workers sought entertainment, complete idleness and diversion from their usual activities. Aided by habit, the mentality of the mass of individuals became spiritually relaxed, thus leading to increased superficiality in culture and reading: not to mention conversation, where a real exchange of ideas was generally avoided, and restricted to banalities.

Furthermore, the immense increase in technical knowledge forced specialisation, hence only partial use of human faculties, and brought with it a concomitant narrowing of horizons and sympathy. Schweitzer found even more worrying the danger of man losing his humanity. We all live in a hurry and work with many other people, often in crowded surroundings. We therefore tend to encounter each other as strangers and do not always feel able to make the extra effort required to treat those we meet as individuals.



In addition, chessboard-like war strategies have encouraged men to think of others as mere objects in the material world. Schweitzer argued that as soon as we forget our relationship towards our fellow human beings, we are on a path to inhumanity, and concluded that 'wherever there is loss of consciousness that every man is an object of concern for us just because he is a man, civilisation and morals are shaken, and the advance towards fully developed inhumanity is only a question of time.'

Finally comes the effect of over-organisation of our public life. While not denying that this is to an extent inevitable, Schweitzer contends that, when developed beyond a certain point, organisations operate at the expense of spiritual life – personality and ideas are subordinated to the institution. Public opinion and propaganda threaten our freedom of thought. We are likened to a rubber ball that has lost its elasticity, and preserves indefinitely every impression made on it. Without independence of thought, we will renounce our faith in truth thought out by the individual. Moreover, we also surrender our personal moral judgement if we fail to uphold our personal opinion. In such circumstances, we may bow to public pressure, no longer judging by the standards of morality but by those of expediency, thus accelerating the demoralisation of the individual by the mass.

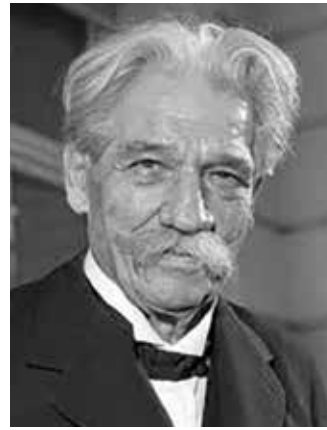
CG Jung shared Schweitzer's concern for the fate of the individual. In his essay *The Undiscovered Self*, he stresses that individuals render themselves obsolete as soon as they combine with the mass and level themselves down to an anonymous unit. And in a letter of January 1955 he emphasises the role of scientific rationalism in reducing the significance of the individual, as well as our own lack of insight into the nature of the group: 'natural laws are in the main mere abstractions (being statistical averages) instead of reality, and they abolish individual existence as being merely exceptional. But the individual as the only carrier of life is of paramount importance. He cannot be substituted by a group formed by a mass, yet we are rapidly approaching the state in which nobody will accept individual responsibility any more. We prefer to leave it as an odious business to groups and organisations, blissfully unconscious of the fact that the group or mass psyche is that of an animal and wholly inhuman.'

Schweitzer's stand

Early in his school days, Schweitzer became aware of the fact that the other village children resented him being better clothed than they were. He was mortified, and his native stubbornness made him determined not to be better off. He refused to wear a new overcoat and was repeatedly beaten, 'but I stood firm', he relates. Then there was a fiasco in Strasbourg over the choice of a new cap; in the end, Schweitzer prevailed in his insistence on a brown one from the unsaleable stock!

By his own account, the most important experience of his childhood concerns a friend's proposal, near the end of Lent, to accompany him on a bird shoot with a catapult. The unsuspecting birds were singing merrily as the hunters approached and took aim. Suddenly the distant church bells rang out, prompting Schweitzer to frighten the birds away and flee home. The bells had driven into his heart the commandment "Thou shalt not kill". This experience foreshadowed his later discovery of the ethic of reverence for life, and also had an important immediate effect: 'from that day onward I took courage to emancipate myself from the fear of men, and whenever my inner convictions were at stake I let other people's opinions weigh less heavily with me than they had done previously. I also tried to unlearn my former dread of being laughed at by my schoolfellows.'

During his teens Schweitzer went through what he described as 'an unpleasant ferment' during which he became 'a nuisance to everybody through a passion for discussion.' He inflicted on everyone he met thoroughgoing closely reasoned considerations concerning all current questions 'in order to expose the errors of conventional views.' He remarked that his motive was not that of egotistical disputatiousness but



rather 'a passionate need of thinking, and of seeking the help of others for the truth.' This led to inward rebellion against vacuous chatter, and he wondered 'how far we can carry this good breeding without harm to our integrity.'

In later life he also displayed a cavalier disregard for some of the more gushing social niceties. Erica Anderson relates Schweitzer saying amusingly on their second morning at Lambarene 'you probably expect me to ask

how you slept last night... but I won't.. I gave that up long ago. If you ask such questions you get interminable answers: "oh, I was still awake at three in the morning, docteur. At four I heard an owl screech, at five a frog croak, and so on..." Similarly Frederic Franck learned not to offer excuses for arriving late at meals. 'It is a rational procedure', Schweitzer explained, 'otherwise I have to go through this boring routine of 'I'm sorry – it does not matter, don't mention it – yes that I could not help it, I hate to be late, and so on ad infinitum.' So much for mimicry of refinements.

A resolution

In 1896, at the age of 21, Schweitzer came to an important resolution – 'there came to me...the thought but I must not accept this happiness as a matter of course, but must give something in return for it... I would consider myself justified in living till I was 30 for science and art, in order to devote myself from that time forward to the direct service of humanity.' He counted on learning the nature of that service in the interval. Meanwhile Schweitzer pursued his doctoral studies of Kant and the eschatology of the New Testament. He published two doctoral theses, and his *Quest for the Historical Jesus* burst on the theological world in 1906. He was ordained curate in 1900, appointed lecturer in theology in 1902, and principal of the theological seminary in 1903. His prodigious energy was able to match the scope and intensity of his activities, which frequently left little time for sleep. He claimed that one could burn the candle at both ends, provided that the candle was long enough!

Musical studies

During this time Schweitzer was also developing his reputation as an organist and had taken lessons in Paris with Widor, with whom he later worked on a complete edition of Bach's works. The young man, when asked what he wanted to play on meeting the composer for the first time, had replied without hesitation, "Bach, of course." His book on Bach appeared in 1905 in French, and he completely rewrote it for the German edition some years later. When they were sitting up in the loft in Notre Dame with the light streaming through the Rose window, Widor gave his definition of organ playing as 'the manifestation of a will filled with a vision of eternity.'





This formulation appealed deeply to Schweitzer, who saw the organ as the 'rapprochement of the human spirit to the eternal, imperishable spirit.' Through the performer, Bach is able to transport us from a world of unrest to a world of peace; but the interpreter himself must be in a consecrated frame of mind, for Schweitzer asserts 'Bach's music depends for its effect not on the perfection, but on the spirit of the performance.' For Schweitzer, Bach was an

anchor of tranquillity. The reader can still share this experience, as many of his recordings on the Gunsbach Village organ from 1950 are still available.

The regeneration of society

In his essay *The Undiscovered Self*, CG Jung wrote: 'what we need is the development of the inner spiritual man, the unique individual whose treasure is hidden on the one hand in the symbols of our mythological tradition, and on the other hand in man's unconscious psyche...if the individual could be improved, it seems to me that a foundation would be laid for the improvement of the whole. Even a million noughts do not add up to one. I therefore espouse the unpopular view that a better understanding in the world can only come from the individual and be promoted only by him.'

Schweitzer echoes these words: 'the renewal of civilisation has nothing to do with the character of experiences of the crowd; these are never anything but reactions to external happenings. But civilisation can only revive when there shall come into being in a number of individuals a new turn of mind independent of the prevalent one among the crowd and in opposition to it, the tone of mind that will gradually win influence over the collective one, and in the end determine its character. It is only an ethical movement that can rescue us from the slough of barbarism, and the ethical comes into existence only in individuals.'

Radhakrishnan, the philosopher president of India, expressed himself in similar terms: 'the great ideas that move the world and exalt character...come from the poets and thinkers...thought is the essence of action...life governed by ideals and philosophies are at the back of all revolutionary movements.... what we are is the result of what we think...we cannot change the social order unless we change ourselves...a more effective social order means a different quality of men...'

Schweitzer explains the divergence of individual and collective values as an unavoidable conflict: 'modern utilitarianism loses its sensitiveness to the duty of humanity in proportion to the consistency with which it develops into the ethics of organised society. It cannot be otherwise. The essence of humanity consists in individuals never allowing themselves to think impersonally in terms of expediency as society does, or to sacrifice individual existences in order to gain their object.' He argues that the great mistake of ethical thought has been in failing to admit the essential difference between the morality of an ethical personality and that which is established from the standpoint of society. As a result, the former is sacrificed to the latter, but the dichotomy remains: 'either the moral standard of personality raises the moral standard of society, so far as it is possible, to its own level, or it is dragged down by it.'

The prevailing level of humaneness is thus a matter of individual responsibility, the voicing of the convictions of conscience. Such convictions of conscience can only be arrived at through elemental force, which implies inward spiritual emancipation rather than subservience to the interests of the group. Scepticism has sapped confidence in our own thinking, so that the individual view is dismissed as 'merely subjective' by the conventional authority holding its own view as 'objective'.

Unfortunately, as outlined above, acquiescence to authority can only result in the annihilation not the transcendence of individuality – the submergence of the individual in the unconscious mass. It is important to realise that elemental force does not mean abstract theorising or lack of concern: on the contrary, it leads to a realisation of the interdependence of life, the oneness of being, to a sympathetic concern for all forms of life. This is Schweitzer's ethic of reverence for life fulfilled in action: 'whenever my life devotes itself in any way to life, my finite will to live experiences union with the infinite will in which all life is one, and I enjoy a feeling of refreshment that prevents me from pining away in the desert of life.'

Schweitzer quotes Goethe in a similar context (he was awarded the Goethe Prize in 1932 and wrote a couple of wonderful essays about him):

“Be true to yourself and true to others,
And let thy striving be in love,
And thy life be an act.”

'The great enemy of ethics is insensitivity', contended Schweitzer in one of his sermons. On the intellectual plane, loss of sensitivity is equivalent to what he called 'resigned reasonableness', which a man acquires by modelling himself on others and abandoning his youthful ideals and concern. He once believed in the victory of truth, inhumanity, in the good, in justice, and in the power of kindness and peaceableness. But these high-minded impulses have been inexorably dissolved by a corrosive cynicism. Schweitzer does not underestimate the difficulty of holding to such ideals: 'we must all be prepared to find that life tries to take from us our belief in the good and true, and our enthusiasm for them, but we need not surrender them.' If we do so, then our ideals are not strong enough; they must be experienced and transmitted through ourselves: 'Grow into your ideals', he advises, 'so that life can never rob you of them.'

The individual is called upon to cultivate contrasting qualities of sensitivity and peaceableness on the one hand, and courage and independence of thought on the other. In our own radius, we can use kindness to heal misunderstanding, mistrust and hostility, but we must stand firm and speak out in the face of temptations to inhumanity. The light must radiate without, the seed must be sown, as Goethe put it, 'without worrying as to how large the harvest will be or where it will come up.' Using Schweitzer's phrase, we must have 'the soul of a dove in the hide of an elephant.'

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