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Personal Review: Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor E. Frankl

Part essay about his time in the concentration camps, part psychiatric tract based on those experiences, Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning is one of the most important books I've read. It is not surprising that there are more than 12M copies in print and that it's been named one of the ten most influential books.

In the first 100 pages, Frankl recounts the time he spent in the camps from 1942-1945. Anyone who has read other accounts of the camps or seen movies of them knows the depravities there. But Frankl's account is somewhat unique in that he approaches the experience as a psychiatrist, in a very clinical fashion, only using emotion here and there to spice his writing. His writing is perceptive, showing a keen empathy for not only those who were heroic in such places, but also those who were not. This goes for both the prisoners as well as the German guards. He explains the psychology of lowered expectations, how a simple de-lousing, for example, could be the source of so much happiness for the prisoners. And given the title, it's not surprising he spends much time talking about meaning. The whole premise of his book is that humans are driven by their search for meaning. And in these pages, he demonstrates how meaning in a prisoner's life, whether it be a family to get back home to or work still left to be done, literally was the difference between life and death in many cases.

This leads to the second part of the book, called Logotherapy in a Nutshell. Logotherapy is a therapy Frankl pioneered after his experiences in the camps. In it, a patient is `actually confronted with and reoriented toward the meaning of his life'. He talks of the existential vacuum, in which so many people now languish due to the complexity of having so many choices and a lack of traditions to fall back on. Logotherapy simplifies this for us. According to it, meaning can come from three places: creating work or doing deeds, experiencing something or encountering someone (love), or by our attitude to unavoidable suffering.
To me, this puts logotherapy in the realm of religion, especially eastern religion. It's about human transcendence. Frankl says here that we derive meaning by helping others (through deeds or work), putting another above ourselves (loving someone), or by seeing unavoidable suffering as something of meaning in its own right. These ideas seem Buddhist to me, and in this case I applaud the convergence of science and spirituality in a space that needs it.

I found this book inspirational. The experiences of the concentration camps by themselves are enough to put matters in harsh perspective for anyone living in freedom. But Frankl's expanding of this information into a book that can help so many others is a fine example of his own theories. We are lucky to have such a work available to us.

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