

Logotherapy: An Overview

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Logotherapy: An Overview

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BASICS OF LOGOTHERAPY

Viktor Frankl is the founder of Logotherapy which has come to be called the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy (after Freud's psychoanalysis and Adler's individual psychology). Logotherapy finds its philosophical roots in existentialism and phenomenology, its psychological roots in psychoanalysis and individual psychology, and its spiritual roots in a profound commitment to the human being as an irreducibly spiritual creature. It is perhaps in the area of the conception of the human being that Frankl's differences with those schools of thought which constitute the roots of Logotherapy can best be distinguished. The anthropology of a therapeutic system profoundly influences the entire system. Most psychology has grown from a view of humanity as a creature of biology fully explicable in terms of the commonalities between humanity and the rest of the living creatures.

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Such a view tends to reduce concepts such as responsibility and meaning to complex expressions of biological urges or drives.

Frankl, convinced of the importance of an explicit conception of the nature of humanity, presents a well-developed anthropology in his writings. He speaks frequently of the nature of human beings. For Frankl, human beings are wonderfully complex, not to be reduced to a collection of drives and urges, not to be understood completely in terms of biology. Human beings are spiritual beings. By this, Frankl means that they are transcendent, not only over the world, but more importantly over self. "*Self-transcendence*, I would say, is the essence of existence; and existence, in turn, means the specifically human mode of being."¹ This essentially human way of being in the world has its core in the unconscious. Frankl finds that humans have both an instinctual unconscious and a spiritual unconscious. The latter gives rise to conscience which gives evidence of its unconscious source in its ability to relate to what is not yet, whereas the conscious mind can only relate to what is or what has been.

Frankl also states that human beings are unique. Each person is at the focus of an absolutely unique confluence of physical and spiritual currents which define the individual as completely and absolutely distinct from all other human beings. Thus one must learn to live as a responsible being expressing and responding to the distinctive self that is unlike all other selves. One must learn to bear the "otherness" of the human condition.

Frankl states that human beings are by nature responsible. The unique confluence of events which result in the distinct individuality of persons calls for a response, which can and should be answered affirmatively, responsibly. There is a call from outside, a call which expresses the meaning of individual lives and circumstances. The call requires an answer, a commitment to meaning, to purposeful rather than chaotic activity. The meaning is circumstantial, thus individual and unique in each person's situation. "Being human is being conscious and being responsible, culminating in a synthesis of both—namely in one's consciousness of his responsibility."²

Despite the absolute and unique individuality of persons, human beings are essentially relational. "Being human means relating, and being directed, to something other than oneself."³ This other is the logos, or meaning. In this sense, meaning is both a part of the person, but at the same time larger than any one person, as meaning can be

shared between persons. Real encounter, for Frankl, is triadic and involves the logos as well as the two persons involved. Without some shared meaning, the apparent encounter and ensuing dialogue between two persons is really only “a mutual monologue” or “mutual self-expression.”

Human beings are limited. This is a two-fold limitation. First, is the limit of one’s destiny, which sums up the unique set of opportunities and influences which converge upon the individual at any particular time. One cannot actualize opportunities which are not present, nor can one respond and be responsible for other than the call of the logos as expressed within the particular set of circumstances.⁴ Secondly each human being is limited by death which sooner or later will put an end to opportunities and responsibilities. Far from seeing death as that which renders all of the acts of life ultimately meaningless, and thus as the cause for despair, Frankl sees death as that which gives direction to life, charging each moment with potential which would not be possible if there is an infinite succession of moments to come. Today is the day, the appointed hour. Such thought would be meaningless were it not for death and the closure it brings. The absolute boundary to our possibilities charges the present with responsibility and meaning. “The meaning of human existence is based upon its irreversible quality.”⁵ And “death itself is what makes life meaningful.”⁶

Human beings are free, but not in the sense of absolute freedom. Such freedom is mythical, actually being chaos. Rather humans may use their transcendence to observe that situation which includes all that impinges upon them at a particular moment, and having observed, they may take a stand for or a stand against the world. Indeed a human being may even take a stand against himself/herself. Freedom is not in the circumstances. It is not something which is possessed and which might be lost. Freedom is the essence of what human beings are by virtue of being human.⁷

An implication of the freedom of humanity is the fact that human beings are more than the sum of heredity and environment. Human beings are the product of both their genetic and situational history as well as the decisions that they have made. Human beings are committing beings, responding to their destiny with affirmation or denial. A human being is “that entity which has freed itself from whatever has determined it (determined it as biological-sociological type); that entity, in other words, that transcends all these determinants either by

conquering them and shaping them, or by deliberately submitting to them.”⁸

Frankl's anthropology, in summary, is absolutely opposed to reductionist anthropologies which perceive humans as driven by instincts or controlled by the will to power. Rather he sees humans as free to transcend that which might determine them through the transcendence of the logos and the freedom to adopt an attitude which brings the determinants within the scope of meaning.

Logotherapy is to be contrasted with other therapies with respect to the goals of therapy. Frankl states that the alleged goal of psychoanalysis is to bring about an acceptable compromise between the demands of the unconscious and the requirements of reality. The goal is to adjust the individual to the surrounding circumstances. Individual psychology is more ambitious and hopeful. “Beyond mere adjustment, it demands of the patient a courageous reshaping of reality . . .”⁹ Logotherapy has as its goal the fulfillment of the individual, a breakthrough into another dimension which allows the individual to transcend the boundaries and constraints of life which prove unchangeable. Thus even the most severe situations of life may prove rich in meaning and fulfillment.

The relationship between anthropology and therapeutic goals is quite clear. Psychoanalysis, operating with an anthropology which sees human beings as organic mechanisms, seeks to adjust the mechanism to fit within the larger mechanisms of society and the cosmos. Individual psychology, with its appreciation of human courage and capacity for growth, seeks adjustment of the larger systems to allow and encourage growth and development of individuals. Logotherapy, with an even higher view of humanity focused upon transcendence and responsibility, seeks human accomplishment even when both inner and outer adjustments leave a gap between the opportunities allowed by destiny and the desires of the individual. Logotherapy seeks to make persons aware of their freedom of response to all aspects of their destiny. The person is shown the possibility of conscious and responsible activity in his/her life situation. The goal is to have the person recognize that there are options in the most oppressive situations, and that one is responsible for one's action/inaction even if the only possible action is the adoption of an attitude. Logotherapy does not say to what or for what a person is responsible. To lead a person beyond the point where “he profoundly understands his existence as responsibility, is neither possible nor necessary.”¹⁰ When Logothera-

py brings a person to the point of discerning for herself/himself the meaning of her/his destiny, a creative and concrete response will occur. The basic human orientation toward meaningful existence asserts itself when the obstacles have been cleared away.

The goal of Logotherapy in other words is to stimulate the will to meaning. Frankl finds that human beings are oriented toward meaning and seek meaning in all their circumstances. Both the will to pleasure and the will to power derive from the will to meaning.¹¹ Above the plane of human existence there is a level of supra-meaning which speaks to the human conscience concerning the meaning of each person's life. Belief in such a supra-meaning is "of the foremost psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic importance."¹² A person who believes in such an ultimate meaning lives a life open to the call of such meaning upon conscience, and is prepared to commit herself/himself to a meaningful response to destiny. At the human level, meaning is always individual and unique. Because meaning is contextual, it varies from individual to individual and from day to day. Being limited and finite, the individual can never perceive the ultimate meaning which gathers up the unique individual meanings into a unique whole.

Meaning is not identical with nor dependent upon success. Personal fulfillment is independent of success. Work and other activity gain meaning just so far as they are the expression of those personal and specific elements which combine to define the unique individual. Meaningful activity expresses or embodies the unique confluence of events, influences and decisions which make up the human.

Meaning is objective in that it comes from outside and may confront the self, standing ahead of and setting the pace for the self. Thus meaning may confront, as well as affirm. Meaning, as the projection from another dimension, ultimately exceeds the scope of rational exploration. Frankl refers to Pascal's remark that the branch can never grasp the meaning of the whole tree.¹³

Frankl believes that when the obstacles have been removed, each person will find that the meaning of his/her situation is readily apparent, and that the person will then automatically react with a creative and concrete response. Frankl supposes that it is neither necessary nor possible to go beyond awakening the individual to her/his existence as a responsible being. The contextual nature of meaning implies that one cannot point out the specific meaning for another. Each must see the meaning of his/her own context. The role of the Logotherapist, Frankl

suggests, like an ophthalmologist, does not tell us what to see but simply corrects our ability to see.

APPLICATIONS OF LOGOTHERAPY TO AGING AND OLDER ADULTHOOD

Logotherapy accepts a priori that striving to find meaning in life is a primary motivational force throughout the life cycle. The vitality of a person's life at every stage depends upon his or her supply of meanings. There is increasing evidence to suggest that the crisis of aging appears to be a crisis of meaning. The challenge of older adulthood is to make sense of life at a stage when changes and losses occur with bewildering and sometimes overwhelming frequency and intensity. Older persons require a sense of meaning in their lives in order to cope successfully with the eroding and debilitating diminishment that aging and growing old often introduce.

Many persons who have worked in long term care have encountered the individual who questions why they continue to live. Mrs. Smith is 96 years old. She has multiple chronic impairments including arthritis and a right brain stroke. She is functionally bed bound. Whenever anyone stops to talk to her, she frequently asks the question, "Why won't God let me die?" Her explanation of this statement reflects her pain. "I am 96 years old. My husband is dead, my parents are dead, my 6 brothers and sisters are all dead, my three children are all dead, even two of my twelve grandchildren are dead. All of my friends are dead and even the nurse who used to take care of me has taken a job somewhere else and is no longer here. I am of no earthly use to anyone . . . Why won't God let me die?" To respond to Mrs. Smith by arguing theology and trying to rationalize God's purpose for everyone, or to argue any position that tries to rationalize God's actions, is to completely miss the point. The Mrs. Smiths in our nursing homes and community are struggling with the crisis of meaning.

It has been observed that the enormous gains in longevity as a result of medical and technological progress have been accompanied ". . . by widespread spiritual malaise . . . and confusion over the meaning and purpose of life—particularly in old age . . ."14 Such findings seem to confirm Frankl's observation that: "The truth is that as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged:

survival for what? Even more people today have the means to live but no meaning to live for.”¹⁵

There is an imperative need for a wider frame of reference in the study of aging that allows for the full exploration of the question of meaning in old age. The natural science model has in many respects served gerontology well, but not well enough. It is powerless to reveal to us the meaning of our lives. What is required is a paradigm that utilizes a phenomenological approach to aging and its processes and moves beyond an empirical research model which is limited to a positivistic focus in biomedical and social conditions of aging. The framework of Viktor Frankl’s Logotherapy provides a phenomenological approach for making the formulation of meaning a legitimate pursuit of inquiry.

Sources of Personal Meaning

Personal meanings do not develop in a vacuum. A phenomenological analysis of the immediate data of the actual life experience of an individual reveals sources of meaning in that person’s life. Frankl maintains that life can be made meaningful in a threefold way:

First, through *what we give* (in terms of creative works); second by *what we take* from the world (in terms of our experiencing values); and third, through the *stand we take* toward a fate we no longer can change (an incurable disease, an inoperable cancer, or the like).¹⁶

Meaning is not invented but discovered. One can give meaning to our lives by realizing *creative values*, that is, by achieving tasks. One can also give meaning to our lives by realizing *experiential values*, “by experiencing the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, or by knowing one single human being in all of his uniqueness. And to experience one human being as unique means to love him.”¹⁷ Even when those experiences are impossible, “a man can still give his life a meaning by the way he faces his fate, his distress.”¹⁸ A person realizes values by attitudes toward destined or inescapable suffering. These *attitudinal values*, as Frankl calls them, give a person, when being confronted with a hopeless situation, a last opportunity to fulfill a meaning—“to realize the highest value to fulfill even the deepest meaning—and that is the meaning of suffering.”¹⁹

New Fields of Meaning

Older persons may need to learn how to redefine their values and goals and understand how the sources of meaning in their lives have shifted. A person's life is never without meaning. It is a matter of refocusing and coming to a new understanding of the sources and shapes of those meanings. Logotherapy provides reorientation which helps older persons to view old age, not as a stage of stagnation and absence of meaning, but of new growth and development characterized more by "being" rather than "doing." This "increased interiority of the personality," as Bernice Neugarten described it,²⁰ may be a proverbial gold mine of new meanings waiting to be discovered at this stage of life.

Furthermore, it is a tenet of Logotherapy that life's transitoriness does not in the least detract from its meaningfulness. Life holds meaning, in whatever circumstance, until the last breath. Frankl reflecting on his role as a medical doctor writes:

Day by day I am confronted with people who are incurable, men who become senile, and women who remain sterile. I am besieged by their cry for an answer to the question of an ultimate meaning to suffering . . . But if there is meaning, it is unconditional meaning, and neither suffering nor dying can detract from it. And what our patients need is unconditional faith in unconditional meaning.²¹

The Meaning of Time

A marked characteristic of Logotherapy is that it takes time seriously. Memory emphasizes time lapsed. In remembering, persons take responsibility for values actualized and values denied. The individual is understood as one responsible for his or her life story and the telling of it.²² Logotherapy's understanding of time is poignantly set forth by Frankl:

All that is good and beautiful in the past is safely preserved in that past. On the other hand, so long as life remains, all guilt and all evil are still "redeemable" . . . this is not the case of a finished film . . . or an already existent film which is merely being unrolled. Rather, the film of this world is just being "shot." Which

means nothing more or less than that the future—happily—still remains to be shaped; that is, it is at the disposal of man’s responsibility.²³

Once a possibility has been made into a reality, it is delivered safely into “the granary of the past.” “The past is precisely that which cannot be taken away.”²⁴

The Tragic Triad

For Frankl, the tragic triad of pain, guilt, and death are inevitable and inherent in human existence.²⁵ But, according to Logotherapy, it is the very transitoriness of human existence which constitutes an individual’s responsibility—the essence of existence. It is this two-fold understanding of finiteness in terms of fallibility and mortality which add to life’s worthwhileness “. . . since only in the face of guilt does it make sense to improve, and only in the face of death is it meaningful to act.”²⁶

Defiant Power of the Human Spirit

One of Logotherapy’s most helpful contributions to gerontology is its stress on the “defiant power of the human spirit.”²⁷ While recognizing the holistic nature of the human being, the Logotherapist appeals to what lies beyond the person’s psycho-physical nature—the spirit. The spiritual core of a person is recognized as capable of taking a stand not only toward negative and painful external circumstances but also toward its own psychological character structure. Such recognition conveys to older persons a renewed awareness of self-worth and human dignity. Conversely, if they regard themselves as inadequate psychic mechanisms, with no control and responsibility for themselves, they have no capacity to transcend themselves or fashion meaning from their suffering.²⁸

THE THERAPEUTIC USE OF MEANING WITH THE ELDERLY

Movement from the theoretical foundation of Logotherapy to the application of this approach to older adults will require the therapist to

first get to know the person and his or her lived world. Like most therapeutic approaches, the Logotherapist needs to establish the empathic bond by listening to the client. In Logotherapy, however, the types of questions may vary from other approaches. Three areas of inquiry are important for the discovery of meaning. The first reflects the values of the individual. For the person who values kindness, meaning can be derived by being kind or receiving kindness. If the individual does not value hard work, or looks down on persons who do find meaning in working hard, then clearly the individual is not going to find meaning in this type of activity. Missinne observes:²⁹

The older person, who either chooses not to or is not allowed to work, may be required to set aside the realization of creative values. Still, he or she has the opportunity to find deep meaning in the experiencing of beauty or loving relationships. If due to isolation and ill health, neither of these is possible, there is still what Frankl considers the highest achievement and, consequently, the deepest meaning available to an older person—the freedom of choosing one's response to this last challenge. How a person faces his own sufferings could be the highest value which will give meaning to his life.

For Frankl, values are transmitted by traditions. He sees these traditions as decaying in modern society. Frankl asserts: "Only values—which might be defined as universal meanings—can be affected by the decay of traditions."³⁰ While Frankl does not discredit the importance of values, he seems to find them lacking in many individuals. Frankl contends:

One may say that instincts are transmitted through the genes, and values are transmitted through traditions, but that meanings, being unique, are a matter of personal discovery. They must be sought and found by oneself, and such discovery of unique meanings, as we now understand, will be possible even if all universal values disappear totally. To put it succinctly: the values are dead—long live the meanings.³¹

Thus, Frankl feels that meaning can be discovered by the individual, even if that person cannot identify his or her values.

As the therapist becomes more acquainted with the older adult, he

or she will keep track of both the values discussed by the client as well as the choices that the individual has made. The choices made by the individual reflect a second area where Logotherapy is somewhat different from many other approaches. Frankl writes:

As a human phenomenon, however, freedom is all too human. Human freedom is finite freedom. Man is not free from conditions. But he is free to take a stand in regard to them. The conditions do not completely condition him. Within limits it is up to him whether or not he succumbs and surrenders to the conditions. He may as well rise above them and by so doing open up and enter the human dimension . . . Ultimately, man is not subject to the conditions that confront him; rather, these conditions are subject to his decision. Wittingly or unwittingly, he decides whether he will face up or give in, whether or not he will let himself be determined by the conditions.³²

As the therapist listens to the client discuss his or her life, it can become clear that decisions have been made in response to the events and conditions of living over which the individual has indeed made choices. Helping the client to understand these choices may help the individual to see where he or she can now have choices that can render the individual greater control over a more meaningful future.

The third area of inquiry relates to the fact that while Frankl acknowledges that there is an ultimate meaning, there is also meaning within each event. As Missinne states: "The comprehension of infinite meaning in one's life is preceded by provisional or short term experiences which also give meaning to life."³³ While one can summarize the collection of the meanings of these single events into a larger generalization of meaning, it must be remembered that the smaller events have meaning as well. Indeed, because each experience for Frankl is a unique experience, it may be difficult to find the conceptual continuity that pulls together an ultimate meaning. As Reker and Wong point out:

The zest and vitality of goal directed activities, the sweat of hard work and the joy of success, the excitement and satisfaction of engaging in intimate relationships, and the many personal experiences that give color, texture, and richness to the tapestry of life are the raw materials for present meaning. We create meaning

through choices and actions as we move through life, but we also discover meaning from many 'happenings' that come our way each day.³⁴

As Frankl asserts: "This ultimate meaning necessarily exceeds and surpasses the finite intellectual capacities of man."³⁵

As the therapeutic relationship moves from assessment to treatment, the therapist may need to help the client to discover meaning. As suggested earlier, Frankl explains that this can be done in three ways:

(1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.³⁶

In many ways, Logotherapy offers a different way to look at the difficulties or events of suffering that happen in life. Frankl suggests that

the emphasis on responsibility is reflected in the categorical imperative of Logotherapy, which is: 'Live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!'³⁷

In this change of perception the individual moves from seeing their fate as unalterable to seeking the meaning in their suffering. It is important to note that Frankl does not suggest that "suffering is necessary to find meaning. I only insist that meaning is possible even in spite of suffering—provided, certainly, that the suffering is unavoidable."³⁸

The actual techniques involved with older clients may include Socratic Dialogue, Dereflection, Paradoxical Intention, or the use of humor. Each of these approaches involves helping older adults to see a new way of examining the "difficulties" or hurts within their lives in order to discover the meaning that these events or feelings can have. It is important for the older adult to be able to see the possibility of finding meaning even if everyone that the client has ever known or cared about has died; to see the possibility of meaning even if they are suffering from incurable diseases. As Frankl maintains:

to see 'that unconditional meaning, however, is paralleled by the unconditional value of each and every person. It is that which warrants the indelible quality of the dignity of man. Just as life

remains potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable, so too does the value of each and every person stay with him or her, and it does so because it is based on values that he or she has realized in the past, and is not contingent on the usefulness that he or she may or may not retain in the present.’³⁹

CONCLUSION

Gerontologists will find in Logotherapy an ally for assisting them in confronting the humanity of their clients at the deepest level—the level of meaning. The Logotherapeutic tenet that self-transcendence is the essence of human existence opens the door to a deeper understanding of the human capacity to dedicate and commit oneself to something or someone beyond one’s self. With its concept of dimensional ontology Logotherapy provides creative interpretations of the ontological differences and anthropological unity of personhood.⁴⁰ It enriches the understanding of meanings and values, of freedom and responsibility, of conscience and commitment, of decision and responsibility, of suffering and faith. It exegetes what Reinhold Niebuhr characterized as the basic question of life, namely, “the problem of meaning.”⁴¹ It dynamically focuses on what Paul Tillich pointed to when he wrote: “Man is ultimately concerned about his being and his meaning.”⁴²

In its recognition of the holistic nature of the human person, Logotherapy appeals to what lies beyond the psycho-physical nature of an older person. By emphasizing that a human being is not simply a psychosomatic organism, Logotherapy introduces an understanding of personhood which affirms one’s capacity to find meaning in life in every stage of life, indeed, even in the midst of suffering and dying. Logotherapy attempts to construct a dynamic synthesis of the various dimensions of personhood and thereby communicates both realism and hope. It provides an understanding of life at all of its diverse stages, including old age, as life lived *sub specie aeternitatis*.

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