

Beate von Devivere

Meaningful Work: Viktor Frankl's Legacy for the 21st Century



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Beate von Devivere
bvd CONSULT
Frankfurt am Main, Hessen, Germany

ISBN 978-3-319-89790-5 ISBN 978-3-319-89791-2 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89791-2>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018940347

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer International Publishing AG part of Springer Nature.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Summary

Meaningful work has become one of the most frequently discussed and searched for issues of our times. Individuals, leaders, teams, management, organizations, research, counseling, and psychotherapy are discussing man's search for meaning in work and activities for positive change. Viktor Frankl's legacy is providing for both scientific and philosophical, pioneering approach to answering twenty-first century demands. Man's inherent search for meaning, their freedom, and their responsibility to act on it are basic components of all current meaning oriented activities. This book is discussing today's global work place challenges, presenting data on man's cry for meaning and a wide range of new approaches across diverse sectors in the international community, addressing meaning and values in work life and implementing meaningful activities. Finally, the author is suggesting integrated approach for accomplishing the Copernican turn, further promoting meaningful work.

Foreword

One rarely has the opportunity to be granted the honor of writing the opening paragraphs of a book as timely and important as the present one. *Meaningful Work* is probing, discussing, and negotiating questions tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people ask themselves day by day: Is my work meaningful? And, perhaps even more importantly: How can I navigate through my working life in such a way that my work is not a mere necessity, but a way of living up to the promise and hope of meaning, existential fulfillment, and development? What can I do to add meaning to my work, to find meaning and my calling in my work, and the work of my colleagues?

Given the fact many of us spend well more than two thirds of our adult lives at or in work, one cannot but wonder why so relatively few authors dedicated their attention to these questions, and one cannot but thank Beate von Devivere for taking up the challenge to tackle these questions, and especially for *how* she tackles them: Von Devivere brings together two research traditions which, so far, rarely have been brought together, and which, it seems, have literally been in the waiting for being brought into an engaging dialogue: management consulting and working studies on the one hand, and existential psychology in the tradition of Viktor Frankl's logotherapy and existential analysis, on the other hand.

Most readers will be familiar with the former, but perhaps not as many with the latter, and even fewer may know that Frankl's pioneering work on meaning as a psychological variable has been tested in more than 600 empirical and clinical studies (Thir and Batthyany 2016), and additionally – equally, and perhaps even more important – been tried and tested in the lives of millions of readers, clients, and patients who at times were unsettled, and perhaps even overwhelmed, by their unfulfilled or unheard quest for meaning in their everyday lives.

Yet even within the research tradition of the psychology of existential concerns, it took surprisingly long to discover the obvious: namely, that the workplace, though commonly (and perhaps stereotypically) believed by psychologists to be primarily a field of, among other things, group dynamics, collaborative decision-making, affiliation, and achievement motivation is as much an existential battleground as life beyond the workplace.

Indeed, research suggests that lack of meaning, and, at the same time, a deep seated longing for finding meaning and purpose in life and work, has become endemic. Taking this finding beyond mere epidemiology, a sizable number of studies speaks about the psychological and economic costs of ignoring the quest for meaning and purpose. A large body of studies demonstrates that the temporary or chronic frustration of the will to meaning paves the way for a range of mental disorders and indispositions or, more specifically, that even if such conditions presumably are the result of multiple factors, absence of meaning awareness significantly increases one's susceptibility to a large variety of mental health and behavioral problems.

Conversely, yet another set of studies shows that a newly found sense of meaning, together with various applications of meaning and specifically Franklian oriented interventions, described in this book is capable of initiating or promoting well-being and striving both on an individual, group, and organizational level, exert a protective effect, and, whether in isolation or in conjunction with other interventions, bring with them a significantly higher rate of health in all spheres of work life.

As the studies cited above indicate, despite the initial cautious skepticism toward Frankl's concept to put existential questions at the heart of psychology, the enterprise pioneered by Viktor Frankl of a scientifically oriented existential psychology soon bore fruit with astonishing rapidity in the late 1960s. This development is evident not least in the huge volume of research publications cited above, authored chiefly by Frankl's students in Harvard and Vienna during these early years. Today, it appears as if Frankl's logotherapy, once only one single psychiatrist's "courageous rebellion against the [...] paradigms that dominated psychological theorizing" (Baumeister & Vohs 2002), has, albeit somewhat belatedly, arrived at the research front of experimental, empirical, organizational, and social psychology.

One likely factor that may have contributed to the strong interest in the psychology of existential concerns may be the fact that, since around 1970, psychological thought in general has opened up to new ideas, especially since increasing numbers of academic psychologists have become aware of the limits of orthodox psychoanalysis (Bornstein 2001, Paris 2004). At the same time, behaviorism, which for several decades was particularly strong within experimental psychology, has likewise lost much of its original dominance. Both developments in the history of ideas of psychology took place perhaps largely due to the so-called cognitive turn in the behavioral science, which then soon spread into clinical and experimental psychology (Gardner 1986, Eysenck and Keane 1993).

This turn not only brought with it a rediscovery of the central role of internal representations of the world, which Frankl and his logotherapy had identified long before as being crucial for understanding human experience and behavior (Frankl 1958); Frankl considered much of the "old psychologies" to be disproportionately concerned with deficits and limits and held that they often tended toward a reductionist pathologism, which attempted to explain even such deeply human and existential concerns such as the need for meaning and authenticity not as expressions of human maturity, but as mere compensations for psychological defects and frustrated "lower" needs (Frankl 1961). The increased openness of psychology to less mechanistic or purely psychodynamic models also led to researchers abandoning some their earlier almost exclusive focus on deficits, and instead starting to look

again at those inner resources by which real and apparent deficits can be overcome or compensated in psychologically mature and healthy ways.

In brief, for a long time, psychology was largely *deficit-based* rather than resource-oriented and thus had little use for existential concerns and the quest for meaning. For several years now, the neighboring field of positive psychology has tied in with these ideas on a broader level (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Still, the systematic scientific pursuit of a broad-based, resource-oriented psychology is a relatively new undertaking, and at least to logotherapists, it did not come as a surprise that research in this area would soon find that meaning is a central psychological (and existential) resource (Klingberg 2009).

Given the noticeable tendency toward a renewed interest in existential issues and their applications specifically in work life, management, and organizational development, and given the fact that the structure and nature of the working place has, at the same time, changed considerably within the past few decades, there is – or rather was – an obvious necessity to look for applications of existential concerns and specifically man's search for meaning and focused interventions in the context of the workplace. Beate von Devivere took it on herself to fill this gap: This book then, written by an accomplished practitioner active and well versed in both fields and research traditions, is truly pioneering work insofar as it does no less than opening up, and establishing, a whole new research field – current existential issues and meaning oriented approaches and interventions in the workplace, as they are coming forth on the individual, team, and organizational level.

The Endowed Viktor Frankl Chair
for Philosophy and Psychology
International Academy of Philosophy,
University in the Principality of Liechtenstein

Alexander Batthyány

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Acknowledgments

This book has emerged from decades of practice in consulting, coaching, and counseling. From my first, rather unexpected, encounter with Viktor Frankl's *Search for Meaning*, recommended by a fellow colleague more than 20 years ago, to over years of work with organizations, teams and individuals, with professional experts' publications and cooperation, who have been widely acknowledging Viktor Frankl's influence on their own practice and life, over my own training in Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, finding meaning in work and private life has been the guiding issue in my work: I owe my sincere thanks to my clients and their trust and their confidence in traveling together the road of finding meaning in their work for their organizations, their functions, and in their personal lives. Throughout my work in various countries, international organizations and missions around the world, in consulting, coaching, and counseling, I have found innumerable silent heroes, witnessing the greatest freedom of humans to choose their attitude to specific conditions, to rise above and to drive the Copernican turn for positive change. Their answers to life, consisting in right action and in right conduct, "taking the responsibility and to fulfill the task which life constantly sets for each individual" (Viktor Frankl) have ultimately been motivating me for editing this book and for compiling their encouraging examples for working for the greater good.

I am especially indebted to Professor Dr. Alexander Batthyány, Director of the International Association of Logotherapy and Existential Analysis and the Viktor Frankl Institute, Vienna, and to Professor Dr. Alexander Noyon (Hochschule Mannheim, Germany): Alexander Batthyány's international engagement in academic teaching, research and practice of Viktor Frankl's works and legacy, and his organizing the Biennial International Congress "The Future of Logotherapy" have profoundly inspired me, giving me the opportunity of feeling connected with a global community of meaning searchers. Professor Alexander Noyon's research,

publications and psychotherapeutic practice, and his deep understanding of Viktor Frankl's approach, putting existential analysis into practice in clients' support in their search for meaning, have been sparking and invigorating my own thinking and practice in existential consulting and counseling. My sincere appreciation and thanks!

Beate von Devivere

Contents

1	Introduction: Man’s Search for Meaning – More Current Than Ever	1
2	The Image of Humans in Search for Meaning	7
2.1	Meaning: Wanting or Waiting?	8
2.2	Meaning Motivation	10
2.3	Meaning Beyond Functional Aspects.	10
2.4	Ultimate Concerns	11
2.4.1	“Where Do We Come From?”	12
2.4.2	“What Are We?”	12
2.4.3	“Where Are We Going?”	13
2.5	Ultimate Meaning.	14
2.6	Implications of the Discussion for Meaning and Work: Interim Conclusions	14
	References.	17
3	Searching and Finding Meaning: Viktor Frankl’s Approach	19
3.1	Will to Meaning	20
3.2	Meaning of Life	21
3.3	Freedom of Will and Responsibility to Act on It.	22
3.4	Values: The Human Condition.	23
3.5	Givers and Takers.	24
3.6	Conscience: What Is “Right”? What Is “Wrong”?	24
3.7	The Tragic Triad.	25
3.8	Existential Analysis	26
3.8.1	Unfolding the Nature of Our Personal Being	27
3.8.2	Existential Analysis in Practice.	28
3.9	The Three Dimensions of Human Existence	30
3.10	The Spiritual Dimension	31
3.10.1	A Matter of Clean Language: Definitions of Religion, Religiousness, Spirituality, Mind, and Existential.	34

3.10.2	International Guidelines Regarding Experts’ Dealing with Spiritual Issues	37
3.11	Addressing Religion: The Pivotal Question	38
3.11.1	Religion and Spirituality	39
3.11.2	What Kind of “Ministry”: Frankl’s Approach on Religion	40
3.11.3	“A World Void of Intrinsic Meaning...”	41
3.11.4	Religion and Well-Being: Some Research Data	43
3.12	Addressing Spirituality in the Workplace	44
3.12.1	Spirituality Cannot Be Bought or Implemented	46
3.12.2	Critical Considerations	47
3.13	Implications of Frankl’s Three-Dimensional Approach for Today’s Workplaces	48
	References	50
4	What Is Man?	53
4.1	Neutrality Is Not Indifference	54
4.2	Ethical Standards Relating to Coaching and Counseling Experts’ Activities	55
4.3	Humanism	56
4.4	Taking Responsibility	57
4.5	Unprecedented Ethical Challenges	58
4.6	Homo Deus? An Existential Crisis of Humankind	59
4.6.1	Homo Deus or Free Will	59
4.6.2	New Sciences: “Nothing but Algorithms” – Twenty-First Century’s Reductionism	60
4.7	Human Reasoning	61
4.7.1	Taking an Attitude	63
4.7.2	The Hybris of Dataism	63
4.8	The Ontological Differences and the Anthropological Unity of Man	64
4.9	What Makes Us Human?	64
4.10	Three Human Conditions	65
4.10.1	Animal Laborans or Homo Faber?	65
4.10.2	Homo Amans	67
4.10.3	Homo Patiens	68
4.11	Conclusions	70
	References	70
5	Twenty-First-Century Meaning Challenges of Work	73
5.1	Megatrends Shaping our Future	73
5.2	Global Societal Challenges	73
5.3	Work Life in a VUCA World	74
5.4	Four Western World Challenges	74
5.5	Diagnosing the Twenty-First-Century Gap	75
	References	77

6	Meaning in the Twenty-First-Century Workplaces	79
6.1	Work: A Potential Source of Meaning	79
6.2	Employed and Unemployed	80
6.3	The Janus Face of Today's Workplaces	80
6.4	Homo Economicus: Powerful Reductionism	82
6.5	Self-Actualization, Pleasure, and Self-Optimization	82
	References	83
7	A Two-Dimensional Approach	85
7.1	Reconciling Two Dimensions in the Human Being	85
7.2	Freedom and Responsibility in Work	87
	References	87
8	The Twenty-First Century Cry for Meaning	89
8.1	Mental Health in the Workplace: The Greatest Challenge of the Twenty-First Century	90
8.2	Facing the Existential Vacuum of Our Times	90
8.3	The Four Collective Maladies of Our Times	91
8.3.1	An Ephemeral Attitude Toward Life	92
8.3.2	A Fatalist Attitude Toward Life	92
8.3.3	Conformist or Collectivist Thinking	92
8.3.4	Fanaticism	92
8.4	Continuous Stress	93
8.4.1	Different Types of Stress	93
8.4.2	Health Effects of Stress	94
8.4.3	Prevalence of Stress, Anxiety, and Irritability in EU 27 States by Sector	95
8.5	Emerging Risks	96
8.6	Undeniable Suffering	96
8.6.1	Selected Mental Health Data	96
8.6.2	Suicide	98
8.7	Brain-Based Economy	99
8.7.1	The Five Brain Chains	99
8.7.2	The Great Convergence	100
8.7.3	Giving Brainy Answers	100
	References	100
9	Man, as He Is	103
9.1	The Self	104
9.1.1	Self-Detachment and Self-Awareness	105
9.1.2	Self-Acceptance	105
9.1.3	Self-Efficacy	106
9.1.4	Self-Esteem	106
9.1.5	Self-Determination and Autonomy	106
9.1.6	Self-Actualization	107
9.1.7	The Limitations of the Self-Concept	108
9.1.8	The Self-Focus of Increased Management Attention	108

9.2	Sense of Coherence	108
9.3	Self-Care	109
9.4	Competence, Calling, and Autonomy in the Workplace	110
9.4.1	The Sense of Calling	111
9.4.2	The Path to Purpose	112
9.4.3	Living the Calling	113
9.5	Motivation	113
9.5.1	Intrinsic Motivation: The Inherent Given	113
9.5.2	We Are All Intrinsically Motivated	114
9.5.3	Suggesting a Reconciliation of Two Motivational Theories	115
9.6	Building Resilience	117
9.6.1	Inner Strengths Comprising Resilience	118
9.6.2	Resiliency Strategies	119
9.7	Empathy and Compassion	120
9.7.1	Empathy	120
9.7.2	Compassion	120
9.8	Self-Transcendence	121
	References	125
10	The Inherent Demand Quality of Present Work Life	127
10.1	Intermediate Bottom Line	128
10.2	Making the Case for Promoting Well-Being and Health in the Workplace	130
10.3	Three Levels of Health Interventions	132
10.3.1	First-Level Prevention	132
10.3.2	Second-Level Prevention	134
10.3.3	Third-Level Prevention	134
10.4	Awareness Raising and Training in the Workplace	134
10.5	Integrated Health Management Approaches	135
10.5.1	European Council Directives	135
10.5.2	The Luxembourg Declaration on Workplace Health Promotion	136
10.5.3	European Network for Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP)	136
10.5.4	The ProMenPol Project	136
10.5.5	Standards Council of Canada	137
10.6	Conclusions	137
	References	137
11	Initiating the Copernican Turn: Answering the “What for”	139
11.1	The What for: The Meaning of It All	139
11.2	Meaningful Work	141
11.3	Meaning in Work: A Means or an End	142
11.3.1	Meaning as an End	142

11.3.2	Meaning as a Means: The Potential Dark Sides of Man's Search for Meaning	143
11.4	The Human Need for Freedom	145
	References	146
12	Toward a Meaningful, Integrated Approach: We Reap What We Sow	147
12.1	Appreciative Inquiry	147
12.2	Positive Psychology and Finding Meaning in Work	148
12.3	The Concept of Good Business	149
12.4	Unchaining the Brain Chains: The Attitude Taken	149
	References	150
13	Igniting the Spark in Every Person	151
13.1	Theory U	151
13.2	Givers and Takers	152
13.3	The Diamond in the Rough	154
13.4	Reinventing Organizations	154
13.4.1	An Evolutionary Approach to Humanity	155
13.4.2	From Scarcity to Abundance	156
13.4.3	Five Stages of Human Development: Breakthroughs in Human Consciousness	157
13.5	Core Human Strengths	159
13.6	A Leap in Meaningful Work	160
13.6.1	Success Ensues	160
13.6.2	Structures, Practices, and Cultures of Pioneer Organizations	161
	References	161
14	New Work: New Culture	163
14.1	New Work Best Practices	165
14.1.1	Wala Heilmittel GmbH	166
14.1.2	Augenhoehe: Reinventing Organizations "On an Equal Footing"	167
14.1.3	Resourceful Humans and Human Resources	168
14.1.4	Fair Finance: Sustainable Banking	169
14.2	Meeting Staff Members' Needs	170
	References	170
15	Values: A "New Surge of Responsibleness" Arising	173
15.1	Character Strengths and Virtues	174
15.2	Good Work: When Meaning, Responsibility, and Conscience Meet	178
15.2.1	The Three E's	178
15.2.2	The Three M's	179
15.3	Prosocial Impact of Work and Meaningful Occupations	180
15.4	Meaningful Organizations: Organizational Character	181
	References	182

16 Leadership: Taking Responsibility	185
16.1 Addressing the Diamond in the Rough	185
16.1.1 Being Directed to Someone Other Than the Self	186
16.1.2 Igniting Engagement	187
16.1.3 Entering the Realm of Freedom	188
16.2 Transformational Leadership: Overcoming Self-Interest	189
16.3 When People Identify with a Purpose Greater Than Themselves	191
16.4 The Culture You Create or the Culture You Destroy	193
16.5 Manifesting the Human Spirit: Exercising Meaningful Leadership	195
16.6 The Conductor as a Musical Collaborator	196
16.7 Integrity and Character-Based Leadership	198
16.8 Leading from Who You Are	199
16.9 Leading Abundant Organizations	199
16.10 Life's Entrepreneur: From Know-How to Know Why	201
16.11 Being Whole: Addressing Mind, Body, and Soul	202
16.12 An Awareness-Based Global Leadership Platform: Creating Transformative Change	204
16.12.1 Spaces of Global Leadership Learning	204
16.12.2 Open Mind, Open Heart, and Open Will	205
16.13 Leading: "The Revolution Has Begun"	205
References	207
17 The Human Potentials	209
17.1 The Art of Practice: Taking the Klimt Perspective	209
17.2 The Good Life: The Courage to Be	212
17.3 From Abundance to Gratitude and Giving	213
17.4 Building a Culture of Purpose	213
17.5 Human Dignity: A Transition Unfolding	216
17.5.1 The Dignity Economy	216
17.5.2 Enhancing Dignity in Various Branches	217
References	218
18 Meaning, Work, and Well-Being: Empirical Findings	221
18.1 Assessment of Meaning	221
18.2 Empirical Findings of Meaning Fulfillment	224
18.3 Meaning and Work	226
18.4 Existential Approaches and Findings	228
18.5 Linking Existential Fulfillment to Work Load and Work Engagement	229
18.6 The Difference Between "Why?" and "What For?"	231
18.7 Meaning Awareness and Storytelling	231
18.8 A Work of Service for Others	232
18.9 Meaning Awareness and Sources of Meaning	232
18.10 Work: A Broader Transcendent Life Purpose	233
18.11 The Future of Empirical Meaning Research	235

18.12	Discussion: Limitations of Empirical Research on Meaning . . .	236
	References	240
19	The Human Capacity: Current Approaches in Humanities	243
19.1	New Findings in Neuroscience	243
19.2	Mirror Neurons.	244
19.3	Investing in Caring Economics	244
19.4	The Neuroplasticity of Our Brain	245
19.4.1	The Co-construction of Identity and Meaning	246
	References	246
20	Meaning-Focused Approaches in Coaching, Counseling, and Psychotherapy	247
20.1	Coaching and Social Counseling Services in the Workplace. . .	248
20.1.1	Coaching Services	249
20.1.2	Social Counseling Services	251
20.1.3	Differences Between Coaching and Counseling Services	255
20.2	Existential Counseling and Coaching	257
20.2.1	The Four Worlds of Existence.	257
20.2.2	Addressing Meaning in Workplace Services.	258
20.2.3	Existential Analysis of Workplace Issues	260
20.3	Interventions in Workplace Counseling and Coaching: An Integrated Approach	264
20.3.1	Standard and Logotherapeutic Interventions.	265
20.3.2	Impact and Outcomes of Workplace Counseling and Coaching.	266
20.4	Discussion	270
20.5	Psychotherapeutic Approaches.	271
20.5.1	Third Wave Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) . . .	271
20.5.2	Acceptance and Commitment Treatment (ACT). . . .	271
20.5.3	Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy.	271
20.5.4	Systemic Approaches	272
20.5.5	Hypnosystemic Concepts	272
20.5.6	Brief, Solution-Focused Approach	273
20.5.7	Strengthening Mindfulness	273
20.5.8	MBSR Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction	274
20.5.9	Potentials and Pitfalls of the Mindfulness Movement	275
20.5.10	Positive Psychology Therapy PPT	275
20.5.11	Conclusions	277
	References	277
21	The Return of Philosophy to Every Day Life: Potentials for the Twenty-First-Century Renaissance.	279
21.1	Existential Philosophy and Existentialism.	280

21.2	The Rediscovery of Ancient Philosophy	283
21.3	Eudaimonia: Happiness Through Living Virtues	284
21.4	Plato's Concept of "Psyche"	286
21.5	Aristotle's Approach: The Good Life	287
21.6	Stoicism	287
21.7	Michel Foucault's Radical Demand for Care for the Self	288
21.8	Self-Care, Self-Cult, and Self-Addiction: Differences	289
21.9	Exercising Care for the Self	290
	References	291
22	Optimism in the Face of Adversity	293
22.1	Frankl's Concept of Tragic Optimism	293
22.2	MCCCT: A Holistic, Meaning-Centered Approach	294
	References	296
23	A Meaning-Centered Integrated Approach: Viktor Frankl's Legacy for Twenty-First-Century Meaningful Work	297
23.1	Work and Life: A Difficult Relationship	297
23.2	Meaning and Work: A Means or an End?	299
	23.2.1 Meaning as an End of Being	299
	23.2.2 Existential Analysis of the Individual Work Life	301
	23.2.3 Meaning: A Terminal Value	302
23.3	Meaning in Work: Situational Values	302
	23.3.1 Creative Meaning Values in Work	302
	23.3.2 Experiential Meaning Values in Work	303
	23.3.3 Attitudinal Meaning Values in Work	305
23.4	Meaningful Work: A Means?	306
23.5	Commonalities to Share	307
23.6	Working Together for Finding Meaning in Today's World	309
	References	312
	About the Author	313
	Index	315

Chapter 1

Introduction: Man's Search for Meaning – More Current Than Ever



Meaning in work and meaning in life have become topical issues that touch on each and every individual. They have been on the agenda since ages. These questions relate deeply to all of us, up to the point of being a matter of life and death.

The meaning of work has become one of the most frequently discussed and searched for issues. Individuals, teams, organizations, scientists, and research are wondering what would make work meaningful and what difference they could make for positive change.

The human being requires meaning. To live without meaning, goals, values, or ideals, seems to provoke considerable distress. Finding meaning in work and life is defined not by asking the philosophical, general question, What is the meaning of life, but rather by individually answering the question: What is the meaning of *my* life? What is the meaning of what I am active in, what I am engaged in, of the work that I am doing? In essence, individual existence fails, unless there is some idea of what to live for.

What is work for? What type of work would I want? What is my calling? What talents do I have? Who is waiting out there for my contribution? Why was I put here? What am I responsible for? What do we live for? What do we live by? What is the meaning of life? Why do we live? What is a good life for me and the community? What is the value of my work for me, my peers, my family, the organization, society, and the global community? What is our image of humans, being the foundation and driving our activities? What sense does it all make?

Search for meaning is touching on general issues of beliefs, values, ethics, moral convictions, thinking, logic, and mind. Meaning is defined in various ways: a goal, the importance attached to an issue, the attitude toward life, and a sense of mindfulness or of self-transcendence. Above all, any definition of meaning suggests that meaning cannot be defined generally, but rather individually and in situational, concrete terms (Chap. 2).

Meaning is relative and unique: relative in terms of significance given to the various issues, and unique, since the individual person's life is a string of unique situations and, related to a specific person, unique in terms of essence and personal existence.

Viktor E. Frankl's life, his work, his research, his lectures, and his extensive publications have had enormous impact on society, work, cultural issues in general, and the expert community in all branches of work life and various organizations, in psychology, psychotherapy, coaching, and counseling. Besides his own publications, until today, there have been boundless experts and professionals from all fields, who have in their work referred to Frankl's works on meaning. His meaning-centered approach of logotherapy and existential analysis, the so-called Third Viennese School, is more than ever relevant in the twenty-first century.

Humans are struggling with global crises and the dehumanization of an increasingly technological culture. Frankl's logotherapy and existential analysis represent a basis to rehumanize work and to benefit from this approach in consulting, coaching, and counseling. Viktor Frankl's approach provides us with a "blueprint" for a better future for humanity that is captured in this book (Chap. 3).

Because of its general holistic orientation, Frankl's approach in logotherapy and existential analysis can be applied to a wide variety of disciplines, ranging from organizational development, management, leadership concepts, training, education, staff health management, medicine, employee assistance, coaching, and counseling up to providing support in existential crisis. It can be employed in all areas of our lives so that we can fulfill our potentials. It may provide for an encouraging answer to one of the core questions that the twenty-first-century technological developments are posing: What is man?

Today, Frankl's concept provides for three roads to finding answers to the challenges and questions, which the twenty-first century is asking us: first, as an existential philosophy, Frankl's approach suggests an understanding of the "What for?," of what the individual existence is about, distinct and different from the mainstream homo economicus output-oriented management approaches. Second, Frankl intended logotherapy and existential analysis to be actively contributing to answering societal and global challenges and to being a contemporary witness of today's discussions, contributing to a good life for each and every individual. Third, logotherapy and existential analysis offer a holistic understanding of the individual person, their physical, psychosocial, and spiritual dimension, providing for a basis of understanding the human condition, for grasping the potentials of diversity of beings and unity of mankind and of the global community's yearning for meaning and the potentials that lie in man and in mankind. Fourth, Frankl's approach gives us an understanding of the current existential questions unanswered, of the sufferings and potential solutions responding to the modern cry for meaning. Frankl's legacy relating to the challenges humanity is facing, and applying it to our future in the twenty-first century, is paving the way to answering life's call upon our work and life (Chap. 4).

Today, humanity is faced with global challenges. Megatrends are shaping our very individual life. Organizations, management, work, and workplaces are actively designing and influencing the way we live. Each individual worker and employee is part of this complex world, in their various roles, being part and actively forming their environment. Freedom and responsibility rests on each person to shape and design these megatrends in a meaningful way (Chap. 5).

Searching for meaning in the twenty-first-century workplaces poses the question: What are the basic assumptions of Frankl's approach, helping us to define our road to living a more fulfilled life, including work and being productive? How do answers provided read in the twenty-first-century workplaces and in meaningful work? The philosophical, anthropological, and therapeutic considerations and empirical findings of logotherapy and existential analysis are providing for a most lucid and powerful paradigm for assessing, understanding, and maneuvering through the twenty-first century's unprecedented challenges. What is man? Viktor Frankl's three-dimensional approach, understanding the person's physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects and the space for action provided by this concept, meets with man's current search for the full potentials of humans against the reductionism of the "homo economicus." Acknowledging, understanding, and recognizing a person's inherent spiritual dimension turn out to be some of currently most discussed challenges in all spheres of life.

What is our freedom, and where is this freedom endangered to become mere arbitrariness, without being balanced by our responsibility to act on it? How do these two basic components of living a fulfilling life spell out in work, management, and in organizational development?

Work is a matter of experiencing own creative and thereby realizing one's unique mission in life. Work is the field where the unique person relates to his or her community, with this relation giving meaning and value to the individual person. This meaning and value are always related to the specific circumstances where and how this work is being delivered.

No profession or vocation has a meaning as such, or no profession has any more meaning than the other one. It is only the concrete person, delivering their own, specific service and work, that gives meaning to this work. Too many persons' natural relationship to their work as an area of potential realization of creative and experiential values and unique self-fulfillment is suffering under the current working conditions. Work has increasingly become a means of making money, establishing status, external recognition, termed as success. To a large extent, working to make a living has become the "What for," but the person's life still has no "Why" to work and live. How can we deal with this "Janus face" of work, and how can we manage work, having become the most influential part of an individual person's life, overshadowing all other spheres of existence and potential meaning in life? How does Frankl's understanding of the meaning of work translate into modern workplaces? What is meaning in work? What is the meaning of work? What is meaningful work? Is there a general definition of meaningful work (Chap. 6)?

Taking a two-dimensional approach on work, according to Frankl's lucid paradigm, offering a closer look at the diverse experiences in work, along the poles of perceived success and failure, of despair and meaning, suggests a lucid understanding of the various aspects of meaning and work (Chap. 7).

Current research and empirical findings on our inherent motivation to make sense out of what we are active in and on how to lead a fulfilling, not only strongly support Frankl's motivational concept. All relevant data on the tremendous health challenges in Western industrialized countries are backing man's frustration of their will

to meaning. We are all intrinsically motivated to find meaning in our work and private life. In all spheres of life, we are confronted with the unheard cry for meaning, to be understood as existential stress, due to lack of meaning, emptiness, and a life perceived as an existential vacuum (Chap. 8).

Together with ever more sophisticated insights into human functioning, the very core of the person, the self, the forming and developing of the self, has entered the grand stage of not only scientific interest and research but is also being addressed in a wide range of management, organizational, and individual activities. All these enterprises are connected by their search for continuous self-optimization, self-actualization, and fulfillment. The unfulfilled desire for meaning in work and life has not only remained the core existential question of humanity, but it is being discussed and answered in ever more dynamic and powerful ways (Chap. 9).

What are the specific activities and measures that organizations are providing to answer this cry for meaning and to provide for preventive measures in organizational health management? Fortunately, international institutions and organizations and the international community have been connecting and linking around an impressive range of scientifically sound concepts for reacting to the greatest challenge of the Western world (World Health Organization), i.e., promoting mental health, also relating to focused workplace-related activities (Chap. 10).

The greater part of this book is relating and dedicated to one of Frankl's most influential legacies for this century: the undeniable core in every human being, the inherent core human strengths, that the twenty-first-century organizations and individuals have started to relate to in initiating the "Copernican turn" in work. Research for this book has revealed a powerful Copernican turn underway, in the ways work is understood, managed, and organized. These global activities across various business branches, fields of expertise, organizations, management levels, and diverse individuals with their distinct backgrounds and history share a guiding compass, their "true north," addressing the self's best human core (Chap. 11).

Focusing on inner rightness as guiding compass, shifting from external to internal values, the order of understanding work and organizational purpose is being reversed: We do not pursue wealth. We pursue a work and life well lived. Wisdom is aligned with rationality, honoring the complex, ambiguous, paradoxical, nonlinear nature of reality, connecting the three dimensions of our existence. These twenty-first-century pioneers and new approaches are appreciating and actually living the cognitive breakthrough, the ability to reason, transcending the "either-or" thinking pattern to the more complex "both-and" thinking, and applying it to living freedom and responsibility, relating to the self and to others in the global community. What are the crossroads, where the various approaches meet in giving answers to man's search for meaning? Where and how do logotherapy and existential analysis meet with other meaning-centered considerations, projects, and concepts of work life?

Based on Frankl's legacy, this book is dedicated to all those impressive concepts and approaches that might change the course of history, giving meaning and hope to the global community and each and every individual working: Their diverse approaches all share one commonality.

They are based on an evolutionary approach to humanity, understanding man's human potentials as they have developed throughout our millennia of civilization, and the dark sides of humanity's present situation. Their approach draws upon the positive concept of understanding the vast unrealized capacities that lie in humanity. Their thinking has changed the paradigm from scarcity to abundance. Their activities are giving vivid examples of giving and living meaning in their work and their organizations, and they show what we need to sow in order to reap meaningful work.

This book provides for specific examples across diverse organizations from different business branches, management, activists, and research, igniting the spark for finding meaning in work and for implementing the according organizational activities. Their practices provide for powerful examples of good work, driven by values, conscience, and awareness for man's need and will to meaning in work (Chaps. 12 and 13).

Some of these activities and organizational examples are addressing the paradigm of "New Work," defining a new understanding and practice of work, appropriate for meeting the global, structural, societal, and individual challenges of the twenty-first-century work (Chap. 14).

All of these concepts, activities, and services provided for in the context of meaningful work are anchored around a strong sense of humanism, globally overarching values of humanity, of an explicit understanding of leadership around personal responsibility and, also, humility in exercising leadership not only in relation to others but also in relating to own life's challenges and potentials. All these activities are centered around a deep understanding of the human potentials and the human will to meaning that wait to be introduced and lived in work and all spheres of life (Chaps. 15 and 16).

Increasingly, recognizing and developing the core human potentials have come to the center of attention for building an overarching work culture of purpose, dignity, and abundance (Chap. 17).

The outcomes of all these activities, focused on finding meaning in work, and their effects on well-being and personal fulfillment, empirically researched and tested, are telling a persuasive story about the different meaning-oriented and existential approaches in addressing, organizing, and finding meaning in work (Chap. 18). All these findings, drawn from a wide set of current scientific approaches in humanities and natural sciences, are establishing a new understanding of the human capacity to drive positive change (Chap. 19).

Increasingly, specific services focused on the individual employee's search for a working environment and life well lived are being offered to staff. These services, ranging from business and executive coaching to counseling and employee assistance programs, are based on a shared set of ethics and values, all of which are based on a humanistic understanding of the person's best potentials, that all serve man's inherent search for meaning and, not being recognized, may lead to existential frustration. Coaching and workplace counseling refer to a variety of current therapeutic approaches, increasingly interested in the relevance and activation of the individual person's search for meaning (Chap. 20).

New approaches in finding meaning in the twenty-first-century work and in driving the “Copernican turn” are closely linked to a renaissance of philosophy and philosophic approaches. Viktor E Frankl has, until today, been the only doctor, professor, and therapist who based his approach and concept on an explicit image of humans and also on philosophical considerations, regarding human existence, which was hardly recognized in last century's discussion and activities, at least in the economic and business world. Today, a yearning for philosophy and humanity's existential foundations, their understanding of the very core of existence, going back to the ancient great thinkers' ideals and ideas about what makes us human, has entered the stage of modern work life, management, organizational development, and personal search for meaning in one's own existence. These philosophers' and engaged activists' ideas are supporting today's Copernican turn, providing insights and understanding of our potentials for driving the twenty-first-century renaissance (Chap. 21).

Being challenged not only by today's megatrends shaping our world but also haunted by the various crises around this planet, the undeniable scientific forecasts relating to climate change, depletion of our natural resources, regional conflicts, hunger, and migration, another paradigm shift can be observed: optimism in the face of adversity, for which Viktor Frankl has left us with an ever-encouraging concept of tragic optimism. An active entrepreneur has defined his own conclusion: “In case there is rescue ahead, I want to have been a part of it.” This active community, driving change in their respective functions in all realms of their work, is placing hope before hopelessness, arguing that for our sake and in responsible action toward the next generations, we cannot afford to stand aside; consequently, their efforts are driven by their commitment and their conviction that a silent revolution has begun (Chap. 22).

Which answers could an integrated approach give to man's current cry for meaning? Putting together all current activities around finding meaning in work and living a fulfilled life, based on values and the best human potentials, a meaning-centered integrated approach, based on Viktor Frankl's legacy, is emerging. There is a global community, strongly aligned along the common cause of working together for making the substantial difference. We are the beings that always decide. With our capacities, each of us is the active collaborator of the individual and our common fate. With the actions described in this book, each and every individual person is writing in the book of history, not only telling about the past but with an unknown number of blank pages, which, at the end, will testify on each individual person's behalf, in whatever organization, business, work, function, and service each person is active.

It is, in Frankl's terms, up to the individual person in their respective business, expert, professional, scientific and therapeutic communities, their commitment and engagement, up to all of us, in our respective work and private communities, to turn our work into an epic, worthy of humankind. There is a strong community, encouraging and driving this change (Chap. 23).

Chapter 2

The Image of Humans in Search for Meaning



Contents

2.1	Meaning: Wanting or Waiting?	8
2.2	Meaning Motivation	10
2.3	Meaning Beyond Functional Aspects	10
2.4	Ultimate Concerns	11
2.4.1	“Where Do We Come From?”	12
2.4.2	“What Are We?”	12
2.4.3	“Where Are We Going?”	13
2.5	Ultimate Meaning	14
2.6	Implications of the Discussion for Meaning and Work: Interim Conclusions	14
2.7	References	17

Discussing the concept of meaning in work and meaning in life implicitly presupposes some concept of being human. Although rarely being specifically clarified, searching for meaning in work is always based on a specific concept of the human being.

For more than a century, for mainstream behavioral sciences and economic theory and practices, meaning and purpose seemed minor or almost irrelevant factors for the human condition and human behavior. Although philosophers had been discussing and working on the influence of thoughts, emotions, and motives on human behavior, modern “doctors of the soul,” while focusing on human drives and learning, considered issues of meaning and purpose as rather ethereal constructs with little or no relevance for healing or for giving guidance for the individual on how to live a good life, or meaning and existential beliefs were considered as mere products of underlying drives. Freud’s, Adler’s, and Jung’s approaches as well as behavioral psychotherapy had little or no interest in existential issues, understanding them more in terms of secondary symptoms or issues to be neglected in the process of learning and potentially changing unproductive beliefs, while stressing either conscious or unconscious drives, motivating human behavior, or rationality and progress in learning, in intellectual insight and personal reflexivity.

While the abovementioned schools dramatically changed humanity’s insight into our soul, our drives, the psychological triggers for our suffering, the effects of the once powerful societal restrictions, and traditional limitations for our human condition, undoubtedly leading to a liberation of thinking, breaking intolerable taboos,

and curing the soul of many, these “schools” and approaches were based on an implicit, tacit image of humans.

Today, we live in an age of knowledge, of science, when natural sciences and technological inventions have substantially influenced the tacit image of humans.

What are the theoretical, psychological, and philosophical foundations of these approaches and practices? What is man in terms of human anthropology, studying and explaining the concept of the human person, and human ontology of being and existence?

Today, the rich foundations of the many facets of meaning, grounded in philosophical, anthropological, and ontological approaches of the human condition, have been rediscovered for a holistic understanding of meaning and its relevance for the twenty-first-century living.

We look back on the twentieth century’s many decades of diverse practical approaches and practices to meaning and existential issues in medical and daily life, addressing work-related and private topics, relating to meaning and existential givens, that are implicit components of each person’s life. Business coaching and consulting have taken aspects of meaning, existential issues, and human values on board of their literature and practices. Many practitioners in the field of coaching and consulting were referring in some way or the other to Viktor Frankl’s concept in grand appreciation of his very own giving witness as holocaust survivor to his concept with his own life, his suffering, and his terminal conclusions on man’s condition.

Together with developments in the various psychotherapeutic approaches, the new field of positive psychology emerged, putting meaning topics back on the agenda of a dynamic discussion around the very foundations of meaning and human existence, their conceptions, their importance, and influence on human’s conditions, well-being, health, and dealing with life’s challenges.

Today – in the age of knowledge and ever faster developments in science and technology – issues of meaning are emerging forcefully.

2.1 Meaning: Wanting or Waiting?

There are various fields of meaning-related sciences – philosophical, existential, linguistic, psychological, and semiotics – with multiple definitions of “meaning.”

Meaning can be defined as sense, purpose, end, intention, a shared mental representation of possible relationships and events, and the basis of an organized network of commonly shared concepts (MacKenzie and Baumeister 2014). Meaning is also defined as cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals and an accompanying sense of fulfillment, and a general perception of purpose and coherence (Mascaro 2014). Some concepts

have defined a hedonic meaning, a commitment to maximize individual pleasure. This, however, does not match the common understanding of meaning.

Wong (1998) has identified seven factors that are generally viewed as characteristics of a person leading an “ideally meaningful life”:

- Achievement
- Social adeptness
- Religion or spirituality
- Self-transcendence or altruism
- Self-acceptance or humility
- Emotional intimacy
- Fair treatment or justice

People are questioning:

- Does the world around us have a consistent meaning?
- Is there any purpose to existence?
- Is there a point of life?
- Does my life matter?
- How do I make a difference?

Today, we can refer to an impressive variety of scientific approaches and empirical findings referring to meaning, demonstrating substantial effort by the various dedicated schools, scientists, and research projects to conceptualize meaning. In their recent dedicated and impressive publication, Batthyany and Russo-Netzer (2014) have for the first time undertaken to present state-of-the-art scientific findings on meaning in positive and existential psychology.

Mainly three approaches have emerged, understanding meaning as:

- Motivational (defining goals and purpose)
- Cognitive (meaning making, sense of coherence)
- Various types of meaning (meaning in life, meaning of life, existential need)

MacKenzie and Baumeister (2014) defines three functions of meaning:

- To help people recognize and discern signals and patterns in the environment, to retrieve information about others, and to detect patterns of behavior
- To share information and knowledge and coordinate actions
- To regulate one’s behavior and affect, consider various options, and think about long range goals

Four needs for meaning as a human motivation to find answers and explanations for life events, a desire for life to make sense of things, can be differentiated:

- Purpose
- Values
- Efficacy
- Self-worth

Looking at latest research, a holistic conceptualization of meaning begins to emerge, relating either to:

- The more functional aspects of meaning as a need for striving, achievement, intimacy, religion/spirituality, and generativity
- The more existential level, personal meaning profile, relationships, religion, service, life work, and self-transcendence

2.2 Meaning Motivation

The influence of individual meaning fulfillment on the development of or protection against mental health problems has been widely tested; Batthyany and Russo-Netzer (2014) report on more than 320 empirical studies: According to these findings, meaning can be seen as an important psychological resource “that enables people to draw strengths and insights from their positive and negative experiences, gain perspective from their present situations and point toward a worthwhile and valuable future” (Batthyany and Russo-Netzer 2014, p. 9).

- There are significant correlations between lack of meaning and a general increase in specific mental health problems, either as causative mechanism or influencing the severity of the problems.
- Poor meaning in life is itself a significant predictor of overall mental health.
- Mental health affects both positive and negative aspects of well-being.
- A renewed meaning awareness would provide crucial healing and coping resources. The presence of meaning awareness was a more significant predictor of successful aging than traditional factors such as social and cognitive resources and other demographic variables.
- An increased sense of meaning in life has a curative effect for the individual person.
- Sense of meaning highly affects individual coping capacities.
- Meaning awareness is of high significance in the processing of external stressors and life events.
- Meaning may be a source of positive experiences.

2.3 Meaning Beyond Functional Aspects

Beyond all commonly shared insights into the promising benefits of meaning awareness for individual health and well-being, nevertheless, there is a basic “meaning problem” to be acknowledged.

We are constantly confronted with findings and behaviors that do not seem to make much sense, if the only rationale of meaning motivation were the functional

aspects to better cope with life events, to recover, to understand, to feel good, and to bounce back from adversity.

Everyday life alone is providing for regular examples, when bringing meaning to the individual life seems to be more than harvesting the best benefits of making meaning: All findings suggest that parenthood adds meaning to the parents' lives, but not necessarily immediate well-being, with their potential being confronted with substantial changes in all spheres of life, i.e., health, lack of sleep, economic situation, income, friends, individual spare time for hobbies, housing, etc.

In work life, we know of myriads of examples, when humans engage in actions against their individual, direct physical, or well-being benefit, because these activities appear to them more meaningful than not undertaking them and because they are understood and recognized as "good" by themselves and because they have a "value in themselves."

All volunteer work, all associations like Médecins Sans Frontières and other International Medical Aid and Crises, support activities; actually all fieldwork in international peace keeping and UN missions are based on dedication for the common good, risking personal health, well-being, and sometimes lives.

Apparently, searching for and finding meaning in life do not always relate to their functional implications and their positive benefits for the individual person in terms of empirically valid benefits. The opposite might be the case: The individual finds individual meaning beyond the tested individual short-term well-being benefits.

2.4 Ultimate Concerns

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Paul Gauguin, *Painting*, Oil on Canvas, Inscription in capital letters, about 1897

Meaning and meaning awareness are central psychological and philosophical factors for understanding and for coping with the challenges of life. Still, as human beings, we are confronted with the "meaning problem": Is search and striving for meaning a means to the end of achieving well-being or comfort from anxieties and existential givens, or is search for meaning an end in itself, relating to some objective correlate "out there"?

While there are powerful motivations to strive for "meaning" to achieve subjective well-being and fulfillment, this functional approach apparently does not represent the whole spectrum of human behavior. Persons act not for their own personal or functional goals but rather according to what seems "right and good" beyond personal gains or because they find meaning and personal growth in moments of sickness, guilt, and suffering, beyond the very functional understanding of getting better, addressing, understanding, and embracing life's ultimate concerns.

The human search for meaning apparently goes beyond a mere set of diagnostic issues, it is more than a subjective tool for getting better.