



# VIKTOR FRANKL— ADVOCATE FOR HUMANITY: ON HIS 100TH BIRTHDAY

## Summary

Viktor Frankl founded the psychotherapeutic school known as Logotherapy and Existential Analysis. Frankl was a medical doctor whose interest in the burgeoning field of psychology and psychoanalysis brought him into contact with the theories of Freud and Adler. Frankl's familiarity with these two schools of psychotherapy combined with his own philosophical approach to human nature became motivating factors in his desire to reduce "reductionism" and promote a more humanistic approach to the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, and medicine. Frankl dedicated both his life and the better part of his career to the topic of meaning. Frankl's unique contribution to the field of psychology focuses on the effect that meaning, possibility, freedom, and decision have on an individual's psychological well-being and development. This article aims to illustrate Frankl's unique contribution to psychology by providing a brief biography and highlighting the contexts in which Logotherapy as a theory emerged.

*Keywords:* Viktor Frankl; biography; logotherapy; existential analysis; meaning; psychoanalysis

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2005 marks the 100th anniversary of Viktor Frankl's birth. The intention of this article is to commemorate this great Austrian personality who founded the new psychotherapeutic school known as Logotherapy and Existential Analysis. Frankl's interest in psychotherapy began early. By the time Frankl was in his mid-teens, he was interested in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and had established a regular correspondence with him. During his 20s, he entered medical school and studied neurology but continued his interest in the burgeoning field of psychotherapy. Frankl studied with Alfred Adler's school of individual psychology before embarking on his own theoretical model. Frankl's contact with and interest in the thought and work of contemporary theorists of psychotherapy, psychology, and philosophy was vast. During his life, he had personal contact with R. Allers, G. Allport, L. Binswanger, M. Buber, R. Cohn, J. Eccles, M. Heidegger, K. Jaspers, F. Kuenkel, A. Maslow, I. Moreno, F. Perls, K. Rahner, C. Rogers, R. Schwarz, P. Watzlawick, and J. Wolpe, to name but a few. It was through these global contacts that Frankl was an ambassador of psychotherapy lecturing at more than 200 universities and frequently giving presentations for the lay public.

Frankl's life and work was committed to overcoming reductionism in psychology, psychotherapy, and medicine. He was dedicated to the topic of meaning, a topic he introduced to psychotherapy and specifically addressed in his theory of Logotherapy. He has been recognized worldwide for the technique of "paradoxical intention," which he developed for the treatment of compulsive behavior and anticipatory anxiety.

## BIOGRAPHY

Viktor Frankl was born on March 26, 1905. With the exception of 2½ years when he was incarcerated in several concentration camps during WWII, Frankl spent his life as a Viennese citizen. Frankl studied medicine and began his career as a neurologist in the 1920s. His interest in psychology and psychotherapy began when he was a teenager and culminated in his acquiring a doctorate in psychology following the war. Frankl's attachment to his native town was so strong that he remained in Vienna during the Nazi regime to protect his parents. In doing so, he allowed a visa for the United States to expire. To remain in Vienna was a very decisive moment in Frankl's life and one that warrants a closer look.

The profound decision Frankl made about remaining in Vienna was characteristic in many respects of his attitude toward life and his engagement with people. Frankl's commitment to his parents, as with others, was grounded in a strong sense of solidarity, the ability to stand his ground

despite a tendency toward shyness, a deeply rooted religious attitude, and a respect for familial tradition. Receiving a visa for the United States in 1941 came as somewhat of a surprise because of the innumerable applications from thousands of Jewish people. The visa was unexpectedly granted to him but restricted to 3 weeks before it expired. The situation for Jews under the Third Reich at that time was extremely threatening and it was quite clear to everyone that it would only become worse. As head of a department at Rothschild hospital in Vienna, Frankl was in a comfortable situation compared to others. He was under a so-called “protection against deportation” and this protection extended to his family and meant that they were safe from deportation to the concentration camps.

Receiving a visa in the midst of this situation produced a dilemma for Frankl. If he were to take it, his parents, brother, and sister would lose this vital protection and inevitably hasten their deportation. To remain in Vienna, however, would likely lead to less scientific work and curtail the progress of Frankl’s own work in Logotherapy. In addition, remaining in Vienna lessened the chances of survival for both him and his family. As the deadline on the visa approached, Frankl found he could not come to a comfortable decision. Neither choice seemed to him responsible. Returning home from work one day, he passed Saint Stephen’s cathedral. Frankl heard organ music emanating from within. As a Jew, Frankl was forbidden by the Nazis to enter a Christian church. Regardless, he entered, covering the yellow star on his clothes with his handbag. Frankl sat in the cathedral for an hour hoping the setting might facilitate a sense of calm and clarity to make his decision. Despairing that a decision could not be reached, he continued home.

When he entered the home he shared with his parents, he saw a piece of marble lying on the radio. He asked his father what it was. Frankl’s father replied that during his walk that day, he had passed the neighborhood synagogue. The synagogue had been destroyed but he had seen this little piece of marble in the ruins and had picked it up as a souvenir. Frankl did not immediately recognize the piece of marble or its significance. His father continued that the marble piece was originally from the board with the Ten Commandments. If Frankl were to look closely, his father pointed out, he would recognize which commandment it came from. At that moment, Frankl’s father began to recite in Hebrew the fourth commandment: “Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you!” (Exodus 20:12). Frankl felt as though he had been hit by lightning and knew instantaneously what his decision had to be. This was no sheer coincidence but a real “hint of heaven” for him. Frankl allowed the visa to expire and, 9 months later, the hospital he worked at was closed. He

and his family (this included Frankl's first wife) were soon deported to the concentration camps. Only his sister managed to immigrate to Australia.

Only 1 in 40 entering a concentration camp survived. Frankl considered his own survival the result of sheer luck, but it was also his extreme motivation. The motivation to survive helped him endure many of the risks he was prepared to take. His motivation was rooted in his own psychological and mental attitudes, attitudes that fueled his life's work and writings. At the time of his deportation, Frankl had completed his first manuscript on Logotherapy (this first book would later appear in English in 1955 as *The Doctor and the Soul*). The unpublished manuscript, reflective of Frankl's own attitude and philosophical positions, dealt with the search for meaning, suffering, and the attitude we adopt in each and every moment of life. Tucked in the pocket of the overcoat Frankl was wearing, it was lost on his first day in the concentration camps. Frankl's psychological attitude, his philosophy of life, religious faith, and mental re-creation of the manuscript during his years in the concentration camps provided a vital and valuable sustenance that he would later attribute to his survival. Frankl lost his family and first wife in the concentration camps. His personal and tragic experience became an unintentional experimentum crucis ("key experiment") of his Logotherapy. He physically and psychologically experienced the key tenets of the theory he had developed. A strong sense of meaning and purpose was not only vital in life but in extreme situations it was crucial for survival.

Following the war, Frankl became head of the neurological department of the Viennese Poliklinik and remained there for 25 years. He met and married his second wife, Eleonore Schwindt, a nurse at the Poliklinik, with whom he had a daughter (and two grandchildren). The postwar years were very creative ones for Frankl. He published numerous books and articles. In the 1950s, two of his books, *The Doctor and the Soul* and *Man's Search for Meaning*, appeared in English. During this time, he began lecturing extensively abroad. His first lecture tour in the United States, for example, began in 1957 with invitations from Harvard, Princeton, Northwestern, University of Chicago, and Union Theological Seminary.

Although the Austrian Nazis were responsible for his deportation to the concentration camps and although he was very often abroad for lecture tours following the war, Frankl continued to live in Vienna. This fact has troubled many Jewish emigrees who left Vienna and could not understand Frankl's loyalty to Austria. The explanation Frankl gave for this decision was also typical of his positive attitude toward human beings, generally. When asked, Frankl would talk about the many positive experiences with the people of Vienna. He often recounted the story of the catholic baroness who kept his cousin hidden during the war or the socialist attorney who treated him as a

friend when Frankl returned from the concentration camps impoverished and quite desperate. These and many other experiences were enough to convince Frankl that core human values of decency, respect, and compassion could still be encountered in Vienna. Frankl was deeply attentive to any signs or expressions of humanitarianism. His attentiveness and advocacy for humane expression never faltered throughout his life.

### A WITNESS OF THE TIMES

Frankl's life spanned the 20th century. At the young age of 10, he waved to the emperors Wilhelm of Germany and the Austrian-Hungarian Franz-Joseph at the Viennese Ringstrasse—a witness of a political epoch long past. He was also a witness to nearly 100 years of the developing field of psychotherapy. Frankl's theoretical emphasis on meaning, suffering, what makes us truly human, responsibility, freedom, and the reality of death and despair was tested personally and observed during the horrors of WWII.

What Frankl witnessed and experienced in the camps was followed by personal despair after his return to Vienna. Within 3 weeks of his release, Frankl learned of the death of his wife, his mother, his brother, and most of his closest friends. During his time in the camps, Frankl had clung to the image of reuniting with his young wife and family. Orienting himself psychologically and emotionally toward that which was most meaningful and valuable for him had, he later commented, given him the strength to endure the time in the concentration camps. Learning of the deaths of his family suddenly broke this valued meaning and hope. In the weeks and months that followed his release, he would question the meaning of suffering and the meaning of his own suffering. He would express his grief and guilt over surviving in a poem written in 1946 that ends with the line, “that you forgive me that I live.”

With the support and assistance of friends, Frankl resumed working. In only 9 days, he wrote “from the soul” his concentration camp experiences. The outcome of those 9 days became a book Frankl originally wanted to be published anonymously as simply a document of human behavior in extremis. Its German title, . . . *despite all say yes to life*, was later translated into English as *Man's Search for Meaning*. This small book from the soul became Frankl's most widely read and was eventually translated into more than 20 languages. It is a document advocating that we uphold and maintain the “most human in human beings” even under the most adverse circumstances life may challenge us with. These most human of traits and abilities include

the dignity of each individual life, the unconditional meaning of life, our responsibility for self and others, and our capacity for love and faith.

## SCIENTIST AND ADVOCATE

As a scientist, physician, and psychotherapist, Frankl was an advocate throughout his life for these specifically human traits. In addition to the somatic and psychological dimensions of the human psyche, Frankl referred to the third “spiritual dimension,” which accounted for these uniquely human expressions. His theory of Logotherapy and Existential Analysis gave scientific expression to the concern for what made a human being truly human. This concern was fruitful for psychotherapy, counseling, consultation, and crisis intervention.

During Frankl’s years in high school (Gymnasium), he was devoted to the work of Sigmund Freud and wrote his first paper on psychoanalysis. With a recommendation from Freud himself, Frankl’s paper was published in the *International Journal for Psychoanalysis* in 1924.

The birth of Frankl’s theory of Logotherapy is set within the context and history of psychotherapy. When Frankl decided to commence training in psychoanalysis, Freud referred him to the secretary of the psychoanalytical society. Frankl arrived at the home of Paul Federn for his appointment and was led into his study. The housekeeper closed the door behind him and Frankl could see Federn working at his desk. Without taking any notice of Frankl, Federn tacitly continued his work. After what seemed to Frankl like hours of standing silently in the room, Federn raised his head and gestured to Frankl to be seated in an assigned chair. In a high voice, which was an unexpected contrast to the tall bearded man, Federn asked, “Now, Mr. Frankl, what is your neurosis?” The unexpected question was surprising. Stammering, Frankl blurted something about his anal traits and then went on to analyze his own psychopathology. At the end of the short conversation, Federn suggested that Frankl should terminate his studies in medicine and return to see him.

Frankl left the house and began walking along the Danube canal to collect his thoughts and attempt to understand what had happened. He had felt completely uneasy during this meeting. What had irritated him so much about this meeting? Slowly it dawned on him. Obviously, the atmosphere and Federn’s posture was a prescribed method: the waiting, the mute assigning of a chair, immediate and direct questioning about his neurosis. But even if this approach had method, it lacked human dialogue and connection. There was no apology or explanation for the silent waiting Frankl had to endure. Federn

had not offered any greeting or introduction. There had been no attempt to establish a dialogue or immediate relation with Frankl by asking what he was currently doing, what he was interested in, how far he was in his studies, or what interested him about psychoanalysis. The immediate position Federn had taken was that Frankl be defined by a neurosis, that the neurosis would be of central interest, and in turn, the neurosis would dictate the direction of analysis.

For the first time, Frankl experienced and encountered *reductionism*, a topic he would fight throughout his life. If psychotherapy abandoned genuine and spontaneous human encounter for methodological reasons, if its central interest were the location of pathology and if this pathology were to be regarded as the determining factor in psychological disturbance, then Frankl no longer wanted to be a psychotherapist. This personal experience of reductionism and pathologism tipped the scales for Frankl. Within an hour of leaving Federn's home, he knew he could not commit himself to the method of psychoanalysis.

Frankl soon joined Alfred Adler's school of individual psychology and it was there that he completed his training and exam in psychotherapy. A similar fate would soon befall him there as well. During a lecture at the 3rd international congress of individual psychology in 1927, Frankl took the position that Adler's concept of the neurotic arrangement and the secondary gain from illness could not be the only motivation in neurotic behavior. Human beings, Frankl stated, not only seek to understand their own existence, they seek a meaning to their lives. This opinion, and the discussions that followed in the association, led to Frankl's teachers, Rudolf Allers and Oswald Schwarz, withdrawing from the association. Frankl did not see an immediate necessity to quit the association, but some months later, Adler excluded him.

Often, creative thinkers have a pivotal experience or intellectual orientation that emerges early on. As a child, Frankl was absorbed by the question of meaning and the meaning of one's existence. As a student, and later as a physician, he had a great intuitive feel for this topic. Questioning the depth and value of the meaning of existence was not only an important guidepost in his own decisions, it influenced his enduring commitment to social issues. As a young physician, Frankl organized free youth advice centers to prevent student suicide. He was deeply concerned that patients in hospitals did not receive the psychological support many required. He saw it as a human obligation, a human responsibility, that each physician apply "medical ministry" (the title of one of his books published in German in 1946). Frankl was a forerunner in applying medical psychology and psychotherapy in hospitals. Frankl focused on providing practical assistance (life skills) to counter the sense of nihilism he saw penetrating Western 20th-century culture. Express-

sions of meaninglessness and despair were not only individual experiences recounted in therapy and counseling sessions, they also reflected the consequences of greater social, economic, technological, and political events.

Frankl's philosophical positions and interdisciplinary style were also influenced by a strong Judeo-Christian foundation. This accounts for the complicated reception his theory received by psychological schools and theological seminaries especially in North America beginning in the late 1950s. Was Logotherapy strictly psychological or was it religious philosophy? The core themes of Frankl's theory, however, both transcend and provide a bridge between psychology and religion. Despite its complicated reception, Logotherapy has been equally embraced as a theoretical and philosophical paradigm that can expand the disciplinary borders of psychotherapy, pastoral counseling, and medicine. Frankl had never intended Logotherapy to be a "substitute for conventional psychotherapy." Logotherapy was to provide a theoretical and practical compliment to psychotherapy, extending it to embrace the specifically human spiritual dimension.

Logotherapy begins with what Frankl considered our primary motivation: the search for meaning. It is this uniquely human capacity to strive and search for meaning and purpose in our lives that lays the foundation for our development, fulfillment, and discovery of our essential selves. Meaning can be discovered through our active work and contribution to the world. Meaning can also be discovered experientially (our subjective experience and interpretations). Finally, meaning can be discovered in the attitudes we adopt toward situations of unavoidable suffering ("how" we suffer). Frankl placed a great deal of emphasis on the meaning we might gain through fate or suffering. Although suffering or harm itself is meaningless, we can find meaning in "how" we face a challenging situation and the value we may ascribe it. Through this process, our attitudes in turn may transform, inspire, or liberate us psychologically and emotionally.

Our uniquely human capacity for self-distance and self-transcendence facilitates the search for meaning. Self-distancing refers to our ability to reflect on our own actions, thoughts, and feelings, whereas self-transcendence refers to our capacity to orient ourselves outward toward another person or toward a cause greater than ourselves. Frankl's deep respect for the dignity of each individual, one's (moral) conscience, personal meaning, and what one takes responsibility for lie at the foundation of Logotherapy and Existential Analysis. Ultimately, Frankl would argue, human existence is unknowable. Its unconditional meaning, however, and our commitment to



the discovery of life's depth and multiple meanings begin with the very human act of encounter Frankl felt was lacking in traditional psychotherapy.

Frankl's passionate writing on human liberty, responsibility, and the meaning of existence extends to his eloquent descriptions of the realities of human failure and experiences of suffering, guilt, and death. He saw human beings as interconnected, yet ultimately whole. He objected to the categorizations of human behavior, emotions, and development that resulted in the reduction of these expressions to mere psychological mechanisms. His belief in the value, dignity, and ultimate mystery of each human life was rooted in an attitude of humility and personal religious devotion.

Frankl's body of work was dedicated to unifying both thought and experience. Logotherapy is therefore not merely theory framed in methodological and scientific paradigms; Frankl literally "worked through" his theory personally and examined it existentially. His work is both an intellectual and experiential examination of the multiple contours of human existence. His message rang with an authenticity that reached many. Carl Rogers stated that Frankl's writings were an "outstanding contribution to psychological thought in the last fifty years."

A key focus or goal of Logotherapy is helping a person gain greater consciousness of their responsibility. Many of Frankl's public lectures were impassioned appeals for greater responsibility both individually and socially. As a concentration camp survivor, he spoke eloquently of our responsibility toward others and toward the world. He often stated, "Since Auschwitz we know what human beings are capable of. And since Hiroshima we know what stands at stake."

## THE PERSON

Frankl's character was quickly evident in any encounter with him. He was an extremely astute and lively spirit. He had a strong sense of humor and loved nothing more than a witty anecdote or joke. His lifestyle was humble and simple, his thinking clear-cut. He deplored and was annoyed by careless thinking.

This clever and brilliant speaker and storyteller was also a shy man who tended to avoid the spotlight. His wish to be buried quietly and privately corresponded with his nature. There was something unapproachable about him. He tried to avoid personal meetings and was especially sensitive to criticism. He was somewhat of an isolated character but this also provided him with the space and time to devote to his large program of work. Teamwork did not come naturally to him. He had difficulties, therefore, with the discussions

and further development of his theory in the GLE (Society for Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, Vienna). He would eventually distance himself from the organization theoretically and personally.

## ONLY THE GOOD SHOULD COUNT

Despite the suffering and injustice Frankl experienced personally, he could never accept the idea of collective guilt. For Frankl, only the individual person becomes guilty before his or her moral conscience. Further, human life, indeed human development, could not rest on guilt, criticism, or failure. During a speech at the Viennese city hall in 1988 marking the 50th anniversary of Hitler's invasion of Austria, Frankl suggested that each nation was "capable of a holocaust." Therefore, we must be continuously conscious of this danger and we must focus our attention and efforts on reconciliation "over all ditches and over all graves." Frankl represented an Austrian nation coming to terms with its past. The greatness of Viktor Frankl's character lies in his deepest conviction: Only the good really counts in life.

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### APPENDIX

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#### Main works:

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