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The Search for Meaning in Life and the Fundamental Existential Motivations

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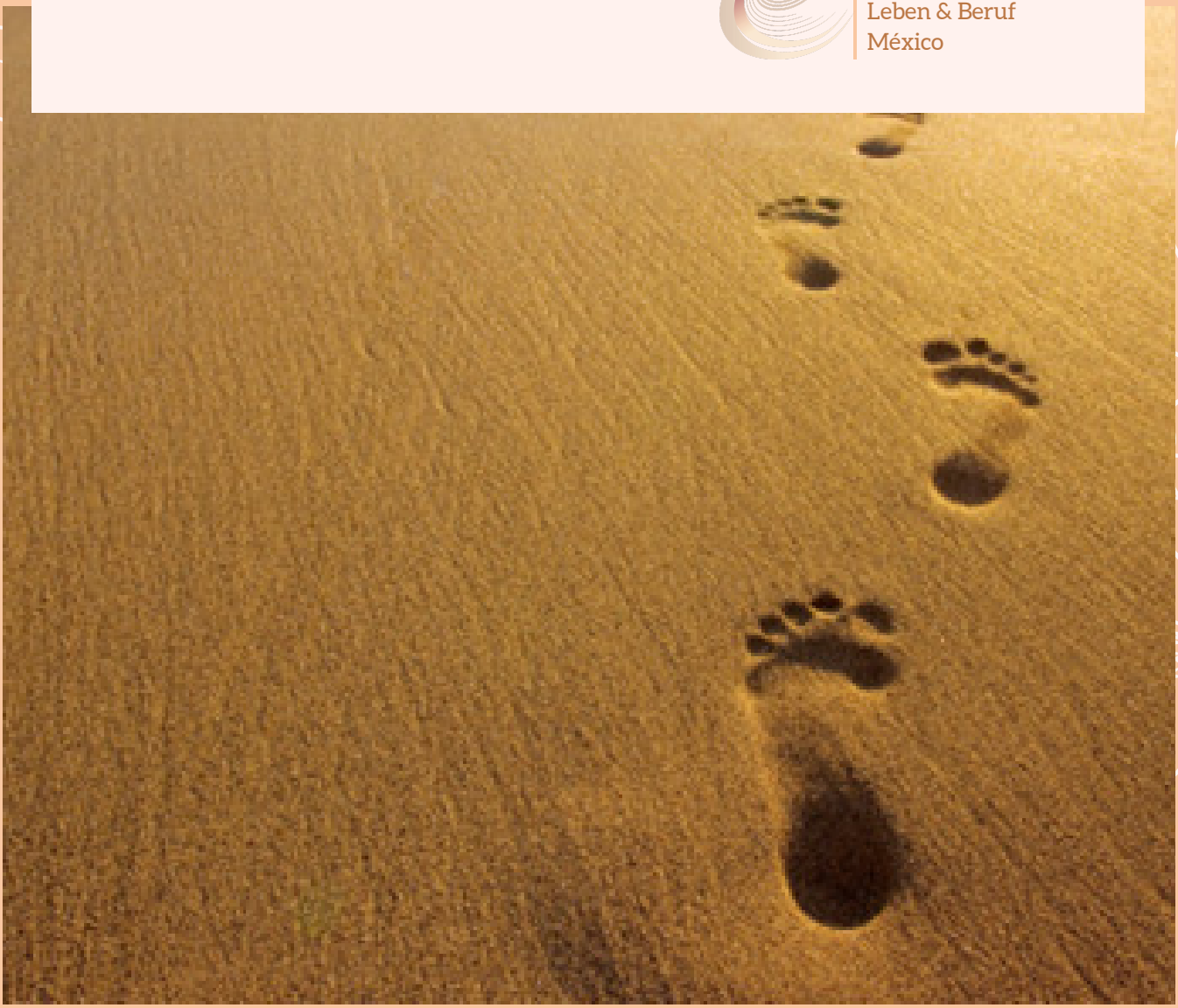

The Search for Meaning in Life and the Fundamental Existential Motivations

ALFRIED LANGLE

In this article noted Viennese existential therapist Alfried Langle reconciles the approaches to Existential Therapy of Victor Frankl and Irvin Yalom. He describes four fundamental aspects of existence that form the matrix for an understanding of personal meaning and psychopathology, and underlie the model of modern Existential Analytical Psychotherapy.

Viktor Frankl once came along and showed me a little drawing that he had come across in a newspaper. With his bright spirit, Frankl was always combining casual happenings with deeper insights; this was the source of his humour and wit.

The drawing Frankl found that day showed a man with a bow in his hand standing next to a wall with an arrow stuck in it. The man was painting the signs of a target around the arrow. Frankl commented on this drawing by saying:

'Look at that, this picture shows exactly what is not meant by meaning! This man is constructing a meaning about an arbitrary action. He tries in retrospect to make a senseless action meaningful by giving it a meaning, to give the appearance of a meaning. But existential meaning is never arbitrary nor is it a construction, if it is supposed to give structure and support to one's life. Such a meaning must be based on given facts, must be hewn out of reality and cannot be changed deliberately!'

For Frankl we do not just attach and attribute meaning to things, rather we find meaning; we do not invent meaning, we detect meaning (see Frankl 1985, 31). In an Existential Analytic and Logotherapeutic context meaning is understood as a correlation of the demand of the situation and the understanding one has of oneself (what a person thinks and feels in terms of who they are or who they should be).

For example, as I write this paper, the demand of the situation for me is to find out what the reader might be interested in and to correlate this with my experience, my view and investigation. The importance of this is *my* meaning. For those reading, the meaning may be to follow the text or correlate it with personal experience or current thinking and consider what is of higher importance right now: to continue to read or to continue one's own thought. Thus, meaning is a gestalt emerging from the midst of both inner and outer reality.

Personal meaning is a *complex achievement of the human spirit*. It is a non-physical power underlying our conscience, our mind, our capacity to feel and to sense and even our body (Merleau-Ponty). The nature of the spirit is *dialogical*. As a dialogical force it brings us into continuous confrontation with other people, other things and with ourselves. This dialogical interaction lays the ground for a basic prerequisite of existence: to detect what is possible in the midst of the given facts. All of that which is not yet fixed represents the existential field that waits to be realized. Our spirit directs us towards dialogue and relationship, where we realize possibility, what is waiting for us and what might challenge us, reach out to us or invite us. This is our existential actuality and at the same time it is our future. Through our spirit we are capable of separating the factual – what is given – from what is possible, thereby creating the specifically human dimension of existence (Frankl 1985, 19, 79, 134; also 1959).

The possibilities within this world point to our human *potential* and our existence is shaped through these possibilities. 'Existence' means having a chance to change things for the better, to experience what is of value and avoid or eliminate what could damage or harm. These possibilities provide us with direction to which we can orient ourselves. This is an *essential* orientation of human beings, not a superficial one. Being directed towards what is possible, yet to be fulfilled and is waiting for us in every situation corresponds perfectly to the essence of our spirit – a spirit that looks for participation, dialogue, creativity and possibility. The essential task of existence is to find this correspondence between our potential for participation (for creativity, action and encounter) and what is possible, needed and undone, and what we see, feel and understand to be waiting for us despite the possibility of risk and error.

A practical guide to meaning

Viktor Frankl (1973) gave a general guide to finding meaning that requires a certain attitude towards the world. Frankl wrote:

'We must perform a kind of Copernican

Revolution, and give the question of the meaning of life an entirely new twist. To wit: it is life itself that asks questions of man… it is not up to man to question; rather, he should recognize that he is questioned, questioned by life; he has to respond by being responsible; and he can answer to life only by answering for his life.' (p.62)

This phenomenological attitude is an openness of mind free from personal interest and directed towards the essence of the situation that allows one be reached or even captured by the situation. If the essence of a situation is valuable in itself, is seemingly perfect and cannot be made better then we are left to enjoy, admire and simply experience. A marvellous sunset, a beautiful face, music by Mozart or a painting by Picasso qualify as examples of what Frankl termed experiential values and one avenue to meaning.

If under different circumstances this openness leads us to an imperfect situation that requires some improvement, we may perceive the circumstance as both valuable and requiring something for its improvement. Such a situation requires either a suitable activity in the world such as speaking to a person, writing a letter, cooking a meal and so on, or it may require mental or spiritual activity in one's inner world that involves a change of attitude towards the world, life, oneself or the future. Frankl included creative and attitudinal values as the two other avenues to meaning.

All phenomenological perceptions reveal possibilities for action that can take the form of subjective experience, work, reflection or one's own attitude. These possibilities, because of their inherent 'demand quality' (Aufforderungscharakter) create a field of tension, which Frankl (1985, 35) called *'existential dynamics'*. Frankl's key to meaning is a more philosophical approach that elaborates the appropriate attitude and subsequently provides the necessary substance or 'grain' for a fulfilling existence.

From a more psychological point of view, Existential Analysis describes the key for a fulfilling existence that finds a way of living with *inner consent*. This relates to what we do, what we commit ourselves to or what we choose to omit. In other words, inner consent is a continuous activity that underlies any fulfilled existence and the finding of meaning. This activity consists of a two-sided dialogue: one is directed towards the outside with such questions as: *'What appeals to me? What attracts or challenges me? Where am I needed, what do I want to do in this situation?'* For example, is what I am reading at this moment interesting to me, does it challenge me, does it speak to me in some way that I might see what I can do with it?

Personal meaning is a complex achievement of the human spirit.

The other dialogue runs inwardly. Whatever I decide to do I cannot leave myself aside to experience meaning. We therefore always live with the question of whether we agree with our decisions. To put it more concretely, this inner agreement is a process of contacting the deepest feelings that arise in any situation. We have to take them seriously. I am not speaking about anxiety, mood, delight or the like, for they too have their meaning. When our deepest and purest emotions correspond with our intentions and plans then we live with inner consent, our inwardly felt or spoken 'yes'. Inner consent enables us to stand on our own, stand as a unique individual and realize ourselves by meeting the demands of the situation. Meaning**,** in our definition, creates a harmony between inner experience and outer action.

The process I have described provides an encapsulated definition of Existential Analysis – and possibly of existential psychotherapy in general – to help a person find a way of life wherein they can give their inner consent to their own actions. A scientific definition of Existential Analysis describes it as phenomenological-personal psychotherapy with the aim of enabling a person to experience his or her life freely at the spiritual and emotional levels, to arrive at authentic decisions and to come to a responsible way of dealing with himself or herself and the world around them (Längle 1993, 1995, 1999a). This reflects the teaching of Frankl that a person's existence is characterised by freedom, the capacity for decision and responsibility (Frankl 1959; 1973, XXIV).

Each of these three steps contains the most important asset of existential analysis: a person's own inner consent.

The four fundamental conditions for fulfilled existence

If we scrutinize the themes that concern us throughout our lives, they turn out to be an offspring of four fundamental realities. These four fundamental realities are the result of our empirical and phenomenological work in psychotherapy over the last twenty years. As spiritual beings we are essentially confronted with:

- the *world* in its factuality and potentiality,
- *life* with its network of relationships and its feelings,
- *being oneself*: existing as a unique, autonomous person and,
- the *future* that we shape (that is, our development through our activities).

Our categories can nevertheless be called 'existential' because they claim our own inner position towards them. Each of the four existential realities lead us into a process that demands an exchange or even a dialogue**.** This exchange or dialogue helps to form our own notions about the quality and content of our subjective reality. Dialogue and encounter require us to decide how we want to relate. This challenges us; it challenges our activities and our response to alter and work on our reality until we can give our inner consent – a consent not merely for what we *do* but for how we *live*. There is, of course, always the possibility of failing, experiencing loneliness or feelings akin to an emotional death.

Long-term happiness is only evident when we are enjoying the ongoing pursuit of our important goals whatever the outcome may be.

Human existence is based on these four fundamental realities, the cornerstones of existence according to modern existential theory.

Yalom (1980) has described quite similar fundamental existential realities that highlight the common existential emphasis on the tragic dimensions of human existence:

- *Freedom* (or 'groundlessness'),
- *Death*,
- *Isolation* (especially loneliness),
- *Meaninglessness* or absurdity.

Although Yalom's categories correspond largely to our four existential realities, Existential Analysis, in the tradition of Frankl, emphasizes the elements of possibility and potential that mark human existence. A comparison of Frankl and Yalom reveals:

- *groundlessness* implies the *world* with its supporting structure,
- *death* means having a *life* with growth and temporality,
- *loneliness* arises from the *uniqueness* of each person, and
- *meaning* relates to a *contextual* understanding of one's own existence and activities that are directed towards a worthwhile future.

We might experience feelings of futility or 'absurdity' as Camus and Sartre have described. Tragedy does pertain to human existence. However, the four cornerstones of existence put forth by Existential Analysis offer a chance to relate and to entrust ourselves to external structures and contents which in their depth lead to spiritual layers that lie behind, underneath or above all human reality (Längle 2001).

As structures of human existence, these realities are involved in every motivation and can therefore also be called the *fundamental existential motivations* (Längle 1992, 1993, 1994a, 1997, 1998a,b,c, 1999a,b, 2002b). Any motivation implicates these fundamental existential motivations: cognition, feelings and values, decision and meaning, all of which result in giving one's inner approval and in arriving at an inner consent. As basics of human existence these motivations are relevant in all areas where an individual stands in the centre: education, pastoral counselling, prevention of diseases, coaching, management trainings, organisational structures and the like.

The first fundamental condition for a fulfilled existence

The first condition arises from the simple fact that *I am* here at all, that *I am* in the world. Where do I go from here? Can I cope with my being there? Do I understand it? I exist, and as an old German saying from the 12th century goes, loosely translated: *'I don't know where I am from, I don't know where to, I wonder why I am so glad.'* I am here, this is me – how is that even possible? This seemingly self-evident fact can lead to questioning of great depth. If I really think about this, I realize that I cannot truly comprehend this. My existence appears like an island in an ocean of ignorance and alludes to connections that surpass me. The most adequate attitude towards this incomprehensible fact is one of astonishment. I can only be astonished that I am here at all.

But I am here, which puts the fundamental question of existence before me: *I am – can I be?*

To bring these questions to a practical and manageable level, I might apply them to my own situation. Can I claim my place in this world under the conditions I live within and the possibilities I have before me? This demands three things: protection, space, and support. Do I enjoy protection and acceptance and do I feel at home somewhere? Do I have enough space for being there? Where do I find support in my life?

If these are not the case, the result will be restlessness, insecurity and fear. If I *do* have these three things, I am able to feel trust in the world and confidence in myself, maybe even faith in God. The sum of these experiences is a fundamental trust; a trust that I have a profound and enduring support in my life.

However it is not enough merely to find protection, space and support. I also have to seize these conditions, to make a decision in their favour, to accept them. My active part in this fundamental condition of being here is to accept the positive aspects and to endure the negative ones. To accept means to be ready to occupy the space I am in, to

rely on the support given and to trust the protection bestowed on me; in short 'to be here' and not to flee. To endure requires the fortitude to accept whatever is difficult, menacing or unalterable and to tolerate what cannot be changed. Life imposes certain conditions on me, the world has its laws to which I must adapt. This idea is expressed in the word 'subject' in the sense of 'not independent', of being subject to.

On the other hand these same conditions of the world are reliable, solid and steady despite the boundaries they may impose. I can allow them to be and accept them if I can be at the same time. To accept means letting the other be, whether a person, a thing or a situation. It means that I can be and the other can be equally because there is still enough space for me and the circumstances do not threaten my being here. Individuals procure themselves the space they need for being with their ability to *endure* and to *accept* the conditions of their lives. If this is not the case, psychodynamics take over the guidance of a person's life in the form of coping *reactions* in order to secure 'being here' (Dasein); (Längle 1998a).

Each fundamental motivation has four types of reaction:

1. the *basic reaction* type,
2. the *paradoxical* reaction type or *'activism'* which is a displacement activity, a hyperactivity,
3. the third type of coping reaction is a specific *aggression* (Längle 1998b),
4. the final type of coping reaction is akin to a feigned death, a semi-paralysis in which a person's activity level is greatly reduced and feelings are deadened.

When the first existential motivation is in danger or not sufficiently realized, the basic coping reaction is avoidance or flight; the displaced reaction is overactivity or compulsive behavior (for example, fighting bacteria by compulsive washing). The aggressive reaction takes the form of destruction such as hate, and a '*feigned death reaction*' is denial or pretending to be non-existent.

If any of these coping reactions are insufficient to stem the psychodynamics that have emerged, they get fixed and psychopathology arises. In cases where a lack of protection, space and support is present, *fear* and *anxiety* arise.

The second fundamental condition for a fulfilled existence

Once someone has their space in the world, they can fill it with life. Simply being there is not enough. We want our existence to be *good*, since it is more than a mere fact. It has a 'pathic dimension' which means that life does not simply happen but rather we experience, suffer or enjoy it (from the Greek 'pathos', suffering, used for example in 'psycho-pathology'). Being alive means to cry and to laugh, to experience joy and suffering, to go through pleasant and unpleasant things, to be lucky or unlucky and to experience what is worthwhile and what is worthless. As happy as we can be, we can also suffer deeply. The amplitude of emotionality is equal in both directions, whether this suits us or not.

I am, therefore, confronted with the fundamental question of life: *I am alive – do I like this fact?* Is it good to be there? It is not only strain and suffering that can take away the joy of life. It may also be the shallowness of daily life or neglecting areas of one's life that make life stale. Do I truly live? In order to seize my life and to love it, I need three things: relationship, time and closeness.

We can verify the presence of life by asking: Do I have relationships in which I feel closeness, for which I spend time, give my time and in which I experience community? What do I take time for? Do I take time for valuable things that are worthy of my time? To take time for something means to give away a part of one's life and spend it with someone or something. Can I feel close by maintaining closeness to things, plants, animals and people? Do I allow the closeness of someone else?

If relationships, closeness and time are lacking, *longing* will arise, followed by distancing – a coldness – and finally depression. If the three conditions are fulfilled however, I experience myself as being in harmony with the world and with myself and I can sense the depth of life. These experiences form the fundamental value, the most profound feeling for the value of life. Whenever we experience something of value, this fundamental value is touched upon. It colors our emotions and represents a yardstick for anything we might feel to be of worth. Our theory of emotion and theory of values correlate with this (Längle 2003).

And yet, it is not enough to have relationships, time and closeness. My active participation, my *consent*, is also required. I must seize life by engaging in life. When I turn to other people, to things, animals, intellectual work or to myself, I turn towards life. When I move towards something or someone, allow

myself to get close, allow myself to be touched, I experience life as vibrant. By fully acknowledging what is before me I not only experience life as vibrant, I equally experience such things as loss and grief. If I am to move freely in life, my consent to being touched by life is necessary.

The basic coping reaction at this level is regression; overprotection or a striving for achievement are 'activistic' reaction types. The aggressive behavior is fury or rage which does not lead to destruction but leads towards the agitation of other persons with the impulse towards obtaining or improving a relationship. Resignation and apathy are reactions that mimic a 'feigned death'. If these reactions cannot neutralize the problem or the loss, depression arises.

The third fundamental condition for a fulfilled existence

The first two fundamental conditions are, however, not sufficient in themselves for a fulfilling existence. In spite of my being related to life and to people, I am aware of being separate and different. There is a singularity that makes me an 'I' and distinguishes me from everybody else. I realize that I am on my own, that I have to master my existence myself and that I am essentially alone and perhaps even solitary. But, there is so much more that is equally singular. The diversity, beauty and uniqueness that exist in all dimensions of life produce feelings of awe and respect in me.

In the midst of this world, I discover myself unmistakably, I am with myself and I am given to myself. This puts before me the fundamental question of being a person: *I am myself – may I be like this? Do I feel free to be like this?* Do I have the right to be what I am and to behave as I do? This is the plane of identity, of knowing oneself and of ethics. In order to succeed here, it is necessary to experience three things: *attention, justice, and appreciation.* Again, we can verify this third cornerstone of existence in our own life by asking: *Who sees me?* Who considers my uniqueness and respects my boundaries? Do people do justice to me? What am I appreciated for? How do I appreciate myself? If these experiences are missing, solitude, hysteria and a need to hide behind shame will result. If, on the contrary, I have experienced attention, justice and appreciation, I will find myself, find my authenticity and my self-respect. The sum of these experiences builds my self-esteem and who I am at my core.

In order to be oneself, it is not enough to simply experience attention, justice and appreciation. I also have to say *'Yes!'* to myself. This requires my *active* participation. I have to look at other people and encounter them. At the same time I have to delineate myself, stand on my own and refuse whatever does not correspond to my sense of self. *Encounter* and *regret* are the two means by which we can live authentically without ending up in solitude. Encounter represents the necessary bridge to the other. It makes me experience another person's essence as well as my own; discovering the *'I'* in *'You.'*

My participation with and appreciation of others creates an equal appreciation for who I am. When these elements are missing coping reactions include: distancing oneself as the basic reaction, stubborn insistence and leading a functional life as reactions of hyperactivity. The typical aggressive reaction consists in annoyance, anger and reproach. A paralysis or resignation at this level leads to dissociation of bodily integrity, dividing and splitting of emotion and cognition. If these reactions don't suffice to neutralize the hurt, they get fixed and histrionic symptoms and/or personality disorders arise.

The fourth fundamental condition for a fulfilled existence

If I can be here, love life and find myself within these, the conditions are fulfilled for the fourth fundamental condition of existence in which I recognize my life and what it is all about. It does not suffice to simply be here and to have found oneself. We have to transcend ourselves if we want to find fulfillment and to be fruitful. Otherwise we would live as if in a house where nobody ever visits.

Life's transitory nature puts the question of the meaning of our existence before us: *I am here – for what purpose?* Three things are needed: a field of activity, a structural context and a value to be realized in the future. We can ask ourselves practical questions such as: Is there a place where I feel needed, where I can be productive? Do I see and experience myself in a larger context that provides structure and orientation to my life; where I want integration? Is there anything that should still be realized in my life? If this is not the case, the result will be a feeling of emptiness, frustration, despair and frequently addiction. If, on the contrary, these conditions are met, I will be capable of dedication and action and finally, my own form of *religious belief.* The sum of these experiences adds up to the meaning of life and leads to a sense of fulfillment.

If a person fails systematically to reach meaning their coping reactions will be a provisional attitude towards life as a basic reaction together with a *'disorganized day-to-day attitude toward life [and] collective thinking'* (Frankl 1973, xvi). Idealization and fanaticism are main forms of hyper-activity along with indignation, aggressive games and cynicism. Fatalism, loss of interest, apathy and what we feel are nihilistic attitudes can be seen as forms of internal paralysis. From all evidence nihilistic attitudes in particular are a form of spiritual deadening. Disorders at this level lead frequently to addictions.

It does not suffice to simply have a field of activity, to have our place within a context and to know values to be realized in the future. A phenomenological attitude is needed. As each situation places a question before me, an attitude of openness represents the existential access to meaning in life (Frankl 1973, XV, 62). *'What does this hour want from me, how shall I respond?'* The meaningful thing is not only what *I* can expect from life. In accordance with the dialogical structure of existence, it is equally important what life wants from me, what the moment expects from me and what I could and should do now for others as well as for myself. My active part in this attitude of openness is to bring myself into agreement with the situation, to examine whether what I am doing is really a good thing: for others, for myself, for the future and for my environment. If I act, if I respond to these questions, my existence will be fulfilling.

Viktor Frankl (1982, 255) once defined meaning as *'a possibility against the background of reality.'* In another context he referred to the potential underlying the meaning: *'The potentialities of life*

are not indifferent possibilities; they must be seen in the light of meaning and values. At any given time only one of the possible choices of the individual fulfills the necessity of his life task.' (Frankl 1985, 57)

The notion of valuable possibilities is further endorsed by the theory of fundamental existential motivations and brings the concept of meaning into an even more concrete definition as the '*most worthwhile (the one of greatest value) and realistic possibility present in a given situation and one for which I feel I should decide.*' Existential meaning is therefore what is possible here and now, on the basis of facts and reality. What is possible for me may be what I need now, or what is the most pressing, valuable or interesting alternative. To define and redefine this continually is an extremely complex task for which we possess an inner organ of perception capable of reducing this complexity to livable proportions: our sensitivity as well as our moral conscience.

Besides existential meaning there is an ontological meaning. This is the overall meaning in which I find myself and that does not depend on me. It is a philosophical and religious meaning that the creator of the world must have had in mind. I can perceive it through divination and in faith (cf. Längle 1994b for the differentiation between the two forms of meaning).

The importance of the ontological meaning for understanding life (cf. Längle 2002a, 60ff.) is illustrated simply by the following story Frankl once told. When the cathedral at Chartres was being built, a traveler came along and saw a man sitting at the roadside, cutting a stone. The traveller asked the man what he was doing there. '*Don't you see?*' the man replied, '*I am cutting corner-stones!*' Nonplussed the traveler continued on his way. Around the next bend, he saw another man, also cutting stones. Again he stopped and asked the same question. '*I am cutting corner-stones,*' was the reply. Shaking his head, the traveler continued on once again. After a while he met a third man who was sitting in the dust and cutting stones just as the others had been. Resolutely the traveler walked up to him and asked: '*Are you also cutting corner-stones?*' The man looked up at him, wiped the sweat from his brow and said: '*I am working at a cathedral.*'

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NOTE
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