

The 24<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Viktor Frankl Institute of Logotherapy  
October 19-21, 2023

**Viktor Frankl's Hermeneutic Space and Belief Systems**

Keisuke Noda, Ph.D.

Diplomate in Logophilosophy

Professor of Philosophy

Unification Theological Seminary, NY, USA

### Abstract

Viktor Frankl identified self-transcendence as the essence of being human and the key to making life meaningful. Although individuals pursue self-transcendence and meaning through the pursuit of religion, exclusive adherence to a belief system raises questions about the pursuit of meaning. The essay articulates Frankl's phenomenological position, an open and inclusive hermeneutic space where multiple meanings are fully disclosed by exploring his insights into the primacy of meaning, Frankl's respect for belief-independent values and individual autonomy, and his multidimensional approach.

### **Viktor Frankl's Hermeneutic Space and Belief Systems**

Frankl identifies self-transcendence as the essence of being human and the key to making life meaningful. Devotees of a belief system, be it religious or ideological, seek self-transcendence to realize the values of the belief system. At the same time, Frankl also rejects dogmatic ideologies in pursuit of a pluralist hermeneutic space.

This essay articulates the characteristics of Frankl's hermeneutic space by exploring his concept of self-transcendence and approaches to belief systems. First, the essay articulates Frankl's philosophical position that the question of meaning takes precedence. The priority of meaning is intrinsic to human existence, precedes and underlies all human endeavors and activities including scientific studies, religious beliefs, use of language, and all others. Further, Frankl's phenomenological approach, that tries to be faithful to the phenomena by avoiding philosophical presuppositions, led him to reject dogmatic ideologies such as reductionism, denominationalism, and other attempts to universalize a perspective. For Frankl, human understanding is necessarily perspectival and access to truth is partial. Frankl analogized religion to language to posit that no religion can claim its exclusive superiority over others.

Second, Frankl identified the individual as the primary locus where the meaning of life is disclosed. Each moment, each situation, each experience carries a specific meaning in an individual's unique life story and contexts. These moments pursue what Frankl conceptualized as "ultimate meaning." Frankl defined religion as the belief in "ultimate meaning" and God as its referent. While Frankl recognizes religion's positive role, he also leaves it up to the individual to choose such a narrative.

Third, Frankl presented a multidimensional approach where multiple disciplinary theories and perspectives are co-present. His multidimensional space can accommodate plural values, multiple meanings in diverse narratives. In this space, Frankl defers to the judgment and decision-making of the individual; at the same time, he rejects both relativism and absolutistic dogmatism or ideology. His hermeneutic space is a non-relativistic pluralism guided by the pursuit for authenticity.

Frankl's philosophy is, thus, deeply grounded in his recognition of the values and autonomy of individual. His hermeneutic space is an inclusive, open space for diverse views and approaches, which guides each individual to make meaningful judgements toward authenticity in his/her journey of life.

### **Frankl's Philosophical Perspectives**

Frankl's hermeneutic space contains three philosophical approaches: 1) the priority of meaning; 2) a phenomenological hermeneutic space that accommodates multiple views and approaches; 3) a definition of religion as it relates to "ultimate meaning."

#### ***Priority of the Question of the Meaning of Being: Will-to-Meaning***

Frankl recognizes that the meaning of life as intrinsic to human existence. Just as Heidegger recognized that a human being exists/lives with an implicit pre-understanding of the meaning of being (Heidegger, 2010), Frankl views the meaning of life as "man's pre-reflective self-understanding" (1967, Footnote 2, p. 18) and human beings are oriented towards meaning prior to engaging in activities. In other words, the question of meaning underlies all human activity and experience.

Frankl conceptualizes this orientation towards meaning as the will-to-meaning and characterizes the priority of meaning as “transcendental” in reference to Kant: “In the strict sense of Immanuel Kant’s transcendentalism, man’s trust in meaning would deserve to be called transcendental” (2014, p. 116). For Kant, “transcendental” means the conditions to make experiences possible (Kant, 2000). Similarly, for Frankl, meaning (the quest for and its fulfillment) is the condition that makes the “human” experience possible. He points out that “[e]ven a person who commits suicide must be convinced that suicide makes sense.” (2014, p. 116). Thus, meaning underlies and precedes the question of to-be or not-to-be. The priority of meaning works like a compass to orient oneself towards meaning.

### ***Phenomenological Hermeneutic Space for Multiple Perspectives and Positions***

Phenomenology began as Husserl’s meta-philosophical approach to describe phenomena by avoiding various philosophical presuppositions (Sofer, 1991). Husserl formulated phenomenology in contrast to dogmatic reductionism, as represented by the historicism and psychologism of his day (Husserl, 1965). Although various philosophers took different approaches to phenomenology since Husserl, such as Heidegger in his hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, 2010), the underlying spirit of phenomenology was a faithfulness to phenomena by avoiding dogmatic philosophical assumptions (Spiegelberg, 1965). Frankl’s philosophy seeks to avoid the pitfalls of dogmatic philosophical assumptions, which can be seen in his criticism of reductionism and his rejection of totalizing a perspective and turning it into an ideology (Frankl, 2014).

### ***Religion and Ultimate Meaning***

Frankl defines “religion as an expression of “man’s search for ultimate meaning.”” (2019, p. xiv) or “the fulfillment of what we now may call the “will to ultimate meaning.” (2000, p. 169). By alluding to the affinity of his definition with that of Albert Einstein’s, Frankl (2000) explains his broad concept of religion:

Religion, we may say, revealed itself as the fulfillment of what we now may call the “will to ultimate meaning.” Incidentally, my definition of religion is paralleled by another one which was presented by Albert Einstein (1950) and reads as follows: “To be religious is to have found an answer to the question, What is the meaning of life?” (p. 169)

Frankl continues by citing Ludwig Wittgenstein’s definition of believing in God as recognizing the meaning of life: “And there is still another definition which was offered by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1960) and reads as follows: “To believe in God is to see that life has a meaning.”” (2000, p. 169). In the tenth thesis of the latest version of *About Ten Theses of the Person*, Frankl also reiterates his definition of faith as a belief in the meaning in life:

Thus, by understanding the phenomenon of faith not as a belief in God, but as the more comprehensive belief in meaning, it is quite legitimate that logotherapy deals with and occupies itself with the phenomenon of faith. In this, logotherapy holds with Albert Einstein, according to whom the question of the meaning of life means to be religious. (Viktor Frankl Institut, <https://www.viktorfrankl.org/texts.html>)

Frankl presents the “meaning of life” as a core central thesis of logotherapy, along with “freedom of will,” and “will to meaning.” In Frankl’s philosophy, the thesis that life has meaning is prior to any inquiry or endeavor. It is the hub that coordinates all human endeavors including religious beliefs, scientific discoveries, and personal, social activities. Thus, for Frankl, the thesis that life

has meaning precedes religious belief or inquiry. Rather than holding that religious belief gives meaning to life, the thesis of the meaning of life would underlie religious belief or inquiry.

His broad concept of religion can accommodate various denominational approaches to God, as well as other religions and worldviews. He points out that his concept of religion is “encompassing even agnosticism and atheism” (2000, p. 169). For Frankl, it is up to each individual which referent he/she takes. By God, Frankl means what individual takes as the referent for the ultimate meaning and he notes such concept encompasses traditional division of theism and atheism:

God is the partner of our most intimate soliloquies. That is to say, whenever you are talking to yourself in utmost sincerity and ultimate solitude—he to whom you are addressing yourself may justifiably be called God. As you notice, such a definition circumvents the bifurcation between atheistic and theistic Weltanschauung. (2000, p. 167)

The priority of the question of meaning thus sets the hermeneutic space in Frankl, and he defines religion and God, or the ultimate being, as the human being's quest for the ultimate meaning (Frankl, 2000).

In addition, while each religious belief system describes God in in some manner, Frankl views God as beyond any conceptual description. For Frankl, God, or the ultimate being, is beyond comprehension:

Just consider a painting that shows, above a landscape, the sky: Any painter who is a representative of realism more often than not induces the onlooker to “see” the sky by putting a couple of clouds thereon. But are not the clouds precisely something that is not

identical with the sky? Isn't it true that they rather hide it, preventing us from seeing it? Still, the clouds serve as the best and simplest symbol for the sky, don't they? (2000, p. 153)

Frankl notes that, just as a painter signifies the sky by painting a cloud, various conceptual or linguistic representations indirectly point to a divine realm beyond theological speculation.

While Frankl recognizes the values of religious belief, he rejects denominationalism and the exclusive superiority claims of a belief system. He points out that, just as no language is superior, no religion is superior to another religion: "But comparing religion with language one should also keep in mind that nobody is justified in claiming that the particular language spoken by himself is superior to another one" (2000, p. 165).

Frankl further reiterates the partial limit of any religious faith in reaching the truth: "After all, it is possible in any language to arrive at truth—at the one truth—and it is also possible in any language to err and to lie." With an understanding of religious pluralism, Frankl rejects a claim of exclusive superiority by a group over others.

However, we are not only confronted with linguistic pluralism but also with religious pluralism, the latter being represented by the fact that, by and large, religion is split up in various denominations. And, again, one denomination cannot claim superiority over against another. (2000, p. 165)

### **Individual Hermeneutic Space**

The meaning of life for Frankl is not a general concept but specific phenomena unique to the context of an individual's life. The primary locus of this phenomena, or meaning, is the life of the individual and the individual's attitude towards life is the key to manifest that meaning.

While Frankl respects the individual's choice of whether to adopt a belief system, he rejects the dogmatic totalization of perspective that transforms that perspective into an ideology.

### ***Meaning, Faith, and the Individual***

For Frankl, meaning is uniquely configured and disclosed at each point of an individual's life: "One could say that meaning differs first from man to man and second from day to day, indeed, from hour to hour" (Frankl, 2004, p. 36). In his/her hermeneutic space, each individual forms his/her worldview, makes value judgements, and interprets events and his/her life itself.

In addition to meanings at various moments of life, one is led to the inquiry to the ultimate meaning until the end of life. Frankl (2014) notes that ultimate meaning is a matter of faith: "as I prefer to call it, the supra-meaning is no longer a matter of thinking but rather a matter of believing. We do not catch hold of it on intellectual grounds but on existential grounds, out of our whole being, i.e., through faith" (p. 111). Frankl also adds, "Man cannot break through the dimensional difference between the human world and the divine world but he can reach out for the ultimate meaning through faith which is mediated by trust in the ultimate being." Frankl understands faith to ultimate meaning to be much broader than the concept of faith as defined by various religious belief systems.

### ***Individual Value***

From a value perspective, Frankl respects the values of both the individual, and the moral autonomy of the individual. Frankl calls the "freedom of will" as one of the principles of logotherapy (2000). Frankl also recognizes the value of an individual as being independent from his/her religious beliefs. For example, he notes that freedom is extended to the freedom to "say

no to God”: “just as the dignity of man is based on his freedom—to the extent that he may even say no to God” (2000, p. 86).

Furthermore, Frankl points out that there is no correlation between the meaning of life and religious beliefs, and also that there is no significant difference between those who believe in a (monotheistic) God across different denominations.

In Meier's study, however, subjects were taken from five different religious denominations, and it is his contention that “the inability to find evidence to show that subjects differ on the PIL scores on the basis of religious differences gives support to Frankl's idea that God, as experienced by different religious affiliations, can give equal meaning to subjects.” (Frankl, 2000, p. 131)

Thus, while Frankl is open to the individual choice of a belief system, Frankl's hermeneutic space is an open space for multiple belief systems firmly grounded in the belief-independent value and autonomy of the individual.

### ***Love and Conscience***

In Frankl's hermeneutic space where meaning is the primary locus for phenomena, that meaning is born out of an individual circumstance. Furthermore, love and the conscience are those capacities that enable the individual to frame meaning through unique individuals or situations:

Love, I would say, is that capacity which enables him to grasp the other human being in his very uniqueness. Conscience is that capacity which empowers him to seize the meaning of a situation in its very uniqueness, and in the final analysis meaning is

something unique. So is each and every person. Ultimately every person is irreplaceable, and if for no other person he is so for him by whom he is loved. (2014, p. 6)

By contrast, some devotees of some belief systems take an unfavorable stance towards non-believers (Kanol, 2021). Put differently, if the belief system is the primary source of values or meaning, then the rejection of a belief system, or those in positions of authority in those belief systems, can generate a hostile attitude. For example, fundamentalists hold “a strong aversion to absorbing evidence that goes against one’s firmly held beliefs” and “a conviction that others ought to do and believe the same, along with a will to enforce others’ behaviour politically so as to make it conform with one’s own system of beliefs” (Auestad, 2015, xiv). When faith or belief in the belief system takes precedence, then the belief system itself defines values such as love, good and evil, and justice. In this hermeneutic space, meaning is assigned according to the values of a belief system, accordingly one’s attitude towards that belief system affects the interpretation of meaning and value.

### ***Faith and Individual Choice***

Frankl clearly articulates the boundary between logotherapy and religion and leaves the choice open to each individual:

Logotherapy does not cross the boundary between psychotherapy and religion. But it leaves the door to religion open and it leaves it to the patient whether or not to pass the door. It is the patient who has to decide whether he interprets responsibility in terms of being responsible to humanity, society, conscience, or God. It is up to him to decide to what, to whom, and for what he is responsible. (2014, pp. 109-110)

Furthermore, Frankl recognizes the positive aspects of religious faith for those who choose it. "An analogous by-product is religion's inestimable contribution to mental health. After all, religion provides man with a spiritual anchor, with a feeling of security such as he can find nowhere else" (2014, p, 110). Frankl respects the individual decision to adhere to a faith and acknowledges the positive effects of a religious belief:

However, when a patient stands on the firm ground of religious belief, there can be no objection to making use of the therapeutic effect of his religious convictions and thereby drawing upon his spiritual resources. (2014, p. 93)

### **Multidimensional Hermeneutics**

Frankl's hermeneutic space allows for multiple perspectives in which each belief system can disclose truth in its own unique way. For example, in reference to Joan of Arc, he recognizes that she is a saint from Catholic perspective, heroin from French perspective, and schizophrenic from psychiatric perspective.

There is no doubt that from the psychiatric point of view, the saint would have had to be diagnosed as a case of schizophrenia; and as long as we confine ourselves to the psychiatric frame of reference, Joan of Arc is "nothing but" a schizophrenic....The fact of her being a schizophrenic in the dimension of psychiatry does not in the least detract from her significance in other dimensions. And vice versa. Even if we took it for granted that she was a saint, this would not change the fact that she was also a schizophrenic. (2014, pp. 14-15)

From a hermeneutic perspective, Frankl's multi-dimensional approach presents an open hermeneutic space where multiple perspectives and values co-exist.

Within psychotherapy, Frankl's hermeneutic space accommodates multiple theories. Each theory has different theoretical assumptions, frameworks, and methods. Rather than universalizing any perspective and turning it to a dogmatic ideology, Frankl's multidimensional approach accommodates diverse "approaches as distinct as Watsonian behaviorism, Pavlovian reflexology, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Adlerian psychology. They are not nullified by logotherapy but rather overarched by it" (2014, p.12).

Frankl's hermeneutic space is guided by the question of meaning and its phenomenological orientation. A narrative of each theory, be it religious or scientific, provides a specific framework of interpretation. Individuals can ask what each theory offers for his or her life and examine its philosophical assumptions and framework of interpretation. Dogmatic belief systems, on the other hand, impose their belief systems as definitive or absolute.

### ***Perspectival Nature of Human Understanding: Rejection of Totalization of Perspective***

Frankl's phenomenological approach led him to disclose and reject various dogmatic philosophical assumptions such as reductionism. Frankl is sensitive to the danger of the totalization of perspective. Each discipline or theory takes a certain perspective, and when one totalizes its perspective it turns into an ideology.

At the moment at which totality is claimed, biology becomes biologism, psychology becomes psychologism, and sociology becomes sociologism. In other words, at that moment science is turned into ideology. (2014, p. 8)

Within psychotherapy, Frankl recognizes the limit of each approach including his own: "Logotherapy is no panacea, nor, for that matter, is any other psychotherapy a panacea" (2014, p. 83). He also criticizes reductionism (2014, p. 15) which is an attempt to universalize and totalize

its perspective, thereby unjustifiably reducing other distinct kinds of phenomena into a single kind of phenomena.

Frankl's critique is derived from his understanding of the diverse manifestation of truth and our limited access to it:

Anyway, one could say that you then feel close to truth, and we are certainly justified in assuming that truth is an aspect of Deity also. Just look above my head: on the wall behind my seat you will see the shield of Harvard University, and inscribed thereon you will read *veritas*, which means truth; but as you also notice, this word is divided into three syllables which are distributed over three books, and we may well interpret this by saying that the total truth is not a universal truth, for it is not accessible to everyone. (2014, p. 69)

Frankl continues, "Man has rather to be satisfied with getting hold of one single aspect of the whole truth. So much more is this true of God, of whom truth is in turn no more than merely an aspect" (2014, p. 69). The realization that human understanding and access to truth is limited calls for humility; as Frankl explains, "Wisdom is knowledge plus: knowledge—and the knowledge of its own limits" (2000, p. 142).

### ***The Manifestation of the Will-to-Power***

Frankl identified the guiding principle of Adler's individual psychology as the "will-to-power," the primary drive of human beings. As Frankl (2014) notes, the concept of will-to-power was developed by Nietzsche. Nietzsche held that the will-to-power was the fundamental drive of human beings, the consequence of which is nihilism (Nietzsche, 1967). Frankl, however,

recognized that power is the means to realize meaning. Thus, the quest for power or superiority mistakes power as the end instead of the means.

Although Frankl did not extend his analysis of Adler and the will-to-power to a discussion of denominationalism, this analysis can inform a critique of denominationalism. Denominationalism claims an exclusive superiority, and attempts to establish power by monopolizing meaning and authority. Frankl recognized that:

The concept of religion in its widest possible sense, as it is here espoused, certainly goes far beyond the narrow concepts of God promulgated by many representatives of denominational and institutional religion. They often depict, not to say denigrate, God as a being who is primarily concerned with being believed in by the greatest possible number of believers, and along the lines of a specific creed, at that. "Just believe," we are told, "and everything will be okay." (Frankl, 2000, p. 17)

Despite the lofty values that are being thought, the primary interest of denominationalism is to amass believers and control the group. Frankl points out that "they build up an image of God as someone who is primarily interested in being believed in and who rigorously insists that those who believe in him be affiliated with a particular church" (p. 18). Frankl notes "Small wonder that such representatives of religion behave as though they saw the main task of their own denomination as that of overriding other denominations." (p. 18).

Thus, where believers may believe that they are acting out of devotion and faith, they may not be conscious of the will-to-power underlying a denominationalist belief system. Specifically, when a belief system moves from being the focus, or the intentional object, of interpretation to the background of thought, the will to power that underlies denominationalist

thinking becomes concealed. In this hermeneutic space, believers pay attention to religious values in the foreground, while power interests lay in their unconscious background. When this happens, devotees act out the group's quest for power without realizing it, or even while believing that they are acting according to the religious values that remain in the foreground. In this way, human beings become the means in this perspective built on power.

### ***Non-relativist Pluralism: Underlying Quest for Authenticity***

Although Frankl leaves the choice of religion or a belief system to the individual, he does not endorse undisciplined relativism, which views meaning as the sole product of one's construction. While Frankl recognizes the limits of human understanding and social, cultural, personal biases, he posits that the underlying spirit of understanding is the pursuit for authenticity. There are, at least, three elements that indicate his non-relativist position.

First, his phenomenological orientation. Phenomenology is an approach that attempts to be faithful to phenomena by avoiding all forms of dogmatic philosophical presuppositions. Husserl developed phenomenology against the relativism of his day (Husserl, 1965) and described its motto as "to the things themselves" (Husserl, 2001, p. 168). Phenomenologists after Husserl developed various approaches within phenomenology. This basic stance to be faithful to phenomena by avoiding dogmatic assumptions is consistent to diverse phenomenologies including Frankl's.

Second, Frankl characterizes meaning as objective or trans-subjective. By this, he means that meaning is relatively independent of one's intention or imagination, as something that is disclosed to each individual rather being constructed out of one's wishes:

This trans-subjectiveness has really been presupposed all along whenever we spoke of self-transcendence. Human beings are transcending themselves toward meanings which are something other than themselves, which are more than mere expressions of their selves, more than mere projections of these selves. Meanings are discovered but not invented. (Frankl, 2014, p. 41)

Third, Frankl approaches the phenomenon of meaning by exploring the tension between meaning and overall meaning, or ultimate meaning. Frankl notes:

But once that we start dealing with an overall meaning we soon meet a law that I would like to formulate as follows: The more comprehensive the meaning, the less comprehensible it is. And if it comes to ultimate meaning, also, it necessarily is beyond comprehension. (Frankl, 2000, p. 149)

Put differently, meaning in the moment and ultimate meaning comprise a part-whole circular hermeneutic circle. Although ultimate meaning is incomprehensible, it guides each individual to the pursuit of authentic meaning until the end of life. Thus, ultimate meaning is like Kantian "regulative idea" which we pursue without reaching (Kant, 2000). Thus, Frankl's openness to individual choice reflects a pluralism without relativism.

## **Conclusion**

Three key perspectives characterize Frankl's hermeneutic space: 1) a phenomenological approach to disclose the priority of the question of meaning in human existence; 2) a respect for the belief-independent values and autonomy of the individual as the locus of the phenomena of the meaning of life; 3) a multidimensionality where multiple frameworks of interpretation and perspectives including various religious belief systems and scientific approaches co-exist.

Frankl identifies self-transcendence as the essence of being human and the key to making life meaningful. Some take belief systems, be it religious or ideological, as the source of value and meaning in seeking self-transcendence. Some belief systems, however, hold a claim of the exclusive superiority of its belief system over others. Devotees of such belief systems may find meaning by realizing the values of the belief system, and in this hermeneutic space, the belief system acts as the final destination and ultimate source of value and meaning. While Frankl recognizes the positive values of religious belief system, he rejects the totalization or universalization of a perspective, which is common to radical denominationalism and ideologies. Frankl took a phenomenological approach, which tries to avoid dogmatic philosophical assumptions and faithfully describe phenomena in question.

By articulating the priority of the question of meaning in life, Frankl opened an open hermeneutic space where multiple perspectives in all disciplines including various scientific theories, religious beliefs can co-exist. Frankl characterized it as multidimensional space where multiple criteria of values and meanings from various perspectives can co-exist.

Each individual must inquire how to respond to and answer the question of the meaning of life. Further, the value of individual autonomy must be recognized to make meaning possible. Meaning is thus prior to the engagement of belief systems as a framework of interpretation. By contrast, manipulative ideologies and some religious beliefs may be driven by the will-to-power, overshadowing the value of the individual and of individual autonomy. While Frankl is open to the individual's choice of belief system, his hermeneutic space allows a perspective that frees individual from the ideological traps of an exclusivist belief system.

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