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Reverence for Life and Ecological Conversion

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Abstract: Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Schweitzer end up defending radically similar, yet critically opposed conclusions about the human animal and its place in nature, particularly with regard to the ethical awareness that does or does not follow from this situatedness. Arthur Schopenhauer's notion of the will accounts for their similar foundational assumptions. But what accounts for the fact that their shared desire to affirm the will to life leads to fundamentally opposed ethical conclusions? What keeps Schweitzer's ascetic ethic of reverence for life from evolving into Nietzsche's anti-ascetic vision of a second innocence beyond good and evil? We argue that situating the notion of reverence for life within an environmental virtue ethics, as one environmental virtue among many, aiming at ecological conversion, better articulates and motivates the disposition demanded by the ethics of reverence for life.

Keywords: Environmental Virtue Ethics; *Laudato Si'*; Schweitzer; Nietzsche; Schopenhauer; Anscombe

Is the affirmation of life moral or immoral? Nietzsche and Schweitzer emerge from shared cultural and religious backgrounds, both formatively shaped by Schopenhauer's thinking. They defend radically similar, yet critically opposed conclusions about the human animal and its place in nature, in particular with regard to the ethical awareness that does or does not follow from this situatedness. For the mature Nietzsche, the human is just as much a part of nature as any other animal. It has just as much a right to kill or be killed, to inflict cruelty or to satisfy instincts toward violence, as do animals of other species. Schopenhauer's influence abides in Nietzsche's thought not least in his notion of the will to power; but for Nietzsche the denial of instinct, and the limitation of power, can produce only sickness.

The mature Schweitzer, by contrast, develops Schopenhauer's concept of the will in a radically different direction: "I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live" (Schweitzer 1960, 309).¹ Discovery of this principle leads him to recognize the intrinsic value of

¹ Schweitzer's ethics of reverence for life is often regarded as an important precursor to insights in environmental ethics, especially in relation to the position defended nearly a century later, by Paul W. Taylor, as *biocentric individualism*. Cf. e.g. Desjardins 2013, 132ff; and Taylor 1986. Brian Henning writes, "...there are many non-egalitarian forms of biocentrism which claim that *all living beings are equal in having value, but not all have value equally*. For instance, Nobel Laureate Albert Schweitzer's 'reverence for life' ethic is perhaps among the most

all life, with demanding and even ascetic ethical implications. What accounts for the radical divergence between Nietzsche's view and Schweitzer's, in which a shared desire toward the affirmation of life leads to radically different ethical conclusions? What keeps Schweitzer's ascetic vision of life-affirmation from evolving into Nietzsche's anti-ascetic vision of a second innocence beyond good and evil?

Our first section addresses both of these questions, establishing three criteria that emerge on the basis of challenges to Schweitzer's position. The second section then suggests that the notion of ecological conversion helps to remedy all three problems, offering resources to better ground the ethics of reverence for life that captivated Schweitzer's thought and grounded his devotion to service. We maintain that situating Schweitzer's notion of reverence for life within an environmental virtue ethics, as one environmental virtue among many, better articulates and motivates the disposition for which it calls. We end by posing a dilemma diagnosed by the ecophenomenologist Erazim Kohák, which indicates one way forward for continued development of key insights out of Schweitzer's life and thought.

1 From Affirmation to Reverence: A Qualitative Leap

Schopenhauer inherits the Kantian distinction between appearances and unknowable things-in-themselves, developing a philosophy of nature on the basis of the latter: underlying and giving rise to all appearances, or representations, is the unknowable, inaccessible force of Will. While all other manifestations of life strive toward transcendence, as unwitting players in the limitless and insatiable drama of existence, the human animal alone becomes conscious of its tragic fate. The philosopher finally comes to realize, as Schweitzer puts it, that "countless individualities which are rooted in the universal will-to-live are continually seeking satisfaction, which is never gratified, in aims which they set before themselves in obedience to an inward impulse. ...The world is meaningless and all existence is suffering" (Schweitzer 1960, 237). Having risen to heightened awareness, Schopenhauer's enlightened thinker recognizes that the best way to live is to seek peace in the elimination of one's own striving, or through the nullification of desire, in flight from the world. Schopenhauer's ethic "appears in a three-fold shape: as ethics of resignation, as ethics of universal pity, and as ethics of world-renunciation" (238). This is the standpoint to which the young Nietzsche and the young Schweitzer are both drawn.

That Nietzsche and Schweitzer transition from being devoted students of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, to expressing their radical dissent from his ethical conclusions, is not quite so surprising when one considers the divergence of those ethical conclusions from Schopenhauer's own life and character. He lectures upon resignation, pity, and self-denial, yet himself indulges sensuous pleasures without conscience, is notoriously misanthropic, and remains devoted to money and the finer things of life, apparently without qualms.² While he speculates that the will-to-live begets only misery, in endless striving, encouraging what Nietzsche will malign as the will to nothingness, Schopenhauer's way of life itself encourages, to the contrary, the sensuous

eloquent, though also the least systematically developed, versions of biocentrism" (Henning 2015, 45). The present essay might be considered to be an attempt at systematic development, so far as Schweitzer's thought allows.

² With the exception of Schweitzer's esteem for the Brahmin we can note his alliance with Nietzsche on this point (Schweitzer 1960, 242).

affirmation of life.³ The affirmation of life, in response to Schopenhauer's theoretical pessimism, becomes the central doctrine of both Nietzsche and Schweitzer.⁴

Both thinkers abandon Schopenhauer's theoretical, ethical position in favor of his practice of life-affirmation, while maintaining remarkably similar ontological frameworks. But by contrast with Nietzsche's affirmation of the "instincts of wild, free, prowling man"—namely, "Hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in destruction" (Nietzsche 1989, 85)—Schweitzer comes to affirm what we would now call the *intrinsic value* of all life, developing an ascetic ethics of reverence for it. Our ethical question arises: what keeps Schweitzer's rendition of life-affirmation from evolving into Nietzschean violence, by which the will to power impels the domination of other wills-to-live?

Although all three of the thinkers in question are, so to speak, beginning from, and interpreting the same phenomena, they arrive at vastly divergent ethical conclusions.⁵ Behind appearances is a fundamental and infinite striving toward self-transcendence, the will to live. Schopenhauer responds by postulating that Will is insatiable—and unknowable, as noumenon behind phenomena—and thus that all life is suffering. The appropriate ethical response is to free oneself from striving, in the negation of both world and self. Nietzsche turns Schopenhauer's pessimism on its head, postulating that satisfaction comes in exerting one's will, so as to break the shackles of morally imposed, artificial constraints.

Schweitzer charts a middle path between these two predecessors, taking an avowedly mystical tack. All life is striving, to be sure, but the one who becomes conscious of the will(s)-to-life being expressed in one's surrounding environment begins to intimate a sense of universal communion. He writes that such awareness "forces upon me an inward relation to the world, and fills me with reverence for the mysterious will-to-live, which is in all things. By making me think and wonder, it leads me ever upwards to the heights of reverence for life" (Schweitzer 1960, 309). Against the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, Schweitzer offers a more fundamental principle of his own, which he calls "the most immediate and comprehensive fact of consciousness" (ibid.). That principle expresses itself as follows: "I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live."⁶

³ Schweitzer writes in his autobiography, "Indian thought, like that of Schopenhauer, is full of contradictions because it cannot help but make concessions over and over again to the will to live, which persists in spite of all negation of the world, though it will not admit that these are concessions. Negation of the will to live is only consistent with itself if it decides to put an end to physical existence" (Schweitzer 1990, 156-157).

⁴ Strangely, however, at least in reference to the question as to whether pity and compassion, or violence and utilitarian instrumentalization are to be preferred with (or without) respect to nonhuman manifestations of life—in particular, concerning nonhuman animals—the four principal theorizers of the "will to life" in the modern period group together into two unexpectedly incoherent teams. On the one side we have the animal-lovers: Schopenhauer, the misanthrope and philosopher of "world- and life- negation" joins together with his rebellious protégé Schweitzer, the ascetically philanthropic medical doctor and proponent of the ethic of reverence for life. On the opposing side are the advocates of cruelty and violence: Spinoza, the arch-rationalist whose Stoic ethic consists in bringing reason in line with *conatus*, or the striving of all life to exert its power, joins with Nietzsche, the arch-anti-rationalist whose "ethics" consists in smashing moral fictions with a hammer, and in exerting the will to power in the manner that one's instincts demand. Curiously, due to the high esteem in which he is held among environmentalists, and especially deep ecologists, regarding nonhuman animals Spinoza is perhaps the most calloused of the four (IVP37s1; Spinoza 2006, 121). For more on the latter point, concerning the view toward nonhumans that emerges on the basis of Spinoza's metaphysics, see especially Lloyd 1980, Rogers 2021, and Hemmingsen 2022.

⁵ Cf. Cicovacki 2012, 86.

⁶ Schweitzer's juxtaposition of Descartes' lifeless *cogito* and his own revived will-to-live, among wills-to-live, recalls Nietzsche's earlier declaration: "Fragmented and in pieces, dissociated almost mechanically into an inner and an outer, sown with concepts as with dragon's teeth, bringing forth conceptual dragons, suffering from the malady of

As his growing understanding of the whole intensifies, awareness of this first principle inspires a desire for Oneness, and unification. “There bursts forth from it again and again as from roots that can never dry up, a living world- and life-view which can deal with all the facts of Being. A mysticism of ethical union with Being grows out of it” (Schweitzer 1960, 309). Schweitzer grounds his fundamental ethical imperative in this way: “Ethics consist, therefore, in my experiencing the compulsion to show all will-to-live the same reverence as I do to my own. There we have given us that basic principle of the moral which is a necessity of thought. It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it” (ibid.).

1.1 *Articulating Schweitzer’s Assumption*

Implicit in Schweitzer’s transition from the factual principle, “all life wills to continue living,” to his ethical conclusion, “It is good to maintain and to encourage life,” is a clear qualitative shift. In Humean terms he has introduced a transition from a factual premise to value-laden conclusion.⁷ It appears that the argument here is in fact an enthymeme, and is thus syllogistic: a second premise has been concealed. A principle has been supposed, which can be articulated as follows. *It is necessary, insofar as it is within one’s capacity, to cultivate life and mitigate the degeneration of life—not solely in one’s own person, but also with respect to those manifestations of life with whom or with which one comes into contact.*

Why has he left this second premise implicit? Here Schweitzer’s profession as medical doctor lends to an analogy. “A doctor can take the fact that something possible is necessary for the cure of his patient’s illness as showing straight off that he must prescribe it, without putting in the extra premise that it is necessary for him to prescribe such possible things as are necessary to cure illnesses of his patient,” writes Elizabeth Anscombe (Anscombe 1981a, 19). A doctor determines that it is necessary for a patient suffering from a certain disease to be given the remedy on hand to cure that disease. He need not articulate a Kantian maxim, “it is necessary that I prescribe all such treatments as will cure the illnesses of my patients,” before administering the treatment. The fact that the person *is a doctor* already assumes as much regarding his intentional state. In other words, any adequate doctor already “*aims at the health of his patient.*”⁸

words and mistrusting any feeling of our own which has not yet been stamped with words: being such an unliving and yet uncannily active concept- and word-factory, perhaps I still have the right to say of myself *cogito, ergo sum*, but not *vivo, ergo cogito*. Empty ‘being’ is granted me, but not full and green ‘life’; the feeling that tells me I exist warrants me only that I am a thinking creature, not that I am a living one, not that I am an *animal* but at most a *cogital*” (Nietzsche 1997, 119).

⁷ He is, in fact, aware of this problem: “Schweitzer does not deny that the distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ exists; he just does not regard it as fundamental for ethics. Nor does he believe that the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ is as big as its advocates affirm. Although clearly separable, nature and morality are not entirely foreign to each other” (Cicovacki 2012, 95). For a brilliant contextualization of the philosophical, religious, and historical circumstances that gave rise to the assumptions behind this Humean rendition of the naturalistic fallacy, especially the false dilemma that morality must be either wholly rational or wholly emotive, see especially the early chapters of *After Virtue* (especially MacIntyre 2007, 56ff). This portion of his argument is in many respects a careful, historically contextualized explication of Anscombe’s powerful critique of modern moral philosophy (Anscombe 1981b).

⁸ But if this doctor were to be aiming at, or intending something other than the health of his patient—for example, if he were aiming at knowledge of the illness from which his patient is suffering—then the second, additional premise would need to be articulated, and intentional assent subsequently given. In our analogy the implicit premise, or principle of action, only needs to be articulated by a doctor who does not already take it as obvious that to do what is “necessary”—the sense of “necessary” articulated by Aristotle, which Anscombe is careful to invoke on multiple occasions, including in “On Promising and its Justice” (Anscombe 1981a), in response to Hume’s division between “fact” and “value”—for the health of a patient is fundamentally the “right” thing for any doctor, as such, to do.

So again, we ask: what keeps Schweitzer's rendition of life-affirmation from evolving into Nietzschean violence? Broadly, synthesizing both Anscombe and Schweitzer, we can respond: *the disposition of the life-affirmer*. Our doctor analogy, in this context, verges on being more than merely an analogy. Schweitzer the medical doctor has cultivated a disposition toward an affirmation of—or, better, toward reverence for—the life of each of his patients. As he comes into increasing contact with nonhuman animals, a disposition to reverence spills over from his relations to human patients into his relations to nonhuman animals.⁹

Anscombe drives home the point of her analogy to the doctor, making the ethical conclusion clear: “Thus ‘it is necessary to do what is good and avoid what is bad’ is required as a premise only by one with a purpose which can be served by acting ill” (Anscombe 1981a, 19). In the case of the practical syllogism, the task of explicitly articulating, then assenting to this second premise is necessary only for one whose practice is to suspend the axiom “it is necessary to do what is good and avoid what is bad” whenever doing so allows him to obtain the object of his desire.¹⁰ But the person whose principal aim is “to *be moral*,” she points out, needs neither to articulate nor explicitly assent to this proposition. To the latter type of person, “it will be nothing but a principle of inference, which is not a premise” (ibid., 20). However, Anscombe concludes, the ‘axiom’ that *it is necessary to do what is good and avoid what is bad* is “not capable of demonstration except as generally holding.” It is, as such, *the* first principle of ethics. And it appears as capable of being suspended only to one whose ethical disposition, or whose habits of character, have been inadequately cultivated.¹¹

What is needed, then, to bridge the seeming gap between Schweitzer's transition from the factual premise “all life wills to continue living,” to his ethical conclusion, “*I* am to maintain and to encourage life,” is a disposition to recognize, or in other words, revere, the intrinsic value of

⁹ Cicovacki cites the Hippocratic Oath as an external imposition of the moral intuition that (human) life is sacred (Cicovacki 2012, 85). But the moral intuition behind that external oath can be *internalized*—in accordance with relevant virtues—such that imposition of a “law” from without is no longer necessary; one acts from character, and one's character is to care for and reverence the lives that have come into one's care. For Schweitzer, the essential point is that that this *internalized* moral intuition concerning human life should flow over into deepened ethico-spiritual awareness of my connectedness to the striving of all life, both human and nonhuman: into recognition of the *sacredness of all life*. “In the context of our discussion of the sacred, this realization amounts to what Phillip Hallie calls ‘an imaginative perception of the connection between the preciousness of my life and the preciousness of other lives.’ In an even broader context, we can call it a perception of the interconnectedness with all other life, a sense of participation in a larger scheme of being, and a sense of brotherhood with everything that exists” (ibid., 84).

¹⁰ Human animals “have to go through a stage in which they separate themselves from their desires... a separation which involves a recognition of goods other than the pleasures of satisfied bodily wants” (MacIntyre 1999, 68). While nonhuman animals also act on the basis of reasons—cf. MacIntyre's argument in the chapter immediately preceding, in *Dependent Rational Animals*, called “Reasons for Action”—only the human, so far as we yet know, can, and indeed must ask: “Is it at this time and in these circumstances best to act so as to satisfy this particular desire?” (ibid., 69).

¹¹ Cf. the distinction of natural from connatural knowledge (Anscombe 1981c, 60).

life, where reverence is worked out in reference to life in its various manifestations in *individual* living beings.¹² Such a disposition will need to be cultivated in accordance with relevant virtues.¹³

Anscombe's analogy assumes that the person in question is in fact a good doctor, where doctors aim at the health of their patients. So too does Schweitzer's ethical imperative assume that the agent in question is a good human being, where human goodness involves, among other things, a disposition to promote the flourishing of the creatures that have come under one's care.¹⁴ Ethical agents aim at what is good, and what is good according to the understanding of nature espoused by Schweitzer—"I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live"—is promoting the continuance of life, in individual living things, and mitigating its destruction. For him, each life that wills to live is a *bearer of value*, and the human animal finds itself uniquely responsible to recognize that intrinsic, non-instrumental value, and to promote the health and flourishing of both humans and other creatures.¹⁵

1.2 Two Objections

If an appeal to nature grounds this initial, foundational premise, we can ask the further question: In what way does nature "will" the promotion of life and the mitigation of what undermines life? When pressure is applied directly, this premise begins to yield under the weight of two objections. The first from comes from without, the second from within.

First, from the outside, we can only admit that nature as such consists of "life which wills to live" if we conceive of the reality of "life" in terms of its manifestations in various living individuals. This assumption surfaces again and again in Schweitzer's work, and it becomes especially explicit when he writes, for instance, that "The only reality is the Being which manifests

¹² Schweitzer writes, "The only reality is the Being which manifests itself in phenomena" (Schweitzer 1960, 304). In other words, *life* is only real as manifested in and through *individual lives*. Cicovacki adds the following comment: "An ethical relation is a spiritual relation that is directed to the concrete manifestations of being—those in my range of activity, those that challenge me to engage in an active relationship with them. When spirituality is directed toward an active devotion to the manifestations of being which demand my attention and care, then, and only then, does my spirituality become ethical" (Cicovacki 2012, 51). Said differently, "Reverence for life drives the person to treat other living beings as sacred. For all life to be treated 'as sacred' and for Schweitzer's mysticism to be relevant in an ethical sense, our utmost respect and our responsiveness must be shown toward the manifestations of life which surround us" (*ibid.*, 55).

¹³ To be sure, the practical syllogism is not, in and of itself, ethical. In *Intention*, Anscombe writes that while practical syllogisms can have moral general premises, "it is clear that such general premises will only occur as premises of practical reasoning in people who want to do their duty" (Anscombe 1963, 78). To this statement she adds the following footnote, recalling themes she had elaborated upon, the year prior (1956), in "Modern Moral Philosophy." "It is worth remarking that the concepts of 'duty' and 'obligation', and what is now called the 'moral' sense of 'ought', are survivals from a *law* conception of ethics. The modern sense of 'moral' is itself a late derivative from these survivals. None of these conceptions occurs in Aristotle. The idea that actions which are necessary if one is to conform to justice and the other virtues are requirements of divine law was found among the Stoics, and became generally current through Christianity, whose ethical notions come from the Torah" (*ibid.*, 78n1).

¹⁴ Note that here we are already pushing the boundaries of, and indeed moving beyond talk of *natural goodness*. We will return to this point in our conclusion.

¹⁵ One might here object: Why not simply emphasize the subjective character trait or virtue, e.g. reverence for life, and jettison the outmoded talk of intrinsic value? Holmes Rolston III offers a persuasive response to this point in "Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole" (Rolston 2005). We will return to this point also in our conclusion. To our point that humans alone are called to *care* for other species, Rolston writes: "What *higher* means here is having the capacity to be concerned for the 'lower.' Humans are subjectively enriched in their experience as and because they love the other, nonhuman species for what they objectively are" (*ibid.*, 68).

itself in phenomena” (Schweitzer 1960, 304).¹⁶ Schopenhauer maintained that all life is characterized by endless striving, frustrating satisfaction and perpetuating suffering *for the individual*. In this sense Schweitzer’s conception of the reality of living beings, and their suffering, is an inheritance from Schopenhauer.¹⁷ As his work as a medical doctor illustrates, the ethics of reverence for life demands nothing less than mitigation of the suffering of individuals, and promotion of their continuance in life.

But when the reality of “life” is expanded to encompass the categories of *species* or *ecosystems*, for instance, as it has been in the previous century, Schweitzer’s conception—and the basis of his ethical imperative—begins to look, to many, more dubious. When conceived in this broader sense, death and destruction become aspects of, and perhaps even forces that aid in the maintenance of life. Note Schweitzer’s response to this challenge, as he conceived of it in his day:

Arising, as it does, from an inner compulsion, the ethic of reverence for life is not dependent on the extent to which it can be thought out to a satisfying conception of life. It need give no answer to the question of what significance the ethical man’s work for the maintenance, promotion, and enhancement of life can be in the total happenings of the course of nature. It does not let itself be misled by the calculation that the maintaining and completing of life which it practises is hardly worth consideration beside the tremendous, unceasing destruction of life which goes on every moment through natural forces (Schweitzer 1960, 311-312).

The blunt fact that culling weak individuals from the species lends to increased fitness of the species, for instance, seems to undermine the assumption that “nature,” or *fact*, can ground an ethics of unconditional reverence for individual manifestations of life. If I am no different metaphysically than other manifestations of Will, and if all life is striving, then for what reason can I claim that “nature” demands such taxing asceticism *of me*, especially when its own operations

¹⁶ The many examples that he offers from his own life and work make this point especially clear. Consider, for example, his reflections on cases where it is more loving to kill a helpless animal individual than not to do so: “When the suffering of a living creature cannot be alleviated, it is more ethical to end its life by killing it mercifully than it is to stand aloof. It is more cruel to let domestic animals which one can no longer feed die a painful death by starvation than to give them a quick and painless death by violence” (Schweitzer 1936, 83-84) In a practical case of ethical conflict, he chooses to keep alive four pelicans whose wings had been “so badly slashed by unfeeling people that they cannot fly” by feeding them fish, rather than letting the pelicans live, and the fish die. After admitting, famously, that he has just killed a mosquito—with hesitation, and in Africa, not in Europe—solely because it is likely a bearer of malaria, he continues, “The important thing is for all of us to reflect on the question of [whether] damaging and killing are permissible. Most people are not yet truly acquainted with this issue. They still approve of thoughtless damage and killing and enjoy the sport of killing (...). Some people who came up the river to my hospital shot, purely as a sport, at all the creatures they saw: the pelican (which still has a need to feed its three chicks), the caiman, which sleeps on a branch looming into the water, and the monkey peering at a boat. I try to make all such people think about their actions. Much will be achieved once people become reflective and wisely realize that they should damage and kill only when necessary. That is the essence. The rationalization of individual cases is a different matter. Someone brought me four pelicans whose wings had been so badly slashed by unfeeling people that they cannot fly. It will take two or three months before their wings heal and they can fly freely. I have hired a fisherman to catch the necessary fish to feed them. I always pity the poor fish to the depths of my soul, but I have to choose between killing the fish or the four pelicans who would surely starve to death. I do not know whether I am doing the right thing in deciding one way instead of the other” (Schweitzer 1992, 218; cited in Cicovacki 2012, 62-63).

¹⁷ Schweitzer follows Schopenhauer in his openness to learn from and adopt eastern religious wisdom, but diverges from him, and aligns himself more squarely with that religious wisdom, in his recognition of the *sacredness* of all life (Cicovacki 2012, 54).

would seem to indicate that death operates in the service of life, conceived in the holist manner? Without further justification in response to this question, we seem to be led, by nature itself, toward the Nietzschean conception of life's affirmation.

Secondly, from the inside: not only does nature conceived of more holistically "will" death and destruction, but so too do *individuals* will the negation, and not simply the affirmation of life. Again in *Philosophy and Civilization* Schweitzer explicitly addresses this problem, and again his response belies problems that he will attempt to circumvent.

In my will-to-live the universal will-to-live experiences itself otherwise than in its other manifestations. In them it shows itself in a process of individualizing which, so far as I can see from the outside, is bent merely on living itself out to the full, and in no way on union with any other will-to-live. The world is a ghastly drama of will-to-live divided against itself. One existence makes its way at the cost of another; one destroys the other. One will-to-live merely exerts its will against the other, and has no knowledge of it. But in me the will-to-live has come to know about other wills-to-live. There is in it a yearning to arrive at unity with itself, to become universal. It remains a painful enigma for me that I must live with reverence for life in a world which is dominated by creative will which is also destructive will, and destructive will which is also creative. *I can do nothing but hold onto 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 (Schweitzer 1960, 312; emphasis added).

There *is* something fundamentally different about human manifestations of Will, namely that in the human animal the universal will-to-live becomes aware of "other wills-to-live," and yearns "to arrive at unity with itself, to become universal." What makes Schweitzer so sure that this quasi-Hegelian higher unification is not a deception singularly experienced by himself alone?

Mystical experience has convinced him of as much. When faced with the fact that "creative will is also destructive will"—the very same Will of which I myself am a manifestation—Schweitzer throws up his hands and admits: it's an enigma. The ethical human being has to ignore this fact and continue on in the task of cultivating reverence for life. All else is temptation. "I can do nothing but hold onto" the "fact"—the feeling—that in me and me alone, or at least in an enlightened few among my species, Will "manifests itself as will-to-live which desires to become one with other will-to-live."¹⁸ This is to be affirmed against all indications to the contrary, even if those indications are also proffered on the part of nature, or Will, itself.

1.3 *Three Criteria*

Schweitzer's responses to these challenges can be updated so as to be made more satisfying.¹⁹ Many of the kernels of profound truth unearthed in Schweitzer's life and thought can be fruitfully replanted in more ancient, fertile soil. On the basis of the challenges and objections we have raised, above, it is clear that certain of his key insights can and perhaps should be cultivated further, in the context of a viewpoint that can:

¹⁸ In Schweitzer, therefore, we have uncovered the false Humean assumption that morality must be *either* wholly rational *or* wholly emotive.

¹⁹ Indeed, careful Schweitzerian thinkers like Predrag Cicovacki have made great strides in this direction (cf. Cicovacki 2012).

- 1) ...more concretely help to bring about a shift, in the human agent, from ‘bad doctor’ to ‘good doctor,’ so to speak, or from one who does not aim at, desire, or intend *the good of other living creatures*, to one who takes it as self-evident that “it is necessary to do what is good and avoid what is bad,” where what is good in this context involves helping to bring about the flourishing of other expressions of life;
- 2) ...conceptualize “life” a bit more holistically, taking into account broader categories of life, without evolving into a Nietzschean conception of life-affirmation; or, in other words, which can accommodate more than mere individual “wills-to-live” *without forfeiting the key element of reverence for the lives of individual living creatures*;
- 3) ...better explain, and guard against (a)moral acquiescence to the fact that some life ‘wills’ the death and destruction of other life.²⁰

With these criteria in mind we seek to bridge the gap from Schweitzer’s key premise, “I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live,” to his ethical conclusion, “It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it.” The notion of ecological conversion supplies needed insight.

2 Bridging the Gap: Ecological Conversion

The notion of *reverence of life* and the seeds of truth discovered by Schweitzer are tentatively grounded in the “mystical experience” of which he speaks. Our contentions in what follows are that these seeds can be cultivated in a more life-giving direction when reconceived in terms of *ecological conversion*, and that reverence for life is more aptly cultivated when considered to be one essential environmental virtue among others.²¹ Both of these, however, extend beyond the natural goodness of the individual, and its flourishing in accordance with its specific life form, toward recognition of the goodness of Being.

2.1 Schweitzer’s Mystical Conversion

The elegance with which Schweitzer recounts his mystical conversion experience is striking. It emerges on the basis of an aporia concerning the metaphysical foundations of reality, prompted by his belief that unless civilization is founded upon a kind of cultural progress with ethical roots that sink down to the heart of nature’s way of operating, its labors will have been carried out in vain.²² Schweitzer laments the moral decay that had become apparent in the Europe of his time, having witnessed the devastation of World War I. This stands in stark contrast with civilization’s

²⁰ On refusing to jettison moral action, in the face of the temptation to despair raised by what has traditionally been termed *natural evil*, see especially Treanor 2021. His final chapter advocates a love of world (*amor mundi*) that refuses to ignore or deny the reality of darkness, and that works toward ameliorating specific instances of evil, as an alternative to the Nietzschean *amor fati*.

²¹ The notion appears five paragraphs into *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical on care for our common home, having originated with Saint John Paul II. The Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew had advocated for the transformation that the term implies, and Pope Francis directs attention to Bartholomew’s advocacy, citing Chryssavgis 2011.

²² All three of those cited in the footnote immediately above, of course, endorse this claim.

increasing *material* progress: increased production, and advances in technology, medicine, and economics. He contends that unless ethical progress increases in due proportion, the whole civilizational edifice is destined to collapse.

Through sustained periods of meditation, Schweitzer grasps around in the dark with increasing desperation. His life had become fixated on a very specific theoretical task: to locate the fundamental principle that links material or natural progress with spiritual progress, so as to provide a firmer foundation by which to ground the labors of civilization. “For months I lived in a continual state of mental agitation. Without the least success I concentrated—even during my daily work at the hospital—on the real nature of the affirmation of life and of ethics and on the question of what they have in common. I was wandering about in a thicket where no path was to be found. I was pushing against an iron door that would not yield” (Schweitzer 1990, 154). In this state of agitation, circumstances compelled him to journey up the river, into the heart of Africa. Constraints of time allowed for little preparation; he boarded a steamboat heading upstream, with the Africans on board offering to share their food and supplies with him. As his way of framing the account indicates, the circumstances of this journey were to have more than metaphorical significance. He presents the account as if nature, or Will itself were providentially guiding him inward, toward the heart of its own workings.

Journeying upstream aboard the steamer, “laboriously navigating—it was the dry season—between the sandbanks,” Schweitzer’s confused mental struggle renders him unable to see anything clearly. He remains frustrated and unable to find relief, his eyes cast down onto the blank page before him. As he looks up, exhausted by arid thoughts, the epiphany arrives:

Lost in thought I sat on the deck of the barge, struggling to find the elementary and universal concept of the ethical that I had not discovered in any philosophy. I covered sheet after sheet with disconnected sentences merely to concentrate on the problem. Two days passed. Late on the third day, at the very moment when at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase “reverence for life.” The iron door had yielded. The path in the thicket had become visible. Now I had found my way to the principle in which affirmation of the world and ethics are joined together (Schweitzer 1990, 155).

He goes on to explain the “affirmation of life” from which all genuine ethics proceed: “Affirmation of life is the spiritual act by which man ceases to live thoughtlessly and begins to devote himself to his life with reverence in order to give it true value” (Schweitzer 1990, 157). But what grounds the *ethics* that he assumes will follow from this attitude of affirmation? What fuels the devotion that gives rise to mystical awareness of nature’s secret, the ethics of reverence for life?

“At the same time the man who has become a thinking being *feels a compulsion* to give every will to live the same reverence for life that he gives his own” (Schweitzer 1990, 157; emphasis mine). The line between “feeling a compulsion” in accordance with a conception of the affirmation of life, or the will to live, which leads to *reverence*, and “feeling a compulsion” which leads to *violence*, is thinner than Schweitzer himself will admit. He has been fully convinced of the truth of his theoretical position, as the weight of the conversion experience recounted above exerted an irresistible pull that vitalized his devotion to service.

2.2 *Environmental Virtue Ethics*

But it seems that environmental virtue ethics describes what Schweitzer himself was in fact already doing—namely, cultivating a disposition toward reverence by means of careful observation of the natural world, and developing relevant virtues which further this end—while also providing a more tenable account of the reverence for life that Schweitzer seeks to make into an ultimate ethical principle, and indeed the fundamental principle of nature itself. On Schweitzer’s account of nature, largely inherited from Schopenhauer, Will does *not* strive to realize meaningful ends, which humans and other animals can either help to cultivate or wrongfully diminish. The non-teleological paradigm to which both of these thinkers subscribe affords no room for hope in a vision of flourishing grounded in a more holistic account of the individual organism’s, or nature’s striving.

Nevertheless, even suspending the question concerning teleology, if we focus on the development of the *disposition* that his ethics calls for, and especially if we seek to learn from *Schweitzer himself* as a model of what he advocates, we find ourselves quite close to disposition-centered domain of what Ronald Sandler deems the *environmental exemplar* approach to environmental virtue ethics.²³ Indeed, *exemplar* is arguably the role that Schweitzer’s autobiography has enabled him to play, in inspiring many to cultivate care and compassion, and an attitude of reverence for life that extends to both humans and nonhumans alike.

To move beyond the fact that Schweitzer’s life and writings have inspired a handful of unquestioningly selfless, exceptional individuals to go and do likewise, the fact is that the consequences of the environmental degradation with which we are faced today *will not be adequately addressed and mitigated* if only a few exceptional individuals heed Schweitzer’s challenge. His call to care is exceedingly demanding, and the standard that he sets is simply too high to apply to the thousands upon thousands of consumers—not to mention the leaders of institutions and corporations—whose daily decisions either worsen or lessen the effects of environmental degradation, with negative effects compounding to produce ecological crisis at a global scale.

The first step toward replanting Schweitzer’s insights in more fertile soil, therefore, is reconceiving reverence for life not as *the* basis for ethics, but rather as one environmental virtue among many.²⁴ The key is to locate this ethical notion within a broader, more holistic, virtue-oriented framework. And cultivating the virtue of reverence for life lends toward the more holistic transformation that Pope Francis refers to as ecological conversion.

When Philip Cafaro initiates the “environmental exemplar” approach in an essay comparing three exemplary models of environmental virtue, a key feature that his examples have in common is conspicuously missing in Schweitzer’s case (Cafaro 2001). This is the fifth and final “common position” named by Cafaro, which, according to him, characterizes any adequate environmental virtue ethic. The first four common positions are: a desire to put economic life in its proper place; a commitment to science, combined with an appreciation of its limits; non-anthropocentrism, in the sense of recognizing that moral considerability extends to more than humans alone; and an appreciation for the wild, and support for wilderness protection (Cafaro 2001, 13-15). The fifth and final position is a bedrock belief that life is *good*, and tremendous joy experienced in response to such goodness.

²³ Sandler also recognizes the *virtue theory* approach and the *extensionist* approach as common alternatives (Sandler 2009, 9-11). He favors the *theoretical* approach, developing a “Pluralistic Teleological Account.”

²⁴ This is the position presented by Jason Kawall in “Reverence for Life as a Viable Environmental Virtue” (Kawall 2003).

Reconceiving reverence for life as one virtue among many not only broadens the appeal of Schweitzer's account, it also enables a transition away from Schweitzer's own largely pessimistic view of life as inexplicably characterized by unjustifiable suffering. Cafaro writes, "there is a practical need to develop positive arguments for environmental protection. Often, the general public views environmentalists as killjoys, willing to countenance any trade-offs of human freedom or happiness in pursuit of their aims. Partly this view is unavoidable." He continues,

Yet the writings of the great naturalists, and our own experiences, tell a story of joyful interrelation with nature. Just as classical virtue ethics provided strong self-interested reasons for treating others with respect—reasons based on a person's concern for his own virtue and flourishing—so an environmental virtue ethics can provide strong grounds for environmental protection. Above all, it can move us beyond our initial ethical response to environmental destruction—contrite self-abnegation—and toward a more positive, sustainable position of respectful dwelling in nature (Cafaro 2001, 5).

What characterizes Schweitzer's account is precisely its *lack* of joyful interrelation: its unwillingness to recognize the goodness of Being, and the mundane joy that would follow from such affirmation; and stubborn dedication to "contrite self-abnegation."²⁵

2.3 *Addressing Our Three Criteria*

This recasting enables us to better address the three criteria formulated above, in response to the primary weaknesses of Schweitzer's position. Taking a cue from Anscombe's call for a shift in moral theory from deontological and consequentialist frameworks to a broader, virtue-oriented framework, we find that virtue theory enables us to better account for the necessary dispositional shift in the human agent from one who does not take it to be immediately self-evident that "it is necessary to do what is good and avoid what is bad," where what is good in our context involves helping to bring about the flourishing of other individualized expressions of life, and mitigating their unnecessary suffering. We can do so by means of holistic moral education, and prescribing the development of environmental virtues as constitutive of overall human flourishing (1).

It also enables us to conceive of "life" more holistically, moving beyond Schweitzer's reduction of *life* to *individual life* and his reduction of the scope of ethics to a narrowed focus on living individuals only.²⁶ And it does so without evolving into a Nietzschean conception of life-affirmation, whereby exerting one's own will over and against the will-to-live of other individuals ultimately follows from one's understanding of what life is (2). Environmental virtue ethics can therefore accommodate more than mere individual "wills-to-live" without forfeiting the element of respect or reverence for the lives of individual living creatures.

Finally, such reconceptualization enables us to better explain and guard against moral acquiescence when faced with the fact that some life 'wills' the death and destruction of other life (3). More needs to be done to shore up this intuition when applied to nonhuman life, but just as

²⁵ In fact, if one was forced to choose a phrase by which to caricature Schweitzer's account, the latter would be an apt choice. Schweitzer wants to affirm the goodness of Being, but cannot. His metaphysical view of the world prevents him from doing so: "To the question of whether I am a pessimist or an optimist, I answer that my knowledge is pessimistic, but my willing and hoping are optimistic," he writes. "I am pessimistic because I feel the full weight of what we conceive to be the absence of purpose in the course of world events. Only at rare moments have I felt really glad to be alive" (Schweitzer 1990, 242).

²⁶ The shift toward a more holistic conception of life brings us a key step closer to recognition of the goodness of Being.

unjust acts toward other humans are to be deemed unjust, and therefore *vicious*—where vice detracts from the actor’s own flourishing and indeed begets diminution of that flourishing—so too does this principle apply when expanded to address the flourishing of other forms of life, in their respective contexts. In short, locating reverence for life as one environmental virtue among many, within a broader virtue-based framework, also contextualizes Schweitzer’s key ethical insights as constitutive of one component of ecological conversion: namely, moral conversion.²⁷

2.4 *The Goodness of Being*

Developing our account to better meet the demands of our third criterion, we conjecture that Schweitzer’s struggle to affirm life as fundamentally *good*, and the destruction of life *found as a “force” present within nature itself* as fundamentally *evil*, is constitutive of his struggle to fully embrace, pursue, and develop the religious element that underlies of his attitude of reverence for life. To be sure, Schweitzer himself acknowledged the religious element toward which his position was leading. Still wrestling with the “evil” implicit in our third criterion, he writes, “In the universe the infinite will to live reveals itself to us as will to create, and this is filled with dark and painful riddles for us.” But again, rather than descending further into the abyss, to wrestle with the darkness, Schweitzer immediately gazes back toward the light: “It manifests itself in us the will to love, which resolves the riddles through our actions. The concept of Reverence for Life therefore has a religious character” (Schweitzer 1990, 237). The theoretical struggle to make sense of natural evil, as a force present *within*—perhaps present alongside, or perhaps tainting and counteracting—“the will to live,” is “resolved” through *actions*, or in other words through the mitigation of suffering in devotion to life. But ignoring the problem doesn’t make it go away. Flight toward “action” can be conceived of as a form of denial.

With Erazim Kohák we stand at a crossroads in our conception of reality, and in understanding the place of the human animal within the larger whole of nature. Kohák writes, “If, in the course of the last three centuries, we have become increasingly marauders on the face of the earth rather than dwellers therein, it is not because we have become more distinctively human, more distinctively cultured, but rather because we have become less so” (Kohák 1984, 91). What sets us apart in our humanity is precisely the ability to perceive what is ethical, and to do it.²⁸

²⁷ Here we allude to Lonergan’s analysis of *conversion*, which he divides into three distinct components: moral, religious, and intellectual. Robert Doran locates a fourth, which he calls psychological conversion. Neil Ormerod and Cristina Vanin explain that at the most basic level, moral conversion “changes the criterion of one’s decisions and choices from satisfactions to values” (Ormerod and Vanin 2016, 331, quoting Lonergan 1972, 240). Religious conversion, on the other hand, refers to one’s “being grasped by ultimate concern. It is other-worldly falling in love, a total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations. But such a surrender is understood not as an act, but as a dynamic state that is prior to and principle of subsequent acts” (ibid.). Finally, intellectual conversion “is a radical clarification and, consequently, the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge” (Ormerod and Vanin 2016, 330, quoting Lonergan 1972, 238). On congruences between Lonergan’s ethics and virtue theory, see especially Patrick Byrne’s *The Ethics of Discernment* (Byrne 2017). One should note that from this point forward, we can conceive of the shift in one’s understanding of reality as moving from “moral conversion” (involving virtue, vice, and the flourishing of other creatures) toward “religious conversion” (toward recognition of the goodness of Being). The author would like to thank Patrick Byrne for his comments and suggestions in response to an earlier draft of this essay.

²⁸ “What is distinctively human about us is our ability to perceive the moral law in the vital order of nature, subordinating greed to love” (Kohák 1984, 91). For an elaboration upon, and defense of this point see MacIntyre’s *Dependent Rational Animals* (MacIntyre 1999). Finally, for a defense of the importance of recognizing animal agency, as a supplement to both *Laudato Si’* and MacIntyre’s *Dependent Rational Animals*, see Mary A. Ashley’s “In Communion with God’s Sparrow: Incorporating Animal Agency into the Environmental Vision of *Laudato Si’*” (Ashley 2018).

Schweitzer's reverence for life and his larger concerns about the progress of civilization are taken up and transformed at a level of higher understanding, and re-contextualized in virtue- and religiously oriented terms: "For humans, it is precisely culture, in the most basic sense of cultivation, of care and respect, ...that can be the way to reclaiming our place in nature."

Yet there *is* something to Schweitzer's pessimism, or his struggle to make sense of the fact that not all life wills to live and let live. This tension can give way to a vantage point from which the nature of reality, and our place in nature, is brought more clearly into focus:

Shall we conceive of the world around us and of ourselves in it as *personal*, a meaningful whole, honoring its order as continuous with the moral law of our own being and its being as continuous with ours, bearing its goodness—or shall we conceive and treat it, together with ourselves, as *impersonal*, a chance aggregate of matter propelled by a blind force and exhibiting at most the ontologically random lawlike regularities of a causal order? ...That answered, all else follows (Kohák 1984, 124-125).

Reality: personal or impersonal? Schweitzer's account of reverence for life stands at the far side of this interpretive crossroads, even as Kohák challenges us to continue wrestling with what might be conceived as the religious, perhaps verging on the intellectual component of ecological conversion. With Cafaro we have noted that what is needed to bridge the gap is not solely the cultivation of goodness in one's own person, which is indeed a necessary condition, but also recognition of the fundamental goodness of Being.²⁹ A twofold disposition toward goodness—toward the cultivation of goodness in one's own person, and toward a fundamental recognition of the goodness of Being—contextualizes and further develops Schweitzer's vitalist understanding of the ethics of reverence for life, on the way toward fuller and fuller expressions of ecological conversion.

2.5 Conclusion

To the points made in our second section, one might object: based on the starting point of the essay, in reference to Anscombe, Hume, and natural judgments about goodness or badness, could not one conclude that things should be the other way around?³⁰ Are not environmental virtues, concern for the flourishing of creatures, and so forth, aspects of the *natural goodness of human beings*?³¹

²⁹ Nodding to another exemplar of environmental virtue, Treanor comments, "The homelessness of sauntering—which Thoreau likens to being at home 'everywhere,' that is, in nature—serves to remind us...to give thanks for the gift and goodness of the greater whole of which we are a part, even if aspects of that mystery's whole are terrifying" (Treanor 2018, 126). Dan Bradley has contextualized the need for recognizing both intrinsic value and the goodness of Being against the background of a recent tendency among environmental philosophers to focus on the melancholic, at the expense of joy. In an excellent recent chapter, Bradley problematizes the axiological anthropocentrism characteristic of Nietzsche's thought, and presents both his own, and Treanor's recent work as a way into a more holistic ecological vision (Bradley 2019, 196).

³⁰ Our thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

³¹ Foot's notion of natural goodness, in accordance with Thompson's notion of the *life form* (or species), enables us to offer natural judgments about the flourishing of an individual. Judgments about the natural goodness of nonhuman species, in accordance with the goods that their forms of life require, are taken to hold in the same way for the human species: considering the human life form, we can make similar judgments about the natural goodness or badness of actions performed by human actors, which avoid succumbing to Hume's version of the naturalistic fallacy. Foot offers the following examples in reference to nonhuman animals. 1. The wolf that hunts with the pack, then feeds on the kill along with the rest of its pack, is a *good* wolf. Conversely, the freeloading wolf that habitually hangs back from the

However, the key point of transition, in our second section, is the move *through* virtue ethics—through the virtue of reverence for life in particular—toward recognition of the intrinsic value of creatures of other species. Indeed, from there we have pushed to move even beyond axiological talk of *value*, toward recognition of the very *goodness* of Being. Although, like Philippa Foot, we have employed the term *goodness* in the context of talk about the virtues, there is a crucial difference: when we have invoked the term *goodness* in reference to the lives of nonhuman creatures, the intention is not at all to refer to what is *good for an animal to do*, in accordance with its life form. Rather, our indication is that *human recognition that it is good for such an animal to exist*, or that its existence is good, is virtuous.

In “Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole,” Holmes Rolston III argues that talk of human virtues and vices is only one half of the situation, and indeed is dangerous without supplementary recognition of the intrinsic value of creatures. Indeed, Foot’s *Natural Goodness* begins with judgments about the actions of nonhuman animals as “good” or “bad” in order to make her case that *human actions* can be judged according to the same standards of natural goodness. The upshot is not about nonhuman animals at all, as she points out in her Postscript:

It may seem that the suggestion of a form of goodness common to all living things must carry implications about the way we should treat animals and even plants. But this is a complete misapprehension. Moral philosophy has to do with the conceptual form of certain judgments about human beings (...). Thoughts about cruelty to animals, or about the wanton destruction of useful or beautifully ingenious living things, belong within the usual distinctions of virtues and vices (Foot 2001, 116).

Rolston provides a needed supplement in reference to an example of the hundreds of species of desert fish that are being wiped out due to human economic projects, and the effects of pollution. He asks: “...why is callous destruction of these desert fish ‘uncalled for,’ if not because there is something in the fish that calls for a more appropriate attitude?” (Rolston 2005, 68). Indeed, this “something” is the *value* of nonhuman creatures.³²

This is precisely why we have moved to supplement talk of human virtue and vice with recognition of intrinsic value; and indeed, why we have pushed further, toward recognition of the goodness of existence. To the suggestion that one might see things the other way around, such that environmental virtues are to be evaluated in accordance with what it is naturally good for human individuals to do, in accordance with their life form, we must reply that what we have gestured toward resides slightly beyond the realm of natural goodness—indeed, beyond what one might refer to as the *natural* (or perhaps cardinal) environmental virtues—toward the theological (environmental) virtue of *caritas*, or love. Our orienting question has been answered, then, and can be summarized in the following manner: the virtue of reverence for life should lead to the affirmation of life’s goodness.

hunt, although perfectly capable of hunting, and yet feeds on the kill with the rest of the pack, is a *bad* wolf. 2. The bee that finds a source of nectar, then dances to alert other bees to its find, is a *good* bee. Conversely, the bee that finds the source of nectar and does not dance, but keeps the nectar for itself, is a *bad* bee.

³² He continues, “Excellence of character does indeed result from a concern for these fish, but if this excellence of character really comes from appreciating otherness, then why not value that otherness in wild nature first? Let the human virtue come tributary to that. It is hard to gain much excellence of character from appreciating an otherwise worthless thing” (Rolston 2005, 68).

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