

Relevance and Value of Meaning in Life

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Editorial

Do we really need to have meaning in life or can we just live our life without even pondering on this question? How does it matter to know the essence of life when we can actually live without even wondering about such questions? Human beings are the only beings that can put their own existence into question and the biggest quest in an individual's life is to find meaning and purpose and the questions about meaning of human life are age old.

Notable historical figures have provided answers to the question of what makes life meaningful, although they have not necessarily put it in these terms. For example: Aristotle on the human function, Aquinas on the beatific vision, and Kant on the highest good. These concepts have bearing on happiness and mortality and are straightforwardly construed as accounts of which final ends (telos) a person ought to realize in order to have a life with meaning.

Meanings are at the core of our experience and also at the core of whatever we do. It only through meanings that we make sense of our existence. In life we find meaning through a sense of purpose which makes life worthwhile. Frankl aptly pointed out a firm sense of meaning is essential for optimal human development. Bruner put it more bluntly, noting that without meaning systems "we would be lost in murk of chaotic experience and probably would not have survived as a species in any case".

Viktor Frankl's work is best known for addressing the existential themes of meaning, human freedom, responsibility, values, spirituality, and death, on which he founded what has become known as the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy. Frankl's Logotherapy, which followed in part and extended from his original Existential Analysis work, was precisely a novel therapeutic approach, one that was a philosophy of human existence, an anthropological theory of personality, and a therapy which addressed the question—What is the meaning of life, by being a Meaning-Centered psychotherapy. He used the Greek word "Logos" in the name of his theory because it denotes

Meaning, and expressed that Logos is deeper than logic and explanation. Frankl attempted to convey to the world that Meaning opened an entirely new dimension, as if peering through the looking glass: looking through the Pathos—the pathology, into the Spirit.

Meaning in life is not just a theoretical or philosophical construct, but it has a bearing on human health and well-being as asserted by Jung who noted that absence of meaning is related to psychopathology. Yalom in an empirical research confirmed earlier clinical observations that to live without meaning, goals, or values provokes considerable stress.

While pondering about what makes life meaningful, several perspectives in the literature could be found, especially in the literature covering philosophy and existential psychology. In an attempt to formulate a single definition of meaning, one may ask what the essence of meaning is. But a single generic answer to this question is not possible to find. For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment as noted by Frankl. Frankl speaks of the uniqueness of meanings; a quality not only of a situation, but even of life as a whole since life is a string of unique situations. Frankl postulated that man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a "secondary rationalization" of instinctual drives.

Meaning serves a number of important functions in human lives. Firstly, meaning provides a purpose for our lives. Secondly, it furnishes values or standards by which to judge our actions. Thirdly, it gives us a sense of control over the events in our life. Lastly, it provides us with self-worth.

When people are unable to find meaning for any of these functions or when they lose or outgrow the meanings that they once had, they become distressed. Many emotional problems result from a failure to find meaning in life and can be resolved only through finding something to make life worth living.