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Recommended Citation

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Midwest American Academy of Religion
Section: Ethics + Philosophy of Religion
March 3-5, 2022

“For You There Are No Strangers”:
Albert Schweitzer and the Ethics of Necessity in Pandemic America

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I. *Introduction*¹

Claiming millions of lives and affecting millions more, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust humanity into a period of intense reflection on the fragility of life. However, in this time when people have been encouraged to care for their fellow human beings by taking the precautions necessary to protect one another, many have asked the same question as one of Jesus' antagonistic opponents in the Gospel of Luke: "and who is my neighbor?"² In addition to the virus, it seems, the United States has been plagued by another adversary: non-necessity toward the other. By claiming no responsibility for the well-being and care of others, no one – including our friends, family, and loved ones – is considered our neighbor.

In this paper, I argue that Albert Schweitzer's thought can prove therapeutic on this front. In his work as a missionary doctor in the Congo, Schweitzer developed an incredibly comprehensive system of ethics, extending not only to humanity, but to animal and non-sentient life *in toto*. In this, Schweitzer emphasizes one's necessity and responsibility toward all other manifestations of the universal "will-to-live." This ethical system has the potential of providing us a framework to think through humanity's obligation to one another amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in our American context. By utilizing his language and concepts and applying them to our current situation, an argument can be made for the same reciprocity and mutual care of one another in 21st century America.

I do as much in four subsequent parts. First, I introduce Schweitzer and the origins of his ethical system with a particular eye toward its theological and philosophical foundations. As

¹ Much appreciation is due to two parties for the genesis of this paper: First, to the community at Concord Trinity UMC in St. Louis, MO who afforded me the time and space to engage in this academic endeavor amidst my responsibilities on their staff, and second to Dr. Dale C. Allison Jr. who, in my final semester at Princeton Theological Seminary, supervised an independent study that allowed me to dive deeply into Schweitzer's ethics, thereby solidifying Schweitzer as an ongoing dialogue partner.

² Luke 10:29. All biblical translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

Schweitzer's own academic influences were incredibly broad, it can be difficult to conclusively identify the stimulus for any given facet of his thought when not exclusively and unambiguously disclosed. However, the combination of these disclosures and personal statements from his various correspondences allows us to make at least a few convincing arguments.

Second, I move from the theoretical foundations of Schweitzer's ethic to its practicality. This discussion primarily centers around the concepts of necessity and antihierarchy – novel components of Reverence for Life that give the system a pragmatic edge over-against its European competitors. It is these two key ethical mechanisms, I argue below, that make Schweitzer's thought so radically relevant to the American cultural milieu today.

Third, I bring popular American ethics *vis-à-vis* the COVID-19 pandemic to light. Pulling from contemporary journalism and social analyses, I showcase both the ubiquity of negative attitudes toward the concept of ethical mutuality, as well as the development of its opposing faction in American society. This survey of America's current ethical attitudes will help to identify exactly why – and how – Schweitzer's system can be useful here.

Finally, a way forward is proposed. By applying Schweitzer's ethical system to our contemporary situation, I suggest that, in light of the antihierarchical structure of Schweitzer's thought, one is obligated to dual acts of necessity: *unethical* necessity toward the life of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and *ethical* necessity toward one's fellow human being. These dual acts of necessity provide a therapeutic inversion to the popular American ethic of rugged individualism and unrestrained autonomy while also assisting with the reconsideration of the components that undergird said ethic.

II. *The Origin and Foundations of “Reverence for Life”*

“True ethics begin where the use of language ceases.”³ The world will never again know the likes of someone who adhered to these words as faithfully as Albert Schweitzer. Prodigious in the fields of theology, philosophy, and music, Schweitzer left his academic post at the University of Strasbourg in 1905 to pursue the end of becoming a missionary doctor in the Congo. He studied medicine at Strasbourg from 1905-1912 and left for Africa in 1913.

Schweitzer felt as though he should not merely accept the untroubled life of security he was born into when so many others were suffering. He says as much in his biography when reminiscing about the day, in 1896, he resolved to do something with his life in service to the rest of the world: “It struck me as inconceivable that I should be allowed to lead such a happy life while I saw so many people around me struggling with sorrow and suffering...I came to the conclusion that until I was thirty I could consider myself justified in devoting myself to scholarship and the arts, but after that I would devote myself directly to serving humanity.”⁴

Two years after arriving in Africa and beginning his career as a doctor, Schweitzer found himself battling an extended case of writer’s block and mental agitation. Convicted by the fact that he’d only spent time criticizing the ethical failings of civilization and society without trying to constructively improve upon them, Schweitzer set out to discover the “elementary and universal concept of the ethical.” However, he did so to no avail: “For months on end I lived in a continual state of mental agitation. Without the least success I concentrated...on the real nature of the affirmation of life and of ethics and on the question of what they have in common. I was

³ Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization II: Civilization and Ethics*, 3rd ed. (London, Unwin Books, 1967), 219.

⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1933), 82.

wondering about in a thicket where no path was to be found. I was pushing against an iron door that would not yield.”⁵ This continued until one day, when making his way down the Ogooué River, “there flashed upon [his] mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase ‘reverence for life.’”⁶ This event was the beginning of the ethical work Schweitzer would develop and proclaim for the rest of his life.

In the eleventh chapter of his *Civilization and Ethics*, Schweitzer lays out the three things necessary for ethical thought. In order to move forward, especially into the further theological foundations, these need to be stated and understood:

[Ethical thought] must have nothing to do with an ethical interpretation of the world; it must become cosmic and mystical, that is to say, it must seek to conceive all the self-devotion which rules in ethics as a manifestation of an inward, spiritual relation to the world; it must not lapse into abstract thinking, but must remain elemental, understanding self-devotion to the world to be self-devotion of human life to every form of living being with which it can come into relation.⁷

The first necessary thing, according to Schweitzer, is to proceed without the assumption that there is an objective meaning or purpose to existence. Knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, cannot do as much for Schweitzer. Instead, “Knowledge, though ever becoming deeper and more comprehensive, can do nothing except take us ever deeper and ever further into the mystery that all that is, is will-to-live.”⁸

The second necessary thing, for Schweitzer, is that one’s will-to-live, which underlies all ethical thought, is but a manifestation of one’s relation to the world. The will-to-live stands subjectively over the world as the position which confesses life to be worth living because we

⁵ Ibid., 154-155.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 212.

⁸ Ibid.

subjectively create meaning and purpose in our lives which are ultimately devoid of meaning and purpose. The propensity to create meaning and purpose in the world inevitably binds one to the world in an irrevocable way, making one's self-devotion emblematic of one's devotion to the world.

Finally, the third thing necessary to ethical thought is that ethics must never become so abstract as to be devoid of the very thing it sets out to do. For Schweitzer, the ethics of the individual and the ethics of the communal interpenetrate; put another way, one's "self-devotion to the world" bears the weight of humanity's self-devotion "to every form of living being." If this is true, which Schweitzer takes it to be, then ethics never require prior deliberation when lived out in the world.

Just as these things are elemental to ethical thought, Schweitzer claims a Cartesian starting point for philosophy: "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.'" Following this, Schweitzer says that "Ethics consist, therefore, in my experiencing the compulsion to show to all will-to-live the same reverence as I do to my own."⁹

This is the baseline understanding of ethics for Schweitzer. It is in line with his European heritage, which historically has taken a philosophically optimistic, life-affirming attitude toward existence. However, Schweitzer is also opposing those European philosophers who adopted a pessimistic, life-negating attitude toward existence, viz. Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer. The major reason for Schweitzer siding with the optimistic, life-affirming philosophies which have been so dominant in his cultural milieu, I argue, is due to his theological convictions.

⁹ Ibid., 213-214.

Though Reverence for Life transcends Christianity, Schweitzer's work on the life of Jesus was influential in his development of this ethic. This is especially prominent in his letters, where he speaks candidly with people concerning the ethic and his first existential exposure to it. In 1931, Schweitzer writes "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."¹⁰

Twice more, toward the end of his life, in 1958 and 1959, respectively, Schweitzer says as much: "I have regarded it as the true mission of my life to advance the humanitarian ideal in our spiritual life...I encountered it in Jesus' Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount"¹¹ and "Knowing love for others and for all creation, know the Beatitude, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will achieve mercy' — that is the goal to which my idea of reverence for life is meant to call them."¹² Without Schweitzer's academic work on the life of Jesus, and thereby using that work to understand his ethical convictions, he may never have constructed his system of Reverence for Life.

In addition to these explicit references to Christianity and the person of Jesus, there are times when there are implicit references to biblical passages or biblical ideas. Though they might not always jump off the page, the underlying influence is there. One example is that which is quoted above: "Ethics consist, therefore, in my experiencing the compulsion to show to all will-to-live the same reverence as I do to my own." This calls to mind Jesus' words in Luke 6:31: "And do likewise to others that which you would have them do to you." Though it is cloaked in philosophical-ethical language, the same principle is at work.

¹⁰ Albert Schweitzer, *Letters: 1905-1965*, ed. Hans Walter Bähr, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 123.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹² *Ibid.*, 287.

Another, more straightforward, example comes a few pages later when Schweitzer says “I can do nothing but hold to the fact that the will-to-live in me manifests itself as will-to-live which desires to become one with other will-to-live. That is for me the light that shines in the darkness.”¹³ This is clearly a reference to John 1:5, which says “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.” It is possible that Schweitzer’s work naturally inhabits Christian language, after having worked with it academically for so many years, or he may be intentionally tipping his hat toward something unique within Christianity which exemplifies this ethic. This, unfortunately, is not able to be answered here.

Above, we have briefly established Schweitzer’s ethical thought and its (possible) influences. The true appeal of Schweitzer’s system, though, is its practicality and ability to be implemented in the day-to-day life of the ethical agent. This practicality is grounded in two specific aspects of Reverence for Life that sets it apart as uniquely useful and applicable to our currently situation. It is to these two components that we now turn.

III. *Necessity and Antihierarchy in Schweitzer’s Ethics*

The Christian obligation of concern for the other is summed up most succinctly in Jesus’ exchange with a scribe in Mark 12. When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus first paraphrases the *Shema* passage from Deuteronomy 6:4 – “Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, and you will love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul and your whole mind and your whole strength...” – and second, claims “you will love your neighbor as yourself.”

¹³ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 216.

This notion of loving one's neighbor as oneself is ultimately concerned with the question of necessity. What is required in order to be a member of a social collective in good standing? This question of necessity was of the utmost importance to Schweitzer, and in keeping with the comprehensive nature of his ethical system, so this question was for him all-encompassing, incorporating all living things, sentient or not. With this in mind, we must turn first to the absence of a value hierarchy between forms of life in Schweitzer's system before we can establish any kind of norm in human-to-human ethical interaction, as this antihierarchical vision is the foundation upon the entire implementation of Schweitzer's ethic is built.

This lack of hierarchy is the key factor that distinguishes Schweitzer's ethical system from the other prevailing schools of European ethical thought: "Reverence for Life is judged particularly strange because it established *no dividing line* between higher and lower, between more valuable and less valuable life."¹⁴ As is particularly relevant to our current global situation, Schweitzer went so far as to include microorganisms in his system: "I rejoice over the new remedies for sleeping sickness, which enable me to preserve life, where once I could only witness the progress of a painful disease. But every time I put the germs that cause the disease under a microscope I cannot but reflect that I have to sacrifice this life in order to save another."¹⁵

Schweitzer's antihierarchical model is acutely recognizable here as he laments the destruction of disease-causing germs in order to preserve human life. And it is not lost on Schweitzer that true ethics, lived in the concrete existence of day-to-day life, require choices and at times, destruction of life is unavoidable. The ethics of Reverence for Life requires one "to

¹⁴ Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought*, 235.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 236.

decide for himself in each case how far he can remain ethical and how far he must submit himself to the necessity for destruction of and injury to life.”¹⁶

For Schweitzer, any injury to life is an unethical act, even if that act is required for the sustenance of one’s own. As unique manifestations of the universal will-to-live, any act of ruin by one will-to-live against another is an immoral act, regardless of its necessity. “In the conflict between the maintenance of my own existence and the destruction of, or injury to, that of another, I can never unite the ethical and the necessary...I must choose between ethical and necessary.”¹⁷ In this sense, Schweitzer’s ethics cannot be relativized at all; they are inherently absolute insofar as they are unflinching in their conviction that all manifestations of life share equal importance and demand equal reverence.

However, due to the lack of hierarchy in Schweitzer’s ethical system, this necessity of destruction must be tempered with empathy for that which is being destroyed, regardless of the kind or classification of life involved. This empathy, for Schweitzer, is the act of seeing oneself in the being that has been killed, “...of imagining in such life the characteristic which we find in our own. That is dread of extinction, fear of pain, and desire for happiness.”

When viewed through this lens, animosity harbored toward something like the SARS-CoV-2 virus begins to feel misplaced, and may even inspire in oneself something akin to sympathy at the realization that the virus does not harbor animosity *toward us*; it only desires to survive. In much the same way that our bodies destroy the virus in an act of *unethical necessity* for the purpose of survival, so the virus does the same thing to us. Recognition of this fact, for Schweitzer, is an essential step toward the affirmation of Reference for Life. At times, these acts

¹⁶ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 221.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

of unethical necessity are required for the survival and betterment of an entire community, and cannot be avoided.

However, though Schweitzer's system incorporates an allowance for instances of unethical necessity, so there is also an imperative for *ethical necessity*, viz. obligatory care toward the other. Again, with the comprehensive view of Schweitzerian ethics in mind, this necessity extends to both human and non-human wills-to-live. Ethical and unethical necessity toward the non-human other is well illustrated in Schweitzer's short excerpt on the truly ethical farmer who, coming home from harvesting flowers as fodder for his animals, must avoid "[striking] the head of a single flower by the roadside...thereby [committing] a wrong against life without being under the pressure of necessity."¹⁸

For Schweitzer, what separates the second act from the first is the burden of necessity. Mowing down flowers for the purpose of sustaining life is an unethical necessity, whereas stepping on and killing a flower inadvertently is an unethical non-necessity. In this particular scenario, though, the highest good – the *ethical necessity* – is the behavior that allows the farmer to avoid inflicting anymore damage and death than is necessary in the first place.

This is, again, portrayed in one of Schweitzer's letters where he talks about the fact that he takes the liberty of killing mosquitos in Africa, but not in Europe, since the insects are known to spread malaria in Africa. As another example of his thought, killing African mosquitos are an unethical necessity in order to preserve life, whereas the abstinence of killing mosquitos in Europe is the ethical necessity. For Schweitzer, killing an insect that presents no threat of harm is another example of the unethical non-necessity.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., 221.

¹⁹ At this point, three categories of agency thus far have been established: ethical necessity, unethical necessity, and unethical non-necessity. However, it is the opinion of the author that this schema's final category of "ethical non-necessity" is a category of action immediately dead-on-arrival. As a specific action or non-action is considered

Necessity and antihierarchy are inherently connected in Schweitzer's thought. Necessity is dictated as such precisely because of the biological egalitarianism espoused in *Reverence for Life*. It is this feature that allows one will-to-live to be obligated toward other wills-to-live in good faith that life will not be harmed or taken when not under the burden of necessity, regardless of the specific creature or form of life. With these two key aspects of Schweitzer's thought before us, let us turn to the contemporary problem of reciprocity in America and how Schweitzer's ethical thought might be able to be leveraged against it.

IV. *COVID-19 and the Problem of Reciprocity in America*

Popular American ethics are predicated upon a false equivalence. Discussions of morality in an American context often begin and end with the rugged individualism that has defined the U.S. as a nation since its declaration of independence from Britain in 1776. Understood as a safe haven from the tyranny of persecution and governmental overreach, America was founded with an eye toward personal rights and individual liberties. In more recent history, this was further fortified by the cultural mania of the Cold War and McCarthyism in the mid-twentieth century.

As such, the American litmus test for what might constitute the notion of "freedom" is quite a voluntaristic one. Unrestricted autonomy – based almost exclusively in one's resolve from moment-to-moment – is often the standard of measurement used to gauge a person's or society's commitment to freedom. However, this begs the question of the definition of freedom, completely disregarding the fact that freedom-as-unrestricted-autonomy does not exist in modern society.

ethical, it is instantly classified as "necessary" and the ethical agent is obligated toward it. In other words, Schweitzer's system is one in which normative ethics, applied ethics, and meta-ethics conflate into a single *modus operandi*.

Society is necessarily hedged-in by and subsists within the constraint of limits that protect people from one's individual rights being infringed upon another's. Freedom cannot exist unless it exists within a set of boundaries. While there are seemingly obvious boundaries, such as particular boundaries around the protection of life and property, there are others that some view as not so straightforward, especially within a culture that conflates freedom and individualism as consistently and thoroughly as the United States.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only served to magnify this seeming ambiguity and force it to the forefront of social and cultural dialogue. As the pandemic has continued to evolve and spread across the world, the American government, like most other nations, instituted specific mandates and policies to protect public health. These mandates, though varying by state, business, etc., often include receiving a COVID-19 vaccine, wearing a well-fitting mask, social distancing by 6+ feet, quarantining in the event of a positive test, and others.²⁰

From the very early days of the pandemic, these measures have been viewed as political and conspiratorial in nature. As early as June of 2020, a mere three months after the pandemic began in earnest, The Guardian published an article commenting on the controversial nature of masking in America: "Many who refuse to wear masks say it imposes on their individual freedom." One woman interviewed is quoted as saying "You're removing our freedoms and stomping on our constitutional rights by these communist [sic] dictatorship orders or laws you want to mandate."²¹

Regardless of how misguided these claims might be, they have continued to spread on the political right. Most recently, there has been an uptick in comparisons of COVID-19 restrictions

²⁰ For further details of some of these plans, see "COVID-19," USA Gov, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://www.usa.gov/coronavirus>.

²¹ Laura Aratani, "How did face masks become a political issue in America?," The Guardian, 29 June, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/29/face-masks-us-politics-coronavirus>

to WWII-era Nazism,²² thus further legitimizing the convictions of those who equate any kind of authoritative mandate as an infringement upon their personal and individual liberties. Despite these comparisons being historically inaccurate and offensive to the individuals and communities who experienced the horrors of the Holocaust, they are becoming more and more openly-accepted on the political and religious right. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), a leading proponent of these metaphors, has claimed that she and those of her same ilk are now “the [Republican] party’s base, not the fringe.”²³

The logic of those who claim the same kind of oppression from COVID-19 mandates as victims of the Holocaust is convoluted and tortuous to understand, and we are not afforded the time and space here to attempt to grasp it. However, the purpose of presenting the above examples has merely been to showcase the prevailing attitudes toward any kind of *enforceable requirement* regarding measures meant to protect public health. This has created a crisis of reciprocity in the United States between those who adhere to mask and vaccination mandates (or continue to mask and get vaccinated regardless of a mandate) to protect public health and those who do not believe or understand themselves to be obligated to take measures to protect anyone besides themselves.

The issue of reciprocity as it is illustrated above is merely the symptomatic response of a portion of the population devoid of understanding ethical necessity as an essential component of human-to-human relationships. Infusing our contemporary American situation with the Schweitzerian model of Reverence for Life merely allows us one way to think through ethical

²² Aaron Blake, “‘Needle Nazis,’ ‘medical brown shirts,’ Mengele and Stars of David: How Nazi-Coronavirus comparisons have proliferated on the right,” The Washington Post, December 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/12/01/nazi-coronavirus-mandate-comparisons/>

²³ Ibid.

issues at a time when every individual is partially culpable for the continued life, or ultimate death, of their fellow humans.

V. Schweitzerian Ethics as Culturally Therapeutic

Though the pandemic may have put them under a magnifying glass, none of the issues discussed above are new to American society. However, our current informational situation is. Between the ubiquity of social media and the post-modern embrace of “alternative facts” - a term popularized by senior advisor to former President Trump, Kellyanne Conway²⁴ - a rejection of (among other things) demonstrably provable science has become commonplace. Never before in history has American society been so saturated with personal opinions that are, 1) regarded as equally authoritative, and 2) so influential over the mortality of oneself and others.

With this in mind, we must first understand that Schweitzerian ethics will not be motivational to all. To an extent, the argument presented here is not targeted at those who deny reality at such a fundamental level. One who denies the very existence of COVID-19 in the first place cannot be moved toward compassionate care for the other vis-à-vis the pandemic until the reality of the pandemic is acknowledged. Where Schweitzer can assist us in our current cultural milieu is in the space that exists between the epistemological acceptance of the pandemic’s ramifications and one’s ethical responsibility therein.

America has a fundamentally-erroneous understanding of the concept of necessity as an infringement upon personal rights that has moved beyond the realm of opinion and into the real, concrete existence of oneself and others. However, rights *must be* coupled with responsibility in

²⁴ David Folkenflick, “Delusions or Deceptions? White House ‘Alternative facts’ Rile Press,” NPR, January 23, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/23/511160267/delusions-or-deceptions-white-house-alternative-facts-rile-press>.

order to avoid devolving into narcissism. It is with the absence of interpersonal and reciprocal responsibility that Schweitzer can assist.

First, though, we must acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic requires regular acts of unethical necessity. Each time someone takes measures to avoid infection and transmission of the illness, she damages the viral life of SARS-CoV-2, either actively or passively. By wearing a mask and social distancing, one passively impedes another will-to-live by refusing it the proper conditions needed to nurture and cultivate its species. However, one actively seeks to destroy the life of the virus by partaking in the vaccine. These efforts are obviously not undertaken frivolously, as they are carried out with the intention of prolonging the life and existence of the human species. With this objective, these measures are indeed necessities, but unethical ones to be sure, as it requires one will-to-live to exert itself against another.

The ethical status of these acts, though, are contingent upon the perception and viewpoint of the other. As they are an exertion against another will-to-live meant to impede its life in some way, they are unethical. But insofar as they are undertaken to protect the life of another, viz. a fellow human, they are indeed ethical. Schweitzerian ethics, though absolute in their antihierarchical convictions, are not immune to ambiguous situations during which time two seemingly-contradictory actions coalesce into a single act of guilty-innocence.²⁵

Viewing these actions from the viewpoint of humanity, we must understand them existentially as ethical necessities for the care and concern of the other. When we speak of the other, though, we may be tempted to believe that we have a responsibility, first and foremost, to

²⁵ This phrase is derived from a similar construction in one of Schweitzer's sermons: "You walk along a woodland path...But your train, unobtrusively as you pass, is death. Here you stepped on an ant and left it in pain. There is a little beetle that you squashed. Over there a worm, over which your foot has trodden, writhes in agony. Into the beautiful song of life, you, the innocent-guilty one, have introduced a melody of pain and death." Schweitzer, *A Place for Revelation*, 18.

humanity as the pinnacle of creation. However, Schweitzer is adamant that this is not the case: “We like to imagine that humankind is nature’s goal; but facts do not support that belief. Indeed, when we consider the immensity of the universe, we must confess that humankind is insignificant... human life can hardly be considered the goal of the universe.”²⁶ Schweitzer is speaking here from both a scientific and philosophical viewpoint, as there is no evidence-based criterion for believing humanity is the apex of life in the universe, nor can any substantive argument be made in Schweitzer’s own philosophical system for as much.

This displacement of humanity from atop the social strata has ramifications for ethical agency in the world, as it forces us to confront the question of why we should care for the life of a particular “other” over-against a different “other.” For Schweitzer, there is not a straightforward answer to this question. In fact, within the realm of Schweitzerian ethics, the decision of which life we should save or sacrifice is indiscriminate at best: “...In practice we are forced to choose. At times we have to decide arbitrarily which forms of life, and even which particular individuals, we shall save, and which we shall destroy.”²⁷

In the context of our particular situation, Schweitzer tells us there is no *objective* argument that demands we care for the human life over the viral life. However, we have the *subjective* duty to be concerned, not only with all “life-destinies” in general, but also with all “human destinies” in particular that accompany us throughout the course of our own existences, offering ourselves “to the man who needs a fellow-man [sic].”²⁸ Empathy with creatures that need and desire empathy is what sets humanity apart. We do not pay specific attention to human life because it is the *telos* of creation, but because we, as humans, share a uniquely human

²⁶ Schweitzer, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” 125.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁸ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 225.

experience: in humanity, one's "will-to-live has come to know about other wills-to-live."²⁹ This positions humanity as a creature unique among creation in that it has the knowledge, not only of other wills-to-live, but the ability to disregard its own will-to-live in favor of another will-to-live.

In one of his sermons, Schweitzer says "For you there are no strangers, only people whose well-being must be your concern."³⁰ For Schweitzer, every person must be the object of our care and concern; we are directly and without deliberation responsible for the ethical necessities that will enable our fellow human to maintain her will-to-live precisely because we have the ability to look beyond our own survival and toward the survival of another. This responsibility, in any given scenario or situation, *is* the ethical necessity.

The responsibility of adhering to this ethical necessity takes precedent over individualist disquiet, as "it is not right to be permanently preoccupied with our own well-being; the welfare of others and of human society in general must become part of our responsibility."³¹ To be sure, though, it is not lost on Schweitzer that this requires and will require personal sacrifice. Whereas most other ethical systems seek to establish minimum and maximum boundaries around ethical action, before and after which one is no longer beholden to the responsibility, Reverence for Life does no such thing. In fact, Schweitzer tells us that "the ethic cannot be fully carried out without the possibility of complete sacrifice of self."³²

In view of our current cultural setting, Schweitzerian ethics can prove therapeutic by forcing us to invert the typical American narrative. Reverence for Life, as an ethical scaffold, is exclusively focused outward; it is "responsibility without limit" toward the other.³³ In stark

²⁹ Ibid., 216.

³⁰ Schweitzer, *A Place for Revelation*, 8.

³¹ Albert Schweitzer, *Reverence for Life: The Words of Albert Schweitzer*, ed. Harold E. Robles, (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 141.

³² Schweitzer, "The Ethics of Reverence for Life," 130.

³³ Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, 215.

contrast with the historical shape of American culture, it does not reflect back on the ethical agent beyond the reverence they, and others, must maintain for their own will-to-live. Though the decision is ultimately left to the agent herself, Reverence for Life directly instructs one to act against her own wishes, desires, and necessities in favor of another.

The solipsistic sentiment that prevails in contemporary America leaves little room for self-sacrificial service to the other. Schweitzer's thought forces us to set aside such egoism and inquire as to the ethical necessity in this moment in history without recourse to dissenting opinion. Such opinions hold no authority within the realm of Reverence for Life, as one's obligation to the other inherently supersedes one's desire against that obligation.

Within the current state of affairs, subscribing to Schweitzer's thought would present itself as making decisions exclusively with the other in mind and putting aside one's own concern-of-self. Getting vaccinated, masking, social distancing, etc. in order to best care for the well-being of the other amidst our current pandemic reality is the ethical necessity at this moment. That is not to say that the ethical necessity will remain static; as the reality of the pandemic changes, new restrictions or practices may very well be introduced. However, the ethical necessity has the ability to absorb new practices and evolve according to the context. The only static aspect of Schweitzerian ethics is the imperative to reverence all life fully and without compromise.

Within this framework, we are offered the opportunity to reconsider the concept of individual rights, not as unrestricted autonomy *for oneself*, but as opportunity for protection *of another*. Schweitzerian ethics allows us to reorient our understanding of one's own rights outward as tools by which we can ensure another is cared for. These rights we are afforded can be recast, not as a barrier built around ourselves in order to shield us from unwanted obligation,

but as safeguards in place to protect our ability to continually seek the well-being of another will-to-live instead of our own. In this light, engaging the ethical necessity does not present a breach of our rights, but a fulfillment of them, thereby paving the way to remedy the ethical hazards associated with conventional American attitudes toward responsibility and obligation outside of self.

IV. Conclusions

The purpose of this project has been to merely begin a conversation, both about the prevailing relevance of Albert Schweitzer's ethical thought, as well as its ability to speak directly to our current global situation. Rarely are historical, concrete issues settled within the halls of academia, but it is here that the battles are often fought. This paper is meant to be a single advancement within the wider ethical conflicts being waged during the pandemic.

Popular American culture paradoxical; it seeks both unlimited, unrestrained freedom while also desiring to establish boundaries around that freedom, preventing any kind of external obligation from penetrating it. COVID-19 has served as a spotlight for several aspects of American society that have long lurked in the shadows, but this is certainly one of the most outwardly visible. Rather than accepting this shadow-side of American society as inherent, Schweitzerian ethics allows us to think about these issues in a new way. By both providing a model for ethical reciprocity between agents, as well as a filter through which we can understand the issues that undergird the problem of reciprocity itself, Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life" can help us adapt and discern the ethical necessity in any and all crises, including the current one, if only we have the humility to let it.

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