

Questions and Answers, June, 30, 1966

Viktor E. Frankl

Question: *How does man work for self-transcendence as contrasted with self-actualization?*

VF: I do not wish to debase the concept of self-actualization. I am in touch with Abraham Maslow and admire him very much. We both agree that self-actualization is an excellent thing. However, self-actualization is only obtainable to the extent to which a man fulfills the meaning of his life or for that matter, the unique meaning of each unique life situation. Then self-actualization occurs automatically and spontaneously, as it were, while it would be spoiled and destroyed and would be self-defeating if I tried to attempt to obtain it in a direct way, by way of direct intention. Only to the extent to which I fulfill a meaning do I also actualize myself. *Per effectum* rather than *per intentionem*.

Question: *You say meaning is inherent in a situation and therefore distinct from values?*

VF: I would say that values are general universal meanings and by being universal meanings, they alleviate the human situation. Being guided by universal values, we are not compelled incessantly to make existential decisions. In the final analysis, man is finding and fulfilling meanings, guided and sometimes also misled by his finite conscience. Conscience is creative in that a man might find that the meaning of which he becomes aware through conscience contradicts any general or universal values. Then he is creating a new value because the meaning discovered through creative conscience today becomes the universal values of tomorrow.

June 30, 1966 at Horace Mann Auditorium, Teachers College, Columbia University, sponsored by the International Center for Integrative Studies

V.E. Frankl

Question: *Does your concept of meaning through suffering not give rise to the danger of masochism?*

VF: There is no danger of masochism because meaning, potential meaning, is only available in indispensable, inescapable, unavoidable suffering. To needlessly shoulder the cross of suffering in the case of an operable cancer when pain relief is available doesn't constitute any meaning. This would be sheer masochism rather than heroism. Nowhere have I found a clearer differentiation between unavoidable, necessary suffering (which gives an opportunity to transmutation into a meaningful achievement) on the one hand, and on the other hand, unnecessary, avoidable suffering (which does not yield any meaning) than in an advertisement which I read in a New York newspaper. It was written in German but an American friend translated it into English. It was couched in the form of a poem and this poem read as follows:

*"Calmly bear without ado
That which fate imposed on you"*

That is to say, unavoidable suffering should be borne courageously and thereby made into a human heroic achievement:

*"Calmly bear without ado
That which fate imposed on you,
But to bedbugs don't resign
Turn for help to Rosenstein."*

Question: *Doesn't your view of the noological dimension imply that the psychiatrist is not competent to administer existential therapy in the noological dimension?*

VF: This is not true. The job assigned to psychiatrists is to make a clinical symptom transparent against the higher dimension, the intrinsically human dimension and thus it is the job of the psychiatrist to treat noogenic neurosis. Particularly, this is his assignment in an age like ours in which, as the famous German Catholic psychiatrist, Viktor von Gebattel, says men are migrating from the priest, pastor or rabbi toward the psychiatrist. A psychiatrist today has to play the role of a substitute for ministry or as I have called it, the role of the medical ministry. No one is justified in saying: "Oh, these people are confronted with existential or philosophical or spiritual problems; we don't wish to embark on dealing with such problems. They should go to a priest, or if they are non-believers then I don't care." These people confront us and we have to do our best. This is not just my personal conviction. There is even a paragraph in the constitution of the world's largest medical association, the American Medical Association, which states that a doctor, when he is not able to cure a patient or even to bring relief from pain, is entitled and even obliged to try to offer some consolation. So this area still pertains to the realm of the medical profession.

Question: *Two people have asked whether you have been in touch with Rabbi Leo Baeck.*

VF: I met Rabbi Leo Baeck in a concentration camp. It was more than just a meeting, it was a true encounter. From then on, I kept in touch with him. Rabbi Leo Baeck was assigned to write a chapter on the borderlines between Judaism and

psychotherapy in a five-volume encyclopedia of neurosis theory and psychotherapy, which I edited with V.E. von Gebattel and J. H. Schultz from Berlin. While working on that manuscript, Rabbi Baeck died in London and thus he could not complete his assignment.

Question: *Is there a place for religion in your theory?*

VF: There cannot be a place for religion in a psychiatric school or theory, precisely because of the difference of dimension. The only thing that can be demanded of a psychiatric approach is that it be left open toward a higher dimension. Psychiatry is no closed system. Psychiatry must remain open so that the religious patient is not done an injustice, but is understood in intrinsically human terms rather than becoming a victim of a reductionist approach to neurosis and psychotherapy. If for no other reason, I am compelled by the Hippocratic Oath on which I had to swear when I took the medical degree, to guarantee that Logotherapy be available for each and every patient, including the agnostic patient and usable by each and every doctor, including the atheistically oriented doctor. Psychotherapy belongs to medicine, at least according to the legislation of Austria, and so the Hippocratic Oath is applicable to psychotherapy, including Logotherapy. Thus I have to be available for each and every suffering human being.

Question: *Do you believe man can overcome despair without a personal God or religious orientation?*

VF: It does not matter what I personally believe. I speak and stand for a school called Logotherapy. Logotherapy seeks to know, not to believe. The ultimate decision, the most personal decision for or against a religious *Weltanschauung* or philosophy of life is up to the patient rather than to the doctor. Logotherapy doesn't have the answers, but Logotherapy is education toward responsibility and thus the Logotherapist is least in danger, of all psychiatric schools, of taking responsibility for such a decision from the shoulders of the patient. He will try to enable the patient to make a decision of his own.

Question: *How can you explain the concept of God?*

VF: Of course, as a Logotherapist, as a psychiatrist for that matter, I cannot explain it. And it would be a very dangerous venture to try to explain it. An apropos example was given by Sigmund Freud in a letter addressed to the great, late famous Swiss psychiatrist, the creator of *Daseinsanalyse* Ludwig Binswanger. Freud said that all his life he had restricted his view to the basement and ground floor of the edifice - that is to say, to a lower dimension. This is not a debasing expression; it doesn't imply any value judgment. It is just that the less inclusive dimension is overarched and humanized by adding the intrinsically human dimension. So Freud was aware of the limitation of his view and was no reductionist when saying so. He only became the victim of the reductionism of his era when he continued his first sentence by saying: "I also believe that I have found a place for religion in that edifice, in that basement, by disposing of it in terms of the collective neurosis of mankind." Only in that moment, even a genius such as Freud could not fully resist the temptation of reductionism.

Question: *Did you intend your last symbol to be a cross?*¹

VF: I wonder if you know that I am not a Christian. It just happens that this diagram is a cross; but I don't mind that it is a cross. And further, viewed in terms of dimensional ontological teachings, I would have to say it may well be that in a higher dimension, this "happening" that the figure is a cross has a deeper or a higher meaning.

Question: *How do you counteract existential vacuum? How do you give meaning to a patient?*

VF: Despite my insistence that we do not *give* meaning, *we do* have to promote the patient to that point where he spontaneously *finds* meaning, because meaning is something to be found rather than to be given. You do not give meanings, attribute meanings, ascribe meanings, attach meanings to things or happenings as if reality were just a projective test. Reality is no neutral screen upon which you project your wishful thinking or upon which you express your inner makeup by attaching meanings. We cannot give meanings in an arbitrary way but if at all, in the way in which we give answers. In the final analysis there is one answer only to each question. There is one solution only to each problem and likewise in the final analysis there is one meaning only to each situation - the right meaning, the true meaning. Reality, rather than being a Rorschach blot into which we project our wishful thinking, expressing ourselves, is rather a hidden figure and we have to find out the meaning. I made the statement that giving meanings is something like giving answers. Let me explain this by evoking something, which happened a few years ago on a theological campus. People in the audience were given cards and invited to write their questions in block letters - printed. Then a theologian gathered the questions and in passing them to me, singled out one and wanted to skip it. I asked why. He said, "It's sheer nonsense. 'Dr. Frankl, how do you interpret 600 in your theory of existence?'" I looked at it and said, "Excuse me, I read it in a different way: 'Dr. Frankl, how do you interpret GOD in your theory of existence?'"

It is a projective test, isn't it? The theologian read "600" and the neurologist read "GOD", an unintentional projective test. I made a slide of it and used it as a projective test in classes of American students studying at the Vienna University. I showed them the slide and then invited them to vote on what it meant. Believe it or not, nine students said "GOD", nine others said "600" and four students oscillated between the two interpretations. What do I wish to convey to you? Only one mode of interpretation of the question was the right one. The way in which I understood the question was the right one. What do I mean by that? That each situation in life implies a question, a call. And we have to try to find out the meaning. You may now understand how I arrive at the definition of meaning. Meaning is that which is meant either by the man who asks a question or by life, which incessantly raises questions, existential questions, to be answered in an existential way by making decisions. But these decisions cannot be made arbitrarily, they must be made responsibly. That is to say, our answer is a call from life or from that super-personal entity called God,

¹ This refers to a diagram Frankl showed during his lecture.

which stands behind life asking questions. Our answer has to be an existential, responsible action; our answer is action rather than just an intellectual or rational answer.

Question: *What is your solution for ending the existential vacuum and how does it tie in with the religious feeling?*

VF: I have spoken of meanings to be found and have made the clear-cut statement that meaning cannot be given, least of all by a doctor, to the life of a patient. A book has recently been published by Redlich and Friedman and unfortunately both authors dismiss Logotherapy as an attempt to give meanings to patients. Thus you see, one cannot but be misunderstood again and again, even by people who receive reprints of your writings for years in which they may read: "Meaning cannot be given; meaning must not be given by a doctor; meaning must be found by the patient himself." If you think it was a Logotherapist who contended that he had the answers, you are mistaken. It was not a Logotherapist, but a serpent in Paradise who said: "I tell people what is wrong and what is right and what is meaningful and what is meaningless."

Let me conclude. What is to be done for a young man, for instance, who cannot see any meaning in life, at least not immediately? He should be made aware that this condition, which is called existential vacuum, is no neurotic symptom. Rather than being something to be ashamed of, it is something to be proud of. It is a human achievement. It is above all, particularly a prerogative of young people; not to take for granted that there is meaning inherent in human existence, but rather to try, to venture, to question and to challenge the problem of meaning of existence. This is an achievement to be proud of rather than a neurosis to be ashamed of. If a neurosis at all, it is a collective neurosis. It is a neurosis of mankind. But if such a young man has the courage to pose such questions, he should also have the patience to wait until meaning will dawn upon him. And until that time - if he is caught in the existential vacuum, in this abysmal feeling (this abyss experience, to put it alongside the peak experience so beautifully elaborated on by Abraham Maslow) - if need be, he should tell himself: This dreadful experience is exactly what Jean Paul Sartre describes so beautifully in his work on *Being and Nothingness*. In this way, he is enabled to put distance between this dreadful experience and himself. There are two main features and traits, which characterize and constitute human existence. The first is self-transcendence - the fact that man is always reaching beyond himself, reaching out for meaning to fulfill, for other beings to encounter. The second is self-detachment, the intrinsically human capacity to rise above the level of somatic and psychic data, above the plane within which an animal being moves and to which an animal being is bound. Man is by no means fully free. Man is not free from determinants. Man's freedom is a finite freedom, not freedom from conditions; his freedom lies in the potentiality for taking a stand toward whatever conditions might confront him.

When Professor Huston C. Smith interviewed me on this matter of human freedom I said, "Man is determined but he is not pan-determined." Then Professor Smith said, "You, Dr. Frankl, as a professor of neurology and psychiatry are cer-

tainly aware that there are conditions and determinants to which man is bound.” I replied: “Well, Dr. Smith, you are right. I am a neurologist and a psychiatrist and as such I know very well the huge extent to which man is conditioned - is subject to biological, psychological and sociological conditions. But apart from being a professor in two fields, I am also a survivor of four concentration camps, and as such, I bear witness to the incredible and unexpected extent to which man is also capable of braving conditions, be they the worst conditions, including those of a camp such as Auschwitz.”

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