Sīla and Soul (Part 9)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:10:20

I'm pretty sure I said at the beginning of this talk that there are many possible approaches to ethics, many different perspectives we can bring to bear on that whole domain of our existence. There are different systems of moral philosophy.

For example, there's utilitarianism, which some of you will know originated with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In that kind of approach, the goodness or what is good is what has utility—in other words, what is useful. That's how you measure and adjudicate actions and behavior. So behavior and actions are chosen for the usefulness of their consequences. You have an eye to the likely consequence of an action, and you measure its usefulness. Usefulness in that system, utility in that system, is usually thought of as maximizing pleasure over pain for the greatest number of people—maximizing pleasure, minimizing pain, maximizing happiness (whatever exactly that means), and maximizing well-being of the greatest possible number of people. Note also, as in so many moral systems of thought, the anthropocentrism there: it is usually focused just on people and not other species.

There are variations within utilitarianism, different variations of that kind of approach. And like all approaches, it will have its particular strengths and weaknesses and its particular difficulties that it encounters. You could hear when I was describing this how exactly do you measure happiness? What exactly do you mean by well-being? How do you try and assess these things? Also, what is the radius of concern in terms of which "greatest number of people" where and when?

For example, some of these Extinction Rebellion actions involve blocking roads or bridges. The traffic stops and people are held up who are part of the traffic, trying to get somewhere, go to work, or this or that. So there's a kind of inconvenience for some people, and for a certain number of people, there's an inconvenience and maybe financial loss, who knows what. Some people were critical: "Oh, you're being selfish by blocking the traffic that way. You're being self-indulgent," etc.

But widening the concern: there are these people in the traffic jam who have been inconvenienced, who may experience some loss of profit or some hassle or whatever, a decrease in their happiness for some time. One could widen that sphere to the whole of society, or the whole of humanity, or the whole of humanity including future generations, or including not just all that, but all species. And then when you start weighing it up that way from a utilitarian perspective, if there's some chance that that kind of action has an effect globally on government policy and corporate policy, then the net increase in likely well-being and happiness may be justified, may be measured to make it worthwhile. But you run into all kinds of difficulties in terms of measurement.

We have been approaching and discussing ethics and questions about ethics from, I guess, mostly what people would call the perspective of virtue ethics, where the emphasis is less on the consequence and more on the subject, the moral subject, the person themselves and their virtues and values and what they're investing in and what they're energizing and what they're working towards and what they're sensitive to.

Here, in that perspective, there's this shift of emphasis. Moral values, as values, are not regarded as dependent on or proportional to their worth. Their value is not proportional to, as John Finnis says in summarizing Hartman's approach, the amount or degree of the lower values they actualize or aim at. They're of a different, higher, better order than the lower values.

He gives an example: the value of active justice in a moral agent—a person working towards or implementing a situation of justice between two parties, people or communities or whatever. The value of that active justice is much higher than the goods value of the apportionments they affect. In other words, someone comes in—let's say it's a judge or someone else—and reapportions money or property or whatever according to measures of justice. However little or great the goods value of the money or the property they redistribute justly, the moral value of the justice stands above that. It's much higher. It's on a completely different level.

So it's a different emphasis. But I also said that we can think sometimes—and most people often nowadays, what's more popular, I think—in terms of the efficacy of one's actions, the consequences and what will work. When we approach something like climate change, species loss, these almost overwhelming problems and issues, crises we face, we think: yes, we need something that's efficacious, we need something that's going to make a difference. And of course, that's the case.

So there are two possible ways in: the way of emphasizing virtue or considering virtues and values, and the way of considering efficacy. I pointed out earlier that if there's too much of an emphasis on virtue, or only an emphasis on virtue, disregarding a consideration of the efficacy of our actions, then that over-emphasis on virtue is itself not a virtue. It's what you might call a disvalue. It's not a value, it's a disvalue. One has been, in a way, so narrowly concerned with virtue and neglectful of the efficacy.

So this whole approach of virtue ethics is one angle, one approach, and like all these things, we can have flexibility in how we approach at different times, or even the relative weight of consideration between, let's say, virtue ethics and considerations of efficacy. We don't always have to approach a situation—a moral situation, a moral crisis, a social or environmental situation—thinking predominantly about virtue.

But it can be part of our moral equipment, part of our moral calibration, our moral instrument. And we can move in and out of that.

Virtue ethics does lend itself, I hope it's clear by now, to a connection with soul-making in some of the ways that I've explored. But even when we consider soul-making, the intention for soul-making in life is

not always going to be primary, and neither should it always be primary. There are other issues, there are other concerns, there are other demands in life. So we move in and out in our lives as practitioners, as soul-making practitioners, we move in and out of emphasizing or prioritizing an intention for soul-making. And that's appropriate. Flexibility—flexibility of way of looking, flexibility of approach, perspective—is really crucial.

When we consider values and virtues, there's this whole possibility of delineating and sensing a kind of hierarchy of values. There are higher values and lower values. To some extent that's possible to discern—where things stand, where two values might stand relative to each other on that hierarchy and what Hartman calls the scale of values. In his way of thinking, goodness is the inclination, the tendency to choose the higher values.

Sometimes this is obvious. It's obvious that this value is higher than that value among moral values. It's obvious that moral values are higher than goods values in that way of thinking. It's really a kind of sensibility—that sensibility to existence. In that sensibility to existence, that soul sensitivity, that sensibility to existence, moral values are higher than goods values. Some of those distinctions are obvious, some are much less obvious.

But I think it's important to realize that the rank, or what Hartman calls the grade—the place on the hierarchy of values—is not necessarily inherent in the value only. To some extent it is, but we also have these other considerations. For example, the fact that we might need to consider a virtue or a value as a complex of other virtues and values. With this notion of a counterweight needed, we're really talking about balances and spectra rather than single, cut-and-dried, black-and-white virtues. This already complicates the issue.

The second reason that the rank or grade or height of a value is not necessarily inherent just in the value itself is that when we consider it with more psychological breadth and sophistication, subtlety of discernment and awareness, we begin to realize that the citta, the soul, approaches the actualization or intention toward a virtue with all kinds of factors and perspectives. The mind, the heart, the being, the soul brings much to its moral intentions and to its working toward a value or the actualization of a virtue.

For example, it might be that wrapped up in the citta at that time is fear. One is actually intending a certain action, maybe even intending a virtue or a value, but it's coming out of fear. As such, it's more narrow-minded or reactive. Or it might be working against fear—one needs to overcome a certain fear to get behind that value and cultivate that virtue and instantiate it. We might say that when it comes out of fear, when it's prompted by fear and that kind of narrow contraction, perhaps it has less value, less height, than when there's no fear and it's a freer choice, a freer moral choice. It's coming more from the moral sensibility rather than from fear and reactivity.

Maybe—some people might say—it's even higher when one has to overcome fear in oneself. I'm afraid of the consequences. If I speak up courageously, I'm afraid of the consequences. I'm afraid of getting

arrested, of getting a criminal record, of what people think, of getting ostracized. Perhaps that can be considered a higher value or virtue.

Sometimes our virtuous behavior and intentions come out of a narrow-mindedness. There's a kind of brittleness there, a narrow attachment to some code that's been handed down to us. Sometimes it comes out of habit—the almost mechanical churning of habit in consciousness. Sometimes a value takes much exertion to actualize, or asks a big stretch of the soul, of the being, or of the body even.

The whole way of looking at self, other, world, and our very intention, our will, our desire, our eros ethically—all this can vary hugely. We might say that there's a higher virtue when those ways of looking are richer, deeper, wider, more noble, more ensouled. All these other factors come in, and we might say that the height or grade of a value or a virtue depends also on those factors. What else is going on in the whole being? The totality—it's a function. If you like, the height, to a certain extent, is a function of that whole complex of intentions and ways of looking and factors, forces in the psyche.

With any virtuous intention or moral action, there can be a flat, ego-level version—a version based on some kind of fixated image, what we might call in our soul-making language an impoverished image. This version of virtue may look the same on the surface. Or it could be much more soulful, much richer, multidimensional, infused with a sense of divinity. There's a spectrum here—not black and white, but a whole range of possibilities.

Once we begin to attune and discern in this way, we recognize that this is quite a complex territory when it comes to judging the heights of values and virtues. Some care is needed in that assessment.

When we talk about climate change, and even more so about species extinction—the massive extinction occurring right now at the hands of human beings—I wonder whether this particular care for species extinction represents an example of a higher value. It's not the same as caring for the suffering of one animal or even a group of animals. It's something different, as I've touched on before. It's actually not just about suffering.

Let me return to this question: What's the relationship between care about suffering and our ethics and soul-making? What's the relationship in that nexus between reduction of suffering, care, ethics, and soul-making?

I remember some years ago reading something George Marshall used to publish, where he criticized many of the media messages trying to promote concern for climate change that featured polar bears. The earth is heating up, the ice is melting, the polar bears will suffer and may disappear. He was quite vociferous in attacking this kind of approach because, he argued, it doesn't actually work for most people in terms of galvanizing a response to climate change. You get the cute polar bear, but polar bears live in the North Pole. Most people don't really encounter polar bears in their lives. Most people would look at an advertisement like that and think, somewhere in the psyche, "Well, it's not really my concern or my

children's concern." Most people are concerned about themselves and their children.

There's some truth in that observation. But perhaps the plight of the polar bear and the possible extinction or decimation of that species—I'm not talking about the suffering of individual polar bears, but the species itself—perhaps the sensibility to that concern, the sensitivity to the tragedy of species loss and the crime of ecocide and species extinction, those crimes against life itself—maybe that kind of sensitivity is actually a higher virtue. It correlates with a higher value.

As we've said, along with Hartman, some people may have a greater capacity, a greater talent for those kinds of virtues, or perhaps for higher virtues in general, just as some people have more talent for mathematical ideas, or aesthetic or musical talent, or art. You can have a talent for values.

The question becomes: Can that be trained? Can we encourage this extension of moral sensibility in ourselves, in each other, in society, in schools? Can we support growth in the education of our moral capacity and sensibility, our sensitivity?

As I mentioned with Polly Higgins, there was also recently the UN Executive Director for the Convention on Biological Diversity—I've forgotten her name—who said that biological diversity, species diversity, the thriving of many different species, is necessary to maintain the natural life support systems on which humanity depends. She added that with biodiversity, unlike climate change where people might feel the impact in their everyday lives, the effects are not so immediately clear. But by the time you feel what is happening, it's too late for us. It will be too late when the bees stop pollinating because there aren't enough bees, and we suffer in our agriculture.

I've touched on this before, but to me it's an important consideration: Is there something here that asks for a different order, a different height of moral sensibility?

What if scientists discovered that a certain species was actually "useless"—that it didn't really provide anything essential for the ecosystem, that the ecosystem could function fine without it, and we could get on fine without it, and other species could manage without it? Perhaps it's merely beautiful, merely graceful, merely miraculous. Perhaps it's not even beautiful by conventional standards.

You know, is a haddock beautiful? We have a narrow sensibility when it comes to beauty, often. Polar bears tend to be—despite being potentially very dangerous animals—furry and cuddly and warm in our imagination. A haddock is cold and slippery and wet, and to most people's eyes, not particularly beautiful.

But then, if there was this useless species, would it then be okay, ethically, if our actions made it forever extinct? There's some other level here that I think is important, some other level of sensibility to make.

And, you know, is this an elitist sort of request, an elitist demand, an elitist aspiration? Yeah, maybe it is. I said right at the beginning, you know, I may sound like an elitist, I probably am an elitist. The whole movement towards awakening is a very elitist movement. It's not like everyone's really going to take that

up, even in terms of how many Dharma people really take up seriously a real movement to deep, deep awakening and insight. So it's only a small portion of even Dharma people.

Soul-making asks so much of us in terms of our skills and the aspects of our being, the demands, the stretches, the know-how, the art of it. Samadhi, you know, even though I was a musician, it's elitist. Not everyone can do that or train that way to take that to a high level of art.

Again, I recall Hartmann's notion of the noble and his kind of insistence that it's through the noble few, those who stretch the sensibility, that humanity evolves spiritually—through their leading, their opening the doors through which more and more people then follow after them, are kind of converted or infected with that sensibility, that moral sensibility.

Of course, in that kind of care or respect for or sacred place given to species and ecosystems, we're saying it's a high value. It's not really a new value because indigenous cultures would be totally rooted in that. So it might be its resurrection is relatively new for our time. But still, there may be a big ask in this, and George Marshall may be right to a certain extent, that it's only some people who are going to be really moved by the plight of, let's say, the polar bear.

But still, if we talk about our life and our soul and the deeper and wider needs of the earth, of humanity, certainly of the species, there's this heightening of our moral sensibilities. And as I said, a species loss is not the same as concern for the suffering of individual animals. There's something else, there's some other sensibility.

And all this, what we've been talking about, begs the question to a certain extent of what then is the relationship of these ways of thinking about ethics and the whole thrust and intention, primary thrust and intention of the Dharma to reduce suffering.

So, you know, happily, our attraction to and need for moral values is often satisfied to a certain extent at least by our attention to and need for and pursuit of a reduction in suffering, a reduction in dukkha. But in most cases, it might not be enough to notice that there are, in fact, two directions of our desire there.

So keep the precepts, for example, as an ethical investment and commitment reduces some suffering. But again, there may be, as I said, two directions or two strata of our intention here.

So the love of higher moral values, the love, the attraction and the eros for a higher ethos or an ethos that encompasses the higher, that cares about the higher. The beauty of sacrifice, the images and archetypes and values bound up in a fuller and more powerful devotion to ethics, may well not overlap with the idea or the thrust, the intention for decreasing suffering, other than as a promise of reward, of a future rebirth or heaven or whatever you might believe.

Or if there are gifts and rewards from a devotion like that, a kind of deep, high, wide, very attuned moral sensibility and commitment. There are rewards from such a devotion in some cases. They are relatively

subtle: the openness of heart, the seeing, the dependent arising of the perception of self-other-world. These are all relatively subtle gifts, if you like, rewards from that kind of devotion.

So there's some reduction of, certainly only some reduction of personal suffering. Maybe we can say in the larger picture, there's a reduction of suffering. But we're really talking about two strands of intention: the reduction of suffering and the love of moral values, and particularly of the higher moral values. And they may overlap to a certain extent, but they are also not completely the same.

And again, the question is, what do we love and what do we want? What are we devoted to? The decrease of suffering or the beauty and soul attraction of moral values? So as I said, they're not exactly and always the same thing. There's not a complete overlap between the two.

And we've said, because values are an element of sensing the soul, one of the 28 elements we've delineated so far, there is an overlap with soul-making. Many people, and I've said this before, many people, perhaps most people would assume at first that an overlap with decreasing suffering would be more likely to be the case—the overlap between the concern for morals and the reduction of suffering. And they would harbor some kind of suspicion of prioritization of soul-making intentions.

But, as we said, soul-making intentions implicitly or explicitly include a devotion to values, or rather to some or other values from the pantheon, the zodiac of values.

So I mentioned the Buddha and his choice to leave his family and generally considering his zest and devotion to know the end of suffering, to not be reborn, to teach others, perhaps his mystical hunger, his hunger to know the mystical. You don't really hear that one so much in the Pali Canon. And that devotion, that intention, trumped his sense of his moral responsibility to be there for his wife and his young son. So he basically abandoned them.

In this antinomy, in this conflict of values, he chose one. Now, you could argue that in his life he always chose what would maximally lessen the suffering for the totality in all time, which is, as we started this part of the talk, that's a version of utilitarianism. And that's how he was thinking. He was, you know, if I become a Buddha, I'll probably help more people than if I stay at home and become a world monarch and keep with my family. And so many people would kind of construe it that way. He chose that because in the totality of things, it would reduce more suffering and increase more happiness for more people over time than if he stayed at home and did other stuff, ruled a kingdom, etc.

But actually that seems to me, if I'm honest, and if we look and feel into it a little more carefully, a bit of a psychologically naive view. Maybe that's heretical. If you feel into the psychology there, is that really what's going on—that he was sort of weighing up, calculating probable amounts of suffering and pain that could be avoided, pleasure that could be increased? Or was his drive, his love, his devotion, his determination, his desire, his choice coming out of a richer psychology that had also to do with his soul, what was beautiful to him, what called him?

To say all this another way, or approach it from a slightly different direction, take metta, for example. It's regarded as a value in Buddha Dharma, but as a value it's subordinate to and dependent on the higher and, in a way, more fundamental, more central value given to reducing suffering—actually, the direction of ending suffering. Metta is one component, one element in that path that prioritizes the end of suffering. And its primary purpose is for that: ending rebirth. So metta is a value in that system of thought because it reduces suffering and leads to the end of suffering, which is its primary value.

Now, probably—to use philosophical jargon—on the margins of the text, sort of briefly alluded to with the perfume, if we were to deconstruct it, there'll be many messages, even in the Pali canon, attesting to the independent value of metta and sila. Primarily, they're given as stepping stones. Their function is to reduce suffering and actually, or primarily, as stepping stones on the path to ending suffering, to not being reborn. But the beauty of metta and the beauty of sila are probably there already—they can't help seeping out and being there, sort of at the edges of the main point of the teachings.

So there's a certain way we think about the Dharma in terms of reducing suffering. Of course, the Mahayana extends that to include all beings. But there are also other factors, and I think it is important to be a little more psychologically sophisticated, a little fuller in our gaze at the psychology of all this. What's really going on? What really are we loving and wanting? What's really motivating us with all this?

Again, if I just look around me right now, it's interesting. So this question about ethics, the emphasis in Buddha Dharma on reducing suffering and that principle way of conceiving what we're doing—look around me right now, and certainly in Devon, where I live, there's very suddenly, really, a lot of Dharma people suddenly involved in, for example, Extinction Rebellion and actions on the streets against inaction. And more widely in the UK as well, something—suddenly there's been quite a dramatic change, almost black and white, among Dharma folks. Maybe in other countries it's starting, or there are the potential seeds, the potential rumblings of that. Maybe in the US something's starting. But certainly around here, it's a dramatic quantum leap, a sudden shift.

I think only some of that—I don't know what proportion, but only some proportion probably—is because of soul-making Dharma teachings. Somehow other conditions have come together for this sudden ignition of the wildfire in the Dharma community. Is it the last IPCC report that was much more stark in its warnings, much more grave, much more demanding in insinuating that rapid action needs to happen? Is it that most of these Dharma people who are getting involved now are actually looking at it through the lens of reducing suffering in the world and for others? Is it just that there's a kind of critical mass of enough people and something starts snowballing? And if three of your friends are talking about this thing and are being involved and sharing with you how it's touched them and how wonderful it was and how they actually survived an action fine, and how they're even thinking of maybe being arrestable or whatever, that has an effect on the people around them. So it's less a few lone voices crying in the wilderness.

So I don't know what all those conditions are. I think, like I said, the soul-making dharma is just one small piece that's relevant for some people. The question more for this fire of commitment and action and engagement that's struck up—the question is really, can it stay steady? Can it be mature?

Remember on one of the retreats, one of the series of talks we talked about the fire, mastering the fire and the way different soul fires burn, the way Eros burns in souls differently and at different times and depending on different conditions. And to have a fire that just flares up and then goes out may not be so helpful as something that's sustainable. You don't want something that gets snuffed out at the next little wind.

It may be, as I said, that for many of those people it's really just a utilitarian consideration—a weighing up of what's the net amount of suffering here—and that's what's galvanizing their response. That's what's framing their perspective and their conceiving of the whole issue and whether to get involved or not. And the commitment and the action and the engagement is supported by a whole web of other conditions.

But again, if we stay with this question of the relationship, the nexus between reducing suffering and soul-making and ethics and values—as I've said before, when talking about Buddha Dharma, talking about awakening, there's a kind of petering out of the whole notion of the cycle of rebirth. There are fewer and fewer people who actually—they may believe in rebirth, but that's actually at the core of their being. What they're aiming for is to end their rebirth. That's become, I think, in Western Dharma—certainly in the people I meet, get a sense from and hear from—rarer and rarer.

So that opens up the question: what are we actually aiming for when we're talking about the goal of the path and awakening, if it's not ending rebirth? It might be just this utilitarian working towards a reduction of suffering—maybe just my suffering, maybe much wider in the more Mahayana sense of all beings. But there's something else. There are other factors, as we've been saying.

And there's something about meaningfulness. As we said, that's an element of soul-making. It's an element of the imaginal. It's an element of sensing the soul. And when we take the consideration of meaningfulness and extend it to our whole life, it becomes deeply interesting to us. What gives us meaningfulness? Is it only a kind of utilitarian reduction of suffering? Yes, that has its place, absolutely. But there are other strata and factors that are part of our psyche, and we need to be more consciously aware of these when we look at what's going on for us and what renders life fruitful, fulfilling, meaningful.

Here's a quote from Predrag Čićovacki—I think I mentioned him before in another series of talks. He wrote a book about Hartmann that I found quite good. He says: "One of the central claims of Hartmann's entire philosophical opus is that it is precisely useless values that bestow meaning upon life. By uselessness he means neither fruitlessness nor meaninglessness. Uselessness only refers to the absence of any tangible purpose or visible end. It is on such useless values that we depend when we attempt to bestow meaning on our strivings and struggles."

He would also include in that—I'm pretty sure, and I certainly do—art as something ultimately useless. Beauty is totally wrapped up in the domain of the useless values. For me, there's almost no boundary between aesthetic concerns, the love of beauty, the care for beauty, and moral concerns.

So there are values that are, in a way, useless. They don't serve an obvious function in our life. They're not easily brought under a utilitarian framework. And these are often the higher values. The higher values are often useless. An aesthetic sensibility, for example, is kind of useless from a certain perspective. But as I said in the last part, these higher values need to rest on the lower values as a foundation. They depend on the lower. Without them, they are hollow.

So a care for higher values, a care for aesthetics that doesn't care for justice or kindness, that completely neglects those—this causes a collapse in the whole value of the aesthetic care.

Let me read again a few things from Hartmann here. The more elementary values, the lower values, the more negative commandments go with them—the prohibitions: thou shalt not steal, not murder, etc. When they're transgressed, the seriousness of that transgression of a lower value is much more serious than the omission or transgression of a higher value. So not to engage in a care for aesthetics, not to cultivate what Hartmann calls one's ideal personality, not to attune to that or listen to the duties of that—if a person neglects to do that or leaves that out of their aspirations, then the transgression is not as serious as killing or stealing.

He says you can't really command higher values, but you can make commandments for the lower values in the form of prohibitions. "Only brotherly love can be commanded of the higher values," he says, "and that, not in the strict sense." So "love your neighbor as yourself"—it's not really a commandment; it's a kind of aspiration. And personal love, what he calls personal love, which is the love of another in a way that—in our language—sees them as image, in his language, it's a love of another that senses and cares for and is attuned to their ideal personality, the soul essence, the image. Personal love cannot be commanded at all.

But genuine morality, he says, is built from below up. "Its essence is not the ideal self-existence of values, but their actualization in life." In other words, we have to act on these. "Only upon the actualization of the lower does the actualization of a higher value rest solidly." These are just different words for saying what we just said. Without that, as I said, they're hollow. If there's a transgression of lower values while one cares for higher values, something's off. It strikes one as off. In transgressing against a lower value, it has more consequences.

It has consequences on a wider range of our existence. When we transgress against a lower value, the consequences affect not just ourselves but ripple outward. The consequences of one person not caring about this or that particular higher value are much more limited.

So the higher value, Hartmann writes, has a narrower field of activity, contains less palpable substance.

Its existence for itself is more pronounced. What's the purpose of that higher value? It exists for itself - this concern with beauty, this concern even with my ideal personality. Yes, if I can actualize, if I can follow my soul's calling, if I can listen for the angel out ahead and do my duty, that will bestow gifts on the world. But in a way, it's just for itself. It's for the beauty of itself, for the soul-making itself.

Its existence for itself is more pronounced in the higher value. It stands and falls for itself alone. When it suffers injury, it injures little else, only what stands above it in order of rank. The basis beneath it remains intact. This becomes most evident in extreme cases like that of the dispensing of spiritual value - the sort of radiant virtue that I was talking about, which is altogether useless and has nothing further dependent upon it, or writing beautiful music, whatever it is. It's useless. Nothing else is dependent on it, or very little. It is similar with love of the remotest, personal love, and all the values of the individual personality, all these higher kinds of values.

The higher values possess their superiority in the conferring of meaning upon life and in its fulfillment. Those are the ones that really give this sense of meaningfulness and fulfillment in our life. For the meaning of the moral life, Hartmann writes, is no more to be found in the lower values than its foundations are to be found in the higher.

If we have only a concern for the lower values, then there can be a kind of impoverishment of our whole life. Our whole ethical life is impoverished by that limitation. We're just concerned with lower values, and it can be, as Jesus criticized, kind of low. There isn't this high nobility. There isn't this love of value and aspiration. Something's not stretching into the beyonds with the Eros, with the soul-making there.

So the higher values have beyondness, as we talked about. They have dimensionality. There's a sense of unfathomability there, mystery, irreducibility. And all this supports them, allows them to become erotically imaginal objects for us, beloved erotic imaginal objects. And to give, as I said, a sense of meaningfulness and fulfillment in our life. Somewhere Hartmann wrote also something like: the aims of our life, of our moral life, should be placed so high that we can only just discern them. But their foundations should be laid as firmly as possible.

When we consider climate change and species extinction, mass species extinction, those two things are threatening the foundations - they're real threats to the foundations of many people's lives, certainly many animals' lives and many species' lives. But they also threaten the foundations of existence itself: that people have water to drink that's not undrinkable because the sea has risen and the salt water has gotten into the water; that people don't live in climates where it's actually too hot to cool the body at certain times of the year; that there's enough rain but not flooding. The foundations are threatened through this kind of unfolding and the lack of care with regard to climate change and species extinction.

These are issues of foundations, and thus they are issues that pertain to the lower moral values. "Thou shalt not kill"? Well, watch your climate emissions, or watch our climate emissions, or take care that the governments make sure that the governments and the corporations act - because we're not going to solve

this just on the back of our individual efforts at lowering our personal emissions. Something much more systemic needs to happen. But yes, those issues touch on the foundations of human being - what human beings need for life: water, air, climate, food.

But they also - there's something in those issues that implicates, involves, touches on, asks for our sensitivity to the highest values and virtues. More and more now people are realizing that climate change, and to a lesser extent species extinction, does and will have a big impact on the foundations, the material foundations of human existence, for many, many people, and eventually for everyone. As such, it touches on, it implicates the foundational, the lower moral values and virtues and commandments. But there's also something here that touches on the highest values, that calls in, that asks for an extension in range, in height of our moral sensitivity.

If it's only a perspective of foundations, then some things in tackling climate change are just completely okay. The idea that many people have touted - and some people think will be an inevitable solution because humanity is being too slow at reducing emissions - is the possibility of geoengineering: putting certain particles into the atmosphere, spraying particles of some chemical into the high atmosphere so they will reflect back a large proportion of the sunlight. The Earth will cool instead of experiencing the warming caused by carbon emissions. So you actually keep the same amount of carbon, or even put more carbon in, and reduce the temperature of the Earth.

Allegedly the problems, it will only solve part of the problems – the problems of global warming by cooling the temperature. One of the side effects of that, apparently, is that it would make the sky white. So if there's enough of these particles in the atmosphere, the sky would no longer be blue, it would be white.

If we're only thinking from the perspective of foundations of human life and material needs and therefore the foundational or lower values, then that's okay. Because what difference does it make? Blue sky, white sky? Or if with noise pollution and light pollution, it's becoming difficult to find places in the world that are not full of the sound of mostly combustion engines burning fossil fuels. But noise and light pollution would be okay from that perspective of just addressing the foundational, just thinking about in terms of reducing suffering, just thinking in terms of the lower values, just sensing it on that level and addressing the foundations, the material foundations of human existence.

Noise and light pollution would be okay as long as we can't measure any effect on health, or pleasure, however we measure that, or GDP. So something, to me, something would be missing there. I don't know how it sounds to you, but it doesn't sound okay to me. My heart hurts as I'm saying this. To me, to my soul, something else is needed.

Something else is calling – a deepening, a widening, an ensouling of our ways of looking, of our view, our sense, our conception of ourselves, our anthropology, our sense of our individual self, our sense of our communities, but also our anthropology, our sense of what human beings are and what their place is in the cosmos. And a sense of each other and a sense of individual things and beings in the natural world,

and a sense of the whole world. All this, something else is called, and that has to do with higher values.

They are necessary, they're implicated, as I said, in our concern for all this, when we look at the whole problem. It's a multi-level problem.

Some people, as I mentioned the other day, have said to me, "Ah, soul-making time – it's really what humanity needs right now. It's the new frontier," or, you know, in this time of sort of post-post-modernism, it's got all the aspects that are needed for taking us forward out of the sort of quagmire or stagnation that came with post-modernism and where we are now in our whole vision of ourselves and philosophy and all that stuff. And that maybe in that sense, in being a new frontier, it's what Hartmann would call one of the noble values of our time. And in his sense of word, remember, the nobility in his meaning is those that look for the new.

But nobility in his language looks for the new not only – it's got its antennae out for new sensibility to new unfamiliar values with respect to a certain culture, time and place – its prime motivation is not just to address the crises, for example the ecological crises it finds itself in.

So people say stuff like that, sometimes some people say stuff like that, but I certainly think that soul-making is not the fix of all modern problems. And whether it's noble in Hartmann's sense, I don't know. I'm not sure. People sometimes say, well, everything that involves soul-making practice – the flexibility and openness conceptually in terms of logos – that sort of is a way to move forward out of the limitations of postmodern philosophy which just, if you like, shoots down negatively different conceptions.

Actually there's a practical possibility of having some flexibility, some openness, and then the actual practical capacity to move between different conceptions, that and the kind of attunement that it asks for, the kind of reverence that it brings, the sensing the soul of the world, the re-enchantment of self, of the world – all these are necessary and new. I don't know. I'm not sure.

So certainly for some people, for sure, for some people, soul-making practice will kind of support and encourage and draw out and grow the virtues, the moral virtues. And for some people, it will – it already has – legitimized and supported their, for instance, their activism, their engagement. It's supported a growth in their care, and the sensing the soul that kind of underpins that will contribute, does contribute to material help with regard to these crises, and that's great and it's necessary and it's really important.

But, you know, on another level, soul-making perhaps is ultimately useless, we could say. What's it for? Yes, there are these fruits, and that's necessary, wonderful, and really important. But the soul loves soul-making. Period. Period.

What's soul-making for? Soul-making is for soul-making. Soul-making is the purpose of soul-making. In that sense, it's useless. It has nothing else that it's in the service of, primarily, or as its main reason. There are gifts, there are offshoots, there are bestowals, and it provides support for all kinds of things, including

a reduction in suffering of self and others. But like all the highest values, so like beauty and art and all that, essentially it's useless, but in the best sense of the word.

Somehow it crowns our lives, blesses and anoints our lives and our deaths, our whole sense of existence. That is perhaps ultimately what it's for and ultimately what we care about and what bestows meaningfulness in life, fulfillment in life, beauty. It's what we love.

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