

Frankl's Assumptions and the Will to Meaning

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Frankl makes three assumptions about the nature of being human that will necessarily influence a logotherapy hermeneutic. As stated by Frankl, these are freedom of the will, the will to meaning, and meaning in life. *Freedom of the will* refers to freedom to choose one's response to the conditions of life; it is not freedom from conditions in life.¹ Indeed, Frankl writes of the *tragic triad*, or those conditions of life from which no human being can escape: pain, guilt, and death.² Frankl sees a fluid boundary between the *area of freedom* and the *area of fate*. At times, the area of freedom may be large with many opportunities to actualize values. At other times, the area of freedom may be small, but it never reduces to zero. Frankl famously 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."³

The *will to meaning*, or the desire to understand the purpose of one's own life, is the basic human motivation in logotherapy.⁴ As noted, Frankl sees it as more basic than even the desire for pleasure and the desire to avoid pain. In fact, he points out that the human person will sacrifice pleasure or choose to undergo pain if it is seen as having a

¹ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 16.

² Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 73.

³ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 65-66.

⁴ Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 61-62.

transcendent meaning for the sake of another or for a cause in which one believes.⁵ Finally, meaning in life is believed to be an objective *demand characteristic* of the environment.⁶ One of Frankl's most important insights is that it is not the human person who asks the meaning of life, but, rather, life that asks something of the human person. He explains: "One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it."⁷ Moreover, logotherapy teaches that life has meaning under any and all circumstances. Meaning in life is unconditional.⁸ It is not the task of the human person to invent a meaning, but to discover the meaning that is already present.⁹

To illustrate the discovery of meaning, Frankl tells the story of his consideration of accepting an American visa to emigrate after the Nazis had annexed Austria:

Shortly before the United States entered World War II I received an invitation from the American Embassy in Vienna to go there to pick up my visa for immigration to this country. At that time I was living in Vienna alone with my old parents. They, of course, did not expect me to do anything but pick up the visa and then hurry to this country. But at the last moment I began to hesitate because I asked myself, 'Should I really? Can I do it at all?' For it suddenly came to my mind what was in store for my parents. . . . Then I went home and when I did so, I noticed a piece of marble stone lying on a table. I inquired of my father how it came to be there, and he said, "Oh, Viktor, I picked it up this morning at the site where the synagogue stood." (It had been burned down by the

⁵ Viktor E. Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism* (New York: Clarion, 1967), 40-41; Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 113. In contexts such as this, Frankl will sometimes contrast the human person with the animal. Animals, however, are increasingly understood to have levels of consciousness. When logotherapy contrasts the human person with the animal, it does so somewhat metaphorically to highlight the freedom of the will that human persons experience within themselves as opposed to those elements of the mind-body organism that are determined by other causes.

⁶ Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*, 21, 64.

⁷ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 108-109.

⁸ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 114.

⁹ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 62.

National Socialists.) “And why did you take it with you?” I asked him. “Because it is a part of the two tables containing the Ten Commandments.” And he showed me, on the marble stone, a Hebrew letter engraved and gilded. “And I can tell you even more,” he continued, “if you are interested; this Hebrew letter serves as the abbreviation of only one of the Ten Commandments.” Eagerly I asked him, “Which one?” And his answer was: “Honor father and mother and you will dwell in the land.” On the spot I decided to stay in the country, together with my parents, and let the visa lapse.¹⁰

One concrete way in which logotherapy understands the will to meaning is through the distinction it makes between *ultimate meaning* and the *meaning of the moment*. Ultimate meaning is believed to exist, but to be largely unknown or unknowable. It is the area of faith.¹¹ The meaning of the moment, on the other hand, is knowable. The meaning of the moment consists in the one categorical value that any given moment in life requires of any given person.¹² This must be discerned, rightly or wrongly, through the operation of conscience.¹³ For Frankl, each combination of person and situation is unique and demands a unique response.¹⁴ Nevertheless, similar meanings discovered in similar situations over time leads to the development of religions and universal values.¹⁵ This does not excuse any given person from choosing what a unique situation may demand even if it should be in opposition to culturally accepted values.¹⁶ He writes: “In an age in which the Ten Commandments seem to lose their unconditional validity, man must learn more than ever to listen to the ten thousand commandments

¹⁰ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 58-59.

¹¹ Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*, 33.

¹² Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 108, 110-111.

¹³ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 57.

¹⁴ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 41.

¹⁵ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 63.

¹⁶ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 42; Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 19, 63.

arising from the ten thousand unique situations of which his life consists. And as to *these* commandments, he is referred to, and must rely on, his conscience.”¹⁷

Frankl gives an example of realizing the meaning of the moment by noting that in one unique situation, a newly married husband was informed through conscience that he should free his wife from her marriage vows. The specific situation was that the young wife, newly arrived in a concentration camp, might be given the option to remain alive if she engaged in sexual activity with members of the SS. Frankl writes of the situation, “The unique meaning was to abandon the universal value of marital faithfulness, to disobey one of the Ten Commandments. To be sure, this was the only way to obey another of the Ten Commandments—‘Thou shalt not kill.’ Not giving her his absolution would have made him co-responsible for her death.”¹⁸ Fabry informs us that this man was Frankl himself.¹⁹

¹⁷ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 65. Italics original.

¹⁸ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 63-64.

¹⁹ Joseph B. Fabry, *The Pursuit of Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 62.