

# Man's Search for Meaning

# Viktor Frankl

(A Touchstone Book. Third Edition: 1959, 1962, 1984)

"He who has a <u>why</u> to live can bear with almost any <u>how</u>."

— Friedrich Nietzsche

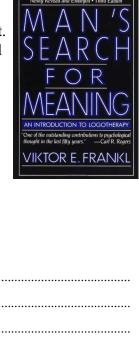
#### Introduction

Viktor Frankl (1905-97).

- Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher, author, and Holocaust survivor.
- Professor of Neureology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna Medical School.
- The founder of logotherapy.
  - ► Mankind's primary motivational force is "the will to meaning" in life
  - ► Fulfillment in life comes through dedication to a cause outside of, and greater than, oneself.
  - ▶ VF: "I admonish my students: 'Don't aim at success the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must *ensure*, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself." [12]
  - ► VF: "One must have a reason to 'be happy'." [140]

# Spiritual Orientation.

- An existentialist who believed we must discover our meaning and purpose in life through our own intuitive senses and life experiences.
- Does mankind have a sin problem?
- Frankl was neither an agnostic nor a secular humanist.
- A deist or a theist?



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# Psychoanalysis v. Logotherapy

#### Psychoanalysis.

- Traditional psychoanalysis is retrospective and introspective.
- **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939) developed his psychoanalytic philosophy based on a naturalistic worldview.
- A philosophy rooted in Epicureanism.
  - ► An emphasis on the "pleasure principle".
- The goal: homeostasis.
- A mechanistic approach to psychotherapy.
- Human behavior is merely a product of deterministic instinctual desires
  - ► Hence, "free will" is an illusion.
  - ▶ VF: "What is missing" in Freudian psychology is "the human reality which I have come to term... *self-transcendence*.... Truly, self-transcendence is the essence of human existence." [Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning, 138]
- Alfred Adler (1870-1937) and the "power principle".

#### Logotherapy.

- Logotherapy is "meaning-centered" psychotherapy.
- Frankl's challenge: "Why do you not commit suicide?" [7]
- Only human beings have any sense of 'meaning and purpose' in life. [NOTE: The *imago Dei* and the reality of the soul.]
- What is "logotherapy"?
  - ► VF: "Logos denotes meaning," [and] logotherapy focuses on the meaning of human human existence" [and] man's search for such a meaning." [104]

[NOTE: This is an eccentric definition. In classical Greek, *logos* meant "the Word" or the ultimate principle of Reason that governs the universe.]

- Some neuroses are rooted in a lack of meaning or any proper sense of responsibility.
- Frankl: Both Freudian and Adlerian psychology discount the "higher aspirations" of the human psyche beyond merely seeking pleasure and power. [Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning, 138]
  - ► VF: "Logotherapy deviates from psychoanalysis insofar as it considers man a being whose main concern consists in fulfilling a meaning, rather than in the mere gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts...." [108]
- Logotherapy transcends Epicureanism and is less ego-centered.

► The necessity for change and transformation

• Tension is "an indispensable prerequisite for mental health" – the tension between what one has achieved and what one should strive to accomplish. [109]

The necessity for change and transformation.						
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- The symptoms of a self-centered orientation.
  - ► Boredom, anxiety, depression, aggression, and addiction.
  - ► An obsession for power, money, social status, pleasure, self-recognition, etc.
  - ► VF: "The sexual libido becomes rampant in the existential vacuum." [112]
  - ► VF: The "existential vacuum." [111-112]

[NOTE: Frankl fails to acknowledge that egocentrism – i.e., sin – is inherent to human nature and can only be overcome through genuine spiritual conversion.]

# **Concentration Camp Psychology**

#### Why Live?

- Frankl describes in detail the inhumane conditions in the camps that were designed to dehumanize, humiliate and degrade the prisoners as if they were soulless animals.
  - For most prisoners, having had their spirits broken, any attempts to maintain one's sense of dignity and respect toward oneself or others quickly disintegrated.
  - ► VF: "Life in a concentration camp tore open the human soul and exposed its depths." [94]

#### Four Stages of Psychological Reaction.

#### (1) Initial shock.

► VF: "The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone.... It was born of the hopelessness of the situation." [31]

#### (2) Apathy and insensitivity.

- Overcrowded and unsanitary barracks, constant hunger, sleep deprivation, rat and vermin infestation, and unrelenting brutality.
- ► VF: "Apathy, the main symptom of the second phase, was a necessary mechanism of self-defense. Reality dimmed, and all efforts and all emotions were centered on one task: preserving one's own life." [40]
- ► "Emotional death."
- ► VF: "Those who have not gone through a similar experience can hardly conceive of the soul-destroying mental conflict and clashes of will power which a famished man experiences." [42, 43]

► VF: "On the average, only those prisoners could keep alive who... had lost all scruples in

- ► "Cultural hibernation." in the camp.
  - Two exceptions: politics and religion.

#### (3) Bitterness, hostility and violence.

- ► VF: For prisoners, their existence "descended to the level of animal life." [60]
- their fight for existence. They were prepared to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft, and betrayal of their friends, in order to save themselves." [19]

#### (4) Hopelessness in the midst of all the pain and uncertainty.

- ► Many lost the will to live.
- ► Some couldn't bear up under the physical and emotion strain and abuse.
- ► Some who were religious simply gave up because they believed a better life awaited them in the afterlife.
- ► Many hated their situation and their persecutors so much that they preferred to die.
- For the few who still struggled to live, the question was why?
  - Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how." [84]
- ► A few managed to find meaning and purpose in the midst of all the evil, insanity and suffering.
  - They sought to maintain their humanity and either died or survived heroically.
  - VF: "Sometimes the situation may require [that a man] shape his own fate by action." At other times it calls for serious contemplation. And "sometimes man may be required simply to accept fate, to bear this cross." [85]

#### **How Did Frankl Survive?**

A fateful final day.

- Frankl's life was spared because he volunteered for medical service in another camp that was infested with typhoid fever.
- Near the end of his ordeal, he was asked to address the men in the infirmary.
  - ► He reminded them that anyone still alive had reason for hope.
  - ► VF: "I told my comrades... that human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have meaning .... I said that someone looks down on each of us in difficult time a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or God and he would not expect us to disappoint him. He would hope to find us suffering proudly... knowing how to die.

"And finally I spoke of our sacrifice, which had meaning in every case. It was in the nature of this sacrifice that it should appear to be pointless in the normal [i.e., natural] world, the world of material success. But in reality our sacrifice did have a meaning. Those of us who had any religious faith, I said frankly, could understand without difficulty." [90-91]

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# **Major Themes**

### The Key to Life.

- Frankl: "Why do you not commit suicide?"
- The pathology of nihilism.
  - ► Life is purely random and meaninglessness.
  - ► We must realize that this life is a [bad] joke. There is no justice, and everything is random. Only when we realize this will we understand how absurd it is to take ourselves and our life seriously. The universe has no purpose. It merely is. There is no ultimate meaning in any decisions we make or how we think and act. [152]

[NOTE: No one actually lives their lives on this basis. Everyone usually acts as if their actions were meaningful and consequential. If nihilists really believed their own propaganda, they would commit suicide.]

- Two kinds of people: the decent and the indecent. [94]
  - ► The decent live for something or someone beyond their own selfish gratification.
- Human behavior is not determined by one's environment or one's situation or status in life. [NOTE: We cannot control what others say about us or do to us, but we *can* control how we react and respond.]
  - ► The ultimate human freedom is the ability of choose one's attitude.
- Frankl's primal question:
  - ► VF: "The question which beset me was, 'Has all this suffering, this dying around us, a meaning?' For, if not, then ultimately there is no meaning to survival." [119]
- The role of religious faith, art and beauty:
  - ► For most of those who survived the Holocaust, "the number of those whose religious life was deepened in spite of, not because of, this experience by far exceeds the number of those who gave up their belief." [Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning, p. 19.]
  - ► Surrounded by so much evil and ugliness intensified some prisoners' perceptions and appreciation for the simple beauty in nature.
  - ► VF: "As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before.... [50]
- A sense of "cosmic consciousness".
- If there is an meaning and purpose in life at all, then there must be meaning and purpose in suffering and dying.
  - ► VF: "What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life....
    [I]t did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We had to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life.... Our answer must consist, not in talk, but in right action and in right conduct." [85]

• Suffering is an opportunity to add a deeper meaning to life, and to bear it with dignity,

	courage and selflessness.
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- ► VF: "Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of sacrifice.... When suffering unjustly or for a righteous cause, such suffering can even become "ennobling rather than degrading." [117-18]
- ► Nitzsche: "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger." [89]
- ► VF: "The last of human freedoms" is the ability to "choose one's attitude in a given [situation]." [9]
- In the concentration camp, stripped of all ego and false dignity, Frankl came to know his true self without illusions.

#### Three Sources of Meaning.

- Meaning in life is the result of pursuing things that matter.
  - Frankl: "Don't aim at success the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must *ensue*, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself." [12]
- "One should not search for an abstract meaning of life."
  - ► "What matters is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment." [113]
  - [NOTE: We all have a common purpose in life i.e., to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves. But how we work out this principle is indeed personal.]
- "Self-actualization" in life can only come through "self-transcendence".
  - ► VF: "Self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence." [115]
- Finding one's meaning in life is an "unintended side effect" of one (or more) drives:
- (1) Personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself.
- (2) Love for, and service to, someone else.
- (3) Patient endurance in the midst of an existential challenge (or crisis). [115]
- Happiness, like success, is a by-product of a greater commitment beyond oneself.
   [NOTE: One's primary relationship and source of meaning and purpose in life must be centered on our love and devotion to our Creator and Sustainer to whom we are ultimately
- Two things that sustained Frankl:

accountable.]

(1) Warm thoughts of his wife.

of the concentration camp.	

- ▶ VF: "[Eventually] I forced my thoughts to turn [away from the oppressive trivialities of life in the concentration camp] to another subject. Suddenly, I saw myself standing on the platform of a well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room. In front of me sat an attentive audience on comfortable upholstered seats. I was giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp.... By this method I succeeded somehow in rising above the situation, abovie the suffering of the moment, and I observed them as if they were already of the past. Both I and my troubles became the object of an interesting psychoscientific study undertaken by myself." [82]
- We will never know until the end of our life what the ultimate meaning of it was.
  - ▶ VF: "To invoke an analogy, consider a movie: It consists of thousands upon thousands of individual pictures, and each of them makes sense and carries a meaning, yet the meaning of the whole film cannot be seen before its last sequence is shown. On the other hand, we cannot understand the whole film without having first understood each of its components.... Isn't it the same with life? Doesn't the final meaning of life, too, reveal itself, if ever at all, only at its end, on the verge of death? And doesn't the final mean... depend on whether or not the potential meaning of each single situation was actualized to the best of the [subject's] knowledge and belief?" [Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning, 143]

#### "The Greatest of These Is Love."

- A "transfixing" insight.
  - [NOTE: I Corinthians 13:13 "the greatest of these is love."]
- Honest love for another person does what is necessary to address their needs.
  - ➤ VF: "Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him... [in which case] he sees that which is potential in him.... Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities." [116]
  - ► M. Scott Peck: Love is "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." [The Road Less Traveled, p. 81]
    - A commitment to "nurturing another's spiritual growth" must be comprehensive: it must include the person's spiritual, religious, physical, mental, emotional, psychological and social needs.

#### **Determinism and Free Will.**

- Are we nothing more than the collective result of our biological, psychological and sociological conditions?
  - Are we merely the product of heredity and environment?The denial that man is a free moral being.

- In reality, we have a moral conscience that overrides at least most of our biological impulses.
  - ▶ VF: "[T]here is a danger inherent in... the theory that man is nothing but the result of biological, psychological and sociological conditions, or [merely] the product of heredity and environment. Such a view of man makes a neurotic believe... that he is the pawn and victim of outer influences or inner circumstances. This neurotic fatalism is fostered... by a psychotherapy which denies that man is free. To be sure, a human being is a finite thing; and his freedom is restricted. It is not freedom from conditions, but it is freedom to take a stand toward the conditions." [132]
  - ▶ VF: "The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome.... Man *can* preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way....

"If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering....

"The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal.... [74-76]

➤ VF: "As a professor in two fields, neurology and psychiatry, I am fully aware of the extent to which man is subject to biological, psychological and sociological conditions. But in addition to being a professor in two fields, I am a survivor of four concentration camps, and as such I also bear witness to the unexpected extent to which man is capable of defying and braving even the worst conditions conceivable....

"Man is *not* fully conditioned and determined but rather determines himself whether he gives in to conditions or stands up to them... Man is ultimately self-determining...

"Man is capable of changing the world for the better if possible, and of changing himself for the better if necessary." [132, 133, 135]

# A Postscript: On Drugs and Addictions.

The "existential vecuum" [142]

VF: "The drug scene is one aspect of a more general mass phenomenon, namely the feeling of meaninglessness resulting from a frustration of our existential needs which in turn has become a universal phenomenon in our [modern] societies." [141]

#### **Assessments**

#### An Antidote to Pop Psychology.

- Frankl's psychology is antithetical to fashionable pop psychology and refreshingly devoid of egoistic self-absorption.
- According to Frankl, everything (and every experience) in life is redeemable.
- The purpose in life is to develop inner strength and a depth of character based on...
  - (1) Commitment to a worthy cause.

[NOTE: Strive to become more Christlike.]

(2) Development of a love relationship.

[NOTE: "Love the Lord your God... and others as yourself."]

(3) Patient endurance in the midst of life's trials.

[NOTE: "In this world you will have trouble" – John 16:33;

"In this world you will suffer many trials. We know that we are children of God, and that whole world is under the control of the evil one" – John 5:19;

"In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" – Rom. 8:28.]

#### The Summa: Frankl's Epiphany.

- A few days after his liberation from the concentration camp, Frankl took a walk through the countryside.
  - Birds flitted about singing their "joyous songs."
  - ▶ VF: "There was no one to be seen for miles around; there was nothing but the earth and sky and the larks' jubilation and the freedom of space. I stopped, looked around, and up to the and then I went down on my knees. At that moment... I had but one sentence in mind always the same: 'I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and He answered me in the freedom of space.' [Psalm 16:1-6, or Lam. 3:55?]

"How long I knelt there and repeated this sentence memory can no longer recall. But I know that on that day, in that our, my new life started. Step [by] step, I progressed until I again became a human being." [96-97]

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# Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning

#### Viktor Frankl

[Perseus Publishing (2000)]

#### Introduction

#### Thesis.

- A sequel to *Man's Search for Meaning*.
- Frankl explores mankind's unconscious longing for inspiration, revelation, and a sense of "transcendence."

[NOTE C. S. Lewis described this longing as "Joy" – attainable only through faith in Jesus Christ as the true Mediator between God and mankind.

- Frankl's thesis:
  - As a deistic (or theistic?) existentialist, Frankl believed we can create meaning for ourselves by realizing our innate yearning for purpose in life.

#### The Preface.

- The book is derived from a lecture that Frankl gave shortly after World War II entitled "The Unconscious God" in which he explicated the interrelationship between psychotherapy and theology. [14]
  - ▶ VF: "There is... a religious sense deeply rooted in each and every man's unconscious depths. In two of my books, *Man's Search for Meaning* and *The Will to Meaning*, evidence has been advanced to support my contention that this sense may break through unexpectedly, even in cases of severe mental illness such as psychoses." [14]
- True "religion" cannot be conditional.
  - ► VF: "[E]ither belief in God is unconditional or it is not belief at all." [152]
  - ► The testimony of a former mental patient.
- What is "religion"?
  - ► VF: "One may define religion as man's search for *ultimate* meaning. [17]
  - ► Ludwig Wittgenstein: "To believe in God is to see that life has a meaning." [153]
- ► A sense of God-consciousness is our most basic awareness.
  - ► VF: "Biology is overarched by psychology, psychology by noölogy, and noölogy by theology."

NOTE: Noölogy is a systematic study of intuitive knowledge – i.e., "the science of

synonymously with "pure rational [deductive] knowledge" as distinguished from empirical [inductive] knowledge.]

- What is the nature and character of God?
  - ► VF: "God is portrayed in a more or less anthropomorphic way. And yet we are not justified in discarding religion solely on account of all its anthropomorphic ingredients." [NOTE: This is the theological principle of "condescension".]

"On the other hand, there are undeniable pitfalls in store for us whenever we embark on anthropomorphism uncritically."

- Note: Science has nothing to say about the meaning of life or the existence of God.
  - ► VF: "Science is blind to ultimate meaning," and scientists have no basis to deny that ultimate meaning does exist." [145]

#### The Spiritual Unconscious.

- What is meant by saying that human beings have a "spiritual" nature?
  - ► Humans are distinct from other animals in that we have a "soul".
  - ► VF: "The 'spiritual' is what is human in man." [28]

[NOTE: Biblical theology declares that only human beings are made in the *imago Dei*.]

#### Frankl on Religious Pluralism: The Vital Missing Link.

[NOTE: Religious pluralism: the belief that all religions are manmade and therefore more-or-less equally legitimate. Like all religious pluralists, Frankl rejected the exclusive claims of Christianity (or Judaism).

On the contrary, Biblical religions – traditional Judaism and Christianity – hold that the Old Testament and New Testament scriptures were divinely-inspired revelations and therefore doctrinally authoritative and exclusive of all other religions.]

- Frankl: No religion can claim the authority to speak for God.
  - ▶ VF: "The concept of religion in its widest possible sense... certainly goes far beyond the narrow concepts of God promulgated by many representatives of denominational and institutional religion. They often depict, not to say denigrate, God as a being who is primarily concerned with being believed in by the greatest number of believers, and along the lines of a specific creed." [17]
  - ► VF: "One denomination [i.e., religion] cannot claim superiority over another." [149] [NOTE: Jesus Christ claimed to be "the [exclusive] Way, the Truth, and the Life" John 14:6.]
  - ▶ VF: "If you want people to have faith and belief in God, you cannot rely on preaching along the lens of a particular church but must, in the first place, portray your God believably and you must act credibly yourself. In other words, you have to do the very opposite of what so often is done by the representatives of organized religion when they build up an image of God as someone who is primarily interested in being believed in and who rigorously insists that those who believe in him be affiliated with a particular church...." [18]


- ► Frankl: The fact that organized religions assert that certain doctrinal (and moral) principles as codified in specific creeds are absolutely true is "a distortion of any sound concept of deity." [150]
  - [NOTE: This denies the reality or even the possibility of direct divine revelation as claimed in the Bible.]
- Frankl: Each individual must construct a religion that is unique and meaningful to oneself.
  - ► VF: "Certainly the trend is away from religion conceived in such a strictly denominational sense. Yet this is not to imply that, eventually, there will be a universal religion. On the contrary, if religion is to survive, it will have to be profoundly personalized." [19]
- Q: In lieu of divine revelation, how would we know that these spiritual inclinations are truly God-given and not merely expressions of "wish-fulfillment"?
- Frankl: It is unnecessary to believe in God in order to have a relationship with him.
  - VF: "God is the partner of our most intimate soliloquies.... [W]henever you are talking to yourself in utmost sincerity and... solitude he to whom you are addressing yourself may justifiably be called God.... [S]uch a definition circumvents the bifurcation between atheistic and theistic *Weltanschauung* [worldviews].... The differences between them emerges only later on, when the irreligious person insists that his soliloquies are just that, monologues with himself, and the religious person interprets his as real dialogues with someone other than himself.... I think that what here should count first and more than anything else is the 'utmost sincerity' and honesty. And I am sure that if God really exists he certainly is not going to argue with the irreligious persons because they mistake him for your own selves and therefore misname him." [151]

[NOTE: Sincerity is necessary, but it is insufficient. The question is: Do our subjective feelings and beliefs correlate to reality?

Hebrews 11:6 – "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."]

► VF: "In a book of mine, *The Unconscious God*, I [conclude] that a religious sense is existent and present in each and every person, albeit buried, not to say repressed, in the unconscious." [151]

[NOTE: Every individual is made in the image of God with a sense of God-consciousness (ref. Romans 1-2). However, this intimation, along with moral consciousness, is often

suppressed and violated by mankind due to our sin nature.]						