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Components and Requirements of Life's Meaningfulness in the Thoughts of William James and Viktor Frankl

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Throughout the annals of history, the quest for existential significance has constituted a principal preoccupation of human beings, accompanied by myriad endeavors to comprehend it, particularly within the domains of philosophical inquiry and psychological analysis. Viktor Frankl and William James represent two distinguished intellectuals who have examined the essence of life from markedly different vantage points.

Methods: Employing an analytical-descriptive methodology, this investigation scrutinizes the constituents and prerequisites for attaining life's meaning as articulated by these two eminent philosophers.

Results: A thorough analysis of their viewpoints elucidates notable parallels notwithstanding their contrasting positions. While Frankl accentuates the pursuit of meaning as a critical mechanism for survival and resilience in the face of adversity, James conceptualizes the meaning of life as a subjective and evolving phenomenon influenced by quotidian experiences and personal decisions. The examination of these two theoretical frameworks underscores the notion that the meaning of life is a construct that may be delineated in various manners contingent upon situational contexts and individual experiences. Moreover, an analysis of the constituents and prerequisites of life's meaning within their respective frameworks reinforces the shared conviction that the attainment of purpose and significance is vital for human flourishing and psychological well-being. Both philosophers concur that the essence of meaningful existence emerges from engagement and proactive endeavors.

Conclusions: The findings of this study suggest that, in accordance with James, individual decisions, emotional experiences, and daily interactions constitute the fundamental elements in the construction of life's meaning, whereas Frankl delineates three essential components: labor and diligence, love and interpersonal relationships, and the confrontation of suffering and adversity as integral to the discovery of meaning in life.

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Introduction

The quest for meaning in life constitutes an essential human requirement; in its absence, individuals may experience a profound sense of disorientation and lack of direction. Human beings possess an intrinsic propensity to pursue meaning, with the significance of life serving as a critical factor in enabling individuals to confront challenges and adversities, thereby rendering life more productive and meaningful. Consequently, the notion of life's meaningfulness represents one of the pivotal concerns that has historically engaged the contemplation of philosophers and intellectuals, serving as the primary emphasis of philosophical, theological, and psychological discourses ([Aroisi & Mukharrom, 2021](#); [Foroozanfar, 2020](#)). From a philosophical standpoint, the inquiry into the meaning of life is framed as an ontological dilemma, with various philosophers approaching it from diverse angles. For instance, philosophers like Socrates and Plato assert that meaning is attained through the acquisition of knowledge and comprehension of truth, whereas existentialist thinkers, including Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, contend that life is intrinsically devoid of meaning and that it is the responsibility of individuals to cultivate their own sense of purpose. Conversely, within the context of monotheistic religions, the meaning of life is frequently associated with an individual's relationship to a transcendent reality, such as God or an ultimate truth, and the absence of meaningfulness may lead individuals to feel disoriented and purposeless, rendering life seemingly valueless and inconsequential ([Abdollahzadeh et al., 2024](#)). On the other hand, contemporary psychological paradigms examine the meaning of life from an empirical and individualistic lens, positing the search for meaning as a fundamental human necessity and recognizing that a life devoid of meaning can precipitate feelings of despair and psychological disorders. Notwithstanding the significant divergences among these perspectives, they collectively underscore the notion that the quest for meaning in life constitutes a foundational and indispensable issue, compelling every individual to seek an answer through specific avenues, whether through philosophical contemplation, religious doctrine, or psychological exploration ([Karimi, 2022](#); [Samavi et al., 2019](#)). William James and Viktor Frankl represent two distinguished scholars whose impactful theories regarding the meaning of life have garnered considerable attention. In his seminal work "Man's Search for Meaning," Frankl accentuates the critical role of life's meaning in the context of enduring suffering. In contrast, James, in his texts "The Will to Believe" and "Variety of Religious Experiences," approaches the exploration of life's meaning

through the lens of religious experiences, employing a pragmatic framework. [Joseph and Delariarte \(2022\)](#), in a study entitled “Teleology and the Meaning of Life: Revisiting the Practical Insights of William James,” recognized that James synthesized his teleological perspective within his psychological, philosophical, and theological frameworks, positing that this teleological viewpoint was a direct response to the Darwinian paradigm that challenged the inherent purpose of the organism. Thus, James interpreted Darwinism in favor of teleology, which considered the role of an intelligent designer and supported the intrinsic purposeful nature of the organism. [Rouhani and Abbasi \(2022\)](#), in an analytical inquiry addressing the essence of life through the lens of William James with a philosophical framework, recognized that James's interpretation of life's significance was anthropocentric and that the pursuit of happiness constituted the paramount and meaningful objective of humanity. James's perspective was rooted in the tenets of relativity; from his vantage point, meaning and happiness were subjective, context-dependent, and capable of being questioned. It is evident that Frankl and James, each employing distinct and original methodologies, have articulated a particular conception of life's meaning that appears to possess a direct correlation with philosophical, psychological, and anthropological paradigms; these two theoretical frameworks encompass extensive and varied content, approaches, and applications, and their meticulous analysis and juxtaposition may elucidate numerous intricate dimensions of the concept of life's meaning ([Wang, 2015](#)). Consequently, given the significance of the notion of life's meaning and the profound impact of the theories posited by James and Frankl within this domain, an investigation and evaluation of the ideas of these two intellectuals, while addressing several critical inquiries in the realm of life's meaning, can facilitate a more profound comprehension of this essential concept and yield insights to assist individuals in discovering meaning and purpose in their existence. The concept of life's meaning occupies a pivotal and fundamental position in the philosophies of William James and Viktor Frankl and is regarded as one of the primary human necessities. William James underscores the significance of convictions, deliberate choices, and spiritual experiences that actively and purposefully shape one's existence and promote psychological well-being ([Seyed Ghandi et al., 2025](#)). Conversely, Viktor Frankl posits that the quest for meaning represents the principal motivating force of humanity, which, even amidst the gravest adversities and suffering, empowers individuals to instill hope and purpose in their lives, thereby transcending existential void and despondency. Overall, the meaning of life, for both

theorists, constitutes a psychological and existential imperative that fortifies the will, sustains mental health, withstands crises, and fosters a fulfilling and purposeful existence. An absence of meaning in life culminates in feelings of emptiness, despair, and existential void, thus amplifying the necessity of emphasizing the meaning of life within the realms of philosophy and psychology. Hence, the researcher in this investigation endeavors to address the inquiry regarding the constituents and elements of life's meaning within the theoretical frameworks of William James and Viktor Frankl.

Material and Methods

This investigation employs a methodological framework that is both analytical and descriptive to scrutinize the fundamental components and necessary conditions for achieving meaning in life, as articulated by the two selected philosophers. The methodology encompasses:

Textual Analysis: A meticulous reading and systematic evaluation of primary philosophical texts to elucidate pivotal arguments, definitions, and conceptual frameworks pertinent to the notion of life's meaning.

Comparative Synthesis: A contrasting and integrative examination of the philosophers' viewpoints to illuminate areas of convergence, divergence, and distinctive contributions to the philosophical discourse.

Descriptive Interpretation: Situating their theoretical propositions within the context of broader philosophical traditions while systematically delineating their proposed criteria for a life imbued with meaning.

Critical Evaluation: Analyzing the coherence, applicability, and potential limitations of their theoretical frameworks through rigorous logical and philosophical examination.

By amalgamating these methodologies, the study seeks to furnish a structured and nuanced comprehension of the philosophers' positions while enriching contemporary dialogues concerning the essence of meaning in life.

Results

A. The components and necessities of life's meaning in James's view

William James is recognized as one of the seminal figures in the establishment of pragmatism as a philosophical doctrine. In his scholarly works, particularly in the treatise "The Will to Believe" and a collection of essays such as "Religious Experiences," he has meticulously examined the intricacies surrounding the concept of life's meaning. James has articulated distinctive and all-encompassing perspectives on the significance of life, which are grounded in both philosophical inquiry and psychological analysis. Through a thorough examination of human experiences, particularly those involving suffering, adversity, and self-awareness, he has endeavored to construct a robust conceptual framework for comprehending the essence of life ([Kennedy, 2017](#)). From James's viewpoint, the requisites for understanding life's meaning encompass diverse dimensions of human experience and the interplay between beliefs, volition, and their consequential outcomes. In his exploration of life's meaning, James prioritizes the analysis of human experiences and emphasizes the pivotal role of individual beliefs and cognitive processes in shaping the meaning of life, rather than conforming to a systematic philosophical framework. He posited that personal experiences are integral to attributing meaning to life. He contended that inquiries into the meaning of life cannot be entirely resolved through logical reasoning alone, but that spiritual and subjective experiences hold significant relevance. James asserted that the significance of an idea or belief is contingent upon its practical implications. Consequently, the essence of life is defined by tangible and authentic actions and experiences that exert influence in an individual's existence ([Dinata et al., 2023](#)).

A-1. Personal experience and its importance in the meaning of life

In his theoretical framework of pragmatism, James accentuates the critical significance of "personal experience" in elucidating the essence of life. In his perspective, the essence of life is derived from direct, lived human experiences. James posited that truth and meaning are neither independent nor abstract constructs; instead, the essence of life is something that each individual actively formulates through their unique experiences. Such experiences encompass achievements, setbacks, adversities, interpersonal relationships, and even subtle alterations in quotidian existence. Consequently, for James, experience constitutes the principal reservoir of meaning and truth, enabling individuals to genuinely ascertain the essence of life ([Kennedy, 2017](#)).

James further contended that the essence of life may vary significantly among individuals and is predominantly influenced by personal experiences, emotions, and convictions. He asserted that truth is a phenomenon that can be appraised based on its practical implications for individuals' lives. Thus, the essence of life is delineated by the outcomes and ramifications of individuals' experiences, and individuals ought to pursue endeavors that imbue their lives with meaning and purpose ([Rouhani & Abbasi, 2022](#)).

A-2. Diversity and Adaptability in the Meaning of Life

In the philosophical framework established by James regarding pragmatism, the constructs of "diversity and adaptability" emerge as pivotal elements intrinsically linked to his interpretation of the essence of existence. "Diversity" signifies the notion that the significance of life is cultivated through an array of personal and societal experiences, resulting in a distinct meaning for each individual. "Adaptability" further denotes the capacity of individuals to alter and reconceptualize the significance of their existence in response to evolving circumstances and experiences. These dual constructs empower individuals to discover novel significances for their lives amid life's adversities and transformations, enabling a continuous process of redefinition ([Kiritani, 2012](#)). According to James, the essence of life does not constitute a static or immutable notion. He posits that the meaning of life is neither an inherent principle nor an aspect that is completely apprehensible from the outset; rather, it necessitates redefinition in accordance with personal experiences, contextual factors, and the consequences of actions. This inherent flexibility implies that an individual must perpetually be prepared to reassess their convictions and values, and to modify them in light of empirical outcomes ([Kaufman, 2020](#)).

A-3. Freedom of Action and Individual Will in the Meaningfulness of Life

James is one of the philosophers who strongly emphasizes the importance of "free will" and "individual responsibility". He believes that the meaning of life is somehow dependent on "individual choices and decisions". Individuals must actively seek meaning and purpose in life through their free will. In this regard, James concludes that the meaning of life is not a predetermined concept, but "the result of individuals' conscious choices" in the face of life's challenges and crises ([James, 2019](#)). According to James, these choices are made based on past experiences, hope for the future, and the desire to improve conditions. He believes that each of

these experiences plays a role in shaping the meaning of individuals' lives in some way. From his perspective, the meaning of life must be discovered through the lived and direct experiences of individuals and must be continuously updated and redefined according to changing circumstances and the results of actions ([Hampson & McKinley, 2023](#)).

A-4. Religious experiences and their importance in the meaning of life

From [James \(2019\)](#) perspective, the meaning of life is, above all, a lived and individual experience that is rooted in religious, psychological, and philosophical experiences. To understand the meaning of life, he examines a set of factors and principles that each play a role in giving meaning to human life in some way. He believes that one of the most important meanings of life is personal religious experiences that can lead humans to deeper truths and meaning. James emphasizes that personal religious experiences can act as a response to "crisis of meaning" and "existential doubts." He believes that when people face deep questions about the meaning and purpose of life, religious experiences can help them resolve these crises. These experiences often allow individuals to escape from a "sense of meaninglessness" and achieve a "new and deeper meaning", transcending the boundaries of individuality and the material world and connecting with something beyond themselves ([Gale, 2005](#)).

A-5. Self-awareness and its relationship to the meaning of life

James paid special attention to the issue of self-awareness and self-knowledge and presented them as essential tools in finding the meaning of life. He believed that in order to achieve a deeper meaning and true satisfaction from life, self-awareness and self-knowledge are two essential prerequisites that help individuals to better understand their identity, goals and values and, accordingly, make more meaningful decisions ([Zhao, 2014](#)). James believed that self-knowledge helps individuals to "discover true meaning" in life and thereby choose goals and values that are in harmony with their true identity. He considered self-awareness and self-knowledge as key tools for overcoming life's crises and challenges, and emphasized that these two tools help individuals to understand the "roots of problems" and their "reactions" to them, and then develop strategies for facing these challenges ([Seigfried, 1990](#)).

A-6. Personal goals and values and their relationship to the meaning of life

William James paid special attention to the concept of "meaning of life" in his theories and emphasized the role of "goals" and "meaningful values" in creating this meaning. He believed that

each individual should seek goals and values that are meaningful to him personally and that he can achieve a kind of real satisfaction and happiness through their pursuit. These values and goals act as meaningful “tools and implements” that give direction and structure to life ([Schwartz, 2012](#)). James emphasized that life goals should be consistent with “the individual’s true values.” He believed that the pursuit of goals that are imposed on an individual from the outside or chosen based on social expectations cannot lead to true meaning in life. Rather, goals must be rooted in “self-knowledge” and “self-awareness.” In James’s view, “meaningful goals” act as a “map” for life that helps individuals move in a specific direction. He believed that when a person moves towards goals that are truly meaningful to them, even the challenges and difficulties of life become less noticeable, because they know they are moving towards something greater and more important. This movement allows the person to experience a “sense of satisfaction” and “purpose”, which is one of the key elements of happiness ([Capps, 2017](#)).

A-7. Suffering and challenges of life and their relationship to the meaning of life

James believed that “suffering and challenges of life are part of human nature and reality”. He had the view that suffering and unpleasant experiences cannot be eliminated from human life and that in fact these experiences can help a person achieve greater “self-awareness”. James believed that when people face problems and crises, they have the opportunity to reach a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. James believed that suffering could serve as a “tool for the discovery of meaning.” He noted that when people face challenges and difficulties, they are forced to think about deeper questions about their lives and their goals. These questions can help them discover “true values” and “meaningful goals” ([James, 2019](#)).

James believed that suffering could aid in the process of “identity formation.” He believed that when people face challenges and difficulties, they not only gain greater self-awareness, but also “reconstruct” their identity and achieve a stronger and more meaningful version of themselves. James also believed that suffering could guide a person toward values that lead to a kind of “spiritual transcendence.” He believed that when faced with problems and challenges, people can develop values such as “love, service to others, and compassion” that help them live more meaningful lives. He also noted that people can achieve a kind of spiritual awakening when faced with the deep suffering of life ([Bushkin et al., 2021](#)).

A-8. Critique of James's Meaningfulness of Life

James's theoretical framework regarding the significance of existence is predicated upon the assertion that each person possesses the capacity to derive their own interpretation of life's meaning, which is contingent upon their unique experiences and decisions. This paradigm inherently culminates in a form of relativism, positing that each individual may perceive truth and significance in a manner that is distinctively their own. This evaluative critique has culminated in two principal dimensions of James's philosophical discourse: the relativity of meaning and the sociocultural and ethical ramifications of such relativism. A predominant critique of James's relativistic stance is the absence of objective criteria for the assessment and appraisal of meaning. Although James contends that individuals can inherently delineate meaning based on their subjective experiences, this perspective may precipitate moral dilemmas ([Doğan et al., 2012](#)).

Relativism concerning meaning may engender social alienation and instability, as the reliance on personal interpretations devoid of shared norms or standards may propel individuals toward heightened individualism and social withdrawal. Such isolation has the potential to erode interpersonal relationships and social frameworks, as individuals may confine themselves to their own experiences rather than engaging in communal interactions. This framework accentuates the significance of individualism and the centrality of personal experiences. Detractors of James assert that this paradigm risks overlooking collective and cultural experiences.

A central critique of James's theory is his disproportionate focus on individual experiences, which may culminate in a form of isolationism. This isolation may inhibit the collaborative synthesis of thoughts and experiences among individuals within a societal context. It is notable that individual experiences are invariably situated within a specific cultural milieu, which significantly informs the conception of meaning and human values ([Greene & Hall, 2010](#)). Furthermore, critics of James posit that the quest for meaning in life represents a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by both individual and collective experiences; thus, a focus solely on individual experiences is likely to preclude access to the richness embedded in the collective and shared experiences prevalent among diverse populations. Indeed, they argue that such communal experiences facilitate a sense of belonging to a broader collective and enable individuals to derive more profound insights regarding the significance of their existence. Such shared experiences foster a sense of solidarity and inclusivity that transcends mere individualism. Additionally, they contend that individual

experiences may not consistently serve as a dependable foundation for defining meaning and truth, as these experiences can be subject to various influences, including social context, cultural background, and psychological state ([Khosravi, 2017](#)).

B. Components of meaningful life in Frankl's view

Victor Emil Frankl (1905), the progenitor of logotherapy, was an Austrian psychologist and the second offspring of a Jewish family. He experienced the majority of his life and educational journey, spanning from elementary to tertiary levels, within a familial milieu that was profoundly preoccupied with religious matters ([Karimi, 2022](#)). Frankl's conceptual framework was formulated during his internment in a Nazi camp in Germany, from which he derived his philosophical discourse on the significance of existence. Frankl bore witness to the atrocities, inhumane treatment, and savage executions of detainees within the German camp. His endeavors were aimed at alleviating the anguish of his fellow beings by instilling hope in those engulfed in despair and elucidating that wisdom can indeed be gleaned from suffering ([Dinata et al., 2023](#)).

Frankl's perspective on the significance of existence constitutes an amalgamation of creative endeavors, profound spiritual experiences, and the acceptance and confrontation of life's adversities. He posits that by selecting appropriate life values, concentrating on affirmative ideals even amid challenging circumstances, and persevering in the face of problems and obstacles, individuals can attain authentic and enduring meaning in their lives, thereby establishing a renewed sense of purpose and direction ([Wright, 2008](#)). Frankl asserted that, in addition to the corporeal and psychosocial dimensions inherent in humanity, there exists a spiritual dimension. He contended that humans are autonomous beings tasked with comprehending the potential significance of their existence. Moreover, he argued that the essence of life is discovered in the external world rather than confined to the human psyche ([Aroisi & Mukharrom, 2021](#)). This spiritual dimension is referred to as the "noetic dimension" by Frankl, which he characterized as the source of human attributes and one that leans towards an anthropological rather than a theological interpretation. Furthermore, although it possesses an underlying unconscious foundation within humans, it bears no relation to their primal instincts ([Aroisi & Mukharrom, 2021](#)). Frankl maintained that the essence of life resides in every circumstance encountered by an individual throughout their existence. In contrast to Freud's theories that accentuated the "will to pleasure" or Adler's theories that concentrated on the "will to power," Frankl proposed that the

quest for meaning constitutes the fundamental impetus of human life ([Uemura, 2018](#)). He believed that humans are perpetually in pursuit of meaning, which can be attained through diverse experiences such as love, labor, creativity, and even suffering. Individuals can only derive satisfaction from their lives when they uncover meaning. By emphasizing the pursuit of meaning in existence, Frankl introduced a significant and distinctive branch of psychotherapy, namely, the theory of logotherapy. He delineated logotherapy as a psychotherapeutic approach that delves into the spiritual dimension to address grief in individuals suffering from mental disorders. Within this theoretical framework, he underscores the will to meaning, the freedom of will, and the pursuit of meaning, even in the midst of suffering, thereby assisting individuals in navigating their existential and psychological crises and imbuing their lives with a deeper significance ([Ghorbani, 2009](#)).

B-1. Free Will and the Meaning of Life

One of Frankl's important innovations in psychology was his criticism of deterministic theories that believed that human behavior was completely determined by external factors, genetics, or unconscious forces. Frankl challenged this view and emphasized that humans can always be free in their choices, in addition to external influences ([van Niekerk et al., 2019](#)). Frankl always emphasized in his logotherapy plan that humans can always and in any situation adopt different attitudes, even if external conditions are severely limited and unchangeable, they still have a choice in how they react, behave, and relate to those conditions, and these reactions, behaviors, and attitudes affect the shaping of the meaning of people's lives ([Yalom & Leszcz, 2020](#)).

B-2. Free will and its role in finding meaning

One of the most prominent examples of free will in Frankl's theory is the human ability to find meaning in difficult and adverse circumstances. The concept of free will in logotherapy theory means that each individual can choose the meaning of their life. This meaning originates not only from external circumstances but also from within the individual. Individuals are free to attribute different meanings to their lives and through this freedom, they can achieve a meaningful life ([Southwick et al., 2016](#)). Frankl believed that finding meaning through free will is done in two main ways:

- 1) Choosing an attitude towards suffering: Even in the face of suffering, humans can decide how to react to it. Choosing a positive attitude and accepting suffering as a part of life can help find new meaning in life.

2) Acting towards a goal: Free will allows humans to move towards goals that are meaningful to them. These goals may include relationships, creative work, or helping others ([Frankl, 2014](#)).

According to Frankl, "freedom of will" allows individuals to find meaning for their lives even in difficult and difficult circumstances and thereby achieve a meaningful and responsible life. In fact, in Frankl's meaning therapy, freedom of will not only means freedom to choose, but also means taking responsibility and responding to life's challenges with a clear and purposeful meaning ([van Niekerk et al., 2019](#)).

B-3. The uniqueness of the meaning of life

The concept of "unique meaning of life" in Frankl's theory of logotherapy refers to the principle that each person has a specific meaning in their life that belongs only to them and cannot be defined in a general and general way ([Frankl, 2014](#)). The concept of unique meaning of life in Frankl's theory is different from what is often known as the "purpose of life." Contrary to views that believe that each person has a general purpose throughout their life, Frankl's meaning of life is a relative and personal matter and changes from person to person, depending on their situations, experiences, and values. Therefore, a person may find different meanings at different stages of life. According to Frankl, just as no two people are exactly alike, no two meanings of life will be alike and each person must find their own "unique meaning of life" that is consistent with their characteristics, values, abilities, and specific circumstances. This concept is also closely related to individual responsibility and means that each person should seek to discover and fulfill the specific meaning that is most important and meaningful to them at that moment. Therefore, finding the meaning of life is not only a right, but also a "duty" and individuals should seek to understand and identify the unique meaning of their life and responsibly protect it ([Frankl, 2014](#)).

B-4. Finding Meaning in Suffering and Challenges

Frankel believed that the meaning of life is not limited to pleasure and success. Unlike Freud, who considered humans to be pleasure seekers, he emphasized that the "will to meaning" is the most fundamental driving force of humans. Frankl believed that a person can find new meaning for their life by accepting and understanding their suffering more deeply. In his opinion, this attitude can help people discover new meaning from this suffering and use it as an opportunity for growth and development instead of giving up. Frankl points to three main approaches in the face of suffering and hardship:

- 1) Developing a positive attitude: A person can choose to deal with their suffering constructively and accept it as part of the growth and learning process.
- 2) Finding a greater purpose: Suffering can help a person realize a greater purpose in their life; A purpose that may not have been understood under normal circumstances.
- 3) Connection with others: Sometimes a person's suffering can inspire and motivate others, thus giving more meaning to a person's life.

In his theory, Frankl refers to "inevitable suffering" that a person cannot change or escape from, and suggests that if we cannot change the circumstances, we must change ourselves ([Ajamin et al., 2017](#)). In fact, from Frankl's perspective, facing suffering and life's challenges is not just a passive process, and individuals must be responsible for their own suffering.

B-5. Accepting responsibility for one's own growth and development

Frankel believed that every day, people are faced with small choices that help shape the meaning and purpose of their lives. Therefore, people have a responsibility to make conscious decisions at every moment and to move purposefully towards the meaning they have determined for their lives. These small choices can gradually change a person's life in a positive direction ([Frankl, 2014](#)). According to Frankel, meaning is not always ready and available in life, but must be discovered and created. This process requires commitment, responsibility, and continuous effort. Therefore, each person must continuously strive for their own growth and development ([Tahmasbipour, 2021](#)). Therefore, the responsibility of the person in Frankel's meaning therapy means accepting an active role in finding and creating the meaning of life. This responsibility includes choosing an attitude towards difficult circumstances, accepting suffering as an opportunity for growth, and committing to oneself and others. One must continually strive to find meaning in one's life and share it with others.

B-6. Criticism of Frankl's Meaningfulness of Life

Although Frankl's meaning therapy has served as a source of inspiration for numerous individuals, particularly those grappling with despair and crises of identity, it has also faced substantial criticism. A primary critique of Frankl's methodology posits that he exhibits an excessive optimism and adopts an overly reductionist perspective regarding the meaning of life. Detractors argue that by underscoring individuals' capacity to derive meaning even amidst circumstances of profound pain and suffering, as illustrated by his personal experiences in Nazi concentration camps, Frankl

neglects the intricate complexities and inherent contradictions of human existence. This critique highlights that, in numerous instances, individuals may struggle to uncover meaning in the context of unrelenting suffering, a concern that Frankl has not sufficiently addressed. Furthermore, another significant critique of Frankl's framework lies in his prioritization of "discovering" meaning as opposed to "creating" it. This divergence in viewpoint has resulted in Frankl being perceived as espousing a predetermined and constrained understanding of meaning ([Wang, 2015](#)).

Frankl explicitly acknowledges the presence of a spiritual and potentially religious dimension to life's meaning, invoking the notions of "God" and "conscience." This aspect has incited criticism from certain scholars, who contend that Frankl's framework is, to a certain degree, contingent upon supernatural elements and is thus of limited utility for individuals who do not subscribe to religious or spiritual beliefs. In contrast to Frankl's assertions, existentialist thought, particularly as articulated by philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, posits that meaning and values ought to be constructed independently of the concepts of God and religion ([Southwick et al., 2016](#)).

Conclusion

In the current investigation, the frameworks pertaining to the significance of life as articulated by William James and Viktor Frankl were scrutinized. Despite the fact that both intellectuals underscored the significance of meaning in human existence, the methodologies and approaches they proposed for its attainment diverge markedly. Herein, we encapsulate the perspectives of these two eminent philosophers. James posits that the significance of life is constructed empirically and on an individual basis. He asserts that personal encounters, particularly those of an emotional and mystical nature, are pivotal in the genesis of life's meaning. For James, individuals cultivate the significance of life through their decisions, confrontations with adversity, and quotidian experiences. Consequently, he advocates for semantic relativism, positing that each individual has the capacity to mold the significance of their existence based on their distinctive experiences and contexts. According to James, the primary instrument for attaining life's meaning is through personal experiences and subjective feelings. He exhibited profound interest in mystical and religious experiences, contending that such phenomena can facilitate the emergence of a more profound significance in one's life. In a broader sense, from James's outlook, the conduits for achieving meaning encompass personal choices (individuals can shape the significance of their

existence through their decisions and actions), emotional experiences (James ardently maintained that emotions, particularly those of a religious and mystical character, can serve as a crucial source for meaning generation), and everyday experiences (the significance of life can also be cultivated through confronting the trials and tribulations of daily existence).

In contrast to James, who accentuates personal experiences, meaning construction, and relativism, Frankl prioritizes the discovery of objective and universal meaning. He postulates that individuals can ascertain meaning in their lives through three principal avenues: work and endeavor (engaging in tasks or projects that hold significance for the individual), love and human connection (the act of loving another individual, particularly through understanding and knowledge, can serve as a pathway to discovering meaning), and confronting suffering and adversity (individuals can unearth deeper significance by actively engaging with suffering). A further fundamental divergence between James and Frankl is encapsulated in the notion of "creation" vis-à-vis "discovery" of meaning. James contends that individuals are tasked with the creation of life's meaning, whereas Frankl emphasizes that meaning is inherently present and must be uncovered. This distinction engenders two entirely disparate methodologies concerning the significance of life. For James, life's meaning is contingent upon individual choices and experiences, while for Frankl, it exists independently of the individual and must be discerned through volition and the endurance of suffering. An additional pivotal distinction in the philosophical outlooks of these two thinkers pertains to relativism versus absolute truth. James asserts that the significance of life is variable among individuals and that there is no universal truth or meaning applicable to all persons. He subscribes to a form of semantic relativism. In contrast, Frankl posits that the essence of life embodies an absolute and universal truth that each individual must endeavor to unearth. He asserts that this essence remains constant across all humanity, with the caveat that the individual pathways to its realization may vary significantly. The role of suffering within the human experience constitutes another salient divergence between the philosophical perspectives of James and Frankl. James tends to overlook the significance of suffering as a vehicle for attaining meaning, placing greater emphasis on the cultivation of pleasurable and affective experiences. Conversely, Frankl contends that suffering serves a crucial function in the quest for meaning. He posits that individuals are capable of uncovering a more profound significance in their lives even amidst arduous

circumstances and in the presence of intolerable suffering. This focus on suffering represents a distinctive characteristic of Frankl's philosophical outlook.

In summary, one may assert that James and Frankl present two divergent paradigms regarding the meaning of life. James accentuates personal experiences, individual choices, and emotional states as instrumental in the quest for meaning, advocating for a relativistic interpretation of life's significance. In stark contrast, Frankl underscores the identification of objective meaning through the avenues of work, love, and confrontation with suffering, viewing the meaning of life as a universal truth that must be discerned by each person. Collectively, the viewpoints of both James and Frankl illustrate that the meaning of life can be both discovered and created through individual experiences and emotions, as well as through the confrontation with suffering and external adversities. Ultimately, while each individual's journey towards the realization of life's meaning may differ, Frankl's perspective posits that meaning must be sought across all facets of existence, including suffering, whereas James's framework suggests that meaning is more contingent upon personal experiences and choices. Recent scholarly research leads us to conclude that: William James, by underscoring the human capacity for foresight and planning, demonstrated that individuals can attain psychological and spiritual advancement through the discovery of meaning in life. Through the introduction of logotherapy and the highlighting of the search for meaning as the primary human motivation, Viktor Frankl illustrated that even in challenging conditions, both survival and psychological well-being can be achieved through the pursuit of meaning.

Overall, the significance of a meaningful existence in the philosophies of these two eminent thinkers underscores the profound influence of meaning on mental health and the personal development of individuals. In engaging with the discourse surrounding research propositions, it is imperative to articulate that an augmented emphasis on interdisciplinary investigation is warranted within the domain of meaningful existence, particularly from philosophical, psychological, and religious viewpoints, thereby facilitating the transmutation of theoretical frameworks into pragmatic applications within psychotherapy and educational contexts. The execution of comparative analyses between Frankl's conceptualization and those of other prominent theorists concerning meaning (such as Erwin Yalom, Rollo May, or Albert Ellis) has the potential to substantially enhance the depth and breadth of the existing literature in this area. It is posited that forthcoming inquiries should scrutinize the ramifications of a meaningful life on

mental health and resilience within particular demographics, including adolescents, the elderly, or patients with chronic illnesses. In addressing the constraints inherent in the research, it should be noted that the examination of meaning-related constructs within the realms of philosophy and existential psychology may occasionally be swayed by the intellectual or religious biases of the researcher, which could potentially obscure the interpretation of certain perspectives.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Payam Noor University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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