Albert Schweitzer and the Transcendence of History

Francis K. Peddle

Albert Schweitzer's diverse and original contributions to philosophy, theology, music, and cultural criticism in general display a deep and acute sense of history. No aspect of his intellectual and humanitarian endeavors was pursued in a historical vacuum or without a keen sensitivity to historical context. Indeed, it is arguable that a significant part of the Schweitzer legacy lies in his relentless pursuit of historical truth. In his novel interpretations of historical events, Schweitzer invariably produced a reevaluation, *sub specie historiae*, of the individuals who shaped those events. The major figures in the history of philosophy are examined not in terms of their contributions to logic or to epistemology but as ethical individuals and thinkers who as such move in the inner halls of world history. Christ is wholly situated as never before, by Schweitzer, in the historical environment of late Jewish eschatology, and Bach is interpreted as a musical poet interacting with the historico-religious context in which he finds himself. Even Schweitzer's crusade for the preservation of old organs can be seen as essentially the endeavor of a man overwhelmed with the power of history and tradition. Also, by pioneering many studies in the history of histories or rather the history of interpretation, Schweitzer can be said to have intensified the historicity of modern scholarship. In his efforts to reveal both the distortions and the accuracy of certain scholarly traditions, Schweitzer was on the cutting edge of such twentieth century disciplines as hermeneutics and interpretation theory which spend much time probing the vicissitudes of historical understanding.

The preponderance of history and tradition in Schweitzer's work has been criticized in a number of different quarters. The relativization of Christ's life within history and the time-process sparked intense theological controversy. On the other hand, his almost exclusive concentration on ethical thought in the history of philosophy has engendered, surprisingly enough, little serious commentary. The attempt to preserve old organs made him seem antipathetic to progress along with his persistent reluctance to modernize the hospital at Lambaréné in equatorial Africa. Certain of Schweitzer's views on the relations between the white and black peoples in Africa have also been misinterpreted as colonialistic and patriarchal. Even his well-known doctrine of reverence for life

Francis K. Peddle is Professor of Philosophy at the Dominican College of Philosophy and Theology, Ottawa, Canada, and a Barrister and Solicitor in private practice.
has been misunderstood as the revival of a mystical, pan-animistic oddity.

What these and other criticisms of Schweitzer’s apparent over-emphasis on history and tradition have failed to take into account is that he never regarded historical research or history *per se* as an end in itself. He viewed the search for truth in history and in everything else as an essential aspect of his philosophy, even though he maintained that the truth of history and external reality can never be known in a final and absolute sense. For Schweitzer, ethical vision and activity are not a function of historical or scientific understanding. He immersed himself in history primarily in order to transcend it, and this transcendence is fundamental to an understanding of his philosophy of life. It will also be seen that this activity of historical immersion and transcendence involves for Schweitzer a twofold conception of truth. These principles are consistently present in all of Schweitzer’s endeavors, but here I have restricted the discussion to his work in cultural criticism and the philosophy of civilization.

In the summer of 1899, while still a student, Schweitzer heard one evening at a gathering of academics in Berlin the phrase “we are all of us just nothing but ‘Epigoni,’” which he felt expressed his innermost feeling at that time.1 The critical insights that lay half consciously within him and which this phrase articulated, created the background and inspiration for a book he proposed to entitle *Wir Epigonen,* or “We Inheritors of the Past.” The prevalent view that civilization was continually progressing not only materially but also intellectually and ethically gave him deep misgivings. He was overcome with the feeling that the idealism of the past had been lost with a concomitant decline in spiritual life. Everywhere the young Schweitzer noticed a proliferation of inhumane ideas and a lack of indignation over the spreading barbarism. A spiritual and intellectual fatigue seemed to him to have gripped civilization and stymied its higher ideals.

The project of *Wir Epigonen* did not come to fruition. Nevertheless, its general critique of civilization stayed with Schweitzer and found a mature expression in the first volume of *The Philosophy of Civilization* entitled “The Decay and the Restoration of Civilization.”2 The title of the volume is significant. For Schweitzer, a thorough-going critique of civilization could only appear in conjunction with a constructive attempt to restore civilization to its true nature. The historical analysis of why civilization had declined and lost sight of its sustaining ideals was not in and of itself an activity that Schweitzer found worthwhile, unless it could be linked to an explication of what civilization is and should be.

Although there are numerous and complex reasons why *Wir Epigonen* did not see the light of day, even though its underlying inspiration had moved Schweitzer profoundly, it is plausible to argue that as a simple questioning of the historical direction of civilization it could not satisfy the demand for an ethical vision which he felt all along as integral and pivotal to an understanding of human culture, and society. It would have been a history without a restorative, without an antidote to the disease, and thus a history devoid of the suprahistorical truths which are necessary to contextualize the detours of civilization from its proper ideals. Already in Schweitzer’s early thought we can see a tension between the necessity of explaining history and the ethical requirement of arresting its decline into inhumanity. If civilization does not regain its innermost ideals, then wholesale calamity can be the only result. But the young Schweitzer had not yet fully articulated to himself the nature of those ideals. He
knew intuitively that the past should only be analyzed in the hope and intent of shaping the ethics of the present and the future, but that future only came completely into focus much later during his first sojourn in Africa as a medical doctor when he began to write *The Philosophy of Civilization*.

Schweitzer’s first extensive publication in philosophy was his doctoral thesis on Kant’s philosophy of religion. The excessive exegetical detail and often circuitous argumentation of this work are to be accounted for by Schweitzer’s inexperience and the considerable interpretive difficulties of the Kantian texts. Nevertheless, the thesis abundantly illustrates Schweitzer’s sharp analytic abilities and uncanny knack of identifying the central fibre of an issue. It is argued in the thesis that a static conception of Kant’s philosophy of religion based solely upon the schematism of *The Critique of Practical Reason* is untenable. Kant’s philosophy of religion is in a state of constant development throughout his works. The driving force of this development is his deepening conception of the moral law. According to Schweitzer, this development raises demands in the philosophy of religion which go beyond the presuppositions of critical idealism. Kant’s changing concept of the moral law involves an increasingly profound conception of the self-perfecting ethical personality. Schweitzer maintains that, by developing the concept of the ethical personality, Kant is unable to remain consistent with his own philosophy.

Apart from the issue of the essential correctness of Schweitzer’s interpretation of Kant, there are a number of significant themes in the thesis relevant to the present discussion. First of all, Schweitzer is intent on approaching Kant from a developmental angle. Yet this development is seen as moving towards a concept of the ethical in Kant that makes claims for absoluteness and universality which go beyond what is contained in the development. There are parallels between this and Schweitzer’s later approach to ethical history from the transhistorical standpoint of the doctrine of reverence for life. Secondly, Schweitzer wishes to show in Kant’s philosophy of religion the triumph of moral intuition over conceptual design. In the end, Schweitzer concludes that Kant’s vision of the moral as an ultimate end in itself brings to naught its intellectual underpinnings. Here we can see some symmetry with Schweitzer’s later theory that an epistemological world-view (*Weltanschauung*) cannot provide the basis of a sound ethics or sustain an adequate life-view (*Lebensanschauung*). Thirdly, Schweitzer’s demonstration of the increasing prominence of conviction over intellectual structure in Kant’s philosophy of religion anticipates to some degree the emphasis in his mature philosophy on the necessary movement of rational thought into ethical mysticism. From this it can be seen that even in Schweitzer’s early work there is a recognition of the necessity for a transcendence of history understood generally as the developmental, the processual, and the inferential. The vision of the ethical has to be in history, that is, in the developmental, but it cannot be constituted by it. The historical is the sempiternal setting for the ethical deed and the conditionality of ethical duty but that setting and conditionality can never decide or determine in any significant way the parameters of the ethical.

It is in *The Philosophy of Civilization* that we find Schweitzer’s definitive and systematic explication of the interrelationship between the historical and the transhistorical in ethical thought. The first volume of *The Philosophy of Civilization or Kulturphilosophie*, “The Decay and the Restoration of Civilization” takes...
up and expands upon cultural criticisms and insights originally intended for *Wir Epigonen*, although many of these themes also permeate the second volume “Civilization and Ethics.” The transcendence of history and the dynamic of the interrelation between the historical and the transhistorical take place on a number of different levels in the *Kulturphilosophie*. There is the broad critique of the ethical history of Western thought from the Greeks to the early twentieth century executed in “Civilization and Ethics.” The final six chapters of this volume contain Schweitzer’s most explicit presentation of the “doctrine of reverence for life.” The Epilogue to Schweitzer’s autobiography also contains concise accounts of his philosophy of life and his understanding of the relation between ethics and religion, though the argument is essentially the same as in the *Kulturphilosophie*. These expositions are the ultimate basis upon which he criticizes previous ethical thought and doctrine. Then there is the more limited critique of Western civilization in decline which Schweitzer says began around the middle of the nineteenth century. This more limited critique is primarily a lament for the lost rationality and idealism of the Enlightenment. Schweitzer qualifies in considerable detail in various places his relationship to the Enlightenment, but there can be no doubt that he regarded it as the highest level of civilization in European culture. The dissolution of cooperation between ethical ideals and reality in post-Enlightenment cultural history therefore sets the stage for the fairly recent decay that Schweitzer feels is so productive of modern inhumanity and thoughtlessness. What will come as a surprise to many is that philosophy, revered, until now at least, as the most trenchantly reflective and substantive of all the intellectual disciplines, is held responsible by Schweitzer for the doleful cultural mi-
aspect of Schweitzer’s critique of the history of thought and culture. The transcendence of history is an indispensable element in the whole approach since the necessarily circular structure of the argument involves both a tranhistorical and historical side.

Unfortunately for the development of civilization since around the middle of the nineteenth century, there has been a one-sided emphasis on history. Schweitzer believes that philosophy played a central role in this cultural decline by renouncing its ideals and duties as the historical consciousness rose to dominance. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, attempts to explain the essence of civilization were unsuccessful because it was sought in origins and history. The content of spiritual life was seen to reside in the rich mosaic of cultural accumulation, and the infinity of open-ended scientific research was assimilated to the study of history as an inexhaustible storehouse to prop up anything and everything in the social and political milieu. The historicization of all aspects of cultural and spiritual life threated our abilities, according to Schweitzer, to think about the true nature of civilization. What role did philosophy play in all of this?

Schweitzer sees the fundamental duty of philosophy as an elaboration of the connection between civilization and a theory of the universe (Weltanschauung). The absence of such a theory, and its divorce from civilization, is the source of the modern crisis. In the Enlightenment there was, in Schweitzer’s view, a connection between the ideals of philosophy and reality, that is, the general thought world of ethical ideals, based on reason, permeated and informed the objective world of social, political, and cultural development. In other words, an ahistorical rationality was brought to bear on historical development, and in their mutual interchange Schweitzer saw a civilization that was balanced and enthusiastically promulgated. The emphasis here must be on the connection between philosophy and the general culture, for each in itself had inadequacies that would subsequently be exposed. Schweitzer saw in the Age of Reason what he liked to call an “elemental” form of philosophizing that produced a popular thought world and a progressive, ethically centered civilization.

Only philosophy could maintain the all-important connection between civilization and a theory of the universe. Yet the connection did become severed around the middle of the nineteenth century, and so philosophy, according to Schweitzer, must be held responsible for the decline that resulted from this bifurcation. The great systems of thought found in German Idealism are looked upon by Schweitzer as intermezzi, albeit valuable and important, between the Enlightenment and the modern deliquescence of spiritual life. On account of his epistemological idealism, Kant identified the ethical with the intellectual. But in doing so he removed ethics from the simplicity and directness that it originally had in the Enlightenment. Schweitzer declares that this loosened the connection between ethics and the belief in progress which had such disastrous consequences later in the nineteenth century. Kant wished to give the naive rationalism of his time a deepened conception of the moral, but in doing so he failed to impart to that conception a definite content of its own.

With the dialectical-speculative systems of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, the optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world seemed to transcend the limits of Enlightenment rationalism in a logico-metaphysics that once and for all would maintain the connection between civilization and a theory of the universe. These systems, however, lost their repute towards the middle of the nineteenth cen-
tury and thereafter only residual and extrapolated doctrines from the idealistic metaphysicians were used for a motley of philosophies and social causes. Although Schweitzer's relationship with Hegel is complex, he relentlessly takes the German philosopher to task for giving an autonomy to progress in the world-process that it cannot and should not have. The Kantian loosening of the connection between ethics and progress is therefore extended with Hegel. The result is a supra-ethical world-view in which individual enthusiasm for ethics and the possibility of real progress therein is drained of all vitality because progressive historical development is immanent and inevitably dispenses with human initiative.

Ernst Cassirer identifies Hegel's rationalism as historical, Schweitzer's as ethical. Hegel's rationalism, Cassirer maintains, made possible the submission of everything "to the verdict of historical reality." If this categorization is correct, then Schweitzer could only see in Hegel a sign of spiritual weakness since the sufferance of world history is a sure indication of cultural decay as opposed to a strong and vital spirituality which creates it. Thought, history, and empirical reality are symmetrical in Hegel as a supra-ethical and immanently developmental Weltanschauung, but the crucial issue for Schweitzer is not the validity and internal consistency of the symmetry but its net effect on the ethical disposition of the individual. Schweitzer replaces the Hegelian "Nachdenken" in which philosophy always comes "too late" with an elemental "Denken" that produces a philosophy which is on time and, even better, constructive of a more ethically enlightened future.

The demise of philosophy as a system of comprehensive thought in classical German metaphysics left a void with regard to the monopoly on truth which was quickly filled by science as the mediator of reality. The scientific mediation and description of reality conceals a more fundamental thought re-orientation. Finished theories of the universe are now understood as hypothetical or mythological. All thought has been reduced to a theory which must be subjected to criticism, revision, and possible falsification. Any theory, no matter what its degree of universality, is in history simply because its veracity is wholly dependent upon already existing or potentially discoverable data. Truth has become tentative and history-bound. Philosophy also succumbed to this thought re-orientation and became primarily an exercise in critical theory which is at the mercy of historical revision and qualification. The scientific spirit supplanted philosophy and permeated historical study in the nineteenth century but it is also the case that science itself became historicized. It was no accident that the spirit of history and science reached widespread popular acceptance at around the same time. For Schweitzer, however, the essence of civilization is ethical, all else, including history and science, being merely its accompanying circumstances.

Our historical sense, according to Schweitzer, is very much our present sense of reality prolonged backwards. It is therefore necessarily value-laden. Schweitzer believes that a certain critical objectivity towards both history and our sense of reality is possible. The wholesale legitimization of the present by the past is a symptom of our cultural decline. Reverence for history, in Schweitzer's view, has been made a religion and the traditional objective separation of past and present has been leveled off into the uniformity of endless revision, moral wavering, and a general avoidance of conclusion. In order to approach the past authentically it cannot be indiscriminately used to deduce the
present. Just as ethics must not be based on history so too must the ideas and dispositions of the present not be founded solely in history but in reason. Proper historical study is therefore only a possibility if history can be transcended. This means that our present sense of reality as conditioned by science and history, in which ideals are simply an ad hoc function of external existences, must be transcended in a philosophy that is "the guide and guardian of the general reason."21

As has been pointed out both the limited and the broad critiques of Western culture were only possible for Schweitzer on the basis of a positive philosophy which could support its reconstruction. This philosophy must "correct" the past but the amending inquiry cannot be an activity in itself for then we are once again entangled in a lifeless scholasticism. Schweitzer interprets the history of Western ethics as a search for an optimistic-ethical world-view. This history remained steadfast in the conviction that the meaning of life could be deduced from its conception of the universe.22 The decisive methodological turn in Schweitzer's philosophy is that the optimistic-ethical interpretation of the world must be renounced.23 By advancing a thoroughgoing epistemological skepticism, Schweitzer declares that history, science, and an understanding of world-process can never be the foundation of the ethical. Neither knowledge in the lesser sense as probable truths about appearances nor in the absolute sense contributes to the validity of ethics. Science and history, as studies of phenomenal detail, are certainly possible but they must stay within their epistemological limits. Resignation as to the possibility of an epistemological understanding of the universe is the pronoas to an ethics based on the universal will-to-live of which the world is a manifestation.

Schweitzer's ethics and world-and life-affirmation (Welt- und Lebensbejahung) come not from intellectual understanding but from simple reflection and meditation on our will-to-live. Life-view must be the foundation of world-view not the reverse as has been the case in the history of Western thought. Though life-view and world-view are not ultimately reconcilable, since knowledge of the world is necessarily external and incomplete, that of the will-to-live internal and direct, Schweitzer feels the bipolarity is harmless if our conception of life is understood to be dependent on itself alone and a straightforward entente developed between life and world conceptions.24 The will-to-live when it comes to meditate on its own existence and its relation to other living existences arrives at the doctrine of reverence for life.25 This absolutely elementary and inward principle of the ethical is universally valid and transcendent of all historical conditionality. Reverence for life takes hold of the individual in a rational meditation (Denken) on itself and its relation to the world. Out of this meditation come the multiform tensions of ethical thought and activity between self-perfection and devotion to others, between the optimistic and the pessimistic, between ethical principle and practice. Reverence for life is the highest idea of the individual will-to-live. It gives meaning to all life, makes possible ethical progress, and creates and sustains the universe of values.

The general framework of Schweitzer's twofold relation to history and truth is now before us. Advancement in the phenomenal knowledge of history is possible but absolute history of the phenomenal is an illusion. Truth can be obtained from history through painstaking effort and a ruthless critical objectivity. There is however a higher truth to be found in simple, elemental reflection on the nature of our will-to-live. Out of this
reflection comes reverence for life as the fundamental principle of ethics. Good consists in maintaining and promoting life, evil in destroying and limiting it. In reflection on the nature of the will-to-live we have a principle whereby intellectual history can be re-evaluated. There is a circumscribed phenomenal truth for history and a transcendental truth in deep ethical reflection that is beyond history yet pervasive in it. History must therefore be suspended and transcended so that it may be re-affirmed on a new foundation.

Schweitzer's half a century of humanitarian efforts in Africa were looked upon by him as an improvisation on the theme of reverence for life. He made his life his argument and in doing so demonstrated that a continuity and reciprocal illumination between world-view and life-view, between theoria and praxis, is possible and necessary. With a simple yet profound and absolute ethics ennobled by the mysticism of "docta ignorantia" Schweitzer became the hope of many for the dawn of an ethically based and enlightened civilization. The history of human culture is replete with unelemental efforts to construct a true ethic. Schweitzer believed that unelemental history must be transformed by an elemental transhistorical perspective which takes hold of the individual and thus makes possible the reconstruction of civilization.

Our cultural history has been illuminated, transformed, and sustained by the permanently valid insights of certain extraordinary individuals in philosophy, theology, and art who give them substance and an iridescent reality. Schweitzer saw an intense and pervasive paradox in the nature of all life. It is only the individual and the strength of personality which are able to grapple with these paradoxes. In self-realization and the goodness of devotion to others—an inner realm of self-perfection as ideal and an outer universe given over to the maintenance and enhancement of life as actual—the structural paradoxes of life can be employed for the enrichment of ethical thought and action. The transcendence of history is only possible by the individual who has and lives the insight that the foundation of ethics lies beyond all history as much as its necessarily imperfect realization must be inherently historical.

4. Autobiography, 19-20. 5. Kiernan, ed., op. cit., 341. 6. Schweitzer originally intended his Kulturphilosophie to have four parts, the third to be entitled The World-view of Reverence for Life, the fourth on the Civilized State. See Philosophy, xi, 84. He then seems to have thought the latter two parts could be condensed into one volume on reverence for life as it applies to social and political problems. Schweitzer worked on this volume intermittently over a number of decades. The stories surrounding it are almost a legend in themselves. See James Brabazon, Albert Schweitzer: A Biography (London, 1976), 359, George N. Marshall, An Understanding of Albert Schweitzer (New York, 1966), 126-127, and Ulrich Neuenschwander, "LaSuite de la Philosophie de la Civilisation dans les Manuscrits Posthumes d'Albert Schweitzer," Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses, 56:1-2 (1976), 83-96. 7. Philosophy, 3, 8. For example, see Philosophy, 3, 80, 82, 167-180. 9. This is a loose paraphrase of Schweitzer's transformation of the Cartesian cogito: "Ich bin..."
Leben, dass leben will, inmitten von Leben, dass leben will," which he says is the most immediate and comprehensive fact of consciousness. See, Philosophy, 309. 10. Philosophy, 80. 11. Ibid., 2. 12. Ibid., xi-xv. 13. "Elemental" is a key term in Schweitzer’s philosophical vocabulary. The broader, more meditative, conception of thought in the German notion of ‘Denken’ is closely linked with his understanding of the elemental. See Autobiography, 224, Goethe: Five Studies, trans. C.R. Joy (Boston, 1961), especially, “The Goethe Prize Address,” 21-30, and Brabazon, op. cit., 224-245. 14. Philosophy, 80. 15. Ibid., 185. 16. For example, see Philosophy, 213-220. See also Norman Cousins, Dr. Schweitzer of Lambaréné, (New York, 1960), 119. 17. Ernst Cassirer, “Albert Schweitzer as Critic of Nineteenth-Century Ethics” in The Albert Schweitzer Jubilee Book, ed. A.A. Roback (Westport, Conn., 1970), 241-257. 18. Albert Schweitzer, “Religion in Modern Civilization,” in George Seaver, Albert Schweitzer: The Man and His Mind (London, 1949), Appendix III, 337. 19. Philosophy, 4. 20. Ibid., 27. This section of the Kulturphilosophie, 26-29, is the only one where Schweitzer discusses in more than a sentence or two our modern historical sense. 21. Philosophy, 8. 22. Ibid., 63-64. 23. Ibid., 23. 24. Ibid., 55, 276, 282. 25. Ibid., 78.