The Image of Ethics (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 2:11:17

When I talked right at the beginning of this talk on ethics and said it seems to me that any really valuable and viable approach to ethics nowadays would need certain things—and I listed seven or eight items of a wish list—I've been following through that thread through this whole talk. I mentioned ontology and epistemology as one of the more important considerations, explorations around ontology and epistemology.

I've already, in the parts of this talk, woven in questions of epistemology and ontology and ideas and possible new ways of thinking about ontology and epistemology—how that might be worked into older ideas to adapt them, modify them, open them out in a different way, allow them to deliver something they otherwise would not be able to deliver to us today. Of course I've talked a lot and written about ontology in previous talks, and some of Sila and Soul was also devoted to ontology and epistemology regarding ethics, regarding values and virtues.

So nowadays in our postmodern culture, most people who think about these kinds of things—philosophers, for instance—would probably tend to agree that ontology is impossible to come to conclusions around, that it's kind of an intrinsically inconclusive subject. But as I've pointed out several times now here and elsewhere, ontology and epistemology are inevitable to our lives, to living our lives, to making choices in our lives, and they're also inevitable to any moment of consciousness, I would say. We're always making ontological and epistemological choices, assessments and judgments about what we sense, what we experience.

We can't really avoid it. It's there anyway, and it's having an effect anyway. Ontology and epistemology are there anyway, in any moment of our consciousness. Certainly they're there in our life, certainly there in regard to our practice—dharma practice. Certainly they're there in regard to ethics in some way or another. And they're unavoidable; they're having an effect. They affect everything. They affect what we choose, they affect how we think, they affect our orientations.

The question, or a question then becomes—always this question—well, what does the ontology and what does the epistemology that I am holding right now lead to? What does the ontology and epistemology that underpins my dharma practice lead to? What does it open? What does it close? What does it bring? What does it deliver? And the same thing for soul-making dharma practice. In soul-making dharma practice we can understand different ontologies and epistemologies, but always this question: what does it bring? Which is a different question—related by is a different question—than just, is it true?

We can have different attitudes and orientations to ontology. Indeed, we do, of course. And there's a whole

range there. I think in this talk, what I really want to do is, in terms of my aims and the scope of this talk, not too different from what I've done in the past, which is three things, really.

One is just to bring to light and mull over and discuss ontological questions and issues and epistemological questions and issues that we need to consider, that we need to at least acknowledge and realize. Just to bring them to light and acknowledge and realize them, see that they're in the picture and discuss them a little bit.

The second thing is to, so to speak, elbow enough room philosophically from entrenched and usually unquestioned ontological and epistemological assumptions. People tend to believe, or we as human beings tend to just believe this or that about what's real or about what constitutes valid knowledge. After many years of modern philosophy and dharma and modern physics, a lot of that is no longer actually tenable as true. A lot of those old assumptions, those entrenched ontological and epistemological assumptions, they're not really viable. So that's the second kind of aim: to elbow enough room and enough space to be creative and to discover. To see if there are other ways forward, but also what might just be allowed because of that space, so that something is not being illegitimately strangled out, illegitimately prevented from taking a viable place in our life, in our consciousness, in our practice, in our view.

And the third is to offer lightly possible alternative ontologies and epistemologies. But I do say lightly, because this elbowing of enough room—the second kind of aim—and this third aim of offering possible alternative ontology and epistemology, doesn't equate to an assertion of any definite ontology or epistemology. It's just doing enough that we can move forward, create, discover ontologies, epistemologies, attitudes that allow us to move forward, create and discover with regard to values, with regard to ethics, with regard to soul-making.

So let's start with a few considerations. If we take Buddha dharma, and especially Pali Canon Buddha dharma, the sense, the reading I have there is really that virtues and values, whatever you might call them, have karmic effects. I'm not even talking about future lives; I'm talking about in this life. They affect the citta, the tenor of the citta, the quality of the citta, the perception of self and other, all that. And that's what's important. So the ontology is just that much ontology: they have karmic effects, and that's what's important.

In Pali Canon Buddhism, particularly as understood in the Theravada tradition, this basic ontological framework predominates. However, in the Mahayana, there emerges a much greater emphasis on the emptiness of phenomena, including the emptiness of citta qualities, values, and virtues. We encounter the teaching of the two truths: the ultimate truth of emptiness and the conventional truth of relative reality.

While these values and virtues are completely empty—this is emphasized, acknowledged, taught, and studied—simultaneously, at the level of conventional reality, they function. They produce karmic effects through different values, virtues, vices, or what we might call disvalues. Thus the emptiness, in a way, becomes less of an issue. The ontological fact of the emptiness of virtues and virtuous qualities of the citta

doesn't necessarily impede their practical function.

In the Vajrayana, we again find tremendous emphasis on the emptiness of these phenomena. Yet there also appears in Tantric texts and Vajrayana teachings a certain encouragement to transgress against what is valuable and virtuous. This presents a complicated subject, though typically the commentaries explain that such transgression is purely symbolic. When texts speak of killing your mother and father, this doesn't mean literal matricide or patricide—mother and father symbolize particular psychological states, and their "killing" represents specific transformative processes.

From a soul-making perspective, we might think similarly to both Pali Canon and Mahayana Buddhism. The crucial question becomes: what is the effect of values and virtues? What happens when we relate to them seriously, when we take them as meaningful? And conversely, what occurs when we ignore them or consider them merely empty?

Actually, this question requires more precision, because if we follow everything we've been exploring in this talk, the effect of virtues and values depends entirely on our conceptual framework and our relationship to them. To what extent am I permitted an erotic relationship with values and virtues? What is my conceptual framework, and does that framework root them in another dimension?

We can broadly break down the ontological approaches within Buddha Dharma—though the categories aren't entirely clean-cut—into two fundamental attitudes. The first appears in Pali Canon Buddhism, especially as commonly interpreted through the Abhidhamma lens in Theravada tradition: virtues and values are real phenomena, real components of mind moments.

The Abhidhamma system categorizes a specific number of possible mental qualities that can arise in any mind moment. It provides an exhaustive list—this many qualities and not another number. In this framework, both the moment and its mental qualities are viewed as real, as inherently existent.

It was precisely this view of inherent existence that Nagarjuna challenged. Much of his writing consists of polemic attacks against this reified understanding of virtue, of mind qualities within mind moments. But our present question is: what does such a realist view, as we find in the Abhidhamma, do to our relationship with ethics, virtues, and values?

In our current language, such a view grants them reality—they're deemed tremendously important—but the entire conception remains what we would call flat, mechanical, almost cold. These mind moments and qualities lack soft, elastic edges. Something feels limited and limiting in this approach. It allows very little scope for eros or soul-making in relationship to ethics. There's no genuine sense of dimensionality, of infinitude, and quite an impoverished understanding of the human being.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the view that everything is empty, including virtues, mind states, values—all empty. Ethics itself is empty.

I think one crucial consideration here is questioning any immature or overly hasty relativism regarding the ontology and epistemology of ethics—any premature nihilism concerning ethical life. As we've touched on before in the Senior Soul talks and here, several thinkers, including philosopher W.T. Stace, have pointed out that just because people have failed to conclusively prove an independent existence of ethics doesn't mean such independent existence is impossible. To conclude otherwise from humanity's current inability to demonstrate this doesn't logically follow.

Similarly, a scientistic worldview that regards as real only what is measurable and material—this reductionist scientific perspective that leaves no place for questions of value or feelings toward value, dismissing them as merely illusory—represents immature, partial, blinkered thinking.

Ethics exists for human beings. As long as there are human beings in the universe, ethics has reality because there are human beings. Just because it only exists for human beings doesn't mean that it has less reality. This goes back to Descartes and Galileo and all that.

Or consider someone like the philosopher Richard Rorty, whom we've discussed as well. He dismisses any ontology or epistemology underlying ethics, then simply insists that what we need to do ethically is just keep the conversation going. We need to keep the conversation going. Well, why? Why do we need to keep the conversation going? That's an ethical assertion, and on what are you basing it? But because he's ruled out from the beginning any possibility of basing ethics in anything else, in any other dimension or value-giving dimension, he can't answer that. And so much of the time he just talks in circles.

We can have a similar kind of immaturity in bringing the teachings of emptiness to bear on the whole domain of ethics. Actually, before I get to that, it seems to me—and I've probably said this elsewhere—that those who emphasize, whether they're in the Dharma or outside of the Dharma, the impossibility of knowing any dimension or ground for ethics, for virtues, for values, are at the same time clinging, sometimes explicitly, more usually tacitly, to the classical scientific materialist view of reality. So very postmodern in the domain of ethics and other domains, but underneath that, or in other areas of life, just actually really clinging to the classical scientific materialist view—very not postmodern.

In this view, anything that Cartesian, Galilean science posits or explains as real is real. And anything else—for example, ethics or values—is not. But we've talked about Descartes. Actually, that came just from a decision made in the first place. And Galileo also made a decision that became a truth. But then eventually even the whole scientific method, which they helped to start, sort of ended up pulling the rug out from under their starting modus operandi and their starting definitions.

We also pointed out how those definitions about what was real and how that scientific methodology over time started with people who were religious. Yes, Galileo was subject to the Inquisition or oppressed by the Inquisition, but they were still religious. Descartes was a very religious person. In fact, much of his so-called logic relies on the existence of God. The taken-for-granted existence of God proves other parts of his logical edifice. There are all kinds of doubt—that's his Cartesian skepticism. But actually, one thing he

didn't doubt was the existence of God. Others—Locke—these were all genuinely religious thinkers. And what they started was rooted in and motivated even by religious thinking and religious aspiration to a certain extent.

But then over history, as we've traced a little bit in this talk, following that thread about "okay, this is real and that's not," all kinds of implications and consequences, including implications and consequences for ethics, unfolded through history over several hundred years. One step was taken and it in turn, in time, implied another step, or together with certain social developments, it implied another step.

But anyway, if we come back to emptiness, it's really important to realize that knowing the emptiness of all things, understanding in one's heart the emptiness of all things, will not lead to a nihilistic morality. It absolutely won't. At least, it's not the way I understand it. I've said this before: emptiness means things are not real. It also means things are not not-real. Neither real nor not-real.

And to me, the indicator of insight into emptiness is care—even an increase in care. Care for others, care for the world. An indicator of insight is the presence and even the increased felt sense of importance of values and virtues, the increased orientation to them—not a decrease, not a letting go and a negligence—an increase in compassion. These are the indicators to me of insight into emptiness. If that's not there and someone's talking about emptiness, either I'm not interested, but if I'm in a teaching position, I'm very interested because something's really not right. Something's off. It's not the Middle Way of emptiness.

I would also say, certainly in the way at least I would teach emptiness and the practices that lead to it, there's so much sensitivity required and cultivated in that path of practice. I think sensitivity too, including heart sensitivity and ethical sensitivity—all that will grow in the course of deepening one's insight into emptiness.

We've talked about much of this before. Sometimes people say, when they hear about emptiness, they think, "Oh, but then I won't—everything's empty, so I won't care about ethics."

Just briefly recapping what must have been the first talk of this series on emptiness and ways of looking—in the way I would teach emptiness through ways of looking and fabrication, we're not starting with asking anyone to believe in the emptiness of all things. That would be really unwise. Usually almost everyone would just say, "But then I wouldn't care, or then nothing would matter." They don't really understand. They're not ready to jump to that level.

We start with two threads: the possibility of ways of looking—the possibility of developing flexibility of ways of looking—and the notion of the fabrication of suffering, of self, and eventually of world, of objects. Start even just with the notion of fabrication of suffering, and then have a look at how the self is fabricated. Just start with those two possibilities, which almost no one can deny, and explore through an open-ended, experiential, first-hand experiential inquiry, rather than starting by believing something and

then trying to act ethically on this belief that I don't really understand.

Open-ended means one doesn't decide the limit of fabrication, or pre-decide that everything is empty, everything is an illusion. One doesn't know what that means yet.

Secondly, emptiness ways of looking, as you develop lots of them, become different lenses—different ways of looking that we can pick up and put down at any time, based on or responsive to the needs of the situation. What helps to reduce suffering here, if that's my intention, for self, for other, for world?

I also said that in other ways of approaching emptiness—through analyses or intellectual analysis practice as they do in the Gelug tradition in Tibet, or through the idea of emptiness as a sort of big empty space with substantial objects and not much self, or the kind of interpretation of a Theravadan view of emptiness as the machine-like process of aggregates—none of those three will automatically weave in or integrate the understanding and exploration of dependent arising, which is the exploration of karma and how this intention, that way of looking, this way of acting actually brings about this sense of self, this sense of world, this much suffering, this kind of suffering.

We're seeing dependent origination and karma work right there when we're approaching it through the ways of looking and fabrication approach. So ethics is integrated unavoidably right from the beginning. Karma is integrated unavoidably right from the beginning into the emptiness exploration, into the emptiness teachings. And it's something we see and know and feel firsthand. That runs all the way through, as opposed to teaching emptiness in some way and then somehow having to stick ethics back into it because we're concerned that what we've done with emptiness might imply that ethics is irrelevant, or we might have forgotten about it.

But we need to be careful again with the whole emptiness thing, not to be lazy and sloppy. There are many ways we can be, certainly around the relationship of emptiness and ethics. So ethics are empty—therefore what? Just because there's no universal agreement doesn't necessarily imply that ethics are empty. What do I even mean when I say ethics are empty?

But even take something like "killing is wrong." Ethics is empty, therefore it's not true to say killing is wrong, or it doesn't apply. Going into this just even a little bit more carefully, we'll see that actually in relation to the notion of killing being wrong, there's always in all cultures and societies—and this is where it gets interesting, or if you like where the emptiness resides—the question of when is it deemed okay to kill. So it's not a blanket, sloppy "killing is wrong" or "no, because ethics is empty and everything's empty, killing is okay." It's neither simply wrong nor right. It's in the detail. When is it deemed okay?

There's putting to sleep a pet that we love, there's the question of euthanasia, there's the question of assisted dignified dying, assisted suicide when someone's terminally ill. Is it okay to kill when you prevent a murderer, you prevent a mass murderer, you prevent someone like Hitler? All these questions. Is there such a thing as a justifiable war? This is where it gets interesting. And we can still say ethics is empty

because those details are hard to work out. Maybe we cannot arrive at a very clear, final, definite conclusion to some of these questions. That's where the emptiness resides.

Or similarly, if you think everything's empty—okay, well, is two plus two equals four? Is that empty of truth? Is that empty of being true? So what's the whole relationship between truth and emptiness? You could say two plus two equals four is dependent on counting to understand it. And you could even say two plus two equals four, in order to be a truth, is dependent on the specification of the base, the numerical base—for example, in base 10.

We call that. But in base 3, 2 plus 2 equals... What would it equal? It would equal 11. 2 plus 2 equals 1, 1. You could say 2 plus 2 is 4 is dependent on perception of 2 and perception of 1, etc. You could say all that. But any of those qualifications and dependencies don't deprive the equation two plus two equals four of a certain inviolable and non-empty truth.

And it may be similar with ethics. There may be lots that is dependent on individual or cultural perspectives. And as we said, on just the fact of human being, there are truths for human beings. But it still might be the case that Hartmann's firmament of values may have an absolute, relatively independent existence, reality, truth to it.

Two things here. One is that when we use the teachings of emptiness, it's really important, whether it's in regard to ethics, certainly in regard to ethics, but also in regard to soul-making and imaginal practice. To me, it's important not to be sloppy and lazy. So that's one thing. And the second thing is with regard to ethics, you know, the ontological and epistemological questions and issues and needs surpass what can be provided by just the notion that things are empty.

So we said, yeah, for liberation, emptiness is enough. For lots of other things, it's not enough. As an ontological stance, we've said that in one of the early talks of this series. And we also said ontology, epistemology, ethics, emotions - these areas of our existence, and they are areas of our existence, they're not just philosophical areas, as I said. Ontology, epistemology, ethics, emotions, probably others - they're endless. I don't think humanity will ever come to an end of their explorations.

And what did I say? You know, if someone says, "I figured them all out, I figured," or any one of those, "I figured ontology, I figured it all out," or epistemology, or whatever it is, run away from that person as a teacher. And if someone says, "You know, don't bother, it's not interesting, it's not useful, it's a waste of time, there's no point. Just ignore ontology and epistemology," I would run away from them as well, as a teacher.

As we said, really right from the beginning, I think, in the soul-making Dharma teachings, ontology and epistemology, or considering ontologies and epistemology and questions and issues there, really support soul-making. It really gives ground to, opens up space for, and also furthers soul-making practice and soul-making possibilities.

Soul-making needs ontology and epistemology, and I would say ethics too. Actually, by this point you might have got a sense that ethics is just a part of soul-making. Soul-making is an approach to ethics, but ethics is definitely a part of soul-making. Soul-making, therefore ethics, needs ontology and epistemology, needs us to turn that soil, to mull over, to be creative, to discover, to question, to open up, to play and construct.

And ontology and epistemology, like ethics and the area of emotionality, all these areas, all these domains, can themselves become erotic, imaginal objects for us. Our relationship to them in themselves can become soul-making and soulful.

So I think these areas are endless. And I hope, you know, my hope is that others, someone or some others in the future will, sometime in the future, will add to what we've been developing here and develop it further and build on it.

I think we need to - certainly in soul-making dharma, again, ethics is a part of that. We need to, and I would say any ethics, needs to include ontology. There needs to be the inclusion of ontology. So I would say soul-making dharma needs the inclusion of ontology, but let's say inconclusively. In other words, in this open-ended way. And it might be the same with regard to anyone trying to move forward with ethics these days. The ontology needs to be included, but in a kind of inconclusive way, maybe. But in a way, that kind of attitude to ontology and epistemology is kind of axiomatic to, fundamental to soul-making dharma.

We can look back in history in the sort of, let's say, the kind of literalism, ontological literalism of the belief in God in the ancient Judaic tradition, for example, of the Old Testament, or that kind of ontology, or Plato's ontology, or Descartes, or Galileo's ontology, or Bacon's - it was very similar, of course - or a kind of monistic materialism, "there is nothing but matter, mind is really just material." That kind of ontology, or the notions of truth that Karl Popper put forward, etc. All of these, over history, seem to have flourished and then kind of run into problems, gone out of fashion, failed, fallen short in some way.

And again, we can have that sort of what in some postmodern circles becomes a kind of widespread view, which is, "Oh, just forget the whole thing about ontology." Or we can say, still we can move forward here. Still we can play. Still we can create and discover.

As I said, regarding ethics, it's important to recognize how ontology and epistemology relate intimately to dimensionality. The ontology and epistemology of dimensionality is the crucial part in the ethical question. It becomes important to establish - or perhaps more accurately, to construct, create, discover, provide, explore - elbow space against the sort of inevitable, usually default indoctrination of ideas around ontology and epistemology, particularly with regard to dimensionality and whatever ways we're trying to give dimension to values, virtues, and ethics.

We spent considerable time in the *Sila and Soul* talk of the *Four Parables of Stone and Light* series exploring the notion of ideal reality, or the realm of ideas, beginning with Plato. Hartmann, whose moral

philosophy we discussed extensively, picked up this notion of ideal reality - the realm of ideas - with values being part of that realm. The realm of values exists within the ideal realm, the realm of ideas.

Regarding the ontology there, Hartmann pointed out that values exist for human beings, but that doesn't mean they're not real. As he would say, just as geometrical laws exist for spatial figures, and physiological laws exist for organic beings, moral laws exist for human beings. This doesn't take anything away from their reality. A geometrical law simply is true - it exists, but only for spatial beings. Geometrical law has nothing whatsoever to say about anger, for example. No geometrical law addresses anger at all.

For both Plato and Hartmann, the realm of ideas, which includes values, exists. It has ontological validity - it exists as a kind of reality. For Plato, the realm of ideas, the realm of forms, was more real than any instantiation of that form. Beauty as ideal reality was more real than any material instantiation of something beautiful. This represents a very rare perspective in contemporary ontology.

Someone like J.N. Findlay, whom I've discussed in previous talks, upheld this kind of inversion of the usual ontological hierarchy - that instantiations of things were less real than the ideal realm. I paralleled this in mathematics when discussing the number pi and other concepts.

Earlier in this talk, we also explored the possible etymology or phonetic relationship between the words "virtue" and "virtual," meaning something that's an image of something. The thing itself is more real; the image is less real. So our virtues in the world are just an image, a copy - a not-quite-real copy of something that's more real, a really existing virtue or value. The word "virtually" might possibly be interpreted as "not quite the real thing" - virtually the real thing. Virtual reality would be the image, and "virtually" means almost, not quite the real thing.

Plato held this ontology - which sounds very unusual to most people today - about this level of the realm of ideas being more real than the level of material reality, things, tables, horses, or whatever.

For Hartmann, however, the level of ideal reality was less real. It was still real, possessing a kind of reality, but actually less real. Ideal being, he said, was "a kind of thinner, floating, insubstantial being, half being, so to speak," which "still lacks the full weight of being" - being what is primarily material.

In his view, there was a hierarchy of reality, from what was most real: inorganic being. Dependent on inorganic being, there was organic being - dependent on chemicals, there is life, some kind of living organism. Dependent on there being a living organism, there is mental being, which depends on organic being. And dependent on mental being, there is spiritual being.

What Hartmann meant by spiritual being was the whole realm of language, ethics, morality, arts, religion, law, politics, philosophy, ideology, historical consciousness, and so forth. That's what he primarily meant by spiritual being.

However, this view that Hartmann held has been brought into question. That hierarchy - which most

people would agree with, minus even his... Most people would agree the most real thing is matter, and stacked on that hierarchy, you get things that are kind of real, and then you enter this area where they're sort of real, but not really real. When you reach values, many people would disagree: do those have reality in themselves? Do those have an independent existence?

Owen Barfield, for instance, represents a philosopher who questioned that whole typical hierarchy of reality, that ontological hierarchy that Hartmann put forward. In his well-known book *Saving the Appearances*, he really pulled that apart. Again, developments in physics, particularly in quantum mechanics, really question that order. It's worth pointing out that Hartmann himself was quite strong in his criticism of Plato's hierarchical ontology.

Hartmann believed that Plato's notion of an ideal realm being more real than the material world—where divine forms possess greater reality than earthly things—could only lead to devaluation and disregard of this actual world. If one believes some other realm is higher and more real while this world is merely illusory, it can only result in dismissing the significance of our present reality.

This perspective is certainly possible, and such philosophical attitudes have indeed fueled worldly disengagement at various times throughout history. However, when this material world becomes the sole reality, viewed purely in materialistic terms, we have witnessed how impoverished an ethics this ultimately delivers.

Actually, the notion that an ideal realm exists—that divine attributes, intelligences, and angels possess greater reality than this world—need not necessarily lead to devaluation of the material realm. This world might be understood as images and refractions of those ideals, or as completely real but having its origins in that ideal sphere. Rather than diminishing material reality, this can actually enhance it.

Quite the opposite effect often occurs. Because things reflect and find their roots in the divine attributes within this realm of ideas, there emerges a greater sanctity in the things of this world. Even for someone with a thoroughly secular mindset—imagine a physicist contemplating how everything originates in the mathematical laws and equations governing the universe—there frequently arises a profound sense of sanctity. This ideal realm of mathematics bestows a level of reverence upon the material things and everyday objects we encounter.

I disagree with Hartmann's assertion that Platonic idealism necessarily demeans worldly things or leads to their devaluation. This interpretation is so commonly presented and accepted as obvious, but I believe we should seriously question the actual implications of any particular ontology.

Returning to physics: if a quark—supposedly a fundamental particle—exists as a "thing" only for observers, becoming substantial only in the presence of observation with location, time, and properties like mass, direction, and velocity, then absent observation, only an ultra-complex, multi-dimensional mathematical idea remains. This suggests two important considerations.

First, this represents an instance where ideal reality—the mathematical idea—possesses more fundamental reality than the quark's apparent manifestation, which only emerges when observed. Indeed, some contemporary physicists propose that only the mathematical laws governing the universe are truly real. Matter, space, time—all are secondary to these mathematical principles.

Second, if quarks exist as things only for observers while fundamentally remaining complex mathematical ideas, then our assumed ontological comparison with "hard matter" becomes significantly softened. At minimum, this challenges our conventional notions of material solidity.

We encounter something similar when discussing emptiness as providing minimal ontology for justifying soul-making dharma and imaginal practice. Images often face immediate ontological dismissal—there's something in the mind saying, "Yes, but it's not real." An image gets compared unfavorably with objects assumed to be genuinely real, like this table.

At minimum, recognizing the emptiness of all phenomena removes any absolutely real reference point. While acknowledging ontological differences and varying ontic status between physical tables and imaginal ones, we dissolve the backdrop objection to taking images seriously.

Regarding Hegel's philosophy—though my knowledge is limited—certain interpretations might allow the ideal level more fundamental reality while involving and expressing itself through material movements, political developments, and historical processes. Different Hegelian interpretations may offer varying configurations of this ontological hierarchy between ideal being and what we typically consider material reality.

This could prove quite fascinating to explore further. If ideal being possesses more fundamental existence, then translating this to ethics, values would have more fundamental existence than their instantiations. In Hegel's framework, the development, movement, and history of values becomes primary, subsuming the material and historical within that process. What's actually occurring is an evolution of value at the ideal level.

We cannot escape epistemological questions regarding anything—material things, ethical matters, meditative experiences. This remains crucially important to acknowledge, even concerning virtues, values, and ethics.

Consider this: even when someone claims it's difficult or impossible to prove the reality of values, they continue acting and choosing according to their values. What I would add to this observation is...

Nietzsche said, well, yeah, most of that's just they're acting from indoctrination, from stupidity, from habit, etc. Their values are basically indoctrination, stupidity and habit. A pretty critical view.

But what I want to say is we still act and choose according to our values. All human beings do. And it's not all because of fear and conformity. Something's happening in our choices, in our ethical choices regarding

values. We're trusting something.

What are we trusting as an epistemic authority? What are we trusting as, "I know this, I feel this way," or "I think," or whatever it is. What are we trusting? And usually it's some sense, it's some felt sense, a moral sense, a conscience, a sense of nobility or beauty, some push or pull in the being, some sense of that.

Could it be that anyway we're trusting something, and what we're trusting is some sense, and could it be that that some sense that we're trusting is maybe the very beginnings of a kind of sensing with soul, sensibility, regarding values and virtues and the choices we make.

So I don't know, is anyone entirely logical and rational in the substance and the basis of their ethical choices? Is there anyone who just kind of computes like a machine? I mean, people more or less. But I think there's always some sense, some moral sense. And I wonder if part of that moral sense has to do with a sense of what's noble, what's beautiful, something pulling me, calling me, something I push away from.

And could that be that in a very inchoate form, just the beginning, the germ, just a fraction, a portion of soul-making sensibility with regard to values and virtues. We are trusting some sense, and I would say we do have some hierarchical differentiation between different values, contrary to what the utilitarians would say or allow us or give any weight to. And also those who just interpret the Buddha Dharma perspective as just saying, well, just reduce suffering, just reduce suffering.

This "just reduce suffering," this goal to reduce suffering or end suffering, is usually for something else, even if I haven't articulated what that something else is, even if I don't realize that it's for something else. So when I gave the sort of thought experiment of that falling and then realizing there's no ground, how that would be, just to imagine everyone's okay with that. You've worked towards everyone being okay with that just falling. The reduction of suffering is for something else in the end, or let's say past a certain point of reduction of suffering, something that we feel is good in some kind of alternate way—worthwhile, beautiful, meaningful.

Some people are scared of this idea. Sometimes I've mentioned it to people who are very committed Buddhists or they've heard me say it in a talk or something. Maybe ending suffering isn't the, or reducing suffering isn't the main thing or isn't the final goal or whatever. And it seems like it really stirs, it really bothers some people.

But again, my invitation is to just have a look, have a look, sense in, feel in, if that thought experiment works for you or something similar. Even if you're scared of the idea, see, is there not something else behind, underneath your concern and your efforts to reduce suffering and your focus on reducing suffering? Isn't there something else, another level?

So it could be that already what's operating for us, even if a person has never heard of soul-making or has heard of it and doesn't like it or doesn't practice it or whatever, it could already be that a part of how we

are navigating our ethical choices is actually through the means of some very kind of inchoate and dimly sensed version of sensing the soul, of soul-making practice with regard to ethics. It could already be that that's what people are doing, we are doing.

So is it possible to develop that? Ontologically there, epistemologically there, there's this, we're already trusting something. What are we trusting? How's it working in us? And is it possibly the case that what we're actually already trusting is the beginnings of soul-making approach, but we don't know that language, or we don't know that practice, or another part of our mind objects to it, but actually that's already part of what's going on, part of how we're functioning epistemologically with regard to ethics and ethical choices and values.

So maybe that's already the case. Maybe it's something that can be developed. We've already said, we've already considered a couple of times already the possibility of regarding eros as epistemologically valid and as ontologically guiding and validating, as John Milbank wrote, giving it an ontologically disclosive status.

The eros, if we have a view of truth not as a definite this or that and a final arriving point, but more as this journey of provisional truths, as it in fact is the actuality in science, as a journey of provisional truths, progressive stages of provisional truth. And if we have that idea and how congruent that is with the way eros works, eros as what takes us, what galvanizes the soul-making dynamic, which also means the perception, of course, of psyche, the sense of what we're in relationship with and the idea of it, the logos, and taking us more into depth, the eros is what opens up the depth, what opens us up to the depth.

And the successive openings, the successive disclosures of truth or reality, but truth and reality just conceived a little bit more maturely, really, or differently. So eros as epistemologically valid and also as ontologically guiding and validating in terms of depth, but also in terms of direction, so that there's, I would say, there can be and there will be with soul-making practice, a trust of the kind of the compass needle, the orientation of eros. Not just that it will take me deeper, but also where it points, the direction.

And all this is within the careful discipline of soul-making dharma practice and sensibility. It's not just, oh, so truth can be whatever I like, or whatever you like. No, we're talking about a real discipline here, and anyone who knows soul-making down the practice, and really practices, understands that, should understand that.

It's a difficult training, asking a great deal—even of those who have already undertaken extensive meditative training. Yet I wonder whether what's unfolding for many practitioners is actually the beginning, the fragmentary emergence of a small version of soul-making sensibility operating in the realm of ethics. Can we fill this out? Can we provide it with greater ontological and epistemological support in our thinking, creating more conceptual space and offering possible frameworks for understanding the ontology and epistemology that might take this further, exploring what emerges from such an approach?

We have already examined how soul-making dharma can offer modifications and sophistications of ontology and epistemology with respect to the dimensions provided through notions of cosmic order or voluntarism. Soul-making dharma can reimagine these entire possibilities, placing them on different ontological and epistemological foundations.

Interestingly, while I find Hartman's conception of a value firmament and its hierarchy compelling, as far as I could discern from his writings, he simply asserts the independent existence of this firmament of values. It exists, he suggests, though we cannot grasp it all at once, and some people lack talent for recognizing and differentiating values.

Let us compare this assertion with something else from St. Augustine, drawn from his text on the Trinity. Here he explores his theory of illumination—the understanding that our minds and hearts remain fundamentally open to the light of God, capable of being illuminated by divine light. They function through this light; the light of the divine permeates our hearts and minds. This is a beautiful conception, a luminous image.

Augustine writes: "God is holy everywhere, whence it is that the mind lives and moves and has its being in him, and therefore it can remember him. Not that it remembers him because it knew him in Adam, or at any other time and place before entering the life of its body, or at the time it was created and inserted into its body—it remembers none of these things, whichever of them really happened to it. They are all consigned to oblivion. It remembers him by turning towards the Lord, as to the light which in some fashion had reached it even while it had been turned away from him."

He continues: "This is the reason why the wicked, too, can think of eternity and make correct judgments of approval and disapproval about human conduct. What are the rules according to which they judge, but the rules which show everyone how to live, even though they may not themselves live according to them? How do they know them? Certainly not in their own natures. For although undoubtedly it is by the mind that these things are seen, it is clear that their minds are changeable, whereas whoever perceives in his mind these rules as the standard of conduct also perceives them to be unchangeable."

Again, we encounter this notion of eternal, independent, objective existence of values and ethical principles. Augustine asks: "Where then are these rules written? Where is it the unjust can discover what is just? Where do they see what they ought to have and lack? Where are the rules written but in the book of that light which we call truth. Here it is that all the rules of righteousness are inscribed, and it is from here that they pass into the heart of the just man, not by bodily transfer, but as though leaving their imprint on him, just as the design of a seal is impressed in the wax without leaving the seal."

I recognize that this language may not resonate with everyone. Some will object for various reasons, and many carry wounds from certain histories that make such expressions difficult to hear. I don't share that particular history, so I find these words deeply moving, even when I may not agree with every aspect. There's something profoundly beautiful in this conception of an absolute light of God—like the light

through the prism we discussed, with the attributes of God as refracted wavelengths, each color possessing its own beauty. This light permeates our soul, our mind, making values accessible to us. These values are eternal because they participate in that light, and they remain accessible because this light suffuses our consciousness, our very being.

Yet one phrase Augustine uses strikes me as ambiguous: "This is the reason why the wicked, too, can think of eternity and make correct judgments of approval and disapproval about human conduct." Does he mean thinking of eternity in terms of hell and its punishments, leading to fearful repentance? Or does he intend something far more congruent with soul-making dharma—contemplating the timeless, experiencing a sense of the timeless dimension?

Perhaps this sense of timelessness opens awareness of dimensionality, of divinity, of the soul-making dynamic itself, which naturally opens the soul. This opening then reveals the ideational and imaginal dimensions, the dimensionality and divinity of values and virtues themselves. Does Augustine mean timelessness in this sense, or does he refer to eternity as eternal punishment and reward? The text remains beautifully ambiguous on this crucial point.

Actually, I don't know enough of his work to know. But even if he meant eternal punishment and reward in that sense, we could, again, soul-making dharma could modify what he wrote there and take the beautiful idea—this idea of something that is absolute in this sense of beyond all categories, beyond all attributes, like when people talk about the dharmakaya, or people talk in the via negativa about the nature of the ultimate godhead, beyond anything that can be said about it—and take that beautiful idea, that light permeating our consciousness. It's one of the elements of the imaginal that then opens up the whole sense, and within that whole sense there will be a soul-making sense of values, and they will have dimensionality and divinity and beauty and duty and necessity.

So it's possible he meant eternal punishment and reward, but we can modify that. This beautiful idea and beautiful language that he's using can be modified from the perspective and understanding of soul-making dharma. But what it will lead to is a slightly different conclusion, I think, than what Augustine is implying. Because it won't necessarily always imply the same conclusions about an activity or a thing in itself. Rather, this activity or that thing will be sensed with soul, and then implicit in that is the sense of divinity and dimensionality and duty and the self's autonomy—duty and my autonomy, beauty, creation, discovery, fullness of intention. All that will be there.

So not the thing in itself, but a different sense of this thing compared to that thing, this choice compared to that choice. And can we trust that? The fullness of intention and all the other soul-making dharma elements. So there's a soul-making dharma modification, perhaps, of what he said—probably, I would guess, but I don't know—in terms of what he said about eternity, the eternal, contemplating the eternal.

But there's also probably a modification, as we've said before, in terms of where it delivers us. It won't be a universal "this thing or that thing, this activity or that activity is taboo, proscribed or prescribed."

Rather, what we're delivered to is a soul, a soul-making sense of something over something else. And that can guide us. Can we trust that to guide us?

I don't know if I mentioned this the other day—I think I mentioned it very briefly—but is there any place for antinomies in Augustine's view of ethics? We talked a lot about them in *Eros Unfettered*. It may well be the case that through soul-making dharma practice, soul-making practice in relation to ethical choices, antinomies are there, are felt, but they're resolved, they're solved for us through bringing the soul-making practice to bear. Because okay, I appreciate that these are antinomies, there are two moral pulls in different directions, but I feel, for me, guided to choose this one. I can trust that it's ethical, but I also know—I'm mature enough to know—that yes, this means I'm neglecting this other one. There's an antinomy there, as Hartman says, and I emphasize so much here.

I don't know if Augustine doesn't see that or tries to avoid the whole issue. But soul-making dharma practice helps us navigate those antinomies and accept the inevitable guilt, if we're going to call it guilt—the fact that in navigating an antinomy, in making a choice in life, and I have to make choices in life. Sitting on a fence forever is not—as Hartman calls it, that's really a sin. But I accept the inevitable guilt.

One example I've given several times: I wrote a letter to dharma teachers ten years ago about climate change and about flying so much in the dharma. I was fully aware there was a very strident tone, very critical, very aggressive, perhaps even sounded arrogant. I was very aware of that. And I was aware that it was going to piss people off and hurt people—people would feel hurt, rather. But I sent it anyway. And yes, quite a lot of people apparently were not happy at all. But I still to this day do not regret sending it. It was a soul choice.

I was tuning in to the... There was an antinomy there—to write it that way, to write it another way, to send it, to not send it. So it was soul that was guiding me, really. Even though at that time my understanding of all that was much less clear to me, much less articulated, much less explored, it was really soul that was guiding me. And I fully accept that I was in a way neglecting other moral values and virtues through the tone of the letter. But somehow it seemed necessary to write it in that way, in that tone. So I accept the guilt of neglecting those other values in the way that I wrote it.

Now if all this sounds... maybe for some people, again, who are not that experienced in actual soul-making dharma practice—I know there are some people who have listened to loads of talks, maybe all the talks on soul-making dharma, but actually haven't practiced much at all, or not in any way that it's really taken off and made a big impact on their being and practice. Maybe touched by the talks, or for whatever reason they're listening, maybe heard other people talk about it. But if you're in that camp, and this makes you... I think if you've done a lot of practice, this idea of soul-making practice, this idea of approaching ethics with soul-making sensibility and conceptual framework and practices, it won't alarm you.

There may be some people who just say, "Oh, I'm really not sure, I'm really not sure. How do I know I can

trust that?" The practice hasn't matured enough to give you that trust in the whole paradigm yet. And maybe then an experiment. If you're really interested in the question, "Can I trust this? Is this a way forward?"

If you're really interested in the question, just take the trouble to do a little experiment: here's an ethical choice, and practice sensing with soul with regard to that ethical choice. As I said when I introduced it, either through an image, an imaginal figure that comes up, or through the values and virtues involved as ideal images. Practice sensing with soul that way in regard to that ethical choice, without carrying out the action that practice implies or suggests, without carrying out that choice, unless the same conclusion as what the soul-making practice suggests is provided via whatever your usual mode of approaching and judging ethical choices is.

You understand? So you're not actually doing anything different. You're not doing or choosing anything different than you would usually do or choose. But you're adding this practice. And do that many times with many different situations and many different kinds of choices. And see what happens.

If you don't really care, you're not going to bother to do that. But if you do care, if you're actually really interested in this question—can I really trust this with regard to ethics? Shouldn't we have another basis in ethics? Surely we can't put soul-making as a basis for ethics. There must be ethics as a basis, then soul-making. Surely. Especially when I hear you talking about all those weird images you have, Rob, of devouring and devouring beloveds and blood everywhere and ritual slaughter and all that—surely we must put ethics first and then the soul-making.

So if you're really interested in that question, actually do some experimentation on your own, as I've suggested. Do that many times in many different ethical situations and see. And see if what happens is you don't learn to trust that actually the soul-making could be a basis for the ethics. You'll know for yourself, and you won't have done anything differently in the course of the experiment. You're not being asked to do anything different than you would have done anyway, or chosen anyway.

One of the modifications, a very central modification that the soul-making Dharma paradigm brings, as we said in regard to the Augustine example and others, and also Augustine's example of the cosmic order, was that it's no longer the thing or the action in itself, universally, that is decreed right or wrong, valuable or not valuable, ethical or not. It's the question of whether it's ensouled and ensoulable. This is really important.

Yesterday we talked about the whole notion of this post-Protestant Reformation affirmation and elevation of ordinary life—work and production and family and children. Historically, there was this equalization of ordinary life, where it was prior to that perhaps seen as less valuable than a life obviously devoted to and consecrated to God. Then there was historically, post-Reformation or with the Reformation, this equalization of ordinary life, this affirmation and elevation of it.

Originally, historically, we were seen as taking part in God's plans. So it mattered how we approached that, that we saw our ordinary life and our work and our family as really taking part in God's plan. And that plan eventually was connected with this more horizontal cosmic order. But anyway, we were taking part in God's plan. And over time, it became just ordinary life without any reference to God. Ordinary life was seen as valuable, as worthwhile, as in itself not just okay but important, as qualifying as the good life. But the reference to God had gone. It was a historical sort of evolution, devolution, development.

Now, with soul-making Dharma approach, what we're saying is it's not that ordinary life is or isn't worthwhile or good with a capital G or beautiful in itself, but it's how we sense it and how we sense the things of ordinary life—family, work, children. Are we sensing them with soul? Because when we are, then they're rooted in a sense, in our sense, our palpable sense of divinity, Buddha nature, whatever you want to call it.

But the ontology there is not simply objective and not simply subjective. So it's not in the thing itself as a universal—the value resides universally in this thing for everyone, and that's just true. It's in the sense of the sensing of the soul. It's in the soul-making sense. And that gives us the sense of divinity. But that sense of divinity is also neither simply objective nor simply subjective. Different ontology.

So in a way, we're not really making a statement about ordinary life or family life and its values. What matters is the relationship. What matters is, is it sensed with soul? And that's what makes it worthwhile, what makes it qualified as living a really worthwhile life.

The soul is more than the heart. That's what makes it beautiful in that way. So we're not saying for or against ordinary life or family life or anything like that. That's important. What's important is that it's sensed with soul—that's the guide for how to live, what to live for, what's worthwhile. This speaks to the bigger question of ethics.

So we just said, neither simply objective nor simply subjective. That's the ontology that's wrapped up in all this, or that's underpinning all this.

We could leave things there, but we might go a little further and extend into a slightly different connection here. With the risk and probability of actually leaving things a little inconclusive—but I still think it's worth exploring—we've been considering ethical values, but we can also consider aesthetic values, or beauty itself as a value too.

I want to explore this now. I've spoken about it before and written about it recently, which will be published sometime in the future. In both talking about it and writing about it, I've emphasized how important and instructive it is to actually inquire into beauty—our notions of beauty and our sense of beauty. How important and instructive that is with regard to soul-making dharma and practice. How intimate the connection is there.

So beauty is a value too. What's the ontology of beauty?

Again, William Stace and others can jump right in and say, "Well, the fact that you can't prove that this or that thing is beautiful, the fact that people don't agree, doesn't mean—does not imply—that there doesn't exist an objective independent truth to beauty."

Some people also nowadays would like to say that values, ethical values, are illusions, actually. There are different ways of saying that, different explanations for why they think this. They might say there's no such thing as beauty, really. What there is is a sense of pleasure.

And Hartman and others would say, "Well, beauty exists for human beings, just like values exist for human beings."

In Charles Taylor's words, just as our best account of material reality includes things like quarks—our current best account includes things like quarks to talk about and explain how material reality is and what it is—our best account of our humanity and our human concerns must include things like values and beauty. Because without them, without those notions and without that kind of vocabulary, it's not just hard but actually impossible to choose and to navigate in life.

We touched on this before. I might have an idea that it's all just atoms or whatever, or even that I'm choosing this because it's pleasant or unpleasant. But that's not really what's happening—it's not really the best account of what's moving me in this or that situation, or how I choose.

So there are different ontologies with regard to beauty: whether it has independent existence, whether it's completely an illusion, or whether it's neither wholly created by my way of looking nor fully, objectively, independently there. It's not just in the eyes of the beholder, but nor is it completely in the object alone. It's create-discovered. Again, this kind of alternate ontology. Alternative ontology.

Remember, quarks are participatory too. So the whole thing gets a little more—hmm, that's interesting. I'm not sure what the degree of prevalence is, but certainly a lot of people who really think hard about quantum physics—a lot of physicists don't think hard about quantum physics, but for the people who do—there's some portion that takes seriously the notion that quarks and everything else that is so-called material is participatory. As I said, it doesn't exist independent of the observer, and how it is and what it is and where it is all depends on the observer.

So it's an alternative ontology—this neither subjective nor objective, fully, simply. But it may not just apply to things like values and beauty. It may also apply to material things, as we've talked about.

And whatever the ontological status of beauty is, and of values—these things are deeply important to the soul. And somehow they're communicated soul to soul. Beauty can be communicated soul to soul and shared between souls. And a sense of value. And the beauty of value as well.

How wonderful, how amazing this possibility of communication. How wonderful, how amazing the depth to which we can care about these things, to which we feel they're important.

So it might be that there's a kind of ontological middle way with regard to beauty that's actually pretty similar to the imaginal middle way. And that's similar to one of the possible ontologies—the same kind of ontological middle way regarding values. That would be different, or in some ways of construing it, that would be different than Hartman's idea of a firmament of values objectively existing. But actually it could still be made congruent. It could still be made congruent.

But it depends on our notion of what the mind is.

It's interesting, too, if we just reflect a little bit on our culture, or where our culture is at, regarding ontologies of three different domains: mathematics, ethics, and aesthetics.

With regard to mathematics, I think most people in our Western culture would agree that there are independently existing mathematical truths, and also that there is a difference in human beings' innate talent to understand those truths and to realize those mathematical truths. Some people are obviously much more trained than others, and we trust those people who are trained more than we trust people who are not trained with regard to what's true in mathematics. These mathematical truths are widely regarded as independently true, whether you're a mathematician or not.

With regard to ethics, it's quite a bit more complicated. If we think about this question of ethos—of what's a really worthwhile life, what's a really beautiful life—then it seems almost fundamentally given in our Western culture to say there's no independent truth about that. No one can tell you what's a worthwhile life, what's a beautiful life. So there's quite a strong view that ethics, in that larger sense about what is a worthwhile life, what is really good—there's no independent truth to that.

When we shrink the domain of ethics down to the question of right and wrong, then people often say there is an independent truth. There is a truth here about what's right and wrong. The very fact that there's so much argument about what's right and wrong for so many questions and issues should make us wonder whether our aggressive belief that there is a right or wrong is actually tenable.

With regard to talent, I think most people would probably believe that some psychopaths or other people who have a mental illness are not capable, or much less capable, of recognizing right and wrong. But in regard to the area of ethics that has to do with what's worthwhile, what's a worthwhile life, what's a beautiful life, the idea of someone being more talented in that domain or being better trained in that domain—it's not universally accepted at all. It's probably universally dismissed.

Mathematics, ethics, aesthetics—then again it gets really interesting. It seems to me that with classical art—figurative classical art, literature, music, classical music, classical literature, classical architecture—people are often willing to admit there's an independent truth there, but say, "I'm not capable of judging it because I leave that to the experts." So we agree that there's a training possible there, there's maybe talent possible in ascertaining these things, and there must be an independent truth, interestingly. And the expert knows that independent truth.

When it comes to more contemporary art, then it gets really, really more complicated and messy in a way.

Here's an interesting thing, I think: if one cares really deeply about art—and by art I mean all the arts—if one cares deeply about art, then one's relationship to art is actually related to what one wants art to do and to affect. So what do I—if I really care about art, I'm looking to art for something. I want it to have certain effects. I want it to do something in my soul, or maybe even in the world, if I really care about it.

And that question of what I want it to do, what I want art to do in my being or hopefully in other beings, that question is related to ethics in the sense of what I consider good, what I consider is a life worth living. It's connected to my sense of dimensionality and maybe even divinity.

So if I care deeply about art, I care deeply about what I want art to do. I have certain things that I want art to do, to effect. And that's related to my ethics in the larger sense—my sense of what's good, what makes life worth living, my sense of dimensionality and all that in existence. Maybe my sense of divinity, even if I don't use that word—sacredness.

And maybe then, if all that's there, I tend to harbor a view that tends towards a sense of the independent existence of truths regarding both ethics and aesthetics. If I care deeply about art, care deeply about what art does and what it affects in my being and hopefully in others' beings, and that's related to my sense of what's good, what's worthwhile, what's deep, what's really meaningful, what's really important in life—then it's often the case that I harbor, even if I conceal it a little bit from others, a view that tends towards more the notion of the independent existence of truths about both what is ethical in the sense of meaningful and what constitutes a life worth living, and also what's of value aesthetically.

So personally—and I've said this before—I cannot agree that the collected works of John Coltrane are equal in value to the collected works of the Smurfs, or even the collected works of Britney Spears, or whatever. I just can't agree, really, if I'm honest. I can't agree. To me, there's a whole different order of value—aesthetic value, which touches on spiritual value, which touches on ethics.

And what I want John Coltrane—when I hear his music, when I'm open to his music, what it does to me, what it can do to me—is totally related to my sense of existence, my sense of soul. It's totally related to my sense of what makes life worth living, and my sense of God, and my sense of dimensionality. The ethics and the aesthetics are connected here, if I care deeply about art, and I tend towards a more realist view of independent existence of value there.

I really cannot agree, if you're going to say, the Smurfs are just as valuable as John Coltrane.

But it's complex, because there seems to be also a kind of taboo more widely about asserting an independent truth regarding the aesthetic worth of something that's non-classical. I mean, you get sometimes the immature "oh, that's shit, that's shit." Usually it's just because someone's unfamiliar with some form or some kind of new contemporary music or contemporary art. But usually the person that says that—art is not that important to them. It's just "shit." It's not coming from a place where art is

actually really important to them, something that they spend a lot of time opening themselves to and resonating with and feeling. It's just that something's unfamiliar, so they just say "shit." They're not trained in a way.

So I don't know—mathematics, ethics in both senses, in the wider sense that we've been trying to open up here: what makes life worthwhile? What makes life really meaningful? What's a life worth living? What is the beautiful life? What is really good that I should aspire to? And in the smaller sense of right and wrong. And aesthetics—the value in art is just a part of aesthetics, the question of value in art and whether that has independent objective existence.

There's a kind of confusion, I find, when you look at the culture and where we are in the culture with these things. Why am I bringing this up? Partly just because of the interesting connection in ontology between—we talked about mathematics in the realm of ideas and ideation and imagination and values. We've talked about ethics, ontology, and then the corresponding ontologies of beauty. To me that's just interesting.

But I'm also bringing up the cultural question of where we are, where we tend to be, our society, the kind of views that are prevalent around all that. Because soul-making Dharma is born now, at this time, in our culture. And so it's born into a set, or a soup really, of ontological and epistemological views and beliefs and questions and possibilities, but also unquestioned assumptions and rigidities and all kinds of things. So it's quite interesting and relevant to also reflect or kind of get a sense of where the culture is on these questions of ontology and epistemology with regard to different domains—mathematics, ethical domains in two senses, and aesthetics.

Because it may be that someone listening to all this, or someone listening to even previous talks before the ethics ones, thinks, "Well, all this soul-making Dharma business and soul-making practice, it's a bit elitist, isn't it? I mean, you have to have done all this other practice and understand this, and you're talking about all this sophisticated philosophy and psychology and Dharma understanding. Isn't that all a bit elitist?" And there's a certain kind of reaction in relationship to that born in a culture.

Then we say, "Well, if you're trying to propose a soul-making Dharma approach to ethics, then that's really elitist. You're expecting too much from people. Only a very elite few would be able to do that."

So it's interesting. You think, "Okay, well, if that's the case, why is it not like mathematics, where you would give the ethical questions to experts—elite, those who are trained—or train yourself?" And epistemologically speaking, giving something to an expert or relying on expert opinions—as I pointed out sometime or other in a talk, that's a kind of epistemology as well. We do that all the time with science. We do that with medicine. You know, if the doctor tells me, "Yeah, your cancer has come back," how do you know? "Well, this and this and this, the blood tests..." or whatever. "This is the probable prognosis." I'm relying on the expert opinion, and we do that all the time in lots of fields, primarily medicine and science, but as I said, also classical art and classical literature. Someone says, "This is good," so yeah, probably it is

good.

But what about doing that with ethics? It's not that simple. We acknowledge, as I said, for mathematics and for aesthetics that there are experts and they've probably had a long and difficult training that's necessary to reach that level of expertise, and maybe they had some innate talent or dispositional propensity to that area. And we give those questions and those issues to them.

Well, one of the reasons we don't do that with ethics as well is because it affects—it is going to affect my life and my choices much more directly, it seems, than questions of aesthetics or mathematics. I can't avoid it like I can avoid mathematics, and I can even avoid art to a certain extent. I mean, soul-making practice is not something anyone else can really do for you anyway. It's your personal practice.

But maybe politically speaking, socially speaking, in issues and matters that affect everyone—so for example, Heathrow expansion, or they're talking about this HS2 rail line, high-speed rail line linking the south and the north of England, supposedly to more equalize the relative wealth and economic growth in the North and South, where it hasn't been equal so far. But while they're in the process of even beginning to build this HS2 railway line, high-speed railway line, it's decimating ecological reserves and nature reserves, some with endangered species and all kinds of things, felling lots of trees. Or as I said, Heathrow expansion. These kinds of issues that will affect a lot of people, or maybe even everyone.

Is democracy the best way of deciding? I touched on this, I think, in the *Cedar and Soul* talk. Maybe, maybe not anymore. I don't know. In a world of equal democracy, but there's Facebook and Google and who knows who tracking my preferences and opinions online and then feeding me both information and marketing in line with my history and my propensities and not opening me up to other views. On top of which there's the spreading of fake news, there's Russian cyber influence and who knows what else, there's the whole unrestrained global capitalist market, global market capitalism, and advertising in a way promoting sometimes the lowest common denominator of desires.

Even decisions about what appears on television—how much does that truly emerge from democratic processes? And can such processes be trusted anymore? For numerous reasons, I believe they cannot. Partly this stems from ethical grounds: as I've explored throughout this extensive talk, we have essentially lost our foundation for ethical thinking and ethical discernment. We've certainly lost the ground—indeed, we've lost even the question itself and the space—for ethics in its larger sense. I mean the profound questions of what constitutes a worthwhile life, what is good, what is beautiful. What is a beautiful life? We have simply lost this entirely.

Given this loss, is handing these decisions to the people through supposedly equal democratic processes really the wisest course anymore? I honestly don't know. It's obviously an extraordinarily complex question.

If everyone were trained in sensing the soul and educated in virtue ethics—approaching the soul through

that pathway—then democracy and these decisions would be fundamentally different. These questions about what is worthwhile, what is beautiful, what is truly important, what makes life worth living—they do bear significantly upon political, social, and economic questions. So if everyone were trained in opening that sense and skilled in discernment, democracy would be an entirely different phenomenon.

In Plato's *Republic*, one of his major texts, he describes an ideal society governed by a kind of spiritual elite—specially trained and dedicated individuals who make the important decisions. This is genuinely dangerous territory for Western culture and society, a dangerous and difficult idea, repugnant to most people when they consider it: the notion of a spiritual elite. But is democracy really in such a healthy state anymore? For many different reasons, I'm not certain it is.

I'm not sure what the answers are. But yes, in Plato's *Republic*—which reads almost like a fantasy novel, a utopian counterpoint to George Orwell—there exists this spiritual elite that educates and establishes a hierarchy of moral purposes. But what would it look like if that hierarchy related to sensing the soul rather than to particular activities in themselves? Quite complex territory.

I should also note that it's not as though we don't already have elites governing our democracies. Consider the ultra-wealthy: thirteen individuals possess wealth equivalent to that of roughly fifty percent of women in the developing world—I can't recall the exact statistic. These ultra-rich individuals and corporations already determine laws and policies within our supposedly democratic systems. Or consider political leaders like Trump, Putin, or even Boris Johnson, who demonstrate both willingness and ability to override, disregard, or circumvent democratic processes entirely.

So while we maintain this ideal of democracy, it's sagging at best and riddled with significant holes. I don't claim to know the answers to any of this. The idea of a spiritual elite is both repugnant and alarming to me as well. But who do you want wielding power? It's not as though elites aren't already running things at this moment.

These are simply questions I'm raising—opening territory that proves more inconclusive than conclusive.

It would be wonderful if we were all taught and trained to develop practices—if not soul-making, then something similar that helps us discern, navigate, relate to, and remain truly alive and sensitive to questions within this much larger conception of ethics. What constitutes the beautiful life? What makes a life beautiful? What is genuinely worthwhile? In what can I anchor my ethics? What sense of another dimension can ground my ethics—not merely my understanding of right and wrong, but also my sense of what is worthwhile and beautiful?

It would be wonderful if we were all trained to develop practices like soul-making dharma or something analogous that assists us in that territory, in that domain—practices that help the soul, help the mind and heart become sensitive, navigate skillfully, and possess a reliable compass. Just as most of us in Western societies ideally receive training in mathematics, reading and writing, logic to some degree, and now even

computer skills as part of standard education, with mindfulness meditation increasingly taught in schools.

Part of me believes it's a complete fantasy that society could ever reach a place where these kinds of practices, tools, approaches, and ways of thinking—not necessarily soul-making specifically, but something similar—would enable our beings to bring our sensitivity, discernment, deep soul, and profound intelligence to bear on this domain, on these essential questions. In some ways, I think it's an utter pipe dream.

Yet we have established these other forms of training as cultural norms, and that establishment required considerable time. I'm uncertain whether mindfulness in schools has yet become standard, but it may well be soon. So who knows? Perhaps it's not such an impossible dream after all.

And perhaps we need not wait for the entire culture to adopt something or for it to become culturally established. We can begin ourselves.

And obviously, for ourselves, we can find out for ourselves: what does this do to my image of ethics? What does it do to my sense of existence and my sense of navigating choices in life, responding to ethical situations, responding to social, political, economic issues, environmental issues? What does it do to my whole sense of myself and my life and the possibilities of my life?

Thank you for listening.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.