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## ETHICS



**Review - Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life**  
Ethical Idealism and Self-Realization  
by Mike W. Martin  
Ashgate, 2007  
Review by Stan van Hooft, Ph.D.  
Nov 25th 2008

There are essentially two approaches to ethics. One stresses duty and seeks to ground and define our obligations. The practical task of such an ethics is to offer guidance for living by telling us what we are obliged to do or to avoid doing. Whether these obligations stem from the commands of God or from the deliverances of pure reason, the fundamental stance of an ethical agent toward them is one of obedience. The second stresses virtue and ethical motivation. The practical task of such an ethics is to explicate and inspire the motivations that lead individuals to act well in a morally complex world. The fundamental ethical stance here is one of caring and responsiveness. What Mike W. Martin's short book makes clear is not only that Albert Schweitzer contributes to the second approach but also that he is a more important contributor to that tradition than he has been given credit for. Martin gives a thorough and clear critical exposition of Schweitzer's moral philosophy in which some of its more Romantic and mystical excesses are not allowed to obscure the valuable philosophical ideas which it contains

Schweitzer's central ethical concept is "Reverence for Life". He sees this as stemming from a fundamental will-to-life inherent in all living things that, in self-conscious beings such as ourselves, establishes a drive towards both self-realization and empathy with other living things. Unlike Nietzsche's will-to-power, it is not egoistic or individualistic. As living beings we are not only concerned for our own lives and development but also for the lives of other living beings and the environments in which we live. Along with the inclination towards self-perfection that this drive engenders, it gives rise to a nature-centered spirituality and to a form of ethical idealism. Rather than obeying moral rules which are conceived of as external impositions, the soul of the ethical life for Schweitzer is the drive towards fulfillment and authenticity. Insofar as we are a will to live, such authenticity will be felt as a need to show reverence for life in all its forms. The virtues that this gives rise to – which include compassion, gratitude, justice, hope, and the pursuit of peace – will be understood not as

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norms or principles to be followed, but as ideals and values in the light of which particular decisions must be made creatively and sincerely. Martin's text is especially valuable in outlining these virtues and showing how they constitute a body of dispositions unified by the fundamental attitude of reverence for life.

The nature-centered spirituality which was central to Schweitzer's thought replaced the Lutheran Christianity in which he was brought up and constitutes a kind of pantheistic faith which led him to be a precursor of some strands of contemporary environmental philosophy. Such a philosophy values nature not just as a necessary resource for human flourishing or even as a repository of beauty and revitalization, but as the very ground of our being and source of motivation. Such ideas also led Schweitzer to an interest in Eastern religions with their stress on compassion for all living things.

Of course it is an important aspect of Schweitzer's life that he was not just an ethical theorist. He was a paradigm example of the kind of moralist who inspires by example as much as by ideas. A high achiever from his earliest years, he gave up a successful life as a pastor, an academic, a concert organist, and even as a father and husband, to found and run a missionary hospital in equatorial Africa. While applauding the self-sacrifice that this involved, Martin does not avoid the ethical difficulties that arose from this essentially colonial role and from the need to give up activities and commitments that were of considerable inherent ethical value in order to fulfill it. He uses them to illustrate the difference between ethical idealism and the more usual ethical principlism which mainstream moral theory encourages us to adopt. In a world of global injustice and exploitation, we all face the ethical difficulty of knowing what we should do. Most of us are fortunate to a degree which the downtrodden of the world can barely imagine. According to Schweitzer's thought this gives us a motivation in gratitude to do what we can for others. But we must also be true to ourselves and to what we love most dearly: our loving relationships, vocations, and interests in art, knowledge, and progress. There is no formula for how to live life. But reverence for life does inspire the kind of concern for self and compassion for others which can lead one to adopt the virtuous stances which lead to such political commitments as the pursuit of human rights and lasting peace.

This is a clear and well written book which will contribute to philosophical and theological debates around virtue ethics while being both accessible and inspirational for the general reader. Its greatest value will be measured by the extent to which it leads its readers back to Albert Schweitzer's original texts.

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**Stan van Hoofft**, Deakin University, is the author of *Caring: An Essay in the Philosophy of Ethics*, (Niwot, University Press of Colorado, 1995) and numerous journal articles on moral philosophy, bioethics, business ethics, and on the nature of health and disease. His *Life, Death, and Subjectivity: Moral Sources for Bioethics*, was published by Rodopi (Amsterdam and New York) in 2004. Stan published two further books in 2006: *Caring about Health*, (Aldershot: Ashgate), and *Understanding Virtue Ethics*, (Chesham: Acumen Publishers).

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The expression "reverence for life" is the key to Albert Schweitzer's personal philosophy. No person must ever harm or destroy life unless absolutely necessary. This attitude permeated everything he did. Schweitzer was born in Alsace in the then German Empire. He studied theology and became a priest, but that was not enough. He wanted to alleviate suffering, and accordingly studied medicine. Together with his wife, who was a nurse, he built and ran a hospital at the mission station Lambarene in Gabon, a French colony at the time. This effort became an example to others. In 1957, Schweitzer spoke on the radio to people all over the world. The respect of the Nobel Prize Laureate for all life made him issue his warning against nuclear tests and the dangers from radioactive fall-out. A Reverence for Life is small book that provides a short, yet wonderful insight into the life and thoughts of one of our great humanitarians. Albert Schweitzer was a theologian, a doctor, a musician, an author, and he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952: all notable achievements; however, I believe that his greatest achievement was not for himself, it was for humanity as a whole, in both his actions and with his words. Albert set up his own rudimentary hospital in Africa and spent many years tirelessly helping the sick and infirm. He used his own funds and the assistance of friends to set up and run his hospital and, even when in ill health himself, he was dedicated to lessen the suffering of other human beings. The work aims to consider A. Schweitzer's ethical principle of reverence for life as a conceptual foundation for the society's attitude to the environment, in particular, to such types of human activity as natural resource management and environmental conservation. Scientific novelty of the study lies in the fact that Schweitzer's ethical principle is being treated not as a historic (protoecoethical) step in environmental ethics development but, on the contrary, as a full-fledged self-sufficient principle. The attained results show that the ethical principle of reverence for life can become a guiding principle in evolution of the society's attitude to the life surrounding it.