

Outlines of Viktor Emil Frankl's Religious Philosophy

Religion is not about ensuring the accomplishment of a relaxed life conduct, or the lack of conflict or some other psycho-hygienic objective.

Religion offers more to human being than psychotherapy; and indeed expects more from her or him.

Viktor Emil FRANKL

In the following paper we shall analyze the religious philosophy of Austrian doctor and philosopher Viktor Emil FRANKL (1905–1997). Scientific literature in this field refers to logotherapy and existential analysis, the disciplines founded by FRANKL as the third Wiener school of psychotherapy, next to Sigmund FREUD's psychoanalysis and Alfred ADLER's individual psychology.¹

FRANKL, however, only partially continues the inheritance of the other two schools, as the names of these new disciplines also show. Logotherapy and existential analysis are rooted in a different philosophical dimension, to such an extent that FRANKL's work can be interpreted independently from a psychological history of reception.²

This is especially valid for fragments in which FRANKL discusses religious phenomena and their philosophical and psychological connections. In this respect, psychoanalysis still has a great importance for FRANKL as a counter-example of the theory and methodology of psychotherapy, which, while performing its tasks, strives for the re-humanization of medical science and psychotherapy by the emphasis of their particularly human characteristics.

¹ Logotherapy means curing by reason. Existential analysis means the analysis of existence as a particular human reality emphasized by existentialist philosophers. As a psychotherapy, existential analysis is a method that maps the existential possibilities of the concrete human being, focusing on the individual's possibilities of rational accomplishment and responsibility in connection to the factors determining the given situation.

² Cf. SÁRKÁNY. 2004.

It is not farfetched to say that, contrary to the antitheism of psychoanalysis, logotherapy and existential analysis favours a treatment of methodological atheism. In a scientific sense, FRANKL perceives either pole of the debate of materialism versus idealism not as a starting point but as a question for decision.

From the point of view of science theory, the position of the problem mixes the viewpoints of the fifties and the sixties, but this situation does not make its message unimportant for contemporary psychology and philosophy. It is even more so in places where some years ago materialism was regarded as a compulsory "intellectual" approach of all scientific research due to pseudo-scientific dogmatism and the political pressure accompanying it.

Thus, it is not merely the objectivity of the research that gets damaged, but also the intellectual freedom of the individual conducting the research. The question characteristic for the period of ideological struggles, but mistaken from the point of view of the referred discipline, is often asked even today: according to logotherapy, was it the matter or the spirit, which was first? In his book, translated into Magyar (Hungarian), Irvin D. YALOM formulates the characteristics of the concept of FRANKL's logotherapy as follows:

"Logotherapy does not belong to the psychoanalytical schools, nor formal psychiatry, nor religious teachings, nor theoretical behavioural psychology, and not even to the 'light' trends of personality development. What is more, in scholarly circles FRANKL's method is considered outrageous by many. His argumentation is often pretentious; he exhorts, he makes peremptory declarations, he often repeats himself, and he is uproarious. In addition, although he claims that his approach to reason is of a secular nature (...), it is clear that FRANKL's approach is a religious one. (...) The works of his followers are definitely inexpressive, and mainly consist of the repetition of the master's statements and his personal glorification."³

In spite of all this, YALOM considers FRANKL's work notable; what is more, he formulates his existential psychotherapy in the spirit of logotherapy. His attitude is exemplary, as it is meaningless to judge the value of FRANKL's doctrine on the basis of his presumed or actual personality and the deplorable ideas of some of his followers; that would also be a typical example of darkest psychologism.

There is an essential contradiction, however, to be noted in the quotation; namely the fact that when speaking about the difficulties of categorizing the discipline of logotherapy, YALOM states that

³ YALOM. 1980. 346.

FRANKL's approach is not a religious one, and several lines later, when formulating the general prejudices against his theory, we read that "FRANKL's approach is a fundamentally religious one". Well now, is logotherapy religious or not?

YALOM does not deal with this problem, but it is important from the point of view of this study, as it points to the particularity of logotherapy: it is not religious, that is, it is not connected directly to any form of confession. At the same time, it can be regarded as partly religious, because the theory and practice of logotherapy does not stop at the level of existential psychotherapy, namely the humanistic turn, but continues the questioning. One of FRANKL's programmatic fragments is worth quoting:

"Our attempt to exceed nihilism only succeeded by revealing the existentiality of human life. Well, humanism can only be successfully prolonged, if we reveal the transcendence of human existence. By proving that vital and social forces and powers do not expressly define the human being, (...) we have regained the existence of the human being. Now, by adding transcendence to the essential study of the human being, we strive to re-establish an image of the human being which orientates itself by the true nature of the human being, inasmuch as it claims that this image contains the essential traces of transcendence. An image of the human being true to the essence blows up the frameworks of both facticity and immanence. The image of the human being cannot be accomplished within the limits of immanence. The human being perceives itself as the image of God – or else becomes its own distorted image."⁴

The quotation makes it clear that FRANKL's theory and therapy of personality is trans-personal, that is, it draws from a dimension exceeding the all-time individual. It should be emphasized that, although it draws from this dimension, its conception is nevertheless radically personalist.

Radically, that is, in accordance with the original meaning of the word 'radical', it is a conception which reveals the roots of personality, and which, accordingly, treats the dimension of trans-personality as self-evident. Moreover, FRANKL does not apply any kind of spectacular psychological theories or oriental techniques, seemingly "transcendent" to our culture, and therefore ideologically neutral.

Instead, as apparent in the quotation above, he prefers the terminology of Western philosophy and theology. His concept of

⁴ FRANKL. 1996, 220–230.

religion is also articulated on the basis of his philosophical presuppositions, which can be summarized in three points: the person is a self-transcendent being; there are (objective) meaningful signs (tasks) in the world; the person answers to, and accomplishes these objective and meaningful signs.

Consequently, the trans-personal manifestations and confessional religions in logotherapy are based on the one hand on the person's self-transcendence, and on the other hand on the (objective) meaningful reality of these phenomena.

In the following, while presenting and explaining the concept of religion of logotherapy, we shall present the anthropology of existential analysis in comparison to a psychoanalytical approach. Finally, we shall discuss the theological affinity of FRANKL's conception.

I. Religion as an Existential (Intellectual) Phenomenon

FRANKL clearly defines the task of logotherapy in what is considered to be his major work, his book entitled *Medical Psychotherapy*: "Just as in the history of philosophy psychologism has been surmounted, something must surmount it in psychotherapy as well, and we would like to term this something logotherapy. This logotherapy – as a "psychotherapy of an intellectual approach" – will have the task to complete psychotherapy in the narrowest sense, and fill the gap that we first try to theoretically deduce, and then justify by psychotherapeutic practice."⁵

Logotherapy is thus primarily meant to eliminate the psychologism appearing in the theory and practice of psychotherapy. Psychologism is a flawed scientific method by which all scholarly, artistic, or even religious accomplishments are interpreted as psychological phenomena, referring to the psychological profile of the subject connected to these accomplishments, in accordance with the pattern of "nothing else than".

According to this approach, it is the task of empirical psychology, which examines the psychological laws of perception, attention and thinking, to answer the basic questions of thinking, religion and art.

The most frequently used counter-argument of psychologism points to the contradictory nature of this method. An inductive psychophysical science cannot form the basis of, for instance, pure logic, which analyzes the laws of thinking, because in the course of its application it already presupposes the existence of the principles of logic (for example, the law of contradiction).⁶

⁵ FRANKL. 1997. 33.

⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the criticism of psychologism, see: HUSSERL. 1992.

Logotherapy is meant for the practical application of this argument; its primary task is to expose the methodological psychologism of assistance professions. Its starting point is the “intellectual approach”, meaning that FRANKL separates the intellectual dimension of the human being from psychological phenomena on the basis of classical Greek and Christian “stratified anthropology” (body, soul and intellect) and the development of contemporary philosophy (phenomenology and existential philosophy).

According to this, specifically human phenomena are not embodied by psychological laws, but by anthropological and ethical concepts like freedom and responsibility. The person – as FRANKL emphasizes over and over – is capable of detaching herself or himself from the direct influence of her or his environment on account of her or his freedom and responsible being. By placing oneself in the service of a certain business even against one’s own psychological nature, one is capable therefore to exceed oneself, in FRANKL’s terms, in the direction of reason of an individual task revealing itself in a concrete situation.⁷

It directly derives from this that FRANKL considers religion not an exclusively psychological but also an “intellectual” phenomenon, in which the person’s transcendence of herself or himself (*self-transcendence*) is eminently expressed. Doubtlessly, FRANKL’s objection to the psycho-dynamic reduction of religion and his claim for the *nodynamic* aspect of human phenomenon are serious offences against the method of psychologism.⁸

It is a question, however, whether the existential analytical revelation of the intellect as an independent sphere of human existence can indeed definitively eliminate the psychologism connected to religion. In a first approach it can, since logotherapy and existential analysis do not project religion onto the level of psychological life, but posit it as an intellectual phenomenon, which belongs to typically human phenomena.

Nevertheless, at a closer look, it seems that the problem of psychologism appears again, although on a higher level: religion is articulated not through a psychological, but an intellectual reduction. From the point of view of the history of religion, FRANKL also defines religion by the method of “nothing else than” in the following way:

⁷ Self-transcendence and the “defying power of the intellect” are closely connected anthropological phenomena for FRANKL. Cf. FRANKL. 2006. 59–70.

⁸ Nodynamic is nothing else than the tension between being (*Sein*) and must (*Sollen*).

religion is nothing else than an intellectual phenomenon, that is, a reality given together with the existence of the person.

Thus FRANKL treats the reality of religion not as a restricted psychological but as a more comprehensive anthropological concept. Therefore, from the point of view of typology of the systematic history of religion, MEZEI Balázs’ attempt to present FRANKL’s concept of religion as a reductive religious historical endeavour seems justified, although he admits that FRANKL “achieves the least reductive form of religious psychology”.⁹

And indeed, the reductive approach to existential analysis is moderated by at least two aspects: on the one hand by FRANKL’s repeated emphasis that religion is much more than it is made apparent by the particularly human categories (*existentialies*) of individual decision and responsibility¹⁰; and, on the other hand, at least according to the interpretive reading of existential analysis, by the differentiation between the terms of religion and religiousness.¹¹

On the basis of this, it becomes evident that it is not the psychology and anthropology of religion, but of religiousness, that he speaks about. Naturally, the reductive concept of religion is also assisted by the terminology in use, inasmuch as the terms *religious pedagogy* or *religious psychology* for instance suggest that these disciplines do not research the pedagogy or psychology of religiousness, but of religion itself.¹²

Therefore, one must differentiate between the various approaches to religion based on one’s attempt to a philosophical treatment of the problem, namely the notional description of the completeness of religion; or a psychological treatment, namely the analysis of the phenomenon of religiousness.

II. Meta-psychology versus Meta-anthropology

If we conceive psychology as an objective science of subjectivity, then FREUD’s and FRANKL’s first reduction connected to religion is plausible. Religion, this comprehensive and very complex phenomenon, is projected onto the sphere of subjectivity. The difference between the two authors lies first of all in the different interpretation of the

⁹ MEZEI. 1995. 13.

¹⁰ See the motto of the article.

¹¹ FRANKL uses the terms *Religion* and *Religiosität*, but does not define their meanings as terms. These two words denote phenomenologically different incidents.

¹² Cf. ANGEL. 2002. 86.

nature of subjectivity. In FREUD's case, religion reaches to the limits of the science he terms *meta-psychology*. The pertaining programmatic fragment is worth quoting:

"I believe that the mythological ideology reaching deeply into the most modern of religions is nothing else for its most part than a *psychology projected to the external world*. (...) It is the task of science to transform this reality beyond perception back to the *psychology of the unconscious*. We could undertake the task to dissolve thus the myths of the Garden of Eden, the original sin, God, good and evil, immortality, etc., and transform *metaphysics* into *meta-psychology*."¹³

Meta-psychology is the anthropological model of psychoanalysis, having a fairly simple philosophical program: by analogy to paranoia, the dissolution of the metaphysical world imagined over or beyond "reality" into the Freudian concepts meant to describe reality. The concepts of the "psyche apparatus", described by psychoanalysis and complying with the rules of mechanics are the primal id (*Es*), the rational ego (*Ich*) and the super-I (*Überich*).

Based on these, cultural achievements for FREUD are the particular representations of a self-preservation instinct and even more so of libido, the principal tasks of which are to "defend the person against nature".¹⁴ FREUD never ceases to emphasize that religion has an outstanding role among cultural achievements, as it attributes every action to the intention of a reason beyond us, and thus protects us from the threatening forces of nature.

Thus FREUD places religion in the world of imagination and investigates the problem of "what these ideas are in the mirror of psychology".¹⁵ Psychology understood as psychoanalysis concludes that "the I is not lord in its own house", that is, religion must also be interpreted in connection to the effects of processes outside the field of the I (mind and will).

Religion, just like culture as a whole, is an *illusion*: as FREUD formulates the ultimate concept of his reduction. Illusions, similar to psychiatric delusions, can be traced back to human desires.¹⁶ The psychologism of FREUD's concept stands clear before us even following this short summarizing analysis.

In connection to this, and in order to present the contradictory

13 FREUD. 1990. 202–203.

14 FREUD. 1991. 21.

15 FREUD. 1991. 26.

16 FREUD. 1991. 38.

methodology of psychologism in psychotherapy, FRANKL speaks about the psychogenesis of psychologism.¹⁷ According to this, psychologism within the field of psychotherapy can be unmasked by applying its own methods to its own self, and thus finding the motifs underlying the arguments of psychologism.

Psychoanalysis sees masks everywhere; for example, religion and art are nothing else in a psychoanalytic perception than the primitive person's attempt to escape. According to this pattern, FRANKL stresses, psychoanalysis itself is a mask, an escape from tasks of cognition and decision; in other words, an escape from reality and responsibility.

For FRANKL the various types of isms (naturalism, biologism, sociologism) are results of a false perception of science, which orientate themselves on the basis of a previously accepted deterministic principle, offending by this the very territory which is most specific to a human being: her or his freedom, or in anthropological terms, her or his intellectual dimension.

As apparent from those said above, FRANKL distinguishes the intellectual dimension from psycho-physical manifestations, as the philosophical concept which, beside the specific rules of the latter, expresses human freedom and the ability of decision. It is important to emphasize that FRANKL perceives this distinction exclusively heuristically. The introduction of the differentiated terms of soul and intellect are actually meant to show the aspects of an indissoluble unity.¹⁸ Therefore, religiousness involves the human being's entire existence.

In his book dedicated to the relationship of psychotherapy and religion, FRANKL summarizes the results of the research of existential analysis in three points. As the starting point of the research, he marks the "ancient phenomenological state of human existence as a conscious and responsible existence".

Following this, logotherapy has attached the intellectual dimension to the spiritual dimension, revealing the unconscious spirituality of the person, which manifests itself phenomenologically by existential decisions. In the third stage of development FRANKL's existential analysis revealed the unconscious religiousness within the unconscious spirituality of the person: the reference to an unconscious God. It displayed the transcendent "You" behind an immanent "I".

This way FRANKL gets to the definition of the "unconscious God", which however does not refer to God's unconscious nature, but to the

17 FRANKL. 1997. 43.

18 FRANKL. 1997. 34.

fact that our relationship with God can sometimes be unconscious or even suppressed.¹⁹ Likewise, Frankl also draws attention on the fact that these statements do not leave the ground of empiricism, and so they do not refer to a “short-circuited” metaphysics or a “dilettante theology”; instead, they are based on the methods of free association and dream interpretation elaborated exactly by psychoanalysis.²⁰

From a methodological point of view, however, existential analysis handles facts as “phenomenological facts”, that is, it does not reformulate them for sake of a previous dogmatic concept of science. Religiousness, FRANKL claims, does not have the character of instinct, but rather of decision: “Religiousness is either existential or nonexistent.”²¹

Therefore, the psycho-hygienic significance of religiousness increases in logotherapy, not without meaning, however, that religion is something utterly different than psychotherapy or logotherapy.²² It derives from all this that the subjective psychological and anthropological aspects of religion stand in the forefront of the investigations of existential analysis, similarly to psychoanalysis. And still, in accordance with his phenomenological approach, FRANKL arrives to completely different results than FREUD.

From this perspective, it is not religion that is unmasked as an illusion, but any kind of seemingly scientific pseudo-metaphysical theory, which displays religion and the phenomenon of religiousness as the impediment of humanity and science, neglecting several other dimensions of religious reality:

“Existential analysis has not been standing where psychoanalysis had been for a long time now; we are not concerned with the future of an illusion any more, but with the eternity of a reality. With eternity, with the present, the presentness of a reality, which has revealed for us the religiousness of the human being: with a reality understood in a strictly empirical sense. A reality, which may remain unconscious, and which can be suppressed.”²³

Therefore religion in Frankl's eyes is not an illusory manifestation of the human soul, but a reality which could also be distorted by a religiousness extradited to authoritative reason.²⁴ If we perceive the

19 Cf. FRANKL. 2002. 50–59.

20 FRANKL. 2002. 53.

21 FRANKL. 2002. 53.

22 See again the motto of the article.

23 FRANKL. 2002. 56.

24 This line of thought is in harmony with the arguments of Joseph RATZINGER (Pope BENEDICT

reality of religion as “dynamic totality”,²⁵ then, in this comprehensive horizon of meaning, religion interpreted in an existential analytical way always appears as the concrete religiousness of a concrete individual, as the true possibility of her or his freedom, decision, and responsibility.

Religion is thus an independent phenomenological fact to which the human being relates one way or another by her or his decisions. In FRANKL's concept, religion is not the person who asks the question related to the meaning of life, but life itself, and everybody answers it with their own lives.²⁶

In FRANKL's understanding this means that the human being is first and foremost a responsibility-being. Deriving from this, the question of religion is answered in each individual person by their responsibility-beings. Whether the individual person experiences this particular question as the voice of their consciousness or the word of a personal God is insignificant from the point of view of logotherapy.

It can be stated, on the basis of the above, that logotherapy and existential analysis radically break with the Freudian program of meta-psychology, which is problematic not only from a scientific but also from a philosophical point of view.²⁷ Instead, FRANKL overtly speaks about a metaphysically nuanced concept of person and therapy,²⁸ which we, employing SCHELER's term, understand as a meta-anthropological viewpoint.

Meta-anthropology points to the relationship of “the most formal ideal of an endless and absolute otherworld existence”²⁹ and the unity of the person. That is, FRANKL's logotherapy and existential analysis create a concept of anthropology that recognises the existence of a dimension beyond the person, but only realises it in the phenomenon of self-transcendence.

XVI.). Cf. HABERMAS–RATZINGER. 2005.

25 In MEZEI's approach the unity of reality and the “meaning of reality” is achieved in religion. Cf. MEZEI. 2004.

26 Cf. FRANKL. 1993. 16.

27 For a detailed analysis of Freudian meta-psychology, see: NYÍRI. 1993.

28 Cf. FRANKL. 1996. 70.

29 SCHELER. 1995. 107.

III. Logotherapy as Individual Mystagogy

Religion for FREUD appears in connection to the principle of joy (*Wille zur Lust*). FRANKL, however, implies a more basic phenomenon of will: if the person knows why, then she or he can bear almost any kind of 'how'-s.³⁰ From the point of view of motivation theory, existential analysis points to the will striving for meaning (*Wille zum Sinn*) as a basically human phenomenon and hails the unconditioned meaning of life.

But what is the source of this unconditioned meaning? FRANKL stops at this point, considering that the positive answer to this question can only be given by faith. Existential analysis draws attention to the concrete unity of the person, happening here and now, while it detaches the intentional content pointing beyond the formal elements of absolute otherworld existence to the sphere of faith.

In FRANKL's view, the human being is not capable of achieving meaning beyond immediate tasks or concrete individual tasks. The ultimate meaning, which penetrates the universe, is given as an effect and not as a task to be achieved: "it accomplishes itself independently of my action and will, whether or not I add to it, or cooperate with it."³¹

Accordingly, he terms the comprehensive meaning of life or the world by the category of "beyond meaning". FRANKL consistently differentiates thus between personal meaning and the kind of meaning that the human being searches for in particular approaches (philosophy or theology). Despite this, theologians have always eagerly referred to FRANKL's work, as the importance of logotherapy in religious pedagogy and pastoral psychology is significant.

Naturally, these references always aim at the widening of FRANKL's perspective and the completion of logotherapy. They lack the fact that logotherapy ceases to question further in relation to the problem of meaning; while recognizing the unconditioned meaning of life, it stops at a here-and-now meaning and does not question its lively source.³²

Philosophical theology, however, in accordance with its task, steps further in the name of that lively experience, which Paul the Apostle describes in his oration to the Greeks on the Areopagos: "Yet God is actually not far from any one of us: for in God we live and move, and have our being" (Acts 17,27–28).

³⁰ In relation to this, FRANKL always quotes NIETZSCHE. For example: FRANKL. 1997. 257.

³¹ FRANKL. 1996. 278.

³² Cf. NÉMETH. 1993.

According to FRANKL, it is only faith, and not any kind of knowledge, that makes possible the transition to a higher dimension. And faith, just like love, cannot be willed. "As intentional activities, they only come into being if an adequate content and object emerges."¹

Because of emphasis on the existential character of religiousness, FRANKL's philosophy of religion can be related first of all to the ideas of theologians who also think in a similar philosophical horizon. Paul TILLICH and Karl RAHNER are among them.

TILLICH explains the difference between philosophy and theology by the different character of the philosopher's and the theologian's disposition. The philosopher, in harmony with her or his mode of questioning and the requirement of objectivity, tries to preserve some distance in the course of the contemplation of existence.

In opposition to this, the theologian *cannot* preserve any distance from the object of her or his research; she or he always relates to her or his object in an existential way: she or he "has to look to where the thing which ultimately defines him manifests itself. (...) The source of his knowledge is not the universal *logos*, but the incarnated *Logos*".²

The two fields, however, are closely connected because, TILLICH emphasizes, both the philosopher and the theologian partake in existence, and they can both account for this by the ontological categories they create. Such a common category (*existentiale*) can be, for example, responsibility, which also involves a theologically based care of the soul.

In this respect the question is not merely to determine the philosophical and theological affinity of logotherapy and existential analysis, but to see how they can be applied in outlining an individual religiousness and faith. Karl RAHNER considers logotherapy very important in revealing the existential references of the transcendental knowledge of God:

"This mystagogy would only be possible in individual conversations, in individual logo-therapy, which would warn the individual person to really experience transcendence, even if perhaps not calling it so, by turning directly to the concrete world."³

According to FRANKL, logotherapy is a *medical* and not a theological psychotherapy. Therefore the question of, and the search for, divinity is not a primary goal of logotherapy, only a side-effect. It is a fact,

¹ FRANKL. 1996a. 76a.

² TILLICH. 1996. 38.

³ RAHNER. 1998. 61. For the comparison of RAHNER's and FRANKL's ideas, see: ZAISER. 2004.

however, that every theory and practice centred on the logos must face such a “side-effect”, even if this would surpass any original perspective of psychotherapy.

But whoever wishes to apply logo-therapy as a medical, and not as a theological psychotherapy in accordance with its original intention, may follow FRANKL's note written about his book *The Suffering Man: The Anthropological Foundations of Psychotherapy*:

“Although (...) several of the arguments exceed the «anthropological foundations of psychotherapy» in the direction of the liminal questions of theology: I hardly have anything to withdraw even after a quarter of a century. Still, it must be kept in mind that the ideas and arguments (...) referring to the borderline between anthropology and theology can by no means be regarded as elements of logotherapy.”⁴

Suggested Reading

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⁴ FRANKL. 1996. 219.

