

THE PERSPECTIVE OF LOGOTHEORY — HELP IN UNDERSTANDING HUMANS SEARCHING FOR MEANING

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Summary

The inspiration to write this article was a conversation between the author of the text and the man who deems himself homosexual. At the same time his relationship with God is of great value for him. He understands this relationship according to the teaching of the Catholic Church. Having heard the story about the man's life, the author searches for the answer to the following question: which theoretical perspective could help to deepen the understanding of his experience, while keeping the respectful approach towards its various aspects.

The author takes the hermeneutic approach while reflecting upon the content of the story she had listened to and the works of V.E. Frankl.

The author reaches the conclusion that logotherapy meets her expectations regarding the understanding of the subject's experience in a sufficient way. The perspective shows the unique and individual nature of his experience. During different periods of his life, he has faced the tension between practicing his faith and various desires connected with his homosexuality. In the context of logotherapy, this tension may be considered as the area of personal search for meaning.

This theory, relating to various areas of human existence, emphasises the importance of the search for meaning.

This process is inevitably linked with some kind of tension, which is called noo-dynamics. The perspective described in logotherapy is connected with an attitude of respect to the spiritual area of people's experience; and it prevents us from ontological reductionism.

Key words: logotherapy, noo-dynamics, search for meaning

The inspiration to write this article was a conversation with the man whom I hereafter call the interlocutor. Our dialogue was held when I was collecting materials for my PhD thesis concerning noodynamics¹ in the experience of homosexual people for whom the faith of Catholic Church is an important value. The aim of the conversation is an effort to understand the difficulties which may be experienced in the situation described below. My interlocutor answered my invitation to the conversation which I posted on the Internet. He sees himself as a homosexual who at the same time believes in God² and who wants to experience his relation with Him in the same way that the Catholic Church teaches. Such a situation is connected with tension which results from the coexistence of faith and pursue of the needs steaming from homosexual orientation. Below, I will introduce the story of my interlocutor's life. Then I will refer to Frankl's logotherapy as a possible context for understanding of the presented experience.

¹ According to V.E. Frankl, noodynamics is: „the existential dynamics of bipolar area of tension, where the first pole is the meaning awaiting fulfillment and the second is the person who can do that” [1, p. 159]. (Unless indicated otherwise, all citations from non-English sources were translated by the author)

² In my reflexion, I narrow down the meaning of faith in God to the way in which it is understood by the Roman Catholic Church. I have chosen this understanding of faith because my interlocutor decided to live according this system of values.

The story about the interlocutor's life³

My interlocutor recalls his childhood as a period in which he was lacking love and warm feelings (“I couldn’t count on as much love as I needed”). He thinks that his family situation and his father’s problem with alcohol caused that state of affairs. At the age of 6–7 he experienced sexual abuse from older men. Then, he had some auto-erotic experiences with other men which have changed into homosexual contacts. That was the time when he discovered his sexual orientation (“I was aware of the fact that I was homosexual”). He said that for him it had been too early to experience sexual initiation. At the age of 13 he started a sexual relationship with his male peer, which lasted for a few years.

Although in my interlocutor’s family house the religious commandments were not important (“At home, no one paid too much attention to faith or religious practice.”), he started to search for some kind of contact with God on his own. He perceived God as a person with whom he could have a relationship (“I turned to God; I had some sort of awareness that there was someone who loved you and whom you could count on”).

At the age of 16–17, he had a ground-breaking experience related to the development of his faith. He called it repentance. He started to consider the idea of life in aloneness (“After the repentance, after retreat I said strongly to myself that if I still had the homosexual inclination and I couldn’t handle it, I would choose living alone, in chastity; and I kind of planned that I would live my life in loneliness”). The experience of repentance changed his attitude to faith – it started to be important to him. He wanted to live according to the teachings of his faith. However, it remained in conflict with his wanting to seek fulfilment in a homosexual relationship. The interlocutor mentioned that at that time he had wanted to break up with his partner, but he had lacked strength to make the decision (“I wanted to break up. But, well, unfortunately, wanting to do something and actually doing it are two different things. So the relationship continued. And the faith was strong, because the body said that everything is all right, it is nice, it is good, but somewhere there inside of me I felt some kind of pangs of conscience, somewhere there inside a voice was telling me “this isn’t your nature, this is not the way” ”). After a while, when his relationship fell apart, he gave up on the search for another man with whom he could have a relationship.

My interlocutor does not consider sexual orientation in itself as a sin. He is aware that he has no influence on the homosexual desire which he feels towards men (“I did not choose my orientation, it did not depend on me.”). However, he does have a feeling that having sex with another man depends on him. He admits that some time ago he had harboured grievance against God for putting him in a situation where he had to choose between his faith and a relationship with a man. As the time was passing, my interlocutor was learning how to accept himself and trust God.

Talking to God using his own words, i.e. prayer, plays a very important role in my interlocutor’s life. He believes that God is a living person who influences his life. He tries to treat God “like somebody who exists, who is invisible, but who stands nearby [...] who watches over me; although I do not see God, He stands behind me.” This kind of relationship with God gives my interlocutor strength, especially in difficult moments. Thanks to his relationship with God, my interlocutor found the meaning of his life, which is ungraspable from the perspective of an external observer.

³ It is impossible to introduce here the whole conversation because it took a few hours. Therefore, I summarized it, quoting or paraphrasing some of the statements of my interlocutor and of other people appearing in his story. My interlocutor has read my summary of his story and accepted it as consistent with what he had wanted to say.

It was important for my interlocutor to tell his family and other people dear to him about his sexual orientation, his “homosexual inclination.” What was very helpful to him was the support from someone close: “I told her: ‘I am homosexual, I am gay, I do not know how to manage my life, I feel overwhelmed, I cannot take it anymore.’ And she hugged me and said that there is still a family, they are there for me. We will try to help you somehow, she said, and she told me not to be afraid that I would get rejected.” He talked about his homosexuality to some members of his family, namely to those who tried to support and accept him. He heard from them that “it is all normal, homosexual orientation is natural and equal to heterosexual orientation, everything is just fine, that there is no need to feel torn that I should not try to change myself but just settle down somewhere instead, just leave and settle down somewhere with a man.”

My interlocutor knows the stance towards non-heterosexual people’s experience adopted by the Church and by science (“To me homosexuality ... the origin of homosexuality is a mystery, because many psychologists and scientists have at some point tried to analyse this phenomenon, but still there is no explicit statement concerning the origins, etc. It is just that since this or that year homosexuality is no longer treated as a disease”; “in its official documents, the Church does not really advise a therapy [...]. In the Church documents it is written that it is a ‘moral disorder’, nothing more.”). My interlocutor confessed: „I was trying to find an answer how should I manage my life? Which way should I go? [...] I decided that if my orientation remains homosexual, if it does not change, I will choose a life in celibacy, purity, and maintain my relations with friends and colleagues”. My interlocutor interprets the “purity” promoted by the Church as resignation from instrumental treatment of the other person, using him to satiate one’s own desires (“when it comes to purity, it means to treat your own body, someone else’s body not like an object, but with respect.”).

The resignation from sexual life enables him to receive sacraments, which are a very important part of his experience of faith (“To me, faith, sacraments, and life with God are very important. I have not missed any Sunday Masses for 12 years. [...] I regularly go to confession, to the same confessor [...] there is prayer and daily life. The faith is a strong fundament of my life, because I know that I am what I am simply thanks to faith”). However, resignation from sex is – at the same time – connected with tension and suffering (“Recently I have had some somatic issues, when there are longer periods of sexual abstinence.”).

My interlocutor is searching for the meaning behind his suffering. He treats his unwanted homosexual tendencies as a cross to bear placed on him by God (“Because God gave me such a cross, I only asked Him to give me strength to carry it and to lead me.”). At the same time, my interlocutor feels lonely in the suffering he experiences. Those close to him, even though they know of his homosexuality, they cannot apprehend his experience in such a degree so as to show him deeper understanding. What is also difficult for him is that, although he tries to live according to the rules of his faith by resigning from erotic life with another man, he does not feel accepted because of his orientation and he thinks that he needs to hide it. What is more, he feels condemned for his orientation by the people connected with the Church, regardless of whether or not he lives in accordance with his orientation. He was also talking about what kind of attitude of acceptance he would like to experience from the people connected with the Church. He compared it to being “like Jesus in this passage of the Bible where he rescues an adulteress. He does not say that she is not sinful and so on. He simply says that whoever is without sin should be the first to throw a stone; He does not condemn her, though He does not praise what she has done; He does not condemn her, He somehow accepted her and this acceptance, this love helped”.

Talking about himself, my interlocutor states that he used to be a colder person. Emotional suffering had less influence on him. However, with passage of time, he opened himself more and

more to his own emotions and his relations with other people. It made him more vulnerable to suffering connected with missing being close to another person (“I did not suffer from loneliness before when I was a cold man, a bit of an ice-boy who was like: you have to be a tough guy and deal with everything by yourself. Recently I have had some moments of frustration, I begin to feel lonely and I feel that I want to get into a deeper relationship with people, with a woman [...]. Lately, there appears a need of this love, this kind of love [...] for me God’s love, faith are not enough [I feel I need], simply, human love, getting a hug and some kind of support from others.”).

My interlocutor notices that his sexuality has been changing with time. He talks about further changes in his experience of sexuality. He hopes that it will continue evolving due to changes in his personality and thanks to relations with other people. He would like to experience himself more as a heterosexual person (“What would I want to do with this attraction to men? I would like it to fade away, though it has already faded away to a large extent. It is good when I am in men’s company, I feel strong friendship, I do not expect any emotionality or love on a man’s part [...], he is just a colleague, a friend. I would like this relations to be like that, with no desire; I would like to feel like a completely heterosexual man; I do not want to steal glances at men and I want this erotic fascination with male body to be gone [...]. Recently I have noticed that previously my [sexual attraction] had been directed towards men only. From erotic point of view, I liked only male bodies; I wanted to have sex only with men [...] I was not interested in the female body, I was not attracted to it. And now it is more like, say, bisexuality. I think that it is just a transition stage when the male body appeals to me more, I appreciate male features, they attract me more, but some kind of fantasizing or desire to have sex with a man are absolutely out of the question. It simply, so to say, does not attract me, it does not arouse me etc. I guess I am just not able to have sex with a man any more. I would feel some kind of aversion, unwillingness, but not pleasure; on the other hand, a woman’s body still does not arouse me so much.”). The interlocutor’s suffering is connected with the fact that changes in his experience of sexuality are not satisfactory to him. He would like to feel more sexual attraction towards women, not men. He tried to participate in therapies which were supposed to support him in his desire to be a more heterosexual person. Eventually, he reached the conclusion that what helps him most to pursue the changes he wants to make is building his relationship with God, and normal, daily life (“There were some meetings with some psychotherapists, [then] I quit therapy; and simply as I lead my daily life I see that this tendency fades away on its own accord, at some point personality changes, orientation changes [...]. Everything seems fresh; I am not a psychologist, I have not got any psychological knowledge, but I know it, I feel it somewhere deep inside”). He mentioned that he wanted a therapy which would help him try to change his orientation, but at the same time would not exert any pressure on him to achieve that goal (“It seems to me that fighting with tendencies only, with the fact that I am attracted to the male body is simply tilting at windmills, this is not what it is all about. If I am to have a therapy, then it should be a therapy which is not aimed at healing attraction or tendencies but at human personality, a person as a whole. Simply, the fact that I am attracted to the male body is some kind of a symptom.”).

My interlocutor adopts the attitude of tolerance towards people who choose a way different than his own (“Some people choose living with a partner and they feel happy in this relationship, and, simply, this is their calling, their way of living. They should not be discriminated and this way of living should not be closed for them [...] I have my beliefs – and someone else can have quite different ones – because of my experience that this is some kind of dysfunction and it could be cured, but other people may say because of their life experience that they have felt homosexual since they were born, that it is natural etc., and this is their point of view. And we may not agree at some points, but we may agree at some others. And first of all, people are free to make choices, and we do not have exclusive rights to the truth.”).

Regardless of all difficulties in his life my interlocutor tries to perceive his future with hope and focuses on the present. He emphasizes that “The most important thing is here and now, because I am not able to change the past and what will come, I simply put trust in God, let Him lead me [...]. But first of all I want to be an authentic person, honest with others, and live my life with God.”

The logotherapy perspective

After listening to my interlocutor’s story, I pondered on the choice of a psychological theory which would enable me to deepen the understanding of his experience. In psychology there are different interpretation contexts, different ways of understanding who a man is and what he experiences. While searching for a theoretical framework, it was important for me to understand my interlocutor’s experience, including different aspects of his functioning, and to avoid ontological reductionism, which may manifest itself, for example, in explanation of man’s spiritual functioning using a psychological approach only [2]. After the process of hermeneutical reflection [3] on the content of the story I had listened to and V. E Frankl’s works, I realized that logotherapy fulfils my methodological expectations in a satisfactory way. Therefore I chose this psychological perspective as the context of understanding my interlocutor’s story.

According to V.E. Frankl [4, 5], the functioning of a human being may be considered in psychophysical and social spheres and the sphere of meaning (noosphere). Therefore every person is a physical, psychological and spiritual entity formed by society. Between these spheres tensions and conflicts may occur, which are called noopsychical antagonism [5].

Warning against physiologism, psychologism⁴ and sociologism, Frankl notices that after reducing a man’s experience to the sphere of physiological and psychological needs and to social influence only, one cannot say much about who this man is⁵. It is invoking to the noosphere that makes it possible to present a man’s individuality in a better way. The sphere of meaning is at the same time the intentional sphere. A man, influenced by other spheres, in this dimension of his existence is not determined by them. He also has the ability of self-transcendence, which means finding meaning of one’s own existence not in oneself but somewhere else. The will of meaning is not the same as self-realization. V.E. Frankl emphasizes that it is “the primary motivation, not only a rationalization or sublimation of drives or instincts.” [after: 6, p. 156].

Discovering meaning is a dynamic process⁶ because it is not arbitrary, but it demands a man’s active participation in the search. This process unfolds during the lifetime of a man, who becomes a biographical entity [6]. Because noosphere is the sphere of individuality, one can say: “if you can even ask about meaning at all, you have to ask about the meaning of a particular person in a particular situation” [4, p. 69].

⁴ One of the traps of psychologism which is worth mentioning is rejection or devaluation the spiritual sphere of human functioning [4, 7].

⁵ The author writes about a following deterministic vision of a man: “in each of this three aspects human existence deprived of its meaning, and man must seem to be a marionette moved by means of strings attached at times to its inside, at times to its outside” [4, p.11].

⁶ “(...) being a human towards values is not a static being, and it is created in a process of gradual shaping of an individual world of values, which decides which of the values “met” during his lifetime a man wants to serve and realize and which he wants to turn away from.” [7, p. 159–160].

According to V. E. Frankl [1], the most beneficial for human development is not aiming for homeostasis (expressed, *inter alia*, in relieving internal tensions at all costs, in keeping the state of equilibrium) but noodynamics connected with a call to fulfil potential meaning and with life “in the field of tension between reality and ideals” [after: 6, p. 157]. In this understanding of development, the role of tension between the actual state of a person and the potential state towards which this person is heading is emphasized. This potentiality is connected with values which are important for people. According to this approach, a man cannot develop while being one’s own goal, but only when he finds his goal outside his own person. As V.E. Frankl emphasizes, “a man always heads and is guided towards someone or something else than himself – it may be both a meaning wanting fulfilment as well as another person, someone met on the way.” [1, p. 166].

Man very often ponders upon values in difficult moments of his life, e.g. situations connected with suffering [7]. According to V. E. Frankl, meaning can be given even to a difficult situation which from the point of view of an external observer seems to be hopeless or doomed to failure. What is more, such a situation may have a special meaning from the existential point of view. Therefore, as the creator of logotherapy and logotherapy notices, helping a man cannot depend solely on developing his working ability and experiencing pleasure. It is equally important to support him in discovering the truth about himself, the meaning of his own existence, values; and to help him develop an ability to endure suffering, which may turn out to be necessary for becoming oneself in a deeper, more profound way through embodiment of one’s values [1, 4]. V.E. Frankl argues with the belief that happiness should be experienced continuously and every lack of the experience of happiness should be treated as a manifestation of maladjustment [1]. The author emphasizes that not all kinds of suffering help people to discover the truth about themselves; only the suffering which is intentional, namely which “refers to the meaning and values” [4, p. 90], is helpful. It is important to recognize which difficulties we ought to overcome, and do it. What is impossible to change is human fate, which can be given meaning [4]. From this perspective, difficult emotional states, suffering can be perceived not only as manifestations which should be eliminated. They can be viewed as existentially significant categories. A strive for reducing all psychological tension may lead to the decrease in possibilities one has for becoming oneself in a more profound way.

What does logotherapy perspective contribute to the understanding of the interlocutor’s experience?

The interlocutor tries to find the meaning of his situation, that is – being a homosexual and, at the same time, believing in God in the way the Catholic Church teaches.

Experiencing the influence of his needs and desires on himself, as well as the influence of his social environment, he struggles to find the meaning behind his experience. The interpretation based on the premises of logotherapy allows the researcher to take into account various areas of the interlocutor’s life, and the influence they have on him. At the same time, logotherapy does not question the interlocutor’s subjectivity and intentionality. Therefore, this perspective allows us to take a closer look at the drama of his experience without reducing it to psychophysical or social sphere only.

Thanks to this perspective, the meaning of life found by the interlocutor can be understood only in relation to a particular person in a particular situation. This emphasizes the unique aspects of his experience. The interlocutor appears not only as a part of a group which has some specific

characteristics, but rather as a person with a unique life story who is searching for the meaning of his own existence. My interlocutor, being under the influence of repentance, tried to break up with his partner but, at the same time, he did not want to lose that relationship. He described his tension between experiencing his faith and fulfilling the needs and desires connected with his sexuality both in the physical and the psychological sphere. Reflecting on his experience, the interlocutor poses important questions about his situation and the search for meaning behind his distress. His distress may be understood in the context of his relationship with God, Who made him carry such a heavy cross, thus permitting the situation, in which faith to God is connected with huge restrictions in my interlocutor's life. Thanks to logotherapy the interlocutor's tensions and conflicts may be seen not as symptoms which ought to be eliminated, but as an area of search for personal meaning. Moreover, this perspective allows us to include in our interpretation the interlocutor's spiritual sphere connected with his faith, as well as his search for meaning, which transcends self-fulfilment.

Logotherapy emphasizes the meaning of values which are important for the interlocutor, which he wants to realize in his life. In his life story my interlocutor lists as important such things as, for example, building his relationship with God, avoiding the attitude connected with instrumental treatment of himself and other people, being there for others. In this context my interlocutor's experience can be viewed as a resignation from affirmation of some values in order to affirm other ones. According to my interlocutor, the self-sacrifices which he makes are connected not only with some kind of loss and suffering. He also experiences support and consolation from God. The interlocutor finds the meaning of existence in this relationship. He believes that God has the power to include the good even in my interlocutor's worst experiences which are difficult for him. The logotherapy perspective enables us to perceive his suffering as connected with his pursue to implement the values which are important for him.

Recapitulation

In his story my interlocutor shared his experiences concerning sexuality, suffering, desires and needs, as well as faith, which on the one hand is “a fundament”, a source of love and strength, but on the other hand makes demands which are difficult to meet.

Logotherapy makes us ponder about searching and finding the meaning of one's own experience. It appreciates the value of the apparent and at the same time it respects the meaning of what is obscure from the perspective of an external observer⁷. Due to that this perspective seems to be suitable since it does not limit the understanding of my interlocutor's story to easy and ready-made answers. Just the opposite, it allows for an understanding open to a never-ending process of searching for meanings [8].

References

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⁷ “We can be charged with that something is not right –believe in something invisible; you should rather not believe in what you cannot see. Countering this charge, it must be emphasized that under no circumstances something what is invisible can be considered as unreal, merely because it is invisible” [5, p. 180–181].

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