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In Search of a Pedagogy of Meaning: A Review of Jarosław T. Michalski's "Meaning of Life and Pedagogy. Impulses of Thought by Viktor E. Frankl"

W poszukiwaniu pedagogiki sensu. Recenzja książki Jarosława T. Michalskiego "Meaning of Life and Pedagogy. Impulses of Thought by Viktor E. Frankl"²

Opening Statement and Contextualization

In the face of accelerating social transformations, value crises, and the growing existential uncertainty among contemporary societies, the question of the meaning of life remains a persistent and urgent educational concern. "Meaning of Life and Pedagogy. Impulses of Thought by Viktor E. Frankl", authored by Jarosław Tomasz Michalski (2024), is a timely and important contribution to this discourse. Drawing inspiration from the thought of Viktor E. Frankl, the pioneer of logotherapy and existential analysis, Michalski offers a comprehensive philosophical and pedagogical reflection on how the search for meaning can be reintroduced as a foundational category of educational theory and practice.

Notably, this English-language monograph is an expanded and revised edition of the author's earlier work "Sens życia a pedagogika. Impulsy myśli Viktora E. Frankla", first published in 2011 in Polish. The original edition was met with positive critical reception, including reviews by scholars such as Professor Jerzy Bagrowicz and Professor Zbigniew Marek SJ, who recognized the work as a pioneering and valuable contribution to the theory and philosophy of education, particularly in

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2 Michalski J.T. (2024). *Meaning of life and pedagogy: Impulses of thought by Viktor E. Frankl*. Cracow: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls.

its integration of existential and personalist perspectives on the human condition and educational practice (Bagrowicz 2011; Marek 2011).

Michalski's work stands alongside Polish contributions to the reception of Frankl's thought, including the psychological and philosophical studies of Kazimierz Popielski and the practical applications promoted by the Krakow Institute of Logotherapy. Yet, it offers a distinctive voice by situating the search for meaning at the very heart of educational theory and practice, addressing the challenges of inclusive education, digital transformation, and human development in a technologized world.

At the international level, Frankl's legacy continues to inspire contemporary thinkers such as Edith Eger (2017), whose works on trauma and resilience extend Frankl's insights into the fields of psychotherapy and personal development. Similarly, Alexander Batthyány, a leading figure in the second generation of logotherapy researchers, has expanded Frankl's existential analysis through empirical studies and philosophical reflection (Batthyány 2016). Michalski's contribution joins this growing body of literature, offering a distinctive pedagogical perspective that complements both psychological and philosophical interpretations of logotherapy in the global context.

Published by Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls in Cracow, the book is part of the "Excellent Science II" programme, supported by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education as a strategic initiative aimed at promoting outstanding scientific monographs. Michalski situates his work at the intersection of philosophy of education, psychology, and pedagogy, arguing that the contemporary crisis of meaning – manifested in existential frustration, nihilism, and moral disorientation – requires a renewed educational response rooted in humanistic and axiological traditions. By bridging Frankl's existential-therapeutic insights with pedagogical theory, the author not only reconstructs the conceptual foundations of logotherapy but also explores their relevance for educators seeking to address the deeper existential needs of their students. This publication invites readers to consider the transformative potential of meaning-oriented education in times marked by spiritual disintegration and cultural fragmentation.

Book Structure and Main Arguments

"Meaning of Life and Pedagogy" by Jarosław Tomasz Michalski is organized into two main parts, preceded by an introduction and followed by a concluding reflection. The book comprises 266 pages, including an extensive bibliography, and systematically guides the reader from the philosophical foundations of Viktor E. Frankl's existential analysis to their educational implications.

In the "Introduction", the author outlines the central thesis that the search for meaning is not only a psychological or philosophical issue but also a fundamental educational task. Michalski argues that education, to remain fully humanizing,

must integrate the existential dimension of human life into its theoretical and practical frameworks.

The first part, titled “Humans and Their Existential Problems. Searching for Answers in the Proposal of Viktor E. Frankl”, presents a comprehensive reconstruction of Frankl’s thought. The author explores Frankl’s life experience, emphasizing the existential challenges he faced, including his time in Nazi concentration camps, which profoundly shaped his philosophical and therapeutic work. Central concepts such as the existential vacuum, noogenic neurosis, and self-transcendence are discussed in depth. One of the book’s most memorable insights captures the existential dynamic of human life. As Michalski develops Frankl’s insight, he reminds us that we are not the ones to ask life about its meaning; rather, life questions us, presenting us with tasks and challenges that require our response. Frankl himself puts it this way:

We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual (Frankl 2006, p. 77; cf. Michalski 2024, p. 183).

The second part, titled “The Significance of the Search for the Meaning of Life for Pedagogy”, shifts the focus to the field of education. Michalski examines how Frankl’s existential analysis can inform pedagogical theory and practice. He emphasizes the role of conscience, which he describes as

not derived from or reduced to the empirical conditions of human existence and [...] free from randomness, arbitrariness and determination by foreign influences (Michalski 2024, p. 207).

Responsibility and meaning are presented as inseparable:

Meaning perceived without responsibility and without reference to conscience would therefore be nothing more than nonsense (Michalski 2024, p. 207).

Michalski stresses that education should cultivate these capacities not by imposing norms, but by helping learners discover and engage with their own existential responsibility. Drawing on Andreas Heitger’s reflections on conscience education, he emphasizes that:

Education to conscience does not mean imposing by the educator its norms and motives of behaviour, but rather shaping the awareness of the existence

of such an instance as conscience, which can only support the morality of everyday life and help in resolving existential crises and various types of choices (Michalski 2024, p. 167).

He further argues that meaning is not a fixed concept but is discovered anew in the lived experiences of individuals:

Meaning is still an explanation, attribution, and acceptance of a specific individual. Individual situations are experienced in different ways, depending on particular people (Michalski 2024, p. 187).

By combining philosophical depth with pedagogical insight, Michalski offers a thought-provoking contribution that challenges educators to reframe their work in light of the human being's inherent orientation toward meaning.

Although primarily philosophical and reflective in nature, the book is grounded in a rigorous methodological framework. Michalski adopts a reconstructionist research model inspired by Jean Piaget's genetic structuralism, which guides the analysis from the origins of Frankl's theory to its contemporary educational applications. His methodological strategy follows a triangulation approach that integrates monographic analysis of Frankl's existential thought, biographical reflection on the author's life experiences, hermeneutic interpretation of primary texts, and phenomenological reflection on the lived experience of meaning. This methodological pluralism not only ensures the internal coherence of the book's argument but also strengthens its relevance for educational theory and practice, offering a bridge between philosophical insight and practical pedagogical reflection.

Critical Assessment

Jarosław Tomasz Michalski's "Meaning of Life and Pedagogy" stands out as a carefully structured and conceptually rich monograph that successfully integrates philosophical anthropology, existential psychology, and pedagogical reflection. The author demonstrates scholarly maturity and methodological consistency, offering readers a coherent narrative that bridges Frankl's logotherapy with educational theory. One of the most notable strengths of the book lies in its ability to present complex existential themes in a manner that is both accessible and pedagogically relevant. Michalski's synthesis of philosophy and pedagogy provides a compelling argument for re-centering education around the human search for meaning, responsibility, and self-transcendence.

At the same time, the book opens further possibilities for exploration, particularly in applying Frankl's insights to contemporary educational contexts marked by cultural pluralism, digital transformation, and psychosocial challenges. While Michalski lays a solid philosophical and theoretical foundation, future research

could expand upon his work by incorporating empirical studies that investigate how meaning-centered pedagogy can be implemented in diverse educational settings. Additionally, interdisciplinary dialogue with fields such as social pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and intercultural education might enrich the framework proposed in this volume, extending its relevance to the complexities of globalized societies.

It is worth noting that this volume builds on the author's earlier Polish-language monograph "Sens życia a pedagogika. Impulsy myśli Viktora E. Frankla" (2011), which has already established itself as a significant contribution to the Polish discourse on existential pedagogy. The original edition offered a pioneering synthesis of Frankl's thought and pedagogical theory, and its publication marked an important step in reintroducing the category of meaning into educational reflection in Poland. What makes the present English edition particularly valuable is that it not only makes Michalski's insights accessible to a global readership but also expands and refines the original argument. The restructured presentation, clearer thematic divisions, and engagement with broader educational challenges enhance the book's relevance beyond its initial cultural and linguistic context. Far from diminishing the importance of the original work, the English edition extends its reach and impact, inviting international scholars and practitioners to engage with a perspective that bridges philosophical anthropology, logotherapy, and pedagogy. This continuity and development between the two editions reflect the enduring relevance and generative potential of Michalski's intellectual legacy.

Future research could also benefit from a closer dialogue with international studies on logotherapy and meaning-centered approaches, such as those developed by Edith Eger (2017) and Alexander Batthyány (2016), whose works bridge clinical practice, existential philosophy, and cultural reflection. Such interdisciplinary engagement would further enhance the relevance of Michalski's pedagogical framework in the context of global educational and psychosocial challenges.

Relevance to Educational Theory and Practice

"Meaning of Life and Pedagogy" makes a significant contribution to educational theory by reintroducing the category of meaning as a central concern for both educational philosophy and practice. In a time when education is increasingly shaped by utilitarian goals, performance metrics, and technocratic paradigms, Michalski's work offers a refreshing reminder that the primary task of education is to support the integral development of the human person – understood as a being fundamentally oriented toward meaning, responsibility, and transcendence. This task appears even more urgent in light of the growing mental health crisis among young people globally. Recent studies report alarming increases in anxiety, depression, and feelings of meaninglessness among adolescents and young adults (WHO, 2021). Many students experience a sense of disconnection from themselves, others, and the world, exacerbated by socio-political instability, climate anxiety, and

the pressures of performance-driven educational systems (UNICEF, 2021). In such a context, education that merely transmits knowledge or focuses on measurable outcomes risks overlooking the deeper existential needs of learners.

Michalski's emphasis on meaning-centered pedagogy offers a timely and necessary corrective by inviting educators to create spaces where students can explore existential questions of identity, purpose, and responsibility. By integrating the search for meaning into educational practice, schools and universities can contribute not only to academic success but also to students' psychological resilience and personal well-being. Meaning-oriented education thus becomes a vital response to the silent epidemic of existential emptiness that increasingly affects younger generations.

By situating Viktor Frankl's existential analysis within the pedagogical domain, the book provides a valuable framework for educators seeking to address the deeper existential and axiological needs of their students. Michalski emphasizes that education is not merely about knowledge transmission or skill acquisition, but about fostering the capacity to respond to life's questions with authenticity and personal commitment. His reflections on conscience, responsibility, and dialogue offer practical insights for educators working in various contexts, from formal schooling to lifelong learning environments.

Moreover, the book's relevance extends beyond theoretical reflection. It challenges educators and educational policymakers to rethink the aims of education in light of the growing existential crises affecting individuals and societies. By advocating for a pedagogy that integrates existential and spiritual dimensions of human development, Michalski's work resonates with current discussions on mental health, well-being, and the role of values in education. It invites educational communities to create spaces where learners can explore their own questions of meaning and purpose, fostering resilience, personal growth, and social responsibility.

For example, in the field of inclusive education, where learners face not only cognitive, social, and emotional barriers but also profound existential questions about their place and value in the community, a pedagogy centered on meaning can empower educators to go beyond technical support and promote the integral development of each person as a unique and responsible agent of meaning. Michalski's emphasis on conscience and responsibility invites teachers to engage students in dialogues that foster personal reflection on values, purpose, and life choices, thus complementing inclusion policies with deeply humanistic educational practices.

Similarly, in today's digital and AI-mediated learning environments, where technology increasingly shapes learners' experiences and interactions, Michalski's work provides an important philosophical counterbalance to instrumental and technocratic trends. It encourages educators to reflect on how digital tools can either reduce education to data-driven performance metrics or become instruments for supporting the human search for meaning and authentic self-expression. In

this context, meaning-centered pedagogy becomes not only relevant but urgently needed to reclaim education as a space for existential exploration, helping learners navigate the challenges of information overload, algorithmic bias, and the loss of authentic interpersonal relationships.

Michalski's reflections thus resonate with current educational challenges, such as preventing youth alienation, strengthening personal resilience, and promoting ethical responsibility in an increasingly fragmented and technologized world. His call to place the human being's search for meaning at the heart of education offers a powerful response to the spiritual and moral disorientation observed in many contemporary educational systems.

Conclusion and Recommendation

"Meaning of Life and Pedagogy. Impulses of Thought by Viktor E. Frankl" by Jarosław Tomasz Michalski offers a deeply reflective and philosophically grounded exploration of the existential foundations of education. By bridging Viktor Frankl's logotherapy with pedagogical theory and practice, the author presents a compelling argument for re-centering education on the human search for meaning, responsibility, and self-transcendence.

Written with conceptual clarity and scholarly depth, the book addresses some of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary education, including the risk of existential emptiness, moral disorientation, and the instrumentalization of human development. Michalski's contribution is particularly relevant for educators, philosophers of education, psychologists, and all those interested in the humanistic dimensions of learning and personal growth.

I highly recommend this book to readers seeking to deepen their understanding of the intersection between philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy. Its accessible language and universal themes make it suitable not only for academic audiences but also for practitioners who wish to bring a meaning-oriented perspective into their educational work. By inviting further reflection and dialogue, *Meaning of Life and Pedagogy* stands as a lasting contribution to the ongoing conversation on the role of meaning in human and educational development.

In light of Professor Jarosław Tomasz Michalski's untimely passing, *Meaning of Life and Pedagogy. Impulses of Thought* by Viktor E. Frankl stands not only as a significant scholarly achievement but also as a living testimony to a life devoted to seeking and affirming meaning. In the dedication to the earlier Polish edition, Michalski expressed his gratitude to his dearest Mother and in memory of his beloved Father, acknowledging their deep faith that what he had chosen and what he was doing had meaning. Today, this work reaches beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries, carrying forward his voice and vision. In doing so, it continues to bear witness to the truth they believed in and nurtured in him – that life, when lived in search of meaning and in service of others, never ceases to speak.

As Viktor Frankl reminds us, each person is “questioned by life and can only respond by being responsible” (Frankl 2006, p. 109). This responsibility often relates to “unfinished work” or relationships that give meaning to life and empower us to endure its hardships (Frankl 2006, p. 104). Though the author is no longer present among us, his legacy speaks through the ideas he left behind, the students he mentored in the art of life and scholarly integrity, and the academic community that continues to draw on his insights. His life and work remain an enduring call to take responsibility for the meaning that still awaits discovery, reminding us that authentic life is never truly silent when its fruits live on in others.

Taken as a whole, “Meaning of Life and Pedagogy” by Jarosław Tomasz Michalski is not only a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion about the role of meaning in education, but also a deeply humanistic manifesto for a pedagogy of responsibility. With courage and consistency, the author presents education not as a process of social adaptation to external norms, but as a journey toward discovering one’s own conscience and the ability to respond to the questions life presents to us. In a time of value crises and growing feelings of disorientation – especially among younger generations – Michalski reminds us that education, if it is to remain truly human, must be a space for seeking meaning, not merely for developing skills or competencies.

His book challenges us to critically re-examine the aims of contemporary education—not to reduce them to technical or utilitarian goals, but to reclaim their existential depth and humanistic authenticity. This work does not end with the closing page; rather, it remains open as an invitation to dialogue, reflection, and action. In this sense, “Meaning of Life and Pedagogy” becomes not only a testament to the life and thought of its author but also a lasting call for each of us – as educators, mentors, or simply as human beings – to dare to respond to the question of meaning that life poses to us every day.

For me, as one of his students, this book carries not only the weight of his scholarship but also the quiet echo of his presence – of the conversations, questions, and moments of learning that shaped my own journey. It stands as a personal reminder that meaning is not something we possess, but something we are called to continue, in the work we do and the lives we touch.

I believe this book will serve as a meaningful resource not only for scholars but also for educators, counselors, and practitioners seeking to bring a meaning-oriented perspective into their daily work with students and communities.

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