

SUFFERING, CONTEXT, CONSCIOUSNESS AND HAPPINESS: LOGOTHERAPY OF FRANKL

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Abstract:

Victor Frankl who was a psychiatrist, philosopher and neurologist is the founder of Logotherapy. He was associated with the famous psychoanalysts like Freud and Adler. He underwent intense suffering during the concentration camp and survived it through finding meaning. After the II World War, Frankl propagated his new form of survival philosophy for finding meaning, wellness and happiness in life. There are many centres around the world propagating his vision and ideas in achieving wholeness and meaning.

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There are many theories developed based on metaphysical, psychological, philosophical, economical, neurological, medical and

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other theoretical foundations on how to achieve happiness, wellbeing and wholeness. One of the unforgettable tragedies of modernity was the holocaust. Millions of people of Jewish descent and others who opposed the unjust, fascist, tyrannical regime of Hitler were put into indescribable horror of suffering, pain and death. Many more millions suffered physically, psychologically as well as spiritually. Even in the midst of vast and horrible expansive desert it is possible to experience valleys full of flowers. In the same way, undergoing unfathomable atrocities, pain and suffering, human beings could rise above the context in which they were thrown into and create incredible experiences and evolve new forms and models of survival and meaning. Victor Frankl, Etty Hillesum, Edith Stein, Maxmillian Kolbe, Anne Frank are some of the unforgettable names that have transcended these horrible experiences because of their heroic resistance in the midst of pathological inhumanity and was capable of transmitting radiance. Among them I want to present two spectacular personalities who contributed immensely to humanity through their substantial contribution in the midst of suffering and pain. Victor Frankl, a psychologist, psychiatrist and philosopher developed *Logo therapy* – Meaning in Life - in the context of extreme suffering and promoted it as a means of achieving happiness in encountering life whatever be the context. Etty Hillesum, evolved herself confronting her own shadows of psychological imbalances and fragility towards a deep spiritual outlook with God and transmitting joy and happiness to the others who were paralyzed in front of disease, cruelty and the dark certainty of death experienced every moment. They are the unsung heroes like beacon lights who can shed light on our paths of uncertain future of illness, failure, cruelty, arrogance etc.

Discovering Meaning – Logo Therapy of Frankl.

Victor Frankl was a trained neurologist and psychiatrist who also pursued philosophy. Associating with Alfred Adler who lived close to his house, Frankl developed some theories on mental health and was doing research on the suicides of young people in the city. The psychiatric practice and the research on mental health enabled him to develop certain theories which the established psychologists like Adler could not accept and he was expelled from the group. He even wrote down his thoughts and practices with the intention of publishing it. Then came the annexation of Austria to Germany by

Hitler and the arrest and deportation of the Jews. Though he could have escaped, he wanted to be with his people and thus, he too was arrested along with his young wife, parents and brothers. In the midst of these unbelievable cruelty, pain and suffering and daily observations of deaths of inmates life was fiercely staring at Frankl. He reviewed his theories within the context of this inescapable suffering, refined them and found that meaning can sustain life even in the extreme situations where hatred, arrogance, cruelty, punishment, slavery, hunger, diseases and even in front of the certainty of death. This is a theory that Frankl evolved and refined through his praxis and experience in the Nazi Prison Camps in sustaining life every moment and every day. Logotherapy, has thus enabled him to survive these inexpressible horrors of life and now it helps millions of people in encountering their own complex life situations which would definitely be inferior than the prison camp experiences Frankl had undergone.

Life Sketch

Victor Frankl was born to middle class Jewish parents Gabriel Frankl and Elsa Lion, on 26 March 1905 in Vienna which was already known for its psychologists and philosophers like Freud, Adler and the Vienna circle, a group of philosophers guided by Ernest Mach who studied and lived there. It is said that at the young age of three he expressed his wish to become a medical doctor though in his adulthood he wanted to be a philosopher both which Frankl realized later in his life. While in the secondary school, Frankl was interacting with Freud on psychoanalysis and was personally invited by him to write an article that was published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Observing the reductionist approach of Freud in interpreting the human beings as a bundle of mere sexual energy, Frankl drifted away from him and attracted towards the personalistic psychology of Alfred Adler. Groomed by Adler, Frankl published his second article in 1925 in the *International Journal of Individual Psychology*. For criticizing that the Adlerian individual psychology was infested with psychologism, Frankl was expelled from the Society of Individual Psychology in 1927 and Adler had never spoken to him again.

Because of the negative impetus received to his theoretical efforts, Frankl moved himself towards applying his theoretical inputs in the concrete situations and problems of people testing whether his theory

could resolve their problems. He studied medicine at the University of Vienna and later specialized in Neurology and Psychiatry. While he was studying for medicine, he had given free counseling to students especially when they received their progress reports and through his intervention it was noted that in 1931 not a single suicide case was reported among students he was taking care of. Frankl further extended his research and tried to help the depressive young people by associating with the Steinhof Psychiatric Hospital in Vienna. By studying the depression and the suicide tendencies of young women, he treated them and initiated the suicide pavilion in order to treat these young women who felt that they were unemployed and hence useless and thus helped more than 30,000 young women to recover from their depressive state of mind. This research and mass treatment processes enabled him to understand the importance of meaning people adhered to life and in the absence of it will be leading to depression and self termination of life itself. In 1937 he started his own practice that was terminated by the Nazi takeover of Austria. He was not at all allowed to treat the 'Aryan' patients and hence associated with the Rothschild Hospital where the Jews were treated. He was appointed as the head of the Neurology department. There he developed a neurosurgical technique to treat suicide attempts. He was an avid mountain climber and the Nazi regime outlawed mountain climbing for Jews which was one of many restrictions and indignities he experienced as a Jew and a human being. One of his friends, Hubert Gsur, who was a German army soldier though he was also a hidden communist, took him to the mountain peak Hohe Wand wearing the army uniform and asking Frankl to hide his yellow star the sign as a Jew he was expected to exhibit.² While reaching the peak Frankl kissed the naked rock several times and touching the rough face of the rock and experiencing the delight of being with the nature expressed his love for nature.

Frankl was in search of love and he associated himself with many women and had some close relationships. While he was in the Rothschild Hospital, he noticed a nurse Tilly Grosser working there, because of her "curly black hair, sparkling eyes, and her warm smile". She knew him as the man who dated her best friend and dropped her without any reason. So her interest was to understand the reason

² Anna Redsand, Victor Frankl: A Life Worth Living.

why Frankl abandoned her best friend and wanted to ask him the question directly and get a clarification. But as they met, Frankl himself explained to Tilly his own reasons why he could not continue the friendship with her and that honesty impressed her. One day he invited Tilly home and as they were about to have lunch with his parents, there was an immediate call for him to save a suicide attempted patient who has taken a drug overdose. As a medical doctor and specialist in saving suicide attempted persons, Frankl immediately responded by taking a taxi and reaching the hospital. When he came back after almost two hours, his parents were already had lunch and Tilly was waiting for him and asked about how the patient felt and whether she recovered after he being treating her. That was the moment Frankl thought she must be the woman to share his whole life and he proposed to her. They were married in 1941. Tilly became his meaning in his most difficult days, remembering, visualizing her and talking to her in solitude which was indeed a consolation for him to survive the violence and inhuman situation of the concentration camp.

On 25th September 1942, the parents, wife and Frankl were deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. He was introduced into the train in order to calm down the people as a psychologist. By the node of the forefinger though he was selected to the left, he moved to the right unnoticed by the authorities. He said such a series of choices and decisions made his life possible in the violence and hatred of the concentration camp and come out alive. This particular camp was a place where the elite Jews and the artists were kept and there were concerts and artistic performances as a marketing strategy for the Nazis in order to show that the Jews living in the concentration camps were happy and they were given the finest treatment. When the Red Cross people from Denmark arrived they were even made a film showing how everyone worked together to beautify the camp. It was a show piece for the Nazis and they even made a film with the title, how the leader Hitler gave this city as a gift to Jews. Frankl organized suicide prevention camps and lectures to boost the morale of the inmates there. "Psychology of Mountaineering", "How to keep nerves healthy", "Existential Problems in Psychotherapy", "Medical Ministry", "Social Psychotherapy", "Body and Soul", were some of the lectures Frankl organized in the camp. His father passed away in the camp due to malnutrition and starvation at the age of 81.

Frankl was selected to be moved to the Auschwitz camp. His wife Grosser also wanted to be with him though he advised her to remain in the same camp so that she could save herself. But Tilly insisted to go with him and hence, both of them were deported on 29th July 1944. From there he was moved to another camp near to Dachau on 19th October 1944 where he spent five months as a mere labourer tilling the land frozen by snow and cold. From here in March he was moved to a rest camp in Tuerkheim. His wife was moved to Bergen-Belsen where she was gassed to death and cremated. His brother and mother were also exterminated in the same way. It was during these terrible moments of life that enabled him to understand the dynamics of the human body, mind and soul and to experiment with it through his own as well as others experiences. On 27th April 1945 the camp was liberated by the American soldiers and Frankl was thrown into freedom.

After the release, the turbulent life in the concentration camp and his search for meaning became an obsession of interest for him. He was already made the manuscript on Logotherapy which he had to abandon in the humiliating and violent introduction to the concentration camp. However after encouragement from many supporters Frankl described his psychoanalytic process in the book *Man's Search for Meaning* in 1959. This is an analysis of the search for meaning in a context independent state from the perspective of a philosopher and psychiatrist. In 1948 integrating psychology and religion, Frankl defended his doctoral dissertation in philosophy with the title *the Unconscious God*. In 1955 he was made the professor of Neurology and psychiatry at the University of Vienna and was visiting professor in many reputed universities like Harvard. He received many awards and published books. In 1947 he married Eleonore who is a Catholic and they have a daughter. After a successful life in promoting his logotherapy, Victor Frankl passed away on 2nd September 1997.

Logotherapy

“What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.” While practicing as a neurologist and psychiatrist Frankl evolved logotherapy and wrote the manuscript with which he has gone to the concentration camp.

However, he had to throw everything away in order to save himself. During the dehumanizing concentration camp experience he had put to test his assumptions and thus developed the third psychological approach from Vienna which is known as logotherapy. The foundation or the underlying motivational principle of logotherapy is the “will to meaning” irrespective of the contexts. In the extreme and severe holocaust scenario, Frankl tested and discovered that meaning is the only surviving tool that can enable a person to survive even in the most inhuman situation. Frankl, basing on research established that there is a strong relationship between “meaninglessness” and criminal behaviors, addictions and depression. Without meaning, people have a tendency to fill the void with hedonistic pleasures, power, materialism, hatred, boredom, or neurotic obsessions and compulsions. Some may also strive for a meta-meaning, the ultimate meaning in life, a spiritual kind of meaning that depends solely on a greater power outside of the personal or the external control. (Frankl, 1992. p.143) For Frankl, the violent, arrogant, hatred filled, disease infested, hopelessness prevailing context became his laboratory to test the dynamics of human body, mind and soul where he refined and refabricated his analysis of the human person and came up with the meaning inducing logotherapy. Suffering, pain and death were the deep ocean of experience where Frankl delved deep and came up with the precious pearl of logotherapy. He explains how he himself was capable of surviving the drastic situation discovering the importance and need of meaning in life.

Though, in the concentration camp there was a pervading and enforced physical and mental primitiveness of life; it was for him a ground to deepen the spiritual life. In the physical suffering, it was possible to retreat themselves to their own inner freedom and inner riches. This attitude can only explain the apparent paradox of the survival of some of the prisoners than the able bodied and stronger physically and robust in nature. One day the prisoners were all marching in the midst of stumbling rocks in the darkness and the ugly shouting of the guards and the deep silence of the prisoners. The, one prisoner in front of him “whispered suddenly: If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don’t know what is happening to us.” This silent whispering brought to him the thoughts about his wife Tilly.

And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise. A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love*. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way—an honourable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory."³

Frankl's visualization of his beloved wife enabled him to preserve life in the drastic situation. However, he was not aware whether she was alive or not; but her presence gave meaning to him and enabled him to survive. "Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still

³ The Meaning of Life P.21

alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance." In the survival context he did not bother about whether she was alive or dead. Even if he knew that she was already dead, her image could have sustained him. "There was no need for me to know; nothing could touch the strength of my love, my thoughts, and the image of my beloved. Had I known then that my wife was dead, I think that I would still have given myself, undisturbed by that knowledge, to the contemplation of her image, and that my mental conversation with her would have been just as vivid and just as satisfying. 'Set me like a seal upon thy heart, love is as strong as death'."

The present time of violence was replaced by the beautiful memories of the past which he was living really and strengthened him to encounter and pursue the incorrigible present. The emptiness, desolation, insomnia, spiritual poverty of his existence, were replaced by the imagination and this nostalgic memory glorified the past and sustained him in his inescapable turbulence. Frankl described how he was taking bus rides, unlocked the front door, answering the phone calls, switching on the electric lights and thus detailing the past moments with his beloved wife Tilly in imagination, he could survive. Frankl narrated his experience of living with Tilly in the following vivid lines!

In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious "Yes" in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. At that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse, which stood on the horizon as if painted there, in the midst of the miserable grey of a dawning morning in Bavaria. "*Et lux in tenebris lucet*"- and the light shineth in the darkness. For hours I stood hacking at the icy ground. The guard passed by, insulting me, and once again I communed with my beloved. More and more I felt that she was present, that she was with me; I had the feeling that I was able to touch her, able to stretch out my hand and grasp hers. The feeling was very strong: she was *there*.

After narrating a number of incidents Frankl concluded that "suffering is an ineradicable part of

life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete." For him suffering and the inhuman situations are not challenges but opportunities to measure one's own inner strength. "Naturally only a few people were capable of reaching great spiritual heights. But a few were given the chance to attain human greatness even through their apparent worldly failure and death, an accomplishment which in ordinary circumstances they would never have achieved. We could say that most men in a concentration camp believed that the real opportunities of life had passed. Yet, in reality, there was an opportunity and a challenge. One could make a victory of those experiences, turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate, as did a majority of the prisoners."

From his analysis of the camp experiences, Frankl come up with the conclusion that those who have a meaning in their life and thus have a hope for the future can easily survive any drastic situation. So the meaning to one's own existence has a bearing on his life. The meaning, the goal restores the inner strength and enable him or her to succeed. Quoting Nietzsche, Frankl established the need to have meaning and goal for the future. "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*," could be the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic efforts regarding prisoners. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a *why*—an aim—for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible *how* of their existence. Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost. The typical reply with which such a man rejected all encouraging arguments was, "I have nothing to expect from life anymore." He would then be perished. "A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the "why" for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any "how." The following was the advice Frankl given to his comrades who were in the concentration camp.

Then I spoke of the many opportunities of giving life a meaning. I told my comrades (who lay motionless, although occasionally a sigh could be heard) that human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a

meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death. I asked the poor creatures who listened to me attentively in the darkness of the hut to face up to the seriousness of our position. They must not lose hope but should keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle did not detract from its dignity and its meaning. I said that someone looks down on each of us in difficult hours—a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or a God—and he would not expect us to disappoint him. He would hope to find us suffering proudly—not miserably—knowing how to die.

Find meaning is the best way to encounter the challenges of life, survive and sustain life. The theoretical foundation of the Logotherapy which Frankl developed during his pre-camp experience is tested, reaffirmed and reinforced during the concentration camp life and he successfully experienced and showed how meaning can catapult one in life and proved whatever be the context one can continue life the way she/he perceives it and how she/he responded to it rather than react to it. Thus his psycho-spiritual therapeutic process is holistic incorporating the theoretical and experimental components enabling the undertakers to achieve wholeness and wellness. Let us examine the foundations of the logotherapy.

Foundations of Logotherapy

There are three presuppositions and three triads as basic foundations to the Logotherapy. The first one is that the reality is composed of ontological layers, namely, the physical, psychological and the pneumatic. In other words, body, mind and spirit as a continuum and one cannot be reduced into the other and there is an ascending order from the body, mind and the spirit. The pneumatic or the spiritual dimension of the human beings is the unique characteristic and that demarcates it from the other beings. Frankl also affirmed that spiritual does not mean any specific religious bias or bending. The second presupposition is that meaning can be discovered and fostered independent of the context. Even in the context of extreme suffering and negativity someone can survive and sustain life having a meaning and hope for the future. The third one is that freedom is a fundamental situation of the mind or psyche and under

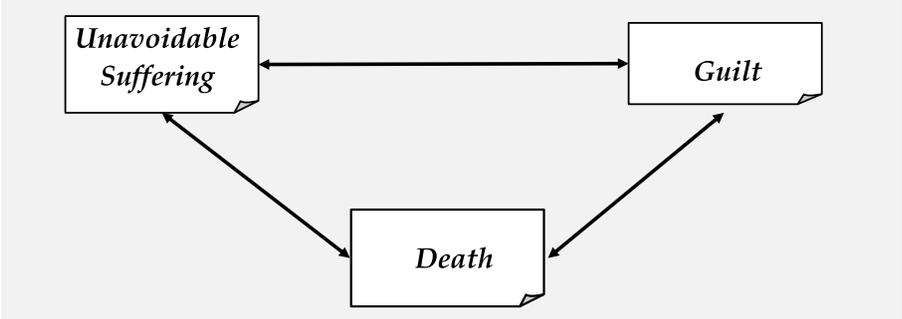
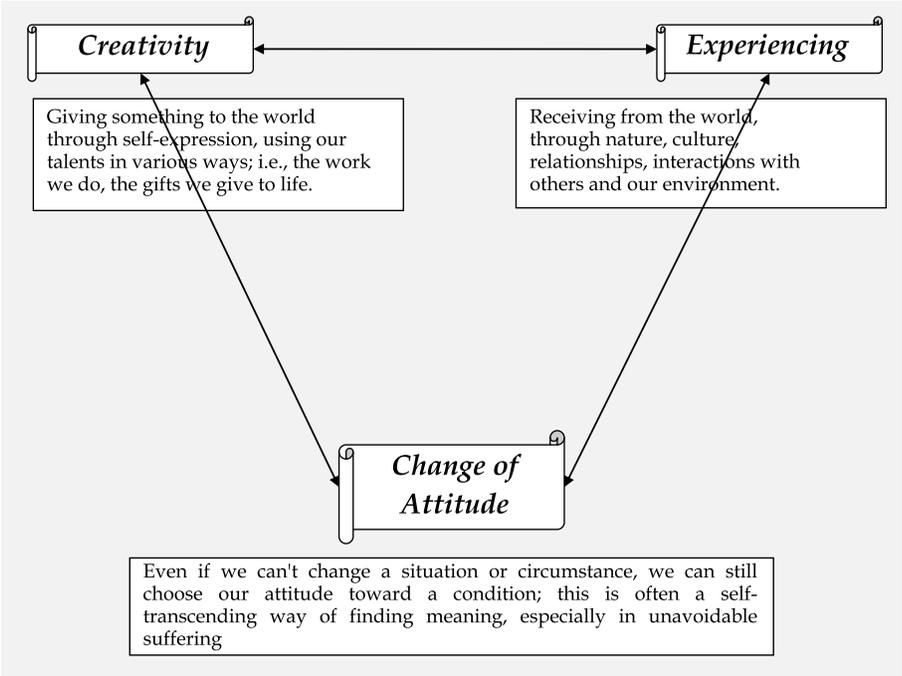
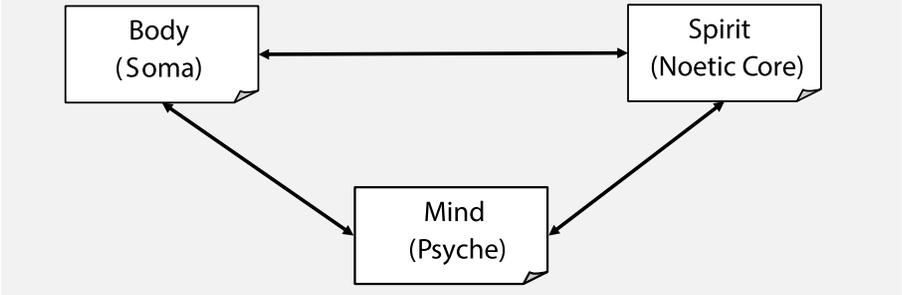
all circumstances it can activate the will to meaning and to find meaning. The Pneumatic core consists of responsibility (not from, but responsibility to), authenticity and creativity, choices, values, self-transcendence, will to meaning, love, conscience and ideals and ideas, etc. It is possible that the pneumatic core could be blocked by the biological or psychological sickness, but the spirit does not get sick. So through achieving meaning, the biological and the psychological blockages could be eliminated bringing wholeness and wellness to the human person.

The three triads explain how to encounter meaning in life. The freedom of the will is the basic foundation. The other two are will to meaning and meaning of life. The second triad evolves from meaning life, integrating creative, experiential and attitudinal values. The attitudinal values evolve into the third triad, namely, suffering, guilt and transitoriness. Frankl observes that "If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death" (p. 88). Suffering according to him triggers the quest for meaning. Embrace of suffering is essential for authentic happiness. According to Frankl, homo sapiens is in complementarity with homo patiens (suffering man) because searching for success is also connected to suffering and meaning. Suffering without meaning definitely leads to the tragic triad. Pain refers to unavoidable human suffering while guilt towards the awareness of our fallibility, vulnerability and fragility. Death gives us the awareness about our transitory nature of life. These negative triads create in us, an awareness about our pneumatic component and the necessity of having meaning and spiritual orientation and aspiration. When one is obscuring the guilt, pain and death, the probability of thrown into the neurotic disorders is higher. So the pneumatic dimension is all the more important in Logotherapy. The cognitions and behaviours are definitely based on the pathways we choose that is governed by the hierarchical layers of the human ontology.

There are two types of meanings that are envisaged, namely the ultimate and the transitional meaning. The ultimate meaning can never be achieved fully and we can only have the glimpses. The ultimate meaning can be God for believers, for scientists it can be the truth, nature and evolution etc for those who do not believe in a superior power beyond us. The transitional meaning can be the answers to the questions of life and the demands of life each moment and context

that is placed before the human being. Instead of asking life questions, one is ready to answer the questions of life by discerning choices every moment and thus being responsible for the whole of life. When life cannot find meaning, life becomes an 'existential vacuum'. This is a state of inertia, boredom, apathy, inactivity leading to existential frustration which eventually becomes a "noogenic neurosis". Hence people try to fill up this emptiness with drugs, violence, food, sports, work-holism, alcoholism, pornography, and other unwanted activities of the mind and body leading to a total collapse of the personality continuum, namely, body, mind and soul.

In order to find meaning, it is necessary to take care of the pneumatic or noetic component. It has to be educated that we are unique, we are self transcendence, there is the possibility that we can change ourselves by changing the attitudes, and thus can find meaning in activity, relationships, service and a transcendental power. Also what cannot be changed could be courageously endured. One also has to be made aware that she/he is not a victim of fate or circumstances. What one encounters, is only the symptoms and she/he is not the symptom. The client is to be made aware about his/her own meaning triangle which could be specific for each individual. One has to seek the answers from within rather than the therapist. The individual is to be strengthened in order to be independent and make her own choices that comes from within rather than induced. There are three pathways Frankl introduced to discover meaning. The creative pathway emphasizes that the human person as a responsible, creative, and free agent capable of self-regulation, self determination and goal striving. Each person has the potentialities and possibilities in life to achieve something significant in life. By being grateful and sensitive towards life, we are mindful of what is happening around us and positively acknowledges the gift that has been gratuitously offered to us. Even one needs to be grateful for the negative experiences. This is the experiential way. In the context of suffering, pain and frustration, the attitudinal pathway leads us. It encourages the pneumatic dimension to go deeper, higher and broader into one's own inner resources and reaching out to the other suffering persons. It enables one to make sense of the tribulations, trials, paradoxes and predicaments of life. Logotherapy proposes that every crisis is an opportunity for personal transformation by revising their foundational assumptions and attitudes and adaptation to their contexts.



So Logotherapy is a philosophy of life, integrated with theory and praxis. It incorporates the body, mind and soul though any specific religious appendage is given. It is a psycho-spiritual tool encompassing the holistic account of the human being leading to wellness and holiness incorporating attitudes and values. This can be applied to every profession and walk of life. It is now employed by educators, counselors, priests, business managers and all sorts of people in the leadership and ordinary life. We, humans are thrown into the world of possibilities and challenges. It is one's responsibility to make the choices and then happiness will be descending through the fulfillment of the meaning one will pursue. However as Frankl himself discovered from his life experience, "Meaning cannot be given but it has to be discovered". So one can assertively say that logotherapy is not only a psycho-spiritual theory and practice but also it is an epistemological analysis of the human person. Thus he has supplanted a solid philosophy through the logotherapy. This has been affirmed by Andrew Tengan through his book *Search for Meaning as the Basic Human Motivation: A Critical examination of Viktor Emil Frankl's Logotherapeutic Concept of Man*, "by articulating the philosophy underpinning logotherapy, (Frankl) has supplanted 'the unconscious [and] invalid philosophical hypotheses of the Freudians and Adlerians by a conscious philosophy".⁴ In summary, it can be affirmed that Frankl rehumanized psychiatry, reaffirmed the self-determinism of the human being that he is not blindly lead by fate or circumstances but powerful enough to direct his own course of life irrespective of the circumstances. Thus Frankl portrays an alternative richer picture of the human person eliminating the reductionist paradigm sponsored by the Freudian deterministic sexual paradigms with an anthropological and philosophical analysis of the human person integrating neurology, psychiatry, psychology and religion to a richer, holistic and comprehensive account with a healing and wellness tool.

⁴ Andrew Tengan, *Search for Meaning as the Basic Human Motivation: A Critical examination of Viktor Emil Frankl's Logotherapeutic Concept of Man*, p. 75.