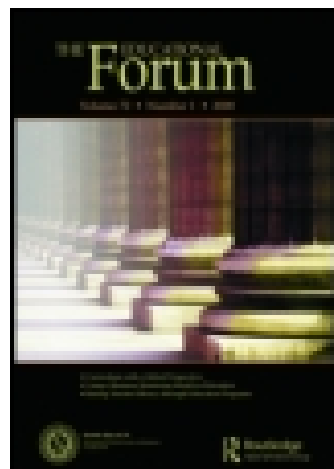


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On the Shoulders of Giants

On the Meaning of Love

Dedicated to the memory of Wendy Fabry Banks who was the first to make her father aware of logotherapy by giving him a copy of Man's Search for Meaning.

Unless life in general had a meaning, it would not make sense to speak of the meaning of love in particular. And what is true of love also holds for procreation: if life were meaningless, its procreation would be equally meaningless.

But it is the very problem of our time that people are caught by a pervasive feeling of meaninglessness, which is the most conspicuous symptom of the collective neurosis of our time. It is accompanied by a feeling of emptiness. Since I described and denoted it as the "existential vacuum" in 1955, it has increased and spread literally all over the world. Our industrialized society is out to satisfy all needs, and our consumer society is even out to *create* needs in order to satisfy them; but the most human of all human needs — the need to see a meaning in one's life — remains unsatisfied. People may have enough to live by; but more often than not they do not have anything to live for. This is most perceptible in the young generation, more specifically in the form of a mass

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neurotic syndrome consisting of depression, aggression, and addiction. There is ample empirical evidence to the effect that suicide proneness, violent behavior, and drug dependency are, in fact, due to a lack, or loss, of meaning.

Motivational Theories

How can we cope with this malaise and frustration of our time? Whenever we want to overcome a frustration, we must first understand the motivation. So let us have a look at what the motivational theories of the two great Viennese psychotherapeutic schools teach us. According to Freud's psychoanalysis, human behavior is ruled by a pleasure principle, and according to Alfred Adler's individual psychology, the human person is dominated by a striving for superiority. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it turns out that the pleasure principle ultimately serves the purpose of maintaining, or restoring, the inner equilibrium, a state without tensions. Thus reads Freud's explicit contention. And according to Adler's conviction, all human beings are originally suffering from an inferiority complex, and throughout their lives aspire to its compensation by attaining a powerful position. As you see, however, both motivation theories depict the human as a being basically concerned with intrapsychic conditions — be it an inner equilibrium or a feeling of inferiority versus a feeling of superiority. But this is not a true human picture. Actually, being human always means reaching out beyond oneself — reaching out for something other than oneself — for something or someone: for a meaning to fulfill, or for another human being to love. In other words, being human always means *transcending* oneself, and unless this self-transcendent quality of the human reality is recognized, psychology degenerates into some sort of monadology. In a word, self-transcendence is the essence of existence.

But what about self-*actualization*? It certainly is a perfectly worthwhile thing; in the final analysis, however, we can arrive at self-actualization only via self-transcendence. And in his diaries, even Abraham Maslow — who made the concept of self-actualization the cornerstone of his "psychology of being" — stated that I had "convinced him"¹ that self-actualization can best be carried out "via a commitment to an important job."² In fact, self-actualization, I would say, is a by-product, or side effect, of self-transcendence — and the same holds for pleasure and happiness: "pursuit of happiness," the unalienable right of the Declaration of Independence, is a contradiction in terms because, as I see it, happiness cannot be pursued but must *ensue*, that is to say, it must establish itself by itself, automatically, as the unintentional effect of our dedication and devotion to a cause to serve, or a person to love. On the other hand, any *direct* intention of pleasure proves to be self-defeating — as easily can be seen in sexual neurosis: the more a male patient tries to demonstrate his potency, the more likely he will end up with impotence; and the more a female patient tries to convince herself that she is fully capable of experiencing orgasm, the more she is liable to frigidity. The cue to cure then lies in forgetting oneself by giving oneself.

But now let us come back to the issue of meaning: I hope I could show you that man's basic concern is neither the will to power, nor a will to pleasure, but a will to meaning, his search for meaning — precisely that which is so much being frustrated today! But man needs not only meaning but also some thing else: he needs the example and model of people who have *fulfilled* the meaning of their lives, or at least are on the way to do so. And this is precisely the moment at which the issue of the family comes in. For I regard the family as a lifelong opportunity to watch and witness what it means to fulfill meaning in life by living for others, nay, by living for each other: the family, indeed, is an arena where *mutual* self-transcendence is enacted!

Love and Sex

By and large, family life is initiated by love — or at least by what is misnamed love while it really is no more than mutual sexual attraction. This brings up the question, what is the relation between love and sex? More specifically, *human* sex. Well, as far as the latter is concerned, it is truly human only to the extent to which it serves as the expression of something *meta*-sexual, and that is love. In other words, human sex is always more than *mere* sex, and it is so to the extent to which it functions as the physical expression of love — or let me say as the "*incarnation*" of love.

However, human sex cannot be human *a priori* but must *become* human, and it does so by ever more becoming self-transcendent, thus ever more participating in the intrinsic self-transcendence of human phenomena. Figure 1 shows the developmental stages of the psychosexual maturation, step by step. First, there is only an interest in what Albert Moll called "*detumescence*," i.e., the decrease of tension as it is aroused by the sex drive. There is yet no relation to any partner so we may say that in order to get rid of sexual tension, masturbation would do — if need be, helped by using a vibrator. Anyway, the goal of sexual activity in the first stage, on the first step, is tension reduction.

However, according to a distinction introduced by Sigmund Freud, drives do not only have a goal but also an object. In the case of sexuality, the object is represented by a partner. But the partner is still seen, and used, as a mere tool to satisfy one's own sex drive and, as a mere tool, is interchangeable — a fact that results in promiscuity — or, even worse, the partner is anonymous — as is the case with prostitutes. That such a relationship still lacks the human characteristic of self-transcendence is laid bare whenever those of our patients who suffer from sexual neurosis speak of "masturbating on a woman."

Only in the third stage of development, on the third step of maturation, the subhuman type of sexual activity is overcome because now the partner is no longer used as an object but seen as a subject, seen as a human being — a fact that precludes being made a mere tool of drive satisfaction. Let us not forget that there is a second version of Immanuel Kant's famous "*categorical imperative*," and it reads as follows: A human being must never be taken as a mere means to an end.

But the highest level of our scale is reached where the partner is seen not only in his or her humanness but, in addition, in his or her uniqueness³ — that uniqueness which constitutes a person as someone incomparable. Only now we have entered the domain of love because it is love alone which empowers us for getting hold of the uniqueness of another human being. And since the loving person alone is enabled to grasp the loved person as someone incomparable and hence irreplaceable, love is the supreme warrant of a monogamous relation which, in turn, is the guarantee of its own durability.

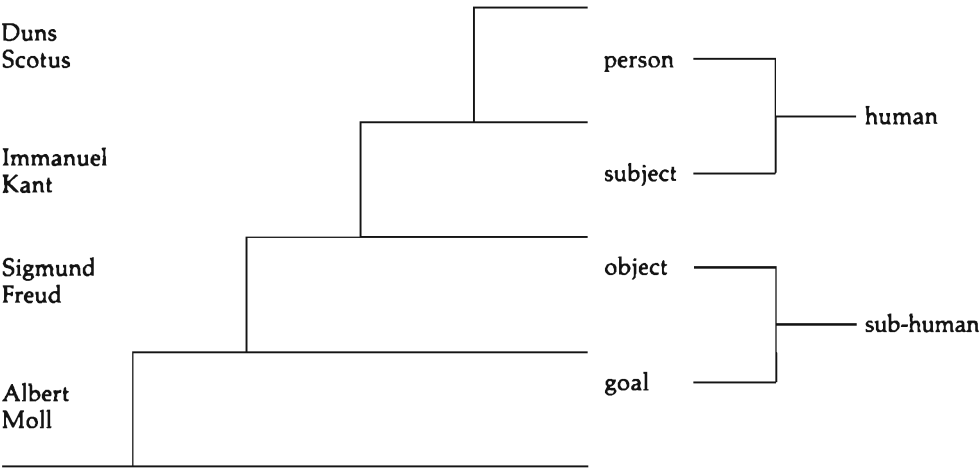


Figure 1
The Developmental Stages of Psychosexual Maturation

Meaning Is Unconditional

At the outset, we spoke of the meaning of love and the meaning of life. Love is certainly one way to meaning; but it is not the only way. In other words, it is in no way a *sine qua non*, an indispensable prerequisite of finding meaning in life. The same holds for procreation. There is an old Chinese dictum according to which a man, in the course of his life, should have written a book, begot a son, and planted a tree. Well, what about myself? I have authored 27 books; but, alas, I have begot only a daughter rather than a son; and, to make it worse, I have never in my life planted a tree! Should I have lived in vain? Should the meaning of life really be dependent on whether or not one is married and has children? How poor would life be if this were true; actually, life is infinitely rich as to the possibilities to fill it with meaning because — contrary to what the feeling of meaninglessness whispers into our ears — life is even unconditionally meaningful, that is to say, it holds a meaning under each and every condition, including misery and tragedy. Or could you otherwise understand and explain that life still can be found, or made, meaningful if you *have* been married but have lost your spouse or if you *have* had children and then have lost them? Let me for the sake of those among you to whom such

a possibility sounds unbelievable, invoke the following two dialogues:

Once, an old general practitioner showed up in my office. He was severely depressed after his wife whom he had loved above all else, had died. What should I have told him? I didn't tell him anything but asked him a question: "What would have happened, Doctor, if not your wife but you yourself had died first?" "Oh," he answered, "how terrible this would have been for her — how much she would have suffered!" "Well," I reacted, "your wife has been spared this suffering, hasn't she? And after all, it is you, Doctor, who have spared her the suffering, haven't you? But you have done so at the price that now you have to mourn her" At that moment, his suffering was bestowed with a meaning — with the meaning of a sacrifice that he owed to his wife.

And now the other dialogue which I am going to quote from a book authored by the German Bishop Georg Moser: "A few years after World War II a doctor examined a Jewish woman who wore a bracelet made of baby teeth mounted in gold. 'A beautiful bracelet,' the doctor remarked. 'Yes,' the woman answered, 'this tooth here belonged to Miriam, this one to Esther, and this one to Samuel' She mentioned the names of her daughters and sons according to age. 'Nine children,' she added, 'and all of them were taken to the gas chambers.' Shocked, the doctor asked: 'How can you live with such a bracelet?' Quietly, the woman replied: 'I am now in charge of an orphanage in Israel.'"

The widowed doctor had lost his wife, and the Jewish mother had lost her children; but as it is said in *The Song of Songs*, love is as strong as death.

Viktor E. Frankl

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1. Richard J. Lowry, *The Journals of Abraham Maslow* (Lexington, Kentucky: Lewis, 1982), p. 39.
2. Abraham H. Maslow, *Eupsychian Management: A Journal* (Homewood, Illinois: R. Irwin, 1965), p. 136.
3. Duns Scotus, the great medieval thinker, allotted to uniqueness a central place in his scholastic-philosophical system and coined for it the word "haecceitas."