

Victor Frankl

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>