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MEANING, MOTIVATION AND SURVIVAL

A review and comparison of Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy

To understand Victor Frankl's theory of logotherapy it may help to have some prior knowledge of existentialism and the existential approach to psychology. It may also help to have had some experience of real suffering in life, because logotherapy was a direct outgrowth of Frankl's personal experience of extreme suffering during World War II.

Victor E. Frankl was born to Jewish parents in 1905 in Vienna, Austria. To see Frankl's life in its historical perspective it is interesting to note that he was born in the same year that Jean Paul Sartre was born in Paris, and in the year that Freud's "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" was first published. It was also the year that Albert Einstein first stated his theory of relativity.

Frankl graduated with doctorates in medicine and philosophy from the University of Vienna and began his career during the period of Freud's greatest influence. But in 1938, when Freud felt impelled to leave Vienna for Paris and London as a refugee, Frankl chose to stay with his family in Austria rather than flee the Nazis. Four years later he was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Dachau where he spent the next three years. After his release in 1946, he was appointed to what is still considered to be one of the top psychiatric positions in Vienna - Head of the Neurological Poliklinik Hospital. He held this post until his retirement in 1970. Frankl has travelled widely, written articles and books (which have been translated into no less than eighteen languages) and has lectured at universities in Europe, the United States and Canada on his theory of logotherapy. In 1970 he was appointed distinguished professor of logotherapy at the U.S. International University of San Diego and Stanford and Dusquesne are among the other universities he has visited during the past ten years.

Perhaps because he has been presented as somewhat of a hero in international Jewish circles, Frankl has always been a welcome guest lecturer in Israel and in Jewish gatherings all over the world. Not long ago he visited Washington D.C. and addressed a large gathering at the Washington Hebrew Congregation, a big reform synagogue which runs a

Sunday morning "Scholar Series" programme. But despite his strong Jewish affiliations, Frankl has chosen to remain an Austrian citizen and to make his home in Vienna where he still lives and works.

Although Frankl has been acclaimed as the founder of the "Third School of Viennese Psychiatry" he has not become famous in his lifetime in the same way that Freud and Adler became famous in their day. His theory of logotherapy has not become one of the mainstream modern theories of psychotherapy, and it is even difficult to find his name listed in the leading books of reference. He is not in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, (Jean Paul Sartre is) nor in Colliers. Significantly enough he is listed at length in "Who's Who in America" and in the Encyclopaedia Judaica.

The Will to Meaning

In contradistinction to Freudian theory which analysed human behaviour in terms of determinism, the sex drives and the repressed experience of the past, and contrary to the Adlerian school which stressed the human desire for power and self-assertion, Frankl's theory of logotherapy claims that man's fundamental motive is to find meaning in life.

Derived from the Greek word "logos" meaning "spirit" or "meaning", Frankl chose the term "logotherapy" because he did not want it to be confused with other contemporary theories of existential thought; these, he disparagingly complains, had all been translated under one heading - "existential analysis", and even though his theory was developed against the backdrop of existential thought, he was at great pains to point out that logotherapy differed from existential analysis because it was concerned not only with "being" in the existential sense, but also with "meaning" - life's meaning and man's will to meaning.

It was during his years in the concentration camps that Frankl observed at first-hand the importance of meaning for man's survival. It appeared to him that those people who were able to find some meaning in their suffering were the ones to survive the longest. His vivid description of life in the camps is probably one of the most sensitive accounts of the psychology of the concentration camp still in print.

Imagery appears to have played some part in Frankl's own survival technique:

"Thus I remember that one morning I marched out of camp, scarcely able to endure any longer the hunger, the cold, and the pain of my feet, swollen from oedema, frozen and festering, and stuffed into open shoes. My situation seemed to me to be beyond comfort or hope.

Then I imagined to myself that I was standing at a lectern in a large, beautiful, warm and bright lecture hall before an interested audience. I was about to give a lecture entitled "Group Psychotherapeutic Experiences in a Concentration Camp", and I spoke precisely of all those things which just then I was going through".

The trick to survival was to objectify the suffering by putting oneself at a distance from it. Jean Paul Sartre called this "phenomenological observation"; Frankl called it "**Trotz mach des Geistes**" - "the defiant power of the human spirit". By using a uniquely human power one can hold oneself above one's environment. It is not an easy exercise and Frankl admitted that not everyone is capable of doing it. Those who do succeed, however, set an example for others, and this is what happened in the camps.

The Existential Vacuum

One of the main concepts in logotherapy is what Frankl called the existential vacuum, a condition similar to boredom, the boredom faced by people who have lost interest in life or who lack initiative.

Frankl carried out an interesting study of boredom while teaching at the University of Vienna. Using his students as subjects, he found that 40% of the German, Swiss and Austrian students (the Europeans) doubted that life had much meaning, as compared to 80% of his American students. From these results, Frankl concluded that what he called the "existential vacuum" was experienced more by people from highly industrialised countries.

"This problem of boredom is becoming increasingly topical. For the second industrial revolution, as automation is being called, will probably lead to an enormous increase in the leisure hours of the average worker. And they will not know what to do with all that free time".

Frankl wrote this in 1957. Reading this in 1982, one wonders whether Frankl foresaw the unemployment and economic recession that was to come, or whether he really believed that increased automation would lead to a shorter working week. In any case, he was perfectly correct in his prediction of the feeling of emptiness - a void of sorts - that is increasingly felt by people living in present-day technological societies.

Of interest is how logotherapy differs from Gestalt therapy on the question of dealing with boredom. Whereas logotherapists would view boredom as the result of not having found meaning in life, Gestaltists would urge us to seek meaning in the boredom. "Fritz" Perls recommended "staying with the

boredom" - entering into the void or the "vacuum", and working through the feeling of emptiness.

*"I think that one of the hell gates that leads to maturity, to **satori** - the great awakening - is the ability to stay with boredom, not to try to jump out of it, do something interesting, or use it for complaining".*

The Noological Dimension and the Utilisation of Tension

Man, says Frankl, has the peculiar ability for self-detachment as a result of which he is able to develop an attitude toward the world he lives in. This uniquely human characteristic enables man to detach himself from his psychological condition; it gives him a sense of "responsibleness". Frankl holds man accountable - not only for his neuroses or psychoses but also for his attitudes. In fact, "attitude" is a key word in logotherapy.

What man needs, according to Frankl, is not homeostasis as recommended by the Freudians, but noodynamics - a state of appropriate tension. Frankl saw stress as playing an important and positive role in mental health: a tensionless state leads to existential vacuum. Here, Frankl diverges widely from the psychodynamic concepts of anxiety and motivation. Rather than seeing man as being motivated by his concern to preserve an inner homeostasis (by gratification of drives and instincts), Frankl saw man's primary motivational force as being what he called "a will to meaning".

" both the meaning of human existence and man's will to meaning are accessible only through an approach that goes beyond the plane of merely psychodynamic and psychogenetic data. We must enter, or better, we must follow man into the dimension of the specifically human phenomena that is the spiritual dimension of being".
