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Between absurdity and meaning: Dialogues between existentialism, nihilism, and existential psychology

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Abstract

The overall objective of this research is to examine the dialectical tensions between Camus's concept of the absurd, Nietzsche's nihilism, and the search for meaning in Viktor Frankl's existential psychology, to understand how these three philosophical frameworks offer distinct responses to the crisis of meaning that characterizes the postmodern condition. The study employs a theoretical-conceptual design based on a hermeneutic-phenomenological and comparative analysis of primary philosophical texts by Nietzsche (The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra), Camus (The Myth of Sisyphus, The Rebel), and Frankl (Man's Search for Meaning), supplemented by secondary sources from WOS- and Scopus-indexed journals (2020–2025). The comparative analysis reveals fundamental tensions regarding the ontology of meaning—whether discovered (Frankl), created (Nietzsche), or defiantly affirmed despite its absence (Camus)—and its implications for contemporary existential ethics. By way of conclusion, the critical synthesis proposes three guiding principles for navigating the postmodern crisis of meaning: genealogical lucidity that questions inherited narratives, absurd solidarity that recognizes the creation of meaning as a collective endeavor, and existential pragmatism that evaluates narratives based on their capacity to promote concrete human flourishing.

Keywords: Existentialism; nihilism; logotherapy; crisis of meaning; late postmodernism.

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Entre el absurdo y el sentido: Diálogos entre existencialismo, nihilismo y psicología existencial

Resumen

El objetivo general de la investigación consiste en debatir las tensiones dialécticas entre el absurdo camusiano, el nihilismo nietzscheano y la búsqueda de sentido en la psicología existencial de Viktor Frankl, para comprender cómo estos tres marcos filosóficos, ofrecen respuestas diferenciadas a la crisis del significado que caracteriza a la condición posmoderna. El estudio emplea un diseño teórico-conceptual basado en el análisis hermenéutico-fenomenológico y comparativo de textos filosóficos primarios de Nietzsche (*La gaya ciencia*, *Así habló Zaratustra*), Camus (*El mito de Sísifo*, *El hombre rebelde*) y Frankl (*La búsqueda del sentido del hombre*), complementado por fuentes secundarias de revistas indexadas WOS y Scopus (2020-2025). El análisis comparativo revela tensiones fundamentales respecto a la ontología del significado —ya sea descubierta (Frankl), creado (Nietzsche) o afirmado desafiante a pesar de su ausencia (Camus)— y sus implicaciones para la ética existencial contemporánea. A modo de conclusión, la síntesis crítica propone tres principios reguladores para habitar la crisis de significado posmoderna: la lucidez genealógica que cuestiona las narrativas heredadas, la solidaridad absurda que reconoce la creación de significado como empresa colectiva, y el pragmatismo existencial que evalúa las narrativas por su capacidad para promover el florecimiento humano concreto.

Palabras clave: Existencialismo; nihilismo; logoterapia, crisis del significado; posmodernidad tardía.

Introduction

The recurrent question concerning the meaning of human existence represents a first-order ontological inquiry, one that has an urgent character in our historical present. For those who subscribe to this research, the crisis of meaning that traverses the postmodern condition is not merely a theoretical challenge, but a concrete existential experience that permeates all dimensions of contemporary life: from the fragmentation of identity narratives to the erosion of epistemological certainties.

In the words of Heidenreich et al. (2021), the fundamental paradox lies in the fact that we live in an age saturated with information yet marked by what various thinkers describe as an authentic “crisis of meaning”, where the multiplicity of perspectives does not produce clarity but perplexity, and the freedom of choice is experienced more as vertigo than as emancipation.

This crisis inscribes itself genealogically

in the collapse of the grand metaphysical and religious narratives that for centuries provided stable interpretive frameworks (Oleksenko & Oleksenko, 2020). Indeed, for authors such as Plesa (2024), the postmodern condition has left the contemporary individual suspended between the Nietzschean recognition of the “death of God” as an irreversible cultural event and the existential urgency of constructing horizons of meaning that make an authentic life possible.

Consequently, contemporary nihilism reveals that the problem of meaning cannot be approached exclusively from abstract existential coordinates but requires consideration of the material and socio-historical conditions that configure the possibilities of experiencing meaning in our present.

Thus, the categories of the absurd and of meaning have historically been handled from positions that appear irreconcilable: existentialism proclaims that existence

precedes essence, Nietzschean nihilism diagnoses the devaluation of all supreme values, and Franklian existential psychology proposes that the human being retains the ultimate freedom to find meaning, even in extreme suffering (Russell, 2008).

However, these three frameworks do not simply constitute mutually exclusive philosophical alternatives, but positions that, in their dialectical tension, illuminate different dimensions of the contemporary existential problem. Therefore, the dialogue among these traditions reveals a priori that the issue is not to choose between affirming or denying meaning, but to understand the conditions of possibility under which meaning emerges, is sustained, or disintegrates in concrete and authentic existential experiences.

Following Wong's ideas (2004), the epistemological relevance of Nietzsche, Camus, and Frankl lies in the fact that each, in their own way, offers not only philosophical diagnoses of meaninglessness but also differentiated existential strategies for inhabiting it. Nietzsche (2008) proposes a radical transvaluation that turns the absence of transcendent foundations into the very condition of possibility for the heroic creation of immanent values.

For his part, Camus (1984) articulates a lucid rebellion that rejects both suicide and metaphysical hope, while Frankl (2006) grounds an existential psychology that maintains that the search for meaning constitutes the primary motivation of the human being. These three positions represent existentially viable responses to the problem of how to live authentically in a contingent world without enduring certainties.

Against this existential backdrop, the aim of this research is to examine the dialectical tensions among Camusian absurdity, Nietzschean nihilism, and the search for meaning in Viktor Frankl's existential psychology, in order to understand how these three philosophical frameworks offer differentiated responses to the crisis of meaning that characterizes the postmodern condition, identifying both their irreducible antagonisms

and their possible complementarities in the construction of an ethics of existence in the twenty-first century.

This research seeks to contribute to that project through a rigorous dialogue among philosophical traditions that can illuminate pathways for inhabiting the contemporary crisis of meaning lucidly and ethically.

More concretely, after the methodology section, the article is organized into five differentiated sections. The first examines the Nietzschean diagnosis of nihilism as a historical-cultural event. The second analyzes Camus's philosophy of the absurd and his proposal of metaphysical rebellion. The third explores Frankl's existential psychology and his understanding of the search for meaning as a constitutive dimension of the human condition.

Next, the fourth section develops a comparative analysis of the tensions and complementarities among these three philosophical frameworks. The fifth section offers, by way of conclusion, a critical synthesis that articulates elements from the three traditions to sketch guidelines for a contemporary existential ethics capable of responding to the specific challenges of the crisis of meaning in late postmodernity.

1. Methodology

In view of the nature and essence of the topic, this research adopts a theoretical-conceptual design of an interpretive qualitative nature, grounded in hermeneutic-phenomenological and comparative analysis of philosophical texts of recognized academic value. In the words of Hovey et al. (2022), hermeneutics as applied to philosophical research constitutes a "nonmethod" in the sense that it does not prescribe mechanical procedures but rather demands a reflexive interpretive attitude that keeps questions and answers open to the dialogical flow between interpreter and texts.

This approach is particularly appropriate for addressing the dialectical

tensions among existentialism, nihilism, and existential psychology, since these philosophical frameworks cannot be reduced to operationalizable variables but require an understanding of their internal conceptual structures and their historical horizons of meaning, in accordance with Gadamer's hermeneutics (2004).

Consequently, the study does not involve the collection of quantitative empirical data or experimental laboratory work but instead undertakes a critical immersion in textual and contextual corpora that has shaped the contemporary philosophical debate on the crisis of meaning.

The primary textual corpus of this research consists of selected works (anthologies) by the three central authors who articulate the philosophical frameworks under analysis. From Friedrich Nietzsche, the study examines *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), and *The Gay Science* (1882), texts in which his diagnosis of nihilism and his proposal of transvaluation are developed (Nietzsche, 2008). From Albert Camus, the analysis focuses on *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1991) and *The Rebel* (*L'Homme Révolté*, 1951), works that articulate his philosophy of the absurd and metaphysical rebellion.

From Viktor Frankl, in turn, the study examines *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 2006), *The Will to Meaning* (Frankl, 2014), and *Psychotherapy and Existentialism* (Frankl, 1985), foundational texts of logotherapy and existential psychology. Complementarily, secondary sources are incorporated, including, though not exclusively, specialized studies published in journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus during the period 2020–2025, with priority given to openaccess articles that address the crisis of meaning in postmodernity from contemporary philosophical and psychological perspectives.

More concretely, the philosophical methods of analysis employed integrate three complementary approaches that respond to the specific nature of the object of study.

a. First, conceptual analysis, which, as Kölbel (2021) argues, constitutes a legitimate methodology in both its empirical and a priori forms, allowing for an examination of the concepts of absurdity, nihilism, and meaning in terms of their structural components, conditions of applicability, and logical relations.

b. Second, the hermeneuticphenomenological method, following the principles articulated by Lopez (2023) in his Heideggerian adaptation: reconstruction through phenomenological suspension and reduction, phenomenological destruction that identifies insufficiencies and aporias in the traditions under study, and reflexive construction that describes the phenomenon in its existential dynamics.

c. Third, comparative analysis which, recognizing that philosophical traditions are not monolithic but internally diverse, privileges the analysis of concepts and problems over the mechanical comparison of individual authors.

In turn, the analytical procedure was structured into four methodological phases, sequential yet recursive, which are explained below:

1. First, the first phase consists of an exhaustive critical reading of the primary sources, during which the key conceptual categories were identified and coded through hermeneutic annotations that recorded both the manifest content and the latent structures of meaning.

2. Second, the second phase carried out an indepth hermeneutic analysis of each philosophical tradition considered in its specificity, attending to the historicalcultural contexts of production, the fundamental philosophical concerns of each author, and the internal conceptual articulations that structure their proposals.

3. Third, the third phase implemented a systematic comparative analysis that identified conceptual convergences, ontological divergences, irreducible dialectical tensions, and possible complementarities among the three philosophical frameworks.

4. Fourth, the fourth and final phase

developed a critical synthesis that does not seek to achieve an eclectic syncretism, but rather a grounded articulation of elements that can contribute to understanding and responding to the crisis of meaning in the contemporary postmodern condition.

In this regard, the selection criteria and methodological rigor applied ensure the philosophical validity and reliability of the analysis. For the primary sources, critical editions and academically recognized translations are privileged, as they preserve the conceptual integrity of the original texts.

For the secondary sources, four concatenated criteria were applied: direct thematic relevance to the research axes; academic quality verified through indexation in WOS or Scopus databases; bibliographic currency, privileging publications from the last five years that incorporate contemporary debates; and representativeness of the diverse interpretive currents, in order to avoid unilateral hermeneutic biases.

The methodological rigor rests on principles of internal argumentative coherence (absence of logical contradictions in the proposed interpretations), textual fidelity (interpretations grounded in explicit textual evidence), theoretical triangulation (confrontation of multiple sources and interpretive perspectives), and critical reflexivity (explicit recognition of the interpretive presuppositions from which the analysis is conducted).

The epistemological considerations underlying this research explicitly acknowledge the interpretive and situated character of philosophical knowledge, rejecting both naïve objectivism and radical relativism (Gadamer, 2004). For these reasons, it is assumed that philosophical texts admit a plurality of legitimate readings without this implying an indiscriminate epistemic equivalence among interpretations; there are rational criteria—logical coherence, textual fidelity, conceptual fecundity—that make it possible to assess the relative validity of different hermeneutic approaches.

In addition to all of the above, the

purpose of this research is not to establish a “definitive philosophical truth” nor to close the debate, but rather to construct a well-grounded, coherent, and critically sustained interpretation that contributes productively to contemporary philosophical dialogue on the crisis of meaning.

Therefore, following the hermeneutic tradition of Ricoeur as well (2007), it is recognized that all understanding is mediated by pre-understandings and that the fusion of horizons between interpreter and texts constitutes the very condition of possibility of philosophical understanding. For those who subscribe to this research, such an epistemological stance makes it possible to integrate methodological rigor with hermeneutic openness, avoiding both neopositivist methodological dogmatism and interpretive subjectivism.

2. Results and discussion

2.1. Nietzsche’s diagnosis of nihilism as a historical-cultural event

Nietzsche’s proclamation that “God is dead” is far more than an atheological claim or an Enlightenment celebration of the demise of religious superstition; in its deepest dimension, it constitutes a historical-cultural diagnosis of the civilizational collapse that defines late modernity (Nietzsche, 2008). In the famous parable of the “madman” in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche stages this event dramatically when the protagonist bursts into the marketplace proclaiming: “God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. — And we, we still have to vanquish his shadow, too” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 167).

In hermeneutic terms, the death of God does not simply designate the empirical decline of religious faith among European populations, but the collapse of the very metaphysical foundation that for millennia organized Western existence. Thus, with the erosion of belief in a transcendent order, in

absolute values guaranteed by the divinity, in a cosmic teleology that confers ultimate meaning on human existence, the entire axiological edifice built upon these foundations inevitably crumbles.

As Grimwood's recent analysis shows, Nietzsche understood that one cannot simply dispense with God and keep everything else the same, because along with the divinity the moral world that she had supervised and legitimized must also die (Grimwood, 2011). In this argumentative context, nihilism emerges precisely from this historical paradox: the modern critical rationality that was born within Christian culture ultimately erodes the metaphysical bases of the very worldview that made it possible, leaving humanity orphaned of certainties and exposed to the vertigo of absolute meaninglessness.

Nietzsche, however, draws a meticulous distinction between two radically different forms of nihilism that respond in opposite ways to this historical-cultural diagnosis (Nietzsche, 1974). Passive nihilism represents the decadent, reactive modality: unable to bear the weight of the freedom that the absence of transcendent foundations entails, the passive nihilist takes refuge in pessimism, the denial of life, and the existential weariness that Schopenhauer, as Russell (2008) notes, had theorized as a philosophical response to the suffering inherent in existence.

This form of nihilism leads to asceticism, rejection of the sensible world, and hope in a consoling hereafter or, in its modern secular version, to a fatalistic resignation before a mechanical universe devoid of intrinsic values.

By contrast, active nihilism constitutes a consciously embraced destructive force that does not lament the collapse of the old values but accelerates it through relentless critique. Nietzsche (1968) conceives this active nihilism as a necessary condition for transvaluation, insofar as only through the complete destruction of obsolete tables of values can the existential ground be prepared for the creation of new, life-affirming values.

This crucial distinction shows that Nietzschean nihilism is not simply a problem

to be overcome by nostalgically returning to pre-Enlightenment certainties, but an inevitable—indeed necessary—historical phase in the development of a humanity that has reached its philosophical maturity.

As Clifford (1960) observes, Nietzsche's genealogy of nihilism traces its roots back to the very internal structure of the Judeo-Christian morality that dominated the West for two millennia. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche argues that Christianity established a metaphysical dichotomy between a transcendent "true world"—characterized by perfection, immutability, and absolute good—and an "apparent world" of earthly life, corrupted by becoming, contingency, and suffering (Nietzsche, 2008). This fundamental ontological division necessarily entailed a systematic devaluation of everything that constitutes concrete life: corporeality, instincts, passions, finitude, conflict, and the plurality of perspectives.

Nietzschean morality, as Szklarska (2015) argues, operates in Nietzsche's analysis as a sophisticated form of lifedenial (*Lebensverneinung*). By projecting all genuine value into an inaccessible suprasensible realm, it turned earthly existence into a mere passage, a test whose meaning could only be fully realized in the postmortem eternity. Therefore, the historical paradox Nietzsche identifies is that this same Christian morality, by promoting truthfulness as a cardinal virtue, ultimately generated the critical spirit and intellectual probity that eventually undermined the credibility of its own metaphysical premises.

When Enlightenment reason erodes faith in the transcendent world, the moral values that depended on it for their grounding suddenly lose their ontological anchor and reveal themselves as "human, all too human." For these reasons, as Plesa (2024) suggests, nihilism thus emerges not as a historical accident but as the logical internal outcome of the self-destructive dynamic inscribed within Christianity itself.

Nietzsche's response to nihilism clearly does not consist in attempting to restore lost certainties or in melancholically resigning

oneself to meaninglessness, but in undertaking a transvaluation of all values (*Umwertung aller Werte*) that radically transforms the very criteria by which we evaluate existence (Nietzsche, 1974).

For authors such as Russell (2008), this transvaluation does not simply entail mechanically inverting the existing hierarchy of values—placing what was previously “below” in the superior position— but grounding values on entirely different principles: instead of metaphysical transcendence, the radical immanence of becoming; instead of the ascetic negation of the instincts, their affirmation and creative sublimation; instead of a morality of resentment that devalues life, an ethics of the will to power that celebrates it in all its tragic complexity (Nietzsche, 1968).

Nietzsche in fact invokes emblematic conceptual figures to articulate this postnihilist vision: the *Übermensch*, or “overman,” as a human type capable of creating values from his own existential sovereignty, without the need for transcendent guarantees; *amor fati*, or love of fate, as a Dionysian acceptance of existence in its totality, including suffering and contingency; and the eternal recurrence as an ultimate criterion of value that asks whether we are willing to affirm life in such a way that we would wish to live it identically, over and over again, unto infinity (Nietzsche, 2008).

As it is formulated in *The Gay Science*: “What does your conscience say? — ‘You shall become the person you are’” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 219). Therefore, an ethics of creative selfrealization constitutes Nietzsche’s alternative to both the dead end of passive nihilism and the nostalgic restoration of unsustainable metaphysical certainties.

2.2. The philosophy of the absurd in Camus and his proposal of metaphysical rebellion

Camus’s philosophy of the absurd begins from a radical premise that opens *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is

suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus, 1991, p. 4). This provocative opening is not an invitation to death but, paradoxically, the threshold of a lucid affirmation of existence.

According to Camus (1991), the absurd arises from the “divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, between the man and his life, the actor and his setting” (p. 6), from the irreducible confrontation between our human need for clarity, coherence, and meaning, on the one hand, and the irrational and indifferent silence of the universe, on the other. He formulates it with precision: “The absurd is not in man nor in the world, but in their presence together... it is the only bond uniting them” (p. 21).

The authors of this article hold that this absurd condition is neither an ontological property of the world nor a psychological trait of the human being considered in isolation, but emerges specifically from their encounter, from the impossibility of reconciling the human aspiration to unity with the chaotic multiplicity of the real.

As Rudd (2024) argues, in the face of this limitsituation Camus rejects both physical suicide and “philosophical suicide”—the leap into religious faith or metaphysical illusions proposed by Kierkegaard and other Christian existentialists—maintaining that both responses constitute evasions that betray absurd lucidity. The only philosophically coherent stance is, as he declares, “revolt. It is the constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity... that revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life” (Camus, 1991, pp. 54–55).

In this regard, metaphysical rebellion represents the philosophical culmination of Camus’s absurdist thought, fully developed in *L’Homme Révolté* (1951) as a systematic continuation of the intuitions of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This prominent existential thinker defines this form of rebellion in precise terms: “Metaphysical rebellion is the movement by which man protests against his condition and

against the whole of creation. It is metaphysical because it disputes the ends of man and of creation" (Camus, 1984, p. 29).

Whereas the rebellious slave protests against the conditions of his slavery, the metaphysical rebel protests against the human condition as such, against the very order of the universe that condemns him to suffering and death without any apparent justification.

At least in principle, this rebellion does not simply entail a nihilistic negation, but rather a paradoxical affirmation of values: in rejecting his condition, the rebel implicitly affirms that there is something in him that deserves respect, that not everything can be permitted, that there are limits that must not be transgressed.

As Camus (1984) argues, "In every act of rebellion, the man experiences not only a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights, but also a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself" (p. 19). Metaphysical rebellion thus recognizes "a fragmented world in order to make it whole. It confronts the general injustice of the world with its own principles of justice" (pp. 29-30).

In symbolic terms, the mythical figure of Sisyphus emblematises Camus's philosophy of the absurd and rebellion. Condemned by the gods to push a rock eternally up to the summit of a mountain, from which it falls back down under its own weight, Sisyphus embodies the human condition in its absurd nakedness: perpetual effort without transcendent purpose, mechanical repetition without possible progress or redemption.

Camus (1991), however, does not read this myth as a story of hopeless tragedy but as a parable of paradoxical existential victory. The crucial moment occurs during the descent, when Sisyphus, temporarily freed from his burden, contemplates lucidly the meaninglessness of his task: "It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me... In each of those moments when he leaves the heights... he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock" (p. 121).

In mainstream philosophical reception, Sisyphus's superiority lies precisely in his

lucid awareness of the absurd. He does not deceive himself with illusory hopes that his punishment will end; he does not fantasize that his effort possesses some hidden cosmic meaning; yet he does not succumb to nihilistic despair either.

For these reasons, his rebellion consists in affirming life in its full ontic totality, including absurd suffering, through defiance and scorn. Camus's famous conclusion condenses this paradox: "we must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1991, p. 123). This happiness is in no sense resigned conformism, but rebellious joy: the satisfaction of one who has fully assumed his condition without metaphysical subterfuges and finds in the struggle itself his *raison d'être*.

2.3. Frankl's existential psychology and the search for meaning as a constitutive dimension of the human condition

In line with the arguments advanced by Bushkin et al. (2021), the existential psychology developed by Viktor Frankl on the basis of his experiences in Nazi concentration camps represents a fundamental epistemological rupture with the two major Viennese schools that preceded him: Freudian psychoanalysis and Adlerian individual psychology.

While Freud (1993) posited the "pleasure principle" as the primary driver of human behavior and Adler emphasized the "will to power" as a compensatory mechanism for feelings of inferiority, Frankl (2014) proposed that the fundamental motivation of the human being is the "will to meaning," asserting that "the search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives" (p. 99).

This thesis, existentially validated under the extreme conditions of Auschwitz, Dachau, and other camps where Frankl was imprisoned between 1942 and 1945, maintains that even when all physiological needs remain

unmet and all affective bonds have been destroyed, the human being still retains the capacity—and the need—to find meaning in his existence. As recent psychobiographical research by Bushkin et al. (2021) documents, Frankl employed at least eight specific strategies to create meaning within the drama he was forced to endure, ranging from creative pursuits, service to others, and contradictory experiences to commitment to decisions, spiritual connection, reinterpretation of apparently meaningless tasks, the creation and pursuit of goals, and the maintenance of an unconditional attitude of inner strength.

Logotherapy—literally “therapy through meaning”—is thus built upon three fundamental pillars: freedom of will, will to meaning, and meaning of life, constituting what Frankl termed the “Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy” (Frankl, 1985). In this particular sense, logotherapy functions as an epistemological bridge between psychology and existential philosophy:

Frankl’s philosophical background is grounded in existentialism and his theory has been placed in the tradition of existential philosophy... He described a situation at the age of 13 that would become a central tenet of his theory... When a teacher told Frankl’s class that life is processes of combustion and oxidation, Frankl asked: “Professor Fritz, if this is the case, what meaning then does life have?” ... Later Frankl described reductionism “as today’s nihilism” ... (Bushkin et al., 2021, p. 234)

However, for those who subscribe to this research, Frankl’s conception of the search for meaning as a constitutive dimension of the human condition requires a critical hermeneutic reading that acknowledges both its existential depth and its theoretical limitations.

Frankl introduces the concept of noödynamics to explain the productive existential tension that characterizes genuine mental health, according to which “mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is

and what one should become” (Frankl, 2014, pp. 104-105).

Mental well-being does not consist in achieving an emotional balance, but rather in the existential dynamics in a polar field of tension where one pole is represented by the meaning that must be fulfilled and the other pole by the man who has to fulfill it. (Frankl, 2006, p. 110)

In ontological terms, he posits a tension that radically contrasts with the Freudian ideal of psychic homeostasis, proposing instead that mental health precisely requires a certain degree of tension between what one is and what one is called to be (Rahgozar & Giménez-Llort, 2020).

The experience of the concentration camp revealed to Frankl a fundamental paradox: it was often not the physically strongest men who survived emotionally, but those who possessed inner strength derived from a purpose yet to be fulfilled, a book to be written, a loved one waiting for them, an unfinished task that only they could accomplish (Frankl, 2006).

This empirical observation grounds the central thesis of logotherapy: “Human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have meaning, and this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and death, privation and dying” (Frankl, 2006, p. 104). Nevertheless, as the systematic review by Rahgozar & Giménez-Llort (2020) on the foundations and applications of logotherapy critically notes, this theory has been criticized for its somewhat simplistic view of human drives and motivations, as well as for its tendency to minimize socio-economic and structural factors that condition people’s capacity to find meaning and transcendence in their everyday lives.

Thus, the question remains open: Is the will to meaning truly universal, or does it rather constitute a privilege of certain existential conditions that Frankl, in his legitimate effort to universalize his particular experience, inadvertently overestimated? Obviously, there are no easy or conclusive answers to this issue.

In any case, the philosophical radicality of Frankl’s proposal lies in his conception of

the ultimate and inalienable freedom of the human being, formulated in one of the most frequently cited statements in existential literature: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (Frankl, 2006, p. 66).

Attitudinal freedom is not merely an exercise in positive thinking, nor a form of resigned Stoicism, but the recognition that even in situations of unavoidable suffering—those that Frankl (2006) describes as an “unchangeable fate” (unabänderliches Schicksal)—the human being preserves the capacity to endow experience with meaning through the attitude adopted toward it.

As contemporary research on logotherapy formulates it, the three fundamental avenues for discovering meaning include: creating a work or accomplishing a deed, experiencing something or encountering someone (especially in love), and the attitude we adopt toward unavoidable suffering (Wong, 2019). This last avenue is particularly significant because it transforms suffering from a mere biological facticity into an existentially meaningful event, insofar as “when we are no longer able to change a situation... we are challenged to change ourselves” (Frankl, 2006, p. 112).

Frankl (2006) repeatedly insists, quoting Nietzsche, that “he who has a why to live can bear almost any how” (p. 76), suggesting that meaning functions not as an anaesthetic that eliminates pain but as a horizon that renders it bearable and, paradoxically, fruitful. This conception has shown contemporary clinical relevance (Wong, 2004).

Therefore, Wong (2019) indicates that individuals who score high on “meaning orientation” are more likely to survive hardships and to attain what the Greeks called eudaimonic happiness—human flourishing grounded in virtue and excellence—as opposed to merely hedonic happiness based on pleasure alone.

2.4. Comparative hermeneutics of the tensions and complementarities among Nietzsche, Camus, and Frankl

The similarities among Camus (1984; 1991); Frankl (2006; 2014); and Nietzsche (2008) emerge from their shared confrontation with meaninglessness as a historical–existential experience of late modernity, even though their philosophical responses diverge radically.

All three, in this sense, acknowledge the irreversible erosion of transcendent foundations: Nietzsche (2008) diagnoses the “death of God”; Camus (1991) identifies the “absurd” as the confrontation between the human need for coherence and the silence of the universe; and Frankl (2014) discerns an “existential vacuum” even in materially affluent societies lacking purpose.

As Shirvani (2025) argues, although the cosmos lacks intrinsic purpose, human beings continue to seek meaning amid existential ambiguity, revealing that the problem of meaning simultaneously encompasses personal agency, normative structures, and social realities. In the case of the authors examined here, their intellectual biographies are contextually marked by limit-experiences that confer existential authority: Nietzsche lived through the cultural erosion of the nineteenth century; Camus experienced the Nazi occupation and the French Resistance; and Frankl survived Auschwitz, where he witnessed how some prisoners preserved their humanity under the worst imaginable circumstances.

The differences are equally instructive. Nietzsche (1968; 2008) adopts a genealogical perspective that radically historicizes values as contingent constructions; Camus (1984), for his part, maintains a phenomenological stance that describes the invariant structure of absurd experience; Frankl (2014) advances, at an anthropological level, the claim that the search for meaning constitutes a transhistorical constitutive dimension of “human nature”.

In this regard, existential philosophy in general is not reducible to the production of

reflective knowledge that sheds light on human existence anchored in the realities of a given time and place; it also entails a psychological and therapeutic option. Indeed, the systematic review by Aiello-Puchol & García-Alandete (2025) shows that logotherapy, for example, reduces depressive symptoms, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress while enhancing sense of life and spiritual well-being, thereby empirically validating Frankl’s (2006) clinical intuitions concerning the therapeutic centrality of meaning.

From our point of view, however, the fundamental tension crystallizes around whether meaning is discovered in Frankl (2006), created in Nietzsche (2008), or defiantly affirmed despite its objective absence

in Camus (1984). These differences also reflect, in line with the analysis of Oleksenko and Oleksenko (2020), their respective stances toward religious tradition: Nietzsche rejects it as a covert form of nihilism; Camus regards it as a “philosophical suicide” that evades absurd lucidity; whereas Frankl preserves a space for the spiritual dimension as a legitimate source of meaning and authenticity.

Table 1 (comparative chart) reveals a set of dialectical tensions that illuminate crucial dimensions of the crisis of meaning in postmodernity. As Bailey (2022) argues, human agency in Frankl depends on “internal decisions” rather than “external conditions,” thereby underscoring that every freedom has both a “from what” and a “toward what.”

Table 1
Tensiones dialécticas y complementariedades entre Nietzsche, Camus y Frankl
frente a la crisis del significado

Dimension	Nietzsche (Nihilism/ Transvaluation)	Camus (Absurdism/Rebellion)	Frankl (Existential Psychology)
Diagnosis of the crisis.	Death of God; devaluation of supreme values and nihilism as a historicalcultural event.	Divorce between the human need for meaning and the irrational silence of the universe; the absurd as an existential structure.	Existential vacuum; noogenic neurosis in materially affluent societies lacking spiritual purpose.
Ontology of meaning.	Meaning does not exist objectively and all values are contingent human constructions.	There is no objective meaning either in the cosmos or in existence, so the absurd is irreducible.	Life possesses objective meaning under any circumstances; meaning is “out there,” waiting to be discovered.
Source of values.	Will to power; heroic creation of values from individual sovereignty.	Metaphysical rebellion; defiant affirmation of life without transcendent justification.	Will to meaning; discovery of meaning through creative work, love, and the attitude adopted toward suffering.
Attitude toward suffering.	Amor fati: Dionysian acceptance that transforms suffering into material for selfovercoming.	Lucid rebellion: neither flight nor resignation, but conscious confrontation with the inevitable.	Suffering as an opportunity to find meaning through the attitude adopted toward inescapable fate.
Stance on hope.	Rejection of hope as escapism; affirmation of the eternal recurrence.	Rejection of metaphysical hope as an evasion of the absurd; only lucid rebellion.	Affirmation of “tragic optimism”; hope is affirmed as a legitimate therapeutic dimension.
Conception of freedom.	Freedom as absence of external determination; capacity to create one’s own values.	Existential freedom recognized in the absurd moment; autonomy in rebellion.	Ultimate and inalienable freedom to choose one’s attitude in any given circumstance.
Role of reason.	Genealogical critique that demystifies reason as an instrument of the will to power.	Rational lucidity that recognizes the absurd without attempting to resolve it.	Reason as the distinctively human capacity to transcend the immediate and grasp meaning.

Cont... Table 1

Existential project.	Übermensch: a human type who creates lifeaffirming values without transcendent guarantees.	The happy Sisyphus: the individual who lucidly assumes the absurd and finds satisfaction in existential struggle itself.	Selftranscendence: the individual who dedicates himself to causes and persons beyond himself.
Relation to the spiritual.	Total rejection: traditional spirituality is a form of nihilism that devalues earthly life.	Rejection of the transcendent; only radical immanence without metaphysical consolations.	Openness to the spiritual dimension as a legitimate source of meaning, without prescribing any specific religion.

Source: Own elaboration, 2026 based on the hermeneutic work of the consulted works: Nietzsche (1968; 1974; 2008); Camus (1984; 1991); and Frankl (1985; 2006; 2014).

The irreducible tension here concerns the ontology of meaning: does it exist as an objective, discoverable dimension (Frankl, 1985; 2006; 2014), is it a human projection that we must create (Nietzsche, 1968; 1974; 2008), or must it be defiantly affirmed in spite of its absence (Camus, 1984; 1991)? This issue determines which existential response becomes appropriate in the face of suffering and finitude. As Oleksenko & Fedorova (2017) point out, in today's world the collapse of the "twoworld" model that once promised transcendent meaning has left us with a delinked reality considered devoid of intrinsic value and with a human being (*Homo economicus*) reduced to economic production.

The second tension involves freedom and responsibility, each with different scopes: for Nietzsche (2008), the capacity to create values; for Camus (1984), the lucidity that recognizes the absurd; for Frankl (2006), the freedom to choose one's attitude toward what cannot be changed. In a tentative summary we may say that, whereas Camus rejects hope as evasion, Frankl grounds it; while Camus seeks "clearsightedness," Frankl maintains that one must first believe in order to create meaning.

At the same time, the third tension concerns the possibility of a universalizable ethics. Nietzsche (1968) proposes an aristocratic morality that rejects egalitarianism; Camus (1991) grounds solidarity in the shared experience of the absurd; and Frankl (1985) holds that the responsibility to discover meaning entails obligations toward others. In the postmodern context of axiological

fragmentation and cultural relativism, these three positions undoubtedly offer mutually incompatible yet necessary responses for understanding the contemporary crisis of meaning.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research has not simply been to compile or synthesize what Nietzsche, Camus, and Frankl said about nihilism, the absurd, and existential meaning, a hermeneutical exercise which, though necessary, would remain sterile if it were limited to textual exegesis without critical projection toward our own contemporary perplexities.

Rather, the aim has been to develop an original philosophical standpoint which, situated at the crossroads of these three traditions, acknowledges that the crisis of meaning in late postmodernity calls for responses that none of these thinkers could fully anticipate from within their particular historical horizons.

The philosophical task, then, consists in building dialectical bridges between seemingly irreconcilable positions in order to articulate an existential ethics that does not negate fundamental tensions, but instead integrates them productively as constitutive dimensions of a mature response to the postmodern condition of which Lyotard (1984) speaks. The critical synthesis proposed here begins by recognizing that Nietzschean

genealogical critique remains fully relevant as an instrument for demystifying claims to universality that conceal particular interests and specific wills to power.

For the authors of this study, Nietzsche's emphasis on the aristocratic creation of values from individual sovereignty must be tempered by Camus's insight that rebellion against the absurd is not a solipsistic act, but one that, in its very gesture, discloses a fundamental solidarity with other human beings who share the absurd condition. Camus correctly intuited that metaphysical rebellion necessarily implies a "we" and not merely an "I": in rejecting unworthy conditions of existence, the rebel implicitly affirms trans-individual values that bind humanity as a community of destiny.

This intersubjective dimension is crucial in order to prevent existential ethics from degenerating into "heroic narcissism" or into a "destructive active nihilism" which, once freed from any normative constraint, ends up justifying totalitarian violence under the guise of radical authenticity. For these reasons, late postmodernity confronts us precisely with this paradox: we need the critical capacity to question inherited values in a radical way, but we also need to ground solidarities that do not depend on unsustainable metaphysical certainties.

In this regard, Frankl's specific contribution to the synthesis lies in his empirically grounded insistence that, independently of the philosophical constructions we may elaborate concerning the ontological nature of meaning, concrete human beings experience the search for meaning as a primary psychological need, the frustration of which generates specific pathologies.

Franklian logotherapy reminds us that any viable existential ethics for the twenty-first century cannot remain merely theoretical or speculative, but must offer practical guidance for individuals who suffer from existential emptiness here and now, under the concrete conditions of present reality, labour precarity, ecological crisis, and the fragmentation of traditional communities.

Frankl's thesis that "life always has

meaning" must, however, be critically reinterpreted, for it may be that what Frankl actually identified is not an ontological property of being, but rather the human capacity for meaning-bestowal (*Sinngebung*) as a cultivable existential competence.

This implies shifting the question from "does life have meaning?" to "how can we develop individual and collective capacities to construct and sustain shared meanings under conditions of radical uncertainty?" Such a pragmatic reformulation makes it possible to integrate Nietzschean genealogical critique (meanings are human constructions), Camusian rebellious solidarity (these meanings must be constructed in common), and Franklian therapeutic orientation (human beings need meaning in order to flourish).

The existential ethics that emerges from this critical synthesis proposes, for those who subscribe to these concluding reflections, three regulative principles for inhabiting—and lucidly reducing—the postmodern crisis of meaning.

First, genealogical lucidity entails maintaining constant critical vigilance over the narratives of meaning that shape individual existence, asking which interests they serve, which forms of life they exclude, and how they might function as mechanisms of covert domination in specific political and ideological contexts.

Second, absurd solidarity implies recognizing that the construction of meaning is not a solipsistic enterprise, but a collective task that links mutual responsibility to other human beings and, in the age of the Anthropocene, to the biosphere itself as a condition of possibility for the production of any future meaning.

Third, existential pragmatism is expressed in the effort to evaluate narratives of meaning not by their correspondence to alleged metaphysical truths, but by their capacity to promote concrete human flourishing, understood not merely as hedonic satisfaction but as the realization of creative, relational, and contributive potentials.

The contemporary discussion on the crisis of meaning implicitly suggests that the

problem is not that life lacks objective meaning, but that meaning must now be consciously created and chosen rather than inherited, a task that is more difficult yet potentially richer. It entails an ethics that does not promise to eliminate existential tension —the Franklian noō-dynamics between what one is and what one is called to be— but instead cultivates it as a source of vitality and personal and collective transformation. It does not offer definitive certainties, but rather provisional orientations for navigating postmodern perplexity without shipwrecking in passive nihilism or seeking refuge in reactionary fundamentalisms.

Within this argumentative context, the reflections developed in this research open multiple questions that future studies will need to address from different interdisciplinary perspectives. First, how do the different modes of meaning-seeking (Nietzschean creation, Camusian rebellion, Franklian discovery) empirically manifest themselves in contemporary populations shaped by variables of class, gender, ethnicity, and geography?

Second, it is also pertinent to ask how digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and virtual realities are reconfiguring the very (objective and subjective) conditions of possibility for the experience of meaning, and what implications this has for the philosophical categories inherited from twentieth-century existentialism.

Third, can the global ecological crisis function as a horizon of collective meaning capable of transcending postmodern fragmentations, or, on the contrary, does the apocalyptic magnitude of the climate threat intensify nihilism by revealing the cosmic insignificance of our human projects? And fourth, how can one foster a productive dialogue between the Western existentialist traditions examined here and other philosophical traditions —Buddhism, Taoism, African philosophies, Indigenous worldviews— that have developed alternative responses to the problem of meaning without depending on the European onto-theological matrix?

Finally, what new institutional

forms and community practices could systematically cultivate meaning-making capacities in postmodern societies, beyond the individualizing responses of the therapeutic market or the authoritarian nostalgias of fundamentalist restorations? These questions admit no definitive answers, but their rigorous formulation is in itself an exercise in lucid resistance against the temptation of passive nihilism and, at the same time, a step toward the collective construction of inhabitable meanings in this historical time.

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