

# Albert Schweitzer's "Reverence For Life": A Biocentric Framework for Environmental Sustainability

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## Abstract

*In the wake of the current environmental crisis and its effect on life, there is a need for ideologies that can foster a reorientation that will possibly give the care for life and environment an obligatory status. One of such ideologies that seek to wake the consciousness of humans to this plight is Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life." Schweitzer developed the groundwork for an environmental ethics encompassing several interloping themes such as the intrinsic value of all life, the unity of life, individual responsibility, and contextual moral decision-making. Schweitzer considers all life (human and non-human) to be equal and should not be destroyed. He further inferred that since the environment is the natural home for all life, it ought to be cared for so that it can fulfill its function of playing a good host to all life forms. Thus, he encourages a holistic interdependence between all life and nature. In spite of the several urgent sensitizations regarding environmental issues in recent times, we still witness severe challenges in these areas due to ignorance, greed, and selfishness. This is why Schweitzer's theory becomes unique in its ability to draw our attention to how much we can either harm or do ourselves good, to the degree that will either manage or mismanage the environment. While his inability to satisfactorily justify the equality of all life forms makes his theory run into difficult challenges, this paper seeks to evince the relevance of Schweitzer's reverence for life towards environmental sustainability.*

*Keywords: environment, life, reverence, Schweitzer, biocentrism.*

## Introduction

The increasing rate of destruction of life and nature in the world today reveals that humans are gradually losing consciousness of the sacredness of life and nature. Hence, it is at such a time as this that the voice of Albert Schweitzer becomes handy to awaken our consciousness to the inherent value of every form of life (human and non-human) and its connection with the rest of nature. Since Schweitzer believes that all life has equal value, he does not allow any weak justification for its destruction. Schweitzer believed that all life has equal value because:

life which wants to live, is surrounded by life which wants to live. Being will-to-life, I feel the obligation to respect all will-to-life about me as equal to my own. The fundamental idea of good is thus that it consists in preserving life, in favoring it, in want-

ing to bring it to its highest value, and evil consists in destroying life, doing it injury, hindering its development (Schweitzer; In Wadlow, 2021).

From this postulation, Schweitzer makes the case that every living thing desires to achieve fulfillment and progress, much like how an individual strives for personal growth. Nevertheless, the will to live is not always consistent; there is an internal drive that aims for self-actualization, a superior state. This principle of equality of all life opposes the idea that humans may exploit the environment for their own goals without considering the consequences on other living beings. It recognizes the fact that all living things have a symbiotic relationship that benefits each other. There are several interdependencies among different species.

The same notion is made by Aldo Leopold in his pioneering work on deep ecology, *A Sand County Almanac*:

All ethics so far evolved rest on a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts...The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soil, water, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land (Leopold, 1949, 161).

Thinking along a similar line, Schweitzer holds that the life of a man is not more valuable than the life of a mosquito. Although this view may seem radical and problematic in certain situations, there is still much to be learned from Schweitzer's philosophy with regards to the importance of preserving life and the environment.

The paper begins by first discussing Schweitzer's biocentric reverence for life. It further considers how Schweitzer expanded his argument for the reverence for life to also include reverence for the environment. This paper observes that while Schweitzer was concerned with enhancing our understanding of the importance of life, he paid little attention to those characteristics or human conditions that incline people to underappreciate or exploit life and the environment. This paper identifies ignorance, greed, and selfishness as some of the major factors that hinder humans from revering life and the environment as much as they should, as suggested by Schweitzer. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the relevance of Schweitzer in the fight for the sustainability of life and the environment in modern times.

### **Schweitzer's Biocentric Reverence for Life**

Schweitzer concluded, following World War I, that the decline in Western culture and civilization might be attributed to the discrepancy between the world's material progress and man's moral duty. In other words, despite the improvement in material prosperity, man's moral consciousness failed to keep up. Hence, instead of

utilizing material prosperity and technological advancement for good, man abused towards it, leading to wars and self-destruction. Therefore, Schweitzer's reference for life was a proposition that was designed to aid in the reformation of western civilization by enhancing our moral consciousness and making it more attentive to the protection and preservation of life.

Schweitzer's reverence for life is hinged on the fundamental human experience that: "I am life that wants to live in the midst of other life that wants to live" (Schweitzer, 1971: 30). Schweitzer argued that since man is connected to the environment, his ethical obligation encompasses all living things. He maintained that every life was sacred and that it was morally wrong to "inflict suffering and death on another living creature unless there is some unavoidable necessity for it, and that we ought all of us to feel what a horrible thing it is to cause suffering and death out of mere thoughtlessness" (Schweitzer, 1971: 31). Schweitzer considered his basic goal and objective as the "devotion to life inspired by reverence for life" (Schweitzer 1987: 311).

After ruminating on a how to succinctly define ethics, Schweitzer said:

Let me give you a definition of Ethics: It is good to maintain and encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or obstruct it... Ethics is the maintaining of life at the highest point of development—my own life and other life—by devoting myself to it in help and love, and both these things are connected (Schweitzer 1987: 309).

Understanding the place of humans in the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of life, Schweitzer argued that man is "life in the midst of all life," and as such should not place any limit on his respect for life. On this basis, he believes that unless it is unavoidable, man ought not mutilate or destroy other life forms simply because he believes other life forms are inferior and subject to him. To do otherwise would be unethical and make man guilty of contradicting his moral responsibility towards the preservation of life.

This radical point of view places every life form at par. In other words, there is no hierarchy of life forms and no particular life form can be considered to have superior value over the others. In Schweitzer's words, he notes that:

We happen to believe that man's life is more important than any other form of life which we know. But we cannot prove any such comparison of value from what we know of the world's development. True, 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. But the principle of reverence for life is none the less universal (Schweitzer, 1971: 29).

In *The Philosophy of Civilization*, he reiterated his definition of ethics as "responsi-

bility without limit towards all that lives" (Schweitzer, 1987: 311). Put briefly, every human action ought to be geared towards the protection, preservation, and care for one's own life and the lives of other creatures inhabiting one's environment.

However, on a more practical level, we observe that man's relationship with other life forms such as the plants and animals in his environment suggests that he cannot help but intervene in the lives of other living things. For instance, man depends on plants and animals for his survival. The food humans eat, the houses they live in, the clothes they wear, the medicine they take, etc. are by products gotten from plants and animals. Likewise, plants and other animals co-exist in a symbiotic relationship.

While Schweitzer's position on the equality and respect for all life may appeal to human emotion or sense of duty, it is hard to imagine how to make this idea feasible considering that in order to sustain life, man has to end or mutilate the life of another. For instance, at a very basic level, for man to eat, he has to end the lives of plants or animals or both. Placing this necessary evil alongside the mandate to "preserve and promote life" creates a dilemma for humanity. Even Schweitzer acknowledges this conundrum, "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).

As a general principle in addressing such conflicting positions, Schweitzer proposes that "whenever I injure life of any sort, I must be quite clear whether it is necessary. Beyond the unavoidable I must never go, not even with what seems insignificant" (Schweitzer 1987: 318). Schweitzer makes this task even more difficult because he leaves no specific details on how, when and where to draw the limits. The only clue Schweitzer gives is that the guiding principle at the back of every conscience ought to be the ultimate need to respect, protect, and preserve life.

### **What is Environmental Sustainability ?**

The environment comprises of the natural elements, the interaction and interrelationships among such elements, as well as the climatic conditions, vegetation belts, physical features, mineral resources and other natural endowments. With this, the environment serves as our basic life support system, which according to Rawat & Mishra (2021) necessitates the observance of the three Rs (reduce, reuse, and recycle), in order to sustain the environment. Therefore, a good understanding of the environment is essential in order to appreciate the value of biological diversity. Sustaining the environment refers to our ability to manage the environment for our benefit without destroying it for the benefits of posterity. This means that while making use of the environment for our benefits, we are to manage it in such a way that we do not destroy it but improve on it or put in place structures that will enhance its continued existence so that those coming after us (future genera-

tions) can also benefit. In other words, environmental sustainability is about ecological balance. We cannot achieve this balance if human economic activities such as mining, oil exploration, and so on continue unabated. This means that to continue to enjoy the benefits of these economic activities, humans must tread with caution. This understanding of ecological balance, informs the choice of Albert Schweitzer's philosophy of "Reverence for Life," which is hinged on service and a show of compassion to others (humans and non-humans).

### **Schweitzer's Reverence for Life and Environmental Sustainability**

As we have seen, Schweitzer is emphatic on the need to respect all life forms. Here, we shall also see that while Schweitzer's reverence for life is primarily focused and directly related to living things, Schweitzer also indirectly suggested the need to extend some level of respect towards the abiotic/non-living components of the environment, due to the vital role they play in sustaining life. He observed that:

The deeper we look into nature, the more we recognize that it is full of life, and the more profoundly we know that all life is a secret and that we are united with all life that is in nature. Man can no longer live his life for himself alone. We realize that all life is valuable and that we are united to all this life. From this knowledge comes our spiritual relationship to the universe (Schweitzer, 1971: 47).

We see that Schweitzer's ethics considers the universe and all that it contains both from an individualistic and holistic standpoint. Usually, environmental ethics is often approached from either an individualistic or holistic standpoint. While the individualistic approach focuses on the intrinsic value of each living thing, the holistic approach focuses on the intrinsic value of whole life communities comprising the living and non-living, biotic and abiotic, organic and inorganic aspects of the ecology. Schweitzer's reverence for life bridges the gap between these two approaches by appreciating the intrinsic value of individual organisms as well as the unity of life in whole communities (Erazim, 2000; Claude, 2005; Joseph, 2006).

Schweitzer notes that all life forms- plants, non-human animals, and humans all exist in a complex relationship of interdependencies involving food, resources, energy, space, and death (Baird, 1986). As a result, humans cannot live in isolation of these vital interrelated networks. Furthermore, all these living organisms evince a strong will to live as we observe from experience and they are all struggling to survive and evolve (John, 1991). A noteworthy result of this shared struggle is the competition for the limited resources of the environment, leading to killings within the food chain. The counterpart to this is tolerance and cooperation among members of a particular group in their common struggle for survival and development (Schweitzer, 1993). To maximize the chances of survival and development, we see

humans and animals both caring for their young and other members of their species as a natural response. However, this awareness of dependency does not end within members of a species, in certain scenarios, it further leads to compassion, care, and numerous mutually beneficial ties between members of different species, like the bond between a person and his/her dog (Lawrence, 1991).

But beyond this interdependence between living organisms, it is also self-evident to humans that the environment plays host for man's dwelling and thriving. Since the environment serves as the home for man's dwelling, it is in the best interest of humans to keep the environment both healthy and sustainable for the present generation, and as an obligation to posterity. The basis for any discussions regarding an obligation to future generations is that our current way of interacting with nature and the environment poses a significant threat to our survival under humane conditions. The way we produce and consume needs to undergo fundamental modifications; otherwise, we risk destroying our foundations of life in a very short time. However, even if we accept this premise, the question of whether we have an obligation to prevent this calamity from happening to future generations still arises.

The obligation to preserve the environment for future generations is based on the basic value of equality across generations of the human species in respect to how we treat and make use of the natural system. It acknowledges that we are an integral part of the natural system and as such, like all earlier generations, must respect it. We have the freedom to use and enjoy the system, but we do not have the right to undermine its resilience and integrity for future generations. This attitude towards posterity, which begins with a consciousness of what Brown Weiss (1984) calls "Intergenerational Equity," necessitates adherence to three fundamental principles: preservation of enough environmental options for posterity, preservation of the quality of the environment, and preservation of access to sufficient environmental resources. If we believe that we who are currently alive are equal and possess the right to a healthy environment, it also seems rational for us to believe that future generations are no less equal and deserve the same right. This point of obligation to posterity was emphasized by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), when it defined Sustainable Development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (1987: 43). In addition, while in our environmental choices we put posterity into consideration, it is also important to note that we cannot talk of environmental responsibility to future generations if we are not first responsible to making the environment as healthy as possible for the present generation.

Hence, if the environment is sick, humans will also partake of this sickness since humans thrive from the substance of the environment. Though the impact

of a sick environment will vary across different populations, those who are in vulnerable locations or are impoverished, young, old, or unwell are expected to be affected the most. However, it is important to note that the effects of climate change will have a global impact and will not be limited to specific regions or populations. For instance, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA, 2021) recorded that as a result of climate change, global temperatures have risen by approximately  $1.98^{\circ}$  ( $1.1^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) from 1901 to 2020. This phenomenon has led to various worldwide implications such as rising sea levels, changes in weather patterns that cause flooding and droughts, and many other significant impacts. These circumstances resonate with the symptoms of a sick environment mentioned by Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*, when he noted that:

It is now generally understood that when soil loses fertility, or washes away faster than it forms, and when water systems exhibit abnormal floods and shortages, the land is sick... The disappearance of plants and animal species without visible cause, despite efforts to protect them, and the irruption of others as pests despite efforts to control them, must, in the absence of simpler explanations, be regarded as symptoms of sickness in the land organism (1949: 154).

Since Leopold gave these indicators of a sick environment, the situation has not gotten any better. According to a new study in the *Nature* journal, Earth has surpassed seven of the eight scientifically recognized safety thresholds, putting the planet in the danger zone. This is a cause of concern not only for the natural world but also for the well-being of those living on it. The study evaluated various aspects such as air pollution, climate change, overuse of fertilizer leading to phosphorus and nitrogen pollution of water, the distribution of groundwater, fresh water supplies, the unbuilt natural environment, and the overall state of the natural and human-built environment. Air pollution is the only area that is not at the critical level globally. The study identified problem areas or “hotspots” in South Asia, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, portions of Africa, and most of Mexico, Brazil, China, and the western parts of the United States, largely due to climate change. According to scientists, freshwater safety standards are not met by around two-thirds of the Earth (Borenstein, 2023).

A sick environment will necessarily endanger the lives of all living organisms in its habitat. This is why Schweitzer argues that reverence for life cannot be separated from reverence for the environment. In reverence for life, he argues that we ought to hold in the similar regard, everything that pertains to the sustenance of life, and that includes all of inanimate nature (Schweitzer, 1936).

It is interesting that despite the interdependence between living organisms and nature, there seems to be a decline in the regard for nature over time. This decline

has been linked to the increase in environmental degradation we are experiencing. According to a study, it was observed that since the 1950s, people have been gradually losing touch with nature and the various benefits it offers for a healthy life. This was observed from the shrinking of nature in our collective imagination, cultural conversation, technological decisions (Kesebir & Kesebir, 2017). The question that arises is why this is happening? Main factors identified for this problem are ignorance, greed, and a selfish perspective about the real value of other human beings, non-human animals, and nature.

Considering the continuous and rapid degradation of the environment, and the consequent depletion and pollution of its natural resources, one can deduce that part of the reason why we have come to this point is due to unawareness and ignorance. In the area of ignorance, while the interrelatedness of all life forms with the environment can be said to be obvious to people in highly educated societies, some persons in less educated and rural societies are yet to come to this consciousness. It is important for people all over the world to have a good grasp of various topics like thermodynamics, global pollution, agricultural production, population growth, water and food distribution systems, education, and energy and communication networks, among others. Unfortunately, many people who are poor or uneducated may not fully understand how all of these activities are interconnected. In a survey carried out across 14 countries, it was observed that individuals with higher levels of education were more inclined to consider climate change as a significant issue than those with lower levels of education (Fagan & Huang, 2019). This gap in knowledge may make people less conscious of the effects of their actions on the environment.

In 2005, Kevin Cole observed that "About 80% of Americans are heavily influenced by incorrect or outdated environmental Myths...and just 12% of Americans can pass a basic quiz on awareness of energy topics" (ix). Another study carried out in 2012 revealed that 27% of Americans regarded themselves to be conscious of environmental issues, while 31% noted that they were truly concerned about the present and future state of the environment. This was an obvious drop from the same survey conducted in 2009, when the percentages were 30% and 36% respectively (Tuttle, 2012). While the media is awash with environmental issues, Green (2015) notes that only about one out of four Americans realize the urgency of the situation and are worried about it. Others affirm that while these issues are presented as already affecting us, they see them to be distant.

One reason for why some people could be less aware of environmental issues could be the fact that talks about the environment are largely sophisticated and commonly found in intellectual circles. The data about the environment on the internet is also massive and difficult to navigate around for some people. A good way to bridge this gap is to make knowledge about environmental issues to be eas-



ily accessible and more comprehensible to people who are less educated or less involved in academic discussions about environmental issues. This may involve simplifying certain cryptic environmental terms and discussions, and the use of arts (fine and performance) to relay the message to masses. Through this, the concern for environmental issues will increase because a lot factors that are responsible for environmental issues spring from everyday human activities. For instance, acid rain, global warming, and smog, are the results of using fossil fuels. Hence, with the knowledge of environmental issues made more relatable to the average individual, there will be a heightened consciousness and positive response. Emphasizing the challenge of ignorance and the need for environmental education, Trevors (2010: 304) notes that:

Citizens of the world need to understand the subject matter in total global pollution, thermodynamics, human population growth, agricultural production and food distribution systems, potable water distribution systems, energy and communication networks and educational systems, as examples, in each of their countries. It is very likely that many humans have a poor understanding of how these activities are completely linked to each other. Again, ignorance is the problem and can only be combated with democratic constitutions, stable governments and scholarly educational systems that are funded at the level necessary to truly educate people for the future.

This begins to make more sense when we realize that environmentally literate people in America are, “10% more likely to save energy in the home, 50% more likely to recycle, 10% more likely to purchase environmentally safe products, and 50% more likely to avoid using chemicals in yard care” (Cole, 2005: xi). Going further, studies also reveal that those with advanced knowledge of environmental issues are, “31% more likely to conserve water and twice as likely to donate funds to conservation” (Cole, 2005: xi). Looking at these facts, the need for environmental education, not just at the academic level but down to the grassroots cannot be overemphasized.

When it comes to greed, it is often said that the resources of the earth are sufficient to meet everybody’s needs but not everybody’s greed. This greed, driven by a capitalist mindset focuses on the maximization of profits at the expense of other lives and the environment. As a result, human life and the environment are continually being exploited so that few individuals can have all the money and resources to create their own utopic heaven on earth while the rest of humanity suffers. But it takes common sense to see that once the earth begins to retaliate for being abused, no one will be spared, including the greedy capitalists.

In response to the common argument that a major cause of environmental degradation is poverty, Boyce (1994) counters that such a line of thinking is either obscuring or masking the real issue at play. He observes that poverty is an offshoot

of much deeper problems which he identified as greed, power, and wealth. Environmental degradation is not the result of poverty but greed, power, and wealth. Mwambazambi (2010: 55) notes that among the several factors that are responsible for environmental degradation in Africa,

The most difficult to overcome is the intrusion of foreign nations in Africa because these nations exploit human greed for wealth. Foreign nations use their greed, the hunger and the poverty of Africans to gain a foothold in Africa. African people need to apply ethical scientific knowledge to food production, to care for their environment by refusing to be polluting agents themselves, to live a sustainable manner in accordance with the will of God and to avert the exploitation of Africa by foreign nations.

To address this issue, Biber (2004) cautions against, "over-consumption and over-exploitation that deplete or dangerously diminish natural resources that God has given to human beings for proper management."

Lastly, selfishness has made certain persons develop an exaggerated opinion of their importance, making them to consider other human beings and life forms as inferior. Pongiglion (2020: 550) writes that:

An agent is selfish when she privileges herself among the other agents involved in a way that implies a disadvantage for others. The following counts as bringing about a disadvantage:

a) Harming someone, directly, indirectly, or jointly; b) Using something, or enjoying a benefit, one is not entitled to, for example, because she has: i. Already used her share; ii. Failed to contribute to it.

Attempts have been made over the years to express this problem through many names- racism, tribalism, sectionalism, sexism, etc. Because of this inequality in reasoning, some tend to care less about the lives and environmental conditions of persons outside their class. Since they already see a lower social class as inferior, they see no reason why they should not live inferior lives, and in inferior environmental conditions. Those in the upper class even tend to purposely create systems and structures that will hinder other members of the supposed lower classes to rise because they are insecure. Their sense of security comes from the fact that there are other persons to trample upon or other persons who will acknowledge their superiority. However, this is unwise because when pushed to extremes, those in the lower classes will attempt to break out chaotically in a bid to survive, and in such instances, even those in the upper class will not be spared.

This is not to say that we should lose or disregard the self in our concern for oth-

ers and the environment. Cafaro (2004: 137) observes that “Throughout the evolution of the Western tradition and despite much variety, four commonalities tend to hold. First, selfishness and self-centeredness are condemned, whereas legitimate self-concern and self-development are praised.” So, the concern here is an inordinate preoccupation to achieve one’s desires at all costs, even when it is at variance with the common good. Since economic activities, including money is essentially geared towards profit, Katoh and Kikuchi (2021: 1) theorized that “selfishness and endless desire are the essence of human beings’ instinct for survival, and as a result, environmental destruction occurs.” This is seen both at the national and international levels. For instance, the endorsement of the Kyoto Protocol climate policy was unduly delayed due to conflict of economic interests among the parties involved (Falkner, 2016). At one time, many developed countries were hesitant to commit to serious emission cuts because this was not in the best interests of their economic goals.

This line of reasoning imagines that as long as we can gratify our desires but able to escape having to face the consequences of our actions, we do not have to worry, let it be a problem to be tackled by the future generation. Unfortunately, the rapid rate of environmental degradation shows that it does not take a generation to see significant changes anymore. There are more changes taking place in 5-10 years than in the last 20 years. But even if we are able to escape the consequences of our environmental mismanagement, should we not be truly concerned about how posterity will enjoy the same earth that plays host to us all? At the end of the day, the truth is that we depend on the environment for survival more than we realize and changes in the environment affects us more than we are aware. Even if not in the spirit of true altruism, an enlightened self-interest that taking care of the environment is as good as taking care of oneself should be enough motivation for authentic environmental concern that will engender sustainability.

### **An Evaluation of Schweitzer’s Reverence for Life**

Albert Schweitzer’s ethics of reverence for life wears a radical and thought-provoking front. It encourages the reader to consider new lines of thought about basic moral positions and the need to reevaluate previously held ethical beliefs about life and the environment. However, it is not without peculiar challenges.

One area that Schweitzer has been heavily criticized is in the area of lacking precision in his use of terminology, often leading to misunderstanding. This was primarily because an underlying motive in some of his writings was aimed at appealing to the emotions of his readers. He himself acknowledged 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 ques-

tions of existence that are in the minds of every human being" (Schweitzer 1998: 202).

The strongest criticisms of Schweitzer spring from his unwillingness to acknowledge any ranking among life forms. This was all the more complicated since he held the view that while life cannot be stratified hierarchically, they do not all possess the same value. He was accused of "pantheism, anthropomorphism, excessive subjectivity and guilt mongering" (Martin 2002: 166). Emil Brunner—the Swiss theologian further revealed that in reality, Schweitzer was inconsistent and untrue to his convictions about the equality of all life forms since in his medical practice, Schweitzer was given to the killing of several million pathogens in order to sustain germ-free surgical conditions (Clark, p.6). Put succinctly, Schweitzer's ethics ran into serious problems because it is challenging to do ethics without value hierarchies.

## Conclusion

Schweitzer's idea of reverence for life will encourage the sustainability of everything else that sustains life (which includes the environment, and everything found in it). From this discourse, we see that the consciousness that comes alive when we interact with Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life is the realization of the inherent value of all life, the equality of all life forms, the unity and interdependence of all life forms, and the connection between life and a healthy environment for that life to flourish maximally. In spite of the challenges that Schweitzer's theory ran into, his theory still possesses relevance in awakening consciousness for the much-needed respect for life and nature in our current world.

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