

Victor Frankl

Post by “timrobbe” of November 22, 2020 at 5:15 AM

Dear friends,

In my readings I more than often read quotes from Victor Frankl. I am sure you heard of him. His view is that the meaning of life comes from 1) a significant other, 2) labour you love doing or 3) suffering. Happiness is a byproduct according to him. It is of course the Stoics that like to quote Frankl.

My view is that the greatest good is life and the means by fully living a good life is living a pleasurable life. Significant others, as in friends, are important, but means to this end. The same goes for doing labour you love. This gives pleasure and therefore you love doing it. With suffering there seems to be a problem. How are suffering and EP to be reconciled? I think that suffering itself is evil (every pain is an evil in itself), but if suffering leads to feelings of, say, fortitude and invincibility or (the opposite) humility etc. then suffering as a pain is endured to ultimately experience pleasure.

Any comments?

Kind regards

TR

Post by “Cassius” of November 22, 2020 at 7:15 AM

Beyond his name I don't know much of anything about Victor Frankl, so I can't address that part at the moment.

As to suffering, I am writing this early in the morning so my response is not very deep - but I agree with what you've written in the post and I think you're ultimately seconding what is contained in "On Ends" as to the wisdom of enduring some pains in order to experience more pleasure / less pain.

I think maybe the issue is in thinking that suffering itself has some value, rather than the value coming through your prudent response to things that cause pain.

Now the "faculty of pain" is valuable in that if you did not have the faculty you would not have the information that it provides, and be able to adjust your choices accordingly.

On Ends:

Quote

X. But I must explain to you how all this mistaken idea of reprobating pleasure and extolling pain arose. To do so, I will give you a complete account of the system, and expound the actual teachings of the great explorer of the truth, the master-builder of human happiness. No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure. To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it? But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no annoying consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no resultant pleasure?

On the other hand, we denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided.

But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains.

Post by "Elayne" of November 22, 2020 at 7:50 AM

[timrobbe](#) -- in all of these examples, Frankl is ignoring that pleasure is exactly what creates the sense of meaningfulness! He is making the same mistake as the Cyrenaics-- only counting immediate present moment sensory pleasure as pleasure. Epicurus divided all feelings into pleasure or pain, so the pleasure of meaningfulness, no matter what triggers it, is pleasure.

IMO, I would avoid viewing friends as instruments, because that will decrease your pleasure in friendship. We have abundant evidence that focusing on extrinsic rewards, a reward viewed as secondary to an instrument rather than intrinsic to it, decreases pleasure in the instrument used. Read Alfie Kohn's Punished by Rewards. The pleasures of friendship are not really separable from the friend-- no need to dissect relationships like that. Here I differ from Epicurus, who emphasized both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of friendship-- but I do so for pleasure maximizing.

Pleasures are not interchangeable-- there's not just one thing, "pleasure", but specific and widely variable pleasurable feelings. What they have in common is that we enjoy them, but in different ways. Epicurus said that if pleasures were all equal in distribution and intensity they would be alike, and what he was pointing out was that this isn't the case. So it's not really using a friend for generic pleasure but the specific pleasures of friendship.

Meaning itself is just pattern recognition and may or may not be pleasurable. $2+2=4$ means something. But meaningfulness is the feeling of pleasure attached to certain patterns, usually social meanings.

When you keep that in mind, it should be easy to see that meaningfulness of friendship is a huge pleasure, and the same for work that feels meaningful.

Even the pleasure of suffering under certain situations creates pleasurable meaningfulness that is stronger than the pain. Think about grieving someone you loved deeply, after the acute pain has lessened-- there's a sense of deeply pleasurable meaning in knowing one has loved enough to grieve. Or think about suffering from fatigue at a job when the income is used to care for one's family-- there can be a feeling of meaningfulness in knowing one cares that much for one's family which is more pleasurable than the bare fatigue. If not, a person wouldn't likely value those types of suffering. Pleasure provides the value.

Some people prefer these sorts of meaningfulness pleasures more than any others, because they can be so intense.

Post by “Joshua” of November 25, 2020 at 6:48 AM

I read *Man's Search for Meaning* a number of years ago. It's been long enough that I don't remember much; here's what I do remember.

The book is split into two parts. One is a Holocaust memoir from a man who lived it. The other is a philosophical discursion by way of an inquiry into Meaning.

Frankl opens the book by sharing an anecdote of his experience in the early days of Hitler's Austria. After a Synagogue had been razed as part of a spiraling anti-Jewish oppression, Frankl found his father seated at the kitchen table with a piece of the rubble. A part of the Decalogue, his father told him. *Which one?* The 5th. "Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the Earth." Victor Frankl was an academic who had acquired a work visa to teach abroad—In America, I think. It was a golden ticket to refuge and freedom. But when he heard those words, he decided to stay in Austria and face what was coming. He spent three years in the living hells of Auschwitz and Dachau. His father, mother, brother and wife were all killed.

Here are a few of my own thoughts.

The murdered Jews of Europe were subjected to torments that no human should ever be made to endure. The survivors emerged with the worst kinds of psychological trauma, which most of them must have borne the scars of until the end of their days. What these people were in need of was therapeutic psychiatry. Frankl was unusually placed in both circles. He was a survivor of Hitler's final solution, and also a psychiatrist. An inquiry into the meaning of life might well be indicated in cases of profound trauma; I do not know. I am far too ignorant both of psychiatry, and of horrific suffering to formulate an opinion on this point.

But speaking philosophically, I must say that I think that Frankl was asking entirely the wrong question.

What is it about human life that makes us think there is any value in asking about its 'Meaning'? You wouldn't ask, "what is the meaning of a rock? What is the meaning of a grasshopper? What is the meaning of a Lipizzaner pony?" Nothing of interest or use is ever likely to be resolved by these questions. People, like rocks and grasshoppers and ungulates, simply *are*. There's no justification to be speaking of meaning or purpose. When Lucretius said that "No bodily thing was born for us to use", he was hitting upon a real point:

Quote

Nature had no such aim, but what was born creates the use. There could be no such thing as sight before the eyes were formed. No speech before the tongue was made, but tongues began long before speech were uttered.

Edward Abbey said that "From the point of view of a tapeworm, man was created by God to serve the appetite of the tapeworm." I would strike even closer to the bone than that; I would point to the "appetite" of that great infinitesimal 'worm' that lies at the nucleus of every one of our cells, and whose sole ambition is to replicate. Through a series of random environmental pressures and selected adaptations, the worm of our DNA has arrived at the point where the whole architecture of the mind and body is necessary for the genetic code to reproduce itself. Good luck finding meaning or purpose there!

I cannot speak for any survivor of trauma, but for my own part I noticed that when I stopped asking fruitless questions about meaning and purpose, I was no longer asked to settle for bad answers.

Around the time I read this book, I also read *The Conquest of Happiness* by Bertrand Russell. I don't remember much of that either, but I seem to think that I found it far more useful and refreshing.

And now for something completely different! Walt Whitman, as read and interpreted by Robin Williams.

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=omveFR-2hmg>