

Meaning, Vacuum and Autonomy

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“Existential Vacuum” is a term coined by Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor psychiatrist, best known for his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. It is the concept used to describe the meaninglessness or emptiness of life.

Critical issues in the Unification Movement (UM), such as denominational rifts and other matters previously unknown to the general membership, pose fundamental questions for Unificationism, both in theory and practice. Even the most devoted members who sacrificed years or decades face complex, challenging questions, one of which is the meaning of their lives in the past, present and

future.

A worldview (belief system) works as a framework of interpretation and serves as a framework to interpret one’s identity and life’s events. It is quite natural to encounter challenges when there is a shift in this framework since it affects how one sees the self and the world.

In this article, I explore how the meaning of life is always and necessarily individuated (no one can live another person’s life; death is uniquely yours) and the negligence of individual autonomy leads to feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness (Existential Vacuum). Although Unificationism in theory holds the development of the autonomous individual as one of its ideals, an uncritical (blind) faith stance can prevent it and lead one to fall into an “existential vacuum.” I illustrate how an existential vacuum can underlie even religious faith and how one can reconstruct the meaning of life by restoring one’s autonomy.



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Why Meaning Matters?

The first question is why meaning matters. No matter what you do and how you do it, the question of why is unavoidable. Without an answer to the “why” of life, there is an emptiness that manifests itself in boredom, apathy, and even despair. Even if you try to avoid the question, the question flows from life itself.

Heidegger pointed out how each individual always and already “interprets” the meaning of his or her existence; as far as each individual “lives,” one always interprets one’s meaning of its being. Why then does one feel the emptiness of life? Heidegger posits, because meaning is intrinsic to your existence, you feel

emptiness when you exist in an inauthentic way; he argues, the meaning of being is an unavoidable question for all.

How Meaning Arises

The meaning of life has a hermeneutic dimension as well as an existential dimension. Hermeneutics is a theory of meaning/interpretation which explains how meaning (interpreted meaning) arises. One of the most basic principles of hermeneutics is the part-whole relationship. Meaning is not some entity as if it were a physical thing. It arises out of part-whole relationships. Consider the meaning of a word. It is determined by how it (part) is used in a phrase, sentence, syntactical and semantic totality of a given language, and social cultural living contexts (wholes). Yelling “Fire!” at 3 a.m. in an apartment means one thing, and hearing “fire” from a man with a cigar in his mouth means another. The meaning of a word (part) is determined by its relationships with its contexts (wholes).

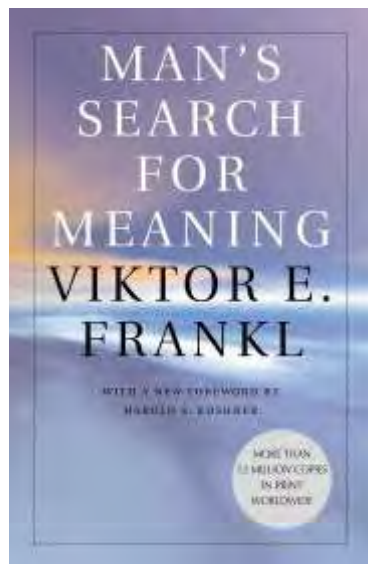
In human life, the meaning of a particular event (part) is determined by multiple layers of contexts (wholes) from one’s personal life to social, communal, and even historical contexts. The meaning of life consists of multi-layered phenomena. The narrative of your life is interwoven with the narratives of members of your family and society. Your life is like a thread that is a part of your family narrative and other people’s life narratives. Similarly, their lives are interwoven into the fabric of your life narrative. Lives are thus shared in multiple ways. The meaning of events in your life is determined by their contextual relationships within contextual layers.

Furthermore, life has a temporal aspect. Multiple part-whole relationships are temporalized by the past,

present and future. To illustrate these points, let's see a life as a story, segmented by various chapters. If chapter one is your childhood, chapter two can be your teenage years, and so on. An event in one chapter means a certain thing within the chapter (whole). Yet, an event resonates with narrative developments in later chapters (wholes).

The meaning of an event in one chapter is not determined by the context of that chapter alone. Just like any story, for example, a struggle in an early chapter comes to have a different meaning later on. In other words, life is open-ended. The whole context of life in its entirety is open-ended. As far as one is alive, one can begin another chapter that transforms the meaning of a previous chapter. Being alive means being open to the possibility of transforming one's meaning of life.

In summary, each person's life is thus contextualized in multiple layers of social, communal, and historical narratives; such part-whole relationships are temporally contextualized. The meaning of life is a synthetic integration of layers of meaning, and yet the meaning of life does not end at a fixed point but it can generate additional meaning through one's legacy even beyond one's lifetime.



The Role of Faith

How then does one's faith play a role in the integration of meaning? Life has its ups and downs, twists and turns. From questions of why I was born to death and beyond, life is filled with enigmatic questions. Faith is, regardless of its degree of authenticity, a helpful guide to provide coherence and a consistent interpretation for life's events. A worldview works as the theoretical context within which one identifies certain events as "significant," links them, and integrates them. A worldview is a theoretical context within which you integrate multiple meanings into your life narrative.

The Unification worldview is not as clear as some may suppose. From key concepts to the application of those concepts, there are a range of issues that require clarification. These issues include the relationship between faith and reason, the nature of religious authority, the validity of truth-claim, and others. Critical scrutiny of theory and practice is in order. Thus, many Unificationists face the challenge of reconfiguring their worldviews while others still argue for a radical fideism and see no need for a rational endeavor.

Existential Vacuum

There are myriad religious, quasi-religious, and non-religious belief systems and worldviews. Regardless of its contents, one can find "some" meaning of life from almost any worldview..

As for one's stance towards a worldview, the emphasis on "absolute obedience" has, for some, generated a formula that faith is obedience, and obedience leads one to self-sacrifice, loyalty, and true love. A fideist argument that puts forth the supremacy of faith over reason enhances the suppression of individual rational judgment and decision-making abilities. Such an attitude fosters "blind" obedience.

Such blind obedience, however, can lead to an existential vacuum. Among the common symptoms of the existential vacuum, according to Viktor Frankl, are: depression, aggression, addiction, sexual promiscuity, blind obedience to authority, and blind conformity to others. Indulgence in pleasure is often cited as a way to escape from the feelings of emptiness.

Some may, however, wonder why Frankl listed the last two. Frankl argues that the meaning of life is something that unfolds to the person who exercises his or her freedom and responds to (not as mechanical reaction or blind action) challenges/tasks. Because one acts as an autonomous agent, he or she is responsible for his or her actions.

I am not arguing religious faith is necessarily "blind" but it is possible and can be rampant. In searching for the meaning of life, the dangers of "blind obedience to authority" and "blind conformity to others" is the absence of individual autonomy. It is not unique to the UM, but followers of religious faiths and non-religious ideologies are susceptible to such blind obedience.

Why do "blind obedience to authority" and "blind conformity to others" make life empty? Doesn't "absolute faith" make life more meaningful? It all depends on how "faith" works in the development of the autonomous, individual self. Ultimately you are responsible for the choices and actions you make. The problem of "blindness" is the absence of such self.

Can I Make My Life Meaningful?

Frankl notes three ways by which to make life meaningful. First, generate experiential values by caring for and loving others. Second, generate creative values by contributing to others through your work. Third, generate attitudinal values by exercising the defiant power of your spirit (exercise your inviolable freedom and take responsibility for your decision/action).

The absence of autonomy takes away from these values and can contribute to feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness, contrary to the ideals of Unificationism. In this regard, one should consider, “What kind of person have I become through my religious devotion?” You as a person are the most credible fruit of your religious dedication. In this inquiry, the question is not “who must I obey” but “what kind of person have I become, am I becoming, and wish to become?” By asking these questions, one can hold onto some control of the self.

As I noted earlier, the meaning of life is open-ended. Each new chapter will change the meaning of your past life. If you have tried to live an authentic life, that truth remains in the past; yet, being alive opens you to new possibilities until your last moment.

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