

Man's Search for Meaning and God's Existence

Exhibit to Religion Chapters One through Three

Whether we read the five "demonstrations" or ways to point out the fact **that** God exists of the thirteenth century Aquinas or the writings of Feuerbach and Hume that conclude God either is a projection or an improper conclusion of human reason, we find that Viktor Frankl's argument comes from reflection upon his experiences as a prisoner in Auschwitz and then Dachau during the second world war. There, he observed and thought about human beings and the value of life in respect to God and to other human beings.

Years of distance exist between and among Aquinas, Feuerbach, Hume and Frankl, but, more importantly, light years of attitude exist between both Feuerbach and Hume and Frankl.

Feuerbach (*Essence of Christianity*) contends that the absolute humans call God and the God-man Christians call Jesus Christ are merely abstract projections created by the human mind; however, the reality is that the human being is god. Whereas some humans have used the abstract projection of God to provide purpose and meaning for human life and actions, according to Feuerbach, beginning with primitive peoples and progressing to Christian believers, the practical reality is that such a projection has misdirected meaning from human existence wherein true and absolute meaning is found - this misdirection results in the degradation of being human and the creation of an absolute we call "God".

Thus, Feuerbach contends that "God was my first thought, Reason my second, and man my third and last". (*Philosophical Fragments*, 1844) Therefore, only ultimate meaning is found within human beings and within human reason is found the only true god which exists, so "Man to man is god".

Hume (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*), on the other hand, contends that some human thinkers have attempted to find proof for the existence of an absolute they call "god" by reasoning from design, or purpose found within the world and from the relationship of effects to causes within the activities occurring in the world. Hume dismisses such attempts as fruitless because he assumes that just as human reason has produced the machines which brought about the industrial revolution, so human reason will uncover the parts which effect the workings of nature and the world around us - nature, after all, is merely a machine, a watch whose workings reason will unravel and reveal so we might fine tune it to work better. Therefore, the only practical approach, according to Hume, is that human beings seek to discover the various parts which make the machine nature and then we will understand nature's and the human beings' workings without creating any need for "god", something a French contemporary of the English Hume called **Deus ex machina**, or "god From the machine", in *L'homme La Machine* (De La Metré).

Some four centuries prior to the thoughts and writings of Feuerbach and Hume, Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle concludes that existence itself as the actuality (**energeia**) of any potency (**dynamis**) gave meaning (**on**, reality) to any activity (acting, such as moving, living, thinking) and that

this existence as actuality had to have a source other than from within the being whose potentiality was actualized through the *ing*. Furthermore, this source would have to be actuality itself, what Aristotle called "Pure Act", Aquinas "God". Thus, the position of Aristotle and Aquinas, distant by some fifteen centuries was that human beings find meaning and purpose in the fact of existing itself because the act of existing for any being is shared and thus must have some vertical source since it cannot be the result of a horizontal process of material evolution. All composed beings, that is, all beings which have potential for actualization are, therefore, dependent upon that which we call God for their individual acts of existence and actuality. Both conclude that awareness of this very dependency provides the *factual evidence* **that** God exists.

The oriental thinkers, especially Lao-tzu, but also the Hindu as manifested within the Gita emphasize the fact that human beings understand only after they renounce contentious argumentation and actions, control their production of words and their use of reason. Literally, this "knowing when to stop" means an acceptance **that** the unknowable exists and that we humans can not know that which is the source of both being and non-being, the **yin** and the **yang**.

Dr. Viktor E. Frankl, psychiatrist, the developer of *logo-therapy*, literally, meaning-therapy, **therapy** being a Greek word meaning attendant - **therapist** in Greek is literally an agent who attends to a patient with the purpose of aiding the return of the health proper to nature. So, Frankl considered the purpose of the therapist as both an internal self-generated use of reason and an external agent using reason to assist the human being to return to health by reflecting upon the meaning of being human, of living and so forth.

Frankl was the leader of the "Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy" and wrote his first book to detail this method, called Man's Search for Meaning. (Washington Square Press, Inc., N.Y., N.Y., 1959; originally titled From Death-Camp to Existentialism, Beacon Press.) This book chronicles his reflections upon his experiences within Auschwitz and then Dachau. The book describes three symptoms which characterize the struggle to continue existence while being a prisoner: first, shock (pp. 3-30), then relative apathy, a kind of emotional death (pp. 31-133), finally, the psychology after liberation (pp. 133-213).

While we were waiting for the shower, our nakedness was brought home to us: we really had nothing now except our bare bodies - even minus hair; all we possessed, literally, was our naked existence. What else remained for us as a material link with our former lives? For me there were my glasses and my belt; the latter I had to exchange later on for a piece of bread. (pp. 22-3)

The daily situation generated a common thought:

The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the

others. From personal convictions which will be mentioned later, I made myself a firm promise, on my first evening in camp, that I would not 'run into the wire'. This was a phrase used in camp to describe the most popular method of suicide - touching the electrically charged barbed-wire fence. (p. 27)

Only two realities, both resulting from the dependence produced by lack faced the prisoners:

Undernourishment, besides being the cause of the general preoccupation with food, probably also explains the fact that the sexual urge was generally absent...With the majority of prisoners, the primitive life and the effort of having to concentrate on just saving one's skin led to a total disregard of anything not serving that purpose, and explained the prisoners' complete lack of sentiment. (pp. 50-1)

However, a curious phenomenon developed:

In spite of all the enforced physical and mental primitiveness of the life in a concentration camp, it was possible for spiritual life to deepen. Sensitive people who were used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain (they were often of a delicate constitution), but the damage to their inner selves was less. They were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom. Only in this way can one explain the apparent paradox that some prisoners of a less hardy make-up often seemed to survive camp life better than those of a robust nature. (pp. 56-7)

One day "...the man marching next to me whispered suddenly: 'If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us now'". Frankl observed, "that brought thoughts of my own wife to mind...I heard her answering me, saw her smile...Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise". Frankl then writes:

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth - that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way - an honorable way - in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, 'The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory'. (pp. 58-9)

Frankl quotes the Old Testament: "Set me like a seal upon your heart, love is as strong as death". Frankl's wife took on the presence of the sacred, love giving meaning to life. Again, Eliade's analysis of the presence and relevance of the sacred within the profane is revealing:

Symbols awaken individual experience and transmute it into a spiritual act, into metaphysical comprehension of the world. In the presence of any tree, symbol of the world tree and image of cosmic life, a man of the pre-modern societies can attain to the highest spirituality, for, by understanding the symbol, he succeeds in living the universal. It is the religious vision of the world, and the concomitant ideology, that enable him to make his individual experience bear fruit, to 'open' it to the universal. (pp. 211-12)

Frankl continues:

The intensification of inner life helped the prisoner find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation and spiritual poverty of his existence, by letting him escape into the past. When given free rein, his imagination played with past events, often not important ones, but minor happenings and trifling things. His nostalgic memory glorified them and they assumed a strange character. Their world and their existence seemed very distant and the spirit reached out for them longingly: in my mind I took bus rides, unlocked the front door of my apartment, answered my telephone, switched on the electric lights. Our thoughts often centered on such details, and these memories could move one to tears.

As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances. (pp.61-2)

Later, Frankl writes "...we were at work in a trench".

The dawn was gray around us; gray was the sky above; gray the snow in the pale light of dawn; gray the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and gray their faces. I was again conversing silently with my wife, or perhaps I was struggling to find the reason for my sufferings, my slow dying. In the last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious 'Yes' in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. (pp. 63-4)

Mircea Eliade comments on just such an experience within The Sacred and the Profane :

Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed

the term hierophany. It is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e., that something sacred shows itself to us. (p. 11)

It must be said at once that the religious experience of the non-homogeneity of space is a primordial experience, homologizable to a founding of the world. It is not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world. For it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation. When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the non-reality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. (pp. 20-1)

Frankl then describes the effort to avoid the loss of purpose, of self-worth of being sacred rather than profane, as Eliade phrased it. Indeed, Socrates provides a parallel statement right at the beginning of the Apology, when he comments that his accusers almost made him forget who he was. But, Socrates sought to bring his fellow Athenians out of the "crowd" mentality whose value accrued from wealth, honor and reputation into self-worth through living an examined life predicated upon the value of the human soul and virtue. Here is Frankl's description, eighteen (18) centuries after the Apology:

I mentioned earlier how everything that was not connected with the immediate task of keeping oneself and one's closest friends alive lost its value. Everything was sacrificed to this end. A man's character became involved to the point that he was caught in a mental turmoil which threatened all the values he held and threw them into doubt. Under the influence of a world which no longer recognized the value of human life and human dignity, which had robbed man of his will and had made him an object to be exterminated (having planned, however, to make full use of him first - to the last ounce of his physical resources) - under this influence, the personal ego finally suffered a loss of values. If the man in the concentration camp did not struggle against this in the last effort to save his self-respect, he lost the feeling of being an individual, a being with a mind, with inner freedom and personal value. He thought of himself then as only a part of an enormous mass of people; his existence descended to the level of animal life. The men were herded - sometimes to one place then to another; sometimes driven together, then apart - like a flock of sheep without a thought or a will of their own. (p. 78-9)

Again, we see that the uniqueness of one's individual human life is the touchstone where we humans find the sacred presence of God. Lao-tzu described this awareness as being proper to the wise person who reflected upon self-worth and was "enlightened ". Aquinas called this the awareness **that** God exists and described the individual's reaction as the natural virtue of religion. Frankl writes:

The consciousness of one's inner value is anchored in higher, more spiritual things, and cannot be shaken by camp life. (p.99)

The proof that human beings can transcend whatever environment and whatever circumstance, even that found within a concentration camp and that any such external situation is at most a condition, but never a cause of human action is the fact that humans have the power to choose the action(s) they take -- an observation which Aurelius Augustine made as the Vandals were putting Rome to the torch and a conclusion which Erasmus made in his treatise written to refute Luther's treatise:

The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's own way.

And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate. (pp. 103-4)

The striking about Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning is that he offers a clear proof **that** God exists from the fact that to be human is to have free choice - the very claim Socrates made about the mission he had from the Delphic Oracle, namely, to tell his fellow Athenians that they must regain their inner sacred reality from self-awareness and the value of the soul and virtue ("...an unexamined life is not worth living".); short of that, they would remain as profane as wealth, honor and reputation - all temporal values, devoid of any spiritual, or virtuous worth. The difficulty Socrates faced is the difficulty each human being faces, one which Tolstoy describes through Ivan Ilych: in order to give spirituality root room, humans must strip themselves of any and every material value, such as wealth, honor and reputation in order to find the sacred present - but, as Eliade notes, the contemporary "humanist" seeks to do away with any and all sacred, or transcendence in order to find meaning within material realities alone, an obvious impossibility from all the particulars we have seen, including Frankl. Frankl quotes Dostoevski: "There is only one thing I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings".

These words frequently came to my mind after I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in camp, whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost. It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings; the way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner

achievement. It is this spiritual freedom - which cannot be taken away - that makes life meaningful and purposeful. (pp. 105-6)

Frankl's conclusion is significant for the meaning and relevance of religion in human life and offers a footnote explanation to Eliade's comment that human beings living in "modern societies" are "living in a desacralized **cosmos**" in a profane world of relativity, having no ultimate meaning, that is, no meaning beyond death (pp. 201-13) - material realities have only material meanings and such meanings are mortal, that is temporal, or non-eternal:

As we said before, any attempt to restore a man's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche's words, 'He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how', could be the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic efforts regarding prisoners. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a why - an aim - for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible how of their existence. Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost. The typical reply with which such a man rejected all encouraging arguments was, 'I have nothing to expect from life any more'. What sort of answer can one give to that?

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life - daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tests which it constantly sets for each individual. (pp. 122-3)

Thus, Frankl parallels Socrates: human beings give the meaning of themselves, their individual spiritual and virtuous value to the world; the world can give no human being meaning! Eliade states that the **homo religiosus** (literally, religious human) exercises this very responsibility, something which Aquinas would seem to have provided the basis for within his analysis of the threefold root word origin of religion, that is, to re-read, to re-choose and to re-bind oneself back to the source of life itself.

Since, for religious man of the primitive societies, myths constitute his sacred history, he must not forget them; by re-actualizing the myths, he approaches his gods and participates in sanctity...For religious man, re-actualization of the same mythical events constitutes his greatest hope; for with each re-actualization he again has the opportunity to transfigure his existence, to make it like its divine model. (pp. 106-7)

Frankl recounts two cases of what Eliade would describe as profane prisoners:

I remember two cases of would be suicide, which bore a striking similarity to each other. Both men had talked of their intentions to commit suicide. Both used the typical argument -they had nothing more to expect from life. In both cases it was a question of getting them to realize that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them...

This uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work as much as it does on human love. When the responsibility of replacing a person is realized, it allows the responsibility which a man has for his existence and its continuance to appear in all its magnitude. A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to be an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the 'why' for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any 'how'. (pp. 126-7)

Finally, Frankl reproduces a talk he gave to his fellow prisoners:

Then I spoke of the many opportunities of giving life a meaning. I told my comrades (who lay motionless, although occasionally a sigh could be heard) that human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death. I asked the poor creatures who listened to me attentively in the darkness of the hut to face up to the seriousness of our position. They must not lose hope but should keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle did not detract from its dignity and its meaning. I said that someone looks down on each of us in difficult hours - a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or a God - and he would not expect us to disappoint him. He would hope to find us suffering proudly - not miserably - knowing how to die.

And finally I spoke of our sacrifice, which had meaning in every case...I told them of a comrade who on his arrival in camp had tried to make a pact with Heaven that his suffering and death should save the human being he loved from a painful end. For this man, suffering and death were meaningful; his was a sacrifice of the deepest significance. He did not want to die for nothing. None of us wanted that. (pp. 131-3)

Frankl's insight in the 1940s reiterates St. Francis of Assisi's insight in the 1230s, namely that the human being's meaning consists in his or her gift of self into a world of meaningless frustration and violence. St. Francis wrote the following prayer to express his insight and this prayer complements Frankl's comment:

Saint Francis of Assisi's Prayer of Peace

Lord, make me a channel of Your peace;
Where there is hatred, may I bring love;
Where there is wrong, may I bring forgiveness;
Where there is discord, may I bring harmony;

Where there is error, may I bring truth;
Where there is doubt, may I bring faith;
Where there is despair, may I bring hope;
Where there are shadows, may I bring Your light;
Where there is sadness, may I bring joy;

Lord, grant that I may seek to comfort rather than to be comforted;
To understand, rather than to be understood;
To love, rather than to be loved;
For it is by giving, that one receives; by forgetting self, that one finds self, by forgiving, that one is forgiven, by dying that one awakens to Eternal Life.

Frankl and St. Francis parallel Socrates: The value Socrates discovered is as simple as the value the prisoner arriving in the camp discovered. Both suffered and died for the purpose of benefiting others. The interesting thing about Frankl's observation about individual worth is that each human being is the one worth which the world lacks until that individual chooses to offer the world his or her unique worth! Yet, no individual can find the uniqueness of this worth unless and until that individual strips him or herself of everything he or she thinks is valuable independently of this basic worth, the presence of a sacred, or being loved within the profane - a basic worth which underlies any really worthy "thing".

Eliade offers a fitting observation about modern "nonreligious man" and an appropriate conclusion to contrast "nonreligious man" with Frankl's comments to his fellow prisoners:

It is easy to see all that separates this mode of being (the presence of the sacred as well as the meaning and purpose the sacred provides humans) in the world from the existence of a nonreligious man. First of all, the nonreligious man refuses transcendence, accepts the relativity of 'reality', and may even come to doubt the meaning of existence...But it is only in the modern societies of the West that nonreligious man has developed fully. Modern nonreligious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in the various historical situation. Man makes himself, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally de-mysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god. (pp. 202-3)

Both Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade detail findings and offer conclusions quite to the contrary of the "nonreligious man". Frankl provides concrete, experiential witness of the birth of an awareness of being loved and thus, being sacred and avoiding the suicide to which being profane leads, witness more dramatic than those of Vandon or Dullas. The mythopoeic human discovers meaning through the presence of the sacred within the world within him or

herself and that discovery results in an attitudinal change which brings both self-worth through an ultimate purpose and freedom of choice and commitment.

The **what** of us (**what** others think, **what** we seek, wealth, honor and reputation, **what** we think of ourselves, others and the world) must find meaning in the **who** we are - each of us discovers the **thou** who we are and are meant to contribute to the world into which we are born. The only obstacle which can keep us from the **who** we are is the **what** we think - a choice which only we, individually can make! So, the Buddhist monk's advice to the occidental youth holds true, as the youth tells the Buddhist monk to stop pouring tea in the tea cup because it is overflowing and full: "Yes," replies the Buddhist monk, "and so are you; go and empty yourself, then come back and you will have room to learn".

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