

VIKTOR FRANKL AND THE BOOK OF JOB

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INTRODUCTION

Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist, neurologist, and Holocaust survivor, developed a comprehensive psychological theory and therapy known as logotherapy and existential analysis. It holds that meaning in life can be discovered without regard to life's circumstances including unavoidable or unjust suffering.

This project reads the Book of Job from the hermeneutic position of Frankl's approach, designed to be used with people in a psychotherapeutic setting, and modified only to the degree necessary to allow the approach to engage in dialogue with a text. Because Frankl developed a vocabulary that has become closely associated with both meaning and suffering, his logotherapy is in a unique position to be a dialogue partner with the Book of Job.

I am particularly pleased to be able to present this paper at a conference whose plenary address was given by Carol Newsom. Of course, Newsom's work on Job was highly influential throughout the project and I will make references to her *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* from time to time. I also want to thank the Hebrew Bible section for allowing this paper to be included as part of its program.

The essence of logotherapy is that the human person is a being that seeks meaning. When meaning is lost, the result is a feeling of emptiness that Frankl calls the existential vacuum. Sometimes, according to Frankl, psychiatric symptoms result from this. Frankl's therapy is a method for the rediscovery of meaning. One key understanding of the nature of meaning in logotherapy is a difference between what Frankl calls ultimate meaning and the meaning of the moment. Ultimate meaning is said to belong to a world beyond the human world, a place where suffering may make sense,

or, as Newsom said in her address last night, may not be “entirely hostile” to human moral society, but which may also overturn “those humanly constructed orders of value and meaning.” However, this world cannot be grasped by the human mind. Rather, human meaning can only be discovered through the realization of certain categorical values that define the meaning of the moment, that is, the value that any given moment calls upon the human person to express, or fulfill. This involves living for someone or something beyond the self. Frankl calls this quality self-transcendence. In addition, logotherapy takes a position against reductionism and nihilism, positions that Frankl believes are in part responsible for the Holocaust.

As we apply Frankl’s viewpoint to the Book of Job, three central movements or themes emerge. The first relates to the existential vacuum and to the rediscovery of meaning in the face of it. This theme is prominent from chapters 1-27, that is, through the dialogue with the friends of Job. The second movement involves the nature of meaning itself. This, we will see, is closely associated with the view of wisdom in the Book of Job, especially as found in chapters 28-37. The third and final movement begins with the God speeches and continues through the end of the book. Ultimate meaning and self-transcendence are the themes that emerge here. What we will now do is illustrate the way in which logotherapy is able to read the Book of Job by giving one or two brief examples from each of these three sections.

JOB AND THE EXISTENTIAL VACUUM

A Meaningful Life and the Existential Vacuum

According to logotherapy, the meaning of the moment is realized through the categorical values—values described as creative, experiential, and attitudinal. That is, meaning can be discovered through creative actions taken in the world, such as work, doing good deeds, acts of kindness, and so forth. Meaning may also be discovered through experiences such as recognizing truth, beauty, and love. Finally, while Frankl recognizes that one is never free from the conditions of life, one is always free to choose the attitude one takes toward those conditions and this becomes the third means to discover meaning. Attitude in particular is the one categorical value that the human

person always remains free to choose. While the others can be taken away, the attitudinal value is described by Frankl as “the last of the human freedoms.”¹

In the prologue we find that Job does, in fact, realize each of these values. His attitudinal value is stated in 1:1 where we read that Job “feared Elohim and turned aside from evil.” Job’s creative value, the result of his work, is implied in 1:3 where Job’s wealth is described. Verses 4 and 5 explain Job’s experiential value as reflected in his religious observance.

As we know, this situation does not continue. First, Job’s children and property are taken away. Then his body is stricken. The words of the satan in 1:9-11 suggest that Job is tempted to abandon his humanity to reductionism and nihilism. “Does Job fear Elohim for nothing?” asks the satan. “But indeed, I pray, extend your hand and touch all that is his and he will certainly curse you to your face.” The satan’s challenge becomes the measure of disinterested piety; Job’s piety will be considered genuine only if he decides not to curse God. When the satan implies that Job’s motivation for piety is the hedge of protection God has put around him, a mere function of what he has—wealth, family, religion—the satan is saying in effect that Job’s actions and attitude are the result of the environment. When changing the environment does not change Job’s attitude of piety, the satan next tries to change Job’s biology. This, also, does not change Job’s attitude. Thus, the reductionism of modern psychology, the assumed determination of human behavior and mental processes by either environmental or biological causes, is denied by the Book of Job, at least as far as human attitude is concerned. This accords well with logotherapy’s understanding of attitude as the “last of the human freedoms.”

So, now, the story should be over. The wager between God and the satan has been won by God; Job has maintained his piety and did not “curse God and die.” Yet, his suffering continues. It is described by God in 2:3 as suffering “in vain,” “for nothing,” or “for no purpose.” Therefore, the turmoil, the tribulation that Job describes results from a sense of meaninglessness, from the existential vacuum logotherapy would say, and not from the loss of children and property per se. Moreover, for Job, it is as if the loss of the sense of meaning in this moment makes the totality of his life, and even the totality of the cosmos, void of meaning.

¹ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 65-66.

The Friends of Job

And so the friends come to comfort Job, and do anything but. Newsom points out, however, that the friends do offer Job a meaning for his suffering. In some ways, and with one important exception, they are not bad logotherapists. They offer him examples of when in the past he actualized creative and experiential values, they offer hope for the future that depends on Job's attitude, they remain open for change in the future, that Job could pray and be restored. They also try to separate ultimate meaning from the meaning of the moment for Job. Zophar in 11:5-6 speaks of, according to Marvin Pope's understanding, "two sides" of abiding wisdom, one side hidden and one side manifest.

The problem with the logotherapy of the friends is that they seek to give Job a meaning for his suffering. According to Frankl, meaning can only be discovered by the person seeking it. And, despite the best efforts of the friends, this is what Job precedes to do.

He does this, among other ways, by unmasking the sadomasochism of religion. That is, the friends are advocating that he turn for deliverance to the one who is abusing him. The psychological purpose of this masochism is to avoid responsibility for one's own life. According to Newsom, "By embracing the masochistic perspective of human corruptibility (in both the physical and moral senses), one can locate being and meaning in God, that is, safely beyond the reach of all powers of destruction and meaninglessness."² The consequence of this view "is precisely the relief from the burden of individual existence, always vulnerable to ambiguity, anguish, loneliness, and meaninglessness. By positing the self as nothing and the object of surrender as absolute reality, the terrors of pain, death, and anomie can be transcended."³

Job refuses to transfer meaning to God. In doing so, logotherapy would argue that Job takes the responsibility for the discovery of meaning upon himself. In the words of Frankl, "Man is responsible for what to do, whom to love, and how to suffer."⁴ Frankl

² Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 143.

³ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 143.

⁴ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 74.

continues, “Acting out of this responsibility patients must push forward on their own to the concrete meaning of their personal existence.”⁵ So, by rejecting the masochism of submitting himself to an abusive God, Job becomes conscious of his own responsibility to find the meaning of his life; he becomes morally responsible.

JOB AND THE WILL TO MEANING

Our logotherapy hermeneutic reads Chapter 28 according to Frankl’s understanding of meaning. In fact, meaning in logotherapy appears to function in the same way that wisdom does in the Book of Job. Both meaning and wisdom refer to the highest aspirations of the human person. For Frankl, this highest aspiration is “that which most deeply inspires man; . . . the innate desire to give as much meaning as possible to one’s life, to actualize as many values as possible.”⁶ For Job, “Silver cannot be weighed as its price, nor can it be valued in the gold of Ophir” (28:15b–16a). It is something that is present and must be found. For Frankl, as we have seen, meaning must be discovered. For Job, wisdom must be sought. While both meaning and wisdom cannot be known in a certain sense, both, paradoxically, can be lived.

Logotherapy reads 28:3 as reflective of this idea: “Men put an end to darkness and to every farthest limit. They search out ore in gloom and deep darkness.” Wisdom, or meaning, is something one must seek to find. Nevertheless, it is not something that is clear and easily visible, rather it is something in deep darkness, something about which we cannot be certain.

Newsom reads chapter 28 in a somewhat similar way. She notes that the meaningfulness of the moral order of the world exists only as a potential. However, in the wisdom poem the moral order of the world “exists as a deep structure not accessible to the rational consciousness, yet in some way is the essential precondition for meaningfulness in human life.”⁷ Job’s mistake, as Newsom understands chapter 28, is in

⁵ Frankl, *Theory and Therapy*, 172.

⁶ Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul*, xvi.

⁷ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 177.

believing that human rationality can grasp this coherency.⁸ Frankl says of ultimate meaning: “This ultimate meaning necessarily exceeds and surpasses the finite intellectual capacities of man.”⁹ He concludes, “*Logos* is deeper than logic.”¹⁰

So we see that wisdom for Job and ultimate meaning for Frankl is somehow a precondition to the meaningfulness of human life, is related to the ordering of values, and cannot be fully grasped by human understanding. Meanwhile, the meaning of the moment can be lived. The paradox is, I think, the same that Newsom referred to last night when she said that it is in “the making of a moral world that human beings grasp something analogous to the wisdom manifest in cosmic creation.” So also through the meaning of the moment, that is, through the categorical values, can humans grasp some sense of meaning that would otherwise be inaccessible.

JOB AND SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

Next, we move to the God speeches and Job’s final response.

The God Speeches

“Who is this?” queries God in 38:2a. A logotherapist notes much in this simple question. “Who is this?” is the existential question. Who will Job choose to be in the face of a world of unjust suffering? The question is not only asked directly by God in the opening statement, it is elaborated upon in a way reminiscent of Frankl’s own insight. That is, in 38:3b God continues, “I will question you and you will answer me.” Frankl writes, “Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is *he* who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for* his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.”¹¹ The way that Job answers this question, the way that Job becomes responsible, is the key to our logotherapy hermeneutic.

⁸ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 177.

⁹ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 118.

¹⁰ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 118. Italics original.

¹¹ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 109. Italics original.

God describes Job as having spoken “words without knowledge” (38:2b). Job did not and cannot know ultimate meaning; as long as ultimate meaning remains the only source of meaning he recognizes, his existential vacuum is inevitable. God next proceeds to reveal a series of images of ultimate meaning that demonstrate the human person’s inability to grasp it. We have noted that ultimate meaning refers to a “a world beyond.”¹² Rather than rational arguments, we find in the God speeches descriptive images that stir the imagination and the emotions. Newsom notes that they “engage specifically aesthetic dimensions of understanding.”¹³ Robert Gordis calls them “poetic pictures rich in hyperbole.”¹⁴ In this sense, they are almost dreamlike, with locations and creatures that fall outside waking human experience. In fact, since the tempest out of which God speaks may be taken as an existential vacuum interior to Job, perhaps even reflective of a dream or vision, then our logotherapy hermeneutic may draw upon existential dream analysis for guidance. Dream analysis in logotherapy, as in psychoanalysis, is based on free association to primary images, as opposed to secondary rational thought.¹⁵ The main difference compared to Sigmund Freud’s approach is that existential dream analysis in logotherapy seeks to uncover unconscious existential, uniquely human elements in the dream rather than instinctual elements.¹⁶ Some variation may be permitted when applying such a technique to a text rather than to an actual dream. In this case, associations are inferred from words or themes previously used in the text, or by word pairing.

We will just mention one example. A land of “waste and desolation” is a description used earlier in 30:3 and now repeated in the imagery of 38:27. In dream imagery the desolate land becomes symbolic of Job’s rejection. Reversing the meaning of the symbol in the God speeches, this same land is cared for by God (38:25-27). The desolate land that Job fears (representing his turmoil?) is suddenly brought life-giving

¹² Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 145.

¹³ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 236.

¹⁴ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job*, 119.

¹⁵ In Freudian analysis, primary processes refer to images and feeling states that arise from the unconscious. By definition, these processes are pre-verbal. Secondary processes are conscious and verbal. For Freud’s discussion, see Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, 519-520 and 535-536.

¹⁶ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 47.

rain for God cuts “a channel for the torrents of rain” (38:25) and brings “rain . . . on the desert” (38:26). The land of “waste and desolation” – if taken as a dream symbol – suggests that Job is being transformed.

Job’s Final Response

Modern scholarship has shown that Job’s final response in 42:1-6 is ambiguous. Scholars have historically asserted that Job either repents, relents, or changes his attitude. Other, more recent scholars, have suggested that Job rejects, not his own attitude, or the statements he has previously made, but, rather, rejects God. In Newsom’s words, it “reserves the possibility of a word yet to be spoken.”¹⁷ Walter Michel sees poetic ellipses present and translates: “By the hearing of the ear, I had heard of you, and now my eye has seen you. Therefore, I reject. . . . And I pity. . . . Upon dust and ashes.”

Let us recall that the initial gamble of the satan was whether or not Job would curse God and die. If these ellipses are filled with “you,” then one might say that the curse of God is complete. However, they are left open. Our logotherapy hermeneutic suggests that the ellipses are left open on purpose. Job’s final response is ambiguous on purpose. That is to say, having now considered the existential question of unjust suffering, it is up to the reader to choose to fill in the ellipses, or not. It is about the ability of each reader, of each human person, to choose her response to suffering.

The title of Frankl’s first book after being liberated from the camps was “*Trotzdem Ja Zum Leben Sagen*” (*Say Yes to Life In Spite of Everything*). In other words, Frankl says in a positive assertion what Job asks negatively. So, for logotherapy, the question is not will Job curse God, the real question posed by the Book of Job is whether the reader will curse God in light of all that has just been read. The reader must now choose “to curse God and die,” or to “say ‘Yes’ to life in spite of everything.” This is our point of free will, this is the essence of the attitudinal value, the highest meaning available to us.

¹⁷ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 234.

Job's Restoration

Throughout the dialogue, Job's friends advised him to pray to God. "If you return to Shaddai you will be rebuilt if you remove injustice from your tents," Eliphaz explains in 22:23. "You will make your prayer to him and he will hear you" (22:27a). Imagine the scene in which Job does pray—but not for himself. He prays for his friends. In the end Job does exactly as his friends suggest, only with a higher purpose than they ever imagined. Frankl writes that "being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter."¹⁸

Logotherapy understands Job's restoration from the position of self-transcendence. Had Job prayed for himself, for his own restoration, he would have been striving to actualize his own best potential. Frankl believes that this is impossible unless a person has someone or something else to live for, that is, self-transcendence.

CONCLUSION

By way of closing, I want to reference the genre of the sapiential nature hymn found at the end of the Elihu discourse (36:24 – 37:13), a genre that seeks meaning, or wisdom, through meditation on the wonders of nature. Newsom notes, "The genre itself has no place for the voice of grief and misery. The human voice that speaks is not allowed to speak of its own fear or pain but only of the glory of God manifest in nature."¹⁹ Subsequently, she imagines the possibility of a genre that was not available to Job, a genre that could contain both the painful emotion of the lament along with the perspective of the sapiential nature hymn. She reflects that if such a genre existed "then perhaps one would have the kind of speech that Job could not find for himself and that no one was able to offer him."²⁰

Logotherapy, perhaps, offers just this kind of speech. Frankl's technique of focusing attention on meaning despite suffering is based on the ability of self-

¹⁸ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 110.

¹⁹ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 232.

²⁰ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 232.

transcendence. Moreover, Frankl himself found that it was possible for a person in pain to have this perspective. He reflects, “As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances.”²¹

Frankl’s logotherapy gives voice to universal human experiences, both of meaning and of suffering. Consequently, the voice of Viktor Frankl deserves to be heard in dialogue with the Book of Job, as well as with other great works that speak to these themes. Indeed, logotherapy, I believe, represents an important hermeneutic voice that has not previously been heard in this context.

Thank you for your attention.

²¹ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 39.