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From reverence for life to bioethics: Albert Schweitzer, a bioethics precursor

ABSTRACT

Precursor only exists, as a precursor, when related to recognized and posterior author. In terms of thoughts, a precursor didn't precede, he coexist. One marvelous example of coexistence is Albert Schweitzer and Fritz Jahr. Jahr is not a Potter precursor; he coined Bioethics as a word. Jahr is the founder. He made a rupture in the history of Ethics, when he proposed the Bioethics Imperative. I will present some highlights related to Bioethics, in the vast and diverse intellectual production of Albert Schweitzer. The Ethics of the Reverence for Life, first coined in a sermon in 1919, is based in Virtue Ethics. Reverence for Life is another kind of love, as a virtue. Reverence for Life is beyond self-sacrifice, self-fulfillment and self-improvement, is a creative force related to civilization. In 1923, in a magnificent book is – Civilization and Ethics – Albert Schweitzer described his proposal in details. In an article, published in 1936 he consolidated his thoughts about humanity, civilization, ethics, life and living. We must recognize the importance of Albert Schweitzer in the history of Bioethics.

An introduction to Albert Schweitzer

Bioethics is a new field of knowledge, it is a meeting ground to share knowledge between disciplines. Bioethics, possibly, is one of the most successful interdisciplinary experiences in our time.

Since the beginning, the founder fathers - Van Rensselaer Potter and Fritz Jahr - proposed Bioethics as this. Even Aldo Leopold, that uses Land Ethics concept in-

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stead of Bioethics, used this approach. Interdisciplinarity is a core characteristic of Bioethics.

Many other thinkers made significant contributions to the bioethical theoretical framework, even without using this word. Albert Schweitzer is one of them. He is a precursor of Bioethics reflections, as we know them in present. Many of his writings resemble the ideas of Potter, Leopold and Jahr.

It is important to remember that Albert Schweitzer, as a person and as a thinker, made important contributions to Theology, Philosophy, Music and Medicine in his long life (1875-1965). He integrates Humanities and Medicine. His healthcare practice in Africa was assembled in a humanistic perspective (1).

The aim of this paper is to compare citations of Albert Schweitzer, Fritz Jahr, Aldo Leopold and Van Reseller Potter in order to demonstrate some similar thoughts.

From reverence for life to bioethics

Reverence for Life (Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben) is the main theoretical contribution of Albert Schweitzer to Philosophy and Bioethics. This concept emerges as an insight in 1915, when he was in Africa. In one of his biographical notes he describes:

Late on the third day (September, 1915), 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". Now I knew that the ethical acceptance of the world and of life, together with ideals of civilization contained in this concept, has a foundation in thought.
(1)

This insight was the beginning of a very brilliant thought. Reverence for Life evolved along his long and creative life. He explained and used Reverence for Life in terms of theoretical and practical approach.

The first time he publicly shared this concept was on February 19, 1919 at St. Nicolai's Church, in Strasbourg, during a Sunday morning service. He said that:

Reverence for the infinity of life means removal of the alienation, restoration of empathy, compassion, sympathy. (2)

Schweitzer not only proposed, but he really lived with compassion. In the same 1919 sermon, Schweitzer enlarges his concept, saying that:

Life is feeling, experience, suffering. If you study life deeply, looking with perceptive eyes into the vast animated chaos of this creation, its profundity will seize you suddenly with dizziness. In everything you recognize yourself. (2)

Fritz Jahr, in his foundation article, published in 1927, used the same comprehensive approach to compassion, when he says:

Philosopher Schopenhauer, openly invoking the Indian ideas, considered, as a special quality of his Ethics, the fact of having claimed also to animals the feeling of compassion. (4)

Aldo Leopold, in his Land Ethics proposal, in 1930s, made a very similar assumption:

Land Ethics simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. (3)

Schweitzer re-affirms, in his book *Civilization and Ethics*, written in 1923, the wide view, when he said:

A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, and that of plants and animals as that of his fellow men... Only the universal ethic of the feeling of responsibility in an ever-widening sphere for all that lives - only that ethic can be founded in thought. (5)

Jahr made the same assumption:

From Biopsychology to Bioethics just one step is required, the acceptance of moral obligations to all living beings, not only in relation to humans. (4)

Reverence for life is a commitment to preserve life, to avoid harms, not only to humans, but also to all other living beings. Schweitzer and Jahr had the same thought about the assumption that Ethics could be extended to plants. In another part of the same Sermon, Schweitzer said:

Reverence concerning all life in the greatest commandment in its most elementary form. We take this prohibition ("Thou shalt not kill") so lightly, thoughtlessly plucking a flower. (2)

Coherently, Fritz Jahr made a very similar reflection when he said:

Most people are naturally not so sensitive as Ed. von Hartmann. Everyone knows that plants are also living beings that are injured when the flower is cut, but the idea that it also feels resentful at that is not familiar to us. (4)

Expanding Ethics to all living beings – humans, animals and plants – was a very creative and a vivacious proposal even in contemporary Bioethics. It is important to remember that Francis of Assisi, cited by Fritz Jahr, extends compassion to the whole nature.

Albert Schweitzer understood that Ethics is intrinsically related to life and deals with good and evil. He linked these concepts when he proposed:

That is what gives me the fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, promoting, and enhancing life, and that destroying, injuring, and limiting life are evil. (5)

Potter, in 1971, justifying Bioethics, in the same way, enhanced this point of view by saying:

We must plead not for a moratorium on new knowledge, but a coupling of biological knowledge and human values. (6)

Potter, when proposed Deep Bioethics, instead of a shallow Ethics approach to health and science issues says:

Bioethics as a new ethics science that combine humbleness, responsibility and an interdisciplinary competence, intercultural, that potential our sense of humanity. (7)

From bioethics to reverence to life

Nowadays, is important to know, to understand and to have commitment to all of these primeval concepts of Bioethics. Eve Marie Engels, who was the first author that refers to Fritz Jahr's Bioethics approach in a published text, assumes followgin:

Bioethics as an ethical reflection about living beings, including human beings, such as those living beings are presented in everyday relationships in the living world and in theoretical and practical contexts in science and research. (8)

This approach to Bioethics, including human beings as moral partners of all living beings, sharing ethical reflections, in a practical and theoretical framework, is a challenge to our society. Bioethics, these days, could be defined as a complex, shared and interdisciplinary reflection about the adequacy of actions related to Life and Living. (9)

Understanding Albert Schweitzer contributions is fundamental to understanding Bioethics as a whole. Schweitzer is a Bioethics precursor because he anticipates Jahr's bioethical thinking (10). Schweitzer made a contemporary contribution when he said:

Life demands that we see through to the solidarity of all life which we can in any degree recognize as having some similarity to the life that is in us. (1)

In conclusion, Reverence for Life is a basilar concept to Bioethics. Albert Schweitzer wrote that:

Just as the screw which churns its way through the water drives the ship along, so does reverence for life drive the man. (1)

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