

The Search for Meaning in Life and the Existential Fundamental Motivations

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Abstract

Personal meaning is a complex achievement of the human spirit and is found in the individual's confrontation with the challenges of the world and one's own being. How can people find orientation in the midst of the innumerable possibilities that characterize our present day and how can this orientation be realised? Phenomenological and empirical research have shown that there are three existential motivations that precede a fourth motivation concerned with finding meaning. The first motivation is framed by the question: How can one relate to the fact of being in the world? The second turns the question around and asks: How can one relate to the fact of having a life? The third: How can one relate to the fact of one's own individual identity (self)? Individuals are fundamentally looking for a greater context and values for which they want to live. Personal existential meaning (Frankl's Logotherapy) derives from this. This paper describes the four fundamental aspects of existence that form a matrix for the psychopathological understanding of psychic disorders and provide a background for clinical interventions. They represent the structure and model of modern Existential Analytical Psychotherapy.

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An Introduction to Meaning

Viktor Frankl once came along and showed me a little drawing that he had come across in a newspaper. Because of his bright spirit, Frankl was always combining casual happenings with deeper insights; this was the source of his humour and wit. The drawing Frankl found that day was of an arrow shot at a plain wall and where it was stuck. A man with a bow in his left hand was standing next to the wall painting the signs of a target around the arrow.

Frankl commented on this drawing by saying: "Look at that, this picture shows exactly what is not meant by meaning! This man is constructing a meaning about an arbitrary action. He tries in retrospect to make a senseless action meaningful by giving it a meaning, to give the appearance of a meaning. But existential meaning is never arbitrary nor is it a construction, if it is supposed to give structure and support to one's life. Such a meaning must be based on given facts, must be hewn out of reality and cannot be changed deliberately!"

Frankl described the concept of meaning as follows: "We do not just attach and attribute meanings to things, but rather find them; we do not invent them, we detect them." (e.g. Frankl 1985, 31) Meaning, from an Existential Analytic and Logotherapeutic context, is understood as a correlation of two given facts: the *demand of the situation*; and *one's understanding of oneself*, i.e. what a person thinks and feels in terms of who they are or should be.

As I write this paper, the demand of the situation for me, as I understand it, is to find out what the reader might be interested in while reading such a paper and to correlate this with my experience, my view and investigation. The importance of this is my meaning. For those reading this paper, the meaning may be following the text or correlating it with personal experience or current thinking and considering what is of

higher importance right now: to continue the reading or to continue one's own thought. Thus, meaning is a Gestalt emerging from the midst of both inner and outer reality. What I wish to outline here is the idea that personal meaning is a complex achievement of the human spirit (or noetic potential, as Frankl preferred to call it so as to make a clear distinction from a religious understanding of that term). Personal meaning is a non-physical power underlying our conscience, our mind, our capacity to feel and to sense and even our body (Merleau-Ponty). The nature of the spirit is dialogical. As a dialogical force it brings us into continuous confrontation with other people, other things and with ourselves. This dialogical interaction lays the ground for a basic prerequisite of existence: for detecting what is possible in the midst of the given facts. All of that which is not yet fixed represents the existential field waiting to be realized. Through our spirit we are directed towards dialogue and relationship, where we realize possibility, where we realize what is waiting for us, what might challenge us, reach out to us or invite us. This is our existential actuality and as an existential reality, it is at the same time our future. It is through our spirit that we are capable of separating the factual, what is given, from what is possible thereby creating the specifically human dimension of existence (Frankl 1985, 19, 79, 134; also 1959).

The possibilities within this world point to our human potential; we shape our existence through these possibilities. "Existence" means having a chance to change things for the better, to experience what is of value and to avoid or to eliminate what could be damaging or harmful. Possibilities provide us with directions to which we can orient ourselves. This is an essential orientation of human beings, not a superficial one. Being directed towards what is possible, what is yet to be fulfilled, what

is waiting for us in each and every situation corresponds perfectly to the essence of our spirit – a spirit that is looking out for participation, dialogue, creativity and possibility. We see the essential task of existence to be one of finding this correspondence between our potential for participation (for creativity, action and encounter) and what is possible, what is needed, what is undone, what we see and feel and understand to be waiting for us, despite the possibility of risk and error.

A Practical Guide to Meaning

Viktor Frankl (1973, 62) gave a general guide for finding meaning. Finding meaning requires an attitude towards the world. Frankl wrote:

We must perform a kind of Copernican Revolution, and give the question of the meaning of life an entirely new twist. To wit?: It is life itself that asks questions of man... It is not up to man to question; rather, he should recognize that he is questioned, questioned by life; he has to respond by being responsible; and he can answer to life only by answering for his life (p. 62).

This attitude is in fact a phenomenological attitude, an openness of the mind free from personal interest, an attitude directed towards the essence of the situation, an attitude that allows one be reached or even captured by the situation.

- (a) If the essence of a situation is valuable in itself, if it cannot be made better for example, if it is seemingly perfect, then we are left to enjoy, to admire and to simply experience. A marvelous sunset, a beautiful face, music by Mozart or a painting by Picasso qualify as examples of what Frankl termed experiential values and one avenue to meaning.
- (b) If under different circumstances this openness leads us to an imperfect situation, a situation that requires some

intervention for improvement, we may perceive the circumstance as both valuable and requiring something for its improvement. Such a situation requires either a suitable activity in the world such as speaking to a person, writing a letter, cooking a meal etc. or mental or spiritual activity in one's inner world, which means a change of attitude towards the world, life, oneself or the future. Frankl included creative and attitudinal values as the two other avenues to meaning.

All phenomenological perceptions reveal possibilities for action. This action can take the form of subjective experiencing, of working, of reflection or one's own attitude. These possibilities, because of their inherent "demand quality" (Aufforderungscharakter) create a field of tension, which Frankl (1985, 35) called "existential dynamics". Frankl's key to meaning is a more philosophical approach, elaborating the appropriate attitude and subsequently providing the necessary substance or "grain" for a fulfilling existence.

From a more psychological point of view, Existential Analysis describes the key for a fulfilling existence in finding a way of living with inner consent. This inner consent relates to what we do, to what we commit ourselves to or to what we choose to omit. In other words, inner consent is a continuous activity that underlies any fulfilled existence and the finding of meaning. This activity consists of a two-sided dialogue: One is directed towards the outside with such questions as: What appeals to me? What attracts or challenges me? Where am I needed, what do I want to do in this situation? For example, is what I am reading at this moment interesting to me, does it challenge me, does it speak to me in some way so that I might see what I can do with it?

The other dialogue runs inwardly. Whatever I decide to do – I cannot leave myself aside to experience meaning. We therefore always live with the question of whether we agree with our decisions. To put it more concretely, this inner agreement is a process of contacting the deepest feelings that arise in any situation. We have to take them seriously. I am not speaking about anxiety, mood, delight or the like, for they too have their meaning. When our deepest and purest emotions correspond with our intentions and plans then we live with inner consent, our inwardly felt or spoken "yes". Inner consent enables us to stand on our own, stand as a unique individual and realize ourselves by meeting the demands of the situation. Meaning, in our definition, creates a harmony between inner experience and outer action.

The process I have described provides an encapsulated definition of Existential Analysis and possibly of existential psychotherapy in general: to help a person find a way of life wherein they can give their inner consent to their own actions.

A scientific definition of Existential Analysis describes it as phenomenological-personal psychotherapy with the aim of enabling a person to experience his or her life freely at the spiritual and emotional levels, to arrive at authentic decisions and to come to a responsible way of dealing with himself or herself and the world around them (Längle 1993, 1995, 1999a). This reflects Frankl's teaching in which he stated that a person's existence is characterised by freedom, by the capacity for decision and by responsibility (Frankl 1959; 1973, XXIV). Each of these three steps contains the most important asset of existential analysis: a person's own inner consent.

The Four Fundamental Conditions for a Fulfilled Existence

If we scrutinize the themes that concern us throughout our lives, they turn out to be an off-spring of four fundamental realities. These four fundamental realities are the result of our empirical and phenomenological work in psychotherapy over the last 20 years. As spiritual beings we are essentially confronted with:

- the world in its factuality and potentiality;
- life with its network of relationships and its feelings;
- “being oneself”: existing as a unique, autonomous person, and
- the future which we shape = our development through our activities.

Human existence is based on these fundamental realities. They are the four cornerstones of existence according to modern existential analytical theory.

Yalom (1980) has described quite similar fundamental existential realities. Yalom’s categories highlight the common existential emphasis on the tragic dimensions of human existence:

- Freedom in the sense of groundlessness,
- Death,
- Isolation in the sense of loneliness, and
- Meaninglessness/absurdity.

Although Yalom’s categories correspond largely to our four existential realities, Existential Analysis, in the tradition of Frankl, emphasizes the elements of possibility and potential that mark human existence. As a comparison therefore:

- groundlessness implies the world with its supporting structure,
- death means having a life with growth and temporality,
- loneliness arises from the uniqueness of each person, and
- meaning relates to a contextual understanding of one’s own existence

and of one’s activities which are directed towards a worthwhile future.

Our categories can nevertheless be called “existential” for one central reason: they claim our own inner position towards them. Each of the four existential realities leads us into a process that demands an exchange or even a dialogue. This exchange or dialogue helps to form our own notions about the quality and content of our subjective reality. Dialogue and encounter require us to decide how we want to relate. This challenges us; it challenges our activities and our response to alter and work on our reality until we can give our inner consent; a consent not merely for what we do but for how we live. There is, of course, always the possibility of failing, experiencing loneliness or feelings akin to an emotional death. We might experience feelings of futility or “absurdity” as Camus and Sartre have described. Tragedy does pertain to human existence. But the four cornerstones of existence that Existential Analysis puts forth, offer a chance to relate and to entrust ourselves to external structures and contents which in their depth, lead to spiritual layers that lie behind, underneath or above all human reality (Längle 2001).

As structures of human existence, these realities are basically involved in every motivation and can therefore also be called the “fundamental existential motivations” (Längle 1992, 1993, 1994a, 1997, 1998a,b,c, 1999a,b, 2002b). As I have outlined in another paper (Längle 2002b), any motivation implicates these fundamental existential motivations: cognition, feelings and values, and decision and meaning, all of which result in giving one’s inner approval and in arriving at an inner consent. As basics of human existence, these motivations are relevant in all areas where an individual stands in the centre: education, pastoral counselling, prevention of diseases,

coaching, management trainings,
organisational structures etc.

The First Fundamental Condition for a Fulfilled Existence

The first condition arises from the simple fact that I am here at all, that I am in the world. Where do I go from here? Can I cope with my being there? Do I understand it? I exist, and as an old German saying from the 12th century goes, loosely translated: “I don’t know where I am from, I don’t know where to?, I wonder why I am so glad.” I am here, this is me – how is that even possible? This seemingly self-evident fact can lead to questioning of great depth. If I really think about this, I realize that I cannot truly comprehend this. My existence appears like an island in an ocean of ignorance and alludes to connections that surpass me. The most adequate attitude towards this incomprehensible fact is one of astonishment. Basically, I can only be astonished that I am here at all.

But I am here, which puts the fundamental question of existence before me: I am - can I be? – To bring these questions to a practical and manageable level, I might apply them to my own situation. I then ask myself: Can I claim my place in this world under the conditions I live within AND the possibilities I have before me? This demands three things: protection, space and support. Do I enjoy protection, acceptance, do I feel at home somewhere? Do I have enough space for being there? Where do I find support in my life? If these are not the case, the result will be restlessness, insecurity and fear. But if I do have these three things, I will be able to feel trust in the world and confidence in myself, maybe even faith in God. The sum of these experiences of trust is a fundamental trust; a trust that I have a profound and enduring support in my life.

It is not enough to find protection, space and support however. I also have to seize these conditions, to make a decision in their favour, to accept them. My active part in this fundamental condition of being here is to accept the positive aspects and to endure the negative ones. To accept means to be ready to occupy the space I am in, to rely on the support given and to trust the protection bestowed on me; in short “to be here” and not to flee. To endure requires the fortitude to accept whatever is difficult, menacing or unalterable and to tolerate what cannot be changed. Life imposes certain conditions on me; the world has its laws to which I must adapt. This idea is expressed in the word “subject” in the sense of “not independent”, of being subject to. On the other hand these same conditions of the world are reliable, solid and steady despite the boundaries they may impose. I can allow them to be and accept them if I can be at the same time. To accept means letting the other be, whether a person, a thing or a situation. It means that I can be and the other can be equally because there is still enough space for me and the circumstances do not threaten my being here. Individuals procure themselves the space they need for being with their ability to endure and to accept the conditions of their lives. If this is not the case, psychodynamics take over the guidance of a person’s life in the form of coping reactions in order to secure “being here” (Dasein) (Längle 1998a).

Each fundamental motivation has four types of reaction:

- 1) the basic reaction type,
- 2) the paradoxical reaction type or “activism”, which is a displacement activity, a hyperactivity
- 3) the third type of coping reaction is a specific aggression (Längle 1998b), and
- 4) the final type of coping reaction is akin to a feigned death, a semi-paralysis. A

person's activity level is greatly reduced and feelings are deadened.

When the first existential motivation is in danger or not sufficiently realized, the basic coping reaction is avoidance or flight; the displaced reaction is overactivity or compulsive behavior (i.e. fighting bacteria by compulsive washing). The aggressive reaction takes the form of destruction such as hate; and 'feigned death reaction' is denial or pretending to be non-existent.

If any of these coping reactions are insufficient to stem the psychodynamics that have emerged, they get fixed and psychopathology arises. In cases where a lack of protection, space and support is present, fear and anxiety arise.

The Second Fundamental Condition for a Fulfilled Existence

Once someone has their space in the world, they can fill it with life. Simply being there is not enough. We want our existence to be good, since it is more than a mere fact. It has a "pathic dimension" which means that life does not simply happen but rather we experience, suffer or enjoy it (from the Greek 'pathos', suffering, used e.g. in 'psycho-pathology'). Being alive means to cry and to laugh, to experience joy and suffering, to go through pleasant and unpleasant things, to be lucky or unlucky and to experience what is worthwhile and what is worthless. As happy as we can be, we can also suffer deeply. The amplitude of emotionality is equal in both directions, whether this suits us or not.

I am, therefore, confronted with the fundamental question of life: I am alive – do I like this fact? Is it good to be there? It is not only strain and suffering that can take away the joy of life. It may also be the shallowness of daily life or neglecting areas of one's life that make life stale. Do I truly live? In order to seize my life and to love it, I need three things: relationship, time and

closeness. We can verify the "presence of life" by asking: Do I have relationships in which I feel closeness, for which I spend time, give my time and in which I experience community? What do I take time for? Do I take time for valuable things, worthy of spending my time on? To take time for something means to give away a part of one's life and spend it with someone or something. Can I feel close by maintaining closeness to things, plants, animals and people? Do I allow the closeness of someone else? If relationships, closeness and time are lacking, longing will arise, followed by distancing - a coldness - and finally depression. If these three conditions are fulfilled, however, I experience myself as being in harmony with the world and with myself and I can sense the depth of life. These experiences form the fundamental value, the most profound feeling for the value of life. Whenever we experience something of value, this fundamental value is touched upon. It colors our emotions and represents a yardstick for anything we might feel to be of worth. Our theory of emotion and theory of values correlate with this (Längle 2003).

And yet, it is not enough to have relationships, time and closeness. My active participation, my consent, is also required. I must seize life by engaging in life. When I turn to other people, to things, animals, intellectual work or to myself, I turn towards life. When I move towards something or someone, allow myself to get close, allow myself to be touched, I experience life as vibrant. By fully acknowledging what is before me I not only experience life as vibrant, I equally experience such things as loss and grief. If I am to move freely in life, my consent to being touched by life is necessary. The basic coping reaction at this level is regression; over-protection or a striving for achievement are 'activistic' reaction types. The aggressive behaviour is

fury or rage which does not lead to destruction but leads towards the agitation of other persons with the impulse towards obtaining or improving a relationship. Resignation and apathy are reactions that mimic a “feigned death”. If these reactions cannot neutralize the problem or the loss, depression arises.

The Third Fundamental Condition for a Fulfilled Existence

The first two fundamental conditions are, however, not sufficient in themselves for a fulfilling existence. In spite of my being related to life and to people, I am aware of my being separate, different. There is a singularity that makes me an “I” and distinguishes me from everybody else. I realize that I am on my own, that I have to master my existence myself and that I am essentially alone and perhaps even solitary. But, there is so much more that is equally singular. The diversity, beauty and uniqueness that exist in all dimensions of life produce feelings of awe and respect in me.

In the midst of this world, I discover myself unmistakably, I am with myself and I am given to myself. This puts before me the fundamental question of being a person: I am myself – may I be like this? Do I feel free to be like this? Do I have the right to be what I am and to behave as I do? This is the plane of identity, of knowing oneself and of ethics. In order to succeed here, it is necessary to have experienced three things: attention, justice and appreciation. Again, we can verify this third cornerstone of existence in our own life by asking: Who sees me? Who considers my uniqueness and respects my boundaries? Do people do justice to me? What am I appreciated for? How do I appreciate myself? If these experiences are missing, solitude, hysteria and a need to hide behind shame will result. If, on the contrary, I have experienced

attention, justice and appreciation, I will find myself, find my authenticity and my self-respect. The sum of these experiences builds my self-esteem, who I am at my core.

In order to be oneself, it is not enough to simply experience attention, justice and appreciation. I also have to say “yes to myself”. This requires my active participation. I have to look at other people, to encounter them. At the same time I have to delineate myself, stand on my own and refuse whatever does not correspond to my sense of self. Encounter and regret are the two means by which we can live authentically without ending up in solitude. Encounter represents the necessary bridge to the other. It makes me experience another person’s essence as well as my own; discovering the “I” in “you”. My participation with and appreciation of others creates an equal appreciation for who I am. When these elements are missing coping reactions include: distancing oneself as the basic reaction, stubborn insistence and leading a functional life as reactions of hyperactivity. The typical aggressive reaction consists in annoyance, anger and reproach. A paralysis or resignation at this level leads to dissociation of bodily integrity, dividing and splitting of emotion and cognition. If these reactions don’t suffice to neutralize the hurt, they get fixed and histrionic symptoms and/or personality disorders arise.

The Fourth Fundamental Condition for a Fulfilled Existence

If I can be here, love life and find myself within these, the conditions are fulfilled for the fourth fundamental condition of existence; I recognize my life and what it is all about. It does not suffice to simply be here and to have found oneself. In a sense, we have to transcend ourselves if we want to find fulfillment and to be fruitful. Otherwise

we would live as if in a house where nobody ever visits.

Life's transitory nature puts the question of the meaning of our existence before us: I am here – for what purpose? Three things are needed: a field of activity, a structural context and a value to be realized in the future. We can ask ourselves practical questions such as: Is there a place where I feel needed, where I can be productive? Do I see and experience myself in a larger context that provides structure and orientation to my life; where I want integration? Is there anything that should still be realized in my life? If this is not the case, the result will be a feeling of emptiness, frustration, despair and frequently addiction. If, on the contrary, these conditions are met, I will be capable of dedication and action and finally, my own form of religious belief. The sum of these experiences adds up to the meaning of life and leads to a sense of fulfillment.

If a person fails systematically to reach meaning, their coping reactions will be a provisional attitude towards life as a basic reaction together with a “disorganized day-to-day attitude toward life” and “collective thinking” (Frankl 1973, XVI). Idealization and fanaticism are main forms of hyper-activity along with indignation, aggressive games and cynicism. Fatalism (Frankl 1973, XVI), loss of interest, apathy and what we feel are nihilistic attitudes, can be seen as forms of internal paralysis. Nihilistic attitudes in particular are from all evidence, a form of spiritual deadening. Disorders at this level lead frequently to addictions.

It does not suffice to simply have a field of activity, to have our place within a context and to know values to be realized in the future. A phenomenological attitude is needed. As each situation places a question before me, an attitude of openness represents the existential access to meaning in life (Frankl 1973, XV, 62). “What does

this hour want from me, how shall I respond?” The meaningful thing is not only what I can expect from life, but, in accordance with the dialogical structure of existence, it is equally important what life wants from me and what the moment expects from me and what I could and should do now for others as well as for myself. My active part in this attitude of openness is to bring myself into agreement with the situation, to examine whether what I am doing is really a good thing: for others, for myself, for the future, for my environment. If I act, if I respond to these questions, my existence will be fulfilling.

Viktor Frankl (1982, 255) once defined meaning as “a possibility against the background of reality”. In another context (Frankl 1985, 57) he referred to the potentialities underlying the meaning: The potentialities of life are not indifferent possibilities; they must be seen in the light of meaning and values. At any given time only one of the possible choices of the individual fulfills the necessity of his life task.”

The notion of valuable possibilities is further endorsed by the theory of fundamental existential motivations and brings the concept of meaning into an even more concrete definition as “the most worthwhile (the one of greatest value) and realistic possibility present in a given situation and one for which I feel I should decide”. Existential meaning is therefore what is possible here and now, on the basis of facts and reality. What is possible for me may be what I need now, or what is the most pressing, valuable or interesting alternative. To define and redefine this continually is an extremely complex task for which we possess an inner organ of perception capable of reducing this complexity to livable proportions: our sensitivity as well as our moral conscience.

Besides existential meaning there is an ontological meaning. This is the overall meaning in which I find myself and which does not depend on me. It is a philosophical and religious meaning, the meaning the creator of the world must have had in mind. I can perceive it through divination and in faith (cf. Längle 1994b for the differentiation between the two forms of meaning).

The importance of the ontological meaning for understanding life (cf. Längle 2002a, 60ff.) is illustrated simply by the following story Frankl once told. When the cathedral at Chartres was being built, a traveler came along and saw a man sitting at the roadside, cutting a stone. The traveller asked the man what he was doing there. "Don't you see", the man replied, "I am cutting stones!" Nonplussed the traveler continued on his way. Around the next bend, he saw another man, also cutting stones. Again he stopped and asked the same question. "I am cutting corner-stones", was the reply. Shaking his head, the traveler continued on once again. After a while he met a third man who was sitting in the dust and cutting stones just as the others had been. Resolutely the traveler walked up to him and asked: "Are you also cutting corner-stones?" – The man looked up at him, wiped the sweat from his brow and said: "I am working at a cathedral."

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