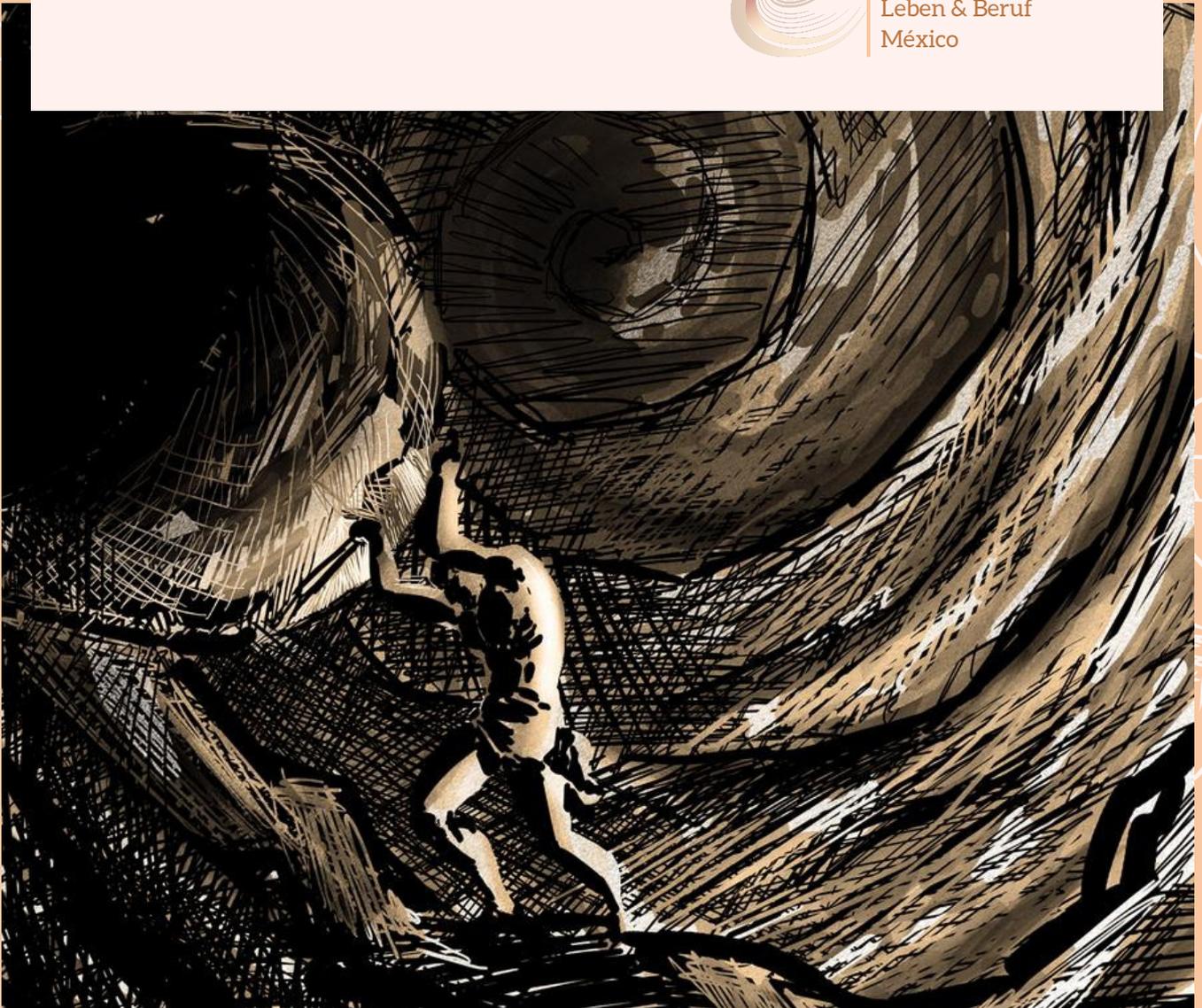


What are we looking for when we search for meaning?



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What are we looking for, when we search for meaning?

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1. Philosophical and psychological understanding of meaning

When a philosopher has the choice of speaking about the "meaning" or about the "essence" of something - how will he decide? He will want to talk about the "essence of meaning" in a balanced way, because "Essentia" is a philosopher's preference. Two reasons help me understand this preference for "the essence". On the one hand philosophy is given the important task to keep a critical watch over the different sciences. On the other hand statements about the essence bear a certain quality of proof by conveying objectifiable contents as part of the thing itself [Schischkoff, 1978, p. 638]. Contents, which can be observed by everybody in the same way. Compared to this phenomenologically objectifiable essence, the meaning of a thing seems like a chameleon: What is meaningful for one person, may lack meaning for the other or may be meaningful for the same person at one time and meaningless at another. Can there be any explanation for this complexity other than the fact that it is indeed the subject which provides an object with its meaning? Meaning as "arbitrary application of meaning", as chosen, even deliberate "subjectivistic" attribution of meaning renders the term questionable for the science of philosophy. In this light, it can be referred to the field of psychology.

The question of meaning not only crosses the border to psychology but also to religion. The attribution of meaning through man has its origin in God, who as Summa Persona gave "creation" its meaning. In the course of this discussion it will become evident how the psychological and religious dimensions have been part of the theme of meaning from the very beginning (see also Frankl 1970, p. 143ff.; Kovacs 1982).

First of all we will have to deal with the question whether meaning can in fact be a purely subjectivistic attribution. I have to face this question as medical doctor and psychotherapist. If this would be the case, I would expect less work in my therapeutical practice with patients suffering from a lack of meaning. Purely subjectivistic attributions of meaning could be expected to undergo a cognitive restructuring relatively simply. On the other hand any merely understandable and helpful new interpretation suggested to the patient would suffice to help overcome the painful and onerous lack of meaning. This, however, is contradicted by experience. An opinion of meaning is comparatively as stable as any sensual perception. One believes primarily what one has seen or heard oneself, whatever others may say against it. Experience shows that people suffering from a lack of meaning are not easily willing to simply apply new and "better" meanings to the circumstances of their life. What keeps them from improving their painful and frustrating emptiness through easy and painless application of meaning? This seems to be rather unexpected and unusual for a purely subjectivistic understanding of meaning.

Experience shows, that meaning can only be accepted when it has passed the "needle's eye of personal evidence" [Längle, 1985, pp. 84ff.], whereby alone the relevance of a new meaning becomes intelligible. Because of the interrelatedness of facts on many levels, there naturally are different perspectives and connections. Out of inner necessity this leads to a pluralism of experiences of meaning depending on the standpoint and perspective of a person. This pluralism of personal experiences of meaning can also be clarified by another picture: Meaning not only depends on the perspective of reality but also on the horizon before which a problem of meaning is seen. According to the broadness of the horizon new facts are included and associated with the original circumstance, thereby shedding a different light of understanding and coping.

According to this practical experience meaning may be subjective in relation to standpoint, chosen perspective and broadness of horizon, in which a problem is seen. It is, however, not only subjective, but also correlatively bound to a trans-subjective object. Meaning is therefore comparable to perception in that a great portion of it is also - but never entirely - subjectively determined. Real perception is constituted by the ob(against)-jectivity(throw) of the object perceived, which in its objective uniqueness must stand in the way of the perceiver as a point of resistance in form and content. Therefore any understanding of meaning, where it is reduced to mere subjectivistic attribution, must be left behind for reasons of the one-sidedness mentioned and replaced by a phenomenological understanding of meaning. Out of "responsibility to the thing itself" it will not wilfully and arbitrarily deal with (subjective and objective!) reality.

Illness, the death of a loved-one, failure, suffering and pain - though their meaning is highly personal, nobody can actually "give" meaning to these circumstances. The person is only responsible for the broadness of horizon and the choice of perspective. Here ends the responsibility for the finding of meaning, because it is up to the real connections and their logos, whether meaning will appear on this horizon. When the suffering person cries out, that he can "see" no meaning in life, he means exactly that: the meaning of life cannot be invented, but must be found [Frankl, 1982a, p.57].

In order to find life-supporting meaning according to therapeutic intention, the therapist must form a picture of the situation and find out about:

1. the circumstances (knowledge of the facts, information),
2. the connections of the facts, which make them comprehensible,
3. the possibilities amidst the factual conditions,
4. the challenge of the situation to meaningful action.

Accordingly, the psychological understanding of meaning always has four aspects: Firstly it is objective "on the basis of its situational reference" [Frankl, 1982a, p. 56]. Secondly, meaning is relative, with regard to the person it is relating to, as well as to further linkages of the situation itself. Thirdly, it is subjective, in that it can only be recognised and realised by the person involved in the respective situation. Beyond these characteristics [Frankl, 1982a, pp. 55ff.] meaning is, fourthly, always appellative by its character of challenge [Frankl, 1982a, pp. 52-57], urging the subject with its typical call to "do something with me!" (For a brief description of Frankl's concept of meaning see Kovacs 1982, p. 125-130.)

2. When and why does the question of meaning pose itself? Phenomenology and motivation

After this initial attempt to save the concept of meaning from the guillotine of the arbitrary and after the description of the psychological conception of meaning for an existential psychotherapy we want to pursue the question, when and why meaning becomes a problem for man at all, in order to deduce from that, what man is finally looking for, when he searches for meaning.

Basically the question of meaning presents itself in two ways during man's course of life: either explicitly urging or implicitly contained in everything. In the first place: We observe that the question explicitly forces itself upon man during phases when meaning is lost [Frankl, 1982a, pp. 18ff.; Längle, 1985, p. 85]. Here primarily losses of value should be mentioned: During illness, suffering, death or sorrow, which call for a special attitude in man. Loss of

meaning, however, is also a frequent phenomenon in the area of work. Not even success serves as protection. Just at the point where work loses its quality of necessity for life, a vacuum of orientation is formed and causes the afflicted person to indeed have everything he can live from, but nothing more he can live for [Frankl, 1982b, p. 11; pp. 239ff.].

Besides loss of value and lack of orientation in work, lack of relations is another phenomenon causing the existential vacuum [Frankl, 1982a, pp. 7, 18f.]. This abounds wherever life is experienced. Living without relating dwindles to boring and joyless consumption. The accompanying emptiness and lack of meaning can not even be denied by our "culture of consumption", manifesting itself more and more in drug-addiction, alcoholism, vandalism, emigration from society and suicide rates.

In this description of loss of meaning three categories: 1. loss of value, 2. loss of orientation and 3. loss of relations are contained, forming the basis for further discussion. At the same time the order of examples was structured according to Frankl's [1982a] three categories of values, which are fundamental to the finding of meaning: experiential, creative and attitudinal values in the face of inevitable suffering.

The question of meaning poses itself explicitly not only in times of loss, but is also implicitly always present at all those times of life, when in case of trouble its missing is painfully experienced. In Frankl's view man is fundamentally oriented towards meaning. Our search for meaning is "so highly integrated in the human condition, that we cannot avoid 'looking for meaning' until we believe we have found it" [Frankl, 1982a, p. 253]. According to Frankl, therefore, "human being is always a being toward meaning, however little it might know it...Whether he wants it or not, whether he thinks it true or not, man believes in a meaning as long as he breathes" [Frankl, 1982a, p. 221]. For Frankl [1982a, p. 253] the struggle for meaning is such a fundamental anthropological category, that he terms it as an "a priori" with reference to Kant or as an "Existential" according to Heidegger. Subsequently we will try to substantiate this claim from the theory of action as well as from the theory of motivation. To do this the second question of this chapter is helpful.

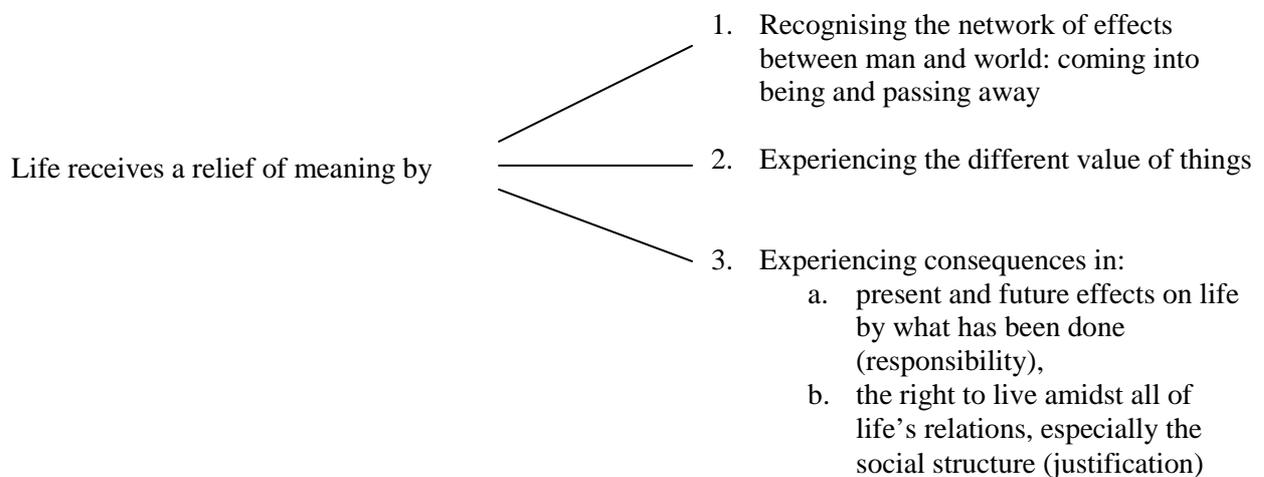
Why does man ask for meaning in the first place? Why is man not only concerned with work and play, but also with meaning? I would like to start out by giving my answer to that right away: Man is equipped with clear subjective criteria to show him and make him sense, that what he does and doesn't do is not of equal value. This statement can be proven philosophically by analysis of consciousness [see: Längle, 1985, pp. 86ff.], anthropologically by the analysis of freedom and responsibility [e.g. Sartre, 1943, pp. 528ff.; Sperber, 1980] as well as psychologically by the analysis of behaviour and action. Above all, however, it is a matter of experience. There is the daily experience in psychotherapy, that the reason why patients enter a doctor's office, is exactly because they suffer from what they (can/must) do and not do. Besides, the statement can be immediately verified by introspection: as long as I experience my life as meaningful, what I do and not do is never of equal value; when everything, however, seems "one and the same", my life loses its features of preference, necessity and secondary things, and I will experience it as meaningless.

What reasons do anthropology and phenomenology give us for the fact that, what we do and not do, is not the same? These reflections, however also are fundamentally important for ethics. Three phenomena precede the question of meaning, enclosing the essence of the question like a three-sided pyramid. These are the three experiences man is always exposed to: 1. He observes effects. 2. He experiences different grades of value for things and events. 3. He experiences consequences. Life receives a structure of heights and depths by these

experiences, forming its (e.g. biographically) characteristic plasticity. These three experiences form a relief of heights and shadows out of each situation, what consequently leads to the discovery of relations through orientation in the midst of recognized values. It is this relief of meaning that lifts a human life out of the animalistic flatness of causal sequences of drives and instincts and endows him with a spiritual dimension.

3. The threefold question of meaning

A closer look at the points one by one will help understand, why the category of meaning is a necessary part of a life worthy of a human being. Man sees that the world is continually effecting him. Acting, he realises that he in turn has an effect on the world. In this way he experiences his special relation with the world, in which he stands. This "being-in-the-world"



(Heidegger) is the fundamental state man finds himself in, his basic ontological experience. In the theory of motivation its correlate is the will to existence, with its yes or no to the world, its will to unfold or refuse action. In this way the very fact that things exist in their network of effects on one's own existence is a reason to ask about the meaning of being. Man asks: "Why is it at all and how does it relate to other things? How do I relate?"

The question of meaning on the ontological level is a question to the ground out of which things are and out of which man himself is ("Grundfrage")! When man asks about the ground for things and for his own being, he is asking the ontological question of meaning. It is carried by the wonder at the incomprehensibility and the anticipation that all things in universe must be interrelated. What man can grasp of it, is only the question. He looks for the answer given to him by religion and the "philosophical astonishment" (Jaspers).

So man experiences his unfolding of action in a network structure of the world's relations, he wonders at the ultimately incomprehensible fact, that he is and that other things are and that there are interrelations. This is not only a factual experience, however, but fundamentally an experience of value. He not only knows that he is, but that in itself it is also good to be [Längle, 1984, pp. 52ff.]. With this finality things of the world rise out of the grey dawn of mere presence and receive the colour of value. Because now they are connected with the value of being - and with regard to that, things are more or less good, beneficial or harmful, useful or obstructive. Man senses, that it matters, what becomes of things and which effects result. For reasons of his axiological predisposition, based on the ability to experience the

value of his own life, man knows the exceptional preciousness of human existence, the value of being addressed by the incentive of his world. He knows that it is not the same, which effects he causes, and that it has different consequences, whether something is and what becomes of it. Man continually faces the axiological question of meaning: "What is good about it?", "What is it good for?" This expresses what Frankl [1982a, p. 221] calls the "will to meaning". In the context of this discussion the term should be reserved for the totality of the noetic fundamental strivings. In motivation theory, "will to value" would apply to this level. This includes the subjective-emotional quality of a person. The quality "good" arises from the sensing of value and out of the relation, in which the observed object on the basis of highly personal intuition is seen together with everything that holds value. This synopsis is achieved by conscience which Frankl [1982a, p. 56] therefore also calls "organ to find meaning" ("Sinn-Organ"). In this way the "will to value" is no more concerned with a final-genetic web of relations, but with a projective-axiological design of future possibilities.

Looking at these two levels of meaning we have found man in an objective reality, of which he wants to know the meaning (objective aspect of meaning). Then we have seen him addressed by the different value of things surrounding him, to which he applies his own global view of value by a sensation of conscience (subjective aspect of meaning). We have compared this process with the appearance of objects out of the dim light of dawn, where the different tones of grey change into colours with the growing daybreak, as a picture corresponding to the sensed value of things. Now, in full daylight, things receive their full depth and plasticity in a third step, at the point when man asks: "What should I do with them?" With this question he reaches the level of active coming-into-relation-with (relational aspect of the question of meaning). It is a need pointing toward action, which man has developed a special sense for: He experiences things not only as ontically given and not only as an axiological incentive but also knows the world as existentially challenging. The things that are there, continually face him as the deciding person with the question: "What are you going to do with it?" This is the existential question of meaning. He finds himself up against the question: "What do I do as a free, creative and responsible person in the middle of this world?" This is how man knows himself as fundamentally questioned in his existence [Längle, 1988, pp. 10ff.], challenged towards his contribution to the formation of this life and this world in the knowledge of an indispensable relation, personal responsibility and justification. He himself must give the answer by his active existence [Frankl 1974, p. 61f]. Here man knows himself as no more dependant on any answer to meaning outside of himself (e.g. depending from a Creator), but realises that existential meaning comes out of himself - his own free person. In the way he actively answers, however, he shows all of his understanding and sensing of the preceding ontological and axiological questions of meaning. The law of the universe, apprehended in the ontological sense, is valid for the world as well as for him. It unfolds in the creative power of the Nous, striving to put meaning into action along axiological tracks. By investing and realising himself in this way, man is satisfying his will to justify his existence. His will to justification arises out of the necessity to be at home and accepted in the social structure, as well as in the structure of biographical life, where everything he has done, finally has to do with himself. This is what man experiences as responsibility.

The existential question of meaning leads up to the decision about the best possibility in a situation, which might also stand as a definition for existential meaning. In this way man finally becomes ready to act, after he has ultimately arrived at the "will to meaning" by the steps of the three noetic motivations. Knowing at this point, what he can, what he wants to do and what he may to do, he finally realises, what he should do - ready to engage himself thanks to his will to act.

4. Analysis of the search for meaning

At a closer view meaning appears as a complex term, requiring a discussion of three noetic areas: the true, the valuable and the right. All of this is present in a real sense: with only one of these three sides missing, meaning of life turns into a frustrating semblance of meaning. Whoever searches for meaning according to our analysis, searches for an equivalent to these three noetic motivations.

Meaning is therefore always orientation by the true, by what is and by what is experienced as reality. Meaning is unconditionally realistic. The person living meaningfully will face and grasp the facts. He needs their ground to hold and support him, in order to act and receive effects. He wants to be perceived by others in the same way, wants to be seen as what he is with his specific faculties. At the same time, search for meaning includes the desire for the attractive, the desire for dealing with the valuable, which man wants to give as much as to receive. Finally, the need for relations is alive in meaning, for relating to oneself (responsibility) as well as to others, which enables the justification of existence.

TABLE 1 Existential analysis and search for meaning. Steps of sequence and motivation in the process of finding meaning.

| <i>Noetic content</i> | <i>Central area of stage of meaning</i> | <i>Epistemological chain</i> | <i>Motivation</i> | <i>Psychological chain</i> | <i>Mode of experience</i> |
|---|---|-------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. TRUE (reality) ↗ see ↘ be seen | Ontology | know (explain) → facts | Will to be | perceive | can |
| 2. ATTRACTIVE (value) ↗ give ↘ receive | Axiology | understand → coherence | Will to value | value | like |
| 3. RIGHT (relations) ↗ do ↘ experience | Ethics | recognise → responsibility | Will to the right | choose/decide | may |
| 4. MEANING (commitment) ↗ existential ↘ ontological | Existence Transcendence | act/know believe | ↗ Will to act ↘ Will to meaning Will to final commitment | work/accomplish pray | should/want |

According to these fundamental aspects of meaning, psychotherapy leads to the finding of meaning via several steps [Längle, 1988, pp. 42ff.]. The seeker of meaning first looks for reality, searches for facts and conditions. Perception is followed by an order of valuations.

The seeker of meaning involves himself as a sensor of values on the basis of his own self-esteem. At the third step, finally, he transcends himself and enters a personal relation by making a decision. Throughout this process he is ever looking for possibilities to make decisions in such a way that his personal integrity (in the sense of responsibility and faithfulness to oneself) is preserved.

The seeker of meaning will then have to decide, whether his search demands action and personal involvement (existential meaning) or refers to a "meaning beyond" (Frankl) and the metaphysical transcendence. In both cases, however, - and this is the actual thesis based on observations of the essence of personhood - the seeker of meaning is concerned with being, values and justification by ways of relating, which is especially important for psychotherapy.

The real impulse, however, and the dynamics of the search for meaning might stem from the transitoriness of human life [Frankl 1973, pp. 63ff.]. Life exists in time and is as such, always unique. This is exactly what gives it the quality of urgency. "...in the face of death as absolute finis to our future and boundary to our possibilities, we are under the imperative of utilizing our lifetimes to the utmost, not letting the singular opportunities - whose 'finite' sum constitutes the whole of life - pass by unused "[Frankl 1973, p. 64]. Just because of its finiteness, man must give his life a special direction and take hold of possibilities, where they offer themselves, before they are overcome by their transitoriness. The realised opportunity, however, which has been saved into reality [Frankl 1973, p. 33], has been lifted out of transitoriness, because it has been irreversibly done. For "having been is also a kind of being - perhaps the surest kind" [Frankl 1973, p. 33].

In light of existential analysis, however, death means failure to transcend oneself and critically deal with the world. In the solitude of solipsism man cannot come to life. Dying, on the other hand, is an essential part of life, being continually practised by man in his existence, with every decision anew. Deciding also means saying good-bye and leaving behind all possibilities that have not been realised. Yet those possibilities, which were realised in the spirit of truth, value and justice, are a spiritual transcendence of the limit of death into an area, where life's design remains.

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