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VIKTOR FRANKL ON ALL PEOPLE'S FREEDOM TO FIND THEIR LIVES MEANINGFUL

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Abstract: According to Viktor Frankl, although people are not always free to choose the conditions in which they find themselves, they are always free to choose their *attitude* towards these conditions and, thus, are always free to find their lives meaningful. This basic tenet of Frankl's theory is also often repeated approvingly in the secondary literature. I argue that the claim is wrong; not all people are free to find their lives meaningful. Counterexamples include people who suffer from severe depression or people who, due to lack of sufficient intelligence, ability to focus, or determination cannot profit from psychological counseling (including logotherapeutic counseling). I also criticize Frankl's oft-repeated argument that some people's success in finding their lives meaningful in the concentration camps shows that all people are free to find their lives meaningful. Frankl's discussion of the noetic dimension and its relation to other dimensions of the human personality is also insufficient for defending his claim about all people's freedom to find their lives meaningful. Frankl's theory of the *noos* suggests that all people's lives are meaningful. But since not all people's lives are meaningful, Frankl's claims about the *noos* seem incorrect: either some people do not have (or are not also) a noetic dimension or the noetic dimension does not always endow life with meaning. Further, the claim that, thanks to all people's noetic dimension, all people's lives are already meaningful is in tension with the claim that all people can wrest meaning from life. I suggest that understanding Frankl as only claiming that all people have a potential for meaningful lives is also unhelpful. Finally, I discuss the implications of my criticism for Frankl's theory at large. I argue that much in this very helpful theory can be retained, but identify those aspects of the theory that need to be modified.

Key words: depression; Frankl, Viktor; freedom; logotherapy; meaning in life; responsibility

According to logotherapy—Viktor Frankl's psychological theory that takes finding meaning in life to be the main human motivation—all people are free to find their lives meaningful. Frankl argues that although people are not always free to choose the conditions in which they find themselves, they are always free to choose their *attitude* towards these conditions. Thus he writes, for example, 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" (emphasis added; 1985, p. 86). Similarly, "I […] bear witness to the unexpected extent to which man is, and *always* remains, capable of resisting and braving even the worst conditions" (emphasis added; 1988, p. 16; see also Frankl, 1985, p. 154). For Frankl, this freedom of attitude is also freedom to find life meaningful:

> … even when—indeed, precisely when—confronted with an unchangeable fact, the human person can still preserve his or her humanity precisely by overcoming the situation. What counts then is the stance and the attitude with which the person confronts the unavoidable blow of fate. Thus, the person is allowed and equipped to wrest and win meaning from life even up to his or her last breath (2004, p. 10).

Moreover,

> Fundamentally […] *any* man can, even under such circumstances [as those in the concentration camps], decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp … the last inner freedom *cannot* be lost. […] It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.
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> […]
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> 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. (Emphasis added; 1985, pp. 87-88)

The claim that all people are free to choose their attitudes, and thus are free to find their lives meaningful, is also often repeated approvingly in the secondary literature on Frankl and logotherapy (see, e.g., Brat, 2013, p. 104; Fabry, 1968, pp. 20, 23; Guttmann, 2008, pp. 31, 41-44; Lukas, 1984, p. 27; Pattakos, 2008, pp. 5, 9, 23, 37, 41-42, 49; Shantall, 2002, pp. 25, 370). This paper argues that the claim is wrong; not all people are free to find their lives meaningful. In various difficult circumstances, many people do not in fact have the freedom to choose the "right" attitudes, including that which finds life meaningful. This is a sad fact of life, but it is part of human reality. I base my argument both on counterexamples and a close reading of key logotherapeutic concepts. I conclude by discussing what my arguments mean for Frankl's theory at large.

Consider a friend of mine who, to protect his identity, will be named here Jeff. Regrettably, Jeff suffers from severe clinical depression. In earlier centuries, not much could be done to help people like him. In our era, things are better, although far from perfect. Jeff has been suffering from depression for many years now. With the help of psychological and psychiatric treatment, things went well for some time. He has been able to marry, have a family, and develop a career. Unfortunately, as is sometimes the case with severe depression, Jeff's medication has become less effective with time, and efforts to replace it with related drugs, or with drugs from other families, have not borne fruit. In consequence, Jeff's depressive episodes have become longer and deeper, and the breaks between them shorter and less restorative.

When I visit Jeff today I am talking with a person who has no energy, and is in significant emotional pain. I hesitate to say that Jeff hates his life, since hatred implies an energy and conviction that people suffering from deep depression do not have. Perhaps one day psychology and psychiatry would advance to the stage in which people like Jeff could be helped. But these disciplines are not at that stage now. At present, Jeff can be helped neither by himself, nor by psychological counseling (including logotherapy), nor by psychiatric intervention. He cannot be helped even if we will tell him to try to find meaning in his suffering, to defy suffering, to transcend the circumstances in which he finds himself, or to

remember the good times. He just cannot do it. He is not free to find his life meaningful, and cannot choose "the stance and the attitude with which … [he] confronts the unavoidable blow of fate" (2004, p. 10). Needless to say, Jeff's is not a unique case. There are many more people like him in the institution in which he is hospitalized as well as in similar institutions around the world. And there are many more people around the world who are severely depressed but are not even hospitalized.

I believe that the existence of such cases disproves the claim that all people are free to find their lives meaningful. But there are also other examples of people who can neither help themselves nor be helped by psychologists or psychiatrists. As clinicians know well, not everyone can profit from psychological counseling, including logotherapeutic counseling. To profit from treatment, clients need to have sufficient degree of, among other qualities, motivation, ability to form relationships, determination, and will to change (Black, Hardy, Turpin, & Parry, 2005; Bachelor, Laverdière, Gamache, & Bordeleau, 2007). Not all people have these prerequisites. Likewise, success in psychological counseling requires some trust between counselor and client. Yet some people, for different reasons, find developing relationships of trust difficult or impossible. Psychological treatments, including logotherapy, also come with a certain ideology. But people who have been acculturated from a young age to endorse other, totalistic and closed ideologies (such as some radical and fundamentalist religious ideologies), may not be free to accept logotherapeutical (or other psychological) treatment that would help them find life meaningful. For example, they may see their lives as meaningless because they have committed a serious sin that the type of god or deity they believe in will never forgive, and be closed to other interpretations of the event.[1] Others might have been educated into some kind of an honor ideology that does not allow them to help themselves or be helped: "My life is meaningless because I am a coward. I didn't behave in a manly way, and therefore I am worthless. Nothing can erase this shame."

Frankl often bases his claim that all people are free to find their lives meaningful even in the harshest conditions on his experience in the Nazi concentration camps. Indeed, notwithstanding the terrible circumstances, some prisoners in the camps did manage to retain a sense of meaning. Frankl writes,

> 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.
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> And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision … which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate (1985, p. 10).

[1] Frankl's view that all people in all circumstances can find their lives meaningful seems to have affinity with the Christian notion that people can always repent and that those who truly do so are forgiven and can find themselves in God (1 John 1:9; Romans 8:1; Colossians 1:14; Acts 10:43). But not all religions share this notion. Although Frankl saw his theory as universal, it may be more culture-specific than he noted.

Likewise,

> Of the prisoners only a few kept their full inner liberty and obtained those values which their suffering afforded, but even *one* such example is sufficient proof that man's inner strength may raise him above his outward fate (emphasis added; 1985, pp. 88-89).

But the argument is problematic, and is similar to arguing that if some people can climb to the top of Mount Everest all people can do so; or that if some people can understand quantum physics all can understand it. Of course, the fact that some percentage of humanity reached the top of Everest shows that the claim "people can reach the top of Everest" is true. But the claim "people can reach the top of Everest," rendered more precisely, is not that *all* people are capable of reaching this mountaintop, but only that *some* people can do so, or that it is incorrect that *no one* can do so.

It might be suggested that Frankl's claim here is more limited: namely, that because some people are able to find meaning in the worst of circumstances (as in the camps), we can conclude that everyone can find meaning under *normal* conditions. But this too is incorrect. Suppose that a few people have the capacity to climb to the top of Everest under extremely difficult circumstances—for instance, with their legs shackled and carrying heavy loads. We cannot therefore conclude that *all* people could reach the top of Everest in the absence of these hindrances. Likewise, even if some individuals are capable of understanding quantum physics notwithstanding difficult circumstances (such as loud music playing in the next room), this too would not show that all people can master quantum physics under normal conditions.

Note that in the citations above Frankl himself writes that those who managed to sustain "the last of the human freedoms"—i.e., to choose how they would respond to the very harsh conditions in the concentration camps—were *few* in number, and that the *typical* prisoner differed from them. Surprisingly, however, he still sees this as sufficient proof that *everyone* has the capacity to behave like those rare, heroic individuals. The move from *some* to *all* here, then, is problematic. Frankl's experience in the concentration camps does not support the claim that all people, no matter the conditions, can have meaningful lives.

Interestingly, Frankl himself discusses depression (as well as other maladies) vis-à-vis the freedom to find life meaningful, but his statements on the topic contradict each other, thus rendering his view on this issue unclear. On the one hand, he claims that "it is our view that a human person who is suffering from an endogenous depression can, as a spiritual person, defy this effect of the psychophysical organism and keep him- or herself out of the events of the organic illness" (2004, p. 62). Here, Frankl seems to hold that even depressed people are free to find their lives meaningful. But he also points out when discussing mental illness that "the human spirit is dependent upon the service of its body. Indeed, more than this, this body *can terminate* its service" (2004, p. 61)—a view that seems in conflict with the statement cited above and with his view that all people are free to find their lives meaningful. It is unclear how these two conflicting views can be made to cohere.

I suggest, then, that it is incorrect that all people are free to find their lives meaningful. Some people are, and some are not, or are not under certain conditions. Frankl's generalizing, totalistic claim is over-optimistic. I find it odd that Frankl made this claim, which seems more typical of a speculative philosopher who presents sweeping, theoretical

generalizations about existence than of a doctor who treats and has experience with real patients in the real world and is familiar with the concrete, difficult reality as it is. I am certain that in his career Frankl encountered many patients whom neither he nor anyone else was able to help. (In his writings, however, he represents only success stories, an unfortunate choice as one can also learn a lot from failures.)

It might be argued, however, that the discussion above takes insufficient account of what Frankl calls the *noetic dimension*. According to Frankl, human existence has three dimensions: a physiological dimension, which relates to the body; a psychological dimension, which relates to the psyche (or soul, or mind); and a noetic dimension, relating to what he calls *noos*, which may be translated (uneasily) as "spirit." *Noos* (or spirit) is distinct, for Frankl, from the psyche, soul or mind. While the psyche, like the body, is conditioned and limited, governed by the empirical, deterministic laws of nature, *noos* is the free dimension of human personality (1988, pp. 16-26; 2004, pp. 151, 173, 175). According to Frankl, the noetic dimension of all people is incapable of being injured or sick (2004, pp. 60, 61-62, 177), and it is this dimension in which, through what Frankl calls conscience and responsibility, meaning inheres (1985, pp. 98, 131-132, 169-170; 1988, pp. 18-19, 49, 63, 65-66, 74; 2004, pp. 61-62, 176). All people have a noetic dimension even if they do not sense it in any way. It is just there, as an objective fact about human existence. Perhaps influenced by Heidegger's use of the term "ontology," Frankl calls his theory of the three dimensions of human personality *dimensional ontology*.

But if we accept Frankl's hypothesis that all people indeed have (or are also) a *noos*, and if we accept that the *noos* is where meaning inheres, then it seems that we have also to accept that all people's lives are meaningful, whether or not they perceive their lives to be so. This is indeed Frankl's view: he writes, "Life proves to be unconditionally meaningful, and it remains meaningful—it has and it keeps its meaning—under all conditions and in all situations" (2004, p. 10). Frankl (1988, p. 10) takes this thesis to be one of "the three pillars" of logotherapy's concept of a person (the other two pillars being the freedom of will and the will to meaning).

But the claim that human life is unconditionally meaningful is problematic as well. First, simple human experience seems to render this claim as preposterous as the claim that all people can find their lives meaningful. Jeff's life today is not meaningful in any normal sense of the term. Unless we re-define the term "meaningful" in a way that gives it a very different sense than the one it usually has in discussions about meaningful lives, to say that Jeff has led a meaningful life over the past few years is simply wrong. But this also suggests that either some people do not have (or are not also) a noetic dimension; or that the noetic dimension does not always endow life with meaning.

Second, if we accept Frankl's claim that all people's lives are always meaningful, then many other statements in Frankl's work appear odd. The claim that everyone's life is meaningful is in tension with Frankl's claim that "… the person is allowed and equipped to *wrest* and *win* meaning from life even up to his or her last breath" (emphasis added; 2004, p. 10), or that "the way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, … gives him ample opportunity—even under the most difficult circumstances—to *add* a deeper meaning to his life" (emphasis added; 1985, pp. 87-88). For if our lives are always meaningful, why should we "wrest and win meaning from life?" Why should we

"add a deeper meaning" to life? This sounds like telling people that they are always and unconditionally healthy *and* that they can, notwithstanding difficult circumstances, overcome their sickness and attain health; or that they are always and unconditionally rich *and* that they can, notwithstanding difficult circumstances, overcome their poverty and acquire wealth.

Perhaps, then, Frankl's assertion that life is meaningful "under all conditions and in all situations" should be understood as claiming only that people's lives are always *potentially* meaningful. More precisely, perhaps all people have (or are also) a noetic dimension, or *noos*, or spirit, in which meaning inheres, and this dimension endows all human beings with the *potential* to find their lives meaningful. However, this suggestion, too, fails to solve the problem at hand. Suppose it is true that all people indeed have the potential to find their lives meaningful. Can all people in fact *realize* this potential, and thus find their lives meaningful? If the reply is negative, then again it is untrue that all people can in fact find their lives meaningful, and Frankl's claims cited at the beginning of this paper are incorrect. If the reply is positive, so that it is claimed that all people can in fact realize their potential to find their lives meaningful—then Jeff's case described above (along with many others) is again a counterexample; it shows that the claim is simply wrong, and not all people can actualize their supposed potential to find their lives meaningful. We are, then, back at square one. The move from freedom to find life meaningful to a potential to find life meaningful is unhelpful. Frankl's claims, cited at the beginning of this paper, that all people can find their lives meaningful still seem false.

It might also be suggested that all people are free to find their lives meaningful in some way that is beyond logic or the power of rational thought. Or perhaps Frankl's claim is correct in some pre-reflective way—that is, one which is not within the limits of reason. Indeed, Frankl seems to consider the noetic dimension as beyond reason: he also calls it *logos*, and says that *logos* is deeper than logic (1985, p. 141). According to this suggestion, then, it is true that Jeff's example refutes Frankl's claims, but it does so only if we choose to consider the issue rationally. If we agree to consider it in some non-rational way, we can simultaneously hold that all people can find their lives meaningful *and* that Jeff cannot find his life meaningful, but no problem arises.

But this solution, if indeed it is one, strikes me as too much of a *deus ex machina*. It renders Frankl's logotherapy too irrational. It also seems inconsistent with the way Frankl himself advances his teachings and argues for his views. This suggestion in fact admits that, according to the way we usually think and understand these terms, Frankl was wrong to claim that all people are free to find their lives meaningful. To save Frankl from making a false claim, this suggestion presents a non-rational sphere in which the claim holds, a sphere in which the claim "all people are free to find their lives meaningful" does not really mean that all people are free to find their lives meaningful, but something else. If this route is followed, it should be exclaimed openly, and upfront, that Frankl's claim that all people are free to make their lives meaningful should not be understood as it usually is, but as meaning something else. Further, those who want to deal with the issue in a non-rational way must still explain why they prefer *this* non-rational theory to any other. After all, by the same "reasoning," one could also hold that no lives are ever meaningful, or that only tall people can find their lives meaningful, or that all people can find their lives meaningful only if they venerate the Aztec goddess *Toci*.

If what I have argued in this paper is correct, Frankl's totalistic claim about everyone's freedom to find life meaningful is over-ambitious and unrealistic. The claim that people always are free to find their lives meaningful should be rejected, and a more modest and realistic claim—perhaps that most or many people are free to find their lives meaningful—should be accepted instead; Frankl's theory requires some amendment. But this does not mean, of course, that the theory is wholly wrong. Accepting that we do not have complete freedom of attitude, and hence also no complete freedom to find our lives meaningful, does not affect many other aspects of the theory, and logotherapy continues to be a powerful way of helping people find meaning in their lives. It has been shown here that some people cannot find their lives meaningful. But others can, and the latter can often profit from logotherapy. We should use logotherapy to help people when doing so is effective, just as we would use, say, a given ear medication when doing so is effective, even if the medication does not help everyone.[2] Likewise, we can still employ logotherapeutic techniques, such as paradoxical intention (deliberate repetition of a disturbing thought or habit; 1988, pp. 146-152), insofar as such techniques are of help to patients. Rejecting the claim that all people are free to make their lives meaningful leaves unaffected also many other claims in Frankl's teachings, such as that all people want to have meaningful lives. The truth of these other teachings should be checked separately.

Yet, rejecting the claim that all people are free to find their lives meaningful does have implications for various other elements of the theory. First, Frankl's claim that people are free to find their lives meaningful comes with a corollary, namely, that people are *responsible* for finding their lives meaningful (1985, pp. 98, 131-133). But if we accept limitations to the first, we must, ipso facto, accept limitations to the second: people who cannot find their lives meaningful are not responsible for not finding their lives meaningful. I should add that I find the notion that all people whose lives are not meaningful are responsible for this condition not only incorrect but also cruel.

Second, Frankl rejects suicide under any conditions (1985, pp. 166-167). It seems that one of his arguments for this position is based on people's supposed freedom to find meaning even in the worst of circumstances. But if that freedom is restricted, as I suggest in this paper, then *this* argument for the absolute rejection of suicide does not hold. If suicide is always wrong, it is so for other reasons.

Third, the discussion above showed that Frankl's views on the noetic dimension are somewhat problematic. The claim that *noos* is both an ineluctable and a meaningful aspect of human existence is in conflict with some people's inability to find their lives meaningful. Frankl's theory of the *noos*, then, also calls for more clarification and amendment.

Saying that a theory requires more work and amendment does not belittle it. All important theories have been amended, developed and improved, often by adherents. The criticisms presented above, then, do not imply that this strong and helpful theory should be wholly rejected. On the contrary, moderating some of the theory's more radical and totalistic

[2] Interestingly, Frankl is realistic rather than over-optimistic when it comes to evaluating the curative powers of logotherapy. He writes clearly that it is not a panacea and is helpful only in some cases (1988, p. 9). But he does not adopt this realistic attitude when it comes to people's ability to find their lives meaningful.

claims and clarifying others are likely to strengthen the theory and render it even more helpful.

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