

LOGOTHERAPY'S CONSIDERATION OF MORALITY, VALUES, AND CONSCIENCE

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For many years I have been teaching about moral development in my graduate classes in child and adolescent development at Hardin-Simmons University. In these classes we look primarily at the theories of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg and touch lightly on the work of Carol Gilligan who has described moral development from the female perspective.



The present paper delves more deeply into what Viktor Frankl said about the source of morality, and it reviews what Logotherapy teaches about this important topic. The purpose for attempting this task is to come to a greater understanding of the source of morality according to Logotherapy. This includes comparing Logotherapy with other philosophies and theories.

Some of my motivation to pursue this task comes from looking at the moral climate of our world today. The growing violence, the terrorist acts, failure of adults to exercise moral leadership, and the continuation of racism and bigotry in our world all make me wonder about the state of morality in our society and the personal conscience of persons growing up in today's world.

In this paper, I define and discuss morality, values, and conscience. These three terms are interrelated but also distinct. Therefore, they warrant discussion and clarification separately.

Morality

*Morality has to do with a doctrine or system of morals, or principles of right and wrong behavior. When looking at the term from a philosophical or sociological perspective, Robert Carter (philosopher and author of *Dimensions of Moral Education*) stated that "morality is concerned with the well being of another person and with actions which treat and recognize the other person as being as worthy of respect and justice as oneself, or anyone else."¹, p.5*

If that is the essence of morality, then according to Carter "what ought to occupy our attention is how to foster in others the capacity to empathize by placing themselves in another's place, and to

apply generally such principles as justice, fairness, and equality of treatment."¹, p.5 Therefore, to be moral we must develop role-taking ability and understand more fully the inner states that underlie the behavior of others. One way educators can promote moral growth, therefore, is by enhancing the role-taking perspectives of young children.

Frankl spoke about values and conscience rather than about morality. As Gould stated, "Frankl does not moralize, but his philosophy embraces a moral sense of being that is energized by an intuitive conscience."⁶, p.13 It is important to note that Frankl stressed that we are free to obey or disobey our conscience. It was very important to Frankl that we understand that we have the freedom to choose right from wrong.

For morality to be meaningful, according to Frankl, it must be something we freely choose over other alternatives. Moral choices are different from instinctual behavior in that they arise out of our free will. Frankl agreed with Adler that the biological, sociological, and psychological factors are important. We are driven or at least affected by instinctual forces; we are influenced by the social milieu in which we live; and we are affected by the training, cognitions, and emotions that are a part of our psyche. However, it is our noetic dimension that allows the personal freedom and responsibility that is necessary in the moral realm.

Frankl's perspective on morality would be placed in the higher stages of Kohlberg's description of moral reasoning. According to Kohlberg, young children make moral choices based on self-interest. The moral choices they make are based on avoiding punishment or giving deference to an authority figure. Or they make decisions on the basis of "what's in it for me?" This is called the *pre-conventional level* of moral reasoning where self is the primary concern. As we develop cognitively we become less egocentric and more socialized in our perspective. Therefore, we become more concerned about how others see us and wonder about what they think of us. Moral reasoning at the *conventional level* is based on meeting the expectations of others and a sense of duty to obey the law for the good of all. At Kohlberg's highest level, the *post-conventional level*, we do what is right on the basis of higher principles, not because we want others to think we are a good person or because we have a *duty* to obey the law, but because we are guided by a higher principle of what is just and right—to bring honor and dignity to all humankind.

It appears that many in our society are at Kohlberg's pre-conventional level of moral reasoning asking "What's in it for me?" Frankl would change that question to ask, "What does life demand or expect from me?" "What is expected of me in terms of

responsibleness?" Frankl went on to say, "We are not fully human until we reach out to another person with empathy in a common search for meaning."⁴, p.21

Immanuel Kant has been referred to as the father of modern philosophy. "For Kant, the origin and decisions of conscience come from what he called 'a priori reason,' not from external circumstances or from internal psychological conditions."⁵, p.40 Kant defined a priori reason as "the source of the maxims and laws that guide conscience."⁵, p.40 Kant spoke of *moral law within* or a *moral imperative* often referred to as the *moral categorical imperative*. Kant, who is known as the *philosopher of duty*, felt that we have a moral core within us and with it go certain moral obligations.

Frankl shared this point of view, although he saw it somewhat differently. Instead of referring to a moral imperative, he often spoke of a moral compass within us. One of the differences between Frankl and Kant is that "Kant uses the term *duty* as the operative word while Frankl chooses the term *meaning*."⁵, p.52

Kant's view is similar to Kohlberg's fourth stage of moral reasoning where duty to obey the law is of primary concern as one reasons about moral issues. Frankl's reasoning is similar to Kohlberg's fifth or sixth stages, which consider higher moral principles that may sometimes require the individual to go beyond the letter of the law in making moral choices.

As Gould stated, "Frankl recognizes the necessity of the concept of duty as a response to what he calls the demand quality of life, but he sees Kant's view of duty for the sake of duty as reductionistic, centering on the law rather than on meaning which allows freedom and responsibleness."⁵, p.52 Frankl saw duty when pursued as a primary goal a very limiting factor that can result in disappointment and failure. If however, *meaning* is pursued as a primary goal, duty can ensue.

By putting duty into the framework of meaning, Frankl transformed the Kantian categorical command to obey duty into a direction that instead activates the spiritual dimension of the will. It is the noetic dimension that allows for human possibilities to transcend beyond duty to the expression of meaning. In other words, our search for meaning and value in life does not come from a *a priori reason* described by Kant, but from the noetic dimension which is the source and power of one's morality.

Values

While referring to morality, it is impossible not to simultaneously refer to values and conscience as well. These three concepts definitely overlap and it is difficult to completely separate one from another.

Frankl seemed to see morality and meaning as the same. When we determine what we ought to do or what is the right thing to do, we find what is meaningful for that particular moment or time or place.

Frankl defined meaning as "what is meant," e.g., what is meant for you in your present situation. This, then, refers to the specific, unique, and personal situations in which each of us finds ourselves. Of the many choices and alternatives that we have, we will only be able to choose one. This choice places a value on what is chosen. How we value is how we choose.

Value has to do with the relative worth, or utility, importance, or significance of something. Carter, the philosopher quoted earlier, defined value as "something you use to subordinate one end-in-view to another in determining what is prized and what is done."¹
^{p.137} Carter went on to say that a great deal of what you are as a person depends upon what you select as valuable and disvaluable. (Frankl would say... on what you select as meaningful).

Logotherapy teaches us that our search for meaning (or personal values) in our life is highly personal and distinct. Frankl also stressed, that even though we are unique, we also share many common qualities as human beings. Millions of people have gone through situations that were similar enough that they reacted in a similar way. They began to find what was meaningful in certain standard situations. In other words, *universal meanings* were found. This is how Frankl defined values—as *universal meanings*. He used the term *meaning* to refer to the unique and specific values in a person's life.

According to Fabry, "Universal values may even spare us decision making altogether: We simply follow generally accepted values."² ^{p.56} But if we follow general values without searching for the unique meaning of a situation, we may find it simplifies life, however it may also prove costly.

When I present Kohlberg's moral dilemma to my graduate classes, I ask my students to take a stand on what Heinz should do. Should he steal the drug that may save the life of his dying wife? Some of my students will quickly decide it is wrong to steal the drug under any circumstances because it is breaking the law. Some cannot make up their mind, and they experience a good bit of conflict over the choice. Others feel certain that they would steal it if there were the possibility that the life of a loved one could be saved. They place the value of life over law. I then complicate the issue even more by asking, "Should he steal the drug if he doesn't love his wife, or if the dying person is a stranger?" All this is to point out that many times there are value conflicts in the situations we face.

Not everything about personal values is black or white, or clearly right or wrong, and we sometimes have to choose between the lesser of the two wrongs. Conflicts between two sets of values do occur and we sometimes find our values overlapping or contradicting each other.

Frankl felt that we should visualize values as spheres in three-dimensional space where values have a higher or lower position. In other words, values have a hierarchy. This would imply that even in following values, we are not spared making decisions. In the process of deciding on the meaning of the moment we must decide which personal value we consider higher in our hierarchy of values.

We are reminded how Frankl and his wife Tillie were faced with value conflicts when they arrived at Auschwitz concentration camp. "When the time came to say goodbye Frankl told his wife with great emphasis, 'Stay alive at all costs.' He had become aware that in this unique situation it was his responsibility to give her his absolution in advance for whatever she might find necessary to preserve her life."^{2, p.61} Frankl knew his wife was beautiful and it was possible that an SS officer might become interested in her. This could be a chance to save her life. However, he also knew that the value of marital fidelity was rooted in her. He felt by not releasing her from her moral obligation toward him he might have become co-responsible for her death. In the same way, in the hypothetical situation of Heinz stealing the drug to save his wife, Heinz was putting life as a higher priority than law.

Even though general values can be helpful in making decisions, when we determine what is meaningful for a particular moment or time or place we still must decide about seemingly conflicting, or hierarchical values that we face. It is very important to realize that a value hierarchy cannot be arbitrarily fabricated. It must be formed by each one personally. One cannot impose his or her order of values on another. As Fabry stated, "We must find the reality of our lives. Whether reality is placed there by God or by life is a question we must decide. The important thing is that a value hierarchy exists and that it is up to us to find our own."^{2, p.63}

Conscience

Frankl said that conscience has the task of disclosing to a person the one thing that is required. It is to direct us to that unique possibility that is to be actualized in a specific situation (the meaning of the moment). This is why Kant's general law, the *categorical imperative*, does not work in these unique situations and why conscience cannot be described in rational terms but only intuitively.

Frankl spoke of the transcendent quality of conscience. In other words, conscience comes from something beyond ourselves.

In his book, *The Unconscious God*, Frankl quoted Maria Von Ebner Eschenback who said, "Be the master of your will and the servant of your conscience."¹⁴, p.52 Frankl, in speaking about conscience asked, "...might it not be something higher than he who merely perceives its 'voice'?"¹⁴, p.53 According to Frankl, we cannot be servant of conscience if it is simply a part of ourselves. Therefore, conscience transcends who we are. It comes from something beyond our self.

It is important to realize that conscience, which originates in transcendence, must necessarily be of a personal nature. Frankl stated that "more correctly, however, we would have to speak of a transpersonal agent of which the human person is just the 'image'."¹⁴, p.54 Frankl gave an example that illustrated this idea. He spoke of the human navel as appearing meaningless when seen as an isolated phenomenon. It can only be understood in the context of its prenatal history and even more points beyond the individual to his origin in his mother. Frankl went on to say, "It is the same with conscience; it can only be fully understood as a phenomenon pointing to its own transcendent origin."¹⁴, p.54

According to Fabry, "True conscience is not just what parents, religion, or society tell us. These influences are real, but at our core we still have this strange little voice. It plays a central part in our life. How we listen and how we act upon what we hear can make our life meaningful or empty, can cause happiness or fulfillment, or tension, conflicts, frustration, and mental disease."¹², p.67 Our task then is to listen to our conscience. Fabry went on to say that this may well be the most important task we have that will bring meaning into our lives.

Frankl reminds us that we not only are guided by conscience in our search for meaning, but also we are sometimes misled by it as well. Even more, we may never know for sure whether it has been the true meaning to which we have committed ourselves. This occurs because many times we must make our choices in the face of uncertainty. Often we are called on to act or make decisions based on incomplete evidence. Fabry made the point that "Columbus never would have discovered America had he waited for all the information on which to base his decision to start out on his journey." Fabry continued, "Few people would decide on a career, marriage, or parenthood if they waited till all the information was in."¹², p.71

However, the possibility that our conscience may err does not release us from the necessity of trying. Gordon Allport, formerly a Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, has been quoted as

saying, "We can be at one and the same time half sure and whole hearted."^{2, p.69}

Even greater than the risk that we may be misled by our conscience is the risk of a suppressed conscience. In extreme cases the suppression of conscience may make someone an Adolf Eichman or an Adolf Hitler or a Timothy McVey. Frankl often was asked about the conscience of the Germans under National Socialism. Did their conscience tell them to betray their mothers and fathers for the sake of the state? Did it tell them to commit mass murder? Frankl's answer was that he does not believe Hitler ever obeyed his conscience. "Never can one's true conscience," Frankl said, "command one to do what Hitler did." Frankl also stated, "I am convinced that Hitler would never have become what he did unless he suppressed within himself the voice of conscience."^{3, p.66}

According to Fabry, Hitler's Germany also illustrates what can happen if conscience is not heard over indoctrination by a dictator. "The German tragedy lay in the fact that the German people confused the state ideology with their personal conscience."^{2, p.69} Some did follow the voice of their conscience as dangerous as it was. Many Germans risked their lives to help hide Jews and other victims during the Nazi regime. Some lost their lives and others were imprisoned in the concentration camps. Many died there because they chose to listen to the voice of their conscience.

Tools to Live in an Imperfect World

As an educator, I find myself looking to the schools to see what role they might play to promote the development of morals and values in our world. What should be our aim?

Frankl was aware that education can play a major role in helping the young find meaning and therefore morality and values in their life. He also was aware that we are living in a time when the existential vacuum is very prevalent among the young. He saw the foremost task of education, not just to transmit knowledge and traditions, but instead to refine one's capacity to find the unique meanings in one's life. "Today's education," he stated, "cannot afford to proceed along the lines of tradition, but must elicit the ability to make independent and authentic decisions."^{3, p.64}

In a television interview by Dr. Huston Smith, Frankl was asked how Professors in Universities can teach values to students. He answered, "Values cannot be taught; they must be lived. What we can give our students is not a meaning but an example, that is to say, the example of commitment to a cause worthy of such a commitment..."^{2, p.105}

Another task of schools is to do all we can to help students become aware of what it means to be fully human and to recognize and use all of the creative forces of life. This means going beyond the intellectual to the noetic dimension. Frankl asserted, "The potentialities of life are not indifferent possibilities but must be seen in the light of meaning and values."^{5, p.143} Young people have so many possibilities available to them today. They need to be helped to realize that the choices they make in each situation not only have implications for the present moment, but for their future as well. How can we help them to reach into the healthy core of their existence when faced with the multitude of choices and potentialities before them? It involves self-transcendence, which is the essence of our human existence.

Frankl hypothesized, and statistical evidence supports the fact that people are likely to become aggressive and to perform violent acts when they are caught in a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness.^{4, p.102} Research has also found that "Criminality and purpose in life are inversely related."^{4, p.103} In light of such facts, it appears that the message of Logotherapy can be particularly applicable to the treatment of delinquents and the rehabilitation of those who are in our prison systems. Even more, perhaps it can be applied to deter the development of such behaviors.

Frankl stated, "If one is to overcome the ills and ailments of this age, he must properly understand them – that is to say, understand them as the effects of frustration." He went on to say, "and if one is to understand the frustrations of man, he has to understand his motivations, to begin with, and especially the most human of human motivations, which is man's search for meaning."^{4, p.104}

Imagine a world where people are encouraged to search for meaning and are able to grow into individuals who recognize the full potential of their humanness while simultaneously recognizing their connectedness to something beyond themselves. This would be a world in which its inhabitants are in touch with their noetic or spiritual dimension; a world where people listen to the voice of their conscience; where they prize and value the things that will lead to a life of service and self-transcendence.

We have to admit, however, we live in an imperfect world. Because of the freedom we have been given to choose the course of our existence, we will never have a perfect world. But Logotherapy gives us tools to live in an imperfect world. Logotherapy gives us tools to respond to the challenges and demands of our lives. It gives us tools to endure all circumstances, even when things are not as we would choose. It gives us tools to

make this a better world, a more moral and meaningful place in which to live and grow.

Let us use Logotherapy's principles to find the strength to recognize our values and listen to our conscience – thus to live morally and serve as examples. And, let us use Logotherapy's principles to do all we can to spread the message and encourage those who need it most to listen to their conscience and find their own unique meanings.

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