

# Human Suffering as a Challenge for the Meaning of life

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## Abstract

When people suffer they always suffer as a whole human being. The emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering of human beings cannot be completely separated from all other kinds of suffering, such as from harmful natural, ecological, political, economic and social conditions. In reality they interact with each other and influence each other. Human beings do not only suffer from somatic illnesses, physical pain and the lack of decent opportunities to satisfy their basic vital, social and emotional needs. They also suffer when they are not able to experience and grasp any meaning of life even if such suffering is not quite as obvious as most forms of physical, social and emotional suffering. Suffering from the lack for the sense of the meaning of life is a special form of emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering. Although all human beings share the same basic human need for some meaning of life, the fulfillment of this need is highly individual and personal. Although all forms of human suffering can be a challenge to the meaning of life, the personal conditions of suffering usually are a stronger challenge for the meaning of life. Among the personal conditions of human suffering, the *Grenzsituationen* cannot be cancelled or raised at all, but only accepted and coped with as existential aspects of the *conditio humana*. According to Karl Jaspers these are: death, suffering, struggling, guilt and failing. The challenge for human beings to cope with these *Grenzsituationen* is a way to move from the mere Being-there to true human Existence.

Any *Ethics of Suffering* would be incomplete without a contribution about emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering. The following contribution is coming from philosophical psychology rather than from empirical psychology. Although there are some important differences between the arm chair reflections of philosophical psychology and the various methods of empirical psychology in the way how they approach and treat psychological phenomena, with respect to understanding human suffering and other aspects of personal being and the nature of the human soul empirical psychology is not in a completely different position from philosophical psychology. After all empirical psychology is always forced to make some theoretical or

philosophical assumptions about the nature of the human soul and personal being and these basic assumptions are not only controversial, but they must go beyond what is empirical and observable.

In PLATO'S dialogue *Phaidros* Socrates is teaching a young friend who wants to study the art of rhetoric that the true master of rhetoric has to know the nature of the human soul.<sup>1</sup> In order to illustrate his suggestion he is comparing the study of the soul with the study of the human body in the art of healing or medicine. Socrates is explaining what Hippocrates taught about studying the nature of the body or the nature of anything else: Whenever we have to study the nature of something we have to think about the question whether we are confronted with something which is uniform or rather with something which is manifold. Accordingly, when we study the nature of the human soul we have *at first* to investigate, whether the human soul is one and the same and therefore behaving similarly at all occasions or whether it is manifold like the form of the human body. *Secondly*, we have to find out what the human soul is causing to what according to its nature and from what it is receiving which kinds of effects itself. This remarkable piece of Platonic dialogue is rejecting the common prejudice that Plato's approach to the human soul or psyche is merely pre-scientific and therefore inferior to the methods of contemporary psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry.

## **1. External conditions of human suffering**

There are various forms of human suffering and there are several ways of distinguishing between different kinds of human suffering. Perhaps one of the most if not the most reliable, effective and adequate way of distinguishing between different kinds of human suffering is by their *external causes*, i.e. by the determinable causes outside of the individual body, the emotional self, the cognitive self and the mind of a person. At least this the way we think about these issues in modern empirical psychology.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Phaidros* 270 a f.

People may suffer (1.) from harmful *natural conditions*, such as earthquakes, volcano eruptions and bush fires, hurricanes, tornados and other extreme weather conditions, etc. They may suffer (2.) from harmful *ecological conditions*, such as radioactive or chemical contamination of the atmosphere and landscape in a certain geographic region including people, animals and plants, food and water, or biological contamination with viruses or bacteria causing epidemics, etc. They may suffer (3.) from harmful *political conditions*, such as dictatorship or anarchy, war or terrorist attacks, bad government, the absence of a modern constitution and a legal state which guarantees basic human rights, law and order, etc. People may suffer (4.) from harmful *economic conditions*, such as the lack of economic growth, unemployment and inflation, the untamed globalization of the market, evasive international companies, lack of social and economic responsibility within management, the weakening of the political power of national governments, etc. They may suffer (5.) from harmful *social conditions*, such as the inability to satisfy their basic human needs, such as hunger and thirst, hygiene, shelter and clothing, security from aggression and crime, etc.

Moreover people may suffer (6.) from harmful *emotional conditions*, such as the inability to satisfy their emotional needs for company, belonging and acceptance, the need for decent work, perspectives for their future and self-respect through the freedom of self-determination, etc. Finally they may suffer (7.) from harmful *cognitive and spiritual conditions*, such as the inability to understand the natural and social world they live in, the inability to understand the *conditio humana*, i.e. the special position of human beings within the world equipped with the abilities for the acquisition of language and thought, of communication and community, of labor and cooperation, of love and self-transcendence through labor, art, science and religion, etc. Finally people may suffer from their inability to experience and grasp some *meaning of life*.

It is mainly due to the psychiatrist VIKTOR FRANKL that modern psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry took notice of this very special human need. According to Frankl lacking any sense for *some meaning of life* is a fundamental form of emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering. The word “some” is not unimportant in this context because we would misunderstand Frankl by assuming that there is *the* meaning of life for all human beings. Although Frankl was convinced that all men and women share the same need for meaning in their lives, he did not assume that

there is one unique, final and universal source of meaning or even only one and the same source for all human beings. Frankl rather considered of the meaning of life in such a way that he realized the personal and individual fulfillment of this fundamental human need under the special, concrete and contingent conditions of one's personal and social situation.

In the same section of PLATO'S dialogue *Phaidros* in which Socrates is comparing the art of rhetoric with the art of healing, he is asking his young friend who is very enthusiastic about rhetoric: "Do you think, that one can understand the nature of the soul without understanding the nature of the whole?" His disciple is answering: "If one may believe the Asclepiad Hippocrates one cannot even understand something about the body without this approach." Socrates is agreeing with Hippocrates about this matter. But he is also insisting that this is not correct because the unquestionable authority of Hippocrates, but rather because of the authority of reason. Therefore both approaches are necessary and complementary to each other: the *holistic approach* of trying to understand the nature of the whole and the *analytic approach* of trying to distinguish the elements of nature. According to Socrates this is even independent of the special field of knowledge: whether one is trying to understand the *nature of the soul* as in the art of rhetoric or whether one is trying to understand the *nature of the body* as in the art of healing – which amounts to be knowing, understanding and treating the body.<sup>2</sup>

According to Plato's idea of the mutual dependence of the *holistic and the analytic understanding* it would not make much sense to separate emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering completely from all other kinds of human suffering. When people suffer they always suffer as whole human beings in the natural, social and political world they live in. Therefore, if Plato is right we may assume that harmful natural, ecological, political, economic and social conditions always have *some* effect on the emotional, cognitive and spiritual conditions of people. People normally suffer more or less emotionally, cognitively and spiritually from harmful natural, ecological, political, economic and social conditions. For example, in a region of the world which is haunted by natural catastrophes or ecological damage, by dictatorship or anarchy, by wars or terrorism, by

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Phaidros*, 270 a f.

cultural or political crises, by bad economies or insufficient health care systems people normally get more and more frustrated emotionally, cognitively and spiritually.

If Plato is right, however we may also assume *vive versa* that emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering has some effect on the natural, ecological, political, economic and social conditions people have to live by. Without a certain emotional, cognitive and spiritual strength human beings normally do not have the psychological and spiritual resources to fight, control and overcome the harmful living conditions whether they are natural, ecological, political, economic or social conditions. For example, without any intelligence, fairness, courage and truthfulness, without any faith, love and hope they do not have the personal qualities necessary to overcome the challenges they have to face by unavoidable natural catastrophes or by man-made ecological damage, by cruel dictatorship or political anarchy, by numerous wars or by terrorist attacks, by certain cultural or political crises, by the downfalls of economies or by the insufficiencies of health care systems.

Although there surely are such causal connections between human suffering and the conditions of the region of the world people live in, the relationship between emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering and the outer conditions of suffering is somewhat more complicated. In his *Encheiridion* the Stoic philosopher EPICTETUS remarked: “It is not so much the things in themselves which disturb human beings, but rather the conceptions of things.”<sup>3</sup> There are many approaches and many leading figures in modern psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry which accept this rather old psychological insight. Philosophically speaking it means to accept the anthropological insight that human beings are *hermeneutic beings*, i.e. they are able to interpret one and the same situation in different ways.

To accept this does not mean to question or even deny the existence of the external world or the existence of various ontological structures of the world independent of the human mind and consciousness. It also does not mean that human beings constitute or create the external world they live in, as contemporary constructivists think. Since there are radical and moderate

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<sup>3</sup> Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, 5

constructivists, biological constructivists (Maturana and Varela) and psychological constructivists (Watzlawick or von Förster) we have to distinguish between certain varieties of *constructivism*. Nevertheless it is common to all of them that they claim that there is some sort of construction of objects, events and state of affairs within the world and they consequently deny the existence of an external and ontologically structured reality independent of human consciousness, language and thought. In this sense they oppose all forms of epistemological or ontological realism (naïve, critical and metaphysical realism).<sup>4</sup>

To accept this anthropological insight also does not mean that KANT'S transcendental idealism about space, time and objects within the world is convincing when he is assuming that they are essentially constituted by the common human subjectivity of appearance and understanding. It merely means to accept that two or more human beings do not only have a different individual perceptual perspective on one and the same object, event or situation within the world depending on their actual and contingent position in space and time. They usually also have a different individual emotional, cognitive and spiritual understanding of one and the same object, event or situation within the world depending on the actual and contingent conditions of their individual emotional, cognitive and spiritual self.

This is the main reason why individual people can cope, react and act in different, various and individual ways when confronted with the same harmful conditions of human suffering in the real world. For example, some may react to one and the same situation with frustration, passivity and depression, others may react with vigilance, activity and responsibility. For this reason there is a certain individuality and subjectivity and therefore even a certain independence of emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering with respect to real and determinate outer sources or harmful conditions.

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<sup>4</sup> A useful collection of essays on contemporary constructivism is: P. Watzlawick (Ed.), *Die erfundene Wirklichkeit. Wie wissen wir, was wir zu wissen glauben? Beiträge zum Konstruktivismus*. München/Zürich 1997, p. 16 f; 39 f; 91 f, and 294 f.

To accept these philosophical insights about the epistemic positions of individual human beings does not necessarily lead to epistemic or even ethical scepticism, subjectivism or relativism. For despite of these psychological facts about the epistemic position of human beings in situations of real life they can still make true or false factual judgments about the state of affairs within the world and right or wrong ethical judgments about their courses of action. Factual truth and the ethical correctness can neither be questioned by the facts of perceptual perspectivity nor by the facts of the individuality of emotional, cognitive and spiritual understanding.

Another well known aphorism in the *Encheiridion* of the Stoic philosopher EPICTETUS distinguishes between things which are in our control and others which are not in our control. “Under our control is our thinking, our actions, our inclinations, our aversions, shortly: everything which is coming from ourselves. Not under our control is our body, our property, our prestige, our outer position – with one word, everything which is not coming from our selves.”<sup>5</sup> Epictetus advice is: “What one cannot change, one must accept.” This piece of advice however might be supplemented by the opposite advice: “What one can change, one must not accept.” Even more so since most of the time one can only find out how much can be changed by attempting to change it. But the sophisticated art of *reasonable decision-making* in situations where one is confronted with and challenged by some sources of human suffering, as e.g. in politics and economy, in law and medicine does not only amount to changing the world, but rather to improving it. Therefore one might even say: Changing is easy, improving is difficult.

KARL MARX in his famous 11<sup>th</sup> Feuerbach-Thesis proclaimed: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, but it is necessary to change it.”<sup>6</sup> This famous dictum however is faulty for at least three reasons: (1.) It is not possible for us as human beings to change the whole world, but only to change certain aspects of and situations within rather small regions of the world. (2.) It is not really necessary to change certain aspects of and situations within the world, but to improve

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<sup>5</sup> Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, 1

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *German Ideology*, A. Theses about Feuerbach, 11. Translated by the author from: *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (1845/46), A. Thesen über Feuerbach, 11, in: *Die Frühschriften*, Stuttgart 1971, p. 341

them, because whenever we change something we can also make things worse rather than to improve them. (3.) It is not possible to improve certain aspects of and situations within the world without interpretation, understanding and knowing those aspects and situations.

This is leading to the opposite advice of the one given by Karl Marx: Before we can improve certain aspects of and situations within the world, we need philosophers and scientists, politicians and economists, judges and medical doctors who can interpret, understand and explain them adequately. This is certainly true for the external conditions of human suffering. Sometimes, but not always it is also true for the personal conditions of human suffering. Given Plato's approach, Epictetus' advice and a rather dialectical view about the complex connections between the emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering of human beings and its outer conditions we can now have a closer look at the personal conditions of human suffering themselves.

## **2. Personal conditions of human suffering**

Another effective and reliable way of classifying various *forms of human suffering* is to distinguish them by their immediate and concrete *sources* within human beings themselves. Accordingly we can distinguish, discover and investigate four types of *internal personal conditions* of human suffering: (1.) There are conditions of human suffering within the *physical body*, such as an ordinary tooth ache, a pain caused by a broken arm or a wound hurting after an operation. (2.) There are human suffering conditions within *the emotional self* such as normal frustration, good and bad stress, mourning, feelings of guilt and shame, fear and depression, lack of faith, hope and love. (3.) There are human suffering conditions within *the cognitive self* such as the weakness of one's memory, lack of concentration and vigilance, lack of flexibility and good sense of judgment, the inability to understand one's friends, relatives or other people we relate to, or the lack of understanding of the social, economic and political structures and events.

(4.) Finally there are conditions of human suffering within the *spiritual self*, such as (a.) *existential anxiety* through lack of self-assertive and self-binding answers to such existential questions as: Who am I? Where am I coming from? Where am I going to? What do I want to do



and realize in my life? What matters the most to me in life? What is my personal hierarchy of utilitarian, aesthetic, ethical and religious values? Which ethical ideals, principles, norms and values are most important to me? There are conditions of human suffering within the *spiritual self* (b.) when someone is *losing faith* in the existence of God, faith in the potential presence of God, faith in the personal relationship to God or faith in the love and mercy of God in view of one's shortcomings, failures and mistakes. Finally there are conditions of human suffering within the *spiritual self* (c.) when someone is losing his or her basic trust in life, losing his or her sense of caring about one's life, losing his or her will to live on and to make the best out of one's life. In other words there is someone who suffers from the inability to grasp some meaning of life.

Such a rather heuristic classification of the internal conditions of human suffering do not prevent us from the ability to further investigate the various external forms, reasons and causes of human suffering within their natural, ecological, political, economic and social circumstances. But it is necessary to distinguish them simply because emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering usually is highly personal and individualized. This means that in many cases *external conditions* (or types of conditions) which cause some inner emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering for one person do not necessarily cause any or at least the same kind of inner emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering for another person despite of the very same external conditions (or type of conditions). And these *internal conditions* can cause human suffering independently of and in addition to any other *external conditions* of human suffering, i.e. if there are no concrete and actual reasons and causes to suffer from any external sources or conditions of human suffering.

Moreover any of these immediate and concrete internal conditions of human suffering can be determined as necessary and sufficient conditions for the subjective appearance, presence and disappearance of some additional *reflective awareness* of human suffering. This means that human beings do not only suffer from *physical pain* (similar to other living beings, such as animals with an adequate nervous system within the spinal cord), they also suffer from *emotional grief*, from *cognitive failure* and *spiritual sorrow* (unlike related living beings, such as chimpanzees or dolphins). Although animals do have some instinctual and habitual feelings of sorts, human feelings do only share some similarities with animal feelings. Apart from these

similarities there is a large variety of culturally and socially shaped human feelings which we don't find in animals, such as social, aesthetic, ethical and religious feelings.

Finally human beings can suffer from their *reflective awareness* of all kinds of suffering, such as physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering. This is not only a quantitative difference or additional factor among the various ways of human suffering (especially when compared with higher mammals). The human capacity to be aware of, to focus on and to reflect (thinking, understanding and explaining) their own human suffering and the suffering of other human beings is changing the very quality of human suffering in many different ways. One well known example is the change of the intensity of bodily pain, such as a tooth ache when concentrating on a certain task or some movie and being distracted in one's self-awareness. There are many other examples which we know by personal acquaintance and introspection. For details we would have to develop various phenomenological analyses what it is like to be aware of, to focus on and reflect the quality, intensity, duration and sources of internal and external conditions of human suffering.

### **3. Human suffering as an aspect of the *conditio humana***

After this rather short outlook on the external and personal conditions of human suffering I would like to outline some basic principles of a *philosophical anthropology of human suffering*. As I have indicated: Human suffering is very special among the various forms of suffering of all sentient beings. *Human consciousness* does not only enclose particularly human forms of physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering. Potential awareness of, focusing on and reflection about one's own suffering and the suffering of other human beings is also influencing, changing and shaping the very *quality of human suffering*. Moreover human consciousness about our own suffering and about the suffering of other human beings is an essential element of the *hermeneutic understanding* of being human within the world. There are mainly four reasons for this *anthropological insight* about the *conditio humana* with respect to human suffering:

One reason for the special quality of human suffering is our *human nature* and it is incarnated in our *special position within the world* when compared to other entities as far as we know and

understand them: As we know by ways of science and philosophy there are (1.) *physical objects and events* which are unable to suffer (i.e. *suffering* in the sense of *feeling pain* rather than in the sense of undergoing some effected change), like all kinds of matter and energy. There are (2.) *living things* which grow, age and die, but cannot feel any pain such as plants or lower animals (without a spinal cord). There are (3.) *living beings* which grow, age and die, breathe, eat and drink, move around, hunt and procreate, which can feel pain and other sensations in their bodies and consciousness, but (a.) which cannot feel the same kind of culture-dependent and socially shaped kinds of suffering, e.g. like shame or guilt, anxiety or despair, (b.) which are not able to share a similar kind of reflective awareness of their own suffering *as* their own suffering, (c.) which are not able to engage in cognitive understanding, reflecting and explaining of their own suffering while it is still lasting or afterwards when remembering it.

Another reason for the special quality of human suffering is that as human beings with our particular nature we do not only have a *special and unique position* among all living beings we know on Earth, but we can also be aware of, reflect, understand, explain and know about our special and unique position among all living beings (as we know them so far). These additional *epistemic abilities* are also transforming our hermeneutic understanding of the *conditio humana* because they are in themselves good reasons to accept the special and unique position among all living beings on Earth (as we know them) and even within the universe (as far as we know it). This philosophical insight about the *special position* and *uniqueness* of human beings within the universe (as far as we know it) however is often denied by many philosophers today because they wrongly tend to think that it is incompatible with Darwin's theory of the evolution of species.

Many naturalist philosophers such as Willard V.O. Quine, Richard Rorty and Daniel C. Dennett think that this notion of man's uniqueness is merely a consequence of the mythological conception of Man as the crown of God's creation and of Man as created within the image of God which we find in the biblical book of *Genesis*. Although this mythological conception of the relationship between God, Man and the world is containing some adequate insights enshrined in metaphorical language, the philosophical insight about the special and unique position of Man among the other living beings on Earth is also adequate and reliable from a merely empirical and

scientific point of view.

In his renowned essay *A Problem of Psychoanalysis* Sigmund Freud has argued that Copernicus, Darwin and he, Freud himself have changed the self-understanding of Man within the universe so deeply that we could no longer consider ourselves to be in a special position among other creatures on Earth or even unique within the universe (as far as we know it).<sup>7</sup> (1.) Although Copernicus taught us that the Sun and not the Earth is within the center of our sun-system, modern cosmology is teaching us that we still appear to be in the middle of an expanding universe without discoverable spatial borders. (2.) Although Darwin taught us that humans are preliminary ending products of the evolutionary development of a manifold of species, our epistemic situation with respect to the very facts of the evolution of nature is still very special and a sound ground for uniqueness among all living beings on Earth. (3.) Although Freud taught us that human reason is not always and completely the master of human behavior and actions, our capacity to realize the various conflicts between the affectivity and intentionality of human consciousness as incarnated within our bodies and hearts is putting us in a remarkably different position compared to all other living beings on Earth. The latter insight is as old as ancient Greek philosophy and it is still true in the age of modern cosmology in which we have begun to seek for other intelligent living beings within the universe. To find some, get in touch with them and communicate with them as non-human persons however would be a really revolutionary beginning of a new age in the history of human cultures and civilization.

A further reason for the special quality of human suffering is that this knowledge about ourselves as human beings can change our *attitude* and *behavior* towards the suffering of all *other sentient beings*, i.e. especially towards all kinds of higher animals (with a spinal cord) which can feel pain and other sensations and which can have some *feelings* similar to, but also different from our own human feelings. Inasmuch as we share some sensations and feelings with them we usually feel closer to them than to other animals and we feel especially responsible for them. Inasmuch as we

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<sup>7</sup> Freud, S., Eine Schwierigkeit der Psychoanalyse, in: Abriß der Psychoanalyse. Einführende Darstellungen, Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer 2009, p. 187-194.

cannot share all of our sensations and feelings with them we usually feel also the distance and alienation from them and do have to realize that many forms of our special human suffering is different from their other forms of suffering.

Finally another reason for the special quality of human suffering is that as human beings we can to some extent choose an *attitude toward* and an *evaluation* of our own personal human suffering and even more so with respect to the suffering of other human beings; e.g. we can notice or deny it, bear or raise it, tolerate or fight it, accept or control, minimize or enlarge it. Therefore as human beings we are always to some extent able to choose some personal and individual form of attitude toward and evaluation of our own suffering or the suffering of others. Last, but not least, we can change our own attitude and evaluation to some extent. This is even true of the philosophical insight about the special position and uniqueness of human suffering within the world. We can look at it pessimistically as the reason for a special and unique, but actually tragic loneliness within the universe, i.e. the *existential tragedy of human suffering*, or rather optimistically as a special and unique, but actually dignified responsibility within the universe, i.e. the *existential dignity of human suffering*.

In the light of these hypothetical principles of a *philosophical anthropology* of human suffering we can finally look at the psychological and ethical problem of suffering from losing one's sense for the meaning of life. For after all we want to understand the complex relationship between human suffering and the reasons for losing one's faith in the meaning of life.

#### **4. The basic human need for the meaning of life**

According to VIKTOR FRANKL there are some basic principles about the meaning of life one needs to understand: (1.) There is no *meaning of life* as such apart from human beings who have an emotional, cognitive and spiritual need for meaning in certain situations of their life. And although there is *no* single, general and universal source for *the* meaning of life for all human

beings, all human beings are in need of *some* meaning.<sup>8</sup>

(2.) Meaning is mostly to be found in *situations of human decision-making*, in *personal relationships* and *social living conditions*. Human beings can and do share many *sources for meaning* such as friendship, marriage and family, raising and educating children, training and instruction of adults, decent work and responsible behavior in all kinds of professions, research, teaching and self-formation within the arts, sciences and religions, responsible positions in education, economy, law and politics, etc.

(3.) Meaning is *individual and personal* in the sense that it is inherent to the concrete and contingent situation of a person within his or her life. Human beings need to discover it for themselves and it cannot be discovered for them by others. Moreover meaning is personal and individual because what might be meaningful for one person must not also be meaningful for another person. Finally, meaning cannot be simply given to someone by someone else, but it must be found by themselves.

(4.) Although meaning is personal and individual, it is not merely subjective, but an *objective reality inherent to a situation*. However it can only be found by means of a special awareness of the form of a situation. The meaningful form of a situation amounts to be an opportunity on the background of a reality. Therefore meaning must be found and cannot be produced at will. And it must not only be found, but it can always be found in any present situation.

(5.) In the search for meaning, human beings are guided by their *conscience*. Since human conscience can fail and is never completely infallible, we can also fail about the meaning of a certain situation and even about the meaning of our life. Judgments about the meaning of a certain situation or the meaning of life are always uncertain and risky. Therefore we can judge about meaning only with an adequate humility.

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<sup>8</sup> V.E.Frankl, Die Sinnfrage in der Psychotherapie, München 1981; Das Leiden am sinnlosen Leben, Freiburg 1977.

(6.) Meaning cannot be searched for, achieved and perceived directly, but only indirectly through some meaningful activities. Whether we feel that our original sense for meaning has been challenged or destroyed by some form of external or personal suffering we cannot make up for it directly and willingly, but we have to find some other aspect of the situation or some new kind of activity which might be another source for our sense for meaning. This is why (the sense for) meaning seems to be so evasive at times and why it cannot be proven to someone who has doubts about its existence.

(7.) Neither the meaningfulness of the notion of the meaning of life nor the existence of meaning can be proven to empiricist or positivist, naturalist or behaviorist philosophers and psychologists, psychotherapists and psychiatrists who merely accept of the existence of empirical facts which can be verified by the positivistic methods of objective and quantifying science. There are philosophers and scientists who deny and doubt that the notion of the meaning of Life does make sense, is referring to an important human need and has to be accepted as a goal of psychotherapy.

(8.) For Viktor Frankl and his adherents however there is no question that there is something like losing one's faith in the meaning of life. It is an essential part of the emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering of human beings. People do have a emotional, cognitive and spiritual need for meaning within their lives. When this basic human need is getting frustrated, according to Frankl, it is satisfied by various substitutes, such as superficial sensual pleasures, obsessions and addictions, neuroses, personality disorders and psychoses, manias, depressions and other psychiatric illnesses.

(9.) The majority of human beings know suffering from losing the meaning of life and have been immediately acquainted with it by themselves or by other people. Emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering is a life-long concern for all human beings independent of age, gender, ethnic origine, nationality or religion. It is a constant topic for all people whether they are laymen or professionals who have to deal with these issues when supporting people who are seeking emotional relief, a healing cure for their wounded souls or a restitution of their mental health.

(10.) Emotional and mental health is the primary and only concern for psychiatrists, psychotherapists and other therapists. Emotional and mental health is not the same as the comprehensive form of well-being, called *Shalom* in the Jewish tradition or the spiritual salvation of the soul in the Christian tradition. Comprehensive well-being and spiritual salvation in the religious sense are of special concern for rabbis and priests, pastors and ministers or other spiritual guides. Therefore people who formally are believers in God (with their specific personal understanding of God) might also suffer from the meaning of life. And this is also true for people who used to have a firm and decent understanding about who they are and what they want to do in their lives before they entered a personal crisis.

(11.) Before psychotherapists and psychiatrists started out to understand, investigate and reflect the emotional and spiritual suffering of ordinary, neurotic and psychotic people in a more systematic, methodological and scientific manner they took it for granted that ordinary people and pre-scientific folk-psychology already know quite a bit about these psychological phenomena. Moreover if they are well educated they also know about the endlessly rich resources for a life-long learning procedure about these psychological phenomena within the manifold of religions and within the various forms and works of arts, such as epos, myths and tales, drama, literature and poetry, sculpture, painting and film, etc.

(12.) Although for Frankl there is no question that there is something like loosing faith in the meaning of life, there are many opinions and convictions, conceptions and controversies about the objective nature, the true sources and the real conditions of the ability or inability to experience and grasp one's actual and concrete meaning of life. Moreover there are many perspectives, descriptions and evaluations about the subjective ways of understanding the meaning of life. And finally there are various psychotherapeutic approaches, methods and rules about the therapeutic treatment of losing one's understanding or the meaning of life.

## **5. Human suffering as a challenge for the meaning of life**

Keeping Frankl's conception about the human need for the meaning of life in mind we can finally



draw some conclusions about the ways in which human suffering can be a challenge for someone's ability to find some meaning in life.

(1.) All external and all personal conditions of human suffering mentioned above can be a challenge for the meaning of life under some situations. It all depends on the *particular and contingent situation* in which the individual person with its specific personality, biography and social setting is positioned at the moment given.

(2.) Whether or not a particular external or personal condition of human suffering really is a challenge for the meaning of life under the given situation is depending on the *individual and personal understanding* of what is constitutive for his or her meaning of life.

(3.) Since one's personal sense for the meaning of life is highly individualized people may cope, react and act in many different, unpredictable and even surprising ways toward any external and personal conditions of human suffering. It all depends on their *personal emotional, cognitive and spiritual resources* for discovering some meaning in the remaining opportunities of their immediate living conditions when being threatened by the loss of meaning in other aspects of their life.

(4.) The individual ways of coping, acting and reacting with respect to external and personal conditions of suffering as challenges for the meaning of life is neither a good reason to *negate or belittle* the immense impact of physical and emotional pain contained in all forms of human suffering nor is it a good reason to *accept and tolerate* all the main sources of physical and emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering. The individual ways of coping, acting and reacting with respect to external and personal conditions of suffering as challenges for meaning can also be a good reason to *resist and fight* some of the main sources of physical and emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering. Therefore all professions in which preventing, prohibiting, diminishing and raising human suffering are essential tasks contain some of the most profound sources for meaning.

(5.) Since all the external and personal conditions of human suffering *can* be, but no single source *must* be a challenge for the meaning of life of all persons (except for the complete annihilation of human life on Earth and the immense threat for the future of mankind posed by atomic, biological and chemical warfare, world-wars and genocide) in all situations *reasonable decisions* have to be made with respect to the problem which external and personal conditions of human suffering are to be accepted and tolerated – even if only because of the inability to raise them under the given situations - and which external and personal conditions of human suffering are to be resisted and fought against. These decisions are always a matter of *phronesis* or sensitive and decent judgment under given circumstances.

(6.) According to KARL JASPERS however there are some conditions of human suffering which belong to human existence as such and which cannot be avoided and prohibited at all: the *Grenzsituationen*, or existential borderline situations.<sup>9</sup> Among them are (a.) *the struggle for existence*, which often is covered up by the human need for love and harmony, solidarity and cooperation; (b.) *the individual death*, which is often denied or only accepted as a general necessity as long as we have not been acquainted with the immediate experience of the death of person close to us; (c.) the *contingency* of many aspects of our life which are a matter of *chance* rather than a matter of the orders and laws of nature or of the social and cultural rules of conduct and which cause a lot of inequalities; (d.) the reality of *responsibility* and *guilt* which cannot be denied despite of all attempts to understand and explain human behavior as determined by fate, biography, personality and (unconscious) motives; (e.) the *existential failing* or the *fragmentary character of human existence* which is the reason why the existential attitudes of both *pessimism* and *optimism* are based on mere rational constructions which fail to be phenomenologically aware of the *ambivalent* and *antinomic structure of human existence*.

(7.) Among all personal conditions of suffering the *Grenzsituationen* usually are the hardest challenges of the meaning of life because they are unavoidable constituents of human existence. On the one hand they provoke deep feelings of helplessness and powerlessness and crash the

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, München 1994, pp. 229 - 280

natural and inborn human narcissism. On the other hand they provoke philosophical and religious questions and they promote and deepen the search for the meaning of life. This is why for Jaspers they are chances to wake up from mere factual *Being-There* (Dasein) to authentic human *Existence* (Existenz). Human suffering however is remaining an unavoidable element of human Existence:

“The common moment of all *Grenzsituationen* is that they bring about suffering; but the common moment is also, that they let the forces grow, which go along with the pleasures of existence, of meaning, of growing. Suffering is not one *Grenzsituation* among others, but all of them turn into suffering under their subjective point of view. Pleasure and suffering are unavoidably chained to each other.”<sup>10</sup>

Although we started out with Plato’s astonishingly modern and scientific approach to personal being and the nature of the human soul, and although we appreciated Epictetus’ hint about the dynamic reality of the human mind we had to learn mainly from Frankl and Jaspers that emotional, cognitive and spiritual suffering is much more individual, personal and complicated than at first sight. Any empirical psychological study on these very important and interesting phenomena of human suffering would have to start out with such preliminary and hypothetical philosophical assumptions in order to reach any reliable results which are adequate to the full and rich complexity of the phenomena.

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, München 1994, p. 247