The Image of Ethics (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 2:12:55

Tonight I'd like to start talking about ethics and pick up some of what I was speaking about in the Sila and Soul series—I think it's nine or ten parts there. I'd like to elaborate certain elements of that and extend what we said there. So these talks on ethics are very much based on those Sila and Soul talks. They're presuming them and, as I said, elaborate on certain strands there and extend it, and I hope take it just a little bit further at least.

Ethics is one of those subjects that's infinite, that I don't think we should ever finally arrive at a full stop and answer where we're completely satisfied. So whatever I say in these talks is really just a snapshot of this time in my own studies and reflections regarding ethics and particularly regarding their connection with soul-making, dharma and practice. So it's just a snapshot now of what could be and what should be, I think, a never-ending exploration.

I'm doing it now partly because I'm concerned there won't be another chance. I hope, obviously I hope there will, but if not, or even if there is for me, that others will explore this whole area and these themes further, more deeply, more widely than I have done, and develop the soul-making dharma in lots of ways, but also in relation to ethics and the ethical aspects of directions within soul-making dharma. And that others would also study other ethical philosophies and perhaps there can be fruitful dialogue in the wider sense at some point.

Pretty much everything I say here rests on an understanding and a digestion of what I said in Sila and Soul, elaborates and extends that. I won't repeat the explanations and the vocabulary that I introduced in those talks very minimally. So I'm assuming that you're up to speed with that.

And why now? Well, because it seems obvious to me that there's an urgent need in our world at present to rethink and to reformulate ethics, to put it on a firmer foundation, to make it more coherent, to make it more central to our lives, and also to make it something beautiful, something attractive, this whole domain, this whole area of exploration. There's an urgent, urgent need for that.

And valuable and important as offering mindfulness to the world and to different demographics in society and the wider world, valuable and important as that is, I would say an even more pressing need, an even more urgent and more basic need is to open up and revivify the whole exploration of ethics and offer something there in terms of education, formulation, and practice. So that strikes me as a very urgent need.

It also strikes me after the Sila and Soul talks that I was perhaps a little too restrained there, a little too modest, if that's the right word, with respect to what I now think soul-making dharma might actually offer

to the area of ethics. Sometimes people get very excited about soul-making dharma and I almost find myself taking the other pole of like, well, you know, let's see, it's not for everyone, and I tend to take the pole of the more unenthusiastic partner there. But perhaps in retrospect I was, as I said, a little too restrained, too modest regarding what soul-making dharma might offer and might inject into the discourse about ethics and how it might open it out and what it might give it and what questions it might bring to bear as well.

So in many ways this talk is questioning about what we need in ethical systems, but it's also a kind of proffering or putting forward or advocating of soul-making dharma as possibly a really potent and viable injection into the way we think about and relate to ethics—an injection into the wider society, not just soul-making dharma practitioners. So it's a little more positive as a stance, perhaps, at least I'm hoping, a little less restrained, a little less modest.

One of the things I think I touched on in the Sila and Soul talks was the very real danger that ethics, the whole area of ethics, slides or has already slid to really become a question of law and legality. So ethics as an area of philosophy has slid or is in the process of sliding to law. And the debate about ethics has slid to almost a debate about laws for the most part. Law ensuring as best as possible, whatever that might mean, that everyone's right to pursue what they want to pursue is protected, as long as it does not infringe on others' similar rights to pursue what they want to pursue in society.

So the whole debate and question, the whole way we see ethics, slides to a question of what laws do we need to put in place? Or what behavior do we need to ensure that will, in turn, ensure that, as best as possible, everyone's right to go after and do what they want to go after and do is protected, as long as, or to the degree that it doesn't infringe on other people's similar rights to pursue what they want to pursue. So that's the ideal of this kind of thinking, this level of thinking about ethics where it's really slid to a level of thinking about law, legality and rights.

And of course this makes sense and it's a good idea and historically it came—Thomas Hobbes was one of the people behind it at the time of the English Civil Wars, utter brutality and chaos and violence and bloodshed. And so thinking about ethics in this way and offering that as an idea was a really good idea and makes sense at a certain level.

But one of the things I want to point out is that it's a limited way of thinking about ethics and it will be limiting. Not to mention, of course, the fact that it's not very well implemented in our societies. The rights of the rich to pursue what they want to pursue seem protected often above the rights of the poor to pursue what they want to pursue even if they're just the rights to basic human needs, or the rights of one ethnic group over another. So it's not very well implemented, both in terms of economic status and race and other social status.

But just as important as that, it has no basis, and this is a big part of what I want to go into—there's no basis underlying that whole ideology. There's not a sufficient basis to decide between someone claiming,

"This is my right to pursue this," and someone saying, "Oh, but that infringes on my right to do that." The philosophical theory, the ethical theory, just stops at this kind of unidimensional flat level of rights and law and has no deeper structure or ideation on which that level rests. And so it becomes, without basis, very difficult to actually go into certain thorny ethical difficulties. Nothing's in place to help us there.

And so ethics slides to a kind of law, and underneath that law is a kind of moral nihilism—a vacuum, a kind of moral vacuum where higher ethical sensibilities in particular, higher values and ethical discourse should or could be.

So the whole thing becomes a slide into a kind of contest or conflict between so-called rights—my right to do this, your right to do that. And there's no really good, well thought out or deep basis for deciding between these conflicting rights, or even for approaching the issue ethically at any deeper level.

One of the things I'd like to explore in these talks is asking the question: what do we need? What do we need in an approach to ethics? What do we need in an ethical philosophy? I want to use that question of what we need to help direct and navigate us through different possible ethical theories, seeing how soul-making Dharma and soul-making ethical Dharma might supply us with those needs and help us navigate what has become a kind of quagmire without signposts.

First of all, generally speaking, what we need is not primarily guidance about what to do, or guidelines and instructions—moral laws about what to do. I don't think any ethical system—utilitarianism, Kant's ethics, Habermas's open dialogue idea—is actually able to inform us or give us that information of what to do in every situation. There will always be moral antinomies, as I explained at length in the *Sila and Soul* talks.

Sometimes a person wants to just know what to do: "I just want to know what's right and what's wrong. Tell me what to do. Give me a list." Sometimes that need or felt need to know what to do may just be coming from a kind of ego fear. Sometimes it can be a lack of full engagement of the soul with these questions—a lack of full engagement that's actually open to the difficulties, for example, the antinomies between different values.

If I feel agitated regarding some ethical choice or ethical situation, can I tell the difference between what we might call ego—a more superficial level of my being and its concerns and agitations—and an agitation that's more rooted at a soul level, a deeper agitation? Or do I just have an aversion to any level of agitation, any difficulty, whether it's at an ego level or a soul level?

Generally speaking, I don't think that's what we actually need. Yet oftentimes that's how we think about ethics, or that's how ethics has come to be amputated as a subject. Ethics becomes: "Let's get a system or a way of thinking that will tell us what to do." And that's how the discourse has shrunk.

Rather, I think generally what we need is related more to the question: what is worthwhile? What is really worthwhile in life? What makes life beautiful? What opens up and supports and gives life to a beautiful

life—what gives the beauty to a beautiful life? What brings a sense of depth to our existence, makes life worth living, makes a life really worth living, brings some sacredness—including a sense of sacredness regarding the human being, who one is, what one is as a human being?

And sacredness regarding our relationship with others, with society. And sacredness regarding our relationship with the world, the earth, with nature, with the cosmos. Because we are human beings in a cosmos. We are human beings on earth as well as human beings in society.

Actually, I think this is what ethics needs. Very generally speaking, ethics needs that. We need to think about it in a broader way. We need to approach it looking for something much broader, something which has been amputated from the whole exploration, the philosophical domain of inquiry, and the whole conversation. It's what matters in that sense—about living a life worth living, in that direction, toward a life of beauty.

This is, I think, most generally speaking, what's needed to save ethics, to redeem it, to re-elevate it, and open it out again into a really flourishing subject—an area of exploration that's actually commensurate with our problems, capable of addressing the immense problems we have now as a species and the immense problems we're causing other species and the immense problems we have in society. An ethics that's actually adequate to that task.

So very generally speaking, we need to move from the question not only of what to do, but what makes life beautiful? What makes life really a life that is worth living? What is the good, to use the ancient terminology that I talked about in *Sila and Soul*?

This is more than just law, and it's also more than economy. We think the economy matters because if the economy is okay, then people will be okay because then they'll be able to pursue what they want to pursue. So if we take care of the law and the economy, then within that framework, everyone can decide for themselves what they want to do and what they feel is important. We need more than that. We absolutely need more than that, and I'm not the first person to recognize this and to say something about it.

But on the other hand, I don't think it's possible anymore in modern or postmodern society to impose this or that particular belief or activity as "this is what you must do ethically to be an ethical person." We have the law for that limited area, but beyond that, it's actually no longer possible to impose any particular belief or activity from the outside.

So what matters? What makes life important?

What makes life rather deep, beautiful, meaningful, worth living? These are the questions that need opening up again, I think. And as I said, that's related to a sense of sacredness—the sacredness of the human being as well as the sacredness of the earth, the cosmos, and our social relations.

But with regard to the human being, we also have to not be completely naive. Perhaps looking back at the sixties, a lot of people felt love and flower power, and it was all a little naive in terms of what that could really accomplish without what it was supposing of human nature, and also what could be accomplished without a more sophisticated practice and philosophy. So on the one hand, not wanting to be naive about human beings and the nature of human beings, but also not wanting to be pessimistic about human beings. And I want to come back to this as one of the themes that's quite central as well.

So it's quite a big ask. And also, you know, I touched on this with Buddha Dharma as well. Just following the five precepts could be regarded as only a kind of safeguard for society. If everyone did that, then society would be a safe place that would allow people to do what they want to do. And if part of what they want to do is get awakened, then that's good on the one hand, or a kind of minimum safeguard for personal liberation on the other.

So we're really talking here about ethics as ethos, as I explained in *Sila and Soul*, as something that's much bigger and has to do with meaningfulness and making life beautiful and worthwhile, and that whole question, and the sense of sacredness.

So what we need is a way of navigating that area, an instrument, something like a compass. And we need training and education in how to use such an instrument. We need to open up what ethics means beyond just taking care of law and economy to try and ensure everyone's rights are not trampled on by someone else's actions. But we also can't impose "everyone goes northeast" or whatever. We need a way of navigating, methods of navigating, an instrument—something like a compass—and training, education in how to use that instrument.

So a way of orienting that's different than a prescribed direction. As I said, not "everyone go northeast." Or prescribed direction together with proscribed directions—prohibited directions—regarding material things, material activities.

Do you understand the difference there? So rather than saying this actual activity or this thing is wrong, that one is right in itself, in themselves—these things, those things, those activities, prescribe this one and we proscribe that one, prohibit that one—we need a way of orienting. It's not so much the thing in itself, the activity in itself, but a way of orienting to this whole question.

And it might be for the, let's say, the least capable in society, it may be necessary that they are limited to prescribed and proscribed directions. It may be. But there's also this question: what's innate capacity and innate limitation with regard to ethics? And what's possible with education? It's a tricky question. It has history far back as, well, before the Enlightenment when they took a certain stand on that, and they believed everyone was *tabula rasa*—it was just a matter of education. It's tricky.

But might it be possible for there to be a more widespread education at some point? This might sound very elitist, but might it be possible for there to be a more widespread education that offers and teaches

us, trains us in ways of orienting, in practices that help us orient in the realm of ethos and opening up that sense of life and navigating well, opening up the sense of beautiful life, deep, meaningful life, and navigating well—knowing that that might be different between different people to a certain extent?

And I think part of that, part of what immediately is kind of required and suggested by that way of thinking about ethics and opening up the idea of what we're actually after there, what we actually need in the most general sense—what comes immediately is the possibility and the need for a relationship of love and of eros with the virtues, with the values, as I talked about in *Sila and Soul*. And as I'm going to go into in a minute, then this opens up in many ways how we can think about and explore the whole domain of ethics. Things like sins of omission start to have their place. Emotion with regard to ethics starts to have its place, but a more mature place. I'll come back to these things.

So if I think about what's my sort of wish list, if you like, for an ethical system or an approach to ethics, a way of thinking about ethics, or what do we need? What do we need? What does it seem to me that we need as a species right now in terms of approaching ethics, thinking about ethics, constructed frameworks for ethics?

I would say, partly what I've already said, that ethics needs to be more than law. More than law and more important than law. And ethics needs also to be more than just an idea of "my rights, your rights." It needs more than just an idea of our individual rights. More generally, as I said, it needs to open up beyond this whole question of what to do.

"What should I do? What's right here?" Right in a different sense. And more fundamentally, this question about how to live: What is a beautiful life? What makes a life really worth living? What gives it depth? So ethics needs to be more than law, more than that singular question, more than law, more than rights—all these elements are interconnected.

It needs to allow place for the idea of sins of omission—sins of omission that recognize we can neglect to do certain things. It needs to expand that notion and give it space. These are the threads I'm going to weave through this talk, coming and going, in and out as we proceed.

As I've said, ethics must include emotion, but it must transcend emotion. Rather, it must be more than just emotion and give a mature place to our emotions. So that's our third point—or fourth, depending on how you're counting. Let me organize this: Not just "what to do" is one. More than laws and rights, that's two. Having space for sins of omission, three. Fourth is including emotion but not reducing ethics to emotion, not limiting it by emotion, and giving mature place to emotion.

Fifth, it must include love and eros, as I mentioned. Number six—and this is really important—it must have dimensionality. I touched on this in the Sīla and Soul talks, but for ethics to work, and all these needs and requirements on this wish list are connected, which is why I can only weave them together rather than present them separately—something needs to be sensed as or granted a higher dimensionality, a

dimensionality in which meaningfulness and purpose and sanctity actually reside.

Without something being sensed as having, or granted, or believed to have, or felt to have higher dimensionality, it's very difficult to make any ethical headway, to say anything meaningful or justifiable about ethics. The justification of whatever we do in ethics needs to be rooted in another dimension. Even if you say "don't kill," the question becomes: why? The why needs to reach into another dimension. Meaningfulness, purpose, and sanctity organically, intrinsically reside in some other dimension. We need to sense ethics that way, even if sanctity is something secularly conceived—it doesn't matter.

This is a vast subject, and I want to explore what this means. How has it been attempted in the past? How might we attempt it now? Attempts without dimensionality, as I'll explain, usually just fail. They have failed. Attempts to explain ethics without dimensionality, to promote an ethical system without dimensionality—they've simply failed.

So that's six—dimensionality. Seven would be connected to this: questions of ontology. If we're talking about dimensionality, we need to address why you can claim something as having a certain dimensionality and therefore intrinsic meaningfulness, purposefulness, sanctity. You need ontological and epistemological arguments for that, justifications for that. Woven into all this are questions of ontology and epistemology—as always, unavoidable. And certainly as Buddhists, we need to go beyond the limited ontology of just emptiness as an answer to everything. I explained this a little in one of the other talks.

Number eight would be a sense of what a human being is. What does it mean to be a human being, and what can a human being become?

All of this is tied together—these eight items on the list of what an ethical system needs nowadays, what I think we need as a species for an ethical system. Eight interconnected elements. They're not really separate in any meaningful way.

One implies the other, drags in another. And so, yes, as I said, I can't really go through this in a linear way.

So there's a little bit of introduction. Some of what I'm going to say tonight—we'll see how far we get—but some of it may well still sound introductory to a superficial listening. Some of you might feel you're waiting for the meaty bit. Some of you won't, of course, but some of you might be. To a superficial ear, it might sound a little bit introductory.

But if you understand the basic theme of what I'm trying to get at here, what I'm offering—which is: why should we get behind the approach of sensing the soul?—then you'll already have heard what we've said so far. The basic theme is an advocacy of the sensing the soul approach to ethics. If you understand that theme, you'll have immediately heard that what we've already said is completely wrapped up in that theme, and there are already some very good reasons emerging from what we've covered for why sensing the soul would be a helpful approach—one really helpful approach to ethics.

Now, I mentioned this aspect where the way we think about ethics needs to be more than just questions of law and rights. We need to prevent this kind of slide of ethics down to questions of law and rights. It's interesting, some of what happened in the Extinction Rebellion protests recently, and how some people on the street were saying, "These XR activists have no respect for law and order. They don't care about law and order."

Let's go into this a little bit. Law and order are definitely—or is, if we take them together—a value in society. But its rank as a value in the hierarchy of values must always be subordinate to the ethical values it upholds and supports. The rank of law and order as a value has to be subordinate to the ethical values that law and order are upholding.

Law and order were healthy, robust, and respected in Nazi Germany and in Mussolini's Italy—two cultures with a lot of law and order, as far as I understand from the history books. But ethically, the whole thing was on a very dubious, completely unethical foundation. Therefore, the law and order there were not valuable—they were anti-values.

So law and order is not in itself a value. It depends on the ethical values it's trying to uphold. The purpose of law and order is to uphold ethical values. Somehow we've kind of divorced them. Law and order has gotten divorced from ethics, so that people are valuing law and order in and of itself, regardless of whether that law and order is supporting good ethics or bad ethics.

It was interesting when Yanai was in court for one of his XR actions. At some point in the proceedings, Yanai was allowed to present his case. He tried to present an ethical case, ethical grounds for breaking the law, for breaking law and order. And the judge at some point responded that this is a court of law and not a court of ethics.

Now, it sounds like this judge was actually pretty good, but his hands were tied. And he made a very valuable point. He doesn't sound like he really drew out all the implications, or maybe even all of what he felt about that limitation. "This is a court of law, not a court of ethics." He might have really wished that it was a court of ethics and been able to come down much more on the side of the Extinction Rebellion protesters being tried there.

But basically, we are not set up in our society—we are not equipped to have such ethical discussions or ethical courts. There's no basis. There's very little dialogue. I mean, people debate whether using stem cells is ethical, or euthanasia, or what's called dignified assisted suicide. Again, it's back to this question: What is it right to do? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do? That kind of level of discussion. What is right? What is wrong? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do?

And as Charles Taylor puts it, the "ought to do" has become divorced from the "good to be."

The "ought to do" becomes the limitation, the circumscribing of the ethical investigation. What ought I to do? As I said before. And that whole question has been divorced from the much deeper question of what is

it good to be? And this whole notion of the good and the beautiful. This question of what is it good to be, which is this question of what makes a life really worthwhile, what makes a life a beautiful life—that has been jettisoned. It's been jettisoned from philosophical discussion, from ethical discussion. They're divorced and then they're jettisoned.

And that brings problems—huge problems. One of them is the problems it brings of this divorce of questions of law from questions of ethics. I don't know what the judge was thinking or feeling, but maybe someone will have the kind of courage at some point. Someone in that position will have the courage, or we will have the courage to admit the gap—admit the gap there, admit the whole, admit the kind of yawning nihilistic abyss above which the pomp and power of the law courts attempts to suspend themselves. It's resting on either nothing, a kind of moralistic nihilism, or very, very thin ice.

And this is connected to the whole question about my right to do this and your right to do that, my right to do whatever it is—my right to go on holiday, my right to enjoy myself after work, my right to whatever. And so much gets dragged into these kind of claims of rights.

Now, it might be soon that my right to fly for a holiday is reckoned legally, or recognised legally somehow, ethically and then legally, as less of a right than the right of others to have a home that's not flooded or not on fire or in drought. The right for others to live in a habitable planet might be regarded as a right that trumps my right to fly on holiday when I feel like it after I've worked hard. It might be that that day comes, and it might be that that day comes sooner—I hope it does—but sooner than later.

But even then, even if there is that sort of switch in the degree of rights, the hierarchy of rights in public opinion, and that gets enshrined in law somehow, in the wider ethical mindset and in law—even then, I would say it's still not an adequate and fertile basis for ethics. Something is missing. It's still just about those rights and the sort of competing rights, contesting rights, and then a decision that this right actually always trumps that right. Even then, still then, it won't be adequate and it won't be fertile as a basis—just that question about rights.

And you can see, even at that level of competing or conflicting rights, there's so much dishonesty and distortion that comes in when people talk on that level. And that, to me, betrays the fact that we're actually lacking a means of approaching ethical questions. So we just have this conversation about rights, but there's no actual way of approaching ethical questions. The means, the practices, the way of thinking about it just becomes my right versus your right, or your right versus my sense of those people on the other side of the world and their rights.

So much dishonesty and distortion that just partly—partly—betrays, not something so much about human nature, perhaps, but just our lacking of a means of approaching ethical questions.

Some of you may know this, but there were a couple of groups who tried to shut down airports or prevent planes from taking off and landing to draw attention to the huge and often unnecessary amount of carbon

emissions that come from flying. And they attempted in different ways to stop the functioning of airports for a few hours or a day or two days or whatever it was.

And it was, I say interesting, but it was also kind of alarming and also totally to be expected and kind of normalised—the response of the airport authorities and others. So this happened, I think, one situation was a city airport in the middle of London, and a lot of activists went there and just sat in the lobby and sort of blocked entrances and things like that, in an attempt to stop planes flying for a while.

And the sort of dishonest and distorted rhetoric of the response and the statements from the city airport authorities, who talked about needing to ensure the safe running or the safe operation of this airport, and then gleefully reported that they had ensured that when the police had cleared the protesters. And this is just completely normal and expected kind of language and trope and attitude and response.

It hides so much, because the use of that word "the safe operation" is a deliberate deflection and distortion. It links the XR protests with terrorism, which, if you've read the news recently, apparently they were linked anyway by a police organisation called Prevent, and now they've retracted that link, but anyway. There was, in the rhetoric, in the spin of the response, this deliberate deflection and distortion as if XR protesters are like terrorists, airport functioning is safe.

But, you know, the carbon dioxide emissions from flying is not safe. And doubly so in an airport like City Airport, where it's mostly really very rich people and corporate executives flying here and there, where they don't need to fly to Manchester or—you know how long that is on the train, a couple of hours or whatever it is. The emissions are not necessary. The emissions are not safe. We know that now. Carbon dioxide emissions are not safe.

Was there anyone whose safety was affected, whose actual safety was affected by that XR sit-in protest? It's a spin. You might as well talk about the safe running of Auschwitz and wanting to ensure the safe running of Auschwitz. Okay, it's maybe extreme, but there's a parallel there. How ridiculous that sounds.

Even more insidious, I think, is the kind of incomplete honesty and distortion that gets deployed through certain common tropes—particularly that XR protests were preventing normal, hard-working people from putting food on their table and keeping a roof above their heads. These are normal people who want to go about their normal lives.

I heard this on a TV debate. I don't have a better idea about how consciousness can be changed in relation to climate change and species extinction, how the alarm can be better sounded. I don't have a better idea than XR. I have many difficulties with how XR does things or what it decides to do, but I really don't know a better approach, speaking as someone who's been involved in environmental activism for decades—writing countless letters, trying to pursue change through so-called democratic processes. I genuinely don't have a better idea.

But then there's this trope in response: these XR people are preventing normal, hard-working people from

putting food on their table, having a roof above their heads—normal people who want to go about their normal lives.

Is that even really true? Did the XR protests really prevent hard-working people from putting food on their table that evening, or from having a roof above their heads? Is that really true? It might be in a couple of cases, but what proportion of cases? It's just a trope, a spin.

And regarding normal life—what if so-called normal life brings very abnormal disaster for others? Abnormal like the fires in Australia. Normal life brings abnormal disaster for others, and then for myself in my normal life too. Normal life was pursued in 1938 Nazi Germany by a lot of people. "I just want to go about my normal life"—but there's a bigger ethical question here.

Mass extinction, mass extermination of species is not normal. It's by far the most abnormal thing that has occurred on Earth since the planet has existed, perhaps apart from the beginning of life itself.

There's something even more insidious going on with this particular trope. Almost no one wants to say they don't care if anyone is deprived of food or loses their job. In this gig economy, some people have no benefits, no safety net at all. They're not slaves, but there's very little protection. This has become a reality—the gig economy and the economy of austerity.

So it might be true that for some people, getting blocked by an XR protest makes them late for work, they get fired from their gig economy job, and they're really on the edge, living at that level of poverty and vulnerability in society. Of course, that might be true.

But first, how many people does that actually affect? More importantly, what has happened in this trope is that the protesters—the people disrupting—get blamed for decades of systematic political and socioeconomic policies of austerity and the gig economy. They do something and they're blamed for the potential results, when actually most of these conditions rest in decades of socioeconomic policies that themselves rest on very shaky ethical foundations.

Yes, certain XR actions could have been better thought out in terms of demographics, areas, and who exactly they would affect. I really do think that. But there's also something more than a little sneaky, insidious, dishonest, disorienting, and distorting about what has become quite a typical response—such an easy trope that's hiding something.

The larger point, again, is about our ethical thinking needing to be more than law. We can't slide into thinking it's just about law and that's all we can talk about, or that ethics is just about rights—protecting people's rights. If we expand the conversation, expand the idea of what ethics is, then it opens up areas for what used to be called, I think, in the Catholic church, sins of omission—neglecting to do something.

This has quite important implications for me. Just as a thought experiment, let's take Nazi Germany as a setting. Compare ethical transgressions:

Person A speaks out during the Third Reich against Nazi policy and ideas, publicly and at the risk of their life. Privately, they're having an extramarital affair.

They're involved with someone other than their spouse—romantically, sexually involved with someone else. That's person A.

Person B is completely faithful to their partner, their spouse, but does not speak up about the Nazi policies, Nazi ideas. After the war, they may say, along with so many others, that they disagreed with Nazi policies and thought Nazism was terrible. But they say that after the war, when it was safe.

Person A, person B, and what they do—they're not antinomians. The point here is to ask and see how you, I, each of us tend to assess ethical misdemeanors. What's your reaction to person A, and your ethical reaction and assessment of person A compared to your ethical reaction to person B? Person A spoke out at the risk of their life, but they were having an extramarital affair. Person B was completely faithful to their spouse, but did not speak up until after the war, when they said they disagreed and thought Nazism was terrible. Maybe they did disagree and think Nazism was terrible, but during the Nazi reign, they did not speak up.

I invite you to ask and see how you tend to relatively assess those ethical misdemeanors. One of them is an omission, a sin of omission—person B. And this also, as I pointed out in "The Necessity of Fantasy," relates to how in the five precepts, as they're usually presented negatively, there's no place for a sin of omission. Walking by on the edge of a lake where someone is drowning, and simply keeping walking mindfully by while the person drowns or someone else has to save them—technically speaking, that's not a transgression, not an ethical transgression, not a sin. I'm still keeping the five precepts. Technically speaking.

Of course, Thich Nhat Hanh has added the positive side to the precepts, which is very helpful. But technically speaking, the Buddhist precepts, as they're usually thought of in terms of the five precepts, don't leave room for how much we can rise up ethically and extend ourselves to the higher virtues.

Now, what if we translate this hypothetical scenario, these hypothetical ethical transgressions—there are two kinds of transgressions there: Person A's transgression in terms of their marriage, and Person B's transgression in terms of their sin of omission, what they have failed to rise up to—what happens if you translate that to our situation now, where we know about and somehow even participate in a willful extinction, extermination of millions of species and climate change? We know that's going on, that those actions, those policies are perpetuated in our time by our societies, just as in Nazi Germany it was clear what was perpetrated. People said they didn't know about what was going to happen to the Jews and the Roma and the homosexuals and the Communists. Most people knew.

Translate that to our situation now.

This phrase, "sins of omission," can mean different things. But what I want to point to here is that we need

to open up—I think we're talking about needs now. What do we need to bring to an ethical system? What does an ethical system need to have? It needs to have a place in it, a space in it, spaces and places in it for the possibility of aspiring to higher values and virtues, for the recognition that it's important and good to aspire to higher values, higher virtues.

There's limited space for that in ethical systems that are not based on virtue. I wonder about this. I wonder if there's limited space for those kinds of aspirations or the recognition of their importance in ethical systems that are not based on virtue. I wonder—I'm not sure if that's correct, but it may be. These ethical systems based on virtue make that much more clear, let's put it that way.

If we go back to the legal thing—I think I've moved, I've lost count now. Since I got ill, I was living at Gaia House, I got ill, and I moved. Basically I moved out the morning of my operation. That was it. I never went back to Gaia House since then. I think I've moved four or five times since then, renting one place or another. I've never rented in England before because I lived in the States, so I don't know if it's an English thing or what, but I would say I had four or five places and three different landlords, I think.

While it's very clear that none of my landlords have acted illegally—they've always kept within the bounds of the law in terms of how they do things or raise the rent or limit things in this way or that way—and one could say from a certain point of view that they've acted ethically, they haven't acted unethically, one would be very hard pushed to find anyone who would say these people have acted virtuously in being a landlord or in their dealings with the tenant.

There's, again, in the wider society, this shrinking away from the idea or the attraction to higher values and higher virtues and the place for that as a possibility, the encouragement to aspire and to reach out to that kind of level. We just need to keep within the bounds of law—there's a sort of minimum, the lowest common denominator—and then that's regarded as ethical.

Sometimes ethical is a bit more than the law, but there's a shrinking here. So I don't know—I'm not sure that it's the case that this kind of thing is not possible with other ethical systems. There's something about a virtue-based ethical system that makes it more apparent, that invites it, that sets it up that way.

Going back to Hartman's hierarchy of values, and still with the notion that the higher values will need to rest on the lower, and including the knowing that there will be inevitable antinomies between different values, particularly values at the same level—that kind of virtue-based system, value-based system, still keeps this whole notion open, what I'm calling sins of omission. And this possibility and encouragement, stimulation, invitation to aspire higher, to higher values, higher virtues. So different ethical systems open in different ways. They open more or less.

Not too long ago, I overheard a conversation between two people who, each of them was a relatively new parent. It was a man and a woman—they weren't a couple. So they were each in a partnership and each had a young child, one young child. They seemed to agree very easily that very close bonding between

mother and child, where the mum rarely goes away and breastfeeding is continued until late, et cetera—that this kind of very close bonding would guarantee that the child, when grown, would not cause harm in the world. I just wondered whether that was a bit naive.

Peer influence becomes huge as time goes on, as does the influence of advertisement and social and cultural norms, including ethical ones. I can think of a family that I've known for many years—the children in that family, the parents and the children—and I've known the children since they were babies. They're now mostly in their twenties, and they have all become very nice, relatively well-balanced psychologically. They're polite, there's a degree of kindness there, they're okay with expressing affection with their parents and their social relations, and so on. But they don't think twice, for example, about flying many times a year. They're quite wealthy, and they don't think twice about what that might contribute to the suffering of others, human and non-human. There is also, it seems to me, very little interest or impetus towards the higher virtues.

This is not quite what I mean by sins of omission, but it's related. So is it enough, this idea that we won't cause harm if we have very affectionate parenting with healthy physical contact with mum and dad, good family dynamics, and all that? The affection from and healthy attachment to mother or primary caregiver—it's probably not enough to bring about the kind of ethical maturity the world needs now.

We may need moral education, which, as I said, has gone away. It's been ruled taboo. It's hard to find in our society. We may need further moral education, whether by the family or otherwise. The role of education and moral education might be huge, but as I said, in our society we lack any but the most basic moral education. Even that may be less really a moral education than one about conforming to norms and obeying the law.

So what do we need to open up a range of possibility—the impetus and the interest in the higher virtues, as well as this whole notion of sins of omission? Some kind of moral education that is not in place at present in Western societies, and that needs to be based on probably a very different way of framing and relating to ethics than is there presently. The two issues—the lack of education and the lack of a good way of framing and relating to ethics—are completely related.

When there is the possibility to aspire, when that's opened and deemed important, the possibility to aspire to higher values, when it's recognized as something good, then love and eros for virtues becomes possible and becomes normal. Because there's that possibility of a beyond, that possibility of extending, rather than just a kind of disgust at what one sees or decides is unethical, or a kind of sentimentality—the sort you'd get in tabloid newspapers or the Daily Mail. It's all pretty limited ethically. Not only is it trammeled in just one direction—it's pretty obvious what they're going to oppose or not—but it's very limited in terms of the emotionality in it. There's no real place there for genuine love of virtue or ethics and genuine eros.

So again, this is part of the list of needs: ethics needs to become an area and a domain in relation to which we can and do feel love and eros and plenty of it, and beauty, because that's all going to be tied in. I'm

using that word eros in the soul-making sense. I'm not only saying this because I think ethics is an interesting subject and I love it—it's that exactly that is the appropriate relationship with this subject.

If we're thinking about what is a beautiful life, what is a life worth living, what is a life with depth and dimensionality and meaningfulness, and with this possibility for higher virtues and the beauty of that and extending myself, then it's exactly eros and love that is an appropriate relationship with that whole domain, with that whole subject.

I remember in the Sīla Soul talks, I played a little bit with different etymologies connected with the word virtue, and I offered different ones. I don't know if I mentioned these two—these two may be a repeat.

Looking at the phonetic or associative connections with the word virtue, I want to highlight two relationships that illuminate what I've just shared about eros and ethics.

Consider our colloquial use of "virtually" - we speak of virtual reality, virtual media. This virtual realm exists as image, electronically manifested. The connection between "virtual" and "virtue" suggests something profound: that virtues themselves can be understood as imaginal realities. They exist as images we can approach, ideals that beckon us forward.

Our other common usage of "virtually" - meaning "almost" or "approaching" - carries similar implications. When we say someone was "virtually exhausted" or "virtually there," we're describing movement toward something, an approximation of a fuller reality.

Both meanings point toward the same truth: virtues exist as imaginal idealities that we imperfectly approach through our lived behavior. Here is the ideational, imaginal reality of compassion or courage or wisdom, and we always approach it imperfectly in the instances of our actions. Our behavior becomes the instantiation of these ideal realities - not the complete embodiment, but the lived attempt to manifest what calls to us from beyond our current capacity.

This understanding naturally invites eros. When there exists an imaginal beyond, a higher dimension we cannot quite reach but yearn to approach, dimensionality opens. When virtues become ideational images rather than mere behavioral prescriptions, eros becomes not just possible but inevitable.

As I mentioned the other day regarding people who marvel at apparent willpower - perhaps what they're witnessing is actually eros. Eros for certain virtues and values. Eros for the ideas seeking expression through us. Eros for the future sangha we envision. Love and attraction, more than mere force of will.

Of course, in any long creative project, in sustained relationships, in parenting, there will be times when we don't feel that animating eros. The same holds true for our relationship with ethics and virtue. There will be periods when practice feels dry, when we're not inspired or called toward what's more beautiful. This is natural, even inevitable.

But when we have the right relationship to virtue - as we might with a long-term creative endeavor, an

enduring friendship, or the ongoing project of raising children - we can remain rooted in knowing even when feeling has temporarily withdrawn. We know firsthand: this matters to me. This is part of my path. I love this work, even when love isn't immediately accessible as feeling.

This knowing itself carries eros, even in dormant periods. We can recognize the many elements of the imaginal present even when we're not actively enchanted.

This connects to another crucial need in how we approach ethics: our understanding must include more than just emotion or moral feeling. While I don't believe ethics should be reduced to cold rationality - as some philosophical systems attempt - neither can it rest solely on feeling-states. Our hearts and their responses form part of our moral instrument, part of our ethical compass, but not the entirety.

It's an element of our compass. So we need emotions and moral feelings, but we need also more than that.

Eros is actually, as you know, more than an emotion. And eros—again, I mean eros in the whole soul-making sense that we use that term—so yes, we need emotion, but we need more than emotion. And part of what's more is we need eros, and partly we need a hierarchy of values, or some sense of a hierarchy of values. I want to come back to that because I want to spin that a little bit differently as we go on. But what that really means is we need a conceptual framework.

So we need emotion, but we need more than emotion. We need eros, we need a conceptual framework, and we need ways of orienting, ways of practicing. More than just emotion to guide us.

Obviously, the value of something like passion depends on what it serves and what the intention is, just like we talked about law and order. Passion is an emotion, but its value—actually, its moral value—depends on what it's serving and what its intention is. Loyalty, I'm not sure if it's an emotion or a stance, but it's connected. The value of loyalty, even passionate loyalty, also depends on its object.

A football supporter completely loyal to their team has a certain value, but a pretty limited value in terms of how valuable that passion and loyalty truly is. Sometimes you see grown men, and the only place where they're really expressing any emotion, or any place you'd see them cry, might be in relation to a football result. You have to wonder what's happening there with the heart. Why so limited? Why so strong in this area and so limited in other areas? And what value does it have, really, if it's just about whether a football team loses or wins?

So the value is dependent on the value of its object. And of course, the value of the loyalty of an SS officer—again, taking Nazi Germany as an example—the loyalty of an SS officer to Himmler, the head of the SS, that's highly questionable what value that has.

I say this because sometimes I run into people who love the sound of soul-making and even start playing with images, but seem to shrink their sense of what's important down to passion—the sense of passion as something really important. It's not important. Just the emotion of passion is not inherently important. It

depends what it's connected to, what it serves, what the intentions are, what its objects are.

I want to say something as well, just in connection with the emotions again. As I said, I feel like they're very important, they have a very important place in terms of our ethical sensibility and how we're going to approach ethics and how we orient and navigate with our ethical instrument, our soul instrument regarding ethics. But we can also sometimes overdo that and not see—kind of blind ourselves a little bit, blinker ourselves to other things—if we put too much emphasis on the emotion.

Take, for example, the idea of grief rituals and grief ceremonies, which some of us have been involved in and are starting more widely now, say with regard to species extinction or climate change. It's interesting: in those grief rituals, the person might come expecting a space where they can really grieve and wail and cry and it be okay and be supported and mirrored, where there's a shared space for intense, deep griefing emotion. But what people can find—and I think you will find if you attend a few of these things—is that a grief ritual may not lead to or support an emotion of grief. And it may not at all be because anything weird is going on in the dynamics, or it wasn't a trustworthy or safe space. It actually depends how the ritual is done and how it's held.

Oftentimes, a ritual distills something and contains it and connects levels. A ritual connects levels, and this is very important for soul-making. So, for example, we connect matter and the imaginal dimensions or the dimensions of divinity. That's the transubstantiation of objects and matter. That's something that happens in, or can happen in, a ritual. It's very powerful for the soul. And as I mentioned the other day, it may involve giving and receiving and grace.

These elements—this distilling of something, this containing of something, and particularly this element of connecting levels, and also this giving and receiving and grace—all of that may not lead to a sort of opening of the floodgates of, in this case, grief. So it depends what the ritual is trying to do and how it is set up and what levels it's aimed at. This is actually quite important, I think, for soul-makers to understand.

Is there a place for both? Spaces—call them rituals or ceremonies or whatever—where there can be collective grief and the depth of that grief regarding species loss, extinction, extermination, can be felt and held together in a safe space and recognized and valued and moved through? This feeling the grief, opening to it, and the importance also there of the heart's capacity expanding. Because as I said many times recently, there can be so much grief there. Part of the work that we do in meditation is to actually expand the heart's capacity, that it knows it can feel this terrible, awful, seemingly bottomless grief—a lot of it's not even mine—and the heart is big enough and knows how to let that move through and how to hold it well.

So can we have place for that kind of space and ritual together? And do we know how to set that up? And can there also be this contextualizing of grief through ritual?

The ritual that holds space in a different way—understanding how we human beings relate to the whole

situation of species loss and ecological devastation—contextualizes grief through dimension and imagination, contextualizing it for the soul, not just for the heart. This kind of ritual might be much calmer, more sober, perhaps even silent. But from it might emerge strength, power, and stamina.

Theoretically, yes, just having the grief and opening to it allows one to move through grief toward empowerment to act. But there's openness and strength available from both kinds of rituals. Potentially, there's openness and strength, power and stamina through both approaches—but they come in very different ways, and they're given to the being in very different ways.

Emotions are vital, but they're not enough.

So we're exploring the possibility of soul-making practice as a basis and approach to ethics. This can happen in two ways, as I explained in the Sila and Soul talks. One is through values and virtues becoming—or being allowed to become—imaginal images, ideational imaginal images, imaginal ideas, whatever we call them. The values and virtues themselves become imaginal.

The second way comes through an image, an imaginal figure, and that imaginal figure implies, or has implicit within it, certain values and certain virtues. Our life then begins to refract and express those values and virtues in its imperfect mimicry and echoing of the image, responding to the duty that flows from the image.

If we talk about ethics in terms of virtues—virtue ethics—then virtues rest on a sense of values rather than on a rational system or enforcement of law. That's the fundamental tenor of virtue ethics: it rests on my sense of values. The soul-making approach would most easily fit with virtue ethics, and it too rests on a sense of values rather than a rationally worked out system or guidelines or enforcement.

A sense of values—extrapolating from much of what we explored in Sila and Soul—really involves sensing them with soul. In other words, sensing the ideational imaginal, and sensing with soul implies all the eros and everything else: the sense of beauty and devotion and duty and meaningfulness, all the elements. Ethics, in this sense, implies and needs sensing with soul, to a certain extent, with respect to values.

Let's explore this further. When we sense the things and beings of the world with soul, values are there, and reverence is there, as elements of the imaginal. There's a natural ethical relationship with whatever we're sensing with soul.

However, there will always be something—some object or person—left out of our sensing with soul until we notice them and give them attention, allowing them to be subsumed into the soul-making dynamic. It's also true that some fantasies involve enemies. So the question arises: what becomes of our ethical relationship with those who are our imaginal or fantastical enemies? If I have an image of a warrior protecting the earth from enemies, what about our ethical relationship with those enemies?

Here we can talk about imaginal duty and its refraction, but also the theater-like nature we've explored

before. In a way, those enemies need to be subsumed—they need to become imaginal as well. Otherwise there's danger of reifying the enemy too much.

It's too much to expect anyone to be sensing with soul all the time and with respect to everything. It's actually impossible to be sensing with soul with respect to everything, because "everything" becomes a category that expands when the soul-making dynamic kicks in, creating and discovering more things, more aspects.

But it may be that as sensing with soul becomes more normal and digested, any situation or thing we attend to or experience—with respect to which we have to make some important choice, one that feels major—may become sensed with soul. Therefore our relationship with it becomes ethical, because it's reverential.

If we take sensing with soul as the basic approach to virtue or ethical living, it will not rid us of the inevitability of antinomies between values at the same level. That cannot happen.

I mean, it may rid a person of an antinomy they have between two values. Sometimes when I explore a dilemma, when I bring the soul-making sensibility and practice to it, I actually find that X is more soul-making for me than Y, even though someone else may have the reverse sense—they might find Y more soul-making than X.

But if everyone were trained in soul-making dharma practice and in approaching ethical choices through it, that person's choice, even though another person disagrees—they choose X, I choose Y; they choose X over Y, I choose Y over X—if everyone were trained in soul-making dharma and that approach to ethics, the person's choice would still be respected as valid if we sensed that it was honestly and authentically sensed with soul.

So what I'm exploring here is this: is it possible that sensing the soul could become a more widely established practice and basis even for ethics? I mean, that might be a total pipe dream, but I'm still exploring the theoretical possibility, at least the theoretical side of the possibility.

Part of the problem with ethics as we think about them now is that when we don't have a notion of dimensionality—when we don't have a sense of dimensionality, or when any idea or notion of dimensionality has been refused, has been shut out, disallowed, as is quite common and quite popular these days—then actually there can be no shared ethics. There's nothing then to prevent someone's ethics from being purely contingent, learned, arbitrary. Someone says, "This is my right, that's your right, this is how I think about ethics, that's how you think about ethics." But it could be held for purely contingent or arbitrary reasons, or held principally for what are actually not ethical reasons at all. It's something amoral—not immoral, as in wrong, but amoral, having nothing to do with morality.

So without dimensionality, it's hard to justify, and it's hard to even know where a person's so-called ethics are coming from. Ethics becomes exactly prey to postmodern nihilistic relativism because of this absence

of dimensionality.

If we pick up a few strands from what we've talked about here and in the Zealand Soul Talks and put them together—if we combine Hartman's notion of that firmament of values, which has an objective existence but has a kind of range and width that usually almost always exceeds the focus of any age, any culture, or any individual, and that also contains within it numerous antinomies—we combine that idea of affirmative values with a demand for a sense of dimensionality. I'll come back to this dimensionality question in more detail later, but if we combine this idea of affirmative values, we need to avoid this kind of postmodern nihilistic relativism with regard to ethics. Some kind of ethics needs to be rooted in something.

So I'm talking about what wishes or needs, let's say, a demand for some kind of sense of dimensionality. What will give us that? Well, soul-making, sensing the soul, gives us a sense of dimensionality implicitly. It's one of the elements. So we can get a sense of dimensionality for this or that virtue or ethic, or even just this or that action we're thinking about, from soul-making dharma practice and with all that implies about the ideational-imaginable.

So those two things—the firmament of values, which does have a kind of objective existence, and a sense of dimensionality, an actual practical, practiced sense of dimensionality—and we add the notion that we can trust the disciplined or trained soul to sense the ethical and to be touched by it, to want to move towards it, to have an erotic relationship with it and to want to manifest some or other of those inherently existing values. In other words, the duty is part of it as well.

If we combine all that—this kind of trust in the soul-making dharma practice, a demand for a sense of dimensionality which we can get also through soul-making dharma practice, and this notion of an objective but hugely ranged firmament of values—then there is an objectively or independently existing ethics to a certain extent, which we can discern epistemologically through the practice, by our careful sensibility and sensitivity, something which can be trained. Maybe there are other ways apart from soul-making dharma practice, but certainly including by training in soul-making and a recognition of and familiarity with the elements of the imaginal. This familiarity and recognition of the elements of the imaginal tell me when I'm on the right track, when the whole thing has become soulful, has that sense of dimensionality, and that I can trust this.

Still, there will be antinomies and differences of opinion and inclination and feeling between different people, of course. But antinomies exist anyway for individuals within themselves. Antinomies are unavoidable in ethical life, as I stressed in the Zealand Soul Talks—they're unavoidable.

But if we ourselves and society are aware of both the independent existence of this value firmament, its wide range, and the inevitability of antinomies both within and between individuals, then at least a more understanding and harmonious existence in society might be possible. Do you understand? If we and most or a lot of other people in society are aware there is this independently existing value firmament with a

huge range, and that there will inevitably be antinomies both within myself and within individuals, then at least we can have more understanding and a more harmonious coexistence in society.

Of course, it might also be—I think it probably would be the case—that if soul-making training and sensibilities were almost universally trained in members of society (let's just dream that for a minute), certain seeming antinomies would be universally understood to be not really antinomies, but oppositions between moral or soulful values and amoral values that are ego values or greed values. Not really antinomies at all. For example, I don't know, like the expansion of Heathrow Airport.

So again, the relationship with emotions. Notice one can have strong opinions and feelings regarding a value without a sense of soul-making and soulfulness there. If there's no dimensionality, then in the soul-making way of approaching ethics, it wouldn't be trustworthy. Just because there's an intense feeling, just because there's a strong opinion, without that sense of dimensionality and without the beauty and the other elements of the imaginal, it's not trustworthy. It's not fully trustworthy in that way of thinking about it.

This is hard as a dream, if we're dreaming this or proposing this. To kind of proffer that as desirable—to say it would be great if everyone, or at least a lot of people, approached ethics through sensing the soul, from soul-making dharma practice—

That would be, you know, actually to insist on, or at least to say is desirable, basically a new epistemology. You're basically insisting on a new epistemology, or saying it's better to have a new epistemology, at least for the domain of ethics. And for any new epistemology to take root and spread and even come to be a norm one day in the wider society is quite an ask and a pretty rare thing. I don't know—perhaps the last sort of major shift of epistemology was the shift to the scientific materialist worldview and its epistemology hundreds of years ago.

So an epistemology is already dominant in a culture. We inherit it and it's hard to question it. Still though, trying to place a new ontology first, in other words, before the epistemology—in other words, just saying, "This is ethical, this is the truth"—before an epistemology, before a way of teaching people how they might recognize something as more valuable, in other words, just presenting ontology, "This is more valuable than that," is probably harder than opening the epistemology in the area of ethics. Actually, how might one sense for oneself that this is more valuable than that?

So in this hope, wish, fantasy, dream, ridiculous impossibility, pipe dream, it's a big ask. Shifting ontology is huge. Shifting ontology just sort of out of the blue and kind of cold is probably very hard before we've shifted and offered the possibility of epistemology. And by epistemology I mean the practice by which one can come to experience things and sense things for oneself palpably, to measure between different values or different ethical choices.

So the other day, I can't remember which talk it was—probably the one on ontology—we talked about the

possibility of opening up and moving forward our sense of ontology and epistemology by allowing and giving place and importance, significant place, to eros. In other words, almost partly basing ontology and epistemology on eros. Of course, that's an idea that a lot of people would very quickly object to and be horrified by.

I read not too long ago a paper by—I don't know if he's a philosopher or a historian of philosophy or something—a guy called Wayne Hankey, who I must say I'm not a huge fan of. And it was a paper quite polemically critiquing John Milbank, the theologian-philosopher I mentioned the other day, who's associated with what they call the radical orthodoxy movement these days.

I want to read a little bit of what Wayne Hankey says and what he criticizes in John Milbank's approach. And as I mentioned the other day, John Milbank's approach seems to have a lot of affinity and overlap and commonality with what we've been working out with the soul-making dharma, but he's done it in an Orthodox Christian context and through very, very different channels of Neoplatonism and so forth through Western philosophy and theology. So he's done it through very different channels than we have. But to me it's quite exciting—at least the little bit I've read so far and what I've seen on YouTube and things—but quite keen.

Anyway, I read this Wayne Hankey paper and I'm going to read a little bit of his critiques. So he says, in trying to sum up what he's attacking here in John Milbank's approach, he says: "Theory belongs to composition and is not separable from it." I have to translate a bit. He means really that theory is something that we can just create. So again we have this poiesis common with our notions and this possibility of creating conceptual frameworks and so forth. So it's definitely not exactly the same—there's probably quite a lot of differences between what John Milbank's saying and what we're opening up, and he's, I think, still very much seeing his project as very much in process. But anyway.

"Theory belongs to composition"—in other words, it's a creative, artistic endeavor—"and is not separable from it. The requirement that we join in the cosmic and divine poiesis," creativity, artistic creativity, "governed not by truth but by desire, means that there can be no theoretical distance or objectivity. Theory occurs as a necessarily incomplete moment within praxis."

So to translate that, basically in our terms it's saying: This is terrible. If you follow your desire, eros, and not something called truth, and you create theory or create conceptual frameworks guided by your eros and desire, then there can be no theoretical objectivity, and it's just something that occurs as a stage, as an incomplete movement, direction, thrust, and temporary stage within practice. So in a way that sounds very similar to the kind of logos of logoi in soul-making dharma.

But then he doesn't like this at all, Wayne Hankey. He doesn't like this at all. He continues: "What belongs to theory is self-consciously constructed within poiesis, practice and desire in order to stand against modern theoretical truthfulness."

So there's this—again, in our language—this kind of standoff of this kind of notion of the emptiness of ultimate truth and any singly, finally true conceptual framework of things, and then our participation in the creation and discovery of theory and conceptual framework and logoi, using all the aspects of our soul and our eros, and that stands against and kind of in opposition to what he's called modern theoretical truthfulness in terms of classical thinking about there being an objective truth.

And he continues: "When we know that"—quote—"we know what we want to know, will to know in accord with desire, and cannot submit that desire to knowledge or knowledge to truth, the nihilist gap has already opened."

When we know that—when we understand that knowledge is something that, and even truth is something that's guided by desire, whether we admit it or not, whether we're conscious of it or not, that eros comes into our decisions about what is true, what conceptual frameworks we pick up—when we know that, and when we, rather than see that as a problem, when we take it on board and go with it in the deepest and fullest and richest and most soulful way that we can, and when we will to know in accord with our desire, as he said, and cannot submit that desire to knowledge or knowledge to truth—in other words, we leave totally aside any requirements that the desire guiding our knowledge be limited by something called truth or objective knowledge—then the nihilist gap has already opened. There's a gap of thinking anything, believing anything, ethically, philosophically, religiously, and so forth.

So just to say I wouldn't agree with that: "cannot submit that desire to knowledge or knowledge to truth." There are, as I said in the talks on the Four Parables series, and just touched on it briefly the other day, there are limits to the eros. It's not just that there are other constraints in our movement towards truth, and one of them is just this power of predictability we talked about in scientific provisional truths, for example. That's the kind of thing that tells me that I know something—it predicts, like Newton's laws predicts. We gave that example. But also dependent fading is telling me that I...

you know, is a prediction that tells me there's something valid here, a provisional truth.

But he said, if that's the case, if we know what we want to know, and we will to know in accord with desire, now that we've let the Eros lead, then the nihilist gap has already opened.

But I would say the nihilist gap has not opened if the desire is disciplined. If it's disciplined desire. By which I mean that it's rooted in and shaped by a really sophisticated and deep and careful practice like soul-making practice. And then the eros there is disciplined. It's not just desire, willy-nilly, random desire that would open the nihilist gap. This is something else. It's actually disciplined and so that gap doesn't open in the way that Wayne Hankey thinks.

So, what does open is a truth that's neither objective nor subjective. Because this kind of trying to cling to a purely objective truth, or notions that truth is something purely objective, completely independently objective, it's very hard to kind of sustain that anymore, as I explained the other day. But with the

inclusion and cooperation of Eros as a guide for our conceptual frameworks, for our logoi, for our ideas, for our notions, for our provisional truths, the discipline of eros when it's in practice in a soul-making way, in sensing the soul, then we arrive at something that's neither objective nor subjective.

We arrive at truths, logoi, conceptual frameworks that are true but neither objective nor subjective, which must be part of a new definition of truth. Because the old one of something purely objective is very hard, as I said, to hang on to. And then it's not a nihilistic free-for-all. And in the area of ethics, similarly, it's not a nihilistic free-for-all.

When we were talking the other day about an ontology or epistemology based partly on Eros and how Eros might be redeemed along with other aspects of our being and affects, might be redeemed and given place in a sort of more sophisticated and more powerful and more far-reaching ontology, we talked about truth being not something one finally ever arrives at, but more of a journey. We talked about this notion of truth that Descartes had, that the truth, true or real things are just what's clear and discreet and easily comprehended by the mind. And how if we don't buy into that definition, and if we also see that truth may be more a journey, and there are provisional truths in science as there are in Dharma, and there's a whole journey there.

Eros doesn't leave us with clear, discrete things easily comprehended by the mind, but opens up their dimensions and their shading into divinity and their unfathomability and their complexity and multi-aspected nature. All this taken together, again, suggests that eros may be, in John Milbank's word, ontologically disclosive, may have a status that is ontologically disclosive. In other words, it tells us about the truth. It tells us about reality, it leads us, and it opens, discloses, to open up for us what might be truth, but truth in inverted commas, because truth is understood differently than in the sort of, well, let's say definitely in classical modernist terms.

So Eros redeemed and given ontological and epistemological value regarding objects but also regarding conceptual frameworks—this to me is a really exciting and important possibility, way of opening up our thinking and validating it perhaps more positively. Validating Eros, validating our soul-making experience, validating what's possible there.

Last thing, I think, for today. It's interesting, just sticking with this idea about—so we're talking about the possibility of soul-making practice as basis and approach to ethics. That can happen in different ways. And what might it be just to dream into the possibility of that being more widely spread in society? And part of that, what would be needed there, is a recognition of the necessity to give some ontological and epistemological value, or value regarding ontology and epistemology to Eros. And the notion of participation, and the notion of truth that is not a final, ultimate, objective, independently existent truth, but a journey, a continuous opening up of provisional truths and participatory.

Last thing to say is interesting in this connection. Years ago, I told this story in some other place for some other reason, but years ago my colleague Stephen Batchelor shared he was scheduled to teach a retreat on

ethics. Ethics was the subject. And no one signed up for it. It got zero interest. And of course that wouldn't happen these days because he's just very famous and people would go just for his name. But I thought that was very telling, the fact that no one signed up for that retreat because clearly no one was interested in ethics.

And in a way, ethics can seem like a very boring subject. And again, if you go back to what John Milbank, where I read that quote from John Milbank the other day, boredom, if you remember, was one of the, was in his list. In his list of what was kind of disallowed as having any ontological disclosive status. So eros, anxiety, boredom, trust, poetic response, faith, hope, charity, and so forth, are disallowed ontologically disclosive status, he said.

Well, one way of understanding a lack of interest is also something as boring. People don't sign up because it's not interesting, because it seems boring.

Boredom is also, we can understand, a lack of eros. When there's boredom, there's an absence of eros. When there's eros, there's no boredom.

But if we expand a little on this idea of the ontological and epistemological value of eros, potentially, then it might be that boredom—as an absence of eros—is telling me something. At its best, I mean boredom at its best. When I'm bored with something, it's not because I'm not open to being erotically engaged, not open to being mentally and soulfully engaged. Rather, boredom at its best might be telling me there's not enough here—in these ideas or this presentation or this picture of how things are. There's not enough truth value or truth possibility here, if we understand truth as a journey. There's not enough truth possibility.

So the usual way we think about ethics—why people didn't sign up—is possibly because how they thought about ethics is just not interesting. It's actually boring. Because the way it's presented, flatly, as a question of right and wrong and ought to do, without this other dimension, or these whole other dimensions, this whole other depth of richness and soulfulness around the question of what is it good to be? What is the worthwhile life? What is the beautiful life?

It might be that people were sensing there's not enough truth value. When ethics as a subject is trammeled and amputated and dis-dimensionalized in that way, there's not enough truth possibility here. And that's actually where the boredom sense is coming from. There's also not enough erotic possibility—they're linked together. And that's where the boredom is coming from. There's neither enough juice nor enough truth possibility in the way we usually conceive of ethics.

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