

Torn Between Paradigms?

A Reflection on Schweitzer's Failure to Complete his Philosophy of Civilization

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Abstract

This paper examines Albert Schweitzer's failure to complete the projected third volume of *The Philosophy of Civilization*. It argues that this failure resulted neither from a lack of intellectual determination nor from the inadequacy of his ethical ideal, but from a fundamental tension between Schweitzer's ethics of reverence for life and the prevailing Modern paradigm within which he initially attempted to formulate it. Characterized by rationalism, reductivism, individualism, and faith in scientific and technological progress, this paradigm could not provide an adequate metaphysical and axiological foundation for Schweitzer's vision. The paper traces Schweitzer's growing engagement with Indian and Chinese thought, focusing especially on the significance of Rabindranath Tagore and classical Chinese notions of complementarity, harmony, and dynamic balance. These influences suggest that Schweitzer was gradually moving toward a different framework without fully articulating it. The paper identifies this alternative as the paradigm of Dynamic Symmetry: a relational, non-reductive understanding of reality grounded in interaction, complementarity, and negotiated balance. It concludes that reverence for life becomes philosophically more coherent within this paradigm, which allows Schweitzer's unfinished project to be understood not simply as a failure, but as an incomplete transition between two fundamentally different ways of interpreting reality, ethics, and civilization.

Keywords: Albert Schweitzer; reverence for life; philosophy of civilization; Modern paradigm; Dynamic Symmetry; Rabindranath Tagore; Chinese philosophy; paradigm change

How could a thinker of Albert Schweitzer's extraordinary discipline, intellectual range, and moral seriousness fail to complete the philosophical project that stood at the center of his life? He never abandoned his ethics of reverence for life, nor did he cease to believe in its significance. For years, he accumulated notes and repeatedly attempted to develop it into the comprehensive worldview he had promised. Yet the work remained unfinished. Why?

In 1923, Schweitzer published the two-volume work *The Philosophy of Civilization* (*Kulturphilosophie*). The first, shorter volume bears the ominous title *The Decay and Restoration of Civilization*, while the more substantial second volume is simply called *Civilization and Ethics*. After critically examining the history of predominantly Western ethical thought, Schweitzer sets

forth his own ethics of reverence for all life, condensed in his frequently quoted formulation: “It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it.”¹

In the Preface to the second volume, Schweitzer announces that two further volumes will complete his project. The third is to be devoted to “The Worldview of Reverence for Life,” while the fourth will address the civilized state. Neither Schweitzer nor those familiar with his life and work could have anticipated that these volumes would never appear. Despite the extraordinary discipline with which he approached all his undertakings—and despite years of effort and the accumulation of voluminous notes—his work on the third volume repeatedly came to a standstill.

I. Schweitzer and the Modern Paradigm

What I call the “Modern paradigm” did not emerge all at once, nor was it the creation of any single thinker. It should not be understood as a doctrine to which all modern philosophers explicitly subscribed, but as a constellation of assumptions that gradually came to shape Western thought. Its rise was stimulated by an increasing number of geographical and scientific discoveries and by a growing opposition to the medieval worldview, with its reliance on inherited authority and the dogmas of the Church.²

Among the earliest and most influential contributors to this paradigm were Francis Bacon and René Descartes. Bacon emphasized the inadequacy of the inherited “idols” that distort human understanding, classifying them as the idols of the tribe, the cave, the marketplace, and the theater. In place of inherited habits of thought, he called for a *new organon*: a method grounded in systematic observation and carefully conducted experiments. Descartes was more radical still. His method of doubt subjected the entire body of received knowledge to critical examination. To overcome the uncertainty produced by this doubt, he developed a method of analysis through which complex claims—and, by extension, complex things—were to be reduced to their simplest constituents before a reliable process of reconstruction or synthesis could begin.

John Locke and Isaac Newton also contributed decisively to the formation of the Modern paradigm. Rejecting Descartes’ doctrine of innate ideas, Locke described the mind as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which experience—primarily sensory experience—gradually inscribes its contents. Newton, in turn, provided the emerging paradigm with its most powerful image of the natural world: a universe governed by rational, objective, and intelligible laws. The world could

¹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, trans. C. T. Campion (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1987), 309.

It would be worthwhile to compare Schweitzer’s formulation with the central ethical directive of Buddhism: “To avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to cleanse one’s mind—this is the teaching of the Buddha;” *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom*, trans. Ācāriya Buddhārakkhita (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), Ch. XIV, Verse 183.

² I use the term *paradigm* here as an interpretive ideal type rather than as the designation of a fully unified historical doctrine. It identifies a constellation of characteristic assumptions and tendencies that enables us to discern a broad pattern within the diversity of modern thought. As with any ideal type, its value is heuristic: it clarifies significant continuities and contrasts without implying that every thinker associated with the period exemplifies all of its features, or that historical reality ever conformed to it in a pure form.

be conceived as a vast container in which independently existing things occupy determinate positions in space and time and enter into causally ascertainable relations with one another.³

The paradigm that emerged from these developments matured during the Enlightenment and continued to shape Western thought throughout the nineteenth century. Its principal features can be summarized as follows:

1. **Skepticism toward traditional authority.** Inherited beliefs, institutions, and customs are subjected to critical examination. The world is increasingly treated as a question to be answered or a problem to be solved, rather than as a divinely ordered reality whose basic meaning has already been disclosed.
2. **Reductivism.** Descartes' method of analysis suggests that every complex whole should be reduced to its simplest constituent parts. Each part can then be examined independently until its nature has been established with sufficient certainty; only afterward can the reconstruction of the whole begin.
3. **Individualism.** Whatever exists is conceived primarily as an individual entity that can be distinguished from other entities and identified and defined in its own right. Individual things may stand near one another or enter into causal relations, but their fundamental separateness remains a basic ontological assumption.
4. **Reason as the primary source of legitimacy and authority.** What should be believed is determined not by tradition but by rigorous reasoning. Beliefs are judged to be true or false, and it is assumed that every properly formulated question must, at least in principle, admit of a correct answer.
5. **Empiricism and science as privileged sources of knowledge.** Reason provides the form of valid thinking, while the material of knowledge and the evidence supporting our claims come from empirically ascertainable facts, gathered through careful observation and the systematic application of scientific methods and instruments. Fact and fiction are sharply distinguished.
6. **Progressivism.** The expansion of knowledge and the advancement of civic freedom are understood as parts of a continuing historical development. Through the accumulation of observable facts and their rational comparison, human beings are expected to make significant improvements both in their understanding of the world and in the organization of social life.

Precisely because these commitments proved so powerful in freeing inquiry from inherited authority and advancing scientific explanation, their limitations can be difficult to see. When extended from the investigation of measurable objects to a systematic account of value and personality, however, critical doubt tends to dissolve inherited horizons of meaning, reductive analysis fragments living wholes, individualism obscures constitutive relations, and the privileging of reason and empirical verification relegates value and personal significance to the merely subjective. Even faith in progress may encourage us to judge beings chiefly by their contribution to future ends rather than by their intrinsic worth.

³ Newton's conception of reality might also be compared to a library catalog, in which every book is presumed to have one proper location. Yet a book can almost always be classified in several different ways and placed in different parts of a library.

Within the Modern paradigm, inanimate objects—dead matter rather than living beings—tend to provide the model for understanding everything that exists. The qualities associated with personality are consequently excluded from what counts as an “objective” account of reality. Human beings themselves are increasingly understood in mechanical terms: their internal processes and external relations are analyzed according to the same principles used to explain inanimate things. This makes possible a unified approach to every conceivable object of knowledge, but only at the cost of obscuring the distinctive character of living organisms and, even more profoundly, the uniqueness of human personality.

The resulting world resembles a structure assembled from individual bricks or building blocks. Each thing can be independently identified; its relations to other things can be causally determined. The mind appears capable, at least in principle, of representing the entire inventory of things and their structural relations. Every change can be articulated in causal terms within the framework of Euclidean space and linear time.

Such an approach increasingly entangles us in a net of abstractions, separating thought from life and from the untidy processes through which life unfolds.⁴ Yet this net of abstractions was regarded as one of the paradigm’s principal strengths. To provide an internally coherent and objectively valid picture of the world, it brackets not only the so-called secondary qualities but also human fears and desires, intuitions and emotions. In the resulting worldview, there is no legitimate place for ambiguities, paradoxes, or antinomies. When they appear, they are assumed to reveal not something about reality itself but only the temporary limitations of human knowledge—limitations that the further development of reason, method, and scientific instrumentation will eventually overcome.

This was the intellectual paradigm within which Schweitzer was raised and educated. Yet Schweitzer was anything but a one-dimensional thinker who merely accepted the views presented to him. His religious upbringing and sensibility did not fit comfortably within this framework. Jesus frequently speaks in parables susceptible to multiple interpretations, and biblical texts abound in ambiguities, paradoxes, and apparently contradictory claims. In a similar spirit, Schweitzer understood religion as “the search for a solution of the problem of how man can be in God and in the world at the same time.”⁵

Alongside the Christian tradition, which remained essential throughout his life, Schweitzer was profoundly formed by his experience of music, particularly the organ music of Bach. This experience encouraged him to seek a unity of thought and feeling and to explore the possibility of bringing rationalism and mysticism together.

Tensions of this kind, for which the Modern paradigm had little tolerance, did not disturb Schweitzer. He understood that the paradigm provided only a skeleton of reality and that its

⁴ As Rabindranath Tagore writes, “Once we accept as truth such a scientific maxim as ‘Survival of the Fittest’ it immediately transforms the whole world of human personality into a monotonous desert of abstraction, where things become dreadfully simple because robbed of their mystery of life.” Rabindranath Tagore, “What Is Art?,” in *Personality* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 52.

⁵ Albert Schweitzer, *Christianity and the Religions of the World*, trans. Johanna Powers (London: Macmillan, 1923), 70.

reliance on abstraction separated philosophy from the fullness of life. In his criticism of the so-called “father of modern philosophy,” he writes:

With Descartes, philosophy starts from the dogma: “I think, therefore I exist.” With this paltry, arbitrarily chosen beginning, it is landed irretrievably on the road to the abstract. It never finds the right approach to ethics, and remains entangled in a dead world- and life-view.⁶

At this stage Schweitzer does not yet challenge the Modern paradigm as a whole. His immediate concern is to find sufficient room for ethics within it. The difficulty is formidable. The paradigm prevents us from regarding either the world or human life within it as possessing intrinsic meaning and value. Expressed philosophically, individual beings are separated not only from one another; being and value are also disjoined. The world is understood in terms of what *is*, while ethical judgments concern what *ought to be*. Any attempt to derive moral norms directly from a factual world composed of mutually independent things risks committing what G. E. Moore called the “naturalistic fallacy.”

The Modern paradigm thus encourages us to regard the world as intrinsically devoid of meaning and value. But where, then, can ethics find a foothold? Would every judgment that something is good amount to no more than the expression of an individual’s subjective preference? If so, ethics as a system of norms with more than private validity would become impossible. Schweitzer, by contrast, sought an ethical principle capable of making a claim upon every human being—not unlike the universality with which Newton’s law of gravitation was thought to govern natural phenomena. As he explains:

The true basic principle of the ethical must be not only something universally valid, but something absolutely elementary and inward, which, once it has dawned upon a man, never relinquishes its hold, which as a matter of course runs like a thread through all his meditation, which never lets itself be thrust aside, and which continually challenges him to try conclusions with reality.⁷

According to Schweitzer, such a principle must also leave room for optimism—for an affirmative orientation toward life and the world. He regarded this affirmation as a fundamental impulse of Western civilization, one that had become especially pronounced during and after the Renaissance. In contrast to what he interpreted as the predominantly pessimistic orientation of Asian traditions, Schweitzer presented the history of Western philosophy as a prolonged struggle to attain and justify an optimistic worldview.

Without directly challenging the Modern paradigm, Schweitzer appears to believe that he can introduce his ethical vision into its framework. He acknowledges that the primal intuition underlying an affirmative worldview cannot be established by rational argument or empirical

⁶ Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, 309.

Schweitzer’s lectures on Goethe suggest that not only ethics but also the philosophy of nature cannot be grounded in such abstraction. See Albert Schweitzer, *Goethe: Five Studies*, trans. C. R. Joy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 22, 102, 128–29, and *passim*.

⁷ Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, 107.

evidence alone. Yet neither can it be arbitrary. Its source lies in our reaction—or, better, our *response*—to what religious believers call “God” and philosophers call “the infinite spirit.” The founders of the Modern paradigm themselves believed in such an infinite spirit. For Schweitzer, however, this is not the God of a dualistic and conventionally theistic philosophy but “the mysterious divine personality which I do not know as such in the world, but only experience as mysterious Will within myself.”⁸

Whatever judgment we make about the cogency of this reasoning, the key to Schweitzer’s ethics of reverence for life lies in our relation to an infinite Being about which we know almost nothing. In Schweitzer’s words:

There is no Essence of Being, but only infinite Being in infinite manifestations. It is only through the manifestations of Being, and only those with which I enter into relations, that my being has any intercourse with infinite Being. The devotion of my being to infinite Being means devotion of my being to all the manifestations of Being which need my devotion, and to which I am able to devote myself.⁹

The “manifestations of Being which need my devotion” are not limited to human beings, but neither do they appear to include everything that exists. Schweitzer is referring primarily to living beings, although his explanations and examples more frequently concern animals than plants:

Man experiences sympathy with animals, as they experience it, only less completely, with him. Ethics are not merely something peculiar to man, but, in a less developed form, are to be seen also in the animal world as such. Self-devotion is an experience of the deepened impulse to self-preservation. In the active as well as in the passive meaning of the word the whole animate creation is to be included within the basic principle of the moral.¹⁰

That basic principle is reverence for life. Schweitzer insists that it “is founded in thought.” Yet his own examples suggest something different: that ethics—or at least the values to which ethical life responds—may be woven into the very fabric of reality rather than constituted by thought. At the same time, he remains convinced that the principle of reverence for life emerges from a careful examination of the Western ethical tradition, including the traditions of modernity.

Nevertheless, something does not add up. However noble and elevated the principle of reverence for life may be, it is neither widely practiced nor especially at home within the Modern paradigm. Rather than following logically from the modern way of thinking, reverence for life appears to stand in tension with its central presuppositions. Perhaps Schweitzer—who knew Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*—initially hoped that this tension could be resolved in a manner suggested by his illustrious predecessor:

If a ball does not pass through a hole, should one say that the ball is too big, or that the hole is too small? In this case, it is indifferent how you choose to express yourself; for you do

⁸ Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, 79.

⁹ Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, 305.

¹⁰ Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, 318.

not know which of the two is there for the sake of the other. By contrast, you will not say that the man is too tall for his clothing, but rather that the clothing is too short for the man.¹¹

Should reality be forced to fit a paradigm of thought, or must the paradigm be made to correspond more adequately to reality? If our deepest intuitions and aspirations cannot be accommodated within our ethical theories and our broader way of thinking, should we revise those intuitions and aspirations—or must we revise the theories and assumptions that fail to accommodate them?

But a paradigm is not like a garment that can easily be lengthened or shortened. What happens when the required adjustment entails a structural transformation of the way we understand not only reality but also ourselves and our place within it?

I believe that Schweitzer encountered precisely this dilemma during the years in which he struggled to complete his philosophy of civilization, particularly between 1931 and 1945. As far as we know, he never relinquished the principle of reverence for life. Could it be, then, that he gradually came to question the Modern paradigm within which he had originally hoped to articulate and defend it?

II. Schweitzer and Tagore

Schweitzer continued to write and publish after 1923. Many of his subsequent works were autobiographical or consisted of collections of sermons, addresses, and public statements. His two principal theoretical works from this period were *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, published in 1930, and *Indian Thought and Its Development*, published in 1934.¹² The first of these is not unexpected: it can be understood as a continuation and culmination of the theological and philosophical studies Schweitzer had undertaken during the first decade of the twentieth century. His extensive study of Indian philosophical and religious traditions, however, is more surprising.

Schweitzer's treatment of Indian—and, to a lesser extent, Chinese—ethical thought in *Civilization and Ethics* had been brief and peripheral. Nothing in that work suggested that Asian traditions might become centrally important to the further development of his philosophy of civilization or to the completion of his ethics of reverence for life. Moreover, Schweitzer never visited India or any other part of Asia, nor did he know the languages of the traditions he discussed. Working in Africa, he necessarily depended upon the translations and scholarly studies available to him in European languages. His initial interest in Indian thought had been encouraged by Schopenhauer, whose own knowledge of Indian traditions was limited and whose interpretation of them was strongly shaped by his philosophical commitments.

Whether justified or not, Schweitzer's general assessment of Indian thought is overwhelmingly critical. He argues that much of the tradition is grounded in the negation of life and the world and

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 439 (A490/B518).

¹² Schweitzer's lectures on Goethe contain extensive material supporting the suggestion that, during the 1930s, he gradually moved away from the Modern paradigm. Goethe retained throughout his life serious reservations about modern approaches to nature and religion, and Schweitzer's interpretation is broadly sympathetic to those reservations. See Schweitzer, *Goethe: Five Studies*.

that it consequently encourages its adherents to regard human—and, ultimately, all finite—existence as sorrowful and devoid of lasting significance. In his view, such an orientation leads to the renunciation of active efforts to improve the conditions of life in this world.

Nevertheless, Schweitzer admires important elements of Indian ethical thought. He values its extension of moral concern beyond relations among human beings to include our relations with animals. More significantly, he is drawn to its monistic and mystical orientation, which he contrasts with the predominantly dualistic and rationalistic orientation of the West. Here Schweitzer begins to depart from both the Modern paradigm and the dominant line of argument in *Civilization and Ethics*. He now suggests that the monistic-mystical tradition, by opening the possibility of spiritual union with infinite Being, represents “the only method [of thought] in harmony with reality.”¹³

A separate chapter of *Indian Thought and Its Development* is devoted to Schweitzer’s contemporary Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). In this chapter, the tone of Schweitzer’s discussion changes noticeably. His admiration for Tagore is unmistakable, despite—or perhaps partly because of—Tagore’s explicit opposition to the Modern paradigm. Schweitzer sent Tagore a personally inscribed copy of his book and hoped for many years that they might meet, although such a meeting never took place.

Schweitzer bases his interpretation of Tagore primarily on *Sādhana*, a collection of lectures delivered at Harvard University.¹⁴ The word *sādhana* literally means “attainment” or “realization,” although in this context it may also be understood as “self-realization.” What impresses Schweitzer most is that, in Tagore’s thought, ethical affirmation of both life and the world becomes fully triumphant. Tagore criticizes ascetics who seek union with God—or with infinite Being—while rejecting union with the world. At the same time, he criticizes Westerners who have lost their inwardness and whose activity in the world is no longer grounded in spiritual devotion. Schweitzer endorses Tagore’s conviction that human beings should belong to God inwardly while actively serving the divine purpose in the world.

Schweitzer agrees with Tagore that joy in life and joy in creation belong to human nature. Mere existence and self-preservation are not enough. We possess an impulse to live in harmony with the world-spirit and to participate in efforts to make the world better. Schweitzer quotes Tagore:

We are bound to [the world] with a deeper and truer bond than that of necessity. Our soul is drawn to it, but our love of life is really our wish to continue our relationship with this great world. This relation is that of love.¹⁵

¹³ Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, trans. Mrs. Charles E. B. Russell (New York: Henry Holt, 1936), 14.

¹⁴ Tagore’s lectures were published in English as *Sādhana: The Realisation of Life* in 1913 and in German translation in 1921. Even the title *Sādhana* contains an implicit alternative to the modern ideal of authenticity understood merely as self-expression in accordance with one’s own will. *Sādhana* suggests that self-realization also requires self-transcendence: it is a lifelong discipline guided by our relation to something greater than ourselves.

¹⁵ Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, 239.

Against those who conceive of the world as a dead mechanism, Tagore understands it as the “music of God”—as the play and manifestation of divine love. Schweitzer is deeply attracted to this vision. In the process of self-realization, the “little ego” must expand beyond itself and reach toward the world-soul. Every action through which we transcend the narrow confines of the ego thereby contributes to the realization of a larger purpose within the world.

Schweitzer calls Tagore “the Goethe of India” and concludes that he expresses the worldview of ethical affirmation “in a manner more profound, more powerful, and more charming than any man has ever done before him.” He adds: “This completely noble and harmonious thinker belongs not only to his own people but to humanity.”¹⁶

Schweitzer’s admiration is philosophically revealing. In Tagore, he encounters the very combination for which he himself had been searching: mysticism without withdrawal from the world, inwardness joined with ethical activity, and union with infinite Being expressed through love and service to finite beings. Most importantly, Tagore achieves an affirmation of life and the world without relying upon the fundamental assumptions of the Modern paradigm. His thought thus confronts Schweitzer with a possibility of great consequence: reverence for life may require not merely a new ethical principle but a different understanding of reality itself.

III. The Alternative Paradigm: Dynamic Symmetry

Tagore was deeply rooted in Indian traditions, particularly the *Upanishads* and, to a lesser extent, the teachings of the Buddha. One of the central affirmations of the *Chandogya Upanishad* is *tat tvam asi*—“You are that.” Human beings are intimately related to infinite Being. Despite the apparent testimony of the senses—and contrary to the individualistic assumptions of the Modern paradigm—things are not fundamentally isolated but deeply interconnected.

Within this vision, existence is better understood as a verb than as a noun. Reality is not a collection of static entities but a dynamic field of relations and interactions. We experience the joy of life when we participate in the abundance of being, when our lives become attuned to infinite Being, and when we discover the infinite within the finite. “We cross infinity with every step,” Tagore writes in *My Reminiscences*; “we meet eternity in every second.”¹⁷

Tagore is equally impressed by the expression *neti, neti*—“not this, not that”—from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. We may be more justified in denying that our concepts exhaust reality than in claiming that any of them captures it completely. The mystery of life escapes every attempt to confine it within a net of concepts and abstractions. Yet our inability to define something exhaustively does not prevent us from experiencing our connection with it or learning how to respond to it. Reality is not mute: it addresses and calls us. Things touch and move us. We live fully in the world when, with attentive senses and an awakened soul, we respond to its unfolding. Or, as Tagore expresses the point more powerfully, “We live in the world when we love it.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, 249.

¹⁷ Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, trans. Surendranath Tagore (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 100.

¹⁸ Tagore, *Stray Birds* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), aphorism 280.

Schweitzer criticizes Tagore for reading sacred texts selectively and for failing to give sufficient attention to their original meanings or to the conflicting tendencies they contain. He reproaches Tagore, in effect, for interpreting these texts in light of what they can mean to us now. Yet Tagore's primary aim is not that of a historian seeking a strictly contextual reconstruction. He reads the sacred texts of his tradition as living sources of insight: for the ways in which they continue to address us and help us confront the problems and mysteries of existence.

Schweitzer himself is not entirely foreign to this manner of interpretation. It informs his readings of the biblical texts concerning Jesus and Paul. It also appears in his engagement with Chinese thought while preparing the third volume of *The Philosophy of Civilization*, particularly in his reflections on *yin* and *yang* and on *wu wei*: acting without coercive interference and allowing one's actions to remain responsive to the unfolding character of things.

When brought into conversation with one another, ideas such as *tat tvam asi*, *neti, neti*, the interdependence of *yin* and *yang*, *wu wei*, and certain biblical teachings point toward an orientation markedly different from the Modern paradigm. These traditions should not be treated as if they spoke with one voice or articulated a single systematic doctrine. Yet they converge in resisting a static and atomistic understanding of reality. They suggest instead that reality is fundamentally dynamic and that the identity of things changes through time and cannot be adequately understood apart from their relations with other things.

The resulting picture is one of fluidity, tension, adaptation, and recurrent movement between order and disorder. Some contemporary thinkers have attempted to gather these patterns under the concept of "Dynamic Symmetry."

Dynamic Symmetry is not a new scientific method comparable to Baconian induction or Cartesian doubt and analysis. It is a broader orientation toward the ever-changing movement of reality. Its central image is that of a delicate and continually renegotiated balance between rigidity and chaos, predictability and spontaneity, preservation and transformation. From this perspective, chaos is not simply an enemy to be conquered but a source of possibility that must be engaged and, where possible, creatively harnessed. Conflict and tension are not necessarily defects to be eliminated once and for all; they may be conditions of adaptation, development, and vitality.

Dynamic Symmetry therefore does not identify harmony with the absence of tension. On the contrary, tension may be what makes harmony possible—just as the pressure of breath entering a flute enables music to emerge. Living systems maintain themselves not by eliminating opposition and fluctuation but by continually adjusting to them. Illness and disorder may sometimes be understood as failures or distortions of this dynamic regulation: processes necessary to life become excessive, deficient, or improperly coordinated.

As one of its most devoted proponents, Benedict Rattigan, puts it, Dynamic Symmetry approaches "the world as one long, unfinished sentence."¹⁹ It regards reality without dogmatization and without the expectation of final closure. Identities possess varying degrees of continuity, but they

¹⁹ Benedict Rattigan, *Edge of Chaos: Unveiling Life's Hidden Symmetry* (published by Oxford Quarterly Journal for Symmetry and Asymmetry; <https://oxq.org.uk/book>).

remain dynamic; things are essentially interrelated; and an adequate response to the movement of reality requires not only intellect and sensory perception but also imagination, intuition, and emotion.

Among the central concepts associated with Dynamic Symmetry are self-organization, the edge of chaos, and scale invariance. Self-organization can be observed in phenomena such as flocking birds, neural networks, and ecosystems. In each case, coherent patterns emerge from the interactions of many components without being imposed by a single central controller. The organization of the whole arises through the local and reciprocal activity of its parts.

The “edge of chaos” designates a transitional region between rigid order and uncontrolled randomness. Systems operating in this region may possess both sufficient stability to preserve their organization and sufficient flexibility to adapt to changing conditions. Their vitality depends upon neither immobility nor disorder but upon a shifting balance between the two.

Scale invariance refers to the recurrence of comparable patterns across different levels of magnitude. In many natural systems, structural or dynamic similarities can be observed at multiple scales, from the very small to the very large. The significance of such recurrence lies not in the claim that every level is identical, but in the possibility that similar organizational principles may operate throughout otherwise very different domains.

We can now compare Dynamic Symmetry with the Modern paradigm according to the six features identified earlier.

First, Dynamic Symmetry does not begin from a radical rejection of tradition or traditional authority. It preserves critical scrutiny and intellectual openness toward the past, but it does not assume that inherited beliefs must be discarded simply because they are inherited. Ancient religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions may contain insights that contemporary thought can recover and reinterpret. Indeed, some ideas now associated with Dynamic Symmetry were perceived, although articulated in very different terms, long before the emergence of modern science.

Second, Dynamic Symmetry resists reductivism. Complex systems cannot be adequately understood merely by decomposing them into supposedly simple and independently intelligible elements. Analysis remains valuable, but the behavior of a whole cannot always be reconstructed from an examination of its parts in isolation. Relations, patterns, contexts, and emergent forms of organization are themselves indispensable to understanding. The world is therefore not simply a problem awaiting a final solution; it is an unfinished movement whose rhythms often suggest something closer to the playfulness of nature.

Third, the rejection of reductivism is closely connected with a rejection of ontological individualism. Whatever relative stability a thing possesses, its identity is shaped by its relations and interactions. A being is not first complete in itself and only subsequently brought into relation with others. Relations participate in the formation and transformation of what each being is.

Fourth, Dynamic Symmetry accepts reason as an indispensable—but not exclusive—source of insight and authority. It is suspicious of rigidly linear thinking and of the assumption that every significant alternative must take the form of an exhaustive either-or disjunction. What appears contradictory at the level of abstract description may sometimes disclose complementary aspects of a more complex reality. The relation between *yin* and *yang* in Chinese thought, or between the wave-like and particle-like descriptions employed in quantum physics, illustrates the possibility that apparently opposed perspectives may both be necessary. Reasoning must therefore work in concert with intuition, imagination, feeling, and cultivated judgment.²⁰

Fifth, Dynamic Symmetry fully acknowledges the value of empirical inquiry and scientific method while denying that they exhaust every meaningful form of understanding. Scientific knowledge may be supplemented by other modes of disclosure, including aesthetic experience, ethical perception, personal encounter, and religious or mystical awareness. This does not require abandoning the distinction between fact and fiction. It requires recognizing that factual description alone may not disclose the meaning, value, or significance of what is described.

Sixth, Dynamic Symmetry calls into question the Modern paradigm's faith in linear progress. Neither thought nor history develops along a single, continuously ascending path. Genuine advances occur, but they may be temporary, partial, or accompanied by losses elsewhere. Progress must therefore be assessed within a wider field of relationships and consequences, with attention to the shifting balance between stability and change, order and chaos, preservation and transformation.

The contrast between the two paradigms becomes especially important when we turn to personality. Within the Modern paradigm, personality remains deeply problematic. If reality consists of independently existing things governed by causal laws, then personality—understood as self-conscious and self-directing agency—appears anomalous. How can a person belong to the causal order of nature and nevertheless possess some capacity for self-determination? The Modern paradigm has difficulty accommodating both dimensions at once.

Within Dynamic Symmetry, by contrast, personality is not an anomaly but a paradigmatic achievement. A person is not a static substance whose identity is given once and for all. Personality emerges through the difficult and lifelong cultivation of a dynamic balance: between continuity and transformation, structure and spontaneity, dependence and freedom, self-affirmation and openness to others.

Persons are themselves dynamic symmetries. They are not fixed entities but ongoing processes of self-organization. They do not first exist in isolation and only afterward enter into relations; they

²⁰ Kant anticipates certain aspects of Dynamic Symmetry when he argues that intuitions and concepts, although fundamentally different, are mutually indispensable: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A51/B75. His antinomies of pure reason are also relevant, since they present pairs of apparently irreconcilable claims that reason cannot resolve while operating beyond the limits of possible experience.

I draw upon both aspects of Kant's philosophy in developing an interactive conception of truth in my *Between Truth and Illusion: Kant at the Crossroads of Modernity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

become who they are through their relations and interactions. Nor are they adequately understood as passive products of external causes. Their identity emerges through a continual negotiation among inherited conditions, environmental influences, personal responses, and unrealized possibilities.

As Denis Noble summarizes the point in his Preface to Benedict Rattigan's *Edge of Chaos*:

From a lifetime in science, I have learned that the most important advances often come from seeing a pattern that was there all along but unnamed. Dynamic symmetry may be such a pattern for our time. It offers a way of understanding how creation—from cell division and neural firing to artistic work and institutional reform—shares a common geometry of balance in motion. We are not outside of that geometry. We are part of it: organisms whose own hearts, brains and societies depend on the same delicate oscillations that Edge theory describes.

The implications of this pattern extend beyond the present reconstruction of Schweitzer's thought. They point toward the possibility of a metaphysical anthropology in which human existence is understood through four interdependent dimensions: the formation of personality, the transformative power of interaction, responsiveness to value, and openness to transcendence within a dynamic and relational reality.²¹

IV. Reverence for Life and Dynamic Symmetry

Schweitzer's mature philosophical and ethical orientation appears considerably closer to the paradigm of Dynamic Symmetry than to the Modern paradigm. It is possible that, in developing his ethics of reverence for life, he had begun to discern what Denis Noble calls "a pattern that was there all along but unnamed." The very concept of *reverence* points in this direction.

Reverence is inherently relational. It is not a property possessed by an isolated subject but an attitude assumed toward another being. To revere life is to respond to its presence and acknowledge its claim upon us. Such a response carries with it a sense of responsibility for the well-being of other forms of life. Reverence therefore presupposes neither separateness nor mastery, but encounter, responsiveness, and participation.

Nevertheless, important elements of the Modern paradigm remain present in Schweitzer's thought. Two of the most prominent are his faith in progress and his reliance upon the concept of the will. Their connection may not be immediately apparent. The will is directed toward an uncertain future, but it seeks to make that future more determinate by moving events decisively in a chosen direction. Its characteristic aim is not balance but transformation: the alteration of what is into what ought to be.

²¹ I am currently developing this possibility in a work in progress provisionally entitled *Metaphysical Anthropology*, planned as four interconnected volumes: *Personality*, *Interaction*, *Values*, and *Transcendence*. Dynamic Symmetry functions in this project as a structural orientation rather than as a comprehensive doctrine, helping to clarify how persons emerge through relations, respond to values, and remain open to dimensions of reality that exceed instrumental understanding.

Reverence, however, cannot be reduced to an act of will. Our reverence for other forms of life—especially when it is not reciprocated—must rest upon respect and trust rather than upon certainty, proof, contract, or law.²² The will seeks to direct the future; reverence begins by attending and responding to what is already present. Schweitzer’s ethics contains both impulses, and the tension between them reflects his position between two paradigms.

In the notes prepared for the projected third volume of *The Philosophy of Civilization*, Schweitzer appears to move progressively away from the assumptions of the Modern paradigm. Some of these notes suggest that he may even have gone beyond what the paradigm of Dynamic Symmetry, as formulated here, would require. Schweitzer could not, of course, have recognized Dynamic Symmetry as an articulated philosophical alternative, since it had not yet been presented in that form. Nevertheless, some of his later reflections move strikingly in its direction.

The radical character of this development becomes visible in several working notes. Schweitzer writes, for example, that “there is no dead matter” and that “all being is comprised of somehow animate units of being.” Even the simplest molecules are “not to be conceived of as simple atom complexes, but as constituted individuals, as constituted through the living energies that prevail in them.”²³ These formulations suggest a kind of pan-vitalism: the view that vitality is not confined to what we conventionally classify as living organisms but belongs, in some form, to being as such.

Other notes appear to move further still, toward a form of pan-spiritualism. Schweitzer writes that in living cells and organisms there is “something somehow spiritual . . . at work,” something that cannot be adequately captured by a materialistic account. No comparable formulations appear in his published works before 1931. Because these statements occur in preparatory notes rather than in a completed argument, we should be cautious about treating them as a settled metaphysical position. Yet they reveal the extent to which Schweitzer was testing the limits of the conceptual framework he had inherited.

We can examine his position more precisely by returning to the six features through which the Modern paradigm and Dynamic Symmetry were compared.

First, with regard to traditional authority, Schweitzer occupies a position between radical skepticism and rigid dogmatism. He questions many ecclesiastical doctrines and rejects conventional dogmatic interpretations of the divinity of Jesus, yet he continues to rely deeply upon the Gospels and regards Jesus as the supreme ethical example. Schweitzer thus practices a

²² Schweitzer’s German expression *Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben* retains connotations of both awe and fear, including the religious resonance of the fear of God. Those connotations are less pronounced in his Latin equivalent, *veneratio vitae*. *Veneratio* emphasizes devotion, honor, and respect rather than fear, and for that reason I find it preferable.

²³ Albert Schweitzer, *Die Weltanschauung der Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben: Kulturphilosophie III*, ed. Claus Günzler and Johann Zürcher, 2 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1999–2000), 2:232.

For an English translation of the relevant passage, see Albert Schweitzer, *The World-View of Reverence for Life: Selected Significant Content of Vol. III of Albert Schweitzer’s Philosophy of Civilisation*, trans. Percy Mark (NESt Book, 2020), 218–20. Schweitzer writes here that “there is no such thing as dead matter,” describes molecules as “individual beings, permeated and governed by living energies,” and suggests that within the relational activity of living cells “something spiritual is somehow at work.”

disciplined skepticism without adopting an a priori suspicion of everything inherited. The past remains indispensable to our understanding of who we are and how we should orient ourselves within reality.

Second, Schweitzer displays little inclination toward reductivism, particularly in its materialistic forms. His later notes suggest that he may have regarded vitality—and perhaps even spirituality—as fundamental features of reality. Yet caution remains necessary. These formulations are exploratory and occasional; they do not amount to a systematically developed or definitively adopted metaphysical doctrine. What can be said with greater confidence is that Schweitzer regarded mechanistic reduction as incapable of accounting for the fullness of life.

Third, Schweitzer's position concerning individualism and relation is more difficult to determine. During the earlier part of his career, he appears largely to have accepted the Modern paradigm's emphasis on independently existing individuals. During the 1930s and afterward, however, his growing awareness of the interconnectedness of living beings moves him increasingly toward a relational conception of reality. Elements of both views were present throughout his work. The most accurate judgment may therefore be that Schweitzer retained a conception of individual identity while gradually recognizing that such identity cannot be understood apart from relation. He did not resolve this tension theoretically, but reverence for life drew him ever more decisively toward relationism.

Fourth, Schweitzer maintains a similarly complex position concerning reason. Rationality and rigorous thought remain indispensable to him, but he does not accept a narrowly linear conception of reasoning governed by inflexible either-or alternatives. From his earliest writings, his thinking is structured by polarities that he neither eliminates nor reduces to a single term: rationalism and mysticism, vitality and spirituality, activity and resignation, and even negative and affirmative forms of resignation. These are not simply contradictions awaiting logical resolution. They are tensions that must be lived, negotiated, and brought into a dynamic relation. According to this criterion, Schweitzer stands much closer to Dynamic Symmetry than to the Modern paradigm.

Fifth, Schweitzer values empirical inquiry and scientific knowledge, but he does not regard them as our only sources of either descriptive or evaluative judgment. More emphatically than many proponents of Dynamic Symmetry, he resists a complete separation between being and value. This does not mean that he disregards the distinction between fact and fiction. It means that he refuses to regard factual reality as intrinsically devoid of significance and value.

His commitment to an affirmative orientation toward life and the world provides the clearest example. So do his concepts of *veneratio vitae* and *veneratio veritatis*: reverence for life and reverence for truth. Schweitzer believes that sustained reflection upon life leads us toward the recognition of a universal responsibility for living beings, just as devotion to truth requires openness to truth in all its aspects and manifestations. Thought does not manufacture these obligations; it gradually awakens us to them.

Sixth, Schweitzer remains a believer in progress. This helps explain his frequent reliance upon the historical method, through which successive philosophical and ethical positions appear to lead toward a more adequate outlook. Yet his belief in progress is not identical with the more dogmatic

progressivism characteristic of modern thought. Schweitzer does not assume that whatever is newer must therefore be better. He neither rejects the past nor directs his attention exclusively toward the future. Past, present, and future remain interdependent dimensions of human orientation.

More importantly, Schweitzer's principle of reverence for life is not conceptually dependent upon progress. We are called to revere life and to act reverentially toward other living beings regardless of whether such conduct produces measurable historical advancement. In this respect, Schweitzer's position resembles Gandhi's commitment to nonviolence. Both reverence for life and nonviolence may have beneficial consequences, but their justification does not depend exclusively upon those consequences. Schweitzer and Gandhi embrace them because they possess intrinsic value.

This priority of intrinsic over merely instrumental value is essential. Reverence for life is not simply an effective means of improving the world. It is an intrinsically worthy way of inhabiting the world and responding to the beings with whom we share it. Such an understanding points toward an axiology capable of supporting Dynamic Symmetry—an account of value grounded not in domination, calculation, or guaranteed progress, but in attentive and responsible participation in a living, relational reality.

Schweitzer therefore cannot be placed unambiguously within either paradigm. His commitment to progress, his language of will, and his continuing search for universal rational foundations retain important features of modern thought. At the same time, his rejection of reductionism, his growing emphasis on interdependence, his joining of rationality and mysticism, and his conviction that value is disclosed through our encounter with life move him beyond the Modern paradigm. His ethics of reverence for life emerges precisely from this unresolved position: it is the discovery that draws him toward a new paradigm, even as he continues to search for its justification within the old one.

V. Looking Backward, Looking Forward

Schweitzer's discovery of reverence for life as the fundamental principle of ethics led him into an intellectual adventure whose complexity he could not have anticipated. The modern tradition in which he had been educated—a tradition culminating for him in Kant—was increasingly challenged during his lifetime, not only in philosophy but also, and perhaps even more radically, in the natural sciences. In his historical studies of Jesus and Paul, Schweitzer could largely set these changes aside. He could not do so when he attempted to develop reverence for life into a comprehensive ethical worldview.

For many years, Schweitzer believed that his ethics required no metaphysical foundation. Yet the attempt to develop reverence for life systematically drew him into questions that could neither be answered historically nor dismissed as irrelevant. If ethics is not limited to relations among human beings, how far does its scope extend? Does it include animals and plants equally? Does it encompass everything animate while excluding supposedly inanimate matter? And if reality is understood dynamically, can we continue to draw an absolute boundary between the animate and the inanimate?

Comparable questions arise concerning consciousness and spirit. Is consciousness restricted to human beings, or does it exist in different degrees and forms throughout the living world? Does vitality belong only to organisms, or does everything that exists display some rudimentary form of activity and self-organization? Schweitzer's later notes even raise the possibility that something spiritual is at work within all living processes. Such questions ultimately call into doubt the apparent self-evidence of individual "things." Within a dynamic and relational conception of reality, how stable is the boundary between being and non-being, or between being and value? Are such boundaries discovered in reality, or are they imposed by the human mind for the purposes of conceptual understanding and practical control?

A systematic ethics cannot entirely avoid metaphysics. It necessarily presupposes some understanding of what kinds of beings exist, how they are related, and why they are capable of making claims upon us. Schweitzer's writings contain indications that an ethically adequate metaphysics would have to assign a central role to personality.

Schweitzer does not use "personality" simply as a synonym for "human being." Personality refers more nearly to the achievement of *being human*: to the realization of our common humanity in an individually distinctive form. We are born human, but personality must be developed. It is a complex, difficult, and lifelong task.

The development of personality depends not merely upon what we do but upon what prepares and gives direction to our actions: what we honor and affirm, how we integrate the darker impulses of our nature into a more comprehensive whole, and whether we accept responsibility for what we do. The goal is not merely to *do* well but to *live* well—to seek a workable reconciliation of vitality and spirituality, labor and love, individual integrity and responsiveness to others.

Schweitzer's ethics of reverence for life, despite its universal scope, is therefore an ethics of personal response. It calls upon each person to develop the attentiveness, sensitivity, and responsiveness through which other living beings can be recognized as worthy of respect and care. Personality provides a bridge between the descriptive and the normative, between being and value. A person is not merely something that exists but someone who matters—someone whose existence possesses intrinsic worth.²⁴

Yet metaphysics and a theory of personality would still not be sufficient. Just as Schweitzer lacked a fully developed account of the real, he also lacked a systematic account of value. Such an axiology would need to examine not only the nature of values but also their varieties, relations, and possible hierarchies. Schweitzer affirms reverence and truthfulness, while his life also testifies to trust, faith, compassion, beauty, courage, endurance, and practical effectiveness. These values do not always point in the same direction.

²⁴ Schweitzer had previously recognized the increasing difficulty of developing personality under modern social conditions: "Economic, social, and political organizations, which are steadily becoming more and more complete, are getting us more and more into their power. The state with its increasingly rigid organization holds us under a control which is growing more and more decisive and inclusive. In every respect, therefore, our individual existence is depreciated. It is becoming ever more difficult to be a personality." Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, 89.

Human life continually confronts us with conflicts of value. Compassion may conflict with justice, truthfulness with kindness, the preservation of one life with the protection of another. Silence, inaction, and refusal to decide do not allow us to escape such conflicts; they are themselves ways of responding to them. Yet Schweitzer says relatively little about how these conflicts should be understood and negotiated. Intuition, circumstance, established conviction, and rational judgment all have roles to play, but none of them provides an infallible procedure.

A more systematic classification of ethical theories might have helped Schweitzer situate his own position more precisely. At least six broad orientations can be distinguished.

- (A) Deontological ethics emphasizes commands, duties, and universally binding principles.
- (B) Consequentialist ethics evaluates actions according to their anticipated results.
- (C) Virtue ethics concentrates upon the cultivation of excellent character.
- (D) Hedonistic theories assign fundamental importance to pleasure or the avoidance of suffering.
- (E) Stoic, Daoist, and related approaches seek tranquility, serenity, or harmony with the order of things.
- (F) One more orientation—which includes important elements of the Golden Rule, the teachings of Jesus, and the ethics of care and responsibility—may be described as an ethics of recommendation.

These orientations inevitably overlap, and Schweitzer's ethics contains elements of several of them. Nevertheless, reverence for life can be developed most fruitfully, within the framework of Dynamic Symmetry, as an ethics of recommendation.

A recommendation is neither a command nor a casual suggestion. A command appeals to authority and demands obedience; a recommendation addresses freedom and invites a response. It does not compel us to act, but neither is it arbitrary. Something is recommended because it is recognized as worthy of affirmation and realization. The good attracts and summons; it does not coerce.

Unlike a calculation, recommendation does not reduce ethical action to the maximization of beneficial consequences. It directs our attention toward what may be worth doing for its own sake. Unlike hedonism, it does not justify an action simply by the pleasure it produces; unlike an ethics centered upon tranquility, it offers no guarantee of serenity. Responding to the good may disturb our peace, expose us to suffering, or require sacrifice.

Nor does the ethics of recommendation exclude the cultivation of character. Responding to what is recommended may gradually form us into persons more capable of recognizing and serving the good. The emphasis, however, falls first upon the encounter and the response: upon the appeal made to us by another being, a concrete situation, or a value seeking realization.

The ethics of recommendation is therefore non-coercive without being ethically empty. It neither forces nor manipulates. It calls upon the best in us—upon the gentle but spirited dimension of personality capable of attending to the lives of others and extending assistance wherever possible. It leaves room for freedom because a genuinely moral response cannot be produced by compulsion.

This ethical orientation finds a more hospitable home within Dynamic Symmetry than within the Modern paradigm. Dynamic Symmetry is suspicious of one-dimensional moral solutions, whether they take the form of universal commands or exhaustive calculations. It understands life as a dynamic process, beings as deeply interconnected, and moral action as a situated response within a continually changing field of relationships. Reverence for life makes sense in such a world because value is not arbitrarily imposed upon an otherwise meaningless reality. It is encountered within the relations through which beings address, affect, and become responsible for one another.

The ethics of recommendation does not entail moral relativism. The invitation to respond is not arbitrary, for it arises from something real: the suffering of another being, the vulnerability of life, the beauty of the world, or the intrinsic appeal of a value. Yet the appropriate response is not always predetermined by a rule. It must be discovered and created within the situation through the coordinated exercise of reason, feeling, intuition, imagination, and judgment.

This position avoids two opposing dangers. The first is moral dogmatism: the belief that every ethical problem has a single answer that can be derived mechanically from a universal rule. The second is moral nihilism: the belief that no response can be more adequate or worthy than any other. The ethics of recommendation affirms that there are moral truths, but that many of them must be discerned and lived rather than merely formulated and applied.

We can now return to the question with which this essay began. How could a thinker of Schweitzer's discipline, range, and moral seriousness fail to complete the philosophical project at the center of his life?

The answer may be that his ethical discovery carried him beyond the conceptual resources with which he had begun. Schweitzer never abandoned reverence for life. He gradually recognized, however, that it could not be sustained in a philosophical vacuum or adequately grounded within the Modern paradigm. It required a more dynamic and relational metaphysics, a richer conception of personality, and a systematic account of values and their conflicts.

Schweitzer could draw upon Tagore and upon Indian, Chinese, and biblical traditions, but he was not a systematic metaphysician. Nor could he adopt any of these traditions without qualification, for each contained elements that resisted his commitment to ethical world-and-life affirmation. The situation was similar with regard to values. Human history offers radiant examples of value and profound insights into its nature, but Schweitzer did not bring them together into a systematic axiology.

His own life remains one of those radiant examples. His work as physician, musician, theologian, and advocate of reverence for life testifies to an exceptional form of human excellence. Yet the theory intended to articulate and support that life remained incomplete. This disparity should not be understood merely as a personal failure. The incompleteness of Schweitzer's philosophy reveals the magnitude of his discovery: reverence for life could not be fully developed without crossing from one paradigm into another.

Schweitzer brought his philosophy to the threshold of that crossing. Those inspired by his life and thought inherit the responsibility of carrying it further: of giving reverence for life a dynamic

metaphysical grounding, developing the axiology it requires, and exploring its fullest expression as an ethics of recommendation.²⁵

²⁵ I am grateful to Benedict Rattigan and James Carleton Paget for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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