

A closer look at Suffering

BY : Nomangwane Isabella Snail

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1. Introduction

What is actually meant by *closer look at suffering*? In this mini – essay I will try and give an exposition of the concept of suffering, surrounded and influenced by the phenomenons of life .A closer look would be investigating and giving meaning to suffering – using the logo-therapeutic principle of tragic optimism, a triad that consists of human existence which may be circumscribed by: (1) pain (2) guilt and (3) death.¹

By saying yes to life in spite of everything means that there is a presumption that life potentially is meaningful under all conditions, even those events that are tragic for us. What matters then is to make the best of the situation. Best in Latin means optimum – hence the phrase tragic optimism. It has been submitted that, although suffering is not a prerequisite for meaning in life, it brings out a person's quest in life.²

Tragic optimism therefore allows a human being to view at the tragedy with the best potential of: (1) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better (3) deriving from life transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action.³

2. Despair

Viktor Frankl, the originator of modern existential analysis has devoted much space in his works to the area of suffering, with a close analysis of the term *despair*. He states that through his observations, he has discovered that people are more willing and capable of dealing with suffering if one can see that this suffering has a positive meaning in life.⁴ However suffering without a specific meaning means that a person experiences an existential vacuum and despair. This phenomenon has become very apparent in the modern times that we live, that are filled with pressure stress and sidetracking of our own values.⁵

Wolicki states that absolutization leads to loosing of hope and despair. This can involve various relative values, spiritual, physical, personal or essential values. Through his observations, he has come to the conclusion that most frequent cases of despair have to do with the unfortunate loss of ones love. Absolutization of love can involve either the experiencing of love or the individual partner.⁶

He goes on to say someone who is unfortunate in finding happiness in love is more likely to break down and be discouraged in his attitudes towards life and often will try

¹ Man's Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

² Logotherapy, Wong TP, 1998

³ Man's Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

⁴ The problem of despair according to Viktor Frankl's existential analysis, Viktor Frankl Foundation, Wolicki M, 1996

⁵ Man's Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

⁶ The problem of despair according to Viktor Frankl's existential analysis, Viktor Frankl Foundation, Wolicki M, 1996

to run away from life by attempting / committing suicide. Many cases of nervous and psychic breakdowns have been observed which result from despair. Here the cause of despair is caused by the idolizing of the state of falling in love or the concrete person to whom the feeling of love is directed.

Another example of absolutization of relative values is the striving for health either physical or psychical, when someone is suffering from an incurable disease like HIV / AIDS, which in itself is chronic illness, one could easily develop a feeling of despair. A person in this state is not fit for anything. In the case of the loss of mental health, such an attitude would become even more evident, where the feeling of worthiness or indisposition is even stronger.

It is man's fundamental task to protect himself / herself from despair, in other words from the idolization of relative values.⁷ There are different ways to protect oneself from despair or from the attempt to run away from it. One way is the disabsolution of the relative values. Another way of running away from despair and protecting oneself from it is by committing oneself to a life of sacrifice and renouncement. One could also save oneself from despair by considering life as a task for us, and various situations and circumstances in life as concrete assignments, which could be fulfilled, by realising the meaning of a given situation and the possibility of achieving values in it.

Viktor Frankl insists that meaning is possible even in spite of suffering, provided with certainty that the suffering is unavoidable. If it were avoidable, the most meaningful thing to do would be to remove its cause – irrespective of its nature, be it psychological, biological or political. To suffer unnecessarily is masochistic rather than heroic or constructive.⁸

Meaning of the Moment and Existential Guilt

Meaning of the Moment and Existential Guilt are two areas of psycho spiritual literature, which surprisingly little has been written about. Our topic is the interrelationship between two-logotherapeutic concept, coined by Viktor Frankl and discussed by various other psychiatrist and psychologists. This relation is explicated via the classical novel "The master and Margarita" authored by Bulgakov in 1993 and the philosophical work of Anselm and illustrated with cases from logotherapeutic practice.

In these documented cases different ways of overcoming existential guilt are presented and dealt with accordingly. The need for 'giving the patient permission to express his/her personality and authentic self' is stressed for successful therapy.⁹ Guttmann goes on to say that existential guilt should not be confused with actual guilt or with guilty feelings. Existential guilt results from feelings that demand action

⁷ The problem of despair according to Viktor Frankl's existential analysis, Viktor Frankl Foundation, Wolicki M, 1996

⁸ Man's Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

⁹ Logotherapy for the Helping Professional: Meaningful social work, D Guttmann, 1996

but the action fails due to various circumstances. May and Yalom ¹⁰ in their translated version of Guttman's writings write that action must encompass three worlds or three distinctive ways:

OWN WORLD (Eigenwelt*)

- By actualising our individual potential by taking full responsibility for our needs in the physical, intellectual and spiritual realms. This is the world of personal reality.

WORLD OF OTHERS (Mitwelt*)

- Relating positively to others by putting aside first impressions, shortsighted biases, disrespectful behaviour towards others or being tolerant towards others, in order to enlarge the individual's social interaction.

NATURAL WORLD / THE NATURE (Umwelt*)

To accept our indebtedness to the natural world and the cosmos in general, by respecting the plants, the animals, the mountains and the rivers, the seas and the stars above in the sky.

It is submitted that people have an ontological responsibility towards meaning – in other words we must relate as fully as possible to the three worlds cited above. Lack of response, or refusal to act on the dictate of our conscience, can result in a feeling of deep dissatisfaction, in the form of a nagging life experience. This nagging is in fact existential guilt. ¹¹ This nagging, if continuously ignored can result in neurotic guilt or depression.

The suffering caused by existential guilt can take the joy of living away from the afflicted, In the case where the meaning of the moment was not realized or lost altogether, existential guilt accumulates, due to the lack of transparency. A person can live on as if nothing has happened, but his sorrow will remain hidden from the outside world. After some decades the signs show, in the form of headaches, dizziness and noticeable anxiety attacks.

To avoid this, Guttman states that, logotherapists must widen and broaden the visual field of the patient so that the whole spectrum of meaning and values becomes able to him in order to become conscious of it. The therapist may help in clarifying the importance of this first step in the process of regaining good mental and spiritual health, but the decision must remain with the patient. ¹²

* German terms

¹⁰ Existential Psychotherapy, R May and Yalom I, 2000

¹¹ Logotherapy for the Helping Professional: Meaningful social work, D Guttman, 1996

¹² Meaning of the Moment and existential guilt – Viktor Frankl foundation, D Guttman 1998

Death and Mourning

Several myths and beliefs have developed about death and bereavement during the ages. Death establishes the end of the future and defines the boundaries of human possibility. In Dying, the life of the human person is reaching its completion and definitive form or quality. The human self becomes complete when life has been completed by death. In death one completes life in its totality.

The main task of the logotherapeutic relationship between meaning and death is to help the individual person step out of the denial towards death and acknowledge the existential reality and potential meaningfulness of human finiteness.¹³ Logotherapy integrates death life and shows the significance of the awareness of death for the quality of life on this side of death. It is common to hear that a grieving person must not repress crying or other external manifestation of deep sorrow. This could be very dangerous, because endless suppression of feelings could eventually lead to unnecessary suffering.

If according to this criterion these manifestations are encouraged, the grieving person may be led into what Elizabeth Lukas has called, a state of continuous lamentation, that according to her may have the following disadvantages:¹⁴

1. **Hyperreflecting** on the reason for lamentation, which is perceived in an exaggerated fashion and which attracts all internationality upon it.
2. The griever **increases the pain** and feels worse every moment, eventually **drowning in sorrow**.
3. The **family and society become tired of this endless behaviour** and **abandon the grieving person**.

It is correct to state that a grieving person should either grieve or refrain from grieving depending on the situation, whether it is to the benefit of another person who is suffering from the same reason – provided that the act of renouncement or self-denial is made out of love for each other person.¹⁵ This can be illustrated using the following example:

If one chooses to sacrifice their feelings and emotions for the sake of the well being of another. That person will not have to worry about his or her own suppressed grief because it will not be in their sub conscience. This clearly shows us that grieving counsellors should not encourage indiscriminate expression of emotions during the grieving process but should rather try to orientate mourners towards the search for meaning existing in every situation, no matter how tragic or painful it may be.

¹³ The question of death in logo-therapy – Viktor Frankl Foundation South Africa, Kovacs G, 1995

¹⁴ Mourning and Logotherapy – Viktor Frankl Foundation South Africa, Bertt G and Bertt A S, 1999

¹⁵ Mourning and Logotherapy – Viktor Frankl Foundation South Africa, Bertt G and Bertt A S, 1999

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