

Student Name

Instructor name

Course

Date

Book Review: Viktor E. Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning"

Some literary works take you to another world or in another realm that you may never know existed, and some authors contemplate astonishing facts and concepts that introduce you to your own true psyche and compel you to disregard the self-assumed mental inhibitions. Renowned psychotherapist Viktor Frankl's literary masterpiece *Man's search for meaning*, published in 1959, is one such example. It is an extraordinary compilation of historical actualities and includes theorizing of salient psychological enhancements that we not only receive education on historical realities, but also about our hidden mental capabilities. Frankl, being a psychologist and therapist of Austrian origin, tried to nurture positive psychological stances through presenting the gruesome account of his life as a prisoner and then narrating the philosophy that helped him in his survival plan. Frankl (1905-1997) was a famed neurologist and was well-known for introducing the theory of logotherapy. The contributions he made in existentialism-analysis made him a modern era legend, and his theories are termed as third Viennese School of Psychotherapy. However, a significant aspect of his persona was that he was a Holocaust survivor, and the experience greatly influenced his mental inhibitions and perceptions on life. This paper is a review of this path-breaking bestseller novel from Viktor Frankl.

In the novel *Man's search for meaning* Frankl presents an account of the painful and traumatic experiences he endured while being imprisoned at the Nazis Auschwitz extermination camp during World War II. The book not only informs the reader about salient disturbing realities hidden behind the four walls of that place, but also puts forth a reliable and easy strategy to deal with difficult situations and predicaments. The chronicle in *Man's search for meaning* has been divided in two parts, and each provides us a comprehensive strategic outlook on life. It accentuates salient theories of existence and entails methods for overcoming the mandatory vulnerability of our psyche. It will not be an overstatement that this book has a historical significance attached since it informs the reader about what actually used to happen in those concentration camps, and the insanely inhuman behaviors that were being adopted by the Germans. In this book, the author's narration of his personal experiences is vivid, explicit and at the same time compelling. It is compelling because instead of burdening human mind with the complexities of nature and psychological revelations, the novel persuades the reader towards digging far deeper into the conceptual extravagance it offered and seek further knowledge about the message that it projected. Here it is important to acknowledge the central theme and message that Viktor Frankl presented to the readers through this book. In this quote from *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl appropriately explains the crux of the novel.

“Everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedom — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way” (65).

The novel's first segment incorporates Frankl's autobiographical account of the days he spent in Auschwitz, Dachau, and salient other extermination camps as a prisoner from 1942 to 1945, whereas the other introduce the readers about the theory he practiced in order to survive. Political scenario, psychological analysis of prisoners and authoring of historical facts is just one

perspective of the novel. The reality is that the book incorporates much more than that and the two parts basically are connected to each other. The first part of the book sets the pace and forms the base for the second part so each strengthens the other and are intertwined. It also provides a proof for the certainty and workability of the principles of logotherapy that has been discussed in the next part of the book in detail. Logotherapy was a conceptual innovation that Frankl accomplished and embedded in the system of existential psychotherapy. Its theories and principles were largely determined, formulated, and practiced while he stayed in the harsh and brutal environment of the concentration camp. The first part is not just about filling the space with gruesome facts about the circumstances that the inmates and prisoners were subjected to including his family. It actually serves as an eye-opener for readers and also provides strong evidence for the psychological revelation that followed in the later part. He did not incorporate his personal experiences as a prisoner to portray the reality behind death camps, but his actual purpose was to use it as a tool to enhance the impact of his theory of logotherapy.

In the first section, Frankl acted as a psychoanalyst for everyone while writing this book and this can be analyzed from the way he answers all queries that appears in a reader's mind while going through the details of the death camp conditions. While inscribing the painful realities, he acknowledged the fact the readers might get perplexed over certain issues, and hence, Frankl dealt with them instantly. He narrated the way people after entering the camp's premises were divided into two lines, and a man was given the duty to determine their fate by pointing out left and right paths for them. One direction entailed crematories and the other was a cleansing station. The prisoners were not only stripped of all their belongings, but also were shaved off all traces of hair on their body. Frankl tried to explain to the readers that within minutes after entering into the death camp, prisoners realized that they had no right on their

bodies from now on. This had a critically negative psychological impact on the psyche of those individuals held as captives. In a situation where only one out of the twenty-eight prisoners had the chance to survive, keeping your perceptions and notions right would have been the most difficult task. Sections of this part that explain the bitter realities of Nazi death camps are so disturbing that one cannot help but imagine how humans can endure such acts. He immediately confers to this query and writes “if someone now asked of us the truth of Dostoevsky's statements that flatly defines man as a being who can get used to anything, we would reply 'yes, a man can get used to anything, but do not ask us how’” (Frankl 36).

Suicide was on the mind of almost every inmate, explains Frankl in this extremely significant quote from the book. “The thought of suicide was entertained by everyone, if only for a short time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situations, constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others” (36). At this point, the reader gets a concise knowledge of the horrific circumstances, and wonders what prevented Frankl from committing suicide. This has been quantified by the author and discussed in the very next part, “even the gas chambers lost their horrors for him after the first few days- after all; they spared him the act of committing suicide” (Frankl 37). In this way there is not only a new psychic revelation provided the capability and flexibility of human mind in every experience of Frankl, but he also uses his knowledge as a psychologist to understand the reader's state of mind and provided relatable reasoning. “[T]here is also purpose in that life which is almost barren of both creation and enjoyment” (Frankl 106). This manner of writing reveals that Frankl did not want to make his work illuminate a disappointing or negative theme, but become a ray of light for those wandering in darkness, and for people who tend to give up instantly in difficult situations.

One aspect that comes across even from this particular segment of the book is the emphasis he laid on the positivity of approach and the searching for a meaningful stance during the course of life. The proceedings and experiences that Frankl shared with the readers cannot be termed as a projection of hatred or vengeance against the Germans. Instead, Frankl tackles the conditions that he and others were forced to reckon with as a challenge that life offered and he formulated a strategic plan of action to eradicate it. Frankl practically applied a new theory that he created in those traumatic days of his life. He established that although a person's stamina, persistence, and conviction can be put to test in any sort of extremely annoying and/or life threatening conditions, it is the perception that saves from going insane or opting for suicide. He explains it with various examples and narrates that he, although being a psychologist, felt it difficult to think straight at first. However, it was the correctness of his state of mind that saved him from committing suicide or give in to the trying conditions. "Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual" (Frankl 97). Frankl tries to explain that suicide should only be looked upon as an escape route or may be an easy way out of a difficult situation and not as a perfect gateway to freedom. Freedom, as Frankl propagates, is not about getting relief from a certain complicated situation or a reaction to some difficult stimuli. It is actually the capability of achieving what one desires for, and the craving of altering our attitude independently.

One cannot help but observe that throughout the book, Frankl analyses every situation and human reactions from a psychological perspective. The manner of tackling from the dehumanizing and violent acts of the Nazis has been divided into three phases and in each phase he explains the changing perceptions, psychological reactions and intellectual mediations of human mind. This part although is emotionally stirring and psychologically disturbing but at the

same time it acts as a catalyst to explain that human mind has been empowered to prepare the body for enduring every possible torture and lets is eventually succeed in every situation. He described that a prisoner's initial psychological response in such inhuman condition is of initiating a state of shock. "The prisoner of Auschwitz, in the first phase of shock, did not fear death" (Frankl 36). This state helps an individual get accustomed to the present circumstances no matter how hard a situation gets. Then the second phase gets instigated in which an individual becomes unresponsive to the hostility or complication of the situation altogether. This has been described as a state of mental numbness and an automatic launching of indifference towards the consequences and happens when the urge to live and hopes of survival start to diminish. During this phase people also start to get accustomed to this situation and accept it as fate, which Frankl proposes is wrongful perception. There are descriptions that entail the way prisoners revolted against the rigid rules of the camps by being late for duty deliberately and seeking "pleasures from suffering" in the most unappealing or unimportant actions like hiding a cigarette (Frankl 47). They all were hopeless and felt lonely after watching their families and loved one being brutally murdered. Death, in such a situation, becomes a relatively better option and a probable solution to get relief from the trying circumstances, which Frankl clearly disagrees with. He proclaims that "without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete" (106). Many inmates have been described as having strong faith in God and psychological conviction that ultimately helped them cross every threshold.

The third phase has been described as of release from the challenge and explains the justification behind the feelings of detachment from the outer world that naturally occurs. Those who have lived their lives in any sort of confinement will agree to the perception Frank offered, that once you are released, nothing initially attracts and the ordeal strengthens your faith in the

existence of God and in the worthlessness of outwardly benefits. The third phase is the most important one because it reveals the insignificance of worldly troubles and the determining role positive attitude and faith can play in eradicating the problematic conditions. “The crowning experience of all, for the homecoming man, is the wonderful feeling that, after all he has suffered, there is nothing he need fear any more — except his God” (Frankl 93).

In the second part of the book *Man's Search for Meaning* Frankl presents his readers the ultimate theory for attaining mental perseverance and positive cognitive advantage called logotherapy. The logo is derived from a Greek word Logos which means spirit, God, and meaning. In this section it becomes apparent that he has implied a strategic compare and contrast policy to exemplify the substantiality of his philosophy. In this context, he has made references to various significant psychologists of his time including Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Arthur Schopenhauer. Mental and theoretical orientation wise he shared conceptual assertions with Nietzsche's school of thought instead of Freud and Adler. Frankl's perception of logotherapy entails that everyone must engrave “will to meaning”, unlike the propositions of Freud's will to pleasure and Adler's will to power, to achieve positivity and stability in life. While being confined, he became an ardent believer in Nietzsche's statement that having a “why” or a reason to live can prepare us for any sort of “how” or situations (80). He realized that those inmates who sustained a reason to live, longed to reunite with their loved ones, wished to attain self-completion, and most significantly professed strong faith in God had greater chance of survival and liberation. He justly narrates the rightful aspects that must encircle the meaning or purpose of our life in this quote “someone looks down on each of us in difficult hours — a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or a God — and he would not expect us to disappoint him” (83).

The review of *Man's Search for Meaning* will not be justified and complete without mentioning the intellectual extravagance that it offers. Through a brief introductory chapter in this book that follows right after the case study ends, Frankl has attempted to propagate the theory that helped him survive through those trying circumstances, and articulates that one must possess a purpose or meaning in life. Existential Vacuum is a concept that is seldom recognized and has been comprehensively explained throughout this part of the book. He believed that existential gap/vacuum is a naturally occurring phenomenon, and can be looked upon as a reactionary phase which develops out of frustration. Frustration, on the other hand, contemplates a person's cognition when he/she fails to find a meaning in life. This existential frustration later enhances, encourages, and influences humanity towards adopting self-destructive measures.

Frankl projects the notion that if one feels free from within, consciously and spiritually, only then can he be termed as a free being. "It is this spiritual freedom — which cannot be taken away — that makes life meaningful and purposeful" (Frankl 67). It is true that not many of the captives survived, and this compels the reader to pose an objection to his concept. This is where the true psychotherapist persona of Frankl comes across, and again he confers to the query and answers it with utmost sincerity. "Naturally only a few people were capable of reaching great spiritual heights. But a few were given the chance to attain human greatness even through their apparent worldly failure and death, an accomplishment, which in ordinary circumstances they would have never achieved" (Frankl 72). Frankl's theory implied that achieving what the world has analyzed as a prospective success, a path that is worthy of living for, or worthy of following is an incorrect notion. One must be spiritually free and satisfied in order to achieve success. Death does not mean that a person has failed in life; it is also an achievement since no body opts for it but grasping it in a dignified manner and feeling spiritually satisfied and full is what makes

a person truly worthwhile. Suffering, in Frankl's conceptual relevance, was not a negative situation, but actually a task which has been propagated as an act of submission that eventually paves the way for a defeat. Frankl writes "when a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task" (78).

The readers of today can completely relate to the findings and theories of Frankl because the world has always followed a singular pattern of accommodating human urges and desires into the wrongful direction. Success and freedom are spiritually awakened feelings, not an outwardly achievement that one is required to attain in order to gain social acceptance. Frank proclaimed that "most men in a concentration camp believed that the real opportunities of life had passed. Yet, in reality, there was an opportunity and a challenge. One could make a victory of those experiences, turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate, as did a majority of the prisoners" (72). In a very simplistic manner Frankl tried to explain it to the readers that failure in acquiring a purpose causes "physical and mental decay" (74). This decaying ultimately propels the emotions of giving up in life, and that can be referred to as the real failure. In this context, he provides the example of December 1944, when he recalled that maximum number of inmates had died before the New Year began just because they had hoped for gaining liberation from captivity before Christmas, and when this did not happen, they gave up hope. Faith played a prominent role in keeping Frankl alive, and spiritual hold helped him pass all the challenges that life suddenly offered to him. He also lost his family, including his pregnant wife, but he did not give up his "faith in future" (74).

It is important to understand the sincerity, depth of philosophical stances, and the significance of Viktor Frankl's theory of logotherapy. He rightly proclaims that the currently followed norms of society, mental inhibitions and salient intellectual preservations that we

human possess and consider the only possible way of life are nothing else but a product of false “mental hygiene”. He utterly rejected the prevailing misconception that acquisition of a “tensionless state” is the perfect gateway to maintain the equilibrium of life. The theory comes forth as not only exemplary, but also proves to be practically applicable and appropriate since it was derived and developed during Frankl’s stay in the concentration camps. The book provides unlimited historical knowledge and is extremely informative in this context. It also suggests significant philosophical revelations that substantially helped the author to overcome the salient psychological stances and apprehensions that he experienced. On the whole, it is a must read from not just the perspective of obtaining historical knowledge but to receive significant, lawful, and valuable spiritual guidance, fortification, and enrichment.

Works Cited

Frankl, Viktor, E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Ed. 4, Boston: Beacon Press, 2000. Print: ISBN 9780807014264.