

The Nature of the Human Person

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Frankl views the human person as a spirit that has a mind and a body (a psyche and a soma). He often refers to spirit as *noos* (and uses the adjective form *noetic*) to avoid religious connotation. He states that by this term he refers to that which is “uniquely human.”¹ The uniquely human realm includes such phenomena as love, freedom, and the will to meaning. The division between the spirit and the mind-body being is absolute for Frankl. The former possesses free will; the latter is subject to the laws of biology and psychology. The former is the seat of human existence; the latter is the home of somatic and psychological facticity.² Consequently, Frankl does not dispute objective, empirical findings, such as elements of the psychodynamic model proposed by Freud (the existence of the unconscious, for instance) or the discoveries of American behaviorism (such as classical conditioning).³ Rather, he sees his contribution as consisting of a psychological model that includes the spirit in an understanding of the human person and in the clinical techniques derived from this model.⁴ Frankl refers to this model as *dimensional ontology*.⁵ He explains: “Once we have projected man into the biological and psychological dimensions we . . . obtain contradictory results.

Dimensional ontology is far from solving the mind-body problem. But it does explain

¹ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 17-18, 22. Frankl recalls an episode at the age of 13 when a teacher told the class that life was nothing but an oxidation process. The young Frankl sprang to his feet and asked, “Professor, if this is the case, what meaning then does life have?” For further discussion of Frankl’s understanding of the uniquely human nature of meaning, see *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 96. One might even argue that logotherapy is Frankl’s answer to his precocious question.

² Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 32-33.

³ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 26.

⁴ Frankl, *On the Theory and Therapy of Mental Disorders*, 228.

⁵ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 23; Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 63-64.

why the mind-body problem cannot be solved. Of necessity the unity of man—a unity in spite of the multiplicity of body and mind—cannot be found in the biological or psychological but must be sought in that noological dimension out of which man is projected in the first place.”⁶ He refers to the functional aspects of the model as *noodynamics* of which he writes, “What man needs is not homeostasis but what I call ‘noodynamics,’ i.e., the existential dynamics in a polar field of tension where one pole is represented by a meaning that is to be fulfilled and the other pole by the man who has to fulfill it.”⁷

Frankl explains his dimensional ontology graphically by use of an image of a cylinder. When the curved plane of the cylinder is viewed, it is divided into three segments representing the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious—terms borrowed from Freud. When viewed from either end, the cylinder is further divided into an inner spiritual core, a psyche, and an outer body (see figure 1). Frankl explains his concept of the human spirit based on this model.⁸

⁶ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 24-25.

⁷ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 105.

⁸ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 22-25; Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 33-36; Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 75-55.

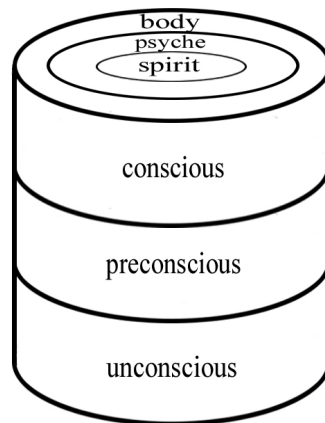


Figure 1. Frankl's Dimensional Ontology

For Frankl, evidence of the human spirit is found in those attitudes and behaviors that would not be predicted from biology and psychology. Frankl often refers to this unpredictable quality of being human as “the defiant power of the human spirit.”⁹ By this, he means the capacity of the human person to behave in accordance with meaningful values even when logic would conclude such values offer no utility. An example would be the sharing of bread between two starving people in a situation where both are likely to die regardless of whether the bread is eaten. Frankl observed this quality of being human even in a concentration camp. He notes, “There were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; 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.”¹⁰

⁹ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 147.

¹⁰ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 66.