

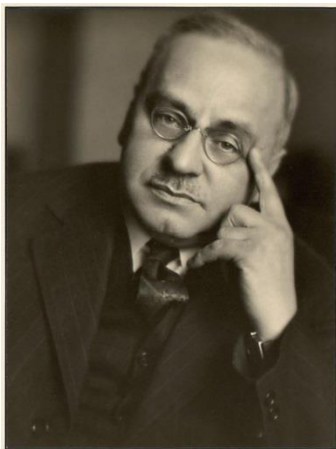
# PHILOSOPHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IDEOLOGIES ON THE MEANING OF LIFE IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

## Introduction

Philosophers and psychologists have contemplated on the reason for human existence and brought forth their analysis in different forms such as theories, essays, novels and so forth. Each of them has his own set of logic to process the analysis of the given notion. Their personal experiences of life which compelled them to contemplate on purpose of human existence have significant role in their analysis. This article traces the contemplations on the meaning of life of some of the prominent philosophers and psychologists in the contemporary era which would depict the general idea of the contemporary secular response to the question of life's meaning.

### **Alfred Adler: *What Life Should Mean to You***

Alfred W. Adler (1870-1937), a contemporary of Freud, was an Austrian medical doctor, psychotherapist, and founder of the school of individual psychology. He developed the importance of human behaviour. His emphasis on the importance of feelings of inferiority, the inferiority complex, is recognized as isolating an element which plays a key role in personality



development. Alfred Adler considered human beings as an individual whole; therefore he called his psychology "Individual Psychology." "Adler was the first to emphasize the importance of the social element in the re-adjustment process of the individual and who carried psychiatry into the community."<sup>1</sup> According to Adler, the major force of all human activity is a striving from a feeling of

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<sup>1</sup> Hildreth Cross, *An Introduction to Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 126.

inferiority toward superiority and perfection. Adler at first referred to this force as a drive for power. He later called the force a *striving for superiority*. He taught that everyone experiences feelings of inferiority and each person strives to overcome such feelings according to a unique set of goals.<sup>2</sup>

One of his major works is his book *What Life Should Mean to You* (1937) which encompasses a number of levels or domains for Adler's analysis. The book begins rather amusingly on the broad social/planetary level with one of the underlying curiosities of human kind condensed to the Meaning of Life. Rather than purporting to know life's meaning, Adler set out in "What Life Should Mean to You" to help each of us create our "own" meaning for our life. Through a fuller understanding of the common areas of life and the value of each person, Adler shows how to overcome the limitations of our past and develop the courage and confidence to transform ourselves--and the world in which we live. "We must make our own lives," Adler writes. "It is our own task and we are capable of performing it. If something new must be done or something old replaced, no one can do it but ourselves. If life is approached in this way, as a cooperation of independent human beings, there are no limits to the progress of our human civilization. "Adler concentrates life into three main tasks and attributes the meaning we find in our lives to the self-measurement of our ability toward these tasks. In brief the tasks concern first our ability to live and be useful upon the planet earth, second our ability to co-operate and have fruitful relationships with other humans and thirdly, our ability to co-operate as two sexes in love, marriage and family life from equal positions of worth.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [n.a.], *The World Book Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Illinois: World Book- Child craft International, Inc., 1980), 53, 54.

<sup>3</sup> Isobel Collins, "What Life Could Mean to You': A Review,"

<http://www.behavior.net/bolforums/showthread.php?t=329> (accessed on 5 January, 2015).

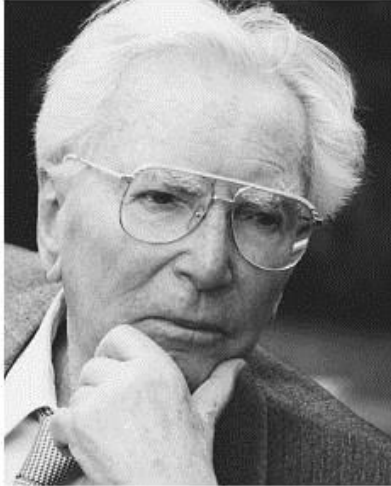
To Adler, human beings are creative, self-determined decision makers who choose the goals they wish to pursue. The “dynamic striving” toward a self-selected goal gives an individual a place in the world. Life has no intrinsic meaning, according to Adler, but each person gives life meaning according to that person’s own fashion. Because people grow up in a social environment, they search for significance by attempting to master their environment.<sup>4</sup> In comparing to Freud, Adler brought a theory that is widely acceptable and that which is social in nature. Yet, the theory is acceptable in the sense comprehending the human behaviour, but not in understanding the meaning of life. Adler also falls prey to the concept of subjective meaning. An inferiority feeling can make a person to strive towards superiority in relation to his/her inferiority feeling which basically relative in nature. And not all who feel inferiority strive towards superiority; rather they accept their state or blame any external factor. But in any sense such *striving for superiority* which is relative and can be even silly, cannot be the meaning of life as a whole. Thus, while Adler’s psychological theory is satisfactory, his philosophical theory is not so.

### **Viktor E. Frankl: *Man’s Search for Meaning***

Viktor Emil Frankl, M.D., Ph.D. (1905 – 1997) was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor. He was Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna Medical School, and had professorships in U.S. International University, University of Dallas, University of Pittsburgh, and Harvard University, and held lectures at 209 universities on

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<sup>4</sup> Paul D. Meier and others, *An Introduction to Psychology and Counselling: Christian Perspectives and Applications*, 2<sup>nd</sup>edn. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 309, 310.



all five continents. Frankl authored thirty nine books which to date (2015) have been published in forty three languages.<sup>5</sup>

Viktor Frankl has developed a form of psychotherapy that he terms “logotherapy,” which is a form of existential analysis, the "Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy". His best-selling book *Man's Search for Meaning*<sup>6</sup> chronicles his experiences as a concentration camp inmate, which led him to discover the

importance of finding meaning in all forms of existence, even the most brutal ones, and thus, a reason to continue living. Frankl became one of the key figures in existential therapy and a prominent source of inspiration for humanistic psychologists. This approach emphasizes the importance of the meaning of life, as suggested by the title of his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning*. His ideas derive from his experience in German concentration camps during the World War II. He noticed that some people admitted to the camps gave up and died soon after they arrived, while others survived incredible hardships. He realized that those who endured had something that provided ultimate meaning in life.<sup>7</sup>For Frankl, his psychological work was the transcendence that beckoned him onward; for others it was family; for still others it was religious faith.

Frankl believes that society is characterized by noogenic neurosis, or a search for meaning. In this quest for ultimacy, our spiritual nature is underscored; we are not just physical creatures. He

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<sup>5</sup> Viktor Frankl Institute, "Biography: Life and Work," <http://www.viktorfrankl.org/e/lifeandwork.html> (accessed on 6 January, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Published under a different title in 1959: *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*, and originally published in 1946 as *Trotzdem Ja Zum Leben Sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager*, meaning Nevertheless, Say "Yes" to Life: A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp.

<sup>7</sup> Meier, *An Introduction to Psychology*, 310.

encourages the counselee to turn away from excessive emphasis upon self, instead to focus upon what is ultimate in life. What is demanded of man is not, as some existential philosophers teach, to endure the meaninglessness of life, but rather to bear his incapacity to grasp its unconditional meaningfulness in rational terms.<sup>8</sup>

While Frankl is obviously not a Christian psychologist, his ideas are quite compatible with Christian thought he didn't ascribe Christ directly to be the meaning of life, rather pointed that there is an ultimate meaning beyond our life and to trace out that transcendent meaning is of prime significance. According to him, life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose. Meaning of life is the hope to live on the face of the earth regardless of adverse circumstances, and lack of meaning became hopelessness in life which sometimes ends up suicide even. He who knows the "why" for his existence will be able to bear almost any "how". Frankl viewed that everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfilment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it.<sup>9</sup> As like the Christian thought, Frankl's view of life is a life that has a specific mission to be accomplished by individuals. Such a mission in its noble nature is the objective meaning of life which is subjectively executed by specific patterns according to the life situations of the individuals.

In logotherapy, the ultimate meaning of life necessarily exceeds and surpasses finite intellectual capacities of man which is spoken of as supra-meaning.<sup>10</sup> Something within our finite mind or

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<sup>8</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), 187, 188.

<sup>9</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 154.

<sup>10</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 187.

experience cannot be meaning of life since our mind or experience is not all-inclusive, and without analysing anything thoroughly the conclusion cannot be drawn. Thus, transitory aspects of life are not really the meaning of life; yet they are made as meaningful by actualizing them and rendering as realities. But transitoriness of our existence does not constitute responsibility. Frankl was plausible in tracing out realities of life from the psychological point of view. His view of life is more acceptable than any other psychologist ever. Though he did not ascribe anything as the ultimate meaning of life, he delineated the nature of the ultimacy and emphasized the significance of search for meaning of life in order to get rid of absurdity and live a meaningful life which can hold the hope in any adverse situation.

### **Albert Camus: *Myth of Sisyphus***

French essayist, novelist, and playwright Albert Camus was born in Algeria in 1913. After studying philosophy at the University of Algiers, he worked as a meteorologist, stockbroker's agent, civil servant, journalist, and actor and director in an amateur theatrical company. Camus grew up in poverty and fought in the French Resistance against the Nazis. As a journalist he



often got into trouble with authorities by campaigning for economic and social reforms on behalf of Algerians. He died in an automobile accident in 1960. Camus expressed his theme of the absurd and irrational nature of the world in various forms. Among his best: a collection of essays, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942); the novels, *The*

*Stranger* (1946), *The Plague* (1948), and *The Fall* (1957); and the play, *Caligula* (1944). He won Noble Prize for literature in 1957.<sup>11</sup>

*The Myth of Sisyphus* is a short essay in which Camus examines “the absurd hero,” the person condemned to endless, meaningless toil. Sisyphus, being near to death, rashly wanted to test his wife's love. He ordered her to cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square.

Sisyphus woke up in the underworld. And there, annoyed by an obedience so contrary to human love, he obtained from Pluto permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness. Recalls, signs of anger, warnings were of no avail. Many years more he lived facing the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea, and the smiles of earth. A decree of the gods was necessary. Mercury came and seized the impudent man by the collar and, snatching him from his joys, lead him forcibly back to the underworld, where his rock was ready for him. Camus describes that Sisyphus is on the bottom of the hill and he has to push the heavy rock to the top of the hill. Sisyphus recollects all the physical strength in his arms and giving the complete physical labour he pushes up the rock. It takes a long time to roll the rock up to the top of the hill but within a second it rolls down and Sisyphus has to repeat again and again.<sup>12</sup>

Camus paints a haunting picture, and it becomes even more so when we realize that Sisyphus is a symbol for all humankind: all human effort is equally devoid of meaning. He represents the agnostic existentialist position on the meaning of life. His agnosticism leads him to say, “I do not

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<sup>11</sup> Brooke Noel Moore and Kenneth Bruder, *Philosophy: The Power of Ideas*, 2<sup>nd</sup>edn. (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1993), 505.

<sup>12</sup> Spark Notes, "The Myth of Sisyphus: Albert Camus,"

<http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/sisyphus/summary.html> (accessed on 15 January, 2015).

know a meaning that transcends life. I do not know the meaning and it is impossible for me to know it.” That is why he calls the world absurd.<sup>13</sup> It is only in this unintelligible limited universe that man’s fate assumes its meaning. The meaning of life is cast in terms of two existentialist values: the revolt against conformity and the absurd, and the freedom felt through existentially free choices.<sup>14</sup>

Presenting the Myth of Sisyphus as an allegory Camus attempts to justify that life is meaningless absurd and fruitless but it should be taken as a challenge. As an allegory, Sisyphus symbolizes all humankind and what Sisyphus does is the symbol of what we do every day in our life. Although this absurd world cannot guarantee a future, it can free the existential human being to become what he or she wishes. A person’s life can have meaning even if the world does not. His notion of the meaning of life, if at all one makes the meaning for his/ her life, is purely subjective in nature, and more than such an idea he is sure that life in general is utterly meaningless. His ideology culminates in no goodness or reformation of life.

### **Bertrand Russell: *A Free Man’s Worship***

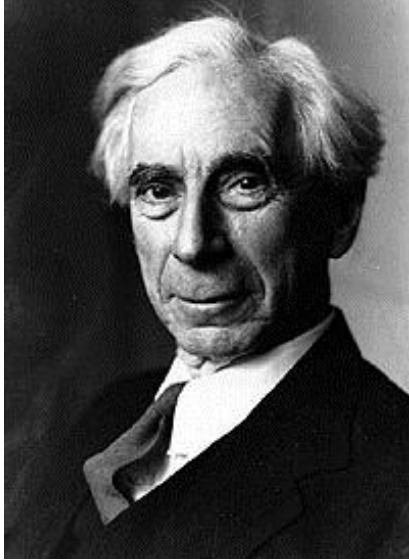
Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) was one of the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth century. He wrote numerous books on a wide variety of philosophical and social issues and was known to the general public for his outspoken stands on religion, marriage, and the banning of the nuclear bomb. His grandfather, Lord Russell, was twice prime minister, his godfather was

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<sup>13</sup> When Camus writes of “the absurd man,” he refers to a person who is aware of and attempt to comprehend absurdity, and such an attempt he calls “absurd reasoning” or ”absurd logic.”

<sup>14</sup> James A. Gould, *Classic Philosophical Questions*, 9<sup>th</sup>edn. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), 667.





John Stuart Mill, and his parents were prominent freethinkers. As a teenager, he had the intuition that God did not exist and found this to be a great relief. In 1950 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.<sup>15</sup>

During one of Russell's deepest crisis in 1903, he wrote an essay named *A Free Man's Worship*. It shows his attempt to find meaning and morality in life, and is a classical essay on humanist ethics. The world, says Russell, is an absurd, godless tragedy in which nature, omnipotent but blind, has brought forth rational children who are superior to their mother, and as such can discover moral ideals with which to sustain them in this ultimate meaningless existence. Morality does not need religion for legitimization. Russell proposes physicalism (proposition that *everything is made solely of physical stuff*) and scientism (proposition that *physical science can—eventually—explain everything*). In one of the most famous atheistic paragraphs ever written Russell says:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole

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<sup>15</sup> Bertrand Russell, "Why I Am Not a Christian," in John R. Burr and Milton Goldinger, *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 147-158.

temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris  
of a universe in ruins....<sup>16</sup>

Russell writes next: "A strange mystery it is that Nature, omnipotent but blind, in the revolutions of her secular hurrying through the abysses of space, has brought forth at last a child, subject still to her power, but gifted with sight, with knowledge of good and evil, with the capacity of judging all the works of his unthinking Mother."<sup>17</sup>

In summary, Existence, self-given-purpose, and a focus on individual suffering and responsibility are the main focus of this essay because Russell is trying to assert the existential decree that life is what we make it and we have no choice in that matter. There is no god to hand down assignments and there is no opting out of making choices that shape our lives and meaning.<sup>18</sup> Russell in his atheism saturated essay rejects the idea of God as the initiator of universe or life. Worshipping to any deity of power is to be slave to such an idea. A free man should worship goodness which is selfless and looking for the good of the humanity. His view of nature which is the primary cause for every entity that exists in the universe is powerful, but blind which is not capable of having any purpose for her actions. Therefore, life on the earth has no objective meaning. Our existence and meaning are only salvaged from the absurdity of suffering in an uncaring world by our choice to free ourselves from the omnipotence of our uncaring mother and to continue to hold our ideals against that uncaring power because we exist,

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<sup>16</sup> Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship" in Louis P. Pojman (ed.), *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991), 546-551.

<sup>17</sup> Pojman, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 546-551.

<sup>18</sup> Alexismalaika, "Bertrand Russell's "A Free Man's Worship","  
<https://alexismalaika.wordpress.com/2011/02/23/bertrand-russells-a-free-mans-worship/> (accessed on 15 January, 2015).

we are unique, and we have the mind and the power to create purpose and live moral lives according to the concept of the good we can all gain from suffering and contemplation.

Russell was honest to his proposal to kill the private passion and look for the betterment of the humanity for which he wish to destroy the so-called religious beliefs. But he selected the worst sample of religion to depict the character of religion as a whole and hence, his perspective on religion is evidently biased. Russell too was sadly convicted for the idea of subjective meaning of life. Humanism and atheism are highlighted ideas in his philosophy. Selfless life is not something new that Russell presented with his natural philosophy rather most of the religious beliefs in its core has this mission (for instance, Buddhism and Jainism- killing private passion; Christianity- living an altruistic life (I Cor. 10:24) for which Christ Himself is the example). Hence, Russell falls short in presenting the meaning of human existence.

### **Leo Tolstoy: *My Confessions***

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) was a Russian novelist and reformer. His great novels, including *War and Peace* (1863-69), and *Anna Karenina* (1873-77), were written in the early period of his creative life. During the later period, he was principally concerned with religious, ethical, and aesthetic subjects. Up to the point when despair almost drove him to end it, the life of Leo Tolstoy seemed to have been one of the self-fulfilment and satisfaction. His noble birth and inherited wealth had given him the opportunities and leisure to develop his inner resources and talents, as well as a wide range of freedom to explore and observe his outer environment. The brilliance of his intellect, the intensity of his responses, and the fertility of his imagination contributed to his early success as a writer of realistic fiction that was saturated with poetic



feeling. He was adored by his wife and children, admired by his fellow artists, and idolized by his increasingly large reading audience for his great literary achievements.<sup>19</sup>

But instead of finding himself happy at the apex of his career, at fifty Tolstoy found completely miserable. Questions about the value of life and art arose in his mind to plague him. To achieve widespread recognition and perpetual fame and to reach personal fulfilment in love, marriage, and family life, he had avoided facing such questions that then could not remain unanswered. The more he reflected on his predicament as a human being, the more he was confronted with doubt and uncertainty. The questions that bothered him were more fundamental existential questions relating in the most personal way to his own life and death for which he even contemplated on killing himself.<sup>20</sup>

He wrote about all of his perplexity and absurdity of life in *My Confessions* (1872-82) in which he mentioned his six unknown questions. This remarkable document lends itself to a number of different interpretations. From the psychological point of view, it reveals Tolstoy's strong guilt feelings over his past impulsive acts of violence, greed, and sensuality and his great need to resolve the unconscious conflicts that continued to trouble him. Also revealed is his intense fear of death, which he later expressed so powerfully in his short story *The Death of Ivan Illych* (1886). From religious point of view that Tolstoy held, the experiences described have a universal human significance. They are to be understood in light of man's sinful nature and his search for salvation. The needs for forgiveness, for atonement, and for peace of soul through a

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<sup>19</sup> Gould, *Classic Philosophical Questions*, 653, 654.

<sup>20</sup> Peyton E. Richter and Walter L. Fogg, *Philosophy Looks to the Future* (Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1985), 60.

loving and harmonious relationship with a Divine Being are, to Tolstoy, the essential and uniquely human needs. Tolstoy was willing to renounce his reason and to identify with the mass of sincere but uncritical believers. Eventually he was excommunicated from the Orthodox Church, but this did not bother him. In the course of contemplating on the Ultimacy, he eventually found the peace of mind which he craved by achieving a final transformation in which he became a practicing primitive Christian and world-famous religious sage.<sup>21</sup> He inferred that God is the sole source for the possibility of life.

I had lived only when I believed in a God. As it was before, so it was now; I had only to know God, and I lived; I had only to forget Him, not to believe in Him, and I died. What was this discouragement and revival? I do not live when I lose faith in the existence of God; I should have long ago killed myself, if I had not had a dim hope of finding Him. I really live only when I am conscious of Him and seek Him. What more, then, do I seek? A voice seemed to cry within me, "This is He, He without whom there is no life. To Know God and to live is one. God is life."<sup>22</sup>

Finally, from the philosophical point of view, Tolstoy's account is of interest because in it he formulates clearly and vividly one of the broadest and most crucial questions. Tolstoy suffered his problems and tried to render his thoughts and feelings as concretely as possible. He boldly confessed of renouncing reason for the understanding of the meaning of life. Yet, he depicted, in a sense, reason as a foe of the understanding of the meaning of life. Appreciably Tolstoy ascribed God as the source and meaning of life; however, he forsake the idea that God is the God of

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<sup>21</sup> Richter, *Philosophy Looks to the Future*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin, *The Experience of Philosophy* (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 464, 465.

reason even. Throughout the process which lead him to such an inference, the reason was also involved as a significant element.

## **Conclusion**

Prominent thinkers of the contemporary era from the field of psychology and philosophy could not trace out the authentic meaning for human existence, that even some of the best thinkers like Viktor E. Frankl could only delineate the nature of the ultimacy and emphasized the significance of search for the meaning of life in order to get rid of absurdity, and on the other hand, thinkers like Leo Tolstoy spurned the role of rationality in favour of fideists' elucidation of the problem. Adler, Camus and Russell fall prey to the concept of subjective meaning of life. Man, by his own intelligence, could only realize the need for the meaning of human life; but God is the authentic person to give meaning for human life since God Himself is the author of humanity. Creator decides the purpose of creation; creation by itself can have no purpose by itself. Hence, inferring God as the meaning of human existence is conceivable.