

## The Existential Vacuum

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A lack of recognized meaning and purpose in life is what Frankl calls the *existential vacuum*, a state he believes is the result of the frustration of the will to meaning.<sup>1</sup> His definition of the idea, his description of its effect, and finally, his understanding of its ultimate resolution will provide points of reference for a logotherapy hermeneutic as it approaches the text.

Frankl describes a person experiencing the existential vacuum as living in a world in which previous traditions and values no longer provide guidance on what to do and a world in which the person may not even know what she wishes to do. A person in this situation may then simply do what others do (conformism) or do what others tell her to do (totalitarianism).<sup>2</sup> Manifestations of the existential vacuum include boredom, apathy, and sometimes *noogenic neurosis*, a clinical term devised by Frankl to describe psychological symptoms caused by moral and spiritual conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

The existential vacuum can also affect attitudes. It may be characterized by: (1) a provisional attitude toward life—living as if there is no tomorrow; (2) a fatalistic attitude toward life—acting as if one has no control over one's destiny; (3) collectivist thinking—a denial of one's own personhood; and (4) fanaticism—a denial of the personhood of those who think differently.<sup>4</sup> Frankl argues that these attitudes lead to the nihilism that he

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<sup>1</sup> Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 84; Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 61.

<sup>2</sup> Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 83.

<sup>3</sup> Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 85; Frankl, *On the Theory and Therapy of Mental Disorders*, 161-162.

<sup>4</sup> Frankl, *On the Theory and Therapy of Mental Disorders*, 161.

believes is in part responsible for the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> “I am absolutely convinced,” writes Frankl, “that the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Majdanek, were ultimately not prepared in some Ministry or other in Berlin but rather at the desks and in the lecture halls of Nihilistic scientists and philosophers.”<sup>6</sup>

The solution to the existential vacuum, according to Frankl, is the development of a sound philosophy of life. Such a philosophy would demonstrate that life has meaning for each and every human person no matter how dire the circumstances.<sup>7</sup> Frankl tells of a time when he was invited to speak to prisoners on death row at the San Quentin State Prison. He was asked to address some of his remarks to one prisoner in particular who was to be executed in a gas chamber four days later. He writes, “How could I cope with this assignment? Resorting to personal experiences at another place where people had to face a gas chamber, I expressed my conviction that either life is meaningful—in which case its meaning does not depend upon its duration—or else it is meaningless, in which case it would be pointless to prolong it.”<sup>8</sup> Frankl then gave an example from literature—Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*—concerning the discovery of meaning even when circumstances seem meaningless.

For Frankl, once meaning is discovered, it has been brought into existence for all time. He states: “Man must make his choice concerning the mass of present potentials: which will be condemned to non-being and which one shall be actualized, and thus rescued for eternity? Decisions are final for the only really transitory aspects of life are the potentialities. When one is actualized, it is actualized forever and can never be

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<sup>5</sup> Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 216-220.

<sup>6</sup> Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 220.

<sup>7</sup> Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 76.

destroyed.”<sup>9</sup> What Frankl means is that once one discovers a meaning in a situation, then what was previously a meaning potential becomes an actual, experienced meaning. It has taken on existence through an act of human choice and thus becomes real. Frankl further explains:

For as soon as we have used an opportunity and have actualized a potential meaning, we have done so once and for all. We have rescued it into the past wherein it has been safely delivered and deposited. In the past, nothing is irretrievably lost, but rather, on the contrary, everything is irrevocably stored and treasured. To be sure, people tend to see only the stubble fields of transitoriness but overlook and forget the full granaries of the past into which they have brought the harvest of their lives: the deeds done, the loves loved, and last but not least, the sufferings they have gone through with courage and dignity.<sup>10</sup>

Frankl believes that discovering and actualizing meaning in the present (or future) can even bring meaning to a meaningless past characterized by the existential vacuum. The discovery of meaning, then, represents overcoming the past and is, therefore, a human achievement. In the case of the prisoner on death row, if he chose to face his death with dignity and courage, then he made those values real in his life and, consequently, his life will forever be defined in part by them. Frankl explains that he had “hoped to show the prisoners that man can rise above himself, grow beyond himself—even in the last moment—and by so doing retroactively invest meaning even in a wasted life.”<sup>11</sup>

Frankl gives another example of investing meaning into a wasted life in the case of Dr. J. When Frankl knew him, he was known as the “mass murderer of Steinhof.” Steinhof was the primary psychiatric hospital in Vienna at the time the Nazi government began its euthanasia program. Dr. J was known for the zeal with which he worked to

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<sup>9</sup> Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 150.

<sup>11</sup> Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 76-77.

ensure that no person experiencing a psychosis escaped death. At the end of the war, Dr. J was captured by the Russians and eventually died in a Moscow prison. Years later, a former Austrian diplomat who was held for a time in the same prison asked Frankl if he had known Dr. J. When Frankl indicated that he had, the diplomat described Dr. J as “the best comrade you can imagine! He gave consolation to everybody. He lived up to the highest conceivable moral standard.”<sup>12</sup> With respect to such defeat of the existential vacuum, Frankl goes on to remark, “How can we dare to predict the behavior of man?”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 132.

<sup>13</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 132.