

# The Importance of Meaning in Positive Psychology and Logotherapy

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## Meaning in Positive Psychology

Professor Martin Seligman, chairman of the Psychology Department at the University of Pennsylvania and founder of the school of positive psychology, defines positive psychology as “the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. It is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play.” He also wrote “... just as well-being needs to be anchored in strengths and virtues, these in turn must be anchored in something larger, just as the good life is something beyond the pleasant life, the meaningful life is beyond the good life.” (Seligman 2002, 14).

Pursuing this approach, he concluded the last chapter of his book *Authentic Happiness* with these poignant words:

“The best we can do as individuals is to choose to be a small part of furthering this progress. This is the door through which the meaning that transcends us can enter our lives. A meaningful life is one that joins with something larger than we are—and the larger that something is, the more meaning our lives have... The good life consists in deriving happiness by using your signature strengths every day in the main realms of living.

The meaningful life adds one more component: using these same strengths to forward knowledge, power or goodness. A life that does this is pregnant with meaning, and if God comes at the end, such a life is sacred.” (Seligman 2002, 206).

And again, three pages further, at the end of the appendix, the author restates the same affirmation in almost similar terms:

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“A meaningful life adds one more component to the good life—the attachment of your signature strengths to something larger. So beyond happiness, this book is meant as a preface to the meaningful life...

Finally, a full life consists in experiencing positive emotions about the past and the future, savoring positive feelings from the pleasures, deriving abundant gratification from your signature strengths, and using these strengths in the service of something larger in order to obtain meaning.” (Seligman 2002, 263).

Nine years after he published *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman published a new book entitled *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* in which he includes a summary of the original theory developed in his first book, in the following terms:

We often choose what makes us feel good, but it is very important to realize that often our choices are not made for the sake of how we will feel. I chose to listen to my 6-year-old’s excruciating piano recital last night, not because it made me feel good, but because it is my parental duty and part of what gives my life meaning (Seligman 2011, 11). Martin Seligman then enumerates the three elements that we choose for their own sakes: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. Positive emotion, he explains, is what we feel: pleasure, rapture, ecstasy, warmth, comfort, and the like. An entire life led successfully around this element, would be a “pleasant life.” Engagement is about flow: being one with the music, time stopping, and the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity. A life lived with these aims could be referred to as an “engaged life.”

The third element of happiness is *meaning*. Indeed, “the pursuit of engagement and the pursuit of pleasure are often solitary, solipsistic endeavors. Human beings, ineluctably, want meaning and purpose in life. The Meaningful Life consists in belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self, and humanity creates all the positive institutions to allow this: religion, political party, being Green, the Boy Scouts, or the family.” (Seligman 2011, 11–12). As we examine this definition of the meaningful life, we soon realize that it coincides with the approach of logotherapy which states that meaning in life can be discovered in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed, that is creativity; (2) by experiencing something (such as goodness, truth and beauty, nature, or culture) or encountering another human being and by loving him/her; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering (Frankl 1984, 133).

Frankl goes even beyond the existential meaning to the notion of what he calls a *super-meaning* or an ultimate meaning. The latter, he asserts, has its origin in the transcendental realm, in the world of spirituality and religion. (Frankl 2000, 138). We must also note that these characteristics of meaning are virtually identical to the elements of meaning enumerated by Seligman, if we allow for some minor variations in the terminology used by these authors: Belonging to and serving something bigger than the self, religion, family... is indeed expressions of transcendence, or emanating from a realm that is beyond the self. Seligman prefers to call these “something that is bigger than the self” which is a way of staying clear of the use of the term “transcendence” which often has an ethereal connotation.

As for the need to reach out to another person or persons, Frankl and Seligman both agree on the importance of the inter-human relationship. Both of them use the term *love* to describe the most sublime aspect of this exchange between two human beings. Seligman rightfully states that “the pursuit of engagement and the pursuit of pleasure are often...solipsistic endeavors. Human beings, ineluctably, want meaning and purpose in life” because meaning and purpose in life supersede in importance the elements of engagement and pleasure. For sure, the motivation of the engagement may well be found in the meaning and purpose of the task that is eliciting it. We are engaged because we are captivated by the profound significance of the project we are pursuing. The engagement is therefore a consequence of meaning and not a motivation in itself. As for the experience of pleasure, it is ephemeral and cannot be an end in itself, albeit it is a pleasant experience. It would thus seem that Martin Seligman is aware of the fact that only meaning and purpose can ultimately validate the value of the fleeting moment of pleasure we experience.

It would seem that the main difference between the conception of Martin Seligman and that of Viktor Frankl resides essentially in the realm of semantics and the choice of the terms we use to designate certain personal experiences. Both agree that certain emotions referred to as “positive” in Seligman’s writings and as “meaningful” in Frankl’s descriptions, are conducive to experiencing a profound sense of satisfaction, leading to a sense of happiness. This feeling can be derived from an authentic relationship with a person whom we love, or from the realization of a project which embodies a unique meaning and which is usually prompted by some form of engagement. Both, Frankl and Seligman, emphasize the realization of these unique projects, which are imbued with a particular noetic significance. In all of them, there is no question that meaning is the primary motivation. The various aspects of these projects may be described in a different order, but in reality, they are all experienced simultaneously and one would be hard pressed to state which element came first and which one was the effect or the cause of the other one.

## Meaning in Logotherapy

We find basically the same etiology of happiness in the writings of Viktor Frankl. In his seminal book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl clearly states that man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a “secondary rationalization” of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance, which will satisfy his own will to meaning (Frankl 1984, 121).

This fundamental principle contains a double affirmation. It asserts that our life decisions are not only motivated by a search for meaning but by an inner need, a will to fulfill the meaningful projects that are prompted by our inner self. In other terms, it is not just a matter of choice, but of acquiescing to a higher instance, which calls us to realize the meaning(s) we have discovered in ourselves.

Even though it does not single out this notion, positive psychology seems to imply it in almost the same way as logotherapy. That is probably the reason why the author of “*Authentic Happiness*,” wrote, “this book is a preface to the meaningful life.” We might thus be inclined to believe that logotherapy and positive psychology are based on some of the same premises.

However, what is regarded as a consequence in logotherapy is regarded as a constitutive element of happiness in positive psychology. Whereas logotherapy asserts that the person who fulfills a *meaningful purpose* derives a genuine satisfaction from it [which may lead to a feeling of happiness], positive psychology states that *positive emotions* (often inspired by meaning) will surely lead to happiness. We cannot, however, put the horse before the cart. Emotions are often preceded by strong expectations, though felt as we experience love for a person or admiration for a human accomplishment. The anticipation may help create the happy mood but the actual experience is still necessary in most cases.

We may also note that while positive psychology uses the term *happiness* to designate the goal of its endeavors, logotherapy uses the term *meaning* (logos) as the original motivation and the consequence or “by-product” to describe the feeling—or emotion—of deep fulfillment which is experienced by the individual who realizes one of his dreams or ideals. It would thus seem that in spite of different modes of exposition and a slightly different terminology, positive psychology has many similarities to logotherapy.

## Mihaly Csikszentmihaly

In a volume entitled *The Evolving Self, a Psychology for the Third Millennium*, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, professor of psychology at the University of Chicago, uses concepts that are very similar to those of Viktor Frankl. Summing up the content of his book in the very last two pages, he states,

“Strange as it may seem, life becomes serene and enjoyable precisely when selfish pleasure and personal success are no longer the guiding goals. When the self loses itself in a transcendent purpose—be it to write great poetry, craft a beautiful piece of furniture, understand the movement of galaxies, or help children be happier—it becomes largely invulnerable to the fears and setbacks of ordinary existence. Psychic energy becomes focused on goals that are meaningful, that advance order and complexity, that will continue to have an effect in the consciousness of new generations, long after our departure from this world.” (Csikszentmihaly 1993, 292)

One may easily recognize several key notions that are similar to the ones used by Frankl: *goals that are meaningful* and *transcendent purpose*. Csikszentmihaly and Frankl fully agree on the transcendental nature of the higher purpose, which motivates the individual. Reading this paragraph of *Evolving Self* cited above, one might have been hard put to identify the author of the paragraph as Csikszentmihaly or Viktor Frankl. He also emphasizes the concept of *flow* which according to him, is characterized by a strong motivation and a complete immersion into an

experience which produces intense positive emotions, hallowed with feelings of great joy and even rapture. As Csikszentmihaly remarks, however, “having goals, having a clear sense of purpose, is necessary to attain flow.” (Ben Shahar 2007, 86) Such a statement is indeed very similar to the principle on which Frankl based his entire psychotherapeutic method.

## Tal ben Shahar

One of the most popular professors at Harvard University, Tal ben Shahar, a disciple of Martin Seligman, published a best-seller book *Happier* some four years ago, in which he refers extensively to Viktor Frankl. He actually devotes almost an entire chapter to Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* and acknowledges his enormous debt of gratitude to Frankl’s teachings:

“... we need the experience of meaning and the experience of positive emotions; we need present and future benefit. My theory of happiness draws on the works of Freud as well as Frankl. Freud’s pleasure principle says that we are fundamentally driven by the instinctual need for pleasure. Frankl argues that we are motivated by a will to meaning rather than by a will to pleasure—he says, “striving to find meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in man.” In the context of finding happiness, there is some truth in both Freud’s and Frankl’s theories. We need to gratify both the will for pleasure and the will for meaning if we are to lead a fulfilling happy life...”

Ben Shahar then stresses the notion that people must be able to recognize and acknowledge the meaning they have fulfilled in order to derive the full satisfaction that will result from it. Being grateful in this way can *itself* be a source of real meaning and pleasure. When we derive a sense of purpose from what we do, our experience of pleasure is intensified; and taking pleasure in an activity can make our experience of it all the more meaningful. (Ben Shahar 2007, 42–43).

Ben Shahar probably meant that we derive a sense of satisfaction and gratification from having done that, which was purposeful, and meaningful in our eyes and not that “we derive a sense of purpose from what we do.” The sense of purpose is the motivation and not the result of our actions. He thus acknowledges the significant contribution made by Viktor Frankl who stressed the importance of meaning and purpose as the *conditio sine qua non* to our attainment of happiness.

In a subchapter entitled “The Meaning, Pleasure, Strengths (MPS) Process”, Ben Shahar is quite explicit on this matter:

“Finding the right work... can be challenging. We can begin the process by asking these three crucial questions: “What gives me meaning? What gives me pleasure? What are my strengths?” and noting the trend that emerges... We may need to spend time reflecting, thinking deeply to recall those moments in our lives when we felt a sense of true purpose.” (Ben Shahar 2007, 103).

The basic notion that meaning and purpose are essential to the attainment of happiness has been accepted by many psychologists and philosophers in our generation. Though we may not be able to measure the degree of happiness a person experiences—because

it is essentially a subjective state of mind—we may still be able to measure some of the consequences of happiness such as joy, hope, optimism, and a sense of satisfaction with life. For the authors we have mentioned above, meaning, purpose, flow, and engagement are some of the key factors leading to happiness.

## The Authentic Happiness Center

[The Authentic Happiness Center](#), which was created by Prof. Martin Seligman may help one get a more concrete idea of the way positive psychology can affect our life. It has a fine website and one may follow the developments of this new approach by becoming a member. The Authentic Happiness Center welcomes the visitor with these words:

“Authentic Happiness is the homepage of Dr. Martin Seligman, Director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania and founder of positive psychology, a branch of psychology, which focuses on the empirical study of such things as positive emotions, strengths-based character, and healthy institutions. This website has more than two million users from around the world, and you are welcome to use all of the resources available here for free.”

Dr Seligman then suggests that “the best place to start to learn more about the latest theory and initiatives in positive psychology, is by checking out recent presentations” and taking some questionnaires on well-being. One of them was developed by M. F. Steger, P. Frazier, and S. Oishi and is entitled “Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ-10).” In it, we find some 10 questions formulated in the first person like “I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful” or “I am seeking a purpose or mission in my life.”

A first reading of the MLQ-10 questionnaire might give the impression that it is fairly similar to the “Purpose in Life (PIL)” questionnaire of Crumbaugh and Maholick, which is widely used in the practice of logotherapy. A further examination, however, indicates that it is quite different from it because it attempts to assess not only the awareness of the importance of meaning in life but also the engagement and willingness of the patient to find that meaning (“I am looking for something meaningful or am seeking my mission in life.”) The quality and intensity of this aspiration is indeed as important as the awareness of the presence or absence of meaning in life.

Martin Seligman goes on to enumerate the theoretical and practical principles involved in the *Positive Psychology Initiatives*, which he has developed. In one of the essays entitled *Introducing a New Theory of Well-Being*, he introduces the formula of **PERMA**, formed with the initials **P**ositive emotions, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning and Purpose, and **A**ccomplishment of which happiness and life satisfaction are all necessary components (Seligman 2011, 16). Interested people are invited to participate in the research to help develop the **PERMA** questionnaire. This approach has the merit of involving the members of the Authentic Happiness Center and enabling them to participate in a valuable initiative in cooperation with the leaders of the movement.

A fascinating question has been raised by Dr. Laura A. King who teaches at the University of Missouri, Columbia, on the subject of meaning: Does the awareness of meaning lead to happiness or does the experience of happiness creates meaning? In the conclusion of one of her many articles on meaning, she writes:

“Our research on the detection of meaning and the experience of meaning in life lead to the conclusion that in thinking about meaning, meaning in life, and happiness, psychologists have often confused causes and effects. Faced with traumatic life events, a meaning-maker might note that, “If I could just make sense of this, I would feel better.” Our research suggests that the situation may be more accurately expressed, “If I could just feel better, this would make sense.” In thinking about meaning in life and happiness, the self-help literature seems to convey the message that “If life had meaning, I could be happy.” Our work suggests a different conclusion: “If I were happy, life would have meaning...” (King 2011).

King then sums up her reflection with this concluding sentence: “Meaning is often not a problem to be solved but an aspect of experience that is simply and intuitively present.”

As Dr King acknowledges it, meaning is indeed part of the experience and “intuitively present” but the person still has to become aware of it, in order to derive the satisfaction, which will come with it. There is, however, a problem that remains unsolved and it concerns the persons who do not feel happy, as for example those who are faced with suffering or death; can we say that there is no meaning to their experience? Not at all, says Frankl, a person may still find a certain peace of mind, realizing that their suffering may have a meaning [on a spiritual level] in spite of the total absence of a physical pleasure. The conclusion of Laura King may therefore be premature and may require further inquiry.

## Conclusion

At the term of this brief comparison between the attitudes of positive psychology and logotherapy on the role played by meaning in their respective theoretical approaches, we have found that there exist many similarities between them. They both agree that meaning is “intuitively present” even when the individual still has to become aware of it. Freud would have suggested that all people are guided by an unconscious intuition or desire to fulfill [*accomplish*] certain tasks or projects that may prove to be important and meaningful to them. The true motivation of our actions, whether conscious or unconscious, may have comprised a meaningful purpose. Whether we call it the desire to *engage* or the “*will to meaning*” may just be a matter of semantics.

At a time when so many people are searching for ways of attaining happiness and finding the meaning(s) of their lives, it is fortunate that both positive psychology and logotherapy are there to provide the help and guidance that is most needed. From a theoretical point of view, we must agree that more research is needed to ascertain the various interactions that exist between pleasure, happiness and meaning.

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