

The Psychology of Viktor Frankl

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Abstract

Regarding the overall human condition, contemporary dominant psychological theory--being primarily deterministic in nature--gives prime credence to heredity genetic factors and environmental conditioning while vaguely recognizing the power (much less presence) of personal will and meaningfulness. The psychology of Viktor Frankl says that this is not the whole of the truth. He tells us that (in spite of these major impacts) humans are ultimately self-determining and able to rise above life's circumstances while transcending one's personal environment through the use of will endowed by meaningfulness.

Man has the ability to rise above his circumstances through the use of his will. He can choose his attitudes and actions. To be human is to be able to transcend one's environment and one's own existence. "Man is ultimately self-determining." (Frankl, 1966, p. 132)

The predominant theory is that man is a product of heredity and environment: that man's life, actions and reactions are mainly the result of determinism. These factors have significant impact, yet man has the freedom of will to make a decision to act on or take a stand regarding conditions in his life. He can raise above and go beyond his environment because "man is, and always remains, capable of resisting and braving even the worst conditions." (Frankl, 1969, pp. 16-17)

Though much of life's circumstances (fate, destiny) are inevitable and unchangeable, the self is changeable. A person is capable of shaping and reshaping his attitudes and actions. He can detach himself from the situation and circumstances by transcending the restrictions placed on him by his environment beyond his control. Though restricted due to psyche and physical stress the mind is independent to make decisions of attitude and action. (Frankl, 1966, p. 65)

Man is not limited to basic instincts and drives. Through the higher calling of personal conscience he perceives the uniqueness in a situation and, acting accordingly, chooses to be moral or respond to higher values. It is a commitment to a cause or something outside of himself such as a person he loves or the higher ideal of God that prompts his response. (Frankl, 1966, pp. 101-102) Even guilt plays a role by prompting one to overcome it with change. (Frankl, 1969, p. 73)

Because of this self-transcendence, there is a restlessness in the human spirit that seeks a reason for existence or meaning in its existence. This desire for meaning (willing to meaning) is

a specific need. Contrary to homeostasis principle which view man as a closed system with a main concern of “maintaining or restoring an inner equilibrium,” the “will to meaning is really a specific need not reducible to other needs.” (Frankl, 1969, pp. 31 & 80)

If the desire for meaning is not realized, the result is a frustration which manifests itself in the existential vacuum. It can be described as a deep feeling of despair and distress much like hanging by the end of your fingers on the edge of an abyss. It is a “spiritual distress rather than an emotional or mental illness.” (Frankl, 1985, p. 138)

The existential vacuum is a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century. Because man doesn't have instincts or drives to tell him what to do, he has to make decisions which require choices. (Frankl, 1969, p. 108) Compared to former times when there were traditions and values to help with decision making, few exist now to tell man what to do. Much of the time he doesn't even know what he wants to do. The result is the conforming to the desires of what others do or which him to do. (Frankl, 1969, p. 83)

Education enhances the problem of the existential vacuum by teaching “nothingbutness”: the theory that man is nothing but the “result of biological, psychological, and sociological conditions, or the product of heredity or environment.” (Frankl, 1966, p. 132) This teaching denies that man is free to exercise his will. It increases the feeling of meaninglessness because of its contention that life has no meaning. (Frankl, 1966, p. 132)

There is a state of tension that accompanies the existential vacuum. It is created by the need for a direction in life. (Frankl, 1969, p. 44) The stress caused by where one has been (the strivings of) or what one has achieved and what one wishes to become or achieve is a tension

that causes a healthy balance of inner tension. (Frankl, 1966, pp. 105-106) This state of tension is necessary to maintain good mental health.

In an industrialized affluent contemporary society, too few demands are placed on youth and people as a whole. This is reflected in a lack of positive tension which is to a loss or lack of meaning. If there is a lack of tension, people will create their own tension: (1) healthy as in sports or (2) unhealthy as in crime, violence, or illicit drug usage. (Frankl, 1969, p. 44)

The existential vacuum manifests itself as boredom and apathy which are reflected in depression, addiction and aggression. This is further reflected in high rates of suicide, drug and alcohol addiction, and crime. The need to escape boredom is manifested as acts of violence in the name of fun. All of this is the result of the seeking to fulfill the “desire to find meaning in life.” (Frankl, 1985, pp. 96-97)

Man masks the meaninglessness of his life by creating diversions. The pursuits of self-actualization, pleasure, sexual over activity, status, power, and accumulation of money only serve to mask man’s search for meaning. Each is an escape from the awareness of the existential vacuum. This flight from self allows one to avoid a confrontation with the void in one’s life. When pursued in and of themselves, these activities become stumbling blocks to fulfillment and happiness. In some ways the concept of self-actualization contradicts self-transcendence. Self-actualization, as an exclusive goal is unattainable, and can only be realized when found outside of oneself. Self-actualization is a by-product of meaning fulfillment that results only from self-transcendence. (Frankl, 1969, pp. 96-98)

To overcome the existential vacuum, man must find meaning in his life. Most see life as transitory due to death, suffering, and distress; but the “only real transitory aspects of life are the

potentialities.” (Frankl, 1966, pp. 122-123) Man is responsible for using the passing moments and opportunities to find meaning in his life: “to actualize potentialities, to realize values, whether creative, experimental, or attitudinal. In other words man is responsible for what do, when to love, and how to suffer.” (Frankl, 1969, p. 74)

With the demise of traditions and values, education’s role in supporting the position of personal responsibility is most important. Education must do more than transmit traditions and knowledge: it must refine a person’s conscience through a sound philosophy of life that provides the capacity to find unique meanings despite crumbling universal values. (Frankl, 1976, 1985, p. 120) Educators must realize that meaning is so unique that it cannot be taught; it has to be lived and demonstrated as an example through how one lives his life by personal dedication to one’s ideals, field of work, etc. (Frankl, 1969, p. 87)

To find meaning, man is in need of a new aspect of leisure that allows for contemplation and meditation. The social norm is a constant activity that causes a running away from instead of towards one’s self. This must be changed by courage to be alone (even lonely) and face problems and find solutions. (Frankl, 1969, P. 87) A personal goal of going beyond one’s self (self-transcendence) and focusing through involvement in the world by committing one’s self to fulfillment of meaning results in self-actualization, pleasure, happiness, etc. (Frankl, 1966, pp. 114-115)

Meaning is not an abstract idea that has universal application for everyone. It varies from moment to moment and situation to situation. (Frankl, 1966, p. 77) Meaning is unique (it is a primary force in a person’s life) and specific for each individual and can be fulfilled by him alone. It is so unique that a life cannot be replaced or repeated. (Frankl, 1966, p. 99) Meaning results

from tensions caused by conflicts in one's existence. A strong idea of how life ought to be versus the way life is results in enthusiasm and idealism. (Frankl, 1969, p. 54)

The average person finds meaning in everyday things, happenings, and events by experiencing one's work, deeds done; nature, culture or a relationship with one's loved one. There are unlimited ways to find meaning but the three principle ways are: (1) doing something—giving of yourself through creations or a deed, (2) receiving or taking from the world in terms of encounters, events, or experiences, (3) through suffering. (Frankl, 1969, pp. 70-71)

While all circumstances provide opportunities for meaning, the noblest meaning is to be found in suffering per one's attitude toward it. This applies to suffering that cannot be changed which must be faced and turned into an achievement. Suffering can have meaning up to the last breath. The ultimate meaning is to be found in the attitude toward an "inescapable, unavoidable situation." (Frankl, 1966, pp. 114-115)

In a material world this seems foolish but from a religious perceptive meaning can be found and understood in even the worst circumstances. It is an attitude that enables man to rise above any circumstance beyond his control. It allows one to remain or become unselfish providing deeper meaning through the attainment of high moral values and stops the downward slide to the level of animals fighting for self-preservation. (Frankl, 1966, pp. 67 & 83)

The ultimate meaning of suffering or life is beyond knowing. Man has to bear his inability to understand or grasp life's deepest non-knowable meanings in rational terms. Trust in an ultimate Being or power precedes trust in an ultimate meaning for all things and suffering. This requires faith. As an animal suffering (scientific research) at the hands of man can only

know that it is suffering but cannot understand why, it is much the same way with man and the Supra Meaning: man cannot understand why, but comfort can be found in the faith that there is an ultimate meaning for all things and suffering. (Frankl, 1969, pp. 144-147)

The conscience is an intuitive ability that aids in discovering meaning. In a particular situation conscience discloses the unique requirement for that individual to gain meaning. Conscience has the power to disclose special meanings that command an individual to do something contrary to or contradictory to accepted values. (Frankl, 1969, pp. 144-147) Rational reasoning using general precepts of morality can allow one to make a mistake; however, conscience adjusts itself to the unique situation and unique requirements of a situation. “Living one’s conscience always means living on a highly personalized level, aware of the full concreteness of each situation.” (Frankl, 1976, 1985, p. 115)

Existence is essentially unconscious and unreflectable. Man exhibits two different types of unconscious: (1) the instinctual unconscious which is shared by man with the animals and (2) the spiritual unconscious which is strictly a human phenomenon. (Frankl, 1976, 1985, p. 23) The concern is with the spiritual phenomena which may be unconscious or conscious, but is ultimately unconscious. From the unconscious depths come the creative phenomena of conscience, love, art, etc. all of which are ultimately unreflectable. (Frankl, 1976, 1985, p. 26) If one attempts to produce or manipulate through reflection these creative aspects on a conscious level the result will be failure. Forced observation or excessive self-reflection can prove to be harmful. (Frankl, 1976, 1985, p. 37) The reason for this is that “human existence exists in action rather than reflection” because it is in action that man finds meaning.” (Frankl, 1976, 1985, p. 30)

Existential analysis, in its third stage of development, has discovered that man is religious by nature. This unconscious religiousness is termed the “unconscious God” and comes from a deep personal center. As a concept, the unconscious God means that man is unconscious of God and his relation to God, it is a hidden relationship. (Frankl, 1976, 1985, pp. 61 & 65)

It is possible to misinterpret man’s unconscious relationship to God. It doesn’t mean that God inhabits us or is within us. It doesn’t mean that the unconscious is superior to (knows more) the conscious. It isn’t an impersonal force operating in man. What it does mean is that the unconscious God is deeply and profoundly personal. (Frankl, 1976, 1985, pp. 62-63)

Considering the implications of the unconscious God, religion plays an important function. Religion results in and helps achieve mental health by producing an inner equilibrium that provides a spiritual anchor or secure feeling unavailable anywhere else. (Frankl, 1969, p. 44) Religion demands much and provides much by placing man on a higher plane of consciousness. Even in an completely deprived state the religious interest are deepened and increased. Personal sensitivities (altruistic, self-reflective, etc.) are increased enabling man to become aware of his inner value which deflects even the worst conditions. Such men (in the German war camps) were able to hold up better physically over a period of time than those of a more robust physical makeup. (Frankl, 1966, pp. 33-35)

People who deny the existence of God repress religious feelings. Repressing the relationship to transcendence lays the ground work for a neurotic existence which shows up as “unrest of the heart.” (Frankl, 1976, 1985, pp. 68-69) It sometimes seems that a neurotic existence is the result of a cripple relation to transcendence. If the angel in man is repressed he turns into a distortion of light. (Frankl, 1976, 1985, pp. 69-70)

The psychological concepts of Viktor Frankl are interesting; many of them reflect my personal experiences and philosophies. The comments that I make regarding the validity of his theories are grounded in my personal life experiences.

As to the “will to meaning”, there is no doubt in my mind that man has the capacity to change his attitudes or behavior at will. The ability to change is directly proportional to the desire to change. Change is normally an unwelcome event; however, if the end result of change is perceived as being more desirable than the present situation, change will take place. This is why the more drastic the change in behavior and attitude the closer the individual has been to hitting rock bottom.

Most everyone at one time or another has transferred the blame for personal unpleasanties to someone else or some event outside of self. To accept the responsibility that everyone is the captain of his own ship is most difficult. Western culture encourages this type reasoning (passing the buck) by blaming environmental impact, poverty, parental abuse, racism, broken homes, etc. for antisocial behaviors while placing little blame on the lack of personal responsibility. Granted environmental impact can be hard to overcome especially in the most extreme cases, but it still doesn't remove responsibility for one's own life. It just means that one has to desire more and strive harder to overcome such obstacles. It has been my experience with others and myself that when the desire for change burns the hottest, there will suddenly appear a means or tool or event that will enable one to make the desired change.

Since late adolescence, my life can be characterized as a journey in search of meaning. The search was most intense from age 17 to 24 (occurring simultaneously with the counter culture of the late 1960's and early 1970's). I was not a member of the counter culture but I was

influenced by associates of it. As a member of the baby boom, television, instamatic generation and a product of an affluent materialistic society, I was primed for the existential vacuum.

While friends sought relief through partying, alcohol and drugs; I became a minister in search of himself. It was like a madness that drove me on an endless searching along the paths of theology, philosophy, and psychology. No matter how I searched for a universal meaning, a cosmic plan for my life, it evaded me. Conformity to the ways of organized religion only increased the confusion. A deep despair became my constant partner. It manifested itself in periods of deep depression, severe headaches, anxiety attacks, a withdrawal from collegiate responsibilities, and an entertainment of suicide. Eventually I resigned my associate pastorate, got a divorce, renounced God and turned to partying, drinking, drugs, and pornography. The local mental center diagnosed me at the age of 22 as a borderline schizophrenic and anxious neurotic. Twenty-four weeks of “confrontational” T-Group therapy never addressed the core issue of meaninglessness while making the presenting symptoms progressively worse.

Approximately a year after graduation from college, I accepted the position as the associate director of the local council of alcoholism. As part of my training, I had to attend a weekly meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous (my abuse of alcohol and drugs was limited to social use and ended prior to this position). At about the same time, my boss advised me to stop searching so hard and learn to listen for the still small voice inside. Both events rescued me from rock bottom and put me on the path to meaning discovery. The books I so relentlessly read were all put away and conscious efforts to find direction were greatly reduced. I learned to live for the moment, to rely on a power greater than myself, and to seek insight through prayer, meditation, and long walks alone.

At this point of evolution in my life simple answers were provided for complicate questions. Sometime after being laid off from this meaningful job as the associate director, I was agonizing over the seemingly meaninglessness of my replacement career and my inability to find another equally meaningful job. The answer to my quest was provided while walking through the shopping mall that same day. Though I had no intention of making a purchase, something prompted me to go inside of a bookstore. As I walked through the door, I looked to my left and hanging on the was a poster of Snoopy dancing in a pile of Fall leaves with the statement; "I asked God, 'What is the meaning of life?' and He answered, "To live." At that moment I understood that meaning is to be found in the simplest of activities and events. Meaning is what you make of your life depending on the present moment. Meaning is not universal in nature and while it can be found in a command performance more often than not it is simply living for the moment. My prior to constant companion of depression immediately lifted never to return.

Self-actualization, pleasure, sexual over activity, power, status, accumulation of money, drug and alcohol abuse, and any other self-gratuitous behaviors are definitely attempts to escape the lack of meaning. Such is evident in my career as an advertising consultant and my volunteer work as a member of the board of directors of a local mission. The flaunting of status and material wealth, the need to maintain a youthful appearance in spite of age, the bravado associated with drug use and alcohol abuse, and sexual excesses are but a sampling of the deep spiritual lacking in our society. It is rare that I encounter a person with meaning and purpose of direction.

Educationally speaking even the elitist of our society has problems finding meaning. Many associates and friends of my wife and I are in the medical field. It is amazing to see such

educated professionals as doctors and nurses with the personal problems of broken homes, drug and alcohol abuse, and status seeking. This is really brought home to me by my teenage son and his peer group in middle school. Absolute conformity--from the excessive demand for designer clothes to a fear of ridicule for making good grades--is the result of an educational system that rewards conformity while discouraging independent thinking.

It is in moments of silence, reflection, prayer and that man becomes aware of the unconscious God and comes to grip with his conscience. The two are inseparable for they are one and the same. While making conscious decisions the conscience intervenes offering advice and a sense of direction. True reality exists at the unconscious level. Much like the tip of an iceberg masks the reality of the massive ice bulk under the water line so it is with the illusion created by the tip of consciousness which represents material reality while hiding the massive bulk of unconsciousness. It is in the unconscious realm that man encounters God and his true self. From this encounter man receives direction through his conscience (that slight tap on the shoulder, the little tug at the heart strings, etc.) as to what and how to live.

Now at the age of 39 (1989), I have discovered that there are two levels of meaning: (1) that found in living life to its fullest for the moment and (2) a mental ideal after which one models his life. The second level of meaning is superior to and should be reflective of the first level of meaning. If an ideal exists after which man models his life, such an ideal will manifest itself in daily actions and attitudes. This higher level of meaning (supra meaning) is knowable through attunement with the unconscious. This allows man to commune with God resulting in the discovery of his life's ideal or purpose; namely the things he was put on this earth to learn

and accomplish. This is not an easy task but it is possible depending upon one's amount of desire and will to want to know.

If suffering is a necessary exercise in obtaining or learning to live one's ideal then suffering has meaning. Suffering for suffering's sake may or may not have meaning depending on whether it directs man to a journey in search of his ideal. In such situations, all suffering has meaning; not just unchangeable suffering. Suffering always has the potential of redirecting man's attitudes and behavior.

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