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# **An Evaluation of the Importance of Viktor Frankl for the Psychology of Religion**

## **Introduction**

As David Wulff (1997, p.628) points out, American humanistic psychology has become widely popular in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and possesses a generally positive approach to the phenomenon of religion. The aim of this essay is to focus on the contribution of the existentialist humanist Viktor Frankl and evaluate his importance for the field of the psychology of religion in particular.

Frankl's contribution will be examined under four distinct headings. Firstly his anthropological perspective ("The Nature of Man"), secondly his view on the origin and role of religion ("The Nature of Religion"), thirdly the practical impact of his approach ("Frankl in the Field") and finally his role in helping to bridge the fields of psychology and religion.

## **The Nature of Man<sup>1</sup>**

When evaluating any theoretical system, an understanding of the assumptions made by the theoretician are vital. In their essay *Logotherapy: An Overview* (Kimber, 2000), Kimber & Ellor hit the nail on the head with the comment that an understanding of the underlying *anthropological* assumptions are vital when considering a psychological system:

The anthropology of a therapeutic system profoundly influences the entire system. Most psychology has grown from a view of humanity as a creature of biology fully explicable in terms of the commonalities between humanity and the rest of the living creatures. Such a view tends to reduce concepts such as responsibility and meaning to complex expressions of biological urges and drives. (pp.10-11)

Since anthropology is key to understanding a psychological system, it is worth spending a little time on an overview of some of the key tenets of Frankl's vision of man. In his work, Frankl presents a new, more complex and "well-developed anthropology" (Kimber, 2000, p.10) which goes to make up what we might term a "higher" view of man. This stands in stark contrast to the anthropological assumptions underlying the approach of some of the early psychologists such as Freud.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term "man" throughout this essay is merely convenient shorthand rather than exclusive.

Whilst not denying the impact of environmental, biological and psychological factors, Frankl refuses to see such conditions as wholly, precisely and fatalistically, determining our actions and blocking our ability to make a “responsible response”. For Frankl, rather than being pushed around by solely their biology and/or unconscious, each person has a positive shaping & directing role to play in their own “creation” by the exercise of free will. Frankl possesses a more optimistic view of the nature of man, with an emphasis on human free will and one’s ability to change present & future (rather than the more “forensic” approach typical of the psychoanalytical perspective).

As Frankl (1985) himself explains concerning logotherapy (his therapeutic approach):

Logotherapy, in comparison with psychoanalysis, is a method less *retrospective* and less *introspective*. Logotherapy focuses rather on the future, that is to say, on the meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in his future. (Logotherapy, indeed, is a meaning-centered psychotherapy). (p.120)

The “will to meaning” lies at the very heart of Frankl’s system as the key driver, motivation or concern of all people. Frankl rejects Freud’s notion of “pleasure” and Adler’s concept of “power” as the key motivational drivers and instead proposes that man’s fundamental preoccupation is with the search for meaning, which can be found only outside of himself. Indeed, the ascension of the drive to pleasure or power as the key human motivator only arises, says Frankl, from a frustrated “will to meaning” as Fuller (1994, p.251) points out.

Frankl’s richer anthropological picture is enabled by his phenomenological approach to human nature, which sees complex phenomena such as the spiritual dimension and conscience as fundamental, irreducible and uniquely human aspects of life rather than as things to be explained away by processes operating at a sub-human (i.e. animal) level (Frankl, 1977, p.117).

As Fuller (1994, p.243) explains, Frankl’s interest is in precisely those “irreducible” aspects of human nature, the “specifically human” which, importantly for Frankl, include the “noölogical dimension”, which Fuller explains as “the realm of the mind” and other commentators classify as the realm of the “spiritual”. So, for Frankl, the spiritual dimension is a fundamental part of the make-up of man and Freud and Adler’s systems are incomplete (although still useful) without it. In essence, Frankl does not seek to explain religion in terms of “something else” (as does Freud), but religion is rather a valid phenomenon to be accepted, studied and worked with in its own right, rather than simply something pathological to be cured.

Frankl's phenomenological approach to human nature leads us to another aspect of his contribution which also needs to be mentioned. In an academic climate in which it is increasingly important to recognise and acknowledge one's own assumptions, Frankl is careful to make explicit his own *philosophical* assumptions and serves as a reminder to all those working in the field to do the same.

Andrew Tengan in his concise and learned critique of Frankl's concept of man (*Search for Meaning as the Basic Human Motivation: A Critical Examination of Viktor Emil Frankl's Logotherapeutic Concept of Man*)<sup>2</sup> makes exactly this point. Tengan says, quoting Frankl:

By articulating the philosophy underpinning logotherapy, [Frankl] has supplanted 'the unconscious [and] invalid philosophical hypotheses of the Freudians and Adlerians by a conscious philosophy'. (p.75)<sup>3</sup>

Tengan's book provides an in-depth critique of the philosophical underpinnings of Frankl's concept of man (from an explicitly Christian perspective). Along the way, he does raise some interesting issues with regard to the comprehensiveness of Frankl's philosophical system (seeing, in particular, Frankl's concept of freedom as being too simplistic). However, this should not detract from Frankl's awareness of the importance of philosophical considerations and his efforts to point the field of psychology to greater self-awareness.

In summary, Frankl paints an alternative, equally valid, and richer picture of what it is to be human, providing a welcome shift away from the reductionist perspective which dominated the earliest workers in the field of psychology of religion. Frankl offers a viable alternative anthropological model to that offered by the psychoanalytical school and a fresh base from which psychologists of religion can explore the (irreducible) phenomenon of religion. Finally, Frankl's self-awareness and exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of his own system serve as a good example to all those working in the field.

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<sup>2</sup> A worthy addition to the Heythrop library.

<sup>3</sup> In a footnote, Tengan does point out that there is some debate over the degree of "philosophical blindness" of Freud and Adler, mentioning A. Vergote in particular as someone who does not see Freud in this manner. However, for the purposes of this essay, the point is still valid.

## **The Nature of Religion**

In this section I wish to concentrate on two aspects of Frankl's work. Firstly, we will survey his view of the origin and role of religion (as an alternative to the Freudian model). Secondly, and as a direct consequence of this, we will consider his (limited) scope of interest in the phenomenon of religion.

Freud's perspective on the origin & role of religion is well known. Working from a psychoanalytical perspective, Freud's oft-quoted view of the origin of religion, as set out in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), sees it as a form of group neurosis, with God nothing more than an "exalted father". For Freud, religion is a crutch for the psychologically weak, infantile and insecure and provides a reassuring framework and set of rules to be followed in an effort to ward off anxiety. It is always pathological.

Frankl, by contrast, possesses a more balanced view of religion, seeing it as potentially contributing to, as well as detracting from, mental health (indeed he has most to say on the healthy aspect of religion). Frankl provides an alternative explanation for the origin of religion – as part of the universal human meaning making process. As has already been explained, for Frankl, an innate part of human nature is the "will to meaning" (1977), a drive which can find its satisfaction in a person's pursuit of transcendent goals, and with which religion is therefore in harmony. Indeed, Frankl states that religion is "man's search for *ultimate* meaning" (1977, p.14).

For Frankl, religion is something that spontaneously wells up from inside a person and is affirmed or encouraged by seeing it lived out in another person. It is not something that can be imposed, preached or "commanded, demanded or ordered" (1977, p.15) externally but instead is a valid means of expressing self-transcendence and an orientation towards "the other". This self-transcendence is a universal human phenomenon and Frankl therefore sees an inherent latent religiousness in human nature. Indeed, for Frankl, religion is almost a psychological necessity, by virtue of the psyche being orientated towards "the Other" (or if not religious in appearance, there must be some commitment to "the other" in terms of self-giving relationship(s)). Frankl (1967) even goes so far as to say:

Psychotherapy, handled correctly, will release a patient's religiosity, even if that religiosity was dormant and its release was not at all intended by the therapist.  
(p.166)

Importantly, Frankl's system leaves room for an understanding of the religious dimension that is unable to be dismissed as merely the illusion of certain neurotic individuals (Freud) or the symbolic language of the Self (Jung). In both Freud and Jung's systems, religion is a *internal* product of the psyche itself, but for Frankl, religion is a *transcendent* phenomenon in which conscience points each person to the meaning which they are being called to freely choose to fulfil. Frankl's analysis of the human person therefore insists on making space for something beyond itself. As Fuller (1994) nicely summarises:

The human being's relation to the divine is not something that takes place within the psyche at all, as Jung claims. The human relation to the divine is rather *to* transcendence, to that which is radically beyond human life and all lower dimensions, to the "other." (p.264)

So Frankl moves the phenomenon of religion out of the realm of the *solely* psychological and makes space for the interaction with the "Other" which is a key aspect of many religions. Frankl therefore actually opens up the possibility for the psychological study of religion as a genuinely transcendent phenomenon. In the process, he not only gains a hearing for his views amongst religious communities, but also fights against the tendency for psychologism present in some circles.

For Frankl, religion as a phenomena actually seems to "fall out" as a direct and logical consequence of the "meaning orientation" of his view of man in his self-transcendent relationship to "the Other". Religion is, if you like, essentially a necessity, based on Frankl's anthropological model.

We now turn to the topic of the *scope* of Frankl's interest in the phenomenon of religion and its psychological understanding. In essence, Frankl has most to say on the points mentioned above, namely the origin and (positive) role of religion and his rather narrow focus would appear to be due to his sole concern for those aspects of religion that are a *direct consequence of his own system*. Specifically, the origin of the religious sentiment (from "inside" a person as a natural consequence of the drive for meaning) and the role of religion in the process of self-actualisation.

As Wulff points out (p.628ff), Frankl sits within the humanistic perspective, broadly shares their concerns and interests with regard to religion, and is subject to similar criticism with regard to a lack of scope. It is certainly true that Frankl shows little interest in the pathological aspects of religion (although these are acknowledged). Nor has Frankl made a significant contribution to other aspects of the psychology of religion such as the social aspect, ritual, mystical experience, etc.

In addition, Frankl also fails to engage with religious tradition & dogma in any sense other than as (unhelpful) sources which impose or command an external form of control onto a person. For Frankl, there is no possibility that these factors may be seen as potential positive sources of inspiration, nor is their role explored (for example) in terms of an unfolding narrative of a community of faith. In this manner, again, Frankl shows similarity to Jung for whom tradition and dogma were certainly dead & lifeless factors on the path to self-actualisation in contrast to inspirational & enlightening numinous experience.<sup>4</sup>

Frankl's scope of interest in the phenomenon of religion is therefore rather limited and Wulff's observation (1997, p.630) on the contribution of the humanistic psychologists that "none [of them] was committed to developing a truly comprehensive psychology of religion" is therefore justly applicable to Frankl. But it is important to realise that this was not his goal. Frankl has a particular insight into an important dimension of the human psyche – the importance of meaning. The issue of how this can or does overlap with the religious dimension is his chief contribution to the psychology of religion, and it should not be lost in a discussion of his failing to address broader issues in the psychology of religion, especially his failing to construct a super-theory which has eluded the grasp of all to date.

### **“Frankl in the Field”**

Perhaps the crucial test of any theory, or the relevance of an approach, is how well it is seen to function in practice and/or how well it matches with experimental data. In this section, I want to briefly mention two areas in which Frankl's approach has made a positive contribution to psychology of religion in practice. Firstly, we will consider the demonstrable therapeutic value of Frankl's approach and then some attempts to “operationalise” Frankl's work.

In general, pastoral psychologists and therapists working from a Christian perspective have found Frankl's therapeutic approach (“logotherapy”) to be highly applicable and beneficial. This is largely due to the fact that logotherapy, with its emphasis on the response to the call of an “external other” and its focus on an orientation away from self, fits well with the teachings of the major religious traditions. See for example *Logotherapy and Pastoral Counselling* (Kimber, 2000, pp.43-57) and Graber (2004).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Jung's account of his “cathedral experience” (Jung, 1995, p.73)

<sup>5</sup> A worthy *omission* from the Heythrop library!

Frankl's system therefore has a practical dimension which makes it useful for those working in the specific field of pastoral psychotherapy. Indeed because Frankl's anthropology extends to include the spiritual (or "noölogical") dimension of man, he also naturally extends the remit of psychotherapy to include spiritual and religious matters as well. These are no longer seen as the exclusive concern of religious professionals working with religious patients but (according to Frankl's understanding) matters of concern for anyone working to improve mental health in the counselling or therapeutic professions.

Turning now to empirical concerns, there has been at least one attempt to operationalise Frankl's approach in the realm of psychology. Paloutzian (1996, p.182) reports an attempt by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1969) to measure the degree of meaning or purpose in a person's life by creating a twenty item Purpose in Life Test (PIL) based on Frankl's ideas.

The results of correlational research using this test (e.g. Crumbaugh (1968)) do seem to show the results that might be expected, with psychiatric groups (e.g. neurotics and schizophrenics) scoring lower (indicating a lower sense of meaning) than others (e.g. college undergraduates). With regard to research carried out specifically to investigate religious attitudes, Wulff (1997, p.628) mentions the results of several additional studies which show a positive correlation between a high PIL score and both a person's ranking of Salvation as well the RO Intrinsic scale.

As Paloutzian points out (1996, p.182), the objective measurement of such a "nebulous concept" as "meaning" is questionable, but the fact that an attempt has been made to operationalise Frankl's approach is evidence of the high regard with which he is held in some circles and the undeniable efficacy of his approach in some therapeutic realms. Frankl has certainly placed his finger on an important aspect of the human psychological condition in general and one which also seems to play an important part as a dimension of religious experience.

Paloutzian (1996, p.163) also mentions that Frankl's emphasis on the dimension of existential anxiety has been used as a factor in some models of religious conversion – the "preconvert" being one who experiences heightened tension due to their search for meaning and whose conversion thereby reduces this anxiety.

In summary, Frankl's insights certainly have a practical dimension in the therapeutic world, but have met with only limited success (or perhaps rather limited *application*) in empirical practice. But this is perhaps more due to the nature of Frankl's theory, which Paloutzian (1996, p.47) includes under the heading of "classical" along with the theories of Freud and Jung. Paloutzian suggests that the lasting influence of such theories is due to the fact that they seem "intuitively convincing" before highlighting their "inability to stimulate theory-testing empirical research" (p.48). Thus, there is found to be a certain "empirical slipperiness" about Frankl's approach which he shares with other thinkers who also postulate a single "big idea" as the backdrop to their psychological approach such as Freud and Jung.

### **The Relationship between Psychology and Religion**

The relationship between the fields of psychology and religion has come a long way since Freud's rather antagonistic and dismissive approach, with an increasing rapprochement apparent. Frankl has made no small contribution to this reduction in tension, with the knock-on effect of advancing the psychology of religion as a distinct arena. His contribution can be seen in three distinct areas.

Firstly, his positive approach to the phenomenon of religion (along with others working from a humanistic perspective) must have contributed to the reappraisal of religion from the professional psychological perspective. In addition, as Wulff (1997, p.624) points out, his approach as an existentialist psychologist also appeals to "liberal religious thinkers". Frankl's work therefore spans and connects with the work of professionals in both fields.

Secondly, in the more popular sphere, Frankl was a successful paperback populariser of his own works, which again may have helped to reduce the tension between these fields in the eyes of the public. Thirdly, as we have seen, his non-reductionist anthropology is in harmony with the view of many religious traditions. This results in a psychotherapeutic approach which finds fertile ground amongst therapists and pastors working with people who already possess an explicit religiosity.

This last point is echoed by James Ellor in his paper on *Bridging Psychology and Theology When Counseling Older Adults* (Kimber, 2000). Writing from an explicitly Christian perspective, Ellor sees Frankl's work as one of the much needed bridges linking theology and psychology:

[Bridges need] to be developed between theology and psychology that will afford a more complete dialogue toward viable explanations of human nature. The work of Viktor Frankl offers important first steps towards developing the necessary bridges between theology and psychology. (p.90)

Ellor's call for a unified theological/ psychological approach to probing more deeply the totality of human nature is both powerful and laudable. It should be noted, however, that by "theology", Ellor seems to assume *Christian* theology and one cannot help feeling that this his call is a little naïve or limited in scope if a broad psychological/ theological consensus is truly the aim.

This does raise the important issue of Frankl's work being susceptible to adoption by those with an explicit theological drum to bang. Indeed this has led to some criticism that Frankl himself is too explicitly religious. In his defence, Frankl would simply claim that he maintains a neutral stance, and that his findings concerning the innate spiritual dimension of man, and his therapeutic approach, are merely "evidence based". (Although this is, of course, the claim of all theoretical psychologists since Freud and Jung).

On the other hand, Frankl has also been criticised by some for not being religious *enough*. Tengan's (1999) book is perhaps a good case study in this class of writing. For Tengan, whilst Frankl clearly sees human beings as behaving religiously by nature, and religion as a genuine phenomenon, he criticises Frankl for failing to take what he sees as the next logical step and "incorporat[ing] properly man's religiosity into his dimensional ontology" (p.134ff). According to Tengan, Frankl illogically fights shy of an unambiguous declaration of man's religiosity as being an essential dimension of his being.

Tengan sees Frankl's reserve as due to a twofold desire to retain professional respectability in the fields of psychiatry/ psychology whilst ensuring that logotherapy is seen as an approach which both therapists and patients without a specifically religious background can make use. In essence, Frankl is concerned that his work is not merely treated as "inspirational reading based on a mixture of psychiatry and religion" (Tengan, 1999, p.135 quoting from *The Doctor and the Soul*). The result, according to Tengan, is that Frankl's works show an increasing secularisation over time.

One senses that Tengan's frustration is caused by Frankl's explicit exploration and examination of philosophical concepts concerning the nature of man, which Tengan perhaps feels are more properly in the domain of the theologian, or at least a shared area of interest, and which therefore gives Tengan the right to criticise Frankl's perspective. Tengan's frustration is compounded by Frankl's use of religious language (see p.138) and one is reminded of the confusion or misunderstanding in some parts of the Christian community caused by Carl Jung's (either playful or mischievous, but certainly deliberate) use of religious and spiritual language.

It would appear to be the unfortunate and inevitable fate of psychologists to date who have ventured away from a reductionist explanation of human behaviour, to be criticised from both sides. On the one hand, some in the psychological community deplore the departure from the path of “pure” psychology, whilst on the other, certain religious traditions decry their failure to have a “sufficient” (for which one should read “correct according to *my* anthropology”) insight into human nature.

Such a battering from both sides does not help advance the field of the psychology of religion. Although perhaps one should see equal criticism from both sides as actually a positive sign of success at walking the fine tightrope? Regardless of one’s personal opinion, Frankl should be credited for his bravery in attempting to function in this space with all its attendant tensions.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we shall review Frankl’s contribution to the psychology of religion as outlined in this essay. As we have seen, in a number of important areas, Frankl challenges the assumptions made by Freud and other earlier workers in the field, and provides a viable alternative explanation for human behaviour and the psychological dimensions of religious phenomena.

In the area of anthropology, Frankl provides a richer, more complex model which some would see as providing a better explanation of the complexity of man and the phenomenon of religion. Even if one disagrees with Frankl’s anthropological model, he has paved the way for others to formulate their own anthropological view and also highlighted the importance of this area as the crucial basis for any psychological system. In a similar manner, Frankl has also provided a great service to the field by making the philosophical underpinnings to his own approach explicit – it can no longer be acceptable for others to be blind to their own assumptions in this area.

Frankl also provides an alternative perspective on the origin of religion, as arising from spontaneous self-transcendence in the process of “man’s search for meaning”, and he emphasises the positive, rather than the pathological, aspects of religious activity. As we have seen, the scope of his interest in the phenomenon of religion is, sadly, rather limited – a drawback he shares with others working from the same broadly humanistic perspective. However, his interest in religion is simply dominated by those areas which are a direct consequence of his own key contribution to the broad field of psychology – man’s search for meaning. Frankl did not set out to make a decisive contribution to the psychology of religion by creating a grand theoretical model. Instead, his contributions to the field arose almost as a spin-off from his main concern.

With regard to the practical impact or application of his psychological perspective, it is in the realm of therapy that Frankl's ideas appear to have had most effect, with his logotherapeutic technique finding a ready home especially amongst those therapist and pastors working with people who would identify themselves as religious.

Finally, by virtue of his anthropological and philosophical interests, Frankl has similar concerns to some theologians, and his work therefore serves as an important step in trying to bridge the formally hostile waters between psychology and religion in the common effort to understand more about what it means to be fully human. As we have seen, criticism from both sides serves as a testimony to his balanced approach and success in this field.

For one whose main concern was not directly with the psychology of religion as such, but simply with man's search for meaning, Frankl has indeed made a significant contribution to the field. Despite his limited scope of interest in the phenomenon of religion, he has succeeded in challenging assumptions, providing alternative perspectives, creating a novel therapeutic approach and helping to bridge the fields of psychology and religion.

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