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from The Problem of Ethics for Twentieth Century Man

Albert Schweitzer

Philosophy fears, and rightly so, that this immense enlargement of the circle of our responsibilities will deprive ethics of the slight hope it still has of being able to formulate commandments in a way that is at all reasonable and satisfying. Indeed, concern with the fate of all the beings with whom we have to deal creates even more numerous and more troublesome conflicts for us than those of devotion limited to human beings. In respect to creatures we find ourselves constantly in situations which oblige us to cause suffering and to impair life. The peasant cannot let all the animals born in his flock survive; he can keep only those he can feed and which it will pay him to raise. In many cases we even face the necessity of sacrificing lives to save others. A man who picks up a stray bird finds himself obliged to kill insects or fish to feed it. In acting thus he is completely in the realm of the arbitrary. By what right does he sacrifice many lives in order to save a single life? In exterminating animals which he regards as harmful in order to protect others he likewise falls into the realm of the arbitrary.

It is, therefore, incumbent upon each one of us to judge whether we find ourselves under the unavoidable necessity of inflicting suffering and of killing, and to resign ourselves to becoming guilty by necessity. As for forgiveness, we must seek it by missing no opportunity to succor living beings. How much better off we should be if men

would reflect on the kindness which they owe to creatures and would abstain from all the harm they do them through heedlessness. The fight against the inhuman traditions and the inhuman feelings which are still current in our day is one which our civilization must wage, if we have any concern for our self-respect.

Among the inhuman customs which our civilization and our sentiment owe it to themselves no longer to tolerate I cannot refrain from naming two: bullfighting, with the kill, and stag-hunting. Thus it is the requirement of compassion toward all living beings which makes ethics as complete as it must be.

There has been another great change in the situation of ethics: it is today no longer able to count on the support of a conception of the world which can serve as its justification.

At all times it has been convinced that it was merely exacting the behavior conforming to the knowledge of the true nature of the universal will which manifests itself in creation. This is the conviction on which not only religion but also the rationalist philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are based. But it so happens that the conception of the world which ethics can invoke is the result of the interpretation of the very world to which ethics has offered, and still offers, itself. It attributes to the universal will qualities and intentions which give satisfaction to its own way of feeling and of judging. But in the course of the nineteenth century the research which allowed itself to be guided solely by concern for truth was bound to surrender to the evidence that ethics can expect nothing from a true knowledge of the world. The progress of science consists in an increasingly precise observation of the processes of nature. These allow us to harness the energies manifesting themselves in the universe to our own uses. But they oblige us at the same time increasingly to give up

any attempt to understand its intentions. The world offers us the disconcerting spectacle of the will to life in conflict with itself. One existence maintains itself at the expense of another.

70 How can the ethics of devotion maintain itself without being sustained by a notion of the world which justifies it? It seems destined to founder in skepticism. This, however, is not the fate to which it is dedicated. In its beginnings ethics had to appeal to a conception of the world which would satisfy it. Having arrived at the knowledge that its fundamental principle is devotion, it becomes fully conscious of itself and thereby becomes autonomous.

We are in a position to understand its origins and its basis by meditating on the world and on ourselves.

80 We lack a complete and satisfying knowledge of the world. We are reduced to the simple observation that everything in it is life, like ourselves, and that all life is mystery. Our true knowledge of the world consists in being penetrated by the mystery of existence and of life. This mystery becomes only more mysterious as scientific research progresses. Being penetrated by the mystery of life corresponds to what in the language of mysticism is called "learned ignorance," which at least has knowledge of the essential.

90 The immediate datum of our consciousness, to which we come back each time we desire to achieve an understanding of ourselves and of our situation in the world, is: I am life which wants to live, 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 wanting to bring it to its highest value, and evil consists in destroying life, doing it injury, hindering its development.

100 The principle of this veneration of life corresponds to that of love, as it has been discovered by religion and philosophy which sought to understand the fundamental notion of good.

The term "respect for life" is broader and because of this more colorless than that of love. But it bears the same energies within it.

This essentially philosophical notion of good has also the advantage of being more complete than that of love. Love includes only our obligation toward other beings, but not those toward ourselves. One cannot deduce from it, for example, the quality of veracity, a primordial quality of the ethical personality along with that of compassion. The respect which man owes to his own life imposes upon him that he be faithful to himself by renouncing every kind of dissimulation to which he might be tempted to resort in a given circumstance.

110 Through respect for life we enter into a spiritual relationship with the world. All the efforts undertaken by philosophy which built up grandiose systems to bring us into relation with the Absolute have remained vain. The Absolute is so abstract in character that we cannot communicate with it. It is not given to us to put ourselves at the disposal of the infinite and inscrutable creative will which is the basis of all existence, by having an understanding of its nature and its intentions. But we enter into spiritual relationship with it by feeling ourselves under the impression of the mystery of life and by devoting ourselves to all the living beings whom we have the occasion and the power to serve. The ethics which obliges us solely to concern ourselves with men and society cannot have this meaning. Only that which is universal in obliging us to concern ourselves with all beings brings us truly into relationship with the Universe and the will which manifests itself in it.

130 In the world the will-to-life is in conflict with itself.

In us, through a mystery which we do not understand, it wishes to be at peace with itself. In the world it manifests itself, in us it reveals itself. It reveals to us, among other things, that the world is our spiritual destiny. By conforming to it we live our existence instead of submitting to it. Through respect for life we become pious in an elementary, deep, and living sense.

EXERCISES

Reading Power

1. The "immense enlargement of the circle of our responsibilities" (lines 1-2) is
 - a. "concern with the fate of all the beings with whom we have to deal."
 - b. bringing the future as well as the past and present into our range of vision.
 - c. not explained in this passage, apparently being a reference to a previous paragraph.
2. Concerning the dilemma explained in the first paragraph, Schweitzer
 - a. has not proved its existence because the examples he gives are petty and unusual.
 - b. shows that it is a surface dilemma only, confronting those who have not enlarged the circle of their responsibilities.
 - c. appears to suggest that it is a real but not insurmountable difficulty confronting the ethics of devotion.
3. If we have a concern for self-respect, we must
 - a. fight against inhuman traditions and feelings.
 - b. always remain neutral.
 - c. rationalize unjust acts and thoughts.
4. A reasonable reaction to the two examples of the "inhuman customs" given in the third paragraph is

- a. they were chosen to illustrate the first great change in the situation of ethics.
 - b. they seem startlingly insignificant in today's world.
 - c. they are appropriate and forceful illustrations.
5. Schweitzer indicates that from a scientific knowledge of the world, ethics can expect
 - a. a justification for its existence.
 - b. nothing.
 - c. a method to use in ethical judgments.
 6. Concerning the pursuit of "knowledge of the true nature of the universal will which manifests itself in creation," Schweitzer says all of the following EXCEPT that
 - a. this is the basis for religion.
 - b. it has led to the disconcerting spectacle of the will-to-life in conflict with itself.
 - c. it will lead to overcoming the skepticism on which the ethics of devotion seems to founder.
 7. The "autonomous" basis of Schweitzer's ethics is best expressed in the words
 - a. "he likewise falls into the realm of the arbitrary" (lines 20-21).
 - b. "Being will-to-life" (line 94).
 - c. "the world is our spiritual destiny" (line 139).
 8. The most accurate statement of Schweitzer's view of love is
 - a. he equates love with his philosophical notion of good.
 - b. he equates love with his fundamental idea of good, as religion and philosophy have also discovered.
 - c. it is incomplete, lacking, for example, veracity.
 9. "The respect which man owes to his own life imposes upon him that he be faithful to himself by renouncing every kind of dissimulation to which he might be tempted to resort in a given circumstance" (lines 113-116). The quality or trait of character called for in this sentence is
 - a. integrity.
 - b. self-reliance.
 - c. respectability.
 10. We cannot communicate with the Absolute because it is too
 - a. practical in character.
 - b. abstract in character.
 - c. dependent on us.