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# Logotherapy and the Logical Trilemma

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## Logotherapy and the Logical Trilemma

Often interpreted from both a biblical and literary perspective, the *Book of Job* is a highly respected text thanks to the philosophical questions raised by its story as well as its unique composition. It is speculated that the prose parts of this hybrid text were written around 2000 b.c.e., with the poetic dialogue being incorporated later between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries b.c.e. The *Book of Job* introduces the reader to the idea of the logical trilemma, and asks why innocent suffering exists. Although theories abound in response to this question, the answer remains unknown. In his autobiographical account of his experiences as a prisoner in concentration camps during World War I, Viktor E. Frankl seeks to solve the mystery of certain types of human suffering, and details his hypotheses with intelligence and eloquence. *Man's Search For Meaning* is critically acclaimed for the innovative theories proposed by Frankl, particularly as they relate to the field psychoanalysis and Frankl's original school of logotherapy. Using this text as a supplement to the *Book of Job*, it is possible to gain insights into yet another possible solution to the problem of the logical trilemma as it is presented in the story of Job. Indeed, by comparing the *Book of Job* to *Man's Search For Meaning*, it becomes apparent that human suffering – innocent or not – helps individuals to identify meaning in their lives and proves the validity of existentialism.

Before suffering and the meaning of life can be discussed, it is necessary to first understand the place of suffering in the *Book of Job*, as it is a crucial aspect of the story. One of the most important theories that needs to be understood with regards to the *Book of Job* is that its foundation is in ethical monotheism, which is a conviction of religions prefaced on the belief in one god who is supposedly the guarantor of moral order in the universe. This theory asserts that God is all-powerful, God is all good, and that innocent suffering exists. These three things together form the logical trilemma, which disappears if any one of these statements is removed

from the equation. The claims made by those who believe in ethical monotheism have been met with great contention specifically because of the logical trilemma, thus resulting in the rise of apologetics and practitioners of theodicy. These people seek to defend the validity and truth of religious texts through attempts to explain inconsistencies within a specific text, such as that of the logical trilemma.

A particularly reasonable theory that was formulated in defense of the logical trilemma maintains God's "perfection" by explaining that God allows innocent suffering to exist because He allows humans to have free will. If not for this gift, man would not be able to make decisions that would lead to suffering. This is evidenced in Genesis with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Within their earthly paradise, God provided Adam and Eve with all that they required, and they were content. However once temptation led Eve to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and free will allowed her to eat its fruit, Adam and Eve's bliss was destroyed. Even before they were punished for their crime and banished from Eden, Adam and Eve began to suffer as a result of simple things like the embarrassment of being naked. Thus it is clear that all suffering originates from free will. According to Frankl, the purest expression of free will is in exercising one's ability to choose how to react to a certain situation. "...Even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by doing so change himself," (Frankl, 170). Frankl views this choice as the "last of human freedoms" (Allport, 12), which only confirms that selecting one's attitude is the ultimate exhibition of free will available to man. This consistent theme of free will between the two texts, particularly as it relates to suffering, is consistent with the foundational theory of existentialism in that it emphasizes the individual as being self-determining and capable of choice ("Existentialism"). This quality is evidenced in the *Book of Job*, as can be seen in Job's resolve

throughout his trials, and the moment when that resolve fails him.

The *Book of Job* is a gripping story of faith which can be found in the texts of various religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Hebrew account of the *Book of Job* starts with God calling the Adversary's attention to Job, asking "Have you paid heed to my servant Job, for there is none like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil?" (*Hebrew Bible*, Job, 1). The Adversary looks at Job and responds by saying that Job is as he is only because God has given him everything. He insists that if God took away all that Job had, Job would curse God. God is intrigued by this suggestion, and gives the Adversary leave to do as he will to test Job's faith, so long as he doesn't kill him. First, the Adversary takes away all that Job has, destroying his home and belongings, and killing his children. Through this, Job remains faithful. Next, the Adversary curses Job with a plague, so that he is covered in painful sores and boils. Job's wife tells him to "curse God and die" (*Hebrew Bible*, Job, 2), and his friends blame Job's suffering on some sin that he must have committed, or one that his children committed. Through his trials, Job remains faithful to God until his monologue leads him to the realization that he is innocent of his suffering, and he curses God for being unjust. Upon this change in Job's demeanor, God is angered and comes to Job in the form of a whirlwind. God speaks grandly of his power and knowledge, and humbles Job by making him admit that he knows nothing. In the end, Job does just that, saying,

‘Hear, pray, and I will speak  
Let me ask you, that you may inform me.  
By the ear's rumor I heard of You,  
and now my eye has seen You.  
Therefore do I recant,  
And I repent in dust and ashes.’ (*Hebrew  
Bible*, Job, 42.6-11).

Not only does Job admit that he is ignorant, but he also accepts this fact to be true, and defines

himself as he once did by his position in relationship to God. Although God needed to remind him of that position, it was Job himself who had to – and ultimately did – determine who he was and what his place in the universe was.

It is important to note that Job was able to reach this conclusion as a result of his suffering. Viktor Frankl, a renowned psychiatrist, has hypothesized that, in a similar manner to the experiences of Job, man can analyze his suffering and its source in order to understand his life's meaning. This belief is the foundation of Frankl's psychoanalytical school of logotherapy, which is a form of modern existential analysis which seeks to determine what a person values about his or her life and "to weave those slender threads of a broken life into a firm pattern of meaning and responsibility" (Allport, 9). Frankl's logotherapy is carefully presented in his autobiography *Man's Search For Meaning*, in which he explains the philosophies which drive logotherapy in conjunction with details about his experiences as a prisoner in concentration camps during World War I, to which he attributes the development and realization of his theories. Although Frankl discussed many philosophical products of his experiences and the intricacies of logotherapy, the most important part of both of these subjects is his interpretation of how suffering helps an individual to find meaning in his or her life. "...Suffering is not always a pathological phenomenon; rather than being a symptom of neurosis, suffering may well be a human achievement," (Frankl, 124-5). In this it is apparent that Frankl views suffering as an integral aspect of human life, necessary in identifying and understanding the meaning of one's own life within a given situation. Within *Man's Search For Meaning*, there are many instances in which the parallels between Frankl's experiences and theories and those presented in the *Book of Job* are nearly impossible to ignore. The resonances of Job's story which appear in *Man's Search For Meaning* offer invaluable insight into how suffering leads to self-determination.

The first and most obvious comparison which can be made between the *Book of Job* and *Man's Search For Meaning* regards the question posed by the logical trilemma of the existence of innocent suffering. Although the logical trilemma is accounted for by free will, one of the main themes of the *Book of Job* is regarding justice. This is an integral problem presented in the text, as it is the underlying premise of the entire story. Job was perceived as a man who was “blameless and upright and feared God and shunned evil, (*Hebrew Bible*, Job, 1). This portrayal of Job makes it clear that he did nothing to deserve the suffering that was put upon him by the Adversary. Rather, the trials Job underwent occurred because the Adversary decided on a whim to test Job's faith in God. Much the same to this was Frankl's experience with the guards in the concentration camps. He said, “The prisoners saw themselves completely dependent on the moods of the guards – playthings of fate,” (Frankl, 74). In both Job's and Frankl's experiences, they found that they were at the mercy of someone else who was treating them a certain way not because of any justified reason, but because the person who had dominance over them simply had a mind to exercise their authority. This abuse of power shows that suffering is often unjustified, and the result of one person's impulsive exercise of their free will, rather than being caused by a crime committed.

Similar to this arbitrary allocation of injustice is the case of the punishment of Job's companions, Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar. God condemned Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar for the counsel that they gave Job during his trials (*Hebrew Bible*, Job, 42), however the crime that God charged them with is not quantifiable. In fact, it has been argued that Job's companions did nothing wrong, but were simply threatened with punishment as a final test for Job. Keeping this in mind, it could be argued that Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar were treated unjustly, as their punishment was for helping Job as he suffered. Frankl observed injustice analogous to this while

he was in the concentration camps. In *Man's Search For Meaning*, he recounted that,

An old friend of mine ... limped over the track with an especially heavy girder, and seemed about to fall and drag others with him. As yet, I was not carrying a girder so I jumped to his assistance without stopping to think. I was immediately hit on the back, rudely reprimanded and ordered to return to my place. A few minutes previously the same guard who struck me had told us deprecatingly that we "pigs" lacked the spirit of comradeship... (Frankl, 43).

This demonstrates that in the case of both Frankl and Job, even the simplest of actions with the best of intentions can be greeted with injustice. As in the case of both these men, all that remains is to decide how to react when faced with such suffering.

The fact that Job's suffering was without justification makes the punishment more damaging emotionally than if he had actually been deserving of the trials. Frankl stresses this numerous times in *Man's Search For Meaning*. At one point he referred to an experience when he was hit because the line of prisoners was not entirely straight, and the SS guard supervising them disliked the asymmetry. Reflecting on the blows he received, Frankl wrote,

Beatings occurred on the slightest provocation, sometimes for no reason at all... At such a moment it is not the physical pain which hurts the most; it is the mental agony caused by the injustice, the unreasonableness of it all... (Frankl, 42).

This effect holds true for both Job and his companions, as they all experienced this manner of unfair treatment.

Another literary parallel between the *Book of Job* and *Man's Search For Meaning* can be found by comparing the people involved in each narrative, particularly the guards in the concentration camp as they were described by Frankl and the characters of God and the Adversary. In *Man's Search For Meaning*, Frankl explained that there were primarily two types



of guards: those that were sadistic and took pride in torturing the prisoners, and those whose senses had been so diminished by all they had seen that they were indifferent to the suffering of the prisoners. “These morally and mentally hardened men at least refused to take active part in sadistic measures. But they did not prevent others from carrying them out,” (Frankl, 106). The obvious comparison here is that the sadistic guards were similar to the Adversary in that they impulsively tormented the prisoners and reveled in their suffering. God is similar to the other guards in that He does not actively take part in the punishment of the prisoners, but through His inaction he permits it to happen. This is an important distinction to make because the motivations behind each character’s action – or lack thereof – further proves the injustice of Job’s suffering. God had no reason to punish Job, but indulged the Adversary, who wanted Job to suffer in order to try to prove a point.

Faced with unceasing physical pain and the torment of the fact that it is without justifiable cause, it became increasingly difficult for Job to maintain his faith in God. After all of his worldly goods had been destroyed, his children had been killed, and he had been afflicted with the terrible plague, Job began to curse his own existence:

My days are swifter than the weaver’s shuttle.  
They snap off without any hope.  
Recall that my life is a breath.  
Not again will my eyes see good. (*Hebrew Bible, Job, 7.11-14*).

At this point, because of his immense suffering and the loss of all he had, Job realizes that he is mortal, and believes that until he dies, he will from that time on only know what is bad. This realization of death and despair makes Job want to die before his time, and when he does not, he becomes angry with God and curses him, saying,

With great power He seizes my garment,  
grabs hold of me at the collar.

He hurls me into the muck,  
and I become like dust and ashes.  
I scream to You and You do not answer,  
I stand still and You do not observe me.  
You become a cruel one toward me,  
with the might of Your hand You hound me.  
You bear me up, on the wind make me straddle,  
break me apart in a storm.  
For I know You'll return me to death,  
the meetinghouse of all living things...  
(*Hebrew Bible*, Job, 30.40-50).

This is the moment when Job renounces God, and declares him unjust. With this, Job also renounces his faith, which prior to his trials had been both strong and sincere. Frankl observed a similar happening in the concentration camps. He wrote, "The prisoner who had lost faith in the future – his future – was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold," (Frankl, 95). Unlike the prisoners Frankl observed, who died shortly after they stopped believing that their future existed, an intervention from God saved Job from this decline, and showed him that his suffering was not without purpose, thus allowing Job to recover not only his worldly goods, which were returned to him twofold, but also his faith and identity.

It cannot be denied that suffering is an integral part of human life. Although the source of an individual's suffering vary, it is important to realize that without suffering, life would not have meaning – at least, meaning that is identifiable by man. In any situation, but especially one where injustice exists, it is necessary to look for the meaning of life as it can be identified in a given moment. Upon realizing the purpose for his or her suffering, one can relieve the pain by knowing that his or her suffering is for a reason. To quote Nietzsche, as Frankl often does, "He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*," (Allport, 12). Upon finding his reason for existence, one begins to understand and define himself and his position in the universe, and can better see a way to overcome his suffering. Indeed, existentialism teaches that "to live is to

suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering,” (Allport, 11). This philosophy is very true for Job, because through his trials, he lived, but it was not until he realized that he was dust and that his suffering was a test of his fate (therefore giving meaning to his suffering) that he was able to move past the experience and not only survive, but thrive.

Thus, it can be seen that the *Book of Job* is a text which asks the question of why innocent suffering exists in the world if God is both all-powerful and all good. With a little digging into the story and an understanding of other stories of a similar ilk and theories from external sources, the answer to this question can be found. In short, suffering – both innocent and justified – exists because God gave humans the gift of free will, and through suffering one is able to define what gives their life meaning. In the words of Viktor Frankl regarding his survival of the concentration camps: “The crowning experience of all ... is the wonderful feeling that, after all he has suffered, there is nothing [man] need fear anymore – except his God,” (Frankl 115).

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