

THE LOGOS OF OUR LIVES

Viktor Frankl, Meaning and Spiritual Direction

Richard Boileau

THE PROLOGUE TO John's Gospel tells us something essential about the source and nature of life: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, *and the Word was God*'. The Greek term in the Gospel that is translated as 'Word' is *logos*, which can also be translated as 'meaning'.¹ Thus our earthly quest for meaning, of which so much is written nowadays, is ultimately a search for the divine source. Similarly, the desire to draw closer to God is essentially a search for meaning or, in Socrates' terms, a search for life's truth, goodness and beauty.² To say this is by no means a denial of the existence of God or a reduction of God's sovereignty, but simply an affirmation of the varied paths by which the divine presence can be apprehended.

Some people who present themselves to spiritual directors arrive with a clear intent to develop a more intimate relationship with God, while others seek a solution to a particular crisis, or relief from an existential malaise. Spiritual directors are encouraged to regard the latter as an expression of an unconscious need for spirituality. Among the authors who have contributed to this understanding is Viktor Frankl, who argued that the most important human motivation is the search for ultimate meaning (which he too called *logos*), even if a person is not conscious of this drive.³ This article explores the links between meaning and spirituality with a view to providing ways of applying Frankl's insights to the practice of spiritual direction in the Christian tradition.⁴

¹ Anthony J. Kelly, 'Logos', in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989), 601.

² For example in Plato's *Republic*.

³ See Viktor E. Frankl, *The Unconscious God* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 25–32, and Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Beacon, 2006), 90.

⁴ See also my 2009 article in *The Way* looking at the potential contributions of psychosynthesis to spiritual direction ('Sub-Personalities and Authenticity', *The Way*, 48/1), and another a year later

Viktor Frankl and Logotherapy

Frankl was a Viennese psychiatrist of Jewish background who survived the Holocaust to found the third Viennese school of psychotherapy, known as logotherapy and existential analysis. This so-called third wave of psychotherapy was a repudiation of Freud and Adler in their emphasis on pleasure and power as drivers of human behaviour. Without denying the 'push' of baser instincts, Frankl pointed to the 'pull' of meaning, and the attendant need for self-detachment and self-transcendence: 'Only to the extent that someone is living out this self-transcendence of human existence is he truly human or does he become his true self'.⁵

Though raised a Jew, Frankl was very familiar with Roman Catholicism, which was a part of his daily life in Vienna. He was a student of Rudolf Allers, a professor at the Vienna Medical School who later immigrated to the United States to teach philosophy at Georgetown Catholic



Viktor Frankl

University. Allers was considered a neo-Thomist, and, while living in Vienna, he played host to intellectuals such as Edith Stein and Hans Urs von Balthasar.⁶ It is through their relationship with Allers that Frankl and Balthasar came to know one another, quoting each other in their work. In *Homo patiens* (1950), Frankl introduced the concept of love starting from Balthasar's assertion that 'the meaning of being is in love'.⁷ Meanwhile, in *Explorations in Theology: Man Is Created* (1986),

(*'Consolation of Mind and Heart: The Search for Meaning and Happiness'*, *The Way*, 49/4) relating the search for happiness and meaning to the Exercises of St Ignatius.

⁵ Viktor E. Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul: From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Vintage, 1986), 294.

⁶ Alexander Batthyany and Jorge Olaechea Catter, 'Notes on Rudolf Allers and His Thought', in Rudolf Allers, *Work and Play: Collected Papers on the Philosophy of Psychology (1938–1963)* (Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 2009), 11.

⁷ Viktor E. Frankl, *Homo patiens* (Vienna: Deuticke, 1950), 30, citing Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Wahrheit der Welt* (Einsiedeln: Benzinger, 1947), 118.

Balthasar suggested that logotherapy is ‘indispensable for basically any form of therapy’ that is open to a new future, a meaningful engagement with the world and environment that is perceived as meaningful as a whole.⁸

Viktor Frankl proposed that a person comprises three aspects: body, mind and spirit.⁹ He made a distinction between mind and spirit because the concept of mind had been reduced to a psyche driven by impulses (pleasure and power), whereas in the dimension of the spirit, he argued, resides the capacity for a person to decide freely for unconditional love to develop. For Frankl, the dynamics of the spirit are different from the dynamics of body and mind. The spirit seeks meaning, *logos*. And in spirit there is a tension between the present and the future, ‘a polar field ... where one pole is represented by a meaning that is to be fulfilled and the other pole by the man who has to fulfil it’.¹⁰

Frankl claimed that the dynamic of the human spirit includes the capacity for self-distancing (inner dialogue) and self-transcendence (reaching out to others). Self-actualisation—personal fulfilment—is, therefore, the expression of a reality transcending the self:

... the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic ‘the self-transcendence of human existence’. It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.¹¹

Such self-actualisation occurs, he argued, in a dialogue with the conscience, which Frankl called the ‘organ of meaning’.¹² Conscience guides a person towards meaning. When someone listens to the voice of conscience, he or she is effectively listening to the voice of God: ‘Conscience is not only a fact within psychological immanence but also a referent to transcendence; only with reference to transcendence, only as some sort of transcendent phenomenon, can it really be understood’.¹³

⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, volume 5, *Man Is Created*, translated by Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2014), 108.

⁹ Viktor E. Frankl, *The Will to Meaning* (New York: Meridian, 1988), 22.

¹⁰ See Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 103–106, here 105.

¹¹ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 110–111.

¹² Viktor E. Frankl, *On the Theory and Therapy of Mental Disorders: An Introduction to Logotherapy and Existential Analysis* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 9.

¹³ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning* (New York: MJF, 2000), 60.

The quest for meaning was the constant heuristic of Frankl's life. At the age of sixteen he gave a lecture to a group of philosophy students on the meaning of life.¹⁴ Eight years later, he had identified three paths to finding meaning, 'even up to the last breath', namely 'a deed to do, a work to create; an experience, a human encounter, a love; and when confronted with an unchangeable fate (such as an incurable disease), a change of attitude toward that fate'. Throughout, he pointed to a core concept derived from direct observation and personal experience, namely capacity 'to turn suffering into a human triumph'.¹⁵

But it was by his experience in the Nazi concentration camps at Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Dachau that his world-view was finally formed. In a lecture he gave following his release, he cited the example of St Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan friar murdered at Auschwitz, who 'found meaning within the fraction of a second when he decided to sacrifice his life, asking the SS for permission to let himself be sentenced to death instead of a family father'.¹⁶

Christian Resonances

Frankl's understanding of the process of finding meaning resonates with Christian teaching and practice in his accounts of the religious meaning of humanity's 'existential vacuum'; self-transcendence; free will and human responsibility; the dehumanisation of the human person in psychotherapy; and facing up to suffering and death.¹⁷

Self-Transcendence, Free Will and Ultimate Meaning

Though his writing is not explicitly theistic ('logotherapy is not a Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish psychotherapy'),¹⁸ Frankl does concede:

Human beings are transcending themselves toward meanings which are something other than themselves, which are more than mere expressions of their selves, more than mere projections of these selves. Meanings are discovered but not invented.

In this way God and truth are located both within and beyond our capacity for understanding ultimate meaning:

¹⁴ Viktor E. Frankl, *Recollections: An Autobiography* (Cambridge Ma: Basic Books, 2000), 56.

¹⁵ Frankl, *Recollections*, 64.

¹⁶ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 157 n. 8.

¹⁷ See, for example, Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 134–135, 138; *The Doctor and the Soul*, 20–22; *On the Theory and Therapy of Mental Disorders*, 13; *Man's Search for Meaning*, 112–115.

¹⁸ Frankl, *Will to Meaning*, 143.

We must remain aware of the fact that as long as absolute truth is not accessible to us (and it never will be), relative truths have to function as mutual correctives. Approaching the one truth from various sides, sometimes even in opposite directions, we cannot attain it, but we may at least encircle it.¹⁹

The struggle with the meaning of things can be acknowledged, resisted or sublimated, but it is always present. I would argue that it is a response—more or less conscious—to God’s call to wholeness and authenticity. Our response can be distorted or direct, timid or bold.

Frankl’s understanding of ultimate meaning thus embraces one of the central themes of Christianity, namely free will. He wrote, ‘Human beings are not one thing among others: things are determining each other, but man is self-determining’; ‘Man is free to rise above the plane of the somatic and psychic determinants of his existence’.²⁰ Hence ‘Social environment, hereditary endowments, and instinctual drives can limit the scope of man’s freedom, but in themselves they can never totally blur the human capacity to take a stand towards all those conditions’.²¹ In taking such a stand, human beings are open to transformation—to being ‘transformed by the renewing of your minds’ (Romans 12:2). Transformation occurs in the authentic pursuit of meaning, sometimes found in flashes of epiphany, but most often as a result of painstaking reflection in which persistent self-interest and lingering fears are set aside.

Fundamentally, the question of meaning is theological. Frankl quotes Einstein, a central figure in modern scientific thought, to affirm that the only satisfying answer to ‘the question of the meaning of human life, or for that matter of any creature’, is a religious one.²² Answers that are steeped in convenience or self-interest in response to the large and enigmatic questions of existence—such as suffering, for example—always fall short. Meaning is also theological because it promotes the particular form of transformation that is *conversion*, which requires us to take responsibility for our response to new circumstances. More precisely, conversion aligns us with ultimate meaning and the vector of God’s grace.

One way of looking at our yearning for meaning is to think of it as a desire for integration, a deep disposition to reconstitute our disparate,

**The question
of meaning is
theological**

¹⁹ Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul*, xiii.

²⁰ Viktor E. Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism: Selected Papers on Logotherapy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 63, 3.

²¹ Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*, 60.

²² Albert Einstein, quoted in Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*, 93 n. 4.



life-tattered parts into a healthy whole. Another word or image for integration is incarnation. Our spirit wishes fully to inhabit our human reality. Our being is fractured when what we are cannot be reconciled with what we were or will be. Spirituality that absorbs all aspects of human existence might, therefore, be called incarnational.

Among the foundational principles of logotherapy are teachings regarding the need for hope to support a meaningful life. Referring to his experience of imprisonment by the Nazis, Frankl wrote,

When we spoke about attempts to give a man in camp mental courage, we said that he had to be shown something to look forward to in the future. He had to be reminded that life still waited for him, that a human being waited for his return.²³

Though this attitude perhaps more resembles wishing than theological hope, it serves to avert the hopelessness in which no spiritual connection can be found. True hope is rooted in ultimate meaning and is, therefore, forward-looking and resilient.

The Constructivist Approach

The idea of ultimate meaning does have its detractors. Constructivist philosophers and psychologists assume that individuals are engaged, whether automatically or deliberately, in reducing the discrepancies between their global belief system and the dynamics of a particular situation by *creating* meaning through assimilation or accommodation. By this account:

... we have no direct access to the world as it 'really is', unfiltered by our perceptions, our embodiment, our social and cultural embeddedness, and our language ... even our construction of the divine bears the stamp of human meaning-making; our theories of the natural world continually evolve, as do our constructions of God or spirituality.²⁴

²³ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 92.

²⁴ From correspondence with Robert Neimeyer, professor of psychology, University of Memphis.

The implications of this ‘meaning-making’ rather than ‘meaning-seeking’ approach to the human psyche, which has proved very valuable in therapy, should not be ignored.²⁵ I suggest there is merit in considering both in parallel when dealing with a spiritual or existential malaise. As ultimate meaning will never be fully grasped in this world, meaning that is responsibly constructed from an honest appraisal of experience does provide a refuge from the distress of meaninglessness, even though—in the experience of spiritual directors—restlessness eventually returns. While constructed meaning may provide momentary benefits, it soon enough leads to dissatisfaction or desolation, and the struggle for ultimate meaning eventually resumes. So it is important not to conflate the search for meaning as expressed in the principles of logotherapy with theories about meaning-making. While the latter provide some useful insights and pathways, the former is a safer guide in the context of spiritual direction. As Paul Wong explains:

Contemporary meaning-making models ... focus almost exclusively on the cognitive function of making sense of the world in negative situations. In contrast, Frankl’s meaning-seeking model focuses more on ... how to live with courage, freedom and responsibility. Meaning seeking is primarily about how to live a life of significance and purpose, in addition to making sense of life and feeling happy.

Eudaemonia: The Heartbeat of Meaning

In popular psychology, indeed, so many claims are made about happiness that some regard it as the preferred marker of physical and mental health. However, as Carol Ryff has observed, ‘research on well-being, if it is to do justice to the topic, needs to encompass the meaning-making, self-realizing, striving aspects of being human’.²⁶ Happiness is typically limited to pleasant outlooks and outcomes. But is adversity necessarily antithetical to happiness, or can it contribute to greater satisfaction through higher levels of consciousness, functioning, maturity and personal development?

The advocates of the happiness criterion turn to Aristotle, who ‘states that the highest of all goods achievable by human action is happiness (the latter term serving as the translation for the Greek word *eudaimonia*)’.

²⁵ See Paul Wong, ‘Viktor Frankl’s Meaning Seeking Model and Postive Psychology’, in *Meaning in Positive and Existential Psychology*, edited by Alexander Batthyany and Pninit Russo-Netzer (New York: Springer, 2014), 149–184, here 173.

²⁶ Carol D. Ryff, ‘Psychological Well-Being Revisited: Advances in the Science and Practice of Eudaimonia’, *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 83 (2014), 10–28, here 12.

However, as Ryff argues, in fact Aristotle looked beyond pleasant emotions for the source of true happiness. *Eudaemonia* has more to do with the human good than with hedonistic pleasure, and rests on two important concepts, namely self-knowledge and authenticity. Aristotle emphasized something that we would regard as foundational in Christian living:

... the highest of all human goods is not happiness, feeling good or satisfying appetites. Instead, it is about activities of the soul that are in accord with virtue, which Aristotle elaborated to mean striving to achieve the best that is within us. *Eudaimonia* thus captured the essence of the two great Greek imperatives: first, to know yourself, and second, to become what you are.²⁷

Happiness, therefore, is not something to be pursued directly, but is the by-product of a well-lived life. We may take a well-lived life to mean one that exhibits classic virtues, the greatest of these being love. Aquinas said something similar, that joy proceeds from love and is not a virtue in itself.²⁸

Making Sense of Suffering

Frankl's observations and experience of physical and emotional suffering, of coping with a situation or condition that cannot be changed, are foundational for logotherapy. Suffering is inevitable and inescapable, so it must not be regarded as an aberration and merely tolerated. It must be given a home in our understanding of the human experience.

Various spiritual writers have endeavoured to explain its purpose. Two traditions stand out especially: Buddhism, in which *dukkha* is the foundational problem of life, and Christianity, in which the passion of Christ is an integral part of the paschal mystery. On the surface, the distinction between the two may appear stark to some people, Christianity seeming to cling to suffering whereas Buddhism appears to focus on it as a problem to be solved. Both these interpretations are naïve. For Buddhists,

... if *dukkha* is perceived in the right way, it is said to lead to faith From faith, other states successively arise which are part of the path to the end of *dukkha*: gladness, joy, happiness, meditative concentration and deepening states of insight and detachment.²⁹

²⁷ Ryff, 'Psychological Well-Being Revisited', 11.

²⁸ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2. 1 q. 28.

²⁹ Peter Harvey, 'Dukkha, Non-Self, and the Teaching on the Four "Noble Truths"', in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by Stephen Emmanuel (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 31–32.

And for Christians, to cling to suffering would be to deny the mystery of Jesus' resurrection, the joy of the Good News and the power of love.

Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday gives us useful insights into the mystery of human suffering and mortality in Christianity. Holy Saturday transforms the meaning of death, the ultimate source of human anguish, loneliness and fear.

Since this love-death of our Lord, death has taken on a quite different meaning; it can become for us an expression of our purest and most living love, assuming that we take it as a conferred opportunity to give ourselves unreservedly into the hands of God.³⁰

In self-dying, we receive the gift of authenticity through self-transcendence:

Similarly, in Frankl's terms, the discovery of meaning enables us to change our attitude to suffering into something more robust and luminous.

Frankl's theory resonates with Holy Saturday-like existence, emphasizing a sacrificial, transcendent, love-imbued meaning for suffering. We live between the present painful reality and how things ought to be. Balthasar denies Holy Saturday, as a passive enduring of utmost desolation, and for Frankl, inactive passive enduring of unavoidable suffering retains the immanent meaning of all suffering, constituting moral attainment. In logotherapy, a person's searching for meaning points beyond to transcendence, community, and ultimate love. Suffering can become a triumph and salvation through love, which is the highest goal we can aspire to.³¹

One might conclude that suffering is a gateway to meaning rather than a host to meaning. This would suggest that we are meant to find meaning in distressing situations or conditions rather than bear them passively and stoically, or even suffer in solidarity with the crucified Christ. We need to have regard for the personal and social dynamic in which the suffering is located and which calls us to discover spiritual meaning.

Logotherapy, Spiritual Direction and Bereavement

One important application of meaning theory is our adjustment to the profound experience of bereavement. The most effective interventions in

³⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Credo: Meditations on the Apostles' Creed*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 53.

³¹ Joseph Barsuglia, 'Holy Saturday in Existential Psychology: Prolegomena Integration of Von Balthasar's Theology of Christ's Descent Into Hell with Meaning Making in Logotherapy in a Christian Context', unpublished article, Graduate School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary, 7 January 2008.

this situation have proved to be those that allocate appropriate thought and energy to the reconstruction of meaning in the process of mourning a significant loss. This has been my experience of accompanying the bereaved for more than thirty years. I have observed that the most significant changes occur in people whose narrative of a tragic episode in their lives is reframed or rephrased as a result of discovering new meaning, finding value or benefit of some sort in it (though typically such transformation involves risk and must proceed at a pace that is natural and safe).

I have often heard it said that all spiritual direction is a process of dealing with loss of some kind; discernment is often a matter of making difficult choices that involve loss. It is no coincidence, therefore, that researchers have established a link between psychological and spiritual bereavement: 'For a subset of spiritually inclined mourners, bereavement also elicits an assault to their long-held religious beliefs or spiritual ways of experiencing and understanding the world'.³² One study revealed, 'different themes subsumed in an overarching narrative of resentment and doubt towards God, dissatisfaction with the spiritual support received, and substantial changes in the bereaved person's spiritual beliefs and behaviors'.³³ A significant benefit of logotherapy in spiritual direction is its ability to integrate the psychological and spiritual parts that strive jointly to respond to distressing situations. Religious coping and meaning-making are effective when they operate in tandem to alleviate the suffering that is experienced by those dealing with grief, whether through separation from or the death of another person, or other significant loss.

Spiritual accompaniment of the bereaved can be both challenging and rewarding. The struggle can lead to growth in faith, hope and compassion; development in religious understanding; even major transformations in outlook, values and behaviour: 'While religiousness might not in itself mitigate the pain of loss ... it may nevertheless set the stage for greater growth through the experience'.³⁴ Regardless of the grief's cause or intensity, whether the result of something taken away or the unintended consequence of a freely discerned choice, spiritual distress deserves competent and caring attention, both in the nature of our listening and

³² Laurie A. Burke and Robert A. Neimeyer, 'Inventory of Complicated Spiritual Grief', January 2015, 1, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287391818_Inventory_of_Complicated_Spiritual_Grief_ICSG, accessed 19 November 2018.

³³ Robert A. Neimeyer and Laurie A. Burke, 'Loss, Grief and Spiritual Struggle: The Quest for Meaning in Bereavement', October 2014, 13, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262603003_Loss_Grief_and_Spiritual_Struggle_The_Quest_for_Meaning_in_Bereavement, accessed 19 November 2018.

³⁴ Neimeyer and Burke, 'Loss, Grief and Spiritual Struggle', 10.

the style of our interventions. Inevitably, it calls for equal weight to be given to recovering meaning from the rubble of tragedy and awakening our consciousness to a new horizon.

* * *

Grief is only one of many challenges in life, but it does demonstrate well the need and opportunity to understand reality in ever deeper ways. It seems that we are unlikely to grow without some form of distress, much in the same way that a weight-lifter knows that development of the body does not occur without pain. Invariably, all experiences, whether they are spontaneously greeted with joy or sadness, result in the adjustment of meaning. Whether it is realised or not, each thing that is heard, seen or felt prompts the question, what sense must I make of this, and how must I adapt to this new understanding? The spiritual director can skilfully and prayerfully play a vital facilitating role in this quest to discover ultimate meaning.

The purpose of spiritual guidance is to help put people in touch with their essential and true selves by unifying all dimensions of their being and to help them develop meaningful relationships with others and with God. In other words, the faithful, hopeful and loving accompaniment of persons who explicitly or implicitly search for meaning enables them to embrace life-affirming values and to discover a path to inner freedom. Always, meaning is the key.

Richard Boileau is a strategy consultant in planning, management and communication (www.boileaustrategies.ca); member of the Secular Franciscan Order; contributor to various journals; and founding director of Crib and Cross Franciscan Ministries (www.cribandcross.org), which provides grief counselling and spiritual direction, online reflections on Franciscan and Gospel themes, leadership of missions and retreats, and humanitarian outreach (Hope for Africa). He earned a certificate in spiritual direction from Dominican University College, and is certified in thanatology by the Association for Death Educators and Counsellors.