A meaningful existence

In Man’s Search for Meaning, Victor Frankl attempts to write a “ detached psychological account” of his experience as a Nazi concentration camp prisoner and answer the question: “ How was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner” (Frankl 3). Initially, Frankl’s descriptions are psychological in nature, however he makes a distinct shift near the end of the book toward a more philosophical account of human experience.

This shift is important in Frankls narrative because it demonstrates how maintaining a philosophy that gives life meaning can positively affect human behavior in even the most dire of situations. Without an object or goal to give a human life meaning, that person is “ haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness” (106) or what Frankl calls the “ existential vacuum” (106).

The connection between philosophy and psychology becomes apparent when Frankl describes his experience upon his release from the dreadful conditions of the Nazi concentration camp as he attempts to give his drained life a source of meaning. Frankl recounts, “ We came to meadows full of flowers. We saw and realized that they were there, but we had no feelings about them. The first spark of joy came when we saw a rooster with a tail of multicolored feathers. But it remained only a spark; we did not yet belong to this world” (88).

This passage seems to draw a connection between Frankl's life experience and “ the divided line” from Plato’s allegory of the cave. Frankl has been trapped in a concentration camp where any aspect of a meaningful human

existence is stripped from the individual, much like those who live in the cave for all their lives. Frankl, like those who leave the cave and enter the intelligible realm, is having trouble discovering meaning within the world, which has a negative impact of his physiological state.

While a comparison with Plato's model helps to understand the nature of Frankl's connection to understanding, we remain aware that Plato's cave is just an allegory and Frankl's concentration camp was all too real. Through the unique lens of a psychiatrist, Frankl analyzes not only himself, but also those around him while a prisoner of multiple concentration camps and concludes that, “ a human being is a finite thing, and his freedom is restricted. It is not freedom from conditions, but it is freedom to take a stand toward those conditions” (130).

He begins to drift away from scientific analysis and underscore that it is a human’s philosophy that affects his choices, which are ultimately reflected in his psychological framework. Frankl shifts from his psychological account to teach his audience the importance of reviewing the philosophical aspects of human life that gives meaning to our existence. Refusing to accept Descartes extreme skepticism, Frankl argues it is not enough to just perceive, but that humans must impose a philosophical framework on perception to create the uniquely human requirement of meaning.

Happiness,” Frankl asserts, “ cannot be pursued; it must be ensued. One must have a reason to ‘ be happy. ’ Once the reason is found, however, one becomes happy automatically” (138). While Frankl may have failed to maintain a “ detached psychological account” of his experiences, his

personal observations create a platform from which he makes a series of thoughtful claims and underscores that our psychological health is dependent upon the philosophical beliefs we hold as individuals.