



Meaning And Suffering: A Study Of Victor Frankl's *Man's Search For Meaning*

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Abstract

Meaning as well as suffering are seen as pivotal elements of life. Both of them constitute life's purpose as suffering caused makes the person to direct own self in meaningful actions. Victor Frankle's *Man's search for Meaning* is a record of life in a concentration camp during World War II. It is a record of human suffering and man's pursuit of meaning in completely adverse situation like Holocaust. The research paper attempts to explore existential analysis through a theory developed by him named Logotherapy. The therapy presents the concept that it is not the pleasure and power but the search of meaning which leads human action to prolific life even in the worst conditions. The search of meaning is the prominent way and motivational force that human beings can sustain the hardest suffering if they find meaning in. The paper analyses the principal themes in Man's Search for meaning especially the essence of meaning in human life. Furthermore, the paper also presents individuals' finding meaning in sufferings with his concept of Logotherapy and its relevance in the contemporary world.

Keyword: Meaning, Suffering, Holocaust, Logotherapy, Existential Crises, Experiences

Introduction

Victor Emil Frankl (1905-1997) was a psychiatrist, neurologist and philosopher from Vienna, Austria. Also, he was a Holocaust survivor as he was a prisoner in German Concentration camp for more than 4 years during the second world war. *The Man's Search for Meaning* is his seminal work and it even stands as a crucial work for survival literature. The book is autobiographical as it is a Holocaust testimony of his experiences of detention at Auschwitz and other concentration camps. The book was originally given title as *A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp* in German in 1946. The English version was published in 1959 which proved to be an international bestseller. Millions of copies were sold in numerous languages and it was also entitled as one of ten most influential books in the US by a survey made by Book of the Month Club and The Library of Congress in 1991 (Esther, 1991). The paper examines the important themes and his therapy keeping in line his concept of suffering and search of meaning.

Man's Search for Meaning by Victor Frankl is split into two divisions. The first part describes about his experiences as a prisoner at Nazi concentration camp. Frankl faced the loss of his family including his parents and his wife and suffered a lot of frustration and trauma. He observed his fellow mates who were Jewish prisoners at the camp and noticed how they suffered and few of them transcended from suffering and could survive. The first part is about the observations he writes to prove his theory later. From his observations on other prisoners, he identified three mental stages that everyone faces as a prisoner in the camp. The first stage was of shock that every prisoner experienced when an individual was admitted to the camp. The second stage was of apathy and emotional death when the prisoner has become accustomed with his existence in the camp. The individual tries surviving with the inmate values along with other prisoners. The third stage was of

disillusionment, moral deformity, and bitterness with life after the individual is liberated (archive.org). The second part of the book focuses on the 'logotherapy.' It explains the theory of Frankl in detailed manner. He writes about the theory as these thoughts helped him to survive until and after he was liberated. The term 'logos' is a Greek word and it means 'meaning'. The theory basically provides the concept of generating meaning in life and that will be the motivational force to survive.

Meaning and Suffering

Existential philosophy focuses on the question of finding meaning. Finding meaning in life is an eternal question and cannot be answered completely at a time. The transition of meaning can be traced in ever-changing circumstances. Creating or making meaning in life has been seen differently from time to time. Previously, it was considered that living for society and living for the humanity is a meaning of life. However, this changed in following centuries with spread of patriotism, living for the country was considered meaningful life. In the contemporary times, the theories and movements in literature provide an emphasis on individualism.

Historically, after both world wars were fought, it was a time of heavy frustrations and individuals found life meaningless. This came as theory of absurd and many writers and playwrights like Martin Esslin, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, and Eugène Ionesco tried recording this experience in their works. However, Victor Frankl being the Jew and being prisoner at the camps provides a contrast view by suggesting that there is a meaning to life and it can be created amidst the worst circumstances too. Frankl says that 'the meaning of life is found in every moment of living; life never ceases to have meaning, even in suffering and death. In a group therapy session during a mass fast inflicted on the camp's inmates trying to protect an anonymous fellow inmate from fatal retribution by authorities, Frankl offered the thought that for everyone in a dire condition there is someone looking down, a friend, family member, or even God, who would expect not to be disappointed'.

Frankl represents the society in only two races on humans: Decent and indecent. He states that every society is about to have these two people. Here in case, Nazi guards were decent while prisoners were indecent and among them most noticeable was kapo, whose duty was to supervise the fellow prisoners and complete administrative works. Nazi created their ideology based on racism and pursuit of living space and power in contrast to the Victor's ideology. The lust for power and pursuit of living space brought others a war and sufferings followed it.

Samuel Beckett with his theatre of absurd said that You are on earth and there is no cure for that (Beckett, 1958). This statement presents view of the dystopian world with barren and desolate nature. The sentence can be seen with a view of how sufferings will lead the life. Frankl also shares his experience and insights on suffering. Both say that suffering is inevitable part of life whether it be physical or mental. Frankl portrays both the experiences – physical and mental at concentration camp. The Holocaust is the physical experience of killing people. 'The Holocaust was the genocide of European Jews during World War II. Between 1941 and 1945, Nazi Germany and its collaborators systematically murdered some six million Jews across German-occupied Europe, around two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population. The murders were carried out primarily through mass shootings and poison gas in extermination camps, chiefly Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, and Chelmno in occupied Poland.' (The Holocaust) The victims were sent to extermination camp by rail and they were put to death in chambers filled with poisonous gas. Many other Jews were put into forced labour camps and large number of them died there by numerous negative means like abuse, starvation, deadly experiments and exhaustion. Moreover, Frankl records the lived mental experience of prisoners at the camp and also provides three stages that lead the mental circumstances even after liberation. The first stage is of depersonalization. The prisoner returns to the life of outside world and tries readjusting but it is still not lively for them as their mind does not emotionally respond to freedom. Freedom is still a dream for them and they do not yet feel the pleasure or realise that they are no more controlled by them. The body is the first to break this stage by responding in want of more food and more sleep. Subsequently, the mind reacts as Frankl writes that 'feeling suddenly broke through the strange fetters which had strained it.' (P. 111).

The second stage initiates from here and it contains the risk of deforming. The prisoner now realizes the freedom due released pressure and then, the prisoner receives power to exercise freedom. Frankl writes an example of his friend who passed through the second stage and his reactions. He states that his friend was

suddenly much possessed with the idea of violence towards his abusers the same way they tortured them. Lastly, the third stage is of struggling i.e. towards the primary realisation of bitterness and disillusionment found in them which will harm their mental health. The victims withheld the bitterness and they find thoroughly hard to respond to the world outside keeping away that bitterness. Frankl writes about this stage as ‘superficiality and lack of feeling...so disgusting that one finally felt like creeping into hole and neither seeing human beings anymore.’(P.113) In the last stage, disillusionment is a disaster for the liberated prisoners as they realise that even in the outside world, there is not an end to suffering. They are disillusioned by returning home and they realise that no one awaited them. This shatters the hope and creates horrific mental experiences which hard to overcome. As an answer to the suffering Frankl says that ‘we are our choices, and the amount in which we suffer is entirely dependent on our response to the innate condition of suffering. We may choose to suffer, or we may choose to thrive despite the condition of suffering. The choice, as Frankl says, is up to us.’

Victor Frankl’s Logotherapy

Frankl has explained the concept of logotherapy in the second part of his Man’s Search for Meaning. Frankl forms this theory as upgradation to previous theories and Guttman writes for it that Logotherapy is often referred to as the “third Viennese school of psychotherapy,” and it originated in the 1930s as a response to both Freud’s psychoanalysis and Adler’s emphasis on power within society. It is more than just “therapy.” It is a philosophy for the spiritually lost and an education for those who are confused. It offers support in the face of suffering and healing for the sick. (Guttman, 2008) Sigmund Freud had provided the concept of will to pleasure and so Friedrich Nietzsche has given the concept of will to power. Both emphasise on power and pleasure which opposed by Frankl saying that the primary drive of human is to search meaning in various conditions.

He introduces this therapy to improve the existing therapies with the focus on ‘meaning dimension’ or in other words, spiritual dimension of Humans. Freedom of will, will to meaning, and meaning in life are the three concept that constitutes Frankl’s theory from Philosophy and Psychology. The first concept of logotherapy is ‘freedom of will’ which represents the idea that as humans, everyone has freedom to choose to react to life situations and they are solely responsible for the choices they make. The individual has autonomy to decide and respond to whatever circumstances. The second concept ‘will to meaning’ tells that individuals are free and are encouraged to find a purpose to achieve their goals. It is when one can’t realise the meaning, one feels meaninglessness and experiences the aggression, depression and frustration. The basic motive is to search for meaning and for which the individuals are capable to overcome pleasure and support suffering for a meaningful cause. Frankl proves this by saying “In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of sacrifice.”(P.117) The third concept ‘meaning in life’ describes that humans are forced to realise the demands of life in every situation. Meaning is an objective reality than only a personal perspective and therefore it is individual’s responsibility to contribute to the life. Having the ability to do so, humans must self-transcend to enhance the circumstance and humanity.

According to Frankl meaning can be found at every moment of life and he points out three ways to find meaning. The first way is creation and he explains that it is essential that you put your effort in working because that is the way to realise your existence and you create meaning through your deeds. The second way is experiences, with which it is foretold that every individual should feel everything that is present in the world. It can be both the elements – internal and external world like nature, culture, truth, being loved, goodness and truth. The third way is the attitude and that is about your perspective to see the world. Frankl says, “If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.”(P.76) Suffering is inevitable part of it but the attitude one possesses towards it completely a choice whether just to suffer with it or finding a meaning in suffering and have a different perception. Lastly, humans must stick to point that they always have freedom to choose response be it negative or positive that freedom cannot be snatched away at all.

Conclusion

Man's Search for meaning stands as an evidence to the experience of the Holocaust of the second world war and it also provides the concept of Logotherapy. Frankl's experiences and the insights on coping with suffering at any circumstances of life leaves an undoubted remark on the reader. In contemporary era, Frankl's Man's search of meaning is highly relevant as modern world is complex and civilian do meet with frustration with many existential crises. Very often the people in present times experience chaos, alienation, loss of hope and meaninglessness but Frankl's therapy provides a hope and meaning to these experiences by finding meaning in suffering, challenges and pain.

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