

Notes on Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning (by Eliot Chan)

Examine the role of personal ethics in the context of the events that unfolded.

Identify events that occurred in the life of Victor Frenkl and the ethical dimensions associated with each event.

Identify various stakeholders and multiple perspectives that could be associated with each.

Think about key characters (for example, Frenkl, capos, Nazi guards, other prisoners, etc) and how their specific identities could have caused them suffering or advantaged them in some way.

The prisoners were being sent to camps mostly to die and that is well known. You should focus upon events in the book where identity issues further exacerbated or alleviated the physical suffering felt by the prisoners (including Frenkl). Give concrete examples including what the various identities were and why you think they became problematic or useful.

Also think about how/why some characters were able to transcend their identities while others did/could not. Some prisoners died from bullets, gas chambers and illness. Yet others gave up the will to live. First understand events in the book where transcending identity allowed prisoners (including Frenkl) to survive by regaining the will to live.

Also look for situations where prisoners lost the will to live by transcending identity in a disempowering manner. Give concrete examples from the book including what the original identity was, what it changed to for them to survive the camp or die. Identify and discuss whether that change was empowering or limiting during their stay in the camp and afterwards when they became free men again.

What were the challenges faced by the prisoners upon release from the camp? How did they overcome these challenges? Were they successful?

Note that the summary only covers the actual book – the foreword, preface and postscripts are not included. Please pardon any grammatical errors and the like I make. Also please note this is not a comprehensive summary – I have simply listed what I think are the most important parts to understanding the plight and psychology of a concentration camp prisoner, and further, the key points of Frankl's work on logotherapy.

I. Experiences in a Concentration Camp

The book begins with a statement that it is rather unconcerned with the horrors of the Holocaust as a whole, but rather, it is interested in the day-by-day attitudes and mindsets of the average prisoner. It does not discuss any prominent figures, and instead focuses on the plight of the “great army of unknown and unrecorded victims”. It states that it is easy for an outsider to misinterpret how camp life was, that it is easy to have a conception “mingled with sentiment and pity”, where in fact, “hard fight[s] for existence” fuelled the prisoners.

He describes a transport that was meant to ship away sick prisoners – it was rather easy to guess that the final destination for these prisoners were gas chambers. Each transport must take a certain amount of prisoners, though it did not matter who they brought, as identities were reduced to mere identification numbers. Documents and possessions were stripped on entry. Every man was controlled by thoughts to keep himself alive, and would, with no hesitation, arrange for someone else to take his place in the transport.

Frankl explains that the only facts that are provided will be necessary to describe a man's experiences. He hopes it will help those who have never been inside a camp to understand those who have been. He attempts to rid the book of personal bias, but it is a difficult task, considering that the description of intimate experiences is necessary for books of this kind. He originally intended to publish it anonymously, but on the draft's completion, decided that it would lose meaning without his "courage to state [his] convictions openly".

He makes it clear that although he is a psychologist, he never was employed within the camp for medical duties. For the majority of his stay, he was simply an ordinary prisoner, who mostly did menial labour. He mentions a time where he dug a tunnel for a water main under a road, and was rewarded with "premium coupons", which could be traded for six cigarettes each, which could, in turn, be traded for an equal number of soups, which helped stave off starvation.

Actually smoking cigarettes was a privilege held for the Capo (prisoners in charge of supervising manual labour, chosen for their brutality), who were guaranteed coupons, and those who had lost all hope. He notes that those who actually smoked their cigarettes were those who had given up, and had lost the strength to carry on.

Frankl classifies prisoner's mental states into three parts: the period following admission, the period when he is entrenched in camp routine, and the period following freedom.

First phase. Characterized by shock. Frankl recounts his admission into Auschwitz, his fear leading him to hallucinate "gallows with people dangling on them". He mentions a condition known as "delusion of reprieve", where a condemned man holds the illusion that he may be saved at the last minute, and links that to the mental state of the prisoners. They were initially optimistic, on seeing prisoners who seemed well fed and, at the least, able to make jokes with one another. Later on they realized those were specially chosen elite.

Fifteen hundred captives were placed into a shed which could "accommodate probably two hundred at most". He talks about the trades of personal possessions for "liquor – schnapps", or "a gay evening", and admits that he couldn't blame long-term prisoners for trying to dope themselves. The only group of prisoners supplied with what seemed to be an endless amount of alcohol were those who worked in the gas chambers and crematoriums, who "knew...they would have to leave their...role of executioner and become victims themselves".

90% of the transport was immediately sent to their death in the gas chambers, and the sexes separated. They held on to their illusions of reprieve, captivated by the charms of the SS guards. Soon they realize their golden tongues and good manners were used to convince the men to hand over the possessions they had left. Frankl's manuscript, his life's work, is taken from him. The guards order the men to strip, and they are shaved hairless, and those who attempt to keep possessions are whipped and beaten.

The men's illusions of reprieve are replaced by grim humour, their delight stemming from the showers spraying real water. He also mentions that they are overtaken by a sense of morbid curiosity, whether he would "come out of it alive or with a fractured skull or some other" injury, the detachment cultivated as a means of mental protection. He then mentions surprise – from not catching a cold, from being able to survive without a certain amount of hours of sleep, and the body's ability to adapt to the situation. He quotes Dostoevsky – "Yes, a man can get used to anything, but do not ask us how".

At some point, every inmate contemplated suicide. A friend of his sneaks into his "block" and gives tips to not look like a 'Moslem' – someone who "look miserable, down and out, sick and emaciated", as those are the ones who are quickly sent to the gas chambers.

Second phase. Characterized by relative apathy and "emotional death". They did not avert their eyes to the horrors around them, and his "feelings were blunted, and watched unmoved". He gives an example of his experience watching a young boy's frostbitten toes removed by tweezers, and he feels no disgust, horror, nor pity.

He spent some time in a hut for typhus patients. After one died, a routine was performed – someone took the remains of the patient's meal. Someone else replaced his own shoes with the dead man's. Another did the same with the now deceased's coat. Eventually, someone would be asked to remove the body, in which it would be dragged across the floor and out of the hut.

The apathy made them insensitive to beatings, which occurred on the slightest provocations. He explains the most painful part of beatings is the insult which they imply – he was beaten for attempting to help an old friend, and reprimanded for the lack of comradeship the "pigs" had soon after. He then recalls a time where he talked back to a guard who had judged him on his past life, and had been beaten for it, illustrating that even the most indignant of prisoners can be roused not by pain, but by insult.

One of the Capos had taken a liking to him, due to his willingness to listen to the Capo's matrimonial troubles. In return, the Capo had ensured that as little punishment as possible (for what it's worth in a concentration camp) came to Frankl.

He explains that with such mental strain, it came as no surprise that many inmates "regressed" to a more primitive form of mental life. They dreamt of food, cigarettes and warm baths. He recounts a time where a fellow prisoner was having nightmares, but he didn't dare wake him up – because what nightmare could be worse than the reality of the camp that surrounded them?

Daily rations consisted of soup and bread. Rations were cut for the sick, and it became simple for them to deduce which of them would be "the next one" to go. He discusses the schools of thought for saving his bread versus eating it immediately. He joined the latter's ranks after listening to a prisoner "cry like a child, because he finally had to go to the snowy marching grounds in his bare feet, as his shoes were too shrunk for him to wear". At that moment, he took comfort in eating a small piece of bread saved in his pocket.

Undernourishment was likely the reason sexual urges were generally absent. The lifestyle led to a complete disregard of anything that did not serve to "saving one's skin". In general, almost all culture disappeared, except for politics and religion, the former's discussion based on fast-travelling rumours. The religious interest of the prisoners was "the most sincere imaginable". He says it was possible for spiritual life to deepen, as that was one of the freedoms that the prisoners still had.

While stumbling across the icy ground, marching with his fellow inmates, Frankl realizes that “love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire”. His mind fills with the thoughts of his wife, and he converses with her in his imagination. He clings to the image of her, and uses it to fuel his will to live.

He states that due to the intensity of the prisoner’s inner lives, the conflict allowed them to experience art and nature as never before. Under their influence, they could even temporarily forget their circumstances. He recounts the beauty of a setting sun, and another prisoner’s words – “How beautiful the world could be!”

Frankl recalls occasional improvised cabarets, where Capos, workers, and prisoners assembled. There were songs, poems, and jokes, and sometimes were rewarded with extra food – “a double helping of soup, straight from the bottom – that meant with peas”! He mentions that rewards were given not only to the performers, but sometimes to the listeners, too. There was a time where a Capo (nicknamed “The Murderous Capo”) happened upon an illegal spiritualistic séance, and they had asked him to recite one of his infamous poems. Frankl admits that his generous applause may have saved his life. Outsiders may be surprised to hear that any form of art existed within the walls of the camps, but also that there was also humour, which allowed the prisoners to detach themselves, even for a brief moment, from their horrid conditions. They often made jokes about camp life being carried outside it – for instance, being at a dinner party, and asking the host for a ladle of soup “from the bottom”.

There was a time, where while in transport, they pass by a group of convicts, and Frankl describes his jealousy – they must have been “well regulated, secure, and happy”, and ruminates on the concept of relative luck. They were grateful for the smallest of mercies. True positive experiences were slim to none – he could only remember two truly happy moments in a span of many weeks.

He recalls a time after his release where he is shown a photograph of prisoners cramped in bunks, and genuinely did not understand the pity of the person who had shown it to him. It was a sick hut, where they needed to do no work and were “taken care of”, where they were content in spite of everything else.

In the short time Frankl was employed as a medical personnel, the hours he spent not helping the mediocresly sick and praying for the seriously sick, he spent sitting on a wooden cover of a water shaft, glad to have some time for himself to sit and think. Incidentally, he also managed to save the lives of three prisoners by hiding them inside the water shaft in order to evade the transport to a death camp.

At one point, a transport was arranged for a group of prisoners, and any of them who volunteered for the dreaded night shift got their names taken off it. The transport was later cancelled, with eighty two of the prisoners still on the list. For many of them, it meant death within the next few weeks.

Later on, another transport is arranged, and the chief doctor, who had taken a liking to Frankl, offered to have Frankl’s name taken off the list, but Frankl decides to stay with his friends. He tells the doctor that if the doctor ever meets his wife, he should tell her that Frankl talked of her “daily, hourly”, that he “loved her more than anyone”, and the time they had together “outweighs everything, even all we [had] gone through here”. Thankfully, the transport was not to a death camp.

The day of liberation was near. On a day when Frankl and a friend were asked to bury three men outside the fence, the Red Cross arrived, and declared the camp and its inmates under its protection. Many had

already fled. They rejoiced with the Red Cross personnel, but celebrated too early. That night, the SS arrived and evacuated the camp.

Along with the apathy arrived a host of other mental problems, in the form of complexes. Many suffered from inferiority complexes, as everyone had always fancied themselves to be a “somebody”. Now, they were treated like “nobodies”. They felt utterly degraded. On the other hand, some of the more recognized prisoners, the Capos, cooks, etc, in fact, felt promoted. And as such, developed delusions of grandeur. The conflict of the promoted minority and degraded majority always met with explosive results. Beatings and impulses toward violence were commonplace.

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way”.

Frankl details the difficulty of succumbing to making decisions that would renounce freedom and dignity, and make them just like any other inmate. He concludes that the sort of person a prisoner became was a result not only of the camp influences, but also was partially a personal mental and spiritual choice, that a man can retain his dignity even in a concentration camp. He quotes Dostoevsky once more – “There is only one thing I dread: not to be worth of my sufferings”.

He notes that former prisoners agree that the most depressing influence would be that they had no idea how long their imprisonment would be. This concept is known as “provisional existence”, to which Frankl modifies to be “provisional existence of an unknown limit”. This prevented inmates from aiming at an ultimate goal in life, as there was no indication how long one would be in this situation. They were stuck with retrospective thoughts, to lose themselves in their past lives. Many believed that the real opportunities of life had already passed once they stepped foot into the camps, like their marches into it were their funerals.

Any attempts made at psychohygiene (cleanliness of the mind, literally) were focused on providing inmates inner strength through pointing out future goals. Frankl pictured himself lecturing to an audience on the psychology of a concentration camp as his goal, allowing him to pretend that the present was already over, and the sufferings of the moment were long gone. He quotes Spinoza – “Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it”. Prisoners who had lost faith in their own futures were doomed.

Frankl reminds us of the connection between the state of mind and the immunity of his body, and that many died soon after Christmas because their hopes of being home by Christmas went unfulfilled, and as a result, both their minds and their bodies gave up. He applauds those who had suffered, and mentions there is no shame in tears, for they bore witness that a man has the courage to suffer.

He recounts a particularly bad day, where the warden had pointed the entire group of prisoners to Frankl for advice. He tells them that “whoever was still alive had reason for hope”. He confesses that survival chances are slim, but in spite of that, he had no intention of losing hope nor giving up, for no man could know what the future would bring. He mentioned the past and all its joys, and how it was they could reflect on that light even in the present darkness. Again he quotes a poet – “What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you”. Finally he spoke of the sacrifices, and that they had meaning. No one wanted to die for nothing.

He then goes on to reflect the minds of the non-prisoners, and states that “mere knowledge that a man was either a camp guard or a prisoner tells us almost nothing”. Kindness and evil can be found in all groups, and we must not attempt to simplify matters by pigeonholing groups into being angels or devils. He settles on the statement that there are only two races of men in the world – “decent men” and “indecent men”, and that both are found everywhere, and penetrate all groups of society.

Third phase. It would be quite wrong to say that the prisoners were mad with joy. They had gone so long without “freedom” that the word had lost meaning to them. This concept was called “depersonalization” – they had dreamed of this all along, but finally, when the time came, they could not truly believe in it. The acute mental tension that plagued the prisoners in their last days in camp was not simple to dispel. Frankl makes the analogy to a diver and “the bends”. Someone who has been under such mental stress for such duration of time is prone to damage when the tension is released quickly, much like a diver who surfaces with excessive haste.

Some of these men, exposed to so much violence and wrongdoing, could not help themselves but to follow those same paths. It was a slow process to “[guide them] back to the commonplace truth that no one has the right to do wrong”. Two other fundamental experiences threatened to damage the newly liberated prisoner: bitterness and disillusionment.

Bitterness stemmed from the seeming aloofness of those around him, those who stated that they knew nothing of what happened or that they had experienced the same thing themselves. Disillusionment came from the realization that liberation did not mean the end of suffering. Perhaps no one, and nothing awaited them on their returns to society.

At this point I think it's not as necessary to pay attention, because my gut instinct is that Karim² will be focusing more on the experiences that Frankl et al went through as opposed to the methodology behind logotherapy and explanations of its usage. However, it's still part of the book, and as such, the summary for it is below.

II. Logotherapy in a Nutshell

Frankl explains logotherapy, very briefly as having the patient “hear things which sometimes are very disagreeable to hear”. It is retrospective, as in dealing with past events, as opposed to introspective, which is self-analyzing. Logotherapy focuses on attempting to provide meaning for the patient’s life, and attempts to defuse feedback mechanisms present in anxious and depressed persons (referred to as neurotic).

The name itself stems from the Greek word “logos”, which denotes “meaning. As such, logotherapy is focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man’s search for what that meaning is. Logotherapy, as a school of thought, believes that this striving to find meaning is what motivates man. It differs from other schools of thought such as the Freudian school, which is centered on pleasure, or the Adlerian school, which is centered on power.

He provides some statistics that back up this argument, such as polls indicating the willingness of those polled to die for something, and the amount of students who stated that their primary goal was to “find a purpose and meaning to my life”. Occasionally, these values hide internal conflicts, but Frankl stresses these are the exceptions to the rule rather than the rule itself, and unmasking is an uncommon

therapeutic technique. He also stresses that unmasking should stop once one is confronted with what is authentic and genuine.

Logotherapy deals with “existential frustration”, which deals with 1) the human mode of being; 2) the meaning of existence and 3) the striving to find meaning in existence. The neurosis that is derived from existential frustration is referred to as “noögenic neuroses”, which have their basis not in the psychological, but rather the “noölogical” (from the Greek *noös* meaning mind) dimension of human existence. In modern terms this is cognitive neuroscience, which deals with knowing and knowledge, whereas psychology deals with behaviour. They are not completely unrelated topics, though they are not the same, either.

Logotherapy is an analytical process which provides the patient with the tools to be able to see his life for its meaning. To make an analogy, the therapist is to the patient’s meaning of life as a set of paintbrushes is to a painting. They do not dictate how the painting should look or be drawn, but allow for the patient to make it. It differs from psychoanalysis where psychoanalysis focuses on the gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts.

Frankl makes it clear that logotherapy does not jive with biology’s understanding that all things should attempt to reach equilibrium, and that a certain amount of mental tension and stress is required of a healthy individual. Man needs to strive and to struggle for a worthwhile goal. Those who have no goals are caught in “existential vacuums”, which manifest them in states of boredom, which in turn manifests other problems, such as depression, aggression, and addiction.

The therapy attempts to make patients fully aware of his own responsibility for his own life – and in turn, the ability for him to control it. As such, it is very important for the doctor not to pass judgments – that is for the patients themselves to do.

He states that there are three very basic ways to find meaning in life. First, is by creating a work or doing a deed. The second, is by experiencing something or encountering someone. The experience could be goodness, truth, or beauty, or by experiencing another human being’s uniqueness – falling in love with them. Third, is the attitude taken when unavoidable suffering occurs. He stresses that suffering is not *necessary* to find meaning, only that it is possible to find meaning *in spite* of suffering.

One of the negative feedback loops of those who are depressed occurs from the value society puts on being happy. They become more unhappy because they are not fulfilling what is valued – increased unhappiness about being unhappy. One question plagued Frankl during his imprisonment – “Has all this suffering, this dying around us, a meaning? For, if not, then ultimately there is no meaning in survival; for a life whose meaning depends upon such a happenstance – as whether one escapes or not – ultimately would not be worth living at all”. Suffering becomes bearable once one can find a purpose behind it.

Logotherapy is not pessimistic but activistic. Figuratively put – “a pessimist...observes with fear...that his wall calendar...grows thinner with each passing day”. “An activist...removes each successive leaf from his calendar and files it neatly...away...after first having jotted down a few diary notes on the back. He can reflect with pride...set down in these notes, on all the life he has already lived to the fullest”. The sufferings man has gone through may be something of which he may be most proud, though the suffering itself may not inspire envy.

Then, Frankl goes into “hyper-reflection”, which refers to the inability to achieve something that is focused upon too heavily. It introduces a technique called “paradoxical intention”, where they inspire patients to attempt their hardest to achieve exactly what it is they do not want. For example, one plagued with insomnia may be asked to try their hardest to stay awake, and in that effort, will fall asleep. He makes note that it is not a panacea, but a useful short term, and possibly long term tool in treating “anticipatory anxiety”.