



# **The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy**

*Viktor E. Frankl*

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# The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy

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**The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy** Viktor E. Frankl  
From the author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, one of the most influential works of psychiatric literature since Freud.

"Perhaps the most significant thinker since Freud and Adler," said *The American Journal of Psychiatry* about Europe's leading existential psychologist, the founder of logotherapy.

## The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy Details

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**Viktor E. Frankl**

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## Taka says

So good, Frankl does it again.

Just as I was getting frustrated by a contemporary book on evolutionary psychology that treats the human brain as nothing but a computer, Frankl comes to the rescue: "...in a certain sense the statement is valid: man is a computer. However, at the same time he also is infinitely more than a computer. The statement is erroneous only insofar as man is defined as 'nothing but' a computer." What I also found fascinating is his concept of "dimensional ontology," where he uses a three-dimensional cup as projected onto lower dimensions: it would look like a rectangle on one surface and a circle on another. In the same way, when human nature is projected onto the lower dimensions of one discipline, say psychology, it will not give the right picture of the whole and also may contradict with another projection. Similarly, a sphere, a cone, and a cylinder can all project onto the ground (lower dimensions) as circles, and so the caveat: even if something looks the same from one vantage point, the reality might be completely different.

Two super small quibbles: As excellent this book is, it is riddled with quotations from other authors—evincing his erudition but also makes the reading experience a little bumpy. Also, I felt the author's afterward at the end of the book didn't add much.

Overall though, this book convinced me I should go read all of his books.

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## ????????? says

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## Bobby says

A bit heavy on jargon and academic references (most of which are outdated now), I recommend this book only for those who are really interested in logotherapy. For most, it's better to start with Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning," which gives a nice overview of logotherapy in lay terms.

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## Shannon says

After Freud, this is such a refreshing and sensible look at psychology! Frankl's theories embrace the hopes

and aspirations all humans are born with.

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## Rawan Saleh says

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## Hussam Al Husseini says

The first book I read for Viktor Frankl was Man's Search for Meaning. This is the second book and I highly recommend it. I really got interested in reading the rest of his books. The book is a little bit difficult to understand because of his philosophical approach. I can summarize the book as follows:

Logotherapy “*is the treatment of the patient’s attitude toward his unchangeable fate.*” It is based on three pillars:

### The First Pillar: The Freedom of Will

“*Man’s freedom is no freedom from conditions, but rather freedom to take a stand on whatever conditions might confront him.*” The freedom of will includes:

1. **Self-detachment** from even the worst conditions (choosing his attitude toward conditions) or from himself (choosing his attitude toward his somatic/psychic phenomena) and therefore becomes conscious of himself. He judges and evaluates his deeds in moral and ethical terms.
2. **Self-transcendence** by love and being conscious and therefore is able to seize a meaning in any situation. With these two qualities, man raises from somatic dimension or psychic dimension into a higher one - noetic dimension (spiritual dimension, even though Frankl did not like to use this term.)

### The Second Pillar: The Will to Meaning

The will to meaning can be defined “*as the basic striving of man to find and fulfill meaning and purpose.*” “*The homeostasis principle does not yield a sufficient ground on which to explain the human behavior*” such as “*the creativity of man, which is oriented toward values and meaning.*” That’s why human behavior is not driven by the will to meaning; man is pulled, not pushed toward meaning. And that is why “*meaning fulfillment always implies decision-making.*”

Frankl does not nullify Freudian psychoanalysis or Adlerian psychology, who neglected the humanness of man in a reductionist way. Reductionism is disregarding and ignoring “*the humanness of phenomena, by making them into mere epiphenomena.*” Reductionism can interpret love as a sublimation of sex. But, “*only to the extent to which an I is lovingly directed to a Thou-only to this extent is the ego also capable of integrating the id, of integrating sexuality into the personality.*”

Reductionism is caused by making “*overgeneralized statements on the grounds of limited findings.*” And by so doing, a person “*no longer sees the forest of truth for the trees of facts.*”

Frankl solved the conflict by an approach he called **dimensional anthropology and ontology**. This approach explains how one thing is seen in the view of a different dimension might contradict one another, but at the same time this contradiction does not contradict the oneness of the thing. As Frankl sees, the will to pleasure

and the will to power are mere derivatives of the primary concern, the will to meaning.

This is because *“pleasure, rather being an end of man’s striving, is actually the effect of meaning fulfillment. If there is a reason for happiness, happiness ensues ... that is why one need not pursue happiness, one need not care for it once there is a reason for it.”* But what if there was no reason for happiness? A man *“provides himself with a cause whose effect is pleasure,”* like alcohol or money. And power, rather than being an end in itself, is actually the means to an end.” However, *“only if one’s original concern with meaning fulfillment is frustrated is one either content with power or intent on pleasure.”*

The pleasure principle is self-defeating because *“the more one aims at pleasure, the more his aim is missed.”* The status drive also *“proves to be self-defeating, insofar as a person who displays and exhibits his status drive will sooner or later be dismissed as a status seeker.”*

*“Only if one’s original concern with meaning fulfillment is frustrated is one either content with power or intent on pleasure.”* And *“the hyper intention of pleasure might be traced to the frustration of another, more basic, concern.”* This holds for self-actualization as well, which is an effect of fulfillment of meaning.

*“Man does not care for pleasure and happiness as such but rather for that which causes these effects. This is most noticeable in the case of unhappiness.”* Frankl agrees with the saying that *“the Freudian pleasure principle is the guiding principle of the small child, the Adlerian power principle is that of the adolescent, and the will to meaning is the guiding principle of the mature adult”* because *“in the earliest stages of development there is no indication of a will to meaning.”*

### **The Third Pillar: The Meaning of Life**

Logotherapy does not give meaning and purpose! *“Meaning must be found but cannot be given, least of all by the doctor.”* There are three groups of meaning and values:

1. Creative values: *“what [man] gives to the world in terms of his creations”*
2. Experiential values: *“what [man] takes from the world in terms of encounters and experiences”*
3. Attitudinal values: *“the stand [man] takes to his predicament in case he must face a fate which he cannot change”*

*“This is why life never ceases to hold a meaning, for even a person who is deprived of both creative and experiential values is still challenged by a meaning to fulfill, that is, by the meaning inherent in the right, in an upright way of suffering.”*

Before knowing how to apply logotherapy, we need to understand existential vacuum (inner void) which is caused by two reasons:

1. *In contrast to an animal, no drives and instincts tell man what he must do.*
2. *In contrast to former times, no conventions, traditions and values tell man what he should do.*

Existential vacuum has dangerous consequences as William Irwin Thompson said *“... if [people] find that their lives are reduced to the mere existence of chairs and tables, they commit suicide.”* So *“education must not confine itself to, and content itself with, transmitting traditions and knowledge, but rather it must refine man’s capacity to find those unique meanings which are not affected by the crumbling of universal values.”* *“The wane of traditions affects only the universal values but not unique meanings.”* However, *“values cannot be taught; values must be lived.”*

Existential vacuum should not be misinterpreted as a pathological phenomenon or neurosis and hence *“the difference between existential despair and emotional disease disappears. One cannot distinguish between spiritual distress and mental disease.”*

2. It might not work with all patients, as some of them are “*feeble-minded to understand the meaning of paradoxical intention*” and the humor used in it.

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Frankl draws on a multitude of sources, including the semi-geometric metaphors of “dimensional anthropology,” religious teaching, personal experience, and direct reference from peer-reviewed journals, to help us understand precisely what he means by having a will, the result of that will (the titular “will to meaning”), and those things with which the human will must contend in the search for meaning. Time and

again, he stresses that the vast majority of psychological theory and therapy has been focused on *reifying* the individual—on the reductionist idea of humans as nothing more than machines trying to reach equilibrium, of mental disorder as being a kind of fault that must be repaired—a focus and interpretation he believes is counter to the purpose of therapy, that is, healing. Instead, he suggests that we *humanize* psychology, that we treat patients with *human* dignity and respect, as beings with will and intention (although these be disordered), rather than as mere *things* acted upon by environment or training.

From there, he shifts his focus to the place which meaning has in the “spirit” of man—not in the “spirituality” of man, which he leaves to the prerogative of the patient, but the “essence” of man in the philosophical sense, that which makes us human. Frankl puts forth that not only is the search for meaning the primary goal of life, but that the typically stated goals by prior psychotherapy schools are merely the by-products of this search: the “pleasure principle” is the effect of achieving meaning, and the “will to power” is one method by which meaning is achieved. Trying to make these by-products into the ultimate goal merely frustrates the patient and compounds the error, hence why someone who is highly successful (in the author’s examples, a businessman or a playboy) can still experience pathological despair in the midst of fulfilling the *will to power* or *will to pleasure*, while a prisoner on death row can experience fulfillment in the midst of objective failure as far as power and pleasure are concerned. The combination of excessive reductionism and grasping after effects when one should be seeking causes has created fertile ground for what Frankl considers the major psychological issue of our time: the incredible expansion of the “existential vacuum,” a void without meanings to fall back on, an expansion perpetuated and accelerated by the nature of the modern global *zeitgeist*, in both East and West.

Having established that these neuroses can exist—that a frustration of “spirit,” of meaning, a.k.a. *noogenic disorder* can be a pathological condition in its own right in comparison to physiochemical (“somatogenic”) and mental/emotional (“psychogenic”)—he proceeds to discussing when and how it is appropriate to apply logotherapy. At the very outset, he establishes that there are different therapies for different disorders with good reason—logotherapy is not a “silver bullet,” though it can serve a therapeutic purpose in its native dimension (noogenic disorders) as well as in other dimensions. Two techniques are central to the logotherapeutic process: “paradoxical intention,” or intending to cause the problematic effect and thereby causing its opposite, and “dereflection,” or ceasing to look inward at the self and thereby look outward at the world. These two techniques can be used separately or in concert to defuse a number of psychogenic disorders, particularly phobias, addictions, and obsessive-compulsive-type behavior, especially when used alongside other treatment methods for possible cofactors (e.g. thyroid issues inducing a tendency to agoraphobia).

Overall, my thoughts on the book were deep and varied. Firstly, the initial section about framing logotherapy, meaning-therapy, struck me (perhaps ironically) as “nothing new.” I’ve read theories very much in the same vein by an author who never had any training in psychiatry, psychology, neurology, or indeed any major medical or scientific study—a professor of languages named C. S. Lewis. Ideas like how seeking pleasure is a self-defeating effort because pleasure is a byproduct, not an aim, or the unique human position of being *worthy* of feeling guilt and *responsible* for handling that feeling, occur more than once in Lewis’ thought. Of course, it was both helpful and refreshing to hear these thoughts from someone with a very different background, someone genuinely trained to heal disorders of the mind, but all through the first section I had a nagging feeling that Frankl was merely replicating the thought of another. (I am absolutely certain that both Frankl and Lewis came to their ideas independently, but the feeling existed despite this.) In either event, I could at least feel a resonance with the general goal and intent of Frankl’s work.

Fortunately, other aspects of his initial discussion were much more useful to me, such as his notes and figures relating to “dimensional anthropology.” Giving these ideas the weight of images assisted me in turning words to concepts, which has been difficult for me in some areas of philosophy. I also greatly enjoyed the opposition to the “reductionist” efforts in psychology, psychiatry, and other sciences. My experience has been that many scientists overzealously pursue their areas of expertise—not that zealous pursuit of knowledge is a problem. It is more a matter that, as Frankl says, “We are living in the age of



specialists, and this takes its toll. I would define a *specialist* as a man who *no longer sees the forest of truth for the trees of facts*,” (page 20, emphasis in original). Seeing this issue clearly and honestly laid out in specific terms, not to judge but instead to provide insight in dealing with issues of the modern day, I felt very heartened and personally appreciated.

In the second section, where the actual application of logotherapy is discussed, I could not help but laugh at some of the anecdotes. Cognitively, I understand the gravity of the issues presented—compulsive gambling and agoraphobia, for example, are anything but trivial issues—but the actual use of things like the technique of paradoxical intention produced a laugh (which may in fact have been his intent). For example, one patient at Frankl's clinic, suffering from agoraphobia, feared he'd collapse in the street if he left his house—his therapist then told him, "Tell yourself that yesterday you had two heart attacks, and today you have time to get three--it's still early in the morning. Tell yourself that you will have a nice, fat coronary, and a stroke to boot." Through this paradoxical intent, he was able to overcome his fear *of* fear, and then the fear itself. As a whole, the second section was equally as enjoyable and educational as the first, but in a more personal way, whereas the first was more theoretical and philosophic. I definitely think I've profited from the reading, and will work to apply Frankl's recommendations to my own life and to those around me who may need help.

Now, that being said--this was an essay written for a class, so it's probably not the best review possible. The important thing here is that I definitely felt that Frankl had something very important to say--something that has been said by others before him--and that his credentials give us another good reason to listen to what these people have said.

**The Serendipity Aegis ~ ?Misericordia? ?????? ❄️❄️💖💖 says**

Meaningful. A re-re-re-re-read!

## Yara abdelkarim says

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**M. H. says**

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## **Melinda says**

I finished reading Viktor Frankl's book "Man's Search for Meaning", and then started looking for more of his books to read. This book is EXCELLENT and I would recommend it for reading after "Man's Search for Meaning". I am already starting on a 2nd reading.

This book is more of an indepth explanation of Frankl's approach to psychology called "Logotherapy". The book is made up of a set of lectures given at SMU in 1966 by way of introduction and explanation of Logotherapy.

Logotherapy is based on the following three concepts --1. freedom of will, 2. will to meaning, and 3. meaning of life. Frankl believes that "life holds a meaning for each and every individual, and even more, it retains this meaning literally to his last breath. The psychiatrist can show his patient that life never ceases to have a meaning. To be sure, he cannot show his patient WHAT the meaning is, but he may well show him that THERE IS a meaning, and that life retains it; that it remains meaningful, under any conditions. As logotherapy teaches, even the tragic and negative aspects of life, such as unavoidable suffering, can be turned into a human achievement by the attitude which a man adopts toward his predicament. In contrast to most of the existentialist schools of thought, logotherapy is in no way pessimistic; but it is realistic in that it faces the tragic triad of human existence: pain, death, and guilt. Logotherapy may justly be called optimistic, because it shows the patient how to transform despair into triumph."

This book is excellent because it DOES face reality, and shows you that your attitude towards your circumstances can transform suffering into a hopeful achievement. Frankl's experiences in the Nazi concentration camps lends such an incredible validity to his observations, and each chapter builds on his wisdom.

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## **Daniel Jordan says**

As one of my colleagues first suggested, Viktor Frankl's writings are actually philosophical even though he was a psychiatrist and neurologist by profession. While this book is clearly not a textbook on applied logotherapy, it does provide a good theoretical framework for logotherapy and is worth reading for that alone. It is less autobiographical than Man's Search for Meaning and may disappoint some who are looking for emotional impact. However, for those who are looking to deepen their understanding of Frankl's concept of meaning it's a must read. Personally, I found the distinction between being and meaning on pages 51 and 52 and the concept of 'dimensional ontology' on pages 22 to 30 particularly valuable.

Also, Frankl is a man who clearly understands his place in psychology (Freud - will to pleasure, Adler - will to power, Frankl - will to meaning). Frankl's comparison of his work to that of Freud, Adler, and others helped put the development of psychology as a discipline in perspective.

In defence of Frankl, readers who see his as self-promotion are underestimating the momentous undertaking of bringing to bear a more humanizing approach to psychotherapy. I assert that Frankl knew that logotherapy would never become part of the psychology establishment.

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