

Tanatopedagogical contexts of Victor Frankl's concept

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ABSTRACT

Tanatopedagogics as a study on upbringing with the awareness of mortality, imprinted in the nature of human being based on a fundamental principle of respect for the dignity of every human being and

the integrity and a priori value of human life draws on the ideas of Viktor Frankl.

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Power knows and appreciates only the meaning and subjective, relative value, value "for oneself"; whereas love can also see the meaning and objective, absolute value, value "in itself". Power has regard to use value of things, love on the other hand care also about dignity of the person [1].

INTRODUCTION

The starting point of this paper is author's understanding of tanatopedagogics as a *study on upbringing with the awareness of mortality, imprinted in the nature of human being based on a fundamental principle of respect for the dignity of every human being and the integrity and a priori value of human life* [2]. In this context Victor Frankl's reflections are a theoretical key element recognizing the essence of tanatopedagogics itself both in the context of theoretical concept and practice [3]. The first element apprehending the above mentioned essence is introduction of Victor Frankl.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Rarely, when views of a researcher, a psychologist, a philosopher or a physician are presented, his/her life is a characteristic interpretation of his/her work. Work and life are cohesion, where one derives from the other, where life experiences legitimize scientific work. Victor Frankl is the example of this dual consistency of work and life.

Viktor Frankl was born on March 26th, 1905 in Vienna, in a middle class Jewish family as the second child of Gabriel Frankl and Elsa Lion [4] Viktor's father, Gabriel Frankl came from Southern Moravia and was an official at the Ministry of Social Services. His mother Elsa Lew came from Prague and was an educated and religious woman devoted to raising her children. His childhood and relationship with his parents can be best shown by a fateful occurrence described by him.

One day I noticed a piece of marble lying on the table. When I asked my father, where it came from he answered that he found it in a place, where national socialists burned the biggest synagogue in Vienna. He took it home because it was a piece of the table with Ten Commandments. There was a golden Hebrew letter engraved on the table; my father explained that it symbolized one of the Commandments. Instantly I asked: Which one? He answered: - Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you [5]. Cared for and loved Viktor knew from an early age that his life will be bound up with helping others; he wanted to be a doctor [6]. In 1923, he started his medical studies at the University of Vienna where, inter alia, under the

influence of acquaintances with Freud and Adler his views and scientific interests crystallized [7]. Between 1928 and 1930 together with Charlotte Bühler (Małachowska de domo) as a student he was involved in organizing free counseling centre for youth in Vienna and other cities [8]. In 1930, he graduated and from 1930 until 1937 worked at Psychiatrischen Krankenhaus Steinhof in Wien where he was responsible for Selbstmörderpavillon (suicide pavilion). In 1941, he married Tilly Grosser with whom and with his parents he was arrested on 25th March 1942 and taken to Theresienstadt concentration camp located in the north western region of the Czech Republic [9]. His father died in the camp on swelling and inflammation of the lungswithin six months, his mother as well as his brother Walter were murdered in the gas chamber in Auschwitz [10]. His wife Tilly was murdered in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945. Thus, the war took all his family members except his sister [11].

Liberation came in Türkheim camp [12], after which, as he said, he started a new period of his life. *Once, a few days after the liberation, I was walking around the neighbourhood, passing by blooming meadows stretching for miles to the nearest town. Skylarks were hovering up to the sky, filling my ears with their cheerful trills. There was not soul as far as the eye could reach; there was nothing around me except the ground, the sky, skylarks' songs and free space. At some point I stopped, looked around and raised my head up – and I kneeled. At this moment I knew so little about the world and about myself, and there was only one thought pounding in my head – the same one over and over again: "I called my Lord from my cramped prison and He listened and gave me back my freedom". I don't remember how long I knelt there and repeated this sentence. All I knew is that on that day, that time my life began anew. Step by step I became a man again [13].*

In the last days of camp ordeal the experience of own self in experiencing human's dignity was braced to a belief that there is no collective fault [14] (Epple, 2009, p. 5), he was only against the so called "collective fault", as one of the first, contrasting it to the concept of an personal responsibility. Another aspect of this issue, which is emphasized by Frankl himself as a fruit of camp experience is the responsibility of the individual for what it does, regardless of its racial or national adherence, profession or religion [15].

After three years of nightmare of the concentration camp Frankl returned to Vienna where in 1945, he wrote his incredible work *Trotzdem Ja Zum Leben Sagen: Ein Psychologe Erlebt das Konzentrationslager* describing his own experiences from Nazi camps [16]. In the research conducted by the Library of Congress this book is one of the ten most important books shaping the

views of Americans. First on the list is the Bible and further placed, after Frankl's book are Harper Lee's *Kill the Mocking Bird*, the trilogy of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien *Lord of the Rings*, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and *Book of Mormon* [17]. Until author's death in 1997, this book was translated into 24 languages and sold in 10 million copies [18]. After returning to Vienna between 1946 and 1971 runs *Wiener Neurologischen Poliklinik*. In 1947 he married his second wife Eleonore Katharina Schwindt with whom he spent 50 years of life until his death on September 2nd, 1997.

DISCUSSION

Viktor Frankl's theory is multi-faceted study on multidimensionality of human experience, where his intellectual foundations based on deterministic tradition of Freud's psychology was his starting point [19]. The essence of this theory is logo therapy proposed by him, recognized by Michalski as the only effective way to portrayal orientation to meaning [20]. Writing about it Frankl stated, *inter alia, thus, a man has freedom anyway, although rarely he renounces it – renounces voluntarily. The man is not always aware of freedom but one can make him aware of it – one has to make him aware of it. This is the purpose of existential analysis – as the analysis of the existence considering freedom and responsibility; but invoking into conscious freedom is the task of psychotherapeutical form of existential analysis which is logotherapy* [21].

At the core of the so understood therapy as well as the whole Frankl's concept is the assumption that man is one indivisible whole and should not be considered only in particular categories, biological, psychological or social ones as it is narrowing and reducing its substance. *Man is a spiritual being, he is spiritual in his essence. Spirituality is, however, what psychologism ignores. Hence it results in insufficiency of all the psychotherapy in closer, hitherto, psychologistic sense – it does not see at all the "spirituality" of the human being.* Further in his analysis he states that *the spirit of a man is a personal spirit* [22]. Michalski [23] Analyzing Frankl's theories in an extremely accurate way, he writes about its spirit. *For Frankl's, the important thing was awareness and each man's personal conviction of the sense of his own life. I have a task in front of me, which gives me a certain purpose in my life. I live with a hope that I will be able to realize achieve this goal/realize this purpose. At the same time my life is not a purpose itself. I do not perceive my life as a possibility to get pleasure or achieve success, but I perceive it as an opportunity to give myself to others. I see the sense of my life in it. At the same time not only my life is a gift the the world but also*

my suffering, sacrifice, work, my acting, experiences, everything what a person can live through in a dimension of a gift to someone else. It is a deep meaning which itself becomes a value. Saturation of Frankl's works with mysticism does not only have an intellectual dimension but above all a biographical one, where experience of suffering made a way not just to create theories but to get to know himself and thereby to create a theory and bases for logotherapy. Entering the Frankl's house, the first thing that drew one's attention was a big cross, which seemed to be not only an expression of the religiousness of the hostess (Viktor Frankl's wife was a Catholic), but it seemed to be a specific creed of beliefs of Frankl himself [24]. *You can only love the values of another person (but this person does not have to be a human being, it can also be a superhuman – for instance God). Person is a specific, it is even something the most specific. Specificity of another person is given to a man...[25] ...although there is a deeply rooted religiousness in a deep unconsciousness of each man*[26].

Frankl's work reverberated in many scientific areas, example of that can be Carl Rogers' words, who said that Frankl's works are outstanding, important contribution in psychological thought over the last fifty years [27]. Finkelstein [28] notes contained in the controversial work dedicated to holocaust show literary and historical dimension of Frankl's works. Just before the Nazi's genocide became holocaust, there were only few scientific works written about it, for instance Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* or Elli Lingens-Reiner *Prisoners of Fear*. However, this small collection of valuable items is better than rows of garbage, which fill libraries and bookstores. It emphasizes that Frankl's work is one of the few really valuable publications dedicated to the crime of Nazi's genocide.

Life and work of Viktor Frankl is a relevant element shaping author's understanding of tanatopedagogic's, where emphasized matters of understanding and defining a human being and inevitability of death become a specific paradigm shaping its ideas.

The context of the essence of understanding a man in tanatopedagogics recognizes its essence in his innate dignity, a priori goodness and inviolability of life as a value.

Deeply analyzing the entirety of Frankl's idea, Michalski writes: *Man as a spiritual person experiences values and emotions merely humane, such as: freedom, responsibility, love, suffering, fear, feeling of inevitability of death, sense of meaning. According to Frankl, man is a unity, but to say he is a psychophysical unity is not enough. The physical and the mental is completed by a spiritual dimension, which opposite to the other two*

is not determined by biology or biography. The spiritual makes the essence of man; only by fulfilling his spiritual nature man lives an authentic life. Thus, man is able to rise above his own conditions – illness, suffering, oppose his own psychophysical organism. According to Frankl, man is an irreducible unity, manifested in three dimensions: somatic, mental and spiritual [29]. Frankl's view on a human being, deeply acknowledges one's spiritual sphere and creates a picture of his exceptional quality and uniqueness, where experiencing himself, his ego, his history is a unique experience, one of a kind and individual [30-32] through the fact of the experience itself that determines the word experience in the category of a continuous process [33,34]. ...Man is not only an individual being, but also a historical one. He is always something quite peculiar, unique and thus his own world is such. As a historical being, man never already "is" but he "becomes" all the time. He becomes a "complete" human being, when his life comes to an end; then his "world" is "entirely complete" [35]. In his reflections, Frankl emphasizing a human dignity, clearly points out that without acknowledging its dignity as a paradigm of the essence of the human nature, all considerations on the subject of a human being do not make sense as its character is brought to subjectivity of life in a context of utility not in a context of spirituality. In the world, where human life and dignity does not matter any more, where man's free will was taken away from him and where he became an object of extermination (after using all of his physical abilities) – in this world human ego ultimately renounced all values [36]. That experience of an innate and a priori dignity is a basis of all actions and the understanding of the essence of man. A person suffering from incurable psychotic disorders may lose ability to normal functioning but still keep the dignity of a human being. Thus, my psychiatric credo is nothing more or less. If I questioned it, I would not take my work seriously. What would I fight for then? For a brain damaged like a machine, which we cannot fix? If the patient weren't more – much more – euthanasia would be something indeed justified [37].

Although the statement that the matter of an innate good, which is the essence of a human being, adopted by the author's in his understanding of tanatopedagogics [38] would be an excess towards Frankl's views on human nature, which is a process of finding meaning, it also refers to a specific dynamics of finding the creation of good. Frankl directly points out that the good in the process of finding it is an element of creating the meaning and experiencing own humanity. [39]. „A fool is not the one who made a mistake, but the one who cannot fix it”. But we do not have to make any repairs at the same level as the mistake we had

made. At a higher level, however, we can always change the mistake into the good, as an honest repentance alters us and we are able to change every negative aspect into positive values: into maturing and growing of our personality [40]. According to Frankl, the good is not only a relevant element in looking for the meaning but also the essence of the meaning itself [41]. Jastrzębski [42] notices that the very essence of logotherapy reaches practically the beginning of the history of philosophy of the ancient Greece, where Logos written with a capital letter was the principle of the cosmic order, the supreme meaning and law of the reality. St. John referred this word to Jesus Christ in the Gospel prologue. While Freud was talking about giving preference to pleasure, Alfred Adler was talking about giving preference to power (about will to pleasure, Alfred Adler was talking about will to power). Frankl gave preference to purpose, meaning, ... Discovering the spiritual dimension of human existence, Frankl, first of all, emphasizes the meaning of the conscience as unaware spirituality. Hereby, he brings the new quality, absent in the classical psychoanalysis into the sphere of unawareness/unconsciousness. The conscience plays an essential role in the structure of human existence as, according to Frankl, personal dignity is based on it. It is not the system of universal rules imprinted into a human being but the most personal answer for the responsibility given to man, both in the particular life situations as well as in the whole existence. Frankl talks about conscience as "primal ontological understanding of the self", the "wisdom of heart", the "sensitivity, which the mind will never have". Therefore, it gives the ultimate meaning to human life. As written before, the singularity of Frankl's theories is influenced by the perfect consistency of himself and his work, his life, his experience and life attitude and choices he made. Experiences of death and suffering create the basis to the credibility of his theories. Words describing suffering and death in Frankl's work are meaningful and true reflection of his experience. Frankl like no one else is a specific expert. Experiencing of nonsense of the holocaust seemed to be in conflict to man's faith and his freedom. The absurdity, the madness of murdering and destroying people in concentration camps and gulags are the contradiction, which fills in the essence of human faith. Despite that, Frankl is immersed in suffering and he sees its meaning by building the theory of believing in a human being in himself and through himself. Death becomes an element in building this meaning. In the context of extreme experience, Frankl's words and his attitude are his creed in this matter. I knew that if I go back to physical work, I will die very soon. Since the death was inevitable anyway, I wanted to make something good out of it. I decided that it would be wiser to help my companions as a doctor than

vegetate and ultimately die as a worker incapable of any work, which I was at that time. [43]. This creed leads Frankl to the thesis that his own death is *the living proof that man cannot lose his inner freedom* [44]. The prospect of death creates the uniqueness of life and gives it meaning. One could say that the infinity of life is the important paradigm associated with discovering and looking for the meaning. *There is no such life situation, which would be completely meaningless. This comes from the fact that apparent negative side of human existence, especially this tragic Triad (Triassic), to which suffering, guilt and death belong to, is possible to be transformed into something positive in a success of some kind, if you just take the proper attitude and mindset* [45].

To sum up the above considerations, life and work of Viktor E. Frankl in its essence makes a specific pedagogy of meaning that enters into tanatopedagogics both in its theoretical and practical context. Frankl's spiritualization and empowerment of man and the meaning given to the gist of life, experience and action make a foundation of authorial understanding of Tanatopedagogics. Logotherapy, however, enters into author's proposal of practical activities in *Tanatopedagogicznej Relacyjnej Terapii Zastępczej (Tanatopedagogical and Relational Replacement Therapy)* in the specific terms of its use by CCJ questionnaire [46]. This pedagogy of meaning finds its dimension in the fact of its placement in the experience of a priori dignity and indisputability of life despite the fact that it is entered into the inevitability of death.

CONCLUSIONS

That fragility and finiteness of life gives it an extraordinary character. Frankl's pedagogy in the dimension of the purpose of education leads to finding in oneself a purpose, which has a pillar indicated in author's understanding of tanatopedagogics, a dignity and the indisputability of life at its core. It is an education where learning and experiencing of the dignity in the context of subjectivity of one self and others and inviolacy of human life are key doctrines. For practical and therapeutical purposes, seeking for the meaning in oneself and in others through the lens of experiencing an a priori dignity makes life less traumatizing.

Just as we can come to self-fulfillment only by taking detour, fulfilling the meaning, we can build our identity only on responsibility, by being responsible for fulfilling this meaning [47]

Conflicts of interest

None to declare.

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