Sīla and Soul (Part 6)

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I'd like to discuss some of the complexities involved in the whole arena of moral values and that kind of consideration of ethics, along with some values and areas that are often not brought to light or talked about. But before getting onto that, let's rummage around just a little bit more in our consideration of the ontology of all of this, partly recapping what we've already said, probably adding a little bit that's new, before moving on.

Reflecting just now, it may be obvious at this point—I don't feel like I have any answers to all these questions that arise in this area. Certainly not any easy answers. And at this point, I'm not sure even how much I'm adding that's original to what's already out there. But as I said, I do want to perhaps shed some light or open up certain areas that are often less considered when we think about ethics or we approach our moral life. And perhaps someone else or others will pick up some of these threads, some of this material, and take it forward, develop it at some point.

Let me begin again with a little recap about the ontology. With the heritage of modernity and postmodernity, many people—perhaps most people in contemporary culture—have either a conscious position or an aspect of their position vis-à-vis ethics that moral values are subjective. They're contingent; they depend on and arise out of culture, place, and the conditions of history here or there. That would be the dominant view, or at least a significant factor, a significant strand of most people's views nowadays.

I do wonder sometimes, though, if one has a long-standing Dharma practice and has heard lots of teachings where moral values and ethics are not seen as culturally contingent so much—what happens in the psyche there between the pull of the contemporary view of modernity toward regarding them as subjective and contingent, and the Dharma view of laws of the cosmos and of the psyche? What happens to a Dharma practitioner in the contemporary world inwardly in regard to all this?

In contrast to that contemporary view, Nikolai Hartmann asserts and posits that moral values are objective. He certainly admits that historically, in different places, at different times, in different cultures, and also in different persons, the range of values—of what he calls the moral firmament, the whole edifice or structure of the totality of values—that range is limited in the consciousness, in the moral consciousness of a certain culture or a certain person at any time. And that is limited and contingent depending on the culture. But just because our torch beam shines only on a small portion of that firmament at any time, it doesn't actually mean that the firmament itself is subjective. That's his position, and to me it's a very interesting position.

What he offers as proof—the fact of guilt, the fact of an intuitive sense of ethics—to me I'm not sure that

they constitute enough evidence to be called proof, strictly speaking. But that's his position, and it's certainly tenable and valid and interesting and powerful.

He also, interestingly, talks about not just the objectivity of values, but the objectivity of the hierarchy of values. So here's the collection of values—these are objective—but also their absolute scale, their arrangement on a hierarchy he would regard as objective.

Let me read a passage where he says that: "Thus much can be said for certain. The rudiments of an absolute scale of values, or this hierarchy of values—which is a higher value, which is a lower value, and where they stand on this sort of ladder—the rudiments of an absolute scale of values are contained in all moral feeling for values. It is clear, even to a very primitive moral sense, that honourableness takes precedence over outward advantage—that honourableness is the higher value than outward advantage. That doing one's duty goes before pleasure." So certainly outward advantage and pleasure have value, but honourableness and doing one's duty have higher value. "The same holds good as a whole of the more obvious gradations in the scale, for instance, in the general preference for moral worth before goods values." In other words, getting rich is not as high on the scale as acting morally, choosing morally.

"In any case," he continues, "so far as a feeling for the values themselves reaches, a sense of their relative importance usually accompanies it." In other words, intuitively we actually have this feeling of the relative importance of values. "The closer the values are in grade—the closer they are in that hierarchy—the less clearly can we discern the order of their preference. Thus the inner situation approaches a conflict of values which actually exists objectively only where values of equal rank stand against each other." So we'll come back to that last point.

And he talks about, in his words, "an astonishing infallibility, a strength of conviction in the sense of relative grade," or intuitive sense of where things stand on this hierarchy, "is enough to justify the old belief in a moral organ"—someone called Hemsterhuis coined the phrase—"an order of the heart, from Pascal, or a logic of the heart, as Scheler said." So these philosophers are talking about the organ, the instrument of moral sense in a human being.

"It is a unique kind of order with its own laws which cannot be proved intellectually, but which equally scorns every intellectual argument brought against it. This is well enough known in the phenomenon of conscience, as in the unerring imputation of guilt, in the sense of responsibility and in the consciousness of guilt, but no less in the infallibility of the prohibitive shrinking from a deed beforehand."

"Certainly this sense of grade varies," he continues, "both in scope and in discrimination, exactly as does the sense of each value. There is also such a thing as blindness to the rank of value, just as there is blindness to material things. And there is perhaps even a perverted or a quite dead valuation of sense. But this is no objection to the certainty and real a priori of the sense of rank, where and insofar as it is present. Exactly the same is true of all genuine a priori"—for example, mathematical truths are a priori truths.

Its universal validity is independent of how many people have the insight. Even if only one person—or no one—actually possesses it, the fact remains that whoever is capable of such insight necessarily has it just as it is in itself and not otherwise.

So there is, according to Hartmann, the objective nature and truth of values, and also their hierarchy. What he offers as proof seems very suggestive to me, pointing toward the objective existence of this hierarchy. But strictly speaking, from a logical standpoint, it doesn't really constitute proof in my mind. The fact of guilt and conscience, the sense of responsibility and consciousness of guilt, the shrinking from doing what we think is wrong beforehand—these constitute important evidence, but fall somewhat short of definitive proof.

If we want to lean more toward the idea of cultural contingency and relativity of values—as many contemporary people do, especially in the wake of postmodern philosophy—we encounter a different problem: Where do we find someone or some group of people who don't have culture? What we witness, what we encounter, are always cultures. We come across nothing else. We encounter ethical or unethical behavior always within the context of human cultures.

As Alasdair MacIntyre points out, human being qua animal—that is, considered purely as animal—prior to or without any particular culture, is a myth. This is myth in the poor sense of the word, in the worst sense. Sometimes people hold this myth of wanting to reduce their understanding of human being to the animality of humanity, as if that were more basic, more true, more real than any cultural accretions or distortions or influences. But that's a myth in the sense that it draws life from a proposition for which there is no evidence. It's not possible to actually encounter such a being.

MacIntyre continues: "Our biological nature certainly places constraints on all cultural possibility. But man who has nothing but a biological nature is a creature of whom we know nothing. It is only man with practical intelligence"—and that, as we have seen, is intelligence informed by virtues, in this case virtues embedded in culture as part of how he defines them—"it's intelligence informed by virtues whom we actively meet in history."

So the proof from the other side—that moral values are only culturally conditioned—is also an impossibility.

But we also spoke briefly about mathematics as a possibly similar set of ontological structures that can exist in ideal form, in the realm of ideas, and that moral values might have a similar ontological status. We discussed the mathematical number pi, an irrational number that can never be precisely instantiated in the world of physical actuality. And the number i, the imaginary square root of negative one—an imaginary, abstract mathematical construct. These manifest, as does pi, indirectly and very cogently in the way they shape and form manifest physical actuality, but we don't actually encounter them directly.

The same applies to a whole host of other mathematical laws, equations, entities—and also to the

quantum Schrödinger wave function, a fluid abstract mathematical entity existing in abstract multidimensional mathematical space that bears a very close relationship with what actually manifests at a certain time and in a certain space. But in itself, we can't even really wrap our usual discursive minds around what it actually is, where it might exist, and what exactly constitutes its ontological reality.

So moral values may have a similar ideal existence—an existence in the realm of ideal forms or ideas. Again, this isn't conclusive, but the fact of the demand for some kind of ontological positioning or categorization of things like mathematical laws and mathematical entities—the fact that most people who reflect on these things feel some need to give them a different reality status than the usual things of physical actuality—opens the door to possibility and legitimacy in other realms too.

There are similarities in the area of logical rules, and possibly also in the realm of moral values as ideal realities. There are differences, which we've talked about briefly, but this doesn't constitute proof so much as it opens a window of possibility, a window of potential legitimization.

In regard to soul-making practice, we have this principle carved out through hard work, careful consideration, and meditative exploration: we can move flexibly, fluidly, agilely, and carefully—with deep attunement and practical significance—between different logoi, different conceptions. In this case, we can move between different ontological frameworks regarding the realm of moral values.

So at times we can lean into entertaining that logos, that conception of moral values having their own kind of real existence in the realm of ideal forms, ideal essences—the sphere of ideas. We can entertain this, place that conception in the soul, in consciousness, for a period of time, for a period of practice, and see what happens. See what unfolds in our meditation, in our outlook on life, in our perspective on different situations, in our sense of our existence and our journey.

Certainly there is the meditative possibility of meditating on these ideal forms—meditating on a certain moral value at the level of an ideal form, in the realm of ideas. When we engage in that meditation and explore that possibility, we're not talking about meditating on a rational definition. We're not defining kindness as this or justice as that, then meditating on that rational definition or mulling it over. That might have its place—logically arriving at a rational definition can be helpful for some people—but we're really talking about something that goes beyond discursive thought.

That process of pondering logically and rationally and arriving at a rational definition may have its place, but it can never capture the idea in its fullness, in its transcendent essence—for various reasons, some of which I'll explore more as we continue.

Yet it might have its place.

Nor is that kind of meditation—meditation on an idea—really meditation on an instance, on a particular instance of justice that we may have read about, remembered, or imagined. Again, and perhaps even more so than with rational definitions or pondering, an instance—the memory of an instance, the

imagination of an instance, the hearing or reading about an instance of justice or kindness or whatever value we're contemplating, whether faithfulness, loyalty, truthfulness—the instance could serve as an entry point to these more transcendent realms, transcendent of the instance, of the particulars of any given instance, this or that particular instantiation of beauty, this or that manifestation of justice.

So an instance could, in meditation, be a starting point and entry point, a springboard if you like, to this other level of the essence of the ideational. But I also want to say that I don't subscribe to the view that the ideational imaginable—as I've mentioned before—or the realm of ideas is necessarily a better kind of meditation or level of meditation than meditation on an instance or an image. We don't have to subscribe to the hierarchy that existed in the metaphysics and cosmology of ancient and medieval times, between the world of physical actuality, the imaginal actuality, and then the higher level of ideational existences, the realm of ideas.

We could, at times, move into that understanding, or some people may subscribe to that hierarchy. Of course, everyone's free to do that. But there's no a priori reason why we have to subscribe to that hierarchy of idea over image. Both can be available as ways in, as important resonances and meditations with regard to our ethical life, and also just with regard to our soul. Both may be helpful in building our moral being, as Hartman says, and in soul-making.

There's also one other reflection—again, one we've touched on before—the possible idea, the possible logos and concept that the very shifting of cultural emphases and perspectives and the shift of the scope, the range of each culture's beam of light, their torchlight within the whole range of values in the vast firmament, that this very shifting could be seen as, could be conceived as part of the world soul's soul-making. It's a movement of soul that's much bigger than an individual and that moves through history, in history, with history, is history.

And in a way, as it shifts—these cultural emphases and perspectives and their scopes, their individual ranges—what gets expressed is what can't be expressed or made manifest all at once. It is actually impossible, just as in some of those mathematical analogies—it's impossible to capture or to manifest and express at the same time, all at once, the whole range of values. It's impossible to live them out. It's impossible even, perhaps, to see them all and hold them all in consciousness at once. Perhaps we'll come back to that later.

But that's an idea that then takes in the notion of cultural relativity and contingency, but casts it in a different light, gives it a different basis, even in conception.

And in this old debate between subjectivity and objectivity—does the mind create the values, or are they objective and the mind just receives them, witnesses them, notices them?—again, there is another level that's possible to us in our sense of it, in our conception of it, which has a non-separation between soul and world, between soul and its objects, its beloved objects, between soul and, in this case, moral values. They are not really separate. They participate in each other. And that's part of the sacredness and mystery.

So the whole dichotomy between subject and object has some mysterious, more mysterious kind of transcendence or synthesis, coincidence of the elements of that dichotomy at another level. And we can, again, get a taste of that in our practice, in our sense of soul-making, and we can entertain it as an idea.

Also in regard to ontology and this whole question of what is real, what is true, we need to consider the whole question of free will versus determinism. This is obviously a really important question. Without a notion of free will, the whole subject of morality just goes away. It has nothing to stand on. We can't talk about morality and what's ethical and what isn't if everything is determined.

If everything is determined—whether physically, because we do this because we're programmed or hardwired that way from biological evolution, or because we trace it to the way neurons work, or whatever physiological impulses, or social determinism, where these conditions in the society, in the culture, in the upbringing caused this act to ensue—and there's no room then for anything but that determinism, if that's the case and there's no space for free will, the notion of free will, then the whole contemplation of something called morality just has nothing to stand on. There's no basis for it.

So this is really quite interesting, and again, we have this question: which is real, which is true?

We can have, again as Hartman outlines—and we've touched on this a couple of times at different points—this whole area about guilt. And we can obviously have two views regarding guilt. We've explained how Hartman is, in a way, a sort of champion of guilt. He won't give it up as something important to our moral growth, our moral being, to our soul. It's wrapped up with our sense of personhood and autonomy. And it's a corollary of free will. If I have free will and I chose something morally questionable, then I am culpable and I have guilt in relation to that. So that's one view, as Hartman outlines it and we've mentioned a couple of times.

The other leaning here would be just to open things up and see more in terms of conditions. And there's an assuaging of guilt there and the dissolving of suffering where there has been this tight grip of guilt and the kind of self-contraction and self-obsession that often goes with that, and the contraction and spinning only around a view of the past, kind of stuck in a whirlpool, a vortex, looking at the past, looking at the self. It's all very contracted. Nothing can come—just like in a whirlpool, it's almost like nothing can come out of that whirlpool at its worst.

And so I've talked and written about working with that kind of contraction of guilt in other chapters, and seeing the freeze and unending blame in other places and talks. It's really skillful, really helpful to be able to open out and see in terms of conditions and less in terms of self. But actually both are important.

And there's a way of opening the guilt out when it's just gotten too problematic. It's actually not helpful at all. It's not doing what Hartman thinks, or what Hartman claims—I think helpfully—that it can. It's not helpful.

It's unhealthy guilt. It's doing nothing helpful in terms of our orientation and our attitude towards future

behavior. It's completely wrapped up in looking at the past. It's not serving our moving forward in a richer, deeper, more ethically upright, more sensitive, more careful and attuned orientation to the future and future choices and our future taking responsibility.

So actually both are possible. There is a way that we can—we need to think in terms of self. The Buddhists go on and on about no-self, but actually self is important. And even if you read carefully the Buddhist passages, there's lots of teachings that have to do with self, that rest on self-view. And there are the teachings of hiri and ottapa—shame, in terms of what others think of us, and in terms of our conscience. There are teachings around self and plenty of other teachings that have to do with self.

So we can't throw the baby out with the bathwater and lose a sense of responsibility. And for that it's the self that needs to be responsible. So do I buy into that as an ultimate truth? No. It's a certain truth that I can move into and out of, and sometimes it's really helpful. And at the same time, or at different times, I can see less in terms of self, or in terms of not-self, or just in terms of conditions.

So there's the kind of balancing of them, but there's also, even more skillfully and helpfully, the teaching that we can move flexibly between these two views. Sometimes I can look, and it's important to look, in terms of self. I was talking with someone the other day—so many people practicing Buddha Dharma or other related traditions in Advaita—I think the whole movement is towards dissolving the self, dissolving the self-sense, and liberation is living in this dissolved self-sense.

And I would say, no, that's only a relative truth. Self is so thoroughly empty that we can pick it up again, knowing that it's empty, and we can put it down. We can be liberated to such an extent that self and the arising of self is not a problem. We don't have to be stuck in some kind of no-self view or trying to attain some kind of ongoing state of no-self. We're so free from self. We're so free in relationship to self that it can come up, it can arise, and we can put it down, both.

So extending that into its moral implications—responsibility and free will and the determination by conditions in the environment, in the history, in the upbringing, biological, and so forth. To only—even just reflect for a moment—to take only one of those positions: there is always free will and there's always responsibility, or everything is determined. To take only one of those, you can feel how brittle it is. And just a little bit of reflection—to me it just sounds silly. Either of those options just sounds silly. Really silly. Silly in that they don't really reflect truth, and silly in terms of what it then implies in terms of how we live and how we consider ourselves and how we judge and discern morally and consider other people.

So the flexibility of view again. And as always, why? Why this view now? Why that perspective at a different time? As I said, it might be sometimes that I'm so caught up in a tight whirlpool and vortex that's not constructive at all. It's just suffering, and I need to ease that suffering, I need to loosen something. So I adopt a certain view of, for instance, reflecting on conditions, and I can do that very carefully, as I've outlined elsewhere, develop skill that way. Or, at other times, I can feel, painful as it is, that I want to keep my sense of guilt and responsibility here. I want to look in terms of self. Because, as Hartman says, that's

part of building my moral being. And it might serve soul-making.

So, as always, the question is, why? What's the intention? What am I trying to serve or support or open when I adopt one possible way of looking over another in the range of flexibility of ways of looking?

Let me read you one passage from Hartman because he says something that struck me as very interesting when I read it with regard to free will and this whole question and its ontology. So he writes: "Freedom"—so he's talking about free will—"freedom is the rising of initiative above the blind happenings of the world." So a human being can take an initiative and not just be determined by the kind of random or purposeless movement of atoms or wider social forces. "Freedom is the rising of initiative above the blind happenings of the world. As such, this is a value. It lifts a human being out of the connections of nature in which he is rooted. It allows him to tear himself away, to rise into the second realm."

He means the second realm ontologically. Lack of freedom is total determination from outside—the serfdom of a human being under the universal course of events.

This is the bit I found particularly interesting: "The profound struggle of human thought to attain a metaphysical proof of freedom of the will is a witness to its worth." In other words, so much intellectual energy has been expended throughout history trying to prove that human beings have free will. None have succeeded so far, but consider how much humanity has tried. And that effort, he suggests, is itself a witness to its worth.

"However desperate the problem may look—the problem of trying to prove that freedom of will exists—however violently all psychological theories deny it" (and he was probably thinking particularly of Freud, as he was writing around that time), "man cannot and dare not permit himself to be robbed of it. He struggles with all his might to retain his belief in it. He has even a deep consciousness that he is free."

So we feel somehow that we are free. "He feels that even if he be not free, he ought to be. For he ought to be a moral being, a person." So for Hartmann, personhood and moral being go together. Without moral being, we're not really persons. "The will to be unfree, or even to renounce without a struggle the consciousness of freedom, would be a renunciation of his selfhood."

So again, there's perhaps the impossibility of proof of that kind of metaphysical idea, that kind of anthropological idea that we have free will. But there's something in the fact of our humanity's struggle and striving to try and prove it—our wanting to retain that sense and that notion of free will. That itself tells us something. So again we see the distinction between orientations towards truth and reality and proof about truth and reality, and orientations that have more to do with soulmaking and what the soul needs. Of course they overlap.

But extending that a little bit, could we not say the same thing with respect to ideational forms—these ideas, for example, of independently existing moral values? There has been, I think, a failure to furnish proof of independently existing moral values, that they're not just culturally contingent. So far, there's

been a failure, philosophically, throughout the history of humanity. But the failure doesn't prove that they don't exist. It just says, well, so far we haven't found conclusive proof.

Again, we could adopt a position of the viability of different logoi, different ideas and notions, different conceptual frameworks about ontology, and we can enter into different conceptions. For example, a conception of a realm of ideas, sphere of ideal existence—and we can also even entertain the idea of a moral absolute, which I'll come to later, some kind of synthesis of all moral values. I'll come back to that later. And so we can enter that and receive the perceptions that follow, that come out of such a conception.

And we can do that, as I say, flexibly, temporarily, lightly, experimentally. All that is available to us, I think, as human beings, as thinking beings, as meditators, as soulmakers.

One of the things Hartmann ponders—and it's partly a legacy from the history of philosophy—so he ponders, like all moral philosophers do, the nature of the good or the nature of goodness. And that phrase "the good," I think I mentioned earlier, is part of the heritage from Plato and perhaps even before: the good.

Surveying different moral philosophies over the course of history, he says oftentimes what different systems of morality do is they take one value, whatever it is depending on the system, and they say that is the highest good, that's the fundamental good, and then they try to derive other values from that or place them in relation to that.

So he writes: "All recognized moral systems speak of the good as of something known, but by it they always mean only one certain special value which they hold to be the only one and the highest. And according as they regard pleasure, happiness, collective unity, justice, love, and so on to be 'the good,' the various types of morality are distinguished." Even this diversity itself shows that in reality none of these values is the good.

Now, historically there was another solution to this which came from Plato, which is the idea of the good. So in the realm, in the sphere of ideal existence, there's a sort of absolute synthesis of all the values, and that is the good.

And so he writes about this: "But if, like Plato, one sets over against such limitations of content"—in other words, some specific views about this or that value being the good—"one sets over against that an idea of the good and places it above the virtues, even then one doesn't get a definition of its content." One still doesn't know what exactly that is—the good. It sounds so abstract. "The idea remains empty."

He mentions also Leibniz and a concept of perfection, and he says that comes perhaps a little nearer to this goal of what we're trying to get a sense of—the good. Again, remember we talked about pāramīs, and one of the translations of pāramīs, the Pali word, is perfections. And I pointed out that would be a problem, because in a way these virtues and values are not perfectible in instance and in physical

actuality and manifestation.

But the idea of a perfection that's out of reach to manifestation, that can never itself be completely manifest, may work as a translation of pāramī. And he says it has something to do with what Leibniz is talking about.

So there is historically, I think, starting with Plato, this idea of the good. Over and above any virtues, there's the good, which isn't a virtue itself. It's this kind of mysterious, absolute synthesis of all virtue that is the origin or the pinnacle, and it exists at a different level.

Hartmann dismisses any kind of belief that we can think our way to some premature synthesis of what that might be—what such an absolute might be—through dialectical philosophical reasoning or whatever. He says that's a kind of pipe dream.

Whether or not there might be a sense of that in a more meditative consciousness is, to me, a different question.

At any rate, Hartman defines goodness and the good in a different way, which I found quite interesting. He writes: "In all morally positive conduct, there is found a trend not only towards values, but towards what is always the higher value." So that to him is the good. It's situational. There's a choice between different values, and what constitutes goodness, or constitutes an instantiation of goodness, is the choice and the preference and the alignment with, based on sensitivity to, what's the higher value.

So to choose something, for example, to choose my own comfort rather than my kindness to another, or convenience or pleasure rather than some kind of altruistic expression, or to choose my security at a certain level—whether it's financial or some kind of existential security—over truthfulness or justice, these would be examples of choosing what's lower: comfort, convenience, pleasure, a certain level of security over what's higher or more noble. That wouldn't constitute goodness.

But if I choose the altruistic, if I choose the higher, the more noble, if I choose justice, truthfulness over my comfort, my convenience, my pleasure, my security, then I'm choosing the higher value. There's a trend going towards the higher value. And that is goodness. So the good is that higher value in any situation, and goodness itself is my capacity to feel that and to orient towards that and to choose that.

Sometimes those kinds of choices are very simple, very obvious. It's clear in a certain situation what the different relative heights are, and there's nothing except our own fears and self-contraction that's preventing a manifestation of goodness, preventing this sensibility to orientation and choice of what's a higher value.

But actually in life, our free will meets and has to negotiate, has to choose between various kinds of value conflicts. So we come across situations that are complex, either in the structure of a situation, or actually there's something even deeper—there are conflicts between different values themselves.

We've given some examples of different situations where the setup of the situation means that I have to choose between an allegiance to this value over an allegiance to that value. And I might feel torn and have to accept the guilt that comes with choosing one and neglecting to choose, neglecting to support and give life to the other value. Some of those are really simple and kind of everyday encountered situations. But others are really quite profound and difficult.

I'm thinking, for instance, of Nelson Mandela and the risks that he took for the sake of justice—risking his life, certainly, when the sense was it was probable that he would lose his life, or certainly face a long, long time in prison. And risking that, along with his obligation to his family, his moral obligation to be there for his family, for his wife and his children. That's a moral value, as a father, as a husband. That value came into conflict with the claims of his conscience regarding justice and a wider sphere of love to encompass the non-white South Africans, not just his family.

Now, if the situation in South Africa at that time had been such that there were two democratic parties vying for office and one could simply stand in allegiance to justice—racial justice or ethnic justice, social justice—simply by walking to the polling station and casting a ballot, and one had a sense that the success of the party that wasn't trying to institutionalize racism was very possible, that would have been a very different situation. The situation then would not have presented an opposition, a choice between being a father, being there for my children as they grow up, supporting them with the livelihood that I earn, with love, with contact, and the wider set of virtues demanded by my conscience with regard to wider social justice.

So there was something very, very difficult and pressing—and that's an understatement—in the structure of that situation. But there are countless examples where our life presents us with situations where something in the structure brings these two values together and I have to choose between them, or several values, and I have to choose between them. And it's given by the situation. It's not inherently a problem in the values themselves.

But as we go into this—and this is one of the things I was trying to say—it's not often that the complexity of values is reflected upon so openly or carefully. This is one of the things that Hartman stresses, and I want to pick up on this a little bit. There's a complexity not just from situations that we encounter in our life, but also among and between values themselves and inner value itself. They are more complex than we might at first realize.

At some point Hartman, in his big tome on ethics, talks about some of the classical virtues—the virtues that, for example, Aristotle would write about. There are some Greek words here—you don't have to remember them, and I'm not even sure if I'm pronouncing them correctly, but the point is a more general one.

He writes: "In juxtaposition to sophrosyne stands akolasia and anaisthesia." He's talking about the virtue of sophrosyne, and he says that actually, you have to consider these other two disvalues as being

important constituent elements, somehow, of this value of sophrosyne.

"Only in contrast to the former, to akolasia, is it properly self-controlled." So sophrosyne usually gets translated as self-control. He's saying that actually, it's only in regard to akolasia, which is something like being completely out of control, that we understand what self-control means.

"In contrast to the latter, to anaisthesia, sophrosyne is the fully developed capacity to react emotionally, to live in the affections." So there's something in this virtue of sophrosyne that's not just self-control. It's self-control, but within a fully developed capacity to react emotionally and to live in the affections. In other words, we have to draw into this consideration of this one virtue, sophrosyne, self-control, another virtue—aisthesis, as opposed to anaisthesia.

And then he talks about another one: "Seen against orgilotes, praotes is mildness." So he's talking about the virtue of praotes, the classical virtue of praotes, which often is translated as mildness or gentleness.

But seen against Aorgesia, it is the capacity to be righteously indignant. So this gentleness, when measured against Orgilotes, can indeed be called gentleness or mildness. Yet when measured against Aorgesia, it reveals itself as the capacity to be righteously indignant.

This brings us to several crucial points. First, what does this imply about our full ethical response to situations like climate change and species extinction? Second, what does it suggest about the sometimes one-sided prioritization of gentleness or equanimity that we often encounter in Buddhist traditions? Certainly in the classical texts, and to varying degrees in contemporary interpretations, there's an emphasis on equanimity—what we might call sophrosone, self-control and equanimity—without the supportive counterweight of a fully developed capacity to react emotionally, to live in the affections, this esthesia.

The more pertinent point right now is that virtues considered singly may be problematic. We must actually examine constellations and syntheses—perhaps virtues need counterweights.

Consider altruism, or what Hartmann calls brotherly love, a virtue that burst into historical consciousness with the emergence of Christianity. It was emphasized strongly by Jesus in his teachings: "Who is near me? What do they need? Put them before me. If a centurion asks you to walk with him half a mile, walk with him ten miles." This turning of the other cheek represented an eruption into human consciousness of brotherly love and altruism toward those around us. Yet this can become almost tyrannical and dangerously unbalanced without a counterweight—perhaps a healthy egoism, a healthy sense of self.

Or consider loyalty—loyalty to one's community, teacher, or country that operates beyond considerations of justice. This would be deeply problematic. Similarly, a loyalty to truthfulness that remains insensitive to other values and their demands for allegiance becomes tyrannical.

There exists a potential tyranny of individual values. The consciousness or soul, in its fervor, love, and

particular direction of soul-making, can elevate one value while neglecting others, establishing it as the dominant thrust at the expense of a fuller moral vision.

This consideration led Aristotle to propose that perhaps a virtue is actually a synthesis of different values rather than a single value. Returning to those Greek terms: sophrosone, proper self-control, is actually a synthesis that includes not only self-control but also the fully developed capacity to react emotionally and live in the affections. Similarly, priotes is gentleness, but it includes the virtue of righteous indignation. Mildness, yes, but also the capacity to be righteously indignant when circumstances demand it.

Aristotle suggested that maybe virtue is actually synthesis itself, and any of these seemingly individual virtues are potentially problematic when isolated.

Let me read a passage from Hartmann about this: "In this sense, it may be said that every moral value has a point in it, not indeed in itself, but for human beings, where it becomes a danger. There is a limit beyond which its dominance in consciousness ceases to be of value."

Imagine taking any single virtue—altruism, loyalty, truthfulness, even courage. If it lacks balance, if it has no counterweight, if it dominates consciousness and moral sensibility too completely, problems arise and it actually stops being a value, becoming instead a disvalue.

Hartmann continues: "Only a sense of justice which is at the same time loving. Only a brotherly love which also considers the far distant. Only a pride which would likewise be humble could be valid as an ideal of moral conduct."

Every value reaches true fulfillment only in its synthesis with others, and ultimately, only in its synthesis with all. There's an intuitive sense that some possible synthesis exists in the ideational realm—a synthesis of all these virtues that seem to need each other despite sometimes pulling in different directions. Yet this intuitive understanding of synthesis remains out of reach, elusive.

"Every single value first attains its own full character through its axiological counterweight in the synthesis." (Axiological simply means pertaining to values.) "Even in itself, it is incomplete. It is even threatened in its valuational character without its counterweight. Whether this consists in a single specific countervalue or in a larger series of values makes no difference. The synthesis may have any degree of complexity."

When we reflect on this deeply, it becomes quite fascinating. We may have various responses in our souls. One response might be almost dismissive: "Well, everyone knows that."

"Yeah, well, you know, moderation in all things." And there's a kind of flaccidity of the mind, of the heart, of the soul in relation to this complexity and also in relation to values. "Yeah, yeah, sure, yeah." You can hear the lack of vigor, the lack of vitality, the lack of attunement and readiness and poise and energization and wrestling with this problematic. But that's one response. "Too much of anything is not a good thing."

But it just becomes a kind of truism. And really all it's doing is not disturbing us. All we're doing is adopting a posture or a kind of non-posture of flaccidity, of non-vigor, of non-vitality, non-keenness in our moral sensibility, so as to remain undisturbed, so as to remain a little bit asleep. The soul not on fire, not churning with the difficulties of the challenges of the soul, making the process of the eros, of the breaking of vessels, of the questioning.

But that would be one response. Maybe it's most people's response, I'm not sure.

Another response to all that complexity and this sort of pulling in different directions of different values would be the kind of postmodern insistence on and relishing of our finitude, our fragmentation—stressing the futility of trying to understand values or trying to propose any kind of higher anchoring of the moral values and of our ethical sense. Ah, see? But again, one question I would have, if that's the kind of outlook with regard to this particular problem, is why? Why are you relishing that picture of our fragmentation, our existential fragmentation, our impossibility, our finitude, the futility of nobility? Why do you emphasize that? What's going on there psychologically?

Another possible reaction or stance in relation to this problematic is with some even dimly intuited sense of a beyond of values—the beyond of the realm of ideas, of the sphere of ideal existence. Impossible as it is to instantiate, as we said with the mathematical analogies, exactly, fully, completely, just as images are impossible to fully, completely instantiate, but also impossible as it might be to come up with a kind of logically coherent, discursive, rational definition of what that synthesis in the beyond might be.

So yes, our finitude, yes, our fragmentation, but there can be with that finitude not a kind of futility or flaccidity, not this hanging on to a certain limitation and blocking of our opening in nobility, but a finitude that gazes also to the horizon, looking at the horizon, almost groping, feeling what might be beyond that horizon, over the horizon.

And there are other possible reactions as well. Let's pause there for now before I go into some more about the complexities and antinomies, oppositions, contradictions between values.

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