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Work as Life's Meaning and Meaning as Life's Work

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There have always been people for whom a cause was fused together with their working lives. Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa could serve as examples. Asking such people what their work means to them, or how they think their careers will take shape, would distinguish the work from the cause and from themselves in such an artificial way that there would be no point at all in asking.

This is an analogue to Viktor Frankl's distinction between self-actualization and self-transcendence.

> ... [B]eing human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence. (Frankl 1947/1997, p. 133)

For Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa, work is meaning and is therefore certainly not separate from the person or from an object or project. Self-transcendence seems to be the key word, and ironically enough, work as a theme is *not* really explicitly interesting.

If we nevertheless take work as a theme, we do so with a view towards the concrete daily life that unfolds in our cultural surroundings. Most of us have a job, we work many hours each day on average, and – perhaps most importantly – some of us attempt to realize ourselves through our work in such a way

that it becomes a goal in itself.

And here, we come back to Frankl's distinction between self-realization and self-transcendence, where the former *cannot* be a goal in itself, but nevertheless has become one in the modern, Western way of life. Before delving into this discrepancy, it becomes important to explore what is really meant by the concept of self-transcendence.

Interpreted based upon the word itself, it means a state of being beyond the self. To put it in another way, human beings go out into the world, and place themselves in relation to the world, where reality and 'the beyond' exist. As Frankl put it:

> … the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system. (Ibid.)

As human beings, we are therefore not just single, small, closed, self-sufficient systems with our own stores of resources; and this approach actually differs from the one currently espoused by humanistic psychology. The self-transcendent person is connected with the world *and* his or her existence has its own completely unique meaning. The uniqueness of meaning for each individual human being's existence arises from this connectedness and not from within the individual. Only in relation to the world does meaning become clear, because it exists *in* the world, but it varies from one person to the next. This meaning thus does not necessarily have anything to do with work. Meaning can also be found in the private sphere through children and family, young as well as old.

Here, Frankl nails down and argues against a common criticism of existential psychology, that is, the perception that with our freedom and our unique existence, we lack any relation to the world around us. Frankl designates connectedness in particular as being most important, because self-transcendence has to do with finding *meaning in life* and thereby has to do with the ultimate driving force of human life.

If we follow his idea that human beings are driven by the will to find meaning, i.e., to find a concrete meaning for their

own personal existence, it is not so surprising that many people choose the workplace as their arena. Modern existence presents us with many possibilities, which are hardly distinguishable from those presented by existential psychology.

In the modern workplace, self-realization is one of the possibilities offered to us, not as a *side effect,* but as a concrete opportunity, a possible project/goal. The all-important distinction, the difference, between self-transcendence and self-realization is thereby at risk of being wiped out. The modern-day person does use all available resources in order to find concrete meaning in his or her personal existence, but is doing so in a context – the workplace – where giving employees new opportunities has an entirely different purpose. The purpose is not for the employees to be self-realized as a side effect while they otherwise are completely absorbed in something outside themselves. In the workplace, the objective is financial profit and/or a positive reputation.

For almost half a century now, we have disconcertedly declared ourselves satisfied with the opportunities given to employees. With the emergence of humanistic psychology, the workplace as a subject was incorporated into the field of psychology, and the unique individual arose – though not in the existential sense, since the focus was on needs; and values, to the extent they were mentioned, were discussed in order to underscore how people could be motivated, even pushed, toward organizational goals. Applying humanistic psychology to the workplace, the prevailing view was that *human beings are condemned to development.*

This verdict sounds somewhat different than the approximately contemporaneous verdict that came from the French existential philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre: *human beings are condemned to freedom.* If his conviction is true, however (which is obviously an important existential presumption) then the humanistic verdict cannot be so. If human beings really are condemned in every situation to have freedom and therefore to be able to choose, then no one can at the same time be condemned to development. A person is free to say "no", to say "no, thank you"; the humanistic rationale will be put forward in

the workplace as being an advantageous proposition.

What then can we deduce about the situation of people today in the modern workplace? My leadoff is to view development as having been generalized into something common to all, into something not worthy of pursuit. As a consequence, I would assert that humanistic resource concepts *seduced people into development.* Human beings have thus not been condemned, but find themselves in a place where, if they were alert and reflective, they would refuse to be.

Now, Sartre would object here that, precisely by not being alert and reflective, people today have thus exercised their freedom and made their choice. People have let themselves be seduced, have chosen to believe in the workplace's arguments about how organizational goals can coincide with employees' personal goals, and that therefore it is just a matter of rowing the boat together. That such a boat is an existential impossibility is another matter. The employees have chosen to believe in it. But why? we might ask.

Indeed, why say yes to seduction, why say yes to being taken in, to being told an untruth? One reasonable answer might be that the alternative was once worse, and that human comfort has in the meantime become too great. Humanistic psychology arrived in the workplace as the new Third School with a well-intentioned view towards the individual. This view was far preferable to the behavioral view, which until then had governed the interpretation of what happened on the factory floor.

Humanistic psychology thereby became a *yes to life,* as the American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, called it. He introduced his five basic needs and gave us the word *self-actualization,* which quickly became *self-realization* with the emphasis on *self.* The individualistic way of life was born. His view of people at work was reformulated a few years later by his student, Douglas McGregor, whose life's meaning lay without doubt in making evident the great need to exchange the old, dark view of the individual for a brighter one:

1. Management is responsible for organizing the elements of productive enterprise – money, materials,

equipment, people – in the interest of economic ends.

2. People are not by nature passive or resistant to organizational needs. They have become so as a result of experience in organizations.

3. The motivation, the potential for development, the capacity for assuming responsibility, the readiness to direct behavior toward organizational goals are all present in people. Management does not put them there. It is a responsibility of management to make it possible for people to recognize and develop these human characteristics for themselves.

4. The essential task of management is to arrange organizational conditions and methods of operation so that people can achieve their own goals best by directing their own efforts toward organizational objectives. (McGregor 1957, p. 375)

It is clear that McGregor, despite his good intentions, did not reckon self-realization as a *side effect.* Notwithstanding that his conceptions about people are new and totally break with negative, industrial notions about people, organizational activity is still carefully arranged, and people are one of the *elements* in the management field.

Half a century has gone by since then. The last World War and its whispering ruins have long since become silent. Only from the Balkans and further off in the world do we get reminders that not everything is growing, and that personal development can also consist in taking responsibility for one's younger siblings, because one's parents have been shot.

But the Balkans, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iraq ... these are obviously not enough. Personal development is still preferably conducted on some extended weekend retreat in a comfortable

spot near a lake or ocean, paid for by the company. Such a way of life is a yes to life, according to Maslow; and one must really be beastly to attempt to say no here. Maslow himself in a way tried otherwise by orienting himself with the European existential philosophers' works, perhaps because with their concepts like *freedom, responsibility* and *meaning*, they gave a philosophical counterpart to his psychological work. In his book, *Toward a Psychology of Being,* from 1962, he reached the conclusion that

> The existentialists' study of the authentic person and of authentic living helps to throw this general phoniness, this living by illusions and by fear into a harsh, clear light which reveals it clearly as sickness, even the widely shared. (Maslow 1962/1998, p. 22)

Considering these words, Maslow certainly does not seem like the founder of the modern mode of working that later proved attractive to so many stressed-out employees. His objective was to argue, via existentialism, that people do *not* neglect to vitalize the resources they have; on the contrary, every human being has the chance to put the falseness of previous generations behind them (the inhibitions of the Freudian bourgeoisie, for example) and thereafter have a chance at self-realization. To that end, the existentialists are naturally useful.

They are not useful, however, concerning their *no to life*:

> I don't think we need take too seriously the European existentialists' exclusive harping on dread, on anguish, on despair and the like, for which their only remedy seems to be to keep a stiff upper lip. … They should have learned from the psychotherapists that the loss of illusions and the discovery of identity, though painful at first, can be ultimately exhilarating and strengthening. (Ibid.)

Now *there* is a ditty one can sing along with. The humanistic psychologist wants to see the good side and move forward. Maslow is correct that the existentialists see the world

differently than he does. Authenticity, for example, is an important existential concept that nicely says something about what really is going on between humanists and existentialists.

Can a person safeguard his or her authenticity if the surroundings (here, the workplace) tend towards a different goal? Can people safeguard their authenticity if their relation to the other (here, the employer) is said to be one of equal worth, but in practice demands unconditional loyalty? Can people safeguard their authenticity, if they must always be a resource?

Here, I am referring to three of the assumptions underlying any Western-style workplace that is run according to human resource management principles. It is assumed that employees have the same goals as their employer. It is assumed that those who are considered equals can also be placed hierarchically in relation to each other. It is assumed that people are always strong.

From an existential perspective, *none* of these assumptions is true; and yet, people can put themselves at the service of a greater cause, so that all these assumptions nevertheless are brought to fruition in practice and thereby become true.

A person *can* have the same goals as the workplace and therefore get along like a fish in water – in authentic connectedness with the surroundings. One example might be the organization Doctors Without Borders.

And a person *can* give himself over – and thereby be subordinate – to another person and still be the other's equal. An example would be Karen Blixen's faithful Danish secretary, Clara Selborn. But notice that the components get switched around. Giving oneself over, subordinating oneself: these come first and are chosen by the person herself. Thereafter comes equal worth.

Finally, as concerns the last assumption, a person *can* maintain his or her mental strength in good shape just through the knowledge of having chosen a meaningful act, which was not in itself an outwardly driven, career-advancing objective or one that would look good to others, but for that person was life-giving and self-effacing. An example of this would be Mother Theresa.

Viktor Frankl can help to explain the real difference between what I have described above as the assumptions behind the Western world's workplaces, and the examples I have given of existential modes of living out the same assumptions. Frankl would point out values, as he points out the definitive distinction:

> Values do not drive a person; rather than push, they draw us. ... When I say that human beings are drawn by values, it is implicit that freedom is always present; the freedom of human beings to choose whether to accept or reject a proposal, i.e. to actualize or waste an opportunity for creating meaning. (Frankl 1947/2004, p. 104)

Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager, og: Der Mensch auf der Suche nach dem Sinn Here again, it is explained that human beings have the freedom to say no. But do organizations see things in the same way? No, there is no further assumption, no further possibility behind the assumptions of the humanistic-minded workplaces; there is *not* in fact the logical possibility that an employee has the ability to say "no, thank you".

On the one hand, I could add rationally that nor are organizations created to give their employees choices. If the answer is "no, thank you", that's all right, and the employee can just find another job. Such consequences are normal from an existential point of view.

On the other hand, I must also more emotionally state that there is an internal contradiction here. It lies partly in the second assumption's switching the order of things – the demand for loyalty comes *before* equality, which makes equality impossible; and it lies partly in the psychological double-bind of an offer that is too good to refuse – *we won't take no for an answer.* In other words, if the employee gets the idea that he would like to say no to these assumptions, it is the employee who has misunderstood the connection; it is not that the assumptions might be ambiguous or manipulative.

These kinds of workplaces produce many various types of

individuals, when we look upon matters a bit more closely. There are many stressed-out employees as well as managers. To use a term from existential psychology, the necessary *state of tension* has gone from being electrifying to being electric shock therapy.

> What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task ... the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him. (Frankl 1947/2004, p. 109)

Isn't the overstressed state of so many people today a clear indication that they lack a worthwhile goal? I will not presume to judge the matter, but instead will stick to the people I meet as an organizational psychologist. Typically, I meet them when sickness or warning signs have forced them to pause for a moment. What can be the matter?

During these encounters, I often think about the Sisyphus myth, which French philosopher Albert Camus used as a metaphor in his exposition of meaninglessness in existence, which can only be overcome by means of consciousness of its absurdity. That is his conclusion; but along the way, he holds up the stark image of a man who strains heavily to get a rock up to a mountaintop in an utterly *meaningless* expenditure of energy, as it turns out, because time after time the rock just rolls down the mountain again, so that the man must begin all over again.

One thought that might immediately come to mind is that people nowadays struggle towards the top in the same way, only to be shocked thereafter by how little it all really meant, if it meant anything at all. As an example, imagine the cancer patient who feels he has spent too much of his time here on earth working; or the parents of a teenager with a drug problem, who suddenly discover what is more important than work.

Actually, though, I believe the myth can, with Camus' help, lead to yet another point. What Camus does is to imagine in a true-to-life way what happens when this man, after his

meaningless, absurd venture up the mountain, descends back down to begin all over again. He imagines that this man, on his way down the mountain, understands perfectly well how absurd these trips up and back down again actually are. Yes, Camus actually imagines that this person is fully aware of the whole situation.

> It is in the pause during his return that Sisyphus interests me.… This recurring hour that is like a breathing space, and which returns just as surely as his misfortune, is the hour of consciousness. At each of the moments when he leaves the heights and descends little by little towards the lair of the gods, he is the master of his destiny. He is stronger than the rock. (Camus 1942/2002, p. 165)

And therein lies the strange paradox, that it is through consciousness of the situation that it becomes bearable. In the face of absurdity, a person can do nothing directly. But he still has his consciousness, and that becomes the means by which he overcomes the work, the absurdity, and his life – even without a god, as Camus set out to show it was possible to live without.

Another thought that might spring to mind is that I would at this point introduce a type of therapy for those suffering from severe stress, consisting simply of making them *conscious* of their meaningless work-mare, so then they will be able to handle it. But no, I have another purpose. Actually, I see the modern way of life as the reverse of Camus' realistic vision of the man and the mountain.

People in modern times typically consider themselves fortunate that their work has become so meaningful – that the rock certainly is heavy, but that there is good reason to haul it up the mountain. In *some* cases, it does not even roll down again. So modern-day work has become filled with meaning. On the other hand, there is also no pause, no trip down the mountain, where there may be occasion for reflection and consciousness. Modern-day people are always on the move, on the way up.

Can we perhaps not cope with this combination? Being on the move is not the same as being absorbed in something. It is not the same as giving oneself over to something, not the same as *being* one's work or letting oneself be surprised by the side effects.

> The individual is complex, knows both love and hate, and has both strengths and weaknesses. The individual has a need for meaning in life, develops through relationships, and is capable of choice in those dilemmas that life offers us due to our fundamental conditions of freedom, meaning, alone-being, death, and other themes of life. The individual has, throughout life, the tasks of dealing with love and hate, strength and weakness, of distinguishing between good and bad, and of coping with life and death. (Schultz 2005, p. 15)

Without the modern comforts as a controlling force in life, work can nonetheless be difficult; the rock can be a heavy weight to bear. But when the rock is borne with consciousness of the meaningfulness in doing so, and not just because it leads to further comforts and luxury, we can then speak of an existential act.

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