The Image of Ethics (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 2:05:55

Let me offer a short recap before we see how far we can progress today.

We are essentially putting forward and exploring soul-making practice—soul-making dharma, sensing with soul—as an approach to ethical practice and ethical philosophy. We're both working with and thinking about ethics in a new way.

I do feel this approach was implicit in the earlier sila and soul talks, but as I mentioned, I was perhaps too restrained there, too held back and modest on behalf of soul-making dharma. I also have a tendency to assume that what is implicit in what I say or write will be understood by anyone listening or reading, or by most people. This is really not a good assumption—it's quite naive. This is something I learned from writing *Seeing That Frees*. Much of what I thought were obvious conclusions, or implicit connections that one could make independently without my spelling them out, was clearly not the case for most people. So I'm trying to redress that tendency and hopefully be more helpful in opening things up.

To recap: we're exploring sensing with soul as an approach to ethical practice and philosophy, examining what this might offer. One thing we started with in the last talk was expanding our notion of what we're actually discussing—what ethics is and what we need to do in thinking about and approaching ethics.

Usually, or very commonly these days, ethics is thought of and approached as the philosophy or set of guidelines, laws, or prescriptions for what to do. What should I do? What ought I to do in this or that situation? We want to include those kinds of questions and ways of approaching them, of course—what should I do here, what ought I to do—but include them within a much larger question and exploration: what is of value?

I'm not the first person to insist on this expansion. Just in modern times, Nicolai Hartmann would say that before you can answer the question "what ought I to do," you have to answer the question "what is of value?" You need to understand this—it's really important. Think this through if it doesn't make sense. What is of value in life? Not just what should I do, but what is of value? What should I love because it's valuable, highly valuable, or ultimately valuable? This will imply, suggest, and direct me in terms of what I should do to a large extent.

We have Hartmann, and we have Charles Taylor, whom I mentioned the other day, who speaks about expanding the exploration from "ought to do" to "good to be" or "good to love." So not just what ought I to do, but what is it good to be as a human being? What ought I to love? What is it good to love as a human being? What should I love?

This expansion is really crucial to opening up ethics so that it becomes a much more fertile area and more dynamic, instead of something that just grinds to a halt or devolves into opposing parties shouting louder and louder at each other from opposite poles of some ethical debate.

What has happened is that this question—what is it good to be, what should I love, what is it good to love, what makes life worthwhile, what is it to live a really worthwhile life—became separated from the question of what is right or wrong to do in certain situations or across the board in all situations. Philosophy has stopped posing that first question: What is it good to be? What is it good to love? What should I love as a human being? What is a worthwhile life? It certainly doesn't attempt to give any answers anymore. It's stopped asking the question, has deemed it irrelevant to ethics, and doesn't include it in ethical philosophy, or only very rarely.

Gradually, whether philosophers, students of philosophy, or ordinary people on the street, it becomes hard to even see a connection between those two questions: What is it good to be and good to love? And what ought I to do? What's right or wrong in a certain situation? You can see a connection there. If it's not obvious, think it through—hopefully it will become more obvious as we continue talking.

As I said on a recent retreat: think on your toes, meaning engage actively. We learn much more when we think actively.

With all this, and as the years of modernity progressed into post-modernity, it became almost agreed upon in modern cultures that no one can impose this or that regarding what people should strive for, what they should aspire to. This cannot be imposed universally by anybody, nor can it be imposed by any individual on another individual anymore.

This freedom that has emerged brings with it tremendous possibilities—we're not all obliged to follow the same view about what is most worthwhile, what we really should be aspiring for. No longer does anyone dictate that "this is really better," leaving those who don't measure up feeling they've settled for a second-class existence.

We have the gift of great freedom these days because there exists, if you like, an imposition of the rule that no one can impose what we should strive for or aspire to, what constitutes the best thing. So we have a kind of imposition about barring an imposition.

This freedom opens up a great space—multidirectional possibilities for our lives, for how we can shape our existence, because of this debarring, this disallowing of any imposition from anyone onto anyone else. Of course, in other religious cultures, some still existing, this is much less the case. And there are many in-between areas as well. But certainly in secular-dominated society, this is indeed the case, though there remain many grey areas—societies that are religious in some ways and deeply secular in others, which is quite common these days.

So it brings freedom, but also brings massive, wide and deep problems. I'll return to that.

But just to get a sense of this, if you're not quite sure you understand what this points to, simply compare: Notice how acceptable it is and how common for people or groups to argue with others, to accuse them of doing something ethically wrong, with the other party arguing back. It's often unpleasant, but it's perfectly acceptable in our society and quite common—it goes on all the time.

But consider how unacceptable it is and how very uncommon to accuse another of living a life that is not worthwhile. "Look at your life. Actually, you're really not living with any deep meaningfulness. It's not a worthy life. It's not a worthwhile life." This is not acceptable to say to someone, and it's very, very uncommon to actually say it, even less common probably to even think it, because we're barred from that kind of view.

It would be unheard of if someone said, "I see you have family and children you care for, you have fun and many experiences, you travel, you're relatively kind—but actually, it's kind of meaningless. It's not a worthwhile life you're living." This is completely unacceptable in our society and pretty much unheard of. This gives you a sense of how far the divorce and division between these two questions has gone.

What happens then is that this first question about a worthwhile life—about what's good to be and good to love, what ought I to love, should I aspire to, what's the best thing to aspire to—is actually forgotten. Often it's not given attention. The question is forgotten and neglected.

On a social level, what emerges is a kind of directionless society without any basis or substantial foundation, without deep soil, deep fundament on which to erect an ethics or even decide about ethics. As advances in technology, consumerism, global population, and globalization thrust upon us different ethical emergencies, dilemmas, situations that need response, we have less and less soil, less foundation on which to grapple with such issues. On a societal level, we get a kind of rudderlessness—not only without rudder, but without even training in how to use one.

But it's generally said that people should decide this question for themselves about what's worthwhile, what it's good to be, what it's good to love, to aspire for, to strive for, what constitutes a truly meaningful life.

But what does "decide for themselves" really mean? Is it something they truly, deeply ponder with all their heart and mind and soul? Or do we just not think about it much? Or think about it briefly in our teens and then get pulled along by something, following what colleagues are following, just following the vedanā—following the pleasant vedanā, avoiding the unpleasant?

What actually happens to that whole question? It's quite interesting. It's not black and white. Some people do ask, "What's a beautiful life?" as I explored in the Sila and Soul talks. When you think of a beautiful life or the good life—yes, it's good to be rich, it's good to be handsome or beautiful.

It's good to be popular, maybe even famous if I can. It's good to have this and that and other material things. And it's good to have and get pleasant and interesting experiences and travel and all that. That

would be one answer.

A more conscious answer would perhaps not even be stated as such, but rather incorporated into the direction and choices of one's life. A spiritual practitioner, Buddhist or otherwise, might say: well, it's good to be kind. It's good to be warm. It's not good to be arrogant. It's good to be helpful to the world in some way. It's good to be relatively confident so that I can actually manifest that kindness and warmth and help.

What we recognize here is the language of values and virtues, but they're only half anchored in dimensionality. It's just good to be those things. It's appealing to be kind, warm, not arrogant, helpful, relatively confident. But this is only half anchored in dimensionality, and therefore it's only half-hearted.

Yes, this person might appear kind and warm and not arrogant and helpful and relatively confident. This person has achieved that. It's good. Maybe it took them a little work. Maybe not so much. But because it was only half-anchored, only half-rooted in a deep dimensionality, it's only half-hearted, their attitude to those values and virtues. It's only half-souled.

Or there may be a kind of dim or vague sense of the dimensionality and divinity of those values, virtues, qualities—kindness, warmth, relative humility, helpfulness, confidence. So there's maybe a dim or vague sense of their dimensionality or divinity. But neither the conceptual framework around their dimensionality, nor the eros in relationship to them—and those things are completely related, the conceptual framework and the eros—neither are allowed to operate fully. This could be for all kinds of different reasons: a block to the eros, a conceptual framework that one hasn't troubled to think through because one's just adopted bits and bobs of other conceptual frameworks and has a bit of a hodgepodge that remains incoherent and therefore not as powerful and galvanizing and as delivering as it could be.

This is actually relatively common among people who would consider themselves, for example, Buddhist practitioners.

What's rarer among Buddhists, certainly in the West, is another type of response to all this. It's rarer, but it exists in certain Abhidhamma-dominated schools of Buddhism. If even a Western practitioner has been saturated or open to that so much it begins to really pervade their way of thinking, then they do think a lot perhaps about what's the good life, what's a really worthwhile life. It's the maximization of positive qualities of the citta. The maximization of mind moments of positive qualities—this mind moment of kindness, this mind moment of helpfulness, this mind moment of compassion. And a minimizing of negative qualities or minimizing of mind moments dominated by negative qualities as they're classified by the Abhidhamma.

The whole way of thinking about the thing is as if it's some kind of mechanical system. These people are much less rare in certain insight meditation circles. In other insight meditation circles, you'll come across them quite a lot. So it depends what circles you move in.

But it could well be that someone listening to a person like that is actually a little disturbed. It sounds

almost scary. It sounds so one-dimensional—a machine-like notion, logos, of the human being. This mechanical system of maximizing the positive mind moments and minimizing the negative moments is supposed to somehow deliver us to nibbāna.

A person can come away and feel: whoa, they're making all the right noises as far as Buddhist philosophy is concerned, I guess. It kind of gels with the teachings, but there's something almost ghoulish about it, ghost-like almost, monstrous, inhuman, Frankenstein-like. There's something hollowed out in the human being there. This is somehow not a beautiful life. Somehow it's almost not quite human. And for all the carefully, precisely incisive talk about virtues, what sounds like a very careful, discriminating, precise intelligence at work somehow also sounds sparkingly stupid in some way.

Or, you know, the whole thing—this whole talk about worthwhile life and values and virtues and aspirations, striving—can just go for a person right into the inner critic.

And the inner critic can just appropriate that whole set of ideas and that whole question and turn on oneself. The inner critic attacks the being, and the whole thing becomes very tight, very contracted, very self-depreciating and self-destructive—not soulful at all. Just as certain kinds of Abhidhamma-dominated Buddhists might come across as what we would call extremely unsoulful, similarly someone who's not even thinking that way can find that the inner critic hijacks the whole conversation. And that's not soulful at all.

But this divorce, this split and jettisoning and forgetting or ignoring—this debarring from approaching the first question of what is it good to be, what is a worthwhile life, what is a beautiful life, what is of utmost value—this relegating and forgetting, or only half-heartedly thinking about and including these questions, is part of the wider and deeper great crisis of modernity and post-modernity.

In our modernist, post-modernist culture, we can easily talk about the need to reduce suffering. But how do we calculate that? How do we compare different sufferings, different kinds of sufferings? What even are the different kinds of sufferings? That's related to what are the different kinds of value, of meaningfulness, and how they stand in relationship to each other.

Again, we can talk about wanting to reduce suffering or wanting to support human flourishing—another kind of modernist and post-modern trope. But what on earth does human flourishing mean? Unless you're talking about just biological survival, we can have a very poor understanding of what human flourishing means, good as it sounds, important as it sounds, wondrously enlightened and noble and modern as it sounds. Unless we actually go into this question of what is of value, what is really good, what is the ultimate good, what makes a life really worthwhile, we cannot possibly decide what human flourishing involves.

So one big need is to expand the conversation so that there are two questions, not just what I ought to do, but what it's good to be and what maybe I ought to love—included and put together, with one as a subset

of the other.

The second thing we discussed was what would be a list of wishes or needs for an ethical system to be incorporated into ethical practice. I ran through a list of, depending on how you count it, six or seven items. If we include this expansion of the domain of what ethics means, which we just talked about, there are also other needs for an ethical system.

It needs to be more than a legal system. We need to be talking about something that's more than law and more than just rights—my rights to this, your rights to that, combating rights. It needs to include, secondly, the possibility of what we call sins of omission, which really means a sort of direction, the possibility and space for higher aspiration, for ethical growth.

Third, it needs to include and engage our emotions, the whole range of our emotional life and our heart capacity. That needs to be very much a part of what we bring to ethics and what ethics actually involves for us. But it needs to be more than that—more than just our emotions or just being governed by emotions, more than just involving our emotions as instrument and guide.

Another need is that we must be talking about, thinking about and practicing ethics in a way that allows love of ethics—and even eros for ethics, for values and virtues and living ethically—to come in, to be given space, and to be honored. It's not just natural for it to be there, but it's actually intrinsic and necessary.

Then we also talked about dimensionality, and that's mostly what I want to start talking about today. We need some kind of rooting in other dimensions, some kind of sense of dimensionality to the whole notion of ethics. Ethics needs rooting in other dimensions. All this requires ontologies and epistemologies that ground it and make sense of it. If we're Buddhist, that means our ontology needs to be more than just saying everything's empty.

Lastly, another need is that all this be related to the sense of what a human being is and what a human being can be.

So all those—seven or eight needs, depending on how we count. They're not separate, and you can't go through them in a linear order, at least I can't see a way of doing so. They involve and imply each other, these different needs.

For example, when we talked about emotions the other day, I mentioned the grief ritual. There's a kind of grief ritual conceived as and functioning effectively as a space where people can really let their grief rip, where they can cry or feel emotions deeply and not be shamed for that, maybe even be held for that.

There's that kind of grief ritual, so conceived, so functioning. And there's another kind of grief ritual, which is more to contextualize the grief. And part of the way it puts the grief into context is by connecting levels. And that would be exactly connecting levels, for example, of human being and soulful being or spiritual being, connecting levels in the cosmos between matter and whatever we're going to say—matter

and soul, whatever. But other rituals function to connect levels and then even to transform levels. And partly what they do then is they contextualize.

Such a grief ritual is conceived and probably won't function in the same way as the first kind of grief ritual. It won't give rise to such a great amount of emotion and tears. But it's still extremely important—extremely important, I would say. So they're both important. There's something about the second one that's easily overlooked.

So emotions are not always the most important thing. And again, in the absence of a place for dimensionality—because that's what the second kind of ritual does: it connects dimensions, or it gives dimensionality, and that's part of the contextualizing of grief or contextualizing of matter or contextualizing of life or contextualizing of death or whatever it is. But in the absence of a place for dimensionality, then our conceptual framework, again implicit or explicit, whether it's conscious and explicitly spelled out or implicit, it can become limited and limiting, even when we're very well-intended.

We really need to feel our emotions about species loss or species extermination. It's very well-intended, but there's something I'm not understanding. There's more to this than my emotion of grief, no matter how deep and bottomless the grief can feel. Actually, the bottomlessness of the grief may be a clue that another dimension is needed. And until that other dimension is conceived and sensed—even if both the conception and the sense are vague—until then, that grief will be literally bottomless, because it's not contacting another dimension.

So that would be an example of how these different needs are not separate. The question of emotionality and the place of emotions is very connected to the place of the need for dimensionality. We could give a million different examples here, but they're really not separate. So I don't think there's a linear way through this.

When we come to thinking about how could we approach ethics through sensing the soul, through soul-making dharma and practice, first of all, a reminder regarding the soul-making dharma approach: this was all arrived at, or is being arrived at, through what we call a phenomenological approach. In other words, through our experience.

For some of us, it was arrived at through just the experience of appearances, of experiences, of perceptions, the whole ways of looking and fabrication notion—which is what I call the phenomenological approach, as far as it relates to emptiness. Just staying with that phenomenological approach all the way to the unfabricated, past the unfabricated, and then opening out and legitimizing the possibility of imaginal practice. So for some, the whole thing is just based on one phenomenological approach, or rather a thread that just evolves.

Or the phenomenological approach in the sense based on experience of having images and then paying attention to: hmm, these images sometimes feel a certain way, or I notice certain things about them, and

that's what we'll begin to call, that's what makes them imaginal. The twenty-eight elements—that's, and other things not included in the list of the twenty-eight. I'm just going phenomenologically, I'm just going from my experience, including the experience of "this is important." There's something about images when they come like this, when they're imaginal, that's important.

So all this, just as a reminder, was arrived at through phenomenological approaches together with a kind of just bold and vigorous questioning of typical assumptions that we have in our culture or that we have in our subcultures, dharma or otherwise—typical logoi. So it was really just arrived at through phenomenology, meaning through our experience and through questioning certain inherited indoctrinations. It was not arrived at through some kind of abstract metaphysical speculation. So I think it's important not to lose sight of that in this day and age, where abstract metaphysical speculation has for hundreds of years now such a bad press.

When we come to thinking about soul-making dharma approach to ethics—and we said, well, basically, you could say, broadly speaking, we could divide that in two. One is through working with the imaginal figure, and the other is through the sense of values or virtues becoming imaginal ideas, the ideational imaginal. So two broad ways.

And just very, very briefly to say, well, okay, what does that mean in practice? So, for example, what does that mean in practice with regard to ethics? How would I bring such teachings and approaches to bear on ethics?

So very, very sketchily, let's say I feel drawn to do X, whatever it is—to express something, to write something, to do something, to refuse to do something, whatever it is. I feel drawn to do that, though I can see some ethical reasons why I shouldn't do that. So here's my ethical dilemma.

Is there an image, an imaginal image, related to doing X, related to doing X?

Again, it might be the very crucible of not knowing and the heat of the situation, the pressure of the situation I feel in the soul that gives birth—that in the alchemy of the heat and pressure in the crucible, it gives birth to an image, it gives rise to an image. But is there an image related to doing X? It might be of doing X, but is it related to doing X? Is it a soul-making image? Is it what we call the authentic imaginal? Is it genuine imaginal? Are all the elements there?

We have to be so careful with this, so careful. So is there a sense of duty in relation to that image? And what's the sense of the refraction of the duty? Am I taking it literally? Am I taking it concretely? Is there autonomy of self? Do I have a choice here? Is there humility? Is there fullness of intention? These are really—I'm just selecting some of the really, really obviously important elements here. Is there fullness of intention here? Why do I want to do X? Is there the fullness of intention?

So that's really a question. I have to explore it imaginally. Is there an image? And is that really a truly imaginal image with all the elements there? And even then, that's not quite enough. What's the refraction?

And then maybe one thinks about not doing X, whatever X is. And maybe there is an image related to that. Or maybe actually there isn't an image, and that's partly why one feels not so cool that way. One can still see that ethically one could make a case that it's important to not do X. So maybe there's a sense of values there. So if there's not an image, it's like, oh, what are the values that are related to not doing X? Not doing X expresses or upholds certain ethical values. And can I sense into those values with soul? Can I relate to those imaginal ideas, those values, those virtues, with soul?

So even though doing X might be actually an imaginal figure, not doing X may be an imaginal figure, may be just a sense of the ideational-imaginal. But I have to really, really work the practice with all the sophistication, all the care, and all the subtlety of attention and all that attunement. And then compare the soulfulness, compare the sense of soul-making either way, and use that as a guide to ethical choice.

Or it might be that here's an ethical choice that I'm needing to make. Here's some situation in my life. And I can see values on both sides, in either branch of this forking of the road. Choose this, there are values. Choose that, there are values. There is what Hartman would call an antinomy. There's a moral antinomy there. Actually, it might be a question of hierarchical difference. Either way, it doesn't matter. Can I sense with soul into each value and each choice, the imaginal idea, the ideational image of each value and each choice, and do that very carefully?

I sense the values on both sides. It's either an antinomy or maybe a hierarchy—hierarchical choice—but I'm sensing what Hartman would call antinomy versus hierarchy. I'm sensing each of these imaginal ideas, these values, each choice, with soul as carefully as I can. Again, then I'm comparing the soulfulnesses on each side.

So very, very briefly, that would be a way to proceed, very sketchily. It's the kind of thing we're talking about as a basic idea.

If we think about this whole approach to ethics, we can divide it up broadly into an approach with an imaginal figure and an approach with an imaginal idea, virtues or values.

So if we talk about the first approach—let's not go too far, let's spend a little time with working with an imaginal figure.

An imaginal figure has an ethos. It has an ethos and it has an ethical perspective. That's partly why values is one of the 28 elements of the imaginal. An imaginal figure has an ethos and an ethical perspective. This figure, that monster, that snake, whatever it is, that flower, that tree.

So there's another possibility for practice here that I would like to suggest and just sketch some instructions. You're familiar by now with the practice we sometimes call twoness, sometimes the balance of attention. I'd like to introduce the practice of threeness and a balance of attention within threeness.

In a situation—let's really talk about practice now. Here's a situation: maybe I'm with someone else, or I'm

having some kind of dialogue with someone, or they're saying something to me, or it's a difficult interaction, whatever, some kind of situation. There's an other, there's myself, and then there's a third, which is an imaginal figure that has come to me. It might be an old imaginal figure that I've known for years, or one that's just come very recently or even in that moment perhaps.

Can I play with the balance of attention, the relative weighting of my attention between the three? So what is it? I'm here with this other person in this situation or here with this situation. Ten percent of my attention, let's say, with the imaginal figure, and the other divided between myself and the other, myself as a regular human being. Or divide three ways equally, 33% each, or 50% with the imaginal figure, or whatever. It's similar to the twoness balance of attention exercise, but now it's threeness.

The question is, what then happens to my sense of the situation? What then happens to my sense of the situation with this other person or some other situation?

One could do it in real time. In other words, this is going on now. I'm putting myself in a situation and trying this. I think I gave an example several times over recent years of that image I have of me as a jazz musician, which is actually kind of its real life, its memory. I was a jazz musician, but it's become image for me in all kinds of ways and very rich ways and sometimes difficult ways and sometimes just very beautiful ways. But sometimes I think I shared a couple of times that having that sense of jazz musician just a tiny little bit in the very background, let's say in an interview, in a dharma interview. It's just very much there in the background, but it's affecting my whole sense of the situation and how I respond and the whole dance of the interaction. It's very, very subtle.

So that would be an example. That's using it in the now, because one could do this—here's a present situation, and one's using an image, it's a past image, one's resurrecting it deliberately, deliberately calling it to life in the moment, and then just having it be in the background, or more in the foreground, or whatever it is, for a situation that's happening now.

One can also do this with a memory of a situation, a memory perhaps of a difficult situation or a confusing situation or one that we ended up feeling very contracted from or we ended up judging ourselves or whatever it is.

So that's one thing—bringing the image into the situation, then playing with the balance of attention, seeing how it affects the sense of the situation. Playing with the balance of attention three ways, and how do the relative balances affect the sense of the situation? Whether it's the memory of a situation or a situation in the present life.

Then there's also the possibility here: can I sense into the imaginal figure's perspective, their feelings, their evaluation of things? So it might be the imaginal figure's evaluation of me. The imaginal figure's evaluation of my stuff, or even my old stuff, the place where I trip up, the place where I get caught again. How do they see it? What's their perspective on it? On my stuff, my difficulties, my mistakes. I feel like if

I'm doing it from there, I feel like I did make a mistake there. Can I get a sense of the imaginal figure's perspectives, feelings and evaluations on me, my stuff, my difficulties, my blocks, my mistakes?

Can I get a sense of the imaginal perspectives, feelings and perspectives of the other? Can I get a sense of the imaginal figure's perspectives and feelings and evaluation of the whole situation, whether it's an obviously ethical situation or not? I think there's a lot of potential here.

Can I enter into the imaginal figure, inhabit it, see through its eyes, sense through its senses, feel through its heart? It might be a stage further of really immersing there into that. So this is more than seeing an image and seeing what it does in imaginal meditation. And it's also more than just an image of sense of me. There's a lot of possibilities here.

But an imaginal figure has an ethos and an ethical perspective. Sometimes what happens is we get blinkered or caught or blinded ethically. And sometimes an imaginal figure, because values is one of the elements of the imaginal, can shine a different light on a situation, an ethical situation, on ourselves, on an interaction, on our difficulties, on our mistakes, on all kinds of things.

So again, a very brief sketch of another kind of practice, but I think very certainly soul-making, potentially, and also helpful in all kinds of ways. One of the ways I'm thinking about is with regard to shame. Because there might be either in a situation or after a situation we feel inadequate, or our shame, our kind of habitual sense of shame locks in. So doing this kind of practice, either now live or in memory, can really open things up and actually begin to separate out what we might call a shallow kind of shame. There's nothing but dukkha there. It's not necessary. It's not serving any function other than creating dukkha and a binding for ourself—ego shame, shallow shame.

Separating that out from what we might call a kind of soul shame, or soul-level shame, which may be more authentic, may have more necessity, maybe will be more fruitful. I think I gave a talk on the Path of the Imaginal retreat called something like "The Love and the Demands of the Imaginal," deliberately putting in the title what can seem like they don't go together—the love and the demands of the imaginal. Opening up the whole notion of duty to image, duty to soul.

So there's so much here that's potentially important, potentially healing at different levels, just in terms of dissolving or blowing away the kind of shallow shame, but also opening up to maybe a level of shame that is actually in itself healing—something we don't tend to think of—a healthy shame, a healing shame that connects us more with our soul power and soulfulness and sense of duty and meaningfulness and redeems something, reconnects, recontextualizes something or contextualizes it. I think there are a lot of possibilities here.

Let's linger. Again, let's not go too fast. I do want to talk about dimensionality primarily. I just want to linger a little bit on this whole question of shame and guilt.

Very loosely, I would say shame has to do with—at least the way I would define it—a negative view of how

I am. I am bad or I am worthless or whatever it is. I am. It's a painful belief and binding belief about how I am. Guilt is a view or views about what I did or what I neglected to do. And it's quite possible, of course—there's a connection here—because it's quite possible that if I'm not careful with a guilt I feel in relation to what I did and didn't do, that I felt I should or shouldn't have done, it's possible that that guilt starts congealing, mortifying, and actually like a kind of rigor mortis into a sense of shame. It becomes something more pervasive, a conclusion that I then carry around or walk around in about who I am. It's quite possible that the guilt, if we're not careful with it, can lead to a more pervasive and long-lasting shame about who I am.

Of course, it's also possible the other way around. To the degree that I have a shame and I carry around or walk around in a shame about who I am, it's more likely that I will perceive situations and conclude without much thought at all that I am guilty of doing this wrong or neglecting to do that, which would have been better.

So these are loaded subjects in our culture, shame and guilt. And a lot of us inherit, of course, as part of our inheritance around ethics and morals, quite a painful relationship with these ideas of shame and guilt coming, some would say, through certain Christian teachings or interpretations of different teachings—different Christian teachings of original sin or whatever it is. Of course, that's not the case with all people. It doesn't have to be the case for Christian teachings. But I think a lot of people do feel that way.

And so the whole area of shame and guilt is something one just can't go near—those terms or those experiences as human beings—in any way that's helpful at all, other than trying to dissolve them or dismiss them. And then a lot of people come to Buddha Dharma because it seems that Buddha Dharma doesn't talk in terms of original sin and guilt and that sort of thing. And indeed, a lot of the way it is taught now in the West is very free of such terms and such even suggestions as shame and guilt and all that.

But the Buddha did in fact talk about these kinds of things. And he talked about hiri and ottappa. Two Pali words—hiri and ottappa. And he called them the guardians of the world. Hiri and ottappa, the guardians of the world. He said when these qualities wane—hiri and ottappa wane—human society moves towards the animal realm. Humans become more like animals and human society becomes more like the animal realm.

What's he talking about? Hiri is something we could say more—I don't know if internally directed is the right word—but it's really the innate sense of shame over a moral transgression. So we really feel ashamed for doing something wrong. And it's connected with our own self-respect. It's related to a sense of our personal honor. This is in the Itivuttaka, for those of you who are interested, among other places, I think.

And then Otapa is more externally oriented—though I don't find that a completely satisfying division. It's the moral dread, sometimes translated as fear of the results of moral wrongdoing. So while Hiri is this innate sense of shame over a moral transgression, Otapa is a moral dread or fear of the results of

wrongdoing, which includes fear of blame and punishment by others. The Buddha says these are really important qualities. We need to be afraid of being blamed and punished by others in our community, in our society. It's also a fear of the karmic consequences of wrongdoing, and a fear that by wrongdoing I will scupper my chances of attaining Nibbana.

Buddhaghosa gives a striking analogy. It's like having an iron rod where Hiri is the excrement smeared on one end of the rod—you wouldn't want to pick up the rod there. But Otapa is as if the other end has been placed in a fire and is red hot—you wouldn't want to pick up the rod there either. So there's Hiri, a kind of disgust or shame at picking up the rod at the defiled end, and there's Otapa, the fear of picking up the burning end and completely scorching your hand.

Shame or disgust, and moral dread or fear of the result of moral wrongdoing. The Buddha says whatever evil arises springs from a lack of Hiri and Otapa. He also says all virtuous deeds spring from the sense of Hiri and Otapa—which I find interesting, though somewhat problematic and limiting, because it leaves no room for eros. All virtuous deeds spring from a sense of shame or fear? Where's the room for eros there? Still, these teachings are clearly there in the Buddha's words, and you can hear just how much he emphasized them and how strong he was in articulating their importance.

It's interesting too because nowadays in postmodern society, we put a lot of emphasis on recognizing whether something is socially or communally constructed and contingent. And it sounds, to a large degree, like some of what the Buddha is talking about here in Otapa is exactly that. This raises questions about whether that's necessarily problematic, or what it means for its ontological status—though I won't go into that now.

Going back to the Sila and Soul talks, we discussed following Hartmann the idea that there is and should be a place for healthy shame and healthy guilt. That's what Hartmann mostly talks about—healthy guilt. I wonder whether there's a way of redeeming this whole area in terms of our ethical practice, our ethical sensibility, and our approach to ethics.

After the Nuremberg trials, Nazi war criminals were named and shamed, then executed. Nowadays there's this teaching about "don't name and shame," but they were named and shamed. It may have to do with what is deemed in society at the time as outrageous enough to warrant naming and shaming. So there's maybe a place—and there is a place, as I've written about and talked about—for ending or dissolving feelings of guilt, thinking more about actions and the conditions that gave rise to actions rather than persons. The importance of that approach is clear. But maybe there's also a place for taking responsibility and cultivating a healthy sense of guilt.

I saw headlines recently about how in Dutch culture, in Holland, flight shaming is becoming more acceptable—that it's increasingly okay to suggest to someone that they're flying too much and unnecessarily, pointing out the ethical cost of that. Well, why should that not be okay? Or shaming someone for driving SUVs? These vehicles use so much more fuel and emit so much more carbon than

regular cars, requiring so many more resources. They're the fastest-growing segment of the automotive industry, so much so that the industry is not reducing its overall emissions at all—it's actually increasing them because of the proliferation of SUVs sold.

I don't know. Maybe there's a place for shaming. Maybe it's a necessary thing.

In terms of flight patterns, I didn't read the full articles, but I do remember being around different groups of senior teachers and sometimes hearing them talk about flying all over to teach retreats, discussing their frequent flyer status. Sometimes when people talk about this, it almost sounds like subtle boasting, or identification with being important because one flies a lot.

Perhaps the culture and society will hopefully, in not too long a time, evolve to a point where that kind of subtle boasting or identification as being important will be about as acceptable as subtly boasting about how many slaves one owns. I've talked about this before. It's easy to say, "But I'm flying for the Dharma. Because I'm teaching Dharma, it's contributing to less suffering"—just as the slave owner would say, "Well, I'm helping the economy, aren't I?"

Sometimes this whole idea of what it's okay to shame and what it isn't is really socially determined, based on where the average or lowest bar of ethical views of right and wrong have reached in a society at any given time.

Anyway, it might be that, certainly with regard to the ideation of the imaginal—the imaginal ideas of values and virtues—there can be, as Hartman said, a sense of guilt. He said that in the sincere soul, there needs to be a sense of guilt. There needs to be a place for that, as something that's inevitable in ethical life and practice. So maybe that has its place.

Also, with regard to imaginal figures, reverence is one of the elements of the imaginal. When I was trying to find the right term, I remember looking up the word "reverence," and it's related, I think from the Latin, to the capacity to feel fear and awe in relationship to something. So maybe this too—wrapped up in the reverence, there's a place for something like hiri and otappa. Whether we're talking about imaginal ideas of values and virtues, or an imaginal figure and how we are or are not refracting that figure, there's a possibility of shame or guilt—ahiri, atappa—for not trying to approach something, a situation, an ethical choice, without having tried to approach it with sensing the soul. And then feeling hiri or otappa, some kind of shame or guilt for that, but a healthy one—one that takes us forward, that inspires us to do something differently when the next situation comes.

Remember, all this, when we're talking about soul-making and the imaginal, is in the context of the benevolence of an image. Love and loving. Love and being loved. Being loved—that's an element of the imaginal. And I would say also, when you really get into the practice of the ideational imaginal, the ideas also can love you. They will love you. They do love you. So in the ideational imaginal, there's a sense of benevolence. We are in relationship with beings, figures, imaginal ideas that love us and place demands

on us. Love and demands of the imaginal, love and demands of imaginal ideas.

That word "benevolence," again from Latin—bene vol, where vol is related to our will, to wanting. Bene, good—they want what's good for us. There's a beneficence; they want what's good for us. Benevolent—that's what it actually means.

Someone asked me a little while ago what I mean by this element of dimensionality shading into divinity. Partly in trying to open it out a bit more with words, I'd say it's pointing to a sense of benevolent mystery. So when I have a sense of an image having this dimensionality shading into divinity, I partly mean there's a sense of benevolent mystery there. Mystery, but also benevolent. And one senses that, even if only subtly and vaguely.

Dimensionality is, to me, related to the word depth. And depth—one way of understanding what that word means—is that something's deep if it's not immediately apparent or immediately obvious. So that's the mystery. There's a benevolent mystery. That's part of what mystery means: depth. Not immediately obvious. Something is not immediately obvious. It's kind of hidden from immediate, obvious view.

But the hiddenness that's part of this dimensionality shading into divinity is not menacing. It's not like something I can't make out that's kind of sinister or menacing, or where the fact that I can't sense what it is clearly is somehow ominous. So this benevolence is very much part of what we mean by dimensionality shading into divinity.

It also means, as related to having soft and elastic edges—which is another of the elements—the dimensionality and the divinity is not sharply defined or clearly delineated.

So, dimensionality—that's what I wanted to begin talking about today. And I said in the last talk, you know, ethics needs something in order to ground ethics, in order to make sense of ethics, in order to evaluate between different ethical choices, in order for the whole thing to really function without any...

Continue beautifying this talk (part 11/17). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

[PRECEDING CONTEXT]
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[END CONTEXT]

meaning in our lives and any vitality in our lives, something needs to be sensed or granted as having a higher or deeper dimension, order, or level.

In that higher, deeper dimension or order, because of this very depth, meaningfulness, value, purpose, and sanctity—in the broadest range of that term—naturally reside there. Without that sense of granting or sensing dimensionality in something, ethics cannot really work. It simply doesn't function very well.

Scientific materialism—a way of thinking that attempts to explain everything, all phenomena and experience, the whole of the cosmos both inner and outer—tries to reduce everything to purely material things, to small material elements like billiard balls. As an approach or enterprise to explain the whole of existence and all our experience, scientific materialism implies that there isn't a reality to values. They're not grounded in anything real. There's no possibility of grounding values in anything substantial.

This creates profound difficulties. It becomes very hard in such an enterprise of scientific materialism to even justify why we should try to reduce suffering in the world. Because suffering itself is scientifically and materialistically reduced—it's just the movement of particles in the universe. What's suffering? Well, it's really a material thing, some neurological impulses. That's really what suffering is, because that's what everything is. And neurological impulses can be reduced to neurotransmitters and molecules across neurological synapses, all of which come down to molecules, down to subatomic particles. Really, suffering is just a shifting, a moving around of particles in the universe. It has no more or less worth than anything else.

So even trying to justify why we should reduce suffering and make that the basis of ethics can have no grounding. If there's no dimensionality, everything's equal—it's just matter. Everything.

The scientific method also rules out human feeling regarding anything. In the scientific method, we try to put aside my feelings, my affects, my desires and wishes. That's all second-class citizen, a distorting thing. Put that aside. So my feelings about anything, including my feelings about values and what's valuable and deeply valuable, the scientific method sidelines.

Now the scientific method may study feelings and even measure them more recently. But it still can offer no real grounding or basis for them. As a psychologist, I might decide to study human feelings and measure them through brainwave activity or questionnaires or whatever. But I still can give no real grounding or basis for them.

Scientific materialism becomes impossible as a foundation from which to root any ontology of ethics. There's nothing real to give any rooting for ethics. There's no recourse to something of value to explain why we should do this and why we shouldn't do that ethically.

Let me point out something about reductionism and dimensionality. A kind of scientific reductionism that reduces everything down to billiard ball-like particles is a reduction merely to smaller units of the same kind of stuff. It's a flattening reductionism. If I start with something that feels rich, like my sense of value, and reduce it down to billiard ball-like particles, I'm taking something that was dimensional and rich and reducing it to something very flat.

If I'm talking about matter and reduce this table down to billiard ball-like particles in my theory of it, that's also a flattening reductionism—a reductionism that doesn't introduce another dimension.

However, if my scientific reduction goes down past such basic particles, down to quantum mathematical probability functions—which exist as complex mathematical functions related to probability in a kind of multidimensional abstract mathematical space—then something different happens. I've gone past electrons. What's an electron? Actually, an electron is this: we can't point to a particle or a wave. All we can point to is this kind of abstract, multidimensional, mathematical entity existing in mathematically multidimensional space. It's not even matter anymore. We've reduced to something of a different kind, a different order. Then we have given a kind of dimensionality.

It's not a flattening, but we've actually dimensionalized matter. We've gone from something that seems obvious - even if it's just small bits of solidity - to something that we can't even really say is the same kind or order of stuff. There's a different dimension there. So that's also a reduction, but it's got dimensionalizing in it.

Still, that second kind of reduction that is dimensionalizing - where we go down to these very abstract entities, where what's really real is not the table, not even the electron or the proton, but these abstract, very complex, very sophisticated mathematical entities, mathematical functions, equations that exist in a strange, abstract, mathematically multidimensional space - that's what's real. It gives a kind of dimensionalizing, but it would still be problematic if that view attempts to "explain" - put that in quotes - things like human love and sense of meaning through that reduction. In other words, again, if it's scientistic, if it attempts a reduction of the totality of existence, of being, and so forth, it's still not flattening, but it would be very problematic. It's not capable of doing so. It's not capable of making sense that way.

So dimensionality is what I'm going to start looking at now. We've just touched on it already briefly. It's a complicated subject and difficult to even find the right language to talk about it, but one way that a sense of dimensionality has historically been ripped out of our exploration of ethics is something we can trace historically.

One of its roots actually came from the Protestant Reformation. One way that emerged from that seed, from that revolution really, ended up impoverishing the kinds of dimensionality that human beings could feel and conceive of and sense in existence - in relation to all kinds of things and also in relation to ethics. It came through the Protestant Reformation partly because one of the main things the Protestant

Reformation set out to do was to abolish and reject any kind of mediation between a human being and God. This was one of its central attempts and thrusts and insistencies: to reject anything that was intermediate between the human being and God.

So no priests - no priests with any kind of higher function or who served as intermediaries in any way. No sacraments either - no holy ritual or holy object, no sanctified object, whatever it is, that could mediate or was necessary to mediate between a human being and God. There was this attempt at completely getting rid of any intermediaries: priests, sacraments, and so forth.

What that brought with it was also a kind of affirmation or elevation or emphasis on ordinary life. It wasn't just the life in the church, and certainly not the Eucharist or the Mass or the priest who was needed as an intermediary. They also - not quite the same point, but connected - kind of rejected monasticism, monks and nuns. For a slightly different reason, probably connected, but one reason given was just basically: there's nothing between you and God, and it's totally up to you and God, that relationship. All of us need to have total commitment. There's no such thing as a person having more or less commitment. You either have a full commitment, or you're damned. A monastic was regarded as someone who had decided, "Yes, I do want to give everything to God. I do want to focus wholeheartedly on that. That is the highest thing. And my commitment is total."

In the Protestant Reformation, the view was that this just wasn't a healthy notion because all of us need to have a total commitment. So no monastics. But in a way that's silly, isn't it? It doesn't really bear out, just looking around us at humans. Clearly there are people with very different levels of motivation and commitment, even if we just talk about their music or art or poetry or whatever. We see it definitely as well in the world of Dharma and practice - there are people with very different motivations and also different levels of talent. So there's something a little bit silly with that. Anyway, that's a side point.

The principal thing I want to focus on now is this rejection of mediation: rejection of priests, of sacraments, but also a rejection of angels as intermediaries. All this came with the Protestant Reformation - rejection of angels and saints, and the Virgin Mary, anything that was an intermediary or could be seen or regarded as an intermediary between the human being and God.

There's a rejection of angels, and including therefore the role of angels as reflecting and refracting at different levels the totally inconceivable reality, nature, or being of God. We reject intermediaries, then angels get rejected, and their role of reflecting and refracting at different levels this totally inconceivable nature of God - that gets rejected as well. Also rejected is the understanding of angels as beings the human can in turn refract and mirror. That we can, as we talk about refracting the angel, reflecting, refracting the *daimon*, mirroring in our life the image - that gets rejected, thrown out as well.

Rejecting angels as beings that reflect and refract at different levels - you know, the totally inconceivable nature of God.

The transcendent, almost unknowable being-in-itself of God, and the rejection of angels as beings that humans can in turn refract, reflect, mirror, and be called by. In being called by these intermediaries, we come into more intimate relationship with and sense of the attributes of the divine. In refracting and mirroring the angels, we express and manifest in human life the attributes of the divine.

All this has to do with a hierarchy of being, a hierarchy of cosmic being: God, hierarchy of angels, human being, nature. I've touched on this before, but these Platonic ideas and forms are sometimes called—and they came to be regarded as—the attributes of God. We can think of them, as I said in the soul talks, as the ideational, imaginal. They're related to these Platonic notions of ideas and forms and images—attributes of God and angels. Ideas, forms, ideational, imaginal, and images all can be seen and regarded as the attributes of God and angels.

So there's a dimensionality here that was scrapped, done away with, outlawed. A hierarchy of intermediaries, and that whole dimensionality that opened up with that, that was very much related to what was ultimately good, pointed and drew us towards what was good, that enabled us to refract and be drawn towards what was virtuous. It embodied virtue, connected virtue with the divine in that ultimate dimensionality, connected virtue with holiness, with that whole scale.

When we talk about images in soul-making dharma, and we talk about the ideational images, we can say that they are a dimension, as angels are in this old sense, pre-Reformation. They are a dimension, and we feel that we're refracting, reflecting something of a different level. We can also say, and we do say, they have dimensionality. Experientially, it's as if the sense of an image is as if in itself it has a dimensionality shading into divinity. So they are a dimension—their very existence tells us of a dimensionality—but they have in themselves, so to speak, or in our sense of them, they have, their being has a kind of dimensionality shading into divinity. They are and they have dimensionality.

In soul-making dharma, this dimensionality is a connection. This whole order of angels and angels as intermediaries is really something that connects. It's sometimes called a chain of being, although that phrase became mixed up and two very different ideas got confused in what that meant. But it connects with one thread these different levels of being, different dimensions.

When I pray to the angels in a supplicatory way, when I ask for help from the angels—and sometimes I do, sometimes I have a sense of the soul-making angels, the angels of soul-making—being so ill and unwell, sometimes trying to give talks and feeling in myself not able to, I will pray to the angels, my sense of the soul-making angel, the image, the imaginal sense of soul-making dharma angels.

In my sense of these angels and the supplication to them, they are not me, but they're also not not-me. They are not me, but they're not other than me. Or they are other, but there is this direct line from my being, from them to my being, that somehow includes my being. To say it another way, I participate in the angels, and they participate in me. I participate in an image, and this imaginal figure participates in me.

Historically, one of the things that happened in the Protestant Reformation—one of the seeds there—ended up having quite a devastating effect in all kinds of ways. There were a lot of really good things obviously as well, but it had quite devastating effects on how we relate to the legitimacy of the world of angels and any sense of intermediaries with divinity or a sense of dimensionality in all kinds of ways in our existence. We inherit that partly as imaginal practitioners. We inherit the history of Western theology and Western philosophy. We can't help bumping into or being buffeted by or constrained by the different elements of that history of Western thought.

Again, what happens when we don't have dimensionality is that it affects our sense of ethics. This illustrates one way it affects the sense of the imaginal, but also our sense of angels as reflecting the virtues, and the virtues being the ideas, the forms, which are the divine attributes of a God, of a divinity whose nature is actually completely transcendent and unspeakable, and beyond any attributes. When we rule out dimensionality, we actually limit what we can do with ethics.

I think human rights, which is something we've become so used to as a notion now, has its roots in Hobbes and Grotius and some others. The notion of civil rights—the roots of that are in Hobbes and Grotius—but it's not because a human being has these rights because, for example, they're made in the divine image, which would be calling on the divinity and the fact of human beings being made in the divine image to give a kind of dimensionality to justify the sanctity and the careful treating of human beings because they're made in the divine image.

When we say, "Why should human beings have rights? Because they're made in the divine image," it's giving a dimension as an explanation, as a grounding.

But the original movement and development of the idea of rights in society wasn't coming from the idea of divine image or that kind of grounding. It was coming, again, post-Reformation, as a kind of... people were trying to figure out a basis for law. So it wasn't even a question of morality and virtue, really. It was trying to ensure stable society, stable societies.

And it was devised, it came up as an idea in the times of the post-Reformation wars—enormous bloodshed and brutality in Europe at that time, and also the civil war in England, likewise very bloody and traumatic. How can we have a sort of basis for law? When people started thinking away from purely theological and soul questions and dimensions to ground ethics, to more legal ways of thinking about it, and contractual. What's the social contract? These are all ideas that were born then, post-Reformation, in attempts at a purely secular moral philosophy—in other words, one that wasn't grounded, or was only very little grounded, in recourse to the dimensionality of divinity.

This is a complete aside. I don't know if I've mentioned this in another talk. I was reading a book called—I think it's called *Epistemologies of the South*. It's a collection of academic essays by sort of post-colonial or anti-colonial thinkers. And one of them was pointing out that the whole notion of human rights was a colonial notion and a Western notion, and they were rejecting it. So it's a very surprising thing to read

because we're so used to thinking—I'm so used to thinking of that as a kind of, this is really basic and important universal notion. Everyone could sign up to this. And this person was saying, no, that's something created by colonial white guys. Anyway, that's an aside.

So when there's no dimensionality, then it's very easy for ethics to slide into what really becomes just law, or this kind of trying to figure out, okay, what are people's rights? And then you get this argument between rights, which is very hard to adjudicate, but it's partly because there's the withdrawing or the ruling out of any other dimensionality. And it has consequences.

So something needs to be sensed, sensed as or granted a higher dimensionality, a deeper dimensionality. It needs to be felt to be of a different level or order. And in that other level somehow naturally reside meaningfulness, value, purpose, sanctity, etc. And without that, we run into a lot of problems in our approach to ethics, in our trying to figure out ethical philosophies or practices.

Something or other needs to be sensed or granted as being of a higher, deeper dimensionality, level, order—whatever we're going to call it. And what happens—this is partly something I read in Charles Taylor recently. He uses a very different language and is coming at the thing from a slightly different angle. But when in the language we're using, when there's no dimensionality, or when the dimensionality is kind of hidden or unconscious—or we could also say in the language I've used in the past, when the soul preferences, because what I give dimensionality to has also to do with where my sense of soul-making is.

But when the dimensionality of my soul and or my soul preferences are hidden or unconscious, it brings certain consequences to the philosophy. So we've talked about—I talked about in other talks in the past—what happens... Or rather, am I choosing a dharma? Am I choosing a notion of awakening and goal and all that? Am I choosing a dharma based on really what my soul is desiring as a way of feeling myself and the cosmos? What kind of cosmos do I want to live in? What's my fantasy of self and cosmos? And then building the dharma around that. And that not being admitted. That actually I want to see the cosmos this way and I want to see myself in relation to the cosmos this way and that's why I'm choosing this kind of version of the Dharma.

So when a dimensionality is refused or it's hidden, unconscious, what you get is a kind of—Charles Taylor says in his words—parasitic philosophies. And I'm not sure whether he said this for all or at least some of what he calls Enlightenment-derived modern positions. I don't think it's all of them, but I'm not sure if he actually says that. They're parasitic in that they're actually relying on some already established moral assumptions about right or wrong, about what should be right—what should be done or not done. But they're refusing to give a why. They're refusing, in other words, to give a dimensionality. There's no grounding in anything else.

So they're parasitic on older philosophies that already, or older notions, older currents in the society that already established these assumptions around ethics. And they just take the same assumptions. They don't change them at all. They just piggyback on them, but they withdraw the why.

They actually don't need to provide a why because there's already a current of people established in those moral assumptions about right and wrong. But also—and this is Charles Taylor pointing out—they provide no positive view, no constructive practice.

I would want to agree with this and actually elaborate on it. There's no positive view or positive framework of philosophy or practice, whether personal or governmental. You can tell when a philosophy is parasitic in this way—or even a dharma or approach—because it's characterized mostly by its polemic attack on other positions. Mostly what you hear is very little that's positive in the sense of constructing views, constructing practices, constructing coherent frameworks. Mostly what you would hear and read is polemic attack on some other view. Or if something is constructive, it's very thin soup.

I was giving you an example in some of those online seminars about trying to construct a Buddhist aesthetics just around the Buddhist notion of impermanence—where art always has to point to impermanence, whatever kind of art. And it's terribly thin as an idea or framework. Very, very thin.

Without something being granted or sensed with a dimension—a deeper dimension, a higher, deeper dimension, order, level—it's actually impossible. It's impossible to ground ethics. It's impossible to make sense of it. It's impossible to even construct and give a why we should do this and not that.

I talk in the Sila talks about Richard Rorty and how, if you read his writings carefully, he will say: "We cannot ground it. There's no such thing as another dimension. There's no higher grounding. You cannot ground ethics in anything else." But then it just slips out in the language that he uses—he's using notions of what's good or bad. But he has no way of explaining or justifying why that is, because there's no other grounding.

I don't know exactly who Charles Taylor meant, but somehow in reading I got a sense that he was referring to what I think are called the New Atheists. There's nothing there except polemic attack on other positions. In terms of what's being offered as coherent construction of frameworks—conceptual frameworks—what's being offered in terms of practice, there's either nothing there at all or very thin soup. There's no way forward offered, really.

Again, with the soul-making dharma, there's both. We've tried to really create and discover a coherent conceptual framework that has depth and range, possibility of elasticity, but also practice. So conceptual framework and practice. And when we talk about ways of looking—practice, practice. It's not just the idea of ways of looking; it's the practice.

As we said, so many of these modern philosophers completely lack any practice. They might talk, like Richard Rorty does, about being open to different views: "keep the conversation going." But they have no way—as I've said this before—no way of actually practicing different ways of looking. So it's all just empty rhetoric. And again, you find there's actually very little offered.

Richard Rorty says—okay, so he's deconstructed this and that, and it's very good, excellent deconstruction

of things to a certain extent—and he says what we really need to do is "keep the conversation going." That's his ethical standpoint: keep the conversation going. One of his main ethical standpoints.

But there is no conversation. There's just nothing to discuss. There's nothing offered. I can't take on other viewpoints to really engage in a conversation, and I'm not really offering anything of myself because I have no framework, because I have no dimensionality. All this is connected.

Looking back historically—and I should note I'm not a historian—we can see different ways that ethics has been provided with dimensionality, different attempts at giving ethics a foundation that would make sense of things, offer reasons, provide orientation, help adjudicate conflicts, and give justification.

I want to briefly mention these approaches now, though we'll return to explore them more deeply in our next talk. We could separate them into four main ways, though these are neither separate nor simple. I'm not presenting them chronologically, and in fact they aren't really chronologically divided either. They overlap, with different versions and variations arising on different timelines, along with modifications and combinations.

These four ways represent different attempts at providing dimensionality—another level, order, or dimension that can support ethics.

The first is what we might call rationality. This goes back to Plato, perhaps even Pythagoras, and who knows how much further back. But I want to emphasize that "rationality" is not a simple word. If you consider four philosophers—Plato, Locke, Kant, and Hegel—for whom rationality was central to their thinking about ethics, that word meant something very different to each of them.

There are at least two main ways rationality has been conceived, though there are many others as well. These different meanings of rationality connect with the second way of giving dimensionality to ethics: cosmic order.

One ancient way of conceiving and sensing the cosmos—lasting up through the Middle Ages—was as having a hierarchical, vertical order. That hierarchy of angels I mentioned earlier would be part of this structure. There's a kind of vertical ordering from the ultimate levels of the Godhead, the mystery of the divine, all the way down to the barest matter. We can speak of things being closer to or further from the divine. This is complex, with many different variations.

Another way of thinking about cosmic order, which came later, sees it as a more horizontal structure—the co-functioning of parts, like how an ecosystem works, or a machine, or a clock. Different parts exist at essentially the same level, functioning together, moving together, perhaps feeding off each other. It's a more horizontal order.

These two ways of thinking about cosmic order correspond to two ways of using either notion of order to ground ethics. For Plato, rationality meant seeing, sensing, and knowing this vertical cosmic order, then

orienting one's life in relationship to it. It becomes clear what the highest good is, and what kind of scale or stairway leads to it. To be rational means to uncover this order, to see and sense it, and to live one's life in accordance with what it naturally suggests and demands.

For someone like Locke, rationality meant something very different—something more akin to what we mean today: being logical. Hegel understood it differently still, as did Kant. We'll explore these distinctions more deeply.

The third way of dimensionalizing ethics has been called voluntarism. This essentially says something is ethical because God said so—because God declared it in the Bible, or because the Bible records that God said it. There's dimensionality here because God is, by definition, a being of a different order, a different dimension, a different level. In this view, God possesses completely free will, and what grounds ethics is simply that God willed it so.

It has nothing to do with the structure of the universe. It has nothing to do with human rationality or our logic being able to discover what the most ethical thing is. It's simply God said so. God exists at a different level, in a different dimension, and therefore ethics gains its dimensionality through God's will. This is what philosophy calls voluntarism—God said so.

A fourth approach grounds ethics in suffering, or we might turn it around and say happiness. This involves attempting to calculate or estimate how much suffering this or that action would cause in comparison with another action, how much happiness would result, and trying to ground ethics in these notions of suffering and happiness.

Do you see how each of these makes its appeal as a dimension? There is an appeal in each to something intrinsically sacred, meaningful, good, valuable, true, higher. Actually, not the last one—I'm including it for now, but the utilitarian approach isn't really a dimension, which is part of its problem. This utilitarianism—thinking that reducing suffering is the most important thing, that increasing happiness is the most important thing—we'll return to this, I hope. But at least the other three, and in some way this fourth one, tries to mask itself as if it were another dimension.

So each of them appeals to something intrinsically sacred or good, ultimately valuable, meaningful, true, higher in some way. This implies or provides a why and a basis for ethics, whether it's an ethics of wrong and right or an ethics of what is good to love, good to be.

But each of these—rationality, cosmic order, voluntarism, reduction of suffering, increase of happiness—each has problems, has run into ways that it failed in the history of our culture. There are places where it fails. Some would say they have failed historically or philosophically, but each brings problems, has problems. There are places where it's easy to find where it simply doesn't function or no longer functions, where something becomes impossible.

I think I'll stop there for today. I just wanted to mention these approaches—these are the kinds of things

that have been attempted as ways of providing dimensionality, or assumed to provide dimensionality, to ethics.

An example of a problem or failure was that notion of cosmic order. After the Protestant Reformation, and even more so with the Scientific Revolution, that idea of hierarchical order and an order of angels was either theologically brought into question, and then increasingly became more and more impossible to take seriously as reality as the scientific revolution grew. So that would be an example of the crumbling and disappearing of that as a possible way of dimensionalizing or giving dimension to ethics.

But I want to return to that as a possibility, in fact, in a different way. As with each of them, we could go through each one and see how it brings different problems.

But let's stop there for today.

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