



**THE ISSUE OF SUICIDE:
A RATIONAL CUM CRITICAL
INQUIRY**

By

Nwangwu, Darlington Nnaemeka

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**NWANGWU, DARLINGTON NNAEMEKA
(FREELANCE WRITER)**

Introduction

The meaning of one's existence on earth is one of the most striking issues in our time and it cannot be neglected in the society at large. This article is centered on one of the most discussed, profound and disturbing human problems which is suicide. It is a pure humanitarian function and a step towards man's existence and the useful utilization of this existence. As a matter of fact, some persons do not consider suffering as a stage or an unavoidable meaning of life. These persons then opt for suicide as a means of avoiding suffering and hardship in life; but the question is: does suicide transcend suffering and hardship? Viktor Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, through his experience in the concentration camp emphasized that even in the brutish and most inconsiderate circumstance, man's existence should not be centered only on when man is enjoying the good things of nature and his existence as a being, but also when the human person is faced with challenges and through this, the attitude he takes to solve these challenges shows the authentic and inauthentic nature of the human person. This work examined Viktor Frankl's existentialism in respect to suicide and his principle of logotherapy as a means of alleviating the problem of suicide, using the philosophical methods of critical/logical analysis and reflection. Before embarking into this important academic journey, it will be more useful if we paused and looked into a brief history of Victor Frankl whose work on suicide and human existence will form the basis of our discussion.

Brief Background of Viktor Frankl

Viktor Emil Frankl (26th March, 1905 – 2nd September, 1997) was born in Vienna, Austria. He received his MD and PhD degrees from the University of Vienna where he studied psychiatry and neurology, focusing on the areas of suicide and depression. As a medical student in the late 20s, he successfully counseled high school students to virtually eliminate suicide. Because of these accomplishments, he was asked to head the suicide prevention department of the General Hospital in Vienna. After treating thousands of people over the four years he was there, Frankl took a position as the head of the neurological department at the Rothschild Hospital, one of the few facilities that allowed Jews to practice medicine at that time.

In December 1941, he married Tilly Grosser. In 1942, Viktor Frankl together with his wife, parents and brother were arrested and sent to the Nazi Theresienstadt concentration camp.

In this concentration camp, there was a written note on the door post “Arbeit Macht Frei” which simply means “Work Makes you free.” Tens of thousands of people died in this concentration camp and they died of violence, malnutrition and disease. Within six months Frankl’s father died in the Nazi Thereisienstadt concentration camp. Frankl lost his dad Gabriel to pulmonary edema and pneumonia. Over the course of three years, Frankl was moved between four concentration camps, including Auschwitz where his brother died and his mother was killed. Frankl’s wife died at Bergen-Belsen. When Frankl’s was liberated in 1945, he learned of the death of all his immediate family members, with the exception of his sister who had emigrated to Australia. In the camps, Frankl and fellow prisoners made an effort to address the despondency they observed in other inmates. In an effort to prevent suicide attempts, Frankl and others tried to help other inmates facing severe depression by encouraging them to reflect on positive memories, scenes and thoughts.

Frankl's Existentialism and the Problem of Suicide

The absurdity of existence raises the question of suicide and the meaning of life thus becomes the only truly serious philosophical problem. This explains why Albert Camus in his work, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* noted that "judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest— whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards" (1). Suicide according to *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* is defined narrowly as that which is "motivated by the thought that these cases are frequently noble and heroic...." Suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide. An act like this is usually prepared within the silence of the heart. There are many causes for a suicide, and generally the most obvious ones were not the most powerful. Rarely is suicide committed (yet the hypothesis is not excluded) through reflection. What sets off the crisis is almost always unverifiable. Newspapers often speak of "personal sorrows" or of "incurable illness." These explanations are plausible, but then, does suicide actually transcend suffering? The answer to this question will form the basis of this research work. There is more to life and that is why Viktor Frankl discussed this issue extensively after his life experience. Frankl is of the opinion that though there can be so many justifications for committing suicide, one should bear in mind the meaningfulness of life even in the most absurd and painful situation.

His bestselling book, *Man's Search For Meaning* talked about the chronicles of his experiences at a concentration camp which led him to discover the importance of finding meaning in all forms of existence, even in the most brutal ones and thus a reason to continue living. He therefore introduces the principle of logotherapy as the best way of dealing with the problem of suicide. In his experience at the concentration camp, he came to the conclusion of the truth that love is the ultimate and the highest good to which man can aspire. The salvation of man is through love and in love. However, in the course of this research, we will be looking at what makes life meaningful and the way we can put to work the logotherapy principle to prevent one from suicidal attempt. It is important to note that though this work is intended to examine the problem of suicide in relation to Frankl's existentialism, there shall also be a strong link with the issue of euthanasia. Could euthanasia form a justifiable grounds for suicide? Obviously, Frankl may not have taken proper note of that. Therefore, the answer to the above question will also constitute as one of the objectives of this work.

Frankl's existentialism emphasizes so much the importance of man's life and the meaningfulness of life. He therefore discussed the principle of logotherapy in his work, *Man's Search for Meaning* as a means of providing plausible solutions to the problem of suicide and giving meaning to man's life here on earth. We shall therefore examine this principle properly.

Logotherapy

Etymologically, logotherapy is gotten from the Greek word "logos" which denotes "meaning" (Frank, 153). "Logotherapy or as it has been called by some authors, (the third Viennese School of Psychotherapy), focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man's search for such a meaning" (Frankl,153-154). According to logotherapy, the striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. According to Marshal Lewis, Frankl identifies logotherapy as "existential" and "phenomenological" (25). The focus of existentialism is on understanding the way in which an individual experiences the world. Phenomenology holds that existence can be studied as one phenomenon among others. These terms have largely converged within fields of psychiatry and natural- scientific approaches.

Logotherapy has developed a special technique to handle cases such as agoraphobia (neurotic fear) which cannot be cured by philosophical understanding. According to Frankl, "to understand what is going on whenever this technique is used, we take as a starting point a condition that is frequently met in neurotic individuals, namely, anticipatory anxiety. It is

characteristics of this fear that it produces precisely that of which the patient is afraid" (193). An individual for example, who is afraid of blushing when he enters a large room and faces many people, will actually blush. Fear brings to pass what one is afraid of, a forced intention, excessive attention or "hyper-reflection" as it is called in logotherapy, may also be pathogenic (that is, lead to sickness). Logotherapy bases its technique on what is called "paradoxical intention." In this approach, the phobic patient is invited to intend, even if only for a moment precisely that which he fears. This basic capacity to detach one from oneself is actualized whenever the logotherapeutic technique called "paradoxical intention" is applied. According to Gordon Allport, "the neurotic who learns to laugh at himself may be on the way to self-management, perhaps to cure" (92). Paradoxical intention is the empirical validation and clinical application of Allport's statement. Paradoxical intention lends itself as a useful tool in treating obsessive, compulsive and phobic conditions, especially in cases with underlying anticipatory anxiety. A most remarkable fact is that paradoxical intention is effective irrespective of the etiological basis in the case concerned. According to Frankl, "what are so often regarded as the causes of neurosis, that is, complexes, conflicts, and traumata are sometimes the symptoms of the neuroses rather than their causes. A reef that appears at low tide is certainly not the cause of low tide; it is rather the low tide that causes the reef to appear" (202). As for the actual causation of neuroses, apart from constitutional elements, whether somatic or psychic in nature, such feedback mechanism as anticipatory anxiety seems to be a major pathogenic factor. A given symptom is responded to by a phobia, the phobia triggers the symptom and the symptom, in turn, reinforces the phobia. Once a patient stops fighting his obsessions and instead tries to ridicule them by dealing with them in an ironical way, by applying paradoxical intention, the vicious circle is cut and the symptom diminishes and finally atrophies. As we see, anticipatory anxiety must be counteracted by paradoxical intention, hyper-intention as well as hyper-reflection must be counteracted by de-reflection. De-reflection, however, ultimately is not possible except by the patient's reorientation toward his specific vocation and mission to life.

Nevertheless, there is a difference between psychoanalysis and logotherapy. In the former, the patient must lie down on a couch and tell you things which sometimes are very disagreeable to tell, but, in the latter, the patient may remain sitting erect but he must hear things which sometimes are very disagreeable to hear. Logotherapy focuses rather on the future, that is to say, on the assignment and meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in his future. In going deep

into logotherapy as a theory which Frankl used for his patients, we will be entertaining and explaining some of the concepts used by Frankl in a very brief but exhaustive manner.

i. **The Will to Meaning:** The will to meaning is simply talking about the meaning of man on earth and this meaning is called meaning only when it has been actualized by that man alone because he alone can achieve that. According to Viktor Frankl, “there are some authors who contend that meaning and values are “nothing but defense mechanism, reaction formations and sublimation”. But as for myself, I would not be willing to live merely for the sake of my defence mechanism,” nor would I be ready to die merely for the sake of my “reaction formation” (Frankl, 154-155). Man, however is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values. We have to beware of the tendency to deal with values in terms of the mere self-expression of man himself. Meaning itself is not only an emergence from existence itself but rather something confronting existence. In a simpler form, meaning should be considered in human existence as a challenge which persons face in their existence.

ii. **Existential Frustration:** According to Frankl, man’s will to meaning can also be frustrated in which case logotherapy speaks of “existential frustration”. We can use the term “existential” in three ways which refer to existence itself (human existence), the meaning of existence and the striving to find a concrete meaning in personal existence, that is, the will to meaning. Existential frustration can also result in neurosis and neurosis is a mental disorder that is less severe than psychosis, marked by anxiety or fear. This also explains why Paul Tillich sees neurosis as the way of avoiding nonbeing by being” (*The Courage to Be*, 66). For this type of neurosis, logotherapy has coined the term “noögenic neurosis.” Also in logotherapy, noögenic neurosis concerns itself with human dimension rather than religious connotation.

iii. **Noögenic Neurosis:** According to Frankl, “noögenic neurosis do not emerge from conflicts between drives and instincts but rather from conflicts between various values; in other words, from moral conflict or, to speak in a more general way from spiritual problem” (160). Among such problems, existential frustration often plays a large role. For noögenic cases, the adequate therapy is not psychotherapy in general but rather logotherapy; a therapy that dares to enter the spiritual dimension of human existence. In fact, “logos” in Greek means not only “meaning” but also “spirit” (Frankl, 160). Spiritual issues such as man’s aspiration for a meaningful existence, as well as the frustration of this aspiration are dealt with by logotherapy in spiritual terms. Not every conflict is necessarily neurotic; some amount of conflict is normal and healthy. Existential

frustration is in itself neither pathological nor pathogenic, a man's concern, even his despair over the meaninglessness of life is a spiritual distress but by no means a mental disease.

iv. **The Meaning to Life:** We should stop asking about the meaning of life and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life daily and hourly. The meaning of life differs from man to man and from moment to moment. It is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way. According to Frankl, "one should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demand fulfillment" (172). Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.

v. **The Meaning of Love:** For Frankl, "love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his potentiality" (176). No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another being unless he loves him. By the spiritual act of love, he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, that which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. According to Frankl, in logotherapy, "love is not interpreted as a mere epiphenomenon of sexual drives and instincts in the sense of a so-called sublimation. Thus love is not understood as a mere side effect of sex but sex as a way of expressing the experience of that ultimate togetherness that is called love" (177). Another way to finding meaning to life is by suffering.

vi. **The Meaning of Suffering:** Whenever one is confronted with an inescapable, unavoidable situation, whenever one has to face a fate that cannot be changed, for instance, an incurable disease, such as an inoperable cancer, just then is one given a last chance to actualize the highest value, to fulfill the deepest meaning, the meaning of suffering. Above all these, what matters most is the attitude we take towards suffering. According to Dostoyevsky as cited by Frankl, once said, *there is only one thing that I dread: not to be worth of my sufferings*. "These words frequently came to my mind after I became acquainted with martyrs whose behaviours in camp, whose sufferings and deaths bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost" (Frankl, 105). It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings; the way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. One of the basic tenets of logotherapy is that man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain, but rather to see a meaning in his life and

that is why man is even ready to suffer on the condition, to be sure that his suffering has a meaning. Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.

vii. **Tragic Optimism:** Tragic optimism simply means one is and remains optimistic in spite of the “tragic triad” and as it is called in logotherapy, a triad consists of those aspects of human existence which may be circumscribed by: pain, guilt, and death. This sub-topic raises the question, how is it possible to say YES to life in spite of all that has happened to man? How to pose the question differently, can life retain its potential meaning in spite of its tragic aspects? Life is potentially meaningful under any condition, even those which are most miserable. What matters is to make the best of any given situation. According to Frankl, “the best” however, is that which in Latin is called optimum- hence the reason for a tragic optimism, that is, an optimism in the face of tragedy and in view of human potential which at its best always allows for: turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment, deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better and deriving from life’s transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action. It must be kept in mind however, that optimism is not anything to be commanded or ordered. One cannot even force oneself to be optimistic indiscriminately, against all odds, against all hope and what is true for hope is also true for the other two components of the triad in as much as faith and love cannot be commanded or ordered either.

Nevertheless, once an individual’s search for meaning is successful, it not only renders him happy but also gives him the capability to cope with suffering. In search for meaning, questions like what happens if one’s groping for a meaning has been in vain? All you just have to do is not give up but continue to hope and have faith and things will go back to their normal shape and this is what Karl Jasper meant when he said man should take a leap of faith into what he calls “transcendence” and in making this leap of faith, individuals confront their own limitless freedom which Jasper calls “Existenz” and finally experience authentic existence. As to the causation of the feeling of meaninglessness, one may ask, albeit in an oversimplifying vein, that people have enough to live but nothing to live for; they have the means but no meaning. Meaninglessness in life can also result from a frustration of our existential needs. Meaninglessness in life can also be seen in the three facets of syndromes like depression, aggression and addiction.

To answer the question, what is meaning? I would like to say that we will be looking at the meaning of human life. In the view of Frankl, "life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answers to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual" (122). The logotherapist is concerned with the potential meaning inherent and dormant in all the single situations one has to face throughout his or her life. The fact remains that meaning and its perception as seen from the logotherapeutic angle is completely down to earth rather than afloat in the air or resident in an ivory tower. How does a human being go about finding meaning? As Buhler Charlotte has stated, "all we can do is study the lives of people who seem to have found their answers to the questions of what ultimately human life is about as against those who have not" (378). Logotherapy conceives of conscience as a prompter which, if need be, indicates the direction in which we have to move in a given life situation. Just as logotherapy teaches, there are three main avenues on which one arrives at the meaning of life and they are simply work, love and suffering.

Suffering is indispensable as well as unavoidable to the discovery of meaning in life. If it is avoidable, the meaningful thing to do is to remove its cause for unnecessary suffering is masochistic rather than heroic. If on the other hand, one cannot change a situation that causes his suffering, he can still choose his attitude. For Friedrich Nietzsche in his work *Twilight of the Idols*, he stated that "if you have your *why* for life, you can get by with almost anyhow. Humanity does not strive for happiness; only the Englishman does" (6). For this reason, if you have a reason to still continue living then I see reason why man should challenge suffering and be victorious. For the second triad which is guilt, one can become responsible by overcoming guilt by rising above it, by growing beyond oneself, by changing for the better. If one should continue harboring guilt within himself, he will never rise above it but held down by this guilt. This can be likened to what we call paradoxical anxiety and you can only overcome this when you fight this obsession.

The third aspect of the tragic triad concerns death but it concerns life as well. For at anytime, each of the moments of which life consists is dying and that moment will never recur and yet is not this transitoriness that challenges us to make the best possible use of each moment of our lives. It certainly is, and hence Frankl's imperative that we should live as if you were living for the second time and had acted wrongly the first time as you are about to act now. This is simply stating that we should live our best life and make meaningful use of each and every

passing day of our lives. According to Heidegger as cited by Omoregbe, “existentiality is man’s possibility to make himself what he wants to be, the possibility to change his world” (72). In fact, the opportunities to act properly, the potentials to fulfill a meaning are affected by the irreversibility of our lives. In view of the possibility of finding meaning in suffering, life’s meaning is an unconditional one at least potentially. That unconditional meaning however is paralleled by the unconditional value of each and every person. It is that which warrants the indelible quality of the dignity of man. Just as life remains potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable, so too does the value of each and every person stay with him or her, and it does so because it is based on the values that he or she has realized in the past and is not contingent on the usefulness that he or she may not retain in the present. Karl Jasper emphasized the social dimension of man and stresses the uniqueness of one individual to another individual (*Philosophy in the Existentialist Tradition*, 19). For this reason, man is a unique nature that is clear and distinct from any other man.

Suicide and Euthanasia: A Double-edged Sword in Viktor Frankl's Existentialism

Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* can help revive a man who has lost interest in living. Frankl's existentialism and his reasons for introducing logotherapy is actually a good idea. Logotherapy as the third Viennese school of psychotherapy, focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as man’s search for such a meaning. Man’s will to meaning can also be frustrated and also existential frustration can also result in neurosis, that is, a mental disorder that is less severe than psychosis, marked by anxiety or fear. When searching for one’s meaning in life, man is faced with challenges in life and not all persons can persevere till the end of such challenges. Most persons give up easily and an example can be cited in Frankl’s experience in the concentration camp. For example, the prisoners in the camp could not withstand the punishments and sufferings in the camp and they ended up smoking their cigarettes and when things like these are done, it shows that they have given up on hope. The introduction of logotherapy by Frankl, helped lots of patients with the issues confronting them. Logotherapy has also helped reduce death rate in hospitals. The problem or the controversy in Frankl's thought lies on the issue of euthanasia.

According to an etymological definition, euthanasia is a medical concept that comes from two Greek words; "eu" which means good and "thanatos" which means death; hence the idea of

"good death". Euthanasia is simply "the practice or method of killing or permitting the death of hopelessly sick or injured individuals in a manner that it is relatively painless for reasons of mercy" (Elijah John, 113). The idea of introducing the ethical issue of euthanasia in this topic is to show if by any means, the practice of suicide can be justified as contrary to Frankl's thoughts. Euthanasia consists of three types; voluntary, involuntary and non-voluntary euthanasia respectively. We are however only concerned with the first type of euthanasia, but brief explanations of the other types shall be given. Voluntary euthanasia involves a deliberate taking of one's life in order to end suffering as well as save cost. As presented by Peter Singer in his famous book, *Practical Ethics*, this euthanasia is the one "carried out at the request of the person killed" (176). We should also recall that in one of Kant's practical/categorical imperatives, he had noted that one should "act so that you use humanity as much as in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as means" (*The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 429). This means that each person has intrinsic worth and dignity and that we should not use people or treat them like things. Thus, the formation of the four duties: perfect duty to the self, imperfect duty to the self, perfect duty to the other and imperfect duty to the other. It is believed that Kant opted for the respect of human dignity, integrity and the human self as a whole. Suffering and ceaseless pains are thus considered as threat and infringements upon human right and dignity. Therefore, the case established for voluntary euthanasia becomes valid, and if this is the case, it follows that suicide is justifiable on this grounds of respect for the human person. The respect that grants the human person free from uncommon and hopeless sufferings and pains.

The second form of euthanasia is non-voluntary euthanasia. While voluntary involves a willful giving of consent to be killed, involuntary involving non-consent giving, non-voluntary euthanasia arises "if a human being is not capable of understanding the choice between life and death..." (179). Those unable to give consent would include incurably ill or severely disabled infants, and people who through accident, illness, or old age have permanently lost the capacity to understand the issue involved, without having previously requested or rejected euthanasia in these circumstances. In cases like this, suicide is justifiable even if the person perhaps does not understand the implication of his or her decision. A good example is a patient, a male to be precise, who has lost his senses in a car accident and has much parts of his body damaged. His family's financial status is very low that going for artificial purchase of these damaged parts will

not be possible. Now, they are left with the options of either killing the boy painlessly or allowing the boy suffer for the rest of his life. Since it will be an imperfect duty to the boy as well as an infringement on his human dignity to incur ceaseless suffering, helping him to commit suicide would then be justifiable. This also applies to the first instance of euthanasia. However, as this research topic is concerned, we are more concerned and connected to the first type of euthanasia, that is, voluntary euthanasia, than the other two. Voluntary euthanasia is a pure form of suicide justified. Therefore, it is on these grounds that we can claim that Frankl's existentialism and his principle of logotherapy is highly limited because it does not give room for respect and the supposed perfect duty to the human person; but, we are still left with the question, does death transcend suffering and pain?

An attempt towards answering the above question will amount to pure metaphysical aspects. First, is there a life after death? If there is, how did one come to the knowledge of such life? Secondly, it has been considered that the world which we live in is full of imperfections and as Plato believed, there is a world of forms where perfections take place. Obviously we might not have a clear understanding of the world of forms which Plato had envisioned, but at least, we are aware of the uncertainties and imperfections of this world, therefore we can assume that wherever the soul transcends after this world is superior. Given this premise, we can then come to the conclusion that since a more superior place is ahead, it cannot be made up of the imperfections of this world and as such, sufferings and pains are absent. Therefore, when one dies, sufferings and all other imperfections of this world dies as well, in order for one to transcend to the proposed "perfect world". This implies that committing suicide would alleviate one from sufferings and pains here on earth, and if this is so, then, suicide as an act can be said to be justifiable.

Conclusion

The human person is considered to be the remedy to the imperfections of the physical world. This implies that even though we live in a society, in a world full of sufferings and pains, we should always find a way of dealing with it instead of running away from it. As human beings, we should consider ourselves as remedies, solutions to the imperfections, sufferings and pains of this world. When we are able to think towards that direction, enhance and equip our minds with all it takes to achieve it, then the meaningfulness of life can be achieved. Even

though that some scholars have argued logically on the justification of suicide, especially on the grounds of voluntary euthanasia, it does not render Frankl's attempt to help and save mankind irrelevant. If man ends his life, then every other thing becomes irrational because, of what use will essence be without existence? The end of existence signifies the end of rationality and influence, but trying to give existence greater essence signifies and represents what Frankl is fighting for. At least the life and true story of Frankl's experiences at the concentration camp are enough to convince anybody who cares to believe, of the importance of life and giving meaning to life. Therefore, I am of the opinion that if man understands the true meaning of life as Frankl has believed, man will be able to undergo suffering and pains as part of existence and conquer them by giving useful meaning to his own existence; to his own life.