FRANKLIAN METAPSYCHOLOGY REVISITED: IS THERE A FRANKLIAN EPISTEMOLOGY?

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates some of the core philosophical premises of Viktor Frankl's philosophy and model of psychotherapy (logotherapy) in order to explore the extent of an epistemological framework. While Viktor Frankl never developed a formal epistemology, it is argued that his thought is coherent and comprehensive enough to suggest the presence of a rudimentary epistemology that could be classified as a form of correspondence theory. There is a description of how—despite the historical, irreconcilable differences between logotherapy and psychoanalysis—these paradigms have epistemological similarities that have increased due to a waning of Freudian orthodoxy.

Much has been written on the subject of the epistemology (or lack thereof) of psychoanalysis, but comparatively little has been written on the subject of Franklian epistemology. This is not surprising considering that Viktor Frankl purposefully avoided developing a thoroughly operationalized formal philosophical system because he desired that logotherapy be widely accepted and applied clinically within the disciplines and functions of psychiatry. This was wise on his part in that any model of psychotherapy with an epistemology risks becoming overshadowed and defined by a system, resulting in abstract entanglements that distract from practical, clinical application. On the other hand, there is affirmative, implicit evidence of at least an embryonic level of epistemology in Viktor Frankl's statements on a wide range of subjects including ontology, empiricism, and phenomenology. By negation, he repeatedly described what logotherapy is not by drawing distinctions between logotherapy and several other contemporary philosophies and psychotherapies. Despite these clues that theoretically point us in an epistemological direction, contemporary academic and clinical practitioners of logotherapy have been presented with a number of apparent contradictions in attempting to determine whether a theory of knowledge underlies Viktor Frankl's system of thought at all. Themes of Franklian literature ostensibly include frequent use of opposites of which we could make a long list: objective/subjective; empirical/intuitive; rational/irrational/non-rational; freedom/instinct; physical/metaphysical, and so forth. Frankl was quite comfortable with paradox and the limits of human knowledge. A pattern is evident in his work wherein he repeatedly utilized various philosophical terms or theories while simultaneously contrasting them with aspects of their opposites, alternately pointing out the pros and cons of various concepts, without endorsement or refutation.

Enigmatically, Dr. Frankl's writings are replete with existential interpretations, categorical statements, referent heuristics, and normative assertions, often presented as factual, without suspension of doubt, as if he possessed an epistemology. His multifarious observations on the subjects of determinism, ontology, theology, phenomenology,
rational thought, and so forth are inclusive of but by far exceed the parameters of medical psychiatry or psychotherapy. Frankl’s appeal is to the reader’s rational understanding, and he seldom writes in a manner that could be characterized as hypothesizing or exploratory. He does not postulate, but asserts as fact his positions. As we find in many of his works, particularly The Unconscious God, Frankl relied on phenomenological and psychological observations presented as more accurate than psychoanalytic theory for explaining human experience and the true nature of the human psyche. That he thoroughly rejected skepticism as well as absolute certainty implies a basis for knowledge within the limits of anthropological-cognitive attainability. He did not reject the importance of epistemology (unlike many existentialists); nor did he endorse any form of fideism (unlike many Christian existentialists). Moreover, unlike the post-modernists that followed his era, Frankl was not primarily a descriptive writer; rather, he boldly articulated his observations prescriptively and normatively as if there was a foundation of knowledge on which he relied. To minimize or set aside the literary archeological evidence for a Franklian epistemology may be an unfortunate case of taking the good doctor’s reticence too literally.

It may be proposed that Frankl might have agreed with Foucault that, strictly speaking, psychology does not (or cannot) serve a particular epistemology (Foucault, 1957). Unlike the natural sciences and most medical disciplines, psychology aims to reveal the non-empirical through the empirical. The human mind as a malleable medical object is not (as yet) solely empirically comprehensible. But Frankl rejected the claim that empiricism is the only valid level of scientific analysis. Throughout his writings he sets limits upon empirical understanding and states that they become inadequate as we approach the depths of the human psyche, particularly within the spiritual realm. There is evidence that Frankl was sympathetic to the idea that there are fixed limits to understanding the human psyche, but even taking this into consideration is not particularly problematic because the delimitations present in Franklian philosophy are superstructural when compared to the surfeit of positive, clear and distinct assertions made throughout his writings. Frankl was more a rationalist than an empiricist, though neither term adequately encapsulates his philosophy.

Generally speaking, the existentialists rejected the idea that a formal epistemology was required to justify their philosophy. Beginning with Kierkegaard, several historically important continental philosophers have asserted in one manner or another that epistemology is either only relevant to scientific inquiry or merely a social construction and therefore is inherently antithetical to existentialism (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2009). Existence itself is the foundation of experience and the starting point for human identity and knowledge; consequently, there is no need for a prerequisite epistemology to fundamentally explain or justify existentialist discourse. Frankl, however, did not agree with such sentiments. A major difference between Frankl and the other existentialists is that he believed that truths about the world and the individual are sensibly interrelated and conjointly reference some form of objective truth that can be described philosophically and scientifically (Frankl, 1975). However, he did not advocate logical scrutiny of highly subjective truths, such as personal meaning, which can only be experienced by the individual. According to Frankl, while subjective reality cannot always
be justified by objective sources, such as science, it should never be expected to contradict objective reality.

**Psychoanalysis and historical antecedents to logotherapy**

It is worth noting that Frankl was cognizant of the historical precursors to twentieth century science that to the modern mind sometimes appear grandiose. The late nineteenth century was replete with assumptions of invincibility that were perhaps superficially emically justifiable and based on a sense of scientific progress, but at its worst, there was a form of presumptuousness, as famously associated with the quote from Lord Kelvin, “There is nothing new to be discovered in physics now. All that remains is more and more precise measurement.” Freud was a product of this intellectual culture and he understood that knowledge is power. Establishing academic and institutional fiefdoms were a way of preserving and disseminating a particular school of thought. In Viktor Frankl's early career, psychoanalysis was a predominant, institutional juggernaut with a rigid orthodoxy that did not tolerate ideological dissent. Even so, psychoanalysis to its credit was historically augmented by scientific observations from other medical disciplines that allowed practitioners to link specific psychopathologies to one or more etiologies extrinsic to the psychoanalytic model. This foundation was laid by Freud, who received a traditional physician’s education in addition to a specialization in neurology. Later, his anthropomorphic interpretations of behavior, psychic phenomena, and clinical nosology were augmented into mainstream medicine. In ironic reciprocity, during the decades of the early and mid-twentieth century the disparate fields of neurology, theology, and philosophy, and in general all of the sciences and humanities were reciprocally influenced by psychoanalysis. It is important to note that this is somewhat paradoxical when we consider that the unique discourses intrinsic to various schools of thought were not structured in a manner that openly facilitated integration of external science. This is most striking from the literature of the 1940s and 1950s wherein one finds a certain awkwardness of language in relation to ideas inclusive of observations and information originating from outside the developed and emerging schools of psychology and psychiatry. A completely closed system would have led to academic extinction, but cautiousness was maintained when new ideas were potentially threatening to an established paradigm. Profound developments in the sciences could not be ignored without great risk, and thus attempts were made to integrate disparate concepts and methodologies within academic schools of thought. Viktor Frankl was completely aware of the need to keep logotherapy relevant and acceptable by not opposing modern scientific discourse and methodologies. He was by orientation open to any legitimate scientific inquiry or discovery. This is one explanation for his at times sweeping observations that either included criticism or praise of a new discovery, method, or theory. That he had a basis to do so again implies a depth to his ideas that extends beyond mere belief or opinion. These facts shaped his proto-epistemology.
Indications of epistemology by negation

Since Frankl was reluctant to explicitly affirm an epistemology, the simplest form of inquiry to begin with is the question, “what is not logotherapy?” In the early Franklian literature logotherapy is most prominently contrasted with psychoanalysis. While initially carefully complimentary toward psychoanalysis, over time Frankl used harsher language to object to (or even rebuke as insidious) the dehumanizing aspects of psychoanalysis. It is reductionistic, atomistic, and makes the subject the pawn of drives, instincts, psychic energy, and mechanisms wherein the subject becomes “the automaton of a psychic apparatus” (Frankl, 1978, p. 22). Psychoanalysis even emasculates the very purpose of life, as show in the following quote: “If meanings and values are really ‘nothing but’ defense mechanisms and reaction formations, as the psychodynamically oriented theories have it, is life really worth living?” (Frankl, 1978, p. 104). Frankl was also critical of scientific philosophies that were antecedents to psychoanalysis such as naturalism and associationism. Furthermore he implied that psychoanalysis commits the fallacy of over-psychologizing human experiences and degrading “the self to a mere epiphenomenon” (Frankl, 1980, p. 27). He repeats the above sentiments in many variations throughout the Franklian literature.

The aforementioned negations point us in an epistemological direction. Reductionism and drive theory have been rejected. In the literature, Frankl’s objections were usually introduced as purely normative before he proposed the alternative theory: whatever dehumanizes the subject is an error due to consequence—the harmful effect proves its inaccuracy. This is where the observation frequently rested without any empirical or theoretical elaboration. Initially he does not positively assert an alternative moral principle; rather, he is descriptive in his statements to the effect that a dehumanizing element is inherent in psychoanalysis, and thus a newer paradigm is required. Frankl proposes logotherapy as a better model of psychotherapy over psychoanalysis on grounds of clinical demonstration and reasoned arguments.

One subject that Viktor Frankl extensively wrote about that permeates and perhaps brings theoretical coherence to his criticisms of psychoanalysis is his discourse on conscience as described in his work, The Unconscious God, which was first published in German in 1947. His postscript from 1975 was elaborative, but contained no retractions or revisions. Along with meaning, the Franklian language of conscience contains the core essence of logotherapeutic thought, which consists of an explicit conceptual structure that remains epistemologically coherent, regardless of the absence of a formal system. While the purpose of the work The Unconscious God appears in no way to be an attempt to describe Franklian epistemology, it presents itself almost as such, de facto, by virtue of the depth of the analysis of conscience and thorough its interrelatedness and relevance to a number of philosophical concepts.

The Unconscious God begins with an especially harsh criticism of psychoanalysis. Its reductionism objectifies and impersonalizes the human subject—in effect, “the wholeness of the human person is in some sense destroyed” (p. 21) and the subject becomes “the automaton of a psychic apparatus,” (p. 22) in other words, drives. In psychoanalysis, human beings are made analogous to parts of a machine, with only the illusion of freedom and self-awareness. While Frankl acknowledges that the analyst does
attempt to build up what has been destroyed, the subject is nonetheless reduced to an interplay of psychic mechanisms that only the analyst understands. This is in contrast to Frankl's humanizing of the therapist and respect for the patient. When compared to psychoanalysis, Frankl's existential analysis is a completely alternative theory that posits a so-called spiritual faculty that is part of the core essence of human identity and experience. Anything that is unique to being human, in other words distinct from other animals, is definitively spiritual. This existential orientation allows for Frankl's famous reflecting of the human question, “What is the meaning of life?” back to the person. In other words, in reality the subject does not ask the question; rather, every person is asked this question as it is put upon the subject by the existential fact of self-conscious, sentient life. This could be misinterpreted as a cynosure or as some sort of fideism wherein God “comes to man,” but Frankl never spoke of it in this sense. The question moves the subject away from the expectation of an external salvific solution toward meaning and provides a reorientation of an existential dilemma back toward the subjective.

Frankl's early opposition to various systems of thought was consistent with his model of psychotherapy. In a lecture given at Princeton in 1947, Frankl sweepingly criticized several philosophies on the basis of being fatalistic or deterministic, including nihilism, biologism, psychologism, and sociologism which he was “tempted” by as a youth (Frankl, 1967, 1980, 2000). In other lectures, behaviorism, scientism, and psychological egoism were condemned (Frankl, 1967), as well as utilitarianism and hedonism (Frankl, 1980). Even contemporary existentialists were criticized for over-emphasizing the self as the creative, intentional impetus for defining meaning, which he considered Faustian because it relied upon a non-referent, solipsistic subjectivity. That “Jean-Paul Sartre believes that man can choose and design himself by creating his own standards” (Frankl, 1978, p. 58) is a form of charlatanism in that it lacks the prerequisites of an objective point of reference and a teleological direction.

There were several historical and contemporary thinkers who Frankl alternately praised and criticized. He was sympathetic to Cartesian dualism and spoke favorably about Kant's philosophy of pleasure, categorical imperative, and postulate of reason, but he opposed Kant's reliance on reason as a necessary prerequisite to every proper action (Frankl, 1967, 1980). He occasionally made use of Schopenhauer's existential reflections while rejecting the concomitant pessimism and fatalism. But describing his multiple influences and subsequent opinions on various thinkers deserves independent treatment; suffice it to say that his writings and lectures have presented us with a litany of what is not logotherapy.

**Ontology**

Much has been written about Franklian multidimensional ontology. In traditional epistemology, the ontological inquiry begins at the Cartesian level of analysis (e.g., whether knowledge comes from subjective or objective sources), and is concerned with how to define self, and with finding a means of making distinctions between self and perception. Frankl was Cartesian in the sense that he viewed the self as the source of knowing and placed a higher value on intuition and interpretation of experience than on empirical data, even when the two were in conflict. He was not, however, skeptical of
empirical reality, although he believed that reason was higher than and required to interpret sensory experience. To Frankl, the world is a world of reason, which we knowingly participate in as subjects.

Like Freud, Frankl believed that existence is principally an unconscious process. No human being can be fully aware of his- or herself. While the border between the conscious and unconscious mind is fluid and permeable, with fluctuating transitions from one to the other (which he refers to as ontological hiatus), the spiritual and somatic dimensions are utterly distinct. Frankl perceived Freud’s error as one of omission in that he accurately described the instinctual unconscious but entirely neglected the existence and importance of the spiritual unconscious. Whereas psychoanalysis treats mental disturbances based on assumptions about drives and instincts, the entire focus of logotherapy is upon the spiritual aspect of man.

In critically examining the spiritual unconscious we are essentially searching Frankl’s epistemology in a most sensitive area. He considered the spiritual unconscious a border area between what can be known and what is beyond the level of human awareness. The spiritual unconscious is entirely distinct from psychophysical facticity (e.g., the external world and instincts) and is “an irreducible phenomenon that is inherent in the being as a deciding being” (Frankl, 1978, p. 33) and a thing-in-itself. It is the source of all that is human and can only be experienced phenomenologically as conscience. It is important to note that despite Frankl’s descriptions of the disparate nature of the self, he insisted that the self was a unity, with each aspect of the mind, body, and spirit being part of the totality of the person. “Mind is contingent upon instinct, existence upon substance. But this contingency does not mean dependency” (Frankl, 1980, p. 75). According to Frankl, psychic introjections do not possess their own being; only the whole of the self is being. The core essence of the person flows from the spiritual unconscious, which acts as executor for Dasein. The spiritual unconscious plays a role in meta-consciousness in that it is the watcher who watches. It is metaphysically distinct from, but not fragmented from, our primitivisms and executive functioning.

According to Frankl there are different levels of human consciousness. There is the conscious mind, which is the faculty for self-awareness, choice, and responsibility. While the conscious mind is undeniably influenced by the appetitive and spiritual dimensions (and the tension between them), ultimately, human free will remains autonomously intact. The source of human influence upon the will (conscious/unconscious, instinctual/spiritual) is completely irrelevant to the free exercise of the will (however circumscribed), but the individual must learn to discern whether the influence is instinctual or not in order to live an authentic life. Human choice is a fact of bifurcated influences: we can choose to act as decent or indecent human beings. Moreover, it is not necessary to be completely self-aware on all levels of consciousness to make authentic choices. Indeed, existence “may be authentic even when it is unconscious; on the other hand, man only exists authentically when he is not driven, but responsible” (Frankl, 1978, p. 27). The psychoanalytic corollary of this is that man is driven, even when he is not aware. In The Unconscious God, Frankl put it succinctly:

Since human existence is spiritual existence, we now see that the distinction between conscious and unconscious becomes unimportant compared with another distinction: the real criterion of authentic human existence only derives from
discerning whether a given phenomenon is spiritual or instinctual—whereas it is relatively irrelevant whether it is conscious or unconscious. (p. 26)

Franklian philosophy appears to agree with the famous existentialist dictum that “existence precedes essence” in that existence is the irreducible basis for human reality and meaning. In essence, the subject is self-defining. There is no need, then, for an a priori metaphysical epistemology. The core essence of the individual consists of and emerges from the spiritual unconscious. The spiritual unconscious is transcendent and goes beyond the human capacity to comprehend itself and becomes an “unanalyzable, irreducible phenomenon” (Frankl, 1978, p. 31). This is why, according to Frankl, self-reflection and introspection are inadequate to solve most psychological problems. Human beings are by nature active and not reflective. The self is incapable of full self-knowledge. There is always a level of unawareness consisting of memories and repressions that cannot be fully known. Even the concept of self is transient. Who I was at the age of ten is not fully descriptive of who I am today. Even tomorrow, I will perhaps have different feelings and beliefs than those I am experiencing now. Frankl rejected, as did his contemporaries, the 19th century psychology of introspection as a means to psychological knowledge.

Ontologically, conscience originates from the spiritual unconscious, is pre-logical and even pre-moral, and cannot be fully rationally explained. Moral self-evaluations only take place after choice has been exercised. Like love, art, and joy, conscience operates in a non-rational, sometimes irrational way. It is part of intuition and is deontologically future-oriented in that it does not indicate what has been done, but what should be done. It is at this point that some have argued that Franklian philosophy contains elements of mysticism. Indeed, he was fond of Pascal’s words, “A heart has its reasons unknown to reason.” That which exists can be understood rationally; that which should be belongs to the realm of the non-rational. Conscience is about what should be, and thus is not rational in its function. It has to do with ethical possibilities. That which should be is anticipated through intuition, but is not actualized at the subjective level. In this manner, conscience is analogous to love and other states of mind which are vital, but not rational. This is why human beings consciously operate on an intuitive level.

According to Frankl, the spiritual unconscious is the core essence of what it means to be human, but this aspect cannot be completely understood and represents the limits of human knowledge. While the spiritual unconscious can be experientially known, it is not a satisfying area of study because it cannot be contemplated as an object. For example, “The self does not yield to total self-reflection” (Frankl, 1978, p. 30). But why is this so? Frankl explained that the self is by nature active and ceases to be its true self when it engages in passive introspection. The spirit is “blind precisely where it has its origin” (Frankl, 1978, p. 31).9 Frankl uses several analogies to help us understand why this limitation of knowledge occurs, including the Heisenberg principle and the blind spot of the retina that cannot see itself. In two other instances his analogies indicate that the spiritual unconscious represents a deeper level of the self that possesses a quasi-autonomous awareness, independent of the conscious mind (perhaps analogous to the Judeo-Christian concept of the soul). In one instance he compares it to the psychic mechanism which activates wakefulness from sleep without requiring any conscious activity. It is also compared to the resistance experienced by hypnotized patients who—
regardless of their response to induction—cannot be instructed or suggested to do things contrary to their free will and conscience.

**Beyond anthropology**

Frankl was a rationalist in that he believed that sound reasoning tells us facts about objective reality. Science and medicine, which rely on empirical facts, require proper interpretation. But he also believed that these domains tell us very little about the human existential condition. Discovering the personal meaning to one’s life and grappling with existential despair and human suffering requires a deeper understanding of the human psyche than science provides.

On rare occasions Frankl implied that there is something higher than logic, science, and even subjectivity. He believed something exists as an ultimate reference point external to the self. The self “cannot be responsible merely to itself. The self cannot be its own lawgiver”; the self is “not autonomous” (Frankl, 1975, p. 57). Frankl states that there must be a real teleological direction human beings are moving toward and criticized modern existentialism for proposing that “man can choose and design himself by creating his own standards” (Frankl, 1975, p. 57). Frankl implied that the transcendent Thou is not a creation but may be the ultimate teleological object, mentioning in a footnote that “I have expressed my conviction that there is a dimensional barrier between the human world and the divine world” (p. 66). He goes even further and writes as if there is a God that humans know exists, regardless of whether or not this belief is conscious.

Another area beyond the capacity of human knowledge is that of supra, or cosmic, meaning. While the subject has meaning and purpose (whether consciously or unconsciously) we do not possess the ability to know “the purpose of the world as a whole” (Frankl, 1980, p. 31). Frankl explained that it is psychologically healthy to have faith that there is a cosmic meaning, even if it is beyond our grasp to logically conclude this, and acknowledges the role that religion and theism might play in grappling with this issue. At the very least, he advocates a type of optimistic agnosticism, suggesting that uncertainty about cosmic meaning does not justify fatalism or detract from subjective meaning. He implied, somewhat vaguely, that God may be the ultimate teleological object, but unelaboratively added, “there is a dimensional barrier between the human world and divine world” (Frankl, 1978, p. 66).

**Comparative epistemologies: Frankl contra Freud**

While logotherapy remains essentially foundationally unchanged since Frankl’s time, psychoanalysis has moved closer to a Franklian epistemology in that it has become more phenomenological as exemplified in the inter-subjectivist and object-relations schools of thought. Despite a long history of psychoanalysis being inherently antithetical, if not anathema, to Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy, a fascinating development has occurred over approximately the last three decades. Psychoanalysis, particularly among the non-continental schools of thought, has moved in an epistemological direction that has unintentionally attenuated some of the historical, foundational differences between psychoanalysis and existential analysis. There are even indications that regardless of the
utterly disparate modalities of psychotherapy and clinical interpretation, aspects of a single epistemology may be of service to both schools of thought. Jonathan Shedler (2010), the current president of the American Psychoanalytic Association, states the following:

Repressed memories get a lot of attention in undergraduate textbooks and in media portrayals of psychoanalysis—and have virtually nothing to do with contemporary psychoanalytic psychotherapy. The goal of psychoanalytic treatment is not to uncover repressed memories, nor has it been since the early 1900s. It is to expand freedom and choice by helping people to become more mindful of their experience in the here and now…. I have encountered students who have rejected psychoanalytic approaches because they believed, mistakenly, that psychoanalysis rejects free will and views all behavior as determined by forces outside our control. Actually, the opposite may be closer to the truth. Psychoanalytic therapists believe that expanding our understanding of the meanings and causes of our behavior creates freedom, choice, and a freer will. (p. 13)

Similarly, Peter Fonagy, current Freud Memorial Professor of Psychoanalysis, states the following:

I’m particularly impressed with qualitative research methods. I think phenomenology has been totally overlooked by psychoanalysis…. We are so excited about the possibility of studying the unconscious, which actually is the least interesting bit to study, but studying phenomenology is really where it’s at. (as cited in Jursit, 2010, p. 5)

Lastly, De Robertis (2001), in an editorial in the International Forum on Psychoanalysis, states that “The hermeneutic conception of psychoanalysis renounces certain ideas of psychoanalytic theory such as Freudian meta-psychology with its mechanistic conception of driving forces, impulses, etc.”

The above sentiments do not at all reflect the reductionist and deterministic views of psychoanalysis repeatedly criticized by Viktor Frankl. It would be easy to be dismissive of such sentiments if they were aberrant, but the more accurate understanding is that contemporary psychoanalysis is in many ways very different from traditional psychoanalysis and in some aspects has completely diverged from Freudian orthodoxy. These divergences are most obvious in the distinctions between traditional psychoanalysis and the object-relations schools (Oppenheim, 2010) and between the self-psychology and cognitive-social schools of analysis (Ogilvie, 1992). This has concerned many traditional Freudians, who have advocated a return to original sources for theoretical validation.12

Of the contemporary epistemologies which were not well-formulated during Frankl’s most formidable years, participatory epistemology seems most congruent with the principles of logotherapy. This epistemology is also congruent with psychoanalysis; however, little has been written on this subject. Participatory epistemology was developed in the 1970s and 1980s by a number of thinkers from various schools of thought, notably in the fields of anthropology and transpersonal psychology. The basis of this epistemology is the thesis that conscious perceptions only have meaning insofar as the human mind interacts with the objective world (Tarnas, 1991). Reality, then, is an ontological correspondence between what Kant would have referred to as noumena and phenomena. Objective truth exists and can be partially known. Subjective truth is also
part of reality in that it is part of the dialectic of empirical information. This view is consistent with Viktor Frankl’s insistence that forms of human knowledge accurately reflect objective reality while simultaneously being subjected to subjective interpretation. The problem remains that Frankl did not explicitly state by what criteria perception relates to knowledge.

Like Freud, Frankl did not describe any criteria for determining how experience, perception, intuition, or reasoning relates to knowledge; nor did he describe any specific procedures for differentiating between truth and error. Both thinkers used an a posteriori justification for their theories, based on case studies, clinical judgment, and treatment effect (Boczar et al., 2001; Graber, 2004), and were concerned with the content and analysis of every critical aspect of human existence as it related to psychological health. But how does Frankl determine the difference between theoretical construction and fact? Again, according to Frankl, it is an appeal to experience and observation that provides the best explanation for a phenomenon. Frankl used this line of reasoning in his criticism of the pleasure principle, which, though a sound theoretical construct, does not adequately explain human behavior (Frankl, 1980). According to Frankl, something is a so-called fact if it provides the best explanation for a phenomenon, by either eliminating contradictions or paradoxes or by intuition. Freud shared similar sentiments:

We have often heard it maintained that science should be built up on clear and sharply defined basic concepts. In actual fact no science, not even the most exact, begins with such definitions. The true beginning of scientific activity consists rather in describing phenomena and then in proceeding to group, classify and correlate them. Even at the stage of description it is not possible to avoid applying certain abstract ideas to the material in hand, ideas derived from somewhere or other but certainly not from the new observations alone. Such ideas—which will later become the basic concepts of the science—are still more indispensable as the material is further worked out. (Freud, 1915, p. 117)

At this point in history there are several considerations that justify revisiting the subject of Franklian-Freudian comparative epistemology. Throughout much of Frankl’s and Freud’s lifetimes there were furtive, largely unsuccessful attempts to define and classify their respective epistemologies, but both men did not attempt to develop, thoroughly define, or epistemologically formalize any theory of knowledge. In the mid 20th century, psychoanalysis and existentialism suffered from empirical critique and failed to meet Popper’s falsification criterion (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2009; Zaphiropoulos, 2001). But presently, due to developments in constructivism and intersubjectivity, it is now possible to retrospectively and imputably epistemologically categorize models of psychotherapy in a manner that was only rudimentarily accessible in the mid 20th century. While arguably anachronistic, this observation serves to replace the assumption that the issue can never be settled—an assumption unfair to contemporary adherents. At the very least, as was pointed out by Kohn (1984), the Neo-Freudians have more affinity with existentialism because they place a greater emphasis upon “our capacity to grow and chose and make meaning” (para. 37). It is also essential to consider that regardless of the evolution of psychoanalysis, the reality of death, being, and human alienation are underlying themes throughout Freud’s corpus and existentialism (Mills, 2003). Overall,
this is an area that requires further study, but considering the history of Frankl contra Freud, it suggests the possibility of fascinating future developments.

Conclusion

Viktor Frankl did not develop an epistemology and there is no evidence of a latent epistemology that he relied upon which could be discovered by archival analysis or historical-literary criticism. However, Frankl did provide us with ample observations and propositions that superficially seem to emerge from an epistemology and direct us either toward or away from specific philosophical positions. Aggregately, we can surmise that he rejected skepticism, empiricism, and reductionism. He appeared to accept the notion of a Cartesian ontological duality, but, unlike Descartes, he did not not doubt the human capacity to accurately interpret objective reality or even think that subjectivity necessarily detracted “from one’s experience of objectiveness of reality itself” (Frankl, 1969, p. 59). Moreover, his belief in the existence of powerfully influential layers of the unconscious mind goes beyond any simple dualistic philosophy. Frankl was a rationalist insofar as he believed that human reason was above and could be relied upon to interpret human perceptions, but believed that knowledge of what constitutes the essence of what it means to be truly human is beyond the limits of human knowledge. Unlike the modernists and post-modernists, he did not reject traditional modes of thought nor succumb to relativism. He did not believe that science or reality is merely a construction or projection of biased or flawed human effort, nor did he embrace positivism. These facts place him outside of the currently dominant Western philosophies.\textsuperscript{14}

Was Viktor Frankl really even an existentialist? Yes is a justifiable answer if by existentialist we mean that his philosophy and psychotherapy was primarily predicated upon the existential questions of human existence (life, death, meaning, despair, etc.) and emphasized the human capacity for authenticity and freedom. No is a justifiable answer if by existentialist we mean a thinker who shared with the continental philosophers an anti-rationalistic world view which viewed truth as arbitrary and postulated that personal meaning is not necessarily linked to objective rationality. While Frankl emphasized subjective choice as the basis for authenticity, he did not agree with the conventional existentialist position that subjectivity originates ontologically or is encapsulated within itself. Frankl's positions on subjectivity, morality, and the existence of God were in some ways more Judeo-Christian than existentialist.\textsuperscript{15} He did not believe that personal meaning is solely generated and limited by subjectivity or even inter-subjectivity. Like Kant and Hegel, he believed that while the human experience only occurs via the world of objects, ultimately and beyond the level of conscious awareness there is something transcendent to human experience that is outside the limits of human knowledge. Moreover, he relied on certain assumptions that never obtained favor in mainstream existentialism. His conception of two levels of the unconscious mind (the spiritual and instinctual unconscious) is mostly foreign to existential analysis.\textsuperscript{16} The complete lack of acceptance of the death of God and an implicit belief in a cosmic order puts Franklian philosophy outside the mainstream of contemporary existential philosophy. In a manner almost reminiscent of scholasticism, Frankl believed in an objective reality that is knowable and simultaneously asserted the possibility of the divine, which is only indirectly and partially
knowable. He speculated that there might be an objective purpose to human life beyond individual personal meaning and endorsed a cosmic teleology (albeit vaguely and cautiously). But does this mean that Frankl should be grouped with religious existentialists? No. Frankl seldom wrote about religion or theology; when he did, it was as commentary on the works of others. Neither did he endorse fideism or any specific faith as a means of engaging truth or reality. While sympathetic to some of the views of Buber, Tillich, Marcel and others, he believed that theology was utterly distinct from the medical sciences (Frankl, 1969, 1980).

What, if any, form of epistemology can be carefully inferred from Frankl’s writings? He appeared to work from a type of correspondence theory that could be described as something like “truth corresponds to that which is a fact; ‘facts,’ relating to the human condition are corroborated by the experience of personal meaning underlying psychological health.” Thus his theories were viewed as more correct than psychoanalysis or other systems because they were superior in producing psychological health accompanied by a sense of subjective purpose in life, the ultimate proof of which was the ability of individuals to rise above experiences of human suffering (whether natural or imposed). Frankl observed that concentration camp prisoners who found no purpose to their suffering were more likely to die from illness and die more quickly (Frankl, 1963). Many logotherapists reference Frankl’s personal experiences in the Nazi concentration camps as verification of his theories (Marshall, 2010; Pattakos, 2004) whereas others emphasize the empirical evidence for meaning-centered therapies (Batthyany & Guttmann, 2006; Melton & Schulenberg, 2008). It is important to note that unlike many contemporary psychotherapies which developed in the aftermath of clinical experimentation (for example, cognitive-behavioral therapy) Frankl’s basic premises were established prior to any clinical implementation; in fact, Frankl was 16 years old when he first conceptualized “meaning” as a critical psychological process (Frankl, 2000). Thus, despite Frankl’s personal experiences and the empirical evidence that has accumulated in subsequent decades, epistemologically speaking, Frankl’s philosophy is founded on a priori premises about human psychological processes historically described in distinction to psychoanalysis.

But the current emphasis among logotherapists upon empirical measures does not imply that Frankl was a pragmatist; rather, he believed that an affirmative moral intention on the part of the individual was necessary for authentic human experience and that results alone were insufficient to indicate existential health (Frankl, 1967). Somewhat echoing classical Western values, Frankl identified a moral life as part of psychological health in the sense that free will implies ethical responsibility (Frankl, 1967). The closest we can come to defining a Franklian epistemology is to say that where there is psychological healing, there is truth. When a logotherapeutic technique helped a patient resolve an existential dilemma (such as meaninglessness, despair, or fear of death) or affected a psychological cure (such as paradoxical intention for obsessive neurosis) Frankl considered it confirmation of his theories.

As with early psychoanalysis, Franklian epistemology is a correspondence between effect and treatment, with a posteriori confirmatory observation. In the absence of a formal system, the methodology is not primarily one of procedural reasoning as facts arise as a result of the object known. He understood meaning to be an ontological fact that
corresponded to human experience, even if it was latent (i.e., unconscious). Frankl was extremely skeptical of pure reasoning without clinical observation, but appeared to have confidence in the human capacity to provide reliable, self-referent a posteriori feedback.\(^{17}\) He therefore relied on behavioral and clinical observations for theoretical verification. On a more abstract level, his theories imply that there is an ontological correspondence between human thought and experience that is knowable and simultaneously reflective of subjective or objective reality; consequently, the human psyche is capable of providing accurate feedback about internal states that indicate levels of existential, psychological, or somatic health. While Frankl’s core premises are perhaps vulnerable to strict empirical and falsifiability criticisms, Frankl never claimed otherwise and argued that empirical methods are inadequate to explain the human existential condition.

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1 In the early 20th century the term “phenomenological” was equivalent to “empirical,” but Frankl consistently used the more contemporaneous meaning throughout his literary corpus.

2 Frankl did not like the religious connotation of the word “spiritual,” which it does not have in German (geistig) and instead used the word “Noölogical” in English. For Frankl, the spiritual aspect of existence is Aristotelian (i.e., that which is “unique to man”).

3 The following quote from Frankl’s autobiography is illuminative: “The theme [existential meaning] runs like a radiant thread through all my work and it concerns the border area that lies between psychotherapy and philosophy, with special attention to the problems of meanings and values in psychology” (Frankl, 2000, p. 59).

4 Of course Kierkegaard did not use the term “existentialist,” and limited his irrationalism to subjectivity.

5 As did Frankl.

6 In *The Unheard of Cry for Meaning* (p. 46) Frankl invoked Aquinas’ term unitas multiplex to describe the
human condition as “unity in spite of diversity.”

7 Thus Frankl’s contention that while Freud viewed the human psyche as containing a “repressed demon,” it was more accurate to say that it contained a “repressed angel.”

8 Let us recall Hegel’s observation on Kant that to be aware of a border “is to transcend it.”

9 Frankl believed that obsessive neuroses develop in response to over-thinking and scrutinizing of the self.

10 Irvin Yalom explores this subject very well in his work *Existential Psychotherapy*.

11 Specifically, the Anglophone schools.


13 Some readers may find aspects of participatory epistemology superficially reminiscent of Spinoza’s epistemology, minus the *participation mystique*.

14 The Japanese existentialist philosopher Yoshihiro Hayashi (2009) has expressed the opinion that while Frankl’s philosophy is outside the mainstream of contemporary philosophy, he was nonetheless a “constructive postmodernist” in that he worked to deconstruct elements of nihilism and replace it with *will to meaning*. I believe this is not only extremely anachronistic, but erroneous. Many elements of postmodernism are inherently antithetical to Frankl’s core philosophy.

15 For example, “But it is my contention that faith in the ultimate meaning is preceded by trust in an ultimate being, by trust in God” (Frankl, 1969, p. 145). In this and other passages in *The Will to Meaning* his language indicated a theism accompanied by a belief in a personal God.

16 With perhaps the exception of Ludwig Binswanger who independently argued that human existence consists of both instinct and an unconscious spirit that transcends instinct (Binswanger, 1963, p. 3).

17 For example, “Our task is to start with simple experimental facts and to evaluate them along the lines of traditional psychiatric methodology” (Frankl, 1975, p. 63).